

THOMAS PFAU\*  
*Duke University*


## A Note on the pre-History of European Nihilism Eroticism and Damaged Life in *Don Giovanni*

Since his first literary appearance in Tirso de Molina's 1630 *El Burlador de Sevilla*, countless writers have taken up the subject (among them Moliere and Corneille, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Nikolaus Lenau, Eduard Mörike, Lord Byron, John Clare, Tolstoy, to name but a few). In a study whose catalogue oddly recalls Leporello's amorous accountancy, Alfons Rosenberg lists no less than 94 versions of the story in Spain, 112 in France, 56 in England, 85 in Germany, etc. Of these, Byron's verse epic surely stands out for its brilliant amalgamation of nihilism and comedy. In notes for the continuation of his poem, Byron indicates that he planned to have his protagonist's European rambles come to an end on the guillotine in 1793 Paris. By way of dwelling on the conjunctions of pleasure and death, let me merely highlight some connections between Mozart's opera and the peculiar *bathos* with which nineteenth-century philosophers and writers sought to invest his music.

When Mozart's Don Giovanni stands over the dying Commendatore, his words ("Ah, the rash old man is down . . . I see his life ebbing away / In mortal agony he lies, from his throbbing breast") attest to the intensity with which death haunts him and motivates his frantic amorous pursuits. Yet his words, delivered in such somber tones, also bespeak the late-absolutist nobleman's incipient nihilism. With his dispassionate physiological description, Mozart's and Da Ponte's Don Giovanni appears steeped in the materialism of the French Materialists—Helvetius, Holbach, and above all Julien Offray de la Mettrie, whose *L'homme Machine* (1742) presages Don Juan's mechanical quest for sensual pleasure. Indeed, one feels tempted to read Don Giovanni's compulsive pursuit of the next seduction as robotic rather than erotic, something grotesquely highlighted in Joseph Losey's film version of the opera where Leporello's roll-call of his employer's conquests ("Madamina, il catalogo e questo) features a seemingly endless scroll extending across the luscious gardens of the Don's Vicenza residence.

Don Giovanni's manic pursuit of sensual pleasure—which Kierkegaard so profoundly linked to the very nature of music itself—attests to the nihilism woven into the social and spiritual condition of late-

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Email: [pfau@duke.edu](mailto:pfau@duke.edu)

absolutist nobility. In ways that Byron was to exemplify in his own biography and dramatize most famously in his unfinished *Don Juan* (1822-24), the principle of a self-consuming and frantically self-renewing erotic desire can be read dialectically—that is, as the incipient consciousness of the nullity of all things. Erotic conquests have become a last refuge for a social class increasingly aware of its obsolescence and imperiled historical condition. Hence the women whose identities Leporello so obsequiously catalogues for Donna Elvira are but interchangeable numbers, and Act I ends not only with Don Giovanni's inconclusive pursuit of Zerlina but also with a crescendo of his moral and very much public indictment. Less than two years after the opera's premiere, such protest was to manifest itself as revolutionary energy at the Place de la Bastille. Faced with Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, Don Ottavio, and (in Joseph Losey's cinematic version) a menacing background gathering of irate peasants, Don Giovanni all but concedes the inevitability and imminence of his own demise ("oh God! A fearful storm threatens me"), even as he reaffirms his metaphysical defiance ("I'll not hesitate or weaken . . . though heaven itself should fall."). With apparent symmetry, the scene repeats itself at the conclusion of the opera, with Don Giovanni once more framed by a morally repulsed cross-section of late-absolutist society and stepping backwards to his fiery end.

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* oddly invokes and then suspends the dramatic principle of revenge, as well as that of love. Both ideals occasion much talk and furnish the material for some arias whose luscious accompaniment and melodic line actually heightens our suspicion that the ideals thus praised are by now decorously irrelevant. One thinks above all of the anemic pathos exhibited by Don Ottavio—that "bridegroom of all bridegrooms" as Theodor Adorno calls him in mock-allusion to E. T. A. Hoffmann's characterization of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* as "the opera of all operas." Yet strictly speaking, there also is no revenge to be found in Da Ponte's libretto, notwithstanding the *leitmotiv* persistence of revenge throughout the opera. For in Mozart's opera, which we may justifiably view as a landmark document from the early dawn of European nihilism, the principle of closure must be that of *self-destruction*, rather than atonement or punishment imposed from without. Not least because of its traditional role as apologist for the *ancien régime*, the Church no longer furnishes the authority that could persuasively impose spiritual remedies for temporal sins. In one of countless strokes of brilliance, Joseph Losey's film of the opera thus has a clergy member sit impassively at the center of the scene where Leporello is unmasked by the duped and irate Donna Elvira, Donna Anna, Don Ottavio, Masetto, and Zerlina. There are other reasons why *Don Giovanni* should have left the safe realm of religious-based morality and theological justifications for some new and strange

existential land. For in its preemptive categorization and proscription of sensual indulgence and erotic desire *as sin* (as Kierkegaard certainly views the matter), late-Enlightenment morality actually refuses to explore in depth the intrinsic meaning of such compulsion. Like revenge, love too takes a backseat in this libretto and even more so in subsequent literary productions (Byron, E. T. A. Hoffmann) whose episodic structure dramatizes the illusory character of love. It has often been noted that Mozart's opera does not feature a single love relationship. To be sure, Don Ottavio's earnest attachment to Donna Anna yields mellifluous pledges to her cause of revenge; yet in the end one can only think of him as an emblem of what we might today call "amorous correctness." Notwithstanding the familiar impulse to stylize his deficiencies as a lover into a virtue, Don Ottavio's palpable lack of erotic charisma ultimately renders him incapable of persuading us or, more importantly, Donna Anna of his earnest attachment. Tellingly, it is not he but Don Giovanni who truly "agitates" and "moves" Donna Anna, with Da Ponte's text leaving it tantalizingly unclear as to whether the events just preceding the opera's opening scene are those of a failed seduction, a successful one, or possibly a rape. Remarkably, Donna Anna's own recitation of the events to Don Ottavio (Act I, scene 13), at once affectively detailed and yet so inconclusive, perplexes by enjoining the latter to avenge what, purportedly, was a non-event.

The central enigma of the opera, and indeed of the Don Juan story in its many versions, concerns the persistence of desire in a world from which love has been evacuated. In Mozart's opera and Byron's eponymous poem three decades later, philosophical Naturalism and the politics of Nihilism, both long in the making, finally meet and recognize their kinship. In Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in particular, a historical and philosophical reading of the *Don Juan* myth converge: here the late-absolutist nobleman appears as a vivid specimen of a damaged psyche; his proto-existentialist and pervasive *ennui* reflects the nobility's deep awareness of its historical futility (a topic brilliantly treated in Wolf Lepennies' *Melancholy and Society*). Indeed, the Don's frantic erotic pursuits, notably unsuccessful throughout the entire opera, seem rather less concerned with the hapless Zerlinas of the world than with keeping at bay the impinging consciousness of his own political obsolescence. Don Giovanni's material and sexual wastefulness thus links up with his outward embrace—itself more a desperate pose than a *bona fide* commitment—of those philosophical movements (rationalism, cosmopolitanism, materialism) about to precipitate the nobility's violent demise between 1789–1794. The enigma, to say it again, thus is the proto-Freudian one of desire ultimately driving the subject towards its own destruction. Long before Wotan's famous words from *Götterdämmerung*,

“nur Eines will ich noch, das Ende,” Don Giovanni articulates the melancholia of existing in a time palpably devoid of all historical and spiritual progression.

Ironically, some four decades later the petio-bourgeois individual of post-Napoleonic France will reveal its ostensibly sober, industrious, and secular psyche to be just as tattered and disillusioned; yet here the proto-Nihilism of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* no longer appears as cosmopolitan tragedy but as a provincial farce. No doubt, Stendhal tipped his hat to Tirso’s, Mozart’s, and Byron’s eponymous hero when presenting his audience—just about to effect another regime change that, alas!, would bring little or no change at all—with the manic and faintly sociopathic character of Julien Sorel. What eventually prompted Nietzsche to see a kindred spirit in the author of *Le Rouge et le Noir* is above all Stendhal’s psychological acumen as, in the course of his 1830 novel he maps the transition from pessimism to modern existentialism and nihilism. The result is a dystopic *Bildungsroman* at once effortless and full of sinister hilarity. To stay with the seduction motif at the heart of the *Don Juan* myth, we may recall Julien Sorel’s dogged attempt to inspire jealousy in Mathilde de la Môle by copying out reams of love letters to the decidedly unattractive Mme de Fervaques. Following some Russian Prince’s manual for seduction by mail—a low-tech version of today’s internet dating, and just as mendacious—Julien battles excruciating boredom as he transcribes a first love letter “full of virtuous phrases, and killingly dull, [with] several sentences nine lines long.” Faintly bemused by the utter insincerity of his generic missives to “so celebrated a font of virtue,” Julien slips into yet another one of his existentialist reveries: “I will be treated with the utmost scorn, and nothing would amuse me more. At bottom it is the only comedy I could appreciate. Yes, to cover the odious object that I call *myself* with ridicule would divert me. If I believed in myself I would commit some crime or other for the sake of amusement.”

As acute a reader of Byron’s *Don Juan* as he proved a listener to Mozart’s opera, Søren Kierkegaard arguably gives the most insightful account of a historical predicament (that of an aristocracy grown acutely conscious of its own irrelevance) now manifesting itself as a philosophical, indeed spiritual crisis legible within the very appearance of desire: “Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* captures the sensual principle of desire just before its banishment by the Christian and early bourgeois world order.” In cultural history, that quality takes up “just a moment; soon everything is changed; then the music too has ceased.” In positing desire as a *principle*, much in the way that Hobbes and Locke had done a century earlier, Mozart’s opera severs the inwardness of its eponymous protagonist from all developmental time. There is no *Bildung*, no moral or social progression here; for the ritual of seduction knows time only as the instant here and

now, and Don Giovanni's interiority is, in Kierkegaard's memorable phrase, "just a sum of moments. . . . Being a seducer, . . . he desires, and this desire acts seductively. To that extent he seduces. He savors the satisfaction of desire; as soon as he has savored it, he seeks a new object, and so on endlessly."

Crucially, this unrelenting pace of desire for experiencing its satisfaction involves a performative dimension; it is a "force," a "charisma" or, ultimately, music. For inasmuch as Don Giovanni's seductive charisma inheres in "the energy of sensual desire," that energy is categorically opposed to "the power of speech. As soon as we give him that power he ceases to be musical." Kierkegaard's remark highlights what the late-eighteenth-century critics of the *ancien régime* branded as its hedonistic attachment to sensual pleasures and a corresponding lack of a language capable of legitimating that class—and indeed the entire rigid system of social and cultural stratification that makes up the *ancien régime*—in rational and collectively valid terms. Like the ineluctable poignancy of erotic desire experienced only in the instant of seduction, music too "exists really only when it is performed." Kierkegaard's great insight into the self-privileging and instantaneous charisma of erotic desire and its formal equivalent, the sensuous power of music *in and as performance*, was to prove consequential for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, with Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, Wagner, and Nietzsche as the most obvious echoes of this dynamic.

The mystery of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* that has haunted listeners ever since has to do with the protagonist's visceral fear of having to wake up to an objective awareness of the very sensual principle that has fuelled him and, in fact, has thus forestalled that very awakening. Thus it could be said that, in their ritualized and recursive nature, Don Giovanni's seductions are formally shaped so as to defer that awakening for as long as possible. As Kierkegaard notes, "the sensual awakens . . . not to movement but to motionless rest, not to joy and gladness but to deep melancholy." More than anyone, it is Donna Elvira who personifies this force of awakening, of becoming self-conscious and hence facing the death and nothingness of his affective, social, and spiritual persona. Not surprisingly, in a long melodramatic strain extending from Lessing's Emilia Galotti to Boris Pasternak's Lara, the wronged woman serves as the eloquent personification of an imminent revolution that will awaken the Don Giovannis and Kamarovskys of the world from their desperate attachment to a regime of sensual, performative, and purely hedonistic pleasure. Notably, Don Giovanni's ignominious career ends with his express refusal of repentance and forgiveness, which again is exactly mirrored by Julien Sorel's refusal to be pardoned for his attempted homicide at close of *Le Rouge et le Noir*. In both cases, this refusal is the

mark of the modern “buffered” self (to invoke Charles Taylor’s phrase) insisting on his “autonomy” to the last. For Don Giovanni, to decline a redemptive denouement reflects an unconscious wish to awaken, at long last, from the moribund regime of aristocratic dissipation, stale sensualism, and ennui—a regime of politics and manners (so desperately eulogized in Edmund Burke’s *Reflections* the year before Mozart’s death) to which, in poignant irony, the very genre of *opera buffa* proves constitutively indebted. The end of the regime, and of Don Giovanni’s depleted life, must come, but at least it will be his, a genuine choice for once made with both clarity and irony. Don Giovanni’s repeated “No” to the invitation to repent conjures up Voltaire’s final *aperçu* on his deathbed. Prodded by the priest to renounce the Devil, Voltaire responds: “Now is no time to make enemies.” It is the end, not redemption, for which Mozart’s protagonist has unconsciously longed, and now that it is within his reach he certainly will not muddle the picture. Don Giovanni’s conspicuous staging of his death in the opera’s penultimate scene also announces the expiration of the delicate compromise between the comic and the serious, between the performative event of seduction and erotic pleasure, on the one hand, and the anxiously deferred yet impinging awareness of the material and spiritual cost of such pleasure, on the other. In that sense, *Don Giovanni* may justly be understood as the apotheosis of an ideological balancing act that the Viennese School had performed during the final decades of an absolutist era that now confronts its demise, both as a political and aesthetic reality.