
‘REDEMPTION TO THE REDEEMER!’

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Questions concerning Wagner and religion are some of the most complex in an altogether complex life and œuvre. Did Wagner believe in God? Was he a Christian? Did his views and practice develop, and do his works reflect and develop this? To answer such questions often depends more on definition of terms – a task both necessary and hopeless – than gleaning real insight. Wagner’s attitudes changed, yet rarely in linear fashion. The apparently atheist follower of materialist Young Hegelian philosophy endured; so did the admirer of Jesus as social revolutionary. Yet a mysticism of Catholic – if hardly orthodox – variety also asserted itself. ‘Our conversation leads us to the mystic Meister Eckhart’, recorded Cosima in her 1873 diary. ‘R. begins to read a sermon by him, which fascinates us to the highest degree. Everything turned inward, the soul silent, so that in it God may speak the highest word!’ In 1881, with *Parsifal* essentially composed yet not fully scored, Cosima writes of her husband looking ‘forward to the better times in which such men as Shakespeare, now prophets in the wilderness, will be brought in to form, as it were, part of a divine service. Thus the world once was – first a ceremonial act spoken, then to Holy Communion.’ Questions multiply; answers seem ever more remote.

Is *Parsifal* a religious artwork, or is it a work ‘about’ religion? Unsurprisingly, the answer turns out to be: both. More profoundly, the very material of Wagner’s drama may be understood to lie in exploring the relationship between the two tendencies. Specific concern with Christianity is far from incidental, in that it enables exploration of both cyclical (Schopenhauerian) and teleological (Hegelian) conceptions of time – otherwise understood, the archetypal ‘Greek’ and ‘Jewish’ strands of the Christian faith. *Parsifal*, like Christianity, is neither merely cyclical nor straightforwardly linear; it is certainly far from the ‘timeless’ work that reactionary commentators have claimed. Instead, we watch, listen to and participate in a struggle between time and eternity.

An abiding dramatic and intellectual conflict, already starkly dramatized in the *Ring*, is taken further in *Parsifal*. We might characterize it as taking place between Hegel and his school on one hand and Schopenhauer on the other, or, to put it another way, between history and anti-history. For Hegel, history represented the progress of the ‘Idea’ or ‘World Spirit’, sometimes referred to as ‘God’, which might embody itself, often anything but consciously, in a ‘world-historical’ figure such as Napoleon – or Siegfried. Where Hegel divined purpose, Schopenhauer discerned no sense in history whatsoever, merely the inchoate striving of the irrational, resolutely non-developmental Will. Recall Hans Sachs’s ‘Wahn’ (illusion) monologue in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*: ‘Wahn, Wahn, everywhere Wahn! Wherever I search, in city- and world-chronicles.’ True reality lies not in the external, phenomenal world, but in the noumenal realm of the Will itself, music being the only art with a direct relationship to that realm. Musical drama thus became for the Schopenhauerian Wagner the metaphysical vehicle for granting real existence to the

categories of the understanding, for penetrating, beyond the 'surface' words of his texts, to the essence of his myths.

In that spirit, Wagner observed in the wake of its 1882 performances that *Parsifal* owed much to 'flight from the world', for:

Who could look all his life long with an open mind and a free heart at this world of murder and theft, organized and legalized through lying, deception and hypocrisy, without having to turn away, shuddering in disgust? Whence then would one avert one's gaze? All too often into the vale of death. To him, however, who is otherwise called and singled out by destiny, there appears the truest reflection of the world itself, as the foretold exhortation of redemption, despatched by its [the world's] innermost soul.

Yet, though couched in the language of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, there remains here a revolutionary socialist's anger at a bourgeois world of lies, deception and hypocrisy. Moreover, revulsion is crucially tempered by a redemptive prophecy as redolent of Christianity as of Schopenhauer. Indeed, in 1879 Wagner described *Parsifal* as 'this most Christian of works'. He had come to believe that charismatic, revolutionary heroes – Siegmund, Siegfried, Tristan, Walther – could never satisfy the hopes invested in them. That was not, however, to say that charismatic heroes as such were to be abjured. Whatever his dark, Schopenhauerian thoughts regarding withdrawal from society, Wagner continued, after the apparent failure of revolution in 1848–9, to engage with the external, political, historical world. Just as Sachs, following his lament, suppresses his depression and turns his attention once again to Nuremberg and to manipulation of *Wahn*, Wagner maintained, indeed developed, his Hegelian conception of music drama, in the tradition of Attic tragedy, as abidingly political – and religious: a reflection, an incitement, an exploration by and of society.

What will become of Monsalvat, the Grail castle and community under Parsifal's leadership after the close of *Parsifal* remains unclear, yet the drama is that of its rescue or salvation, not of annihilating destruction. (That has already been accomplished – but in Klingsor's realm.) Parsifal discovers what he needs through his own historical experience and the transformative influence this exerts; yet he does not control that historical experience. Despite Nietzsche's venom, *Parsifal* stands in this respect at least close to the portrayal of Jesus in *The Anti-Christ* (which itself stands in some respects close to Wagner's own incomplete prose drama, *Jesus of Nazareth*):

One might... name Jesus a 'free spirit' – what is established is nothing to him: the word killeth, whatever is established killeth. The concept, the experience of 'life', as he alone knows it, for him opposes every kind of word, formula, law, belief, dogma. ...his 'wisdom' is precisely the pure ignorance [*reine Torheit*, a reference to Parsifal] of all such things. Culture is something he has never heard of...

Parsifal was, then, to be a different kind of hero from his Wagnerian predecessors. In the drama that bears his name we deal with a complex, endlessly fascinating interaction

between *Mitleid* (Schopenhauer's empathetic compassion, literally 'sorrow with'), grace (Christianity) and the cunning of historical reason (Hegel). Christian grace, in all its ambiguity, mediates between compassion and history. Amfortas, for instance, is unable to do anything to rectify his plight; he must simply wait. He has acted with disastrous results, as Klingsor impotently continues to act. When Klingsor's spear is stopped in its tracks by the sign of the Cross, the spear is transformed into an agent of healing. Yet, although Parsifal makes the sign, agency comes from beyond. For both Schopenhauer and Wagner, *Mitleid* was closely connected, though not exclusively, with Christianity – and what could be more Christian than the sign of the Cross?

Parsifal, it should be stressed, is not Christ. Wagner criticised Hans von Wolzogen for having, in an essay the composer otherwise admired, called Parsifal a reflection of the Redeemer: 'I didn't give the Redeemer a thought when I wrote it.' We should probably take that claim with a large pinch of salt, while noting Wagner's anxiety to avoid identification. The Hegelian words with which he opened his contemporaneous essay, *Religion and Art*, may help explain that anxiety:

One could say that when religion becomes artificial, it is reserved for art to grant salvation to the kernel of religion, by having us believe that mythical symbols, which the former [that is, religion] would have us believe in their real sense, may be comprehended through their symbolical value, in order to discern therein, via an ideal presentation, the concealed profound truth.

And yet, it seems that what actually accomplishes Parsifal's personal transformation is something beyond Hegel and Schopenhauer. Wagner himself called it grace; there are several, far-from incidental references in his poem to *Gnade*, a term he had not employed in explicitly theological terms in an opera since *Lohengrin*. In the Prelude to Act III, we hear again the conflict between the dynamic passing of time and blind, purposeless circularity; the former has become arduous, yet it has still not been overcome. Grace, however, if it does not supplant, at least enables realization both of self and community. When, in Act III, Parsifal returns to Monsalvat in search of the Grail, his search is successful either through chance or through the intervention of something higher, if something higher exists – and it appears that it does. It is that alone which enables Parsifal finally to heal Amfortas's wound, thereby putting Amfortas out of his eternal agony and, crucially, rejuvenating his equally sickened community. How 'symbolic' such a force may be is open to question, but then a good part of Wagner's dramatic genius is itself to raise questions rather than to answer them.

Almost despite himself – on account, perhaps, of the Will's striving towards salvation – Wagner finds himself drawn toward Christianity, or at least toward elements of Christian teaching. He resembles Wotan and Kundry as described in a conversation recounted by Cosima: 'R. sees a resemblance between Wotan and Kundry: both long for salvation and both rebel against it, Kundry in the scene with P., Wotan with Siegfried.' Yet both, whether through the urgings of the Will or through the mediating agency of grace, go beyond their respective rebellions and are saved. Their sins are forgiven:

Brünnhilde delivers benediction to Wotan, and Parsifal converts Kundry. 'I do not believe in God', Wagner told Cosima on another occasion, 'but in godliness, which is revealed in a Jesus *without sin*.' Though heterodox, Wagner's profession is nevertheless inconceivable without Christ and Christianity. Such an idea helps explain Wagner's desire, when telling Ludwig II of the 'purity of content and subject-matter of my *Parsifal*', to restrict performances to Bayreuth, to protect the work from 'a common operatic career'. He would 'not entirely blame our Church authorities if they were to raise an entirely legitimate protest against representations of the most sacred mysteries upon the selfsame boards in which, yesterday and tomorrow, frivolity sprawls in luxuriant ease'.

However, Wagner never claims that *Parsifal* is itself a sacred rite, but rather that it presents such a rite (Holy Communion), on stage. The rite, however, is staged at a time of profound crisis for the community of Monsalvat. Amfortas, not only king but also high priest, has succumbed to the blandishments of Kundry and therefore been caught off guard by Klingsor. Klingsor captured Amfortas's spear and wounded him – apparently irreparably – with it. The spear is the only thing that can heal Amfortas's wound. Without it, moreover, the Grail, which the increasingly frail Amfortas can hardly bear to uncover, stands in danger of capture by the community's adversaries. Crisis is underlined and deepened by the agony Amfortas feels – as, through *Mitleid*, do Parsifal and we – in continued revelation, on stage, in the poem and in the orchestra, of his open wound. Parsifal's Act II cry of recognition, 'Amfortas! – the wound!', is preceded by Kundry's kiss, its *Tristan*-chord making the connection with what Nietzsche dubbed *Tristan's* 'voluptuousness of hell'. This is not an incitement to chastity, but an indictment of insufficient or perverted conceptions of love, whether in the trivial delights of the Flowermaidens' pleasure garden or the terrible self-castration of Klingsor, which was intended to elevate him to mastery over physical desire yet rendered him all the more its abject slave. Parsifal recoils in terror. 'His demeanour', read Wagner's stage directions, 'expresses a terrible change; he presses his hands forcefully against his heart, as if to overcome a rending pain.' That pain resounds in screaming orchestral sequences, harmonically and melodically, of more-or-less unresolved diminished seventh chords, their dissonance enhanced by added notes.

Just as Wagner's 'mixture chords' both loosen the bonds of tonality and bind the chords on their own terms more closely together – thereby anticipating Schoenberg and the final agonizing and emancipating crisis of tonality itself – so does the agony of the wound intensify and symbolize the crisis of Monsalvat and ritual. Yet crisis offers a necessary starting-point for the Act III redemption, both on stage and as an audience rite. The pure fool and we may then be enlightened through fellow-suffering: 'durch Mitleid wissend, der reine Tor'. Words and music are repeated in ritualistic fashion; however, they also, owing to development of the drama, develop in their meaning. Only after the mysterious workings of grace have furthered Parsifal's *Mitleid* does he gain the understanding necessary to save Monsalvat and its rite, so as to fulfil the 'durch Mitleid' prophecy. We might play with the celebrated opening of St John's similarly predestinarian Gospel: In the beginning were Will's sorrow and Heart's sorrow (Parsifal's mother, Herzeleide), and the sorrow (*Leid*) was with (*mit*) the Will, and the sorrow was Will; *Parsifal* was the representation of that Will and of that *Mitleid*.

Recalling Wagner's own words from *Religion and Art*, has musical drama vouchsafed salvation to religion itself? Might the relationship even have worked both ways? That possibility may help us to understand Wagner's unwieldy designation, *Bühnenweihfestspiel* ('stage-festival-consecration-play'). It also suggests one possible interpretation of *Parsifal*'s notoriously enigmatic concluding words: 'Redemption to the Redeemer!'

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