“Don’t fix your mind in just one place”: Reading *The Death of Klinghoffer*

When the librettist Alice Goodman, the composer John Adams, and the director Peter Sellars embarked on their second opera, they chose as their subject an event that was still live news. Their first collaboration, *Nixon in China* (1987), had also been based on recent history. A dramatization of President Richard Nixon’s visit to China in February 1972, its central characters (the President, his wife Pat Nixon, Chairman and Madame Mao, Premier Chou En-lai and Secretary of State Henry Kissenger) were still large presences in the popular consciousness, and, with the exception of Mao and Chou, still alive. Their second opera would take this principle much further. The events retold in *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991) took place only six years before the opera’s première. In October 1985, the Italian cruise ship MS *Achille Lauro* was hijacked by four Palestinian terrorists. They demanded the release of fifty prisoners held in Israeli prisons and forced the ship to sail for Syria, but were refused permission to dock at the port of Tartus. They murdered the wheelchair-bound Jewish American holidaymaker Leon Klinghoffer and threw his body into the sea; his wife, Marilyn Klinghoffer, was not informed until later, believing her husband to be in the infirmary. The ship sailed south to Port Said, where after two days the hijackers gave themselves up in exchange for assurances of safe passage. These were the spare facts around which the opera was built: the events of a few days, in the self-enclosed world of a ship in the middle of the ocean. “We had our Aristotelian unities,” says Goodman. “I thought: this will work.”

For all its alacrity in responding to recent events, the opera was no match for the speed of the entertainment industry. By the time that *The Death of Klinghoffer* was first performed at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, two made-for-TV movies had already appeared about the *Achille Lauro* hijacking (in 1989, starring Karl Malden, and in 1990, starring Burt Lancaster). What raises *The Death of Klinghoffer* over these retellings, though, and over the coverage of the news media, is the plurality of perspectives that Goodman and her collaborators were able to bring to bear, and the multiple stories they revealed playing out within the same events. One of these is a story about American Jewry. Leon Klinghoffer was born in New York in 1916, the son of Pinchas and Lena (née Rief) Klinghoffer, two of the more than two million Jewish refugees to arrive in the United States from Eastern Europe in the four decades either side of 1900. Raised in New York City on the Lower East Side, he worked in his family’s

hardware store. After wartime service in the Army Air Corps, he took over the business with his brother Albert, and shortly afterwards became an inventor, making his fortune with a home rotisserie oven. By common testimony, Leon Klinghoffer combined hard work and toughness with many acts of kindness. He married Marilyn Windwehr in 1949, and the couple had two daughters. When, in his sixties, two strokes left Leon wheelchair-bound, Marilyn cared for him devotedly despite her own cancer diagnosis (she survived her husband by only four months). The couple took a Mediterranean cruise in 1985 to celebrate their thirty-sixth wedding anniversary, during which Leon was murdered. His body was thrown in the sea and later washed up in Syria; he is buried at Beth David Memorial Park in Kenilworth, New Jersey.

Another story being told is the history of Israel and Palestine. Nineteen years before Leon Klinghoffer was born, in 1897, the first Zionist conference was convened by Theodor Herzl in Basel, Switzerland. Spurred by the anti-Semitism uncovered by the Dreyfus Affair in France, Herzl's movement sought "the creation of a home for the Jewish people in Palestine." As many early Zionists realized, despite the attempts of others to deny it, Palestine was already settled by Muslim and Christian Arabs. After decades of campaigning, diplomacy, purchasing of land, settlement, and armed conflict, the State of Israel was established in 1948. In Arabic, these events are known as *al-nakba*, the catastrophe, during which approximately 750,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled from their homes, many becoming refugees. By 1985, a series of conflicts had considerably expanded the Israeli state. A spectacular victory in 1967 left Israel occupying the ancient lands of Judea and Samaria, or the West Bank. With Israel and Egypt signing peace accords in 1979, the Palestinian people were increasingly isolated; tensions were building, which in 1987 would break out in the first intifada (Arabic for "shaking off"), a grassroots uprising against occupation. Palestinian nationalism had begun to find expression through organizations like the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF), founded in 1961, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), founded in 1964. Under the leadership of Abu Abbas, the PLF launched a series of attacks during the 1980s on both civilian and military targets, of which the *Achille Lauro* hijacking was among the most audacious. Four men occupied the ship and took American and British hostages; one, Youssef Majed al-Molqi, shot Leon Klinghoffer. They handed themselves over after two days in exchange for safe conduct, but the plane carrying them was diverted by U.S. military aircraft to Sicily, where they were arrested and imprisoned in Italy.

Running through and behind both of these histories, however, is a tapestry of narrative patterns that stretch back into a mythological past that can barely be called "history" at all. The book of Genesis records how God promised Abraham the land of Canaan (modern-day Israel) for his descendants' inheritance. Abraham is the mythical ancestor of the Jewish people through his son Isaac, but also through Ishmael—his son by the Egyptian slave Hagar—the ancestor of the Arabs. In the Hebrew account, God favors Isaac: "I will make [Ishmael] a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac." But Islam also regards Abraham as a founder, and Muslim tradition identifies Ishmael as the beloved son whom Abraham was prepared to sacrifice. The origin myth of the Jews and Arabs is a tale of brothers who are rivals for land and for parental and divine favor. The Hebrew Bible has many similar sibling pairs: when Alice Goodman writes "Let the supplanter look / Upon his work," her line recalls Abraham's grandson Jacob (the name means "usurper" or "supplanter") who tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright, and who came to be known as Israel.

The complexity of *The Death of Klinghoffer* lies in its simultaneous attention to all of these histories, and much of the critical controversy surrounding the work has been a result of attending to one or other of them and ignoring the others. The text's many juxtapositions—biblical narrative alongside modern conflict, Jewish American experience alongside Palestinian disenfranchisement—demand reading in the same way we might speak of "reading" the iconography of a medieval cathedral. The view taken must be stereoscopic, the eye moving between disparate narratives and images, tracking parallels and contrasts. As Virgil says to Dante, of the friezes on the terraces of Mount Purgatory, "non tener pur ad un loco la mente": don't fix your mind in just one place. The two opening choruses—of "Exiled Palestinians" and "Exiled Jews"—reverberate through the work, situating events simultaneously in contemporary and mythical time. In the final aria, Marilyn Klinghoffer's blazon of the suffering body ("all the pain / Of hands, of feet, of skin") calls back the erotic and sorrowful duet between the Promised Land and the Daughter of Zion in the "Chorus of Exiled Jews": "To me you are a land of Jerusalem stone; / your scars are holy places." Mrs. Klinghoffer's word "skin" is heard against the chorus's "My hide is worn thin," which carries the shock of human skins made into "hides" at Buchenwald. Nothing in this work can properly be seen from one perspective only.

The Death of Klinghoffer's structure of paired choruses—"Exiled Palestinians" and "Exiled Jews," "Ocean" and "Desert," "Night" and "Day"—carries a debt to biblical patterns, what the

Hebrew scholar Robert Alter has called “the dynamics of parallelism.” The odd one out is the “Hagar Chorus”—rightly, because Hagar herself is an odd one out. The Egyptian wife of Abraham, she is an exile who falls off the edge of one story and into another, becoming in the shared memory of the Semitic nations the ancestor of the Arabs through her son Ishmael. Hagar is, at the same time, the founding mother of Palestine, a page torn from the Holy Scripture of Israel, and a witness to the fact that every point of contact is a potential point of conflict.

Close attention to the extraordinary poetry of the libretto can help make this plurality of meaning clearer. The hijackers sing in short, sharp-edged lines known as “Skeltonics” which act like fragments of glass, reflecting the various lights by which the events of the opera demand to be understood. In Goodman’s hands, these lines are as adaptable to the indictments and taunts of the sadist whom the passengers, in a telling mirror-image of imperialist American masculinity, nickname “Rambo,” as they are to the haunting and broken ruminations of the nihilistic, melancholy Mamoud:

> Those birds flying
> Above us, these landing
> On the ship’s railing,
> Not migrating,
> —Doesn’t the earth belong
> to them?—revisiting
> their lands . . .

The birds have their source in the Qur’an (67:19) but the difficult realities of remembering and forgetting, among *Klinghoffer*’s central concerns, are such that the voice of the holy text bleeds into the words of the “Chorus of Exiled Palestinians” with its grievances over land and ownership. Compare the emotional tug of “Doesn’t the earth belong / to them?—revisiting / *their* lands” with the earlier chorus: “Though we have paid to drink / *Our* water . . .” And here, too, ownership and appropriation are densely layered questions: these lines are taken from the Hebrew book of Lamentations (5:4). This meeting of lyric and violence marks a site where Goodman takes an ethical stand—a commitment to viewing others, even those who hate us, as fully human—while at the same time it evokes a toxic and intoxicating romantic nationalism. If the hijackers are given music of romantic beauty, this is because the poetry exposes romantic nationalisms and tribalisms as dangerous.

Goodman's lines for Mr. and Mrs. Klinghoffer are written in the same verse form, but the emotional range is sharply distinct. Against Mamoud's birds "landing / On the ship's railing," listen to Klinghoffer's words as he attempts to distract and console his wife:

> Oh dammit. M.,
> Let's see you smile.
> Look at that gull,
> Think he'll land in the pool?

Where Mamoud's lonely, lyrical voice radiates outward to anyone who will listen, like the Levantine radio stations he lyricizes elsewhere, Klinghoffer's question cannot be understood apart from a particular addressee, relationship, and instant of time. "Love's work," to borrow Gillian Rose's phrase, is not aligned with the expansive and abstract but, as the musicologist Robert Fink has argued in his great essay "*Klinghoffer* in Brooklyn Heights" with the small and the concrete.

We hear Goodman's writing at its most loving where it tunes in, with exquisite exactness, to the idiomatic kinks of the American language. Klinghoffer's angry, righteous riposte to his persecutors is anchored in the cadences of Jewish American speech:

> You don't give a shit,
> Excuse me, about
> Your grandfather's hut,
> His sheep and his goat,
> And the land he wore out.
> You just want to see
> People die.

His account of the hijackers' motivations is as partial and as impeachable any other political judgment in the libretto, but this is not where Goodman places the emphasis. "You don't give a shit, / Excuse me" is what steals the show, drawing on the mordant syntax of Yiddish underneath the skin of Jewish American English. (Leo Rosten, in *The Joys of Yiddish*, offers the joke of the woman pressed by her hostess to take another cookie: "I already had five," she

protests; her hostess replies, “You had, excuse me, six, but take another: Who’s counting?”) By drawing on her American Jewish upbringing at this moment of high conflict, Goodman takes her stand with Klinghoffer without making him a saint. She makes him a *mensch*, not a martyr. The groundedness of his speech gives him a solidity and a reality; Goodman reminds us of the kind of heroism that is not based on superlative purity or virtue or strength, but on the fullness of the life that a human being has to lose, a life that he desperately longs to keep on living.

In one of the opera’s most astonishing moments, the body of Leon Klinghoffer sings on after his murder. The sounds the body makes as it sinks under the waves are given a voice, and its movements transformed into choreography. In the “Aria of the Falling Body,” Leon Klinghoffer suffers, in Shakespeare’s words, “a sea change, into something rich and strange,” something both more and less than the tragic, redemptive heroism that some of the opera’s critics have hankered for and found wanting. The Aria is a *kaddish*, like the Mourner’s Kaddish (or, for that matter, the Our Father); that is, a sanctification, a prayer that opens by magnifying the name of the Lord. It is also, in the deepest tradition of Jewish imagination, focused lovingly upon the things of this world. As the body falls, its song gives a shape to cycles of historical memory, recalling the material remnants of lives and homes abandoned in the wake of violence:

> Good furniture
> Exposed to the rain
> Buckled and warped
> Malachite and brass
> Were quickly stripped
> And inlays worked loose . . .

As scavengers work loose “souvenirs” from abandoned bureaus, so the sea, we know, strips flesh from bone. Early in the opera, the Ocean Chorus evokes an undersea world “deep-silted with the motes / of carrion”. But out of this disintegration emerges something miraculous. Klinghoffer’s body calls “Good furniture” and “Locked bureau drawers” into being even as it sings its own unmaking; it urges renewed ethical attention to the lives which are evidenced by these perishable belongings. It is an appeal for what rabbinical tradition calls *tikkun ha-olam*, “the repair of the world.” The Israeli poet Nathan Alterman describes something of what is at stake in this aria in the final lines of his poem “In the Marketplace”: “Amidst the odors of

roasting grain and broths, under a sky of sweeping clouds, so bustling and so businesslike, so wondrous is the resurrection of the dead.”

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Ross-shire, Scotland
Easter Sunday, 2026

Note: This essay draws on the introduction and notes written to accompany Alice Goodman’s *History is Our Mother: Three Libretti* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2017).