

# Is it Here that Time becomes Space? Hegel, Schopenhauer, History and Grace in *Parsifal*

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Richard Wagner's final drama, *Parsifal*, has generally been understood to represent the culmination of an ideological line very different from that of his earlier works, with the exception of *Tristan und Isolde* and possibly the later sections of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The revolutionary of the Dresden barricades in 1849 has finally sold out to the quietism of Schopenhauer and/or to Christianity – or, which amounts to the same thing, he has at last cast off the folly of his radical youthful flirtations. Thus Roger Scruton posits a 'transformation of the *Ring* story, from Young Hegelian beginnings to a quasi-Christian or at any rate Schopenhauerian end', in which 'we witness a process of growing up in Wagner for which there is no equivalent in Marx'. Mention of Marx is far from incidental, since Wagner is thereby achieving an emancipation from Hegel such as Marx never does. The *Ring*, Scruton startlingly claims, is therefore 'not about power or money or even love; it is about original sin'.<sup>1</sup> This nicely sets the scene for the less ambiguously Christian milieu and message of *Parsifal*.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche was more hostile:

for what would a seriously intended *Parsifal* mean? Must one really see in it (as somebody has expressed it against me) 'the abortion [...] of a hatred of knowledge, spirit, and sensuality'? A curse upon senses and spirit in a single *hatred* and breath? An apostasy and reversion to sickly Christian and obscurantist ideals? And in the end even self-abnegation, self-striking-himself-out on the part of an artist who had previously striven with all of his will's might to achieve the opposite, the highest spiritualisation and sensualisation in his art? [...] One should remember how enthusiastically Wagner followed in the footsteps of the philosopher Feuerbach. Feuerbach's slogan of 'healthy sensualism' sounded in the '30s and '40s to Wagner as to many other Germans – they called themselves Young Germans – as words of redemption. Did he finally learn otherwise? For it appears that he at least in the end willed to *teach* differently.<sup>3</sup>

Redemption in later Wagner, then, has become something more profound for Scruton and something reprehensible and perhaps disingenuous for Nietzsche. Yet its nature is similar and the radical Young Hegelianism of Wagner's more youthful days has been

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Scruton, 'A Quest for Truth', *Literary Review* (April 2006), 15.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Lucy Beckett, *Parsifal* (Cambridge, 1981), especially Chapter 6.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Nietzsche contra Wagner: Aktenstücke eines Psychologen', *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Berlin and New York, 1967–88), vi: 'Wagner als Apostel der Keuschheit', §3, 430–31.



One of a group of 15 illustrations for *Parsifal* made by Franz Stassen (1869–1949). The central placing of the spear links the flowering meadow and Good Friday Music directly with the wounded Christ on the cross.

jettisoned. I shall argue, however, that it has not been vanquished; conversion is never completed. That conflict which plays itself out in the *Ring* between Hegel and Hegelianism on the one hand and Schopenhauer on the other continues to do so in *Parsifal*.<sup>4</sup>

### **Wagner's intellectual method and the importance of Christianity**

The work's concern with Christianity is far from incidental, in that it allows exploration of both the cyclical (Schopenhauerian) and the teleological (Hegelian) – or, if you prefer, the archetypal Greek and Jewish strands of the faith. *Parsifal*, like Christianity, is neither merely cyclical nor straightforwardly linear. There is greater progress – and at times regress – than Dieter Borchmeyer allows when he writes of a spiral-like 'restitutio in integrum', or 'return to the beginning in an intensified form', but the Hegelian characterisation of a spiral remains helpful in considering the ongoing conflict between time and the eternal.<sup>5</sup> Wagner also introduces a crucial Christian agency of mediation, that gift from God commonly and often confusingly known as 'grace', which crucially for us may be considered to represent a decisive *act*. In the words of the New Testament scholar James Dunn, 'In Paul [...] χάρις is never merely an attitude or disposition of God (God's character as gracious); consistently it denotes something much more dynamic – the wholly generous *act* of God. Like "Spirit", with which it overlaps in meaning [...], it denotes effective divine power in the experience of men.'<sup>6</sup> This is not meant in a Young Hegelian, detranscendentalising manner, bringing the divine (back) down to earth in the greatest deeds of man; nor, however, is it quite so inconsistent as one might imagine, especially when dealing with Wagner's associative and agglomerative rather than analytical intellectual method. At any rate, *Parsifal* is far from the 'timeless' work that some commentators have claimed.<sup>7</sup> There is instead a struggle between time and the timeless, for, as so often with the dialectical Wagner, it is not 'either-or'.

This conflict, then, does not merely colour Wagner's works; it is the very stuff of their drama. Wagner's dramas benefit greatly from exploration of their mutual relationships, as Houston Stewart Chamberlain made clear in an essay of 1886. However dubious Chamberlain's later writing turned out to be, this stood at the time as perhaps the most important commentary on *Parsifal*.<sup>8</sup> Chamberlain is unduly eager to deny that *Parsifal*

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed exploration of this theme in the *Ring*, see Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner's 'Ring'* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, tr. Daphne Ellis (Princeton, 2003), 239. See Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge, 1975), 35, 48, 69.

<sup>6</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Dallas, 1988), 17.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Peter Wapnewski, *Der traurige Gott: Richard Wagner in seinen Helden* (Munich, 1978), 211–13; and, drawing upon this, Mary A. Cicora, 'Medievalism and Metaphysics: The Literary Background of *Parsifal*', *A Companion to Wagner's Parsifal*, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer (Woodbridge, 2005), 29–53 (pp. 39–40).

<sup>8</sup> On Chamberlain's earlier writings, see Roger Allen, 'Die Weihe des Hauses: Houston Stewart Chamberlain and the Early Reception of *Parsifal*', *ibid.*, 245–76. See also Allen's "'All is here music": Houston Stewart Chamberlain and *Der Ring des Nibelungen*', *wagnerspectrum*, iii (2006), 155–68.

was a Christian work; it is all too easy to say that it is no more Christian than the *Ring* is pagan.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as Hans Küng suggested upon the occasion of *Parsifal*'s centenary, as the work of a great dialectician, *Parsifal* can be 'both Christian and heathen at once'.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Chamberlain rightly points to the extent to which *Parsifal* was contemporary with the *Ring* and *Tristan und Isolde* – he might also have added *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* – and continues:

In the *Ring* and in *Tristan* (which the Master considered to be an act of the *Ring*), Wagner had created an image of real life, of the 'world that is only suffering': in *Parsifal* – where he intended, specifically, to establish a strict parallelism with the *Ring* – he 'constructed the holy world of a better life'.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever Chamberlain's characterisations of these works, his structural thesis merits consideration. All of Wagner's works tend to raise more questions than they resolve, with the result that he will 'follow on' from the riddles each work poses in its successor or successors. (He cannot do this after *Parsifal*, which may explain commentators' need to view it as a destination or *summa summarum*.)

Intention, then, is matched, indeed surpassed, by outcome. Like many writers, Wagner did not know precisely what he would say when he first put pen to paper; and when he did, he would often change his mind. At the very least, Wagner would make a major contribution, constantly questioned and reformulated, to this new canon in flux. For Wagner's method had never been Socratic; he had never been concerned to correct 'errors' in his earlier work, but rather to explore more profoundly ideas and conflicts already problematised – not, incidentally, a bad cue for producers and other interpreters of his work. Wagner called Beethoven 'the master who was called upon to write the *world history of music* in his works', with all the sense of progression that implies, and such a sense of historical progression is just as marked in Wagner's own oeuvre.<sup>12</sup> *Parsifal* has been seen as a 'late' work, even an almost incongruously modern work.<sup>13</sup> For Adorno in 1956, *Parsifal* exhibited both the Wagnerian *Altersstil* and the 'still disconcertingly new'.<sup>14</sup> In many respects, however, it may simply be considered as the work that stands, owing to Wagner's death, at the end of his dramatic explorations, with no more and no less than this entails.

### The biographical background

Let us begin biographically, then, in 1845. Wagner completed the score of *Tannhäuser* in April, ready for scheduled performance in Dresden that autumn, departing in July for

<sup>9</sup> Houston Stewart Chamberlain, 'Notes sur *Parsifal*', *Revue wagnérienne*, ii (1886–7), 220–26 (p. 225).

<sup>10</sup> Hans Küng, 'Wagner's *Parsifal*: A Theology for our Time', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, xxiii (1984), 311–33 (p. 311).

<sup>11</sup> Chamberlain, 'Notes sur *Parsifal*' (note 9), 226.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Wagner, 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, 16 vols. in 10 (Leipzig, 1912–14) [SS], iii.93. All translations are by the author.

<sup>13</sup> See Anthony Barone, 'Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* and the Theory of Late Style', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vii (1995), 37–54.

<sup>14</sup> Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, 'Zur Partitur des "Parsifal"', *Moments musicaux* (Frankfurt am Main, 1964), 52–7 (p. 52).

the Bohemian spa town of Marienbad. Two decades later, he would recount in his autobiography, *Mein Leben*:

I intended to abandon myself to a life of the utmost leisure, as is in any case essential when undergoing the exhausting regime of a cure. I had therefore chosen my summer reading with care: the poems of Wolfram von Eschenbach in the versions of Simrock and San Marte, together with the anonymous epic of Lohengrin with the great introduction by Görres. With a book under my arm I betook myself to the seclusion of the neighboring woods, where I would lie beside a brook communing with Titurel and Parzival in this strange and yet so intimately appealing poem of Wolfram. But soon the longing to create something of my own from what I found here became so strong that, although I had been warned against any stimulus of this kind while taking the waters at Marienbad, I had difficulty fighting off the impulse. This soon put me into a highly overwrought state of mind: *Lohengrin*, the first conception of which dates from the latter part of my time in Paris, stood suddenly revealed before me in full armour at the centre of a comprehensive dramatic adaptation of the whole material. [...] From a few remarks in Gervinius's *History of German Literature*, I had formed a particularly vivid picture of Hans Sachs and the mastersingers of Nuremberg.<sup>15</sup>

Deconstruction of Wagner's mythology has become an industry, yet this account has remained essentially uncontroversial. Indeed, Wagner wrote the first prose draft for *Die Meistersinger* during that vacation, although musical composition would not commence until 1862. Wolfram, whom Wagner had just depicted as an all-too-moral character in *Tannhäuser*, now furnished as summer reading the legend of Parsifal. However, centre stage would first be taken by Wagner's first grail opera, *Lohengrin*, explicitly connected with the figure of Parsifal. This would later provide cheap ammunition for Nietzsche: 'Parsifal is the father of Lohengrin! How did he manage that?'<sup>16</sup> But the dramas themselves are never explicitly connected, so that *Parsifal's* Parsifal can be and, so far as we know, shall remain a chaste hero, whilst being mentioned as Lohengrin's father in the earlier drama. (In Wolfram, Parzival has a wife early on, a situation irreconcilable with *Parsifal*.) *Lohengrin* was followed by the ever-expanding *Ring* project, its dramas explicitly connected, from which Wagner would break off to compose *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger*.

The idea of *Parsifal* was not static; it continued to develop. It is beyond the scope of this essay to present a full account of this development.<sup>17</sup> But there are two instances from the 1850s, both connected with the emergent *Tristan* drama, which require attention. (At the same time, we should bear in mind that the *Ring* was the focus of Wagner's attention for much of this period.) The year 1854 was a momentous one. Wagner embarked upon the composition of *Die Walküre*. Later in that year, during the autumn, he was introduced to the philosophy of Schopenhauer; without exaggeration, this was, as Thomas Mann remarked, 'the great event in Wagner's life'.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, he conceived the idea of an opera on the *Tristan* legend, after Gottfried von Strassburg. One

<sup>15</sup> Richard Wagner, *My Life*, tr. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1983), 302–3.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Der Fall Wagner', *Sämtliche Werke*, vi (note 3), §9, 34–5.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Beckett, *Parsifal* (note 2), 1–23.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Mann, 'Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner', *Essays of Three Decades*, tr. H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York, 1976), 330.

scene sketched, and later (wisely) rejected, introduces 'Parzival' as Wagner was still calling him. Visiting Tristan's castle of Kareol during his arduous wandering, Parzival witnesses Tristan in his mortal agony.<sup>19</sup> (The equivalent in *Parsifal* itself would be the extraordinary depiction of time passing and of compassionate wisdom hard won that is the Prelude to Act III.) Wagner would recollect: 'I identified Tristan, wasting away but unable to die of his wound, with the Amfortas of the Grail romance.'<sup>20</sup>

This does not happen in the completed *Tristan*, yet Wagner retained a subtler connection. At work on the same section of the third act in which he had considered having Parsifal appear, Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck:

This last act is now a real intermittent fever: – the deepest and most unprecedented suffering and yearning, and, immediately afterwards, the most unprecedented triumph and jubilation. [...] It is this thought that has most recently turned me against Parzival again. [...] It suddenly became dreadfully clear to me: it is my third-act Tristan inconceivably intensified. With the spear-wound and perhaps another wound, too, – in his [Anfortas's/Amfortas's] heart –, the wretched man knows of no other longing in his terrible pain than the longing to die [...] he demands repeatedly to be allowed a glimpse of the Grail in the hope that it might at least close his wounds [...] but the Grail can give him one thing only, which is precisely that he *cannot* die; its very sight increases his torments by conferring immortality upon them.

[...] And you expect me to carry though something like this? And set it to music, into the bargain? – No thank you very much!

[...] When my old friend Brünnhilde leaps into the funeral pyre, I shall plunge in after her, and hope to die a Christian! So be it! Amen!<sup>21</sup>

During the composition of Tristan's monologue, which pushes mortal agony beyond endurance, Wagner contemplates a drama in which this would be 'inconceivably intensified'. He declines to proceed, though much of this is rhetoric, for *Parsifal* is clearly on his mind. Even the *Ring's* gods are allowed to die: Wotan's redemption lies in acceptance of his mortality. Amfortas, however, is to be sentenced to immortality. So is Kundry, who therefore must die in redemption. *Parsifal* is thus also to be a drama intimately connected with and yet lying beyond the *Ring*. Moreover, Wagner in his letter connects Christianity with the Immolation Scene from *Götterdämmerung*, whose final version and the meaning thereof would cause him considerable indecision. When facetiously wishing his life to end before composing *Parsifal*, he also points the way towards it, whilst holding back, just as in *Parsifal* itself, from defining the precise nature of his attitude toward Christianity.

### Hegel and Schopenhauer

An abiding conflict, already starkly dramatised in the *Ring*, is taken further in *Parsifal*. There are various ways, each of them perhaps insufficient in itself, in which it might be

<sup>19</sup> Martin Geck and Egon Voss (eds), 'Dokumente zur Entstehung und ersten Aufführung des Bühnenweihfestspiels "Parsifal"', *Richard Wagner: Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus, Egon Voss and others (Mainz, 1970–), xxx.12.

<sup>20</sup> Wagner, *My Life* (note 15), 511.

<sup>21</sup> Letter of 30 May 1859 to Mathilde Wesendonck, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, tr. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London, 1987) [SL], 456–60.

characterised, but one lies in considering the conflict between Hegel or Hegelianism and Schopenhauer, or between history and anti-history. Conflict between subject and object lay at the heart of Hegel's ontology, and was expressed in the ensuing drama of history through the alienation (*Entfremdung*) of mind. In Hegel's own words: 'Enquiry as to the *means* whereby freedom produces itself as a [real] world leads us to [consider] the phenomenon [*Erscheinung*] of history itself.'<sup>22</sup> The 'phenomenon' is the actual, realised appearance of what it previously was in purely ideal terms; for *Erscheinung* may also be translated as 'epiphany', which we shall do well to bear in mind when considering what happens in *Parsifal*. History is the progress of the 'Idea' or 'World Spirit', which Hegel sometimes refers to as 'God', as it manifests itself in the phenomenal world. Heinrich von Treitschke would claim in the 1880s, with good reason, that Hegel's 'school' had exercised an influence in German life of a magnitude comparable only to that of the sophists in Athens.<sup>23</sup> When Wagner was at work on *Parsifal* and when, shortly after, Treitschke was writing his history of Germany, that school was not yet dead. Like Christianity, it had been written off several times, not least after the failure of revolution in 1848–9. Yet, obstinately, it continued to fight its corner, every bit as much in the Marx of *Capital* as in the Marx of the early, 'humanist' *Paris Manuscripts*. This it did also – in its ambiguity, perhaps still more interestingly – in Wagner.

It is in divergent readings and developments of Kant's philosophy that the conflict between Hegel and Schopenhauer is born, and as for Kant, the categories of time and space 'apply to objects only in so far as objects are viewed as appearances, and do not present things as they are in themselves'.<sup>24</sup> By the same token, the concepts of the understanding are 'mere forms of thought, without objective reality [...] Only *our* sensible and empirical intuition can give to them body and meaning [*Sinn und Bedeutung*].'<sup>25</sup> Kant's forms of space and time are those *a priori* conditions within the subject that render intuition possible. (For the pure concepts of the understanding, there are different categories, such as causality, unity, plurality and so forth, relating objects to one another.) Schopenhauer disdained history, and the philosophy of history as commonly understood, for concerning themselves with '(in Plato's words), what is always *becoming* and never *is*'. Anyone who had studied Herodotus had read enough history from the philosophical standpoint, for humanity was ever the same. Hegelian *Afterphilosophie* numbed the mind by regarding the phenomenon (*Erscheinung*) as the thing-in-itself, therefore concerning itself with the forms and events of the phenomenon.<sup>26</sup>

For Schopenhauer, it is the irrational Will and its consequent principle of individuation (*principium individuationis*) which posits Kant's *a priori* conditions of space and time. Will, in stark contrast to Hegel's Spirit, is resolutely non-developmental, though the two share a crucial priority of one universal principle through which we might

<sup>22</sup> Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, 'Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte', *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1969–72), xii.33.

<sup>23</sup> Heinrich von Treitschke, *History of Germany in the Nineteenth Century*, tr. Eden and Cedar Paul, 7 vols. (London, 1915–19), iv.568.

<sup>24</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (Basingstoke and New York, 2003), 80.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, 2 vols. (Munich, 2002), i.516–17, 514.

comprehend the world. Scorn the self-consciousness of Fichte, Hegel and their followers as he might, Schopenhauer remains in this respect firmly within the German Idealist tradition. Within Schopenhauer's framework, true reality lies in the noumenal realm of the Will itself, and music is the only art with a direct relationship to that realm. Musical drama becomes for the Schopenhauerian Wagner, and in some sense always had been, the metaphysical vehicle for granting real existence to the categories of the understanding, for penetrating, beyond the 'surface' words of his poem, to the essence of his myth.

Wagner remains in thrall to what Schopenhauer termed, by way of contrast to the categories of time and space, a 'spurious *a priori*, opposed to truth', in the guise of the historical specificity of the Hegelian subject.<sup>27</sup> In an early burst of enthusiasm for Schopenhauer, Wagner would exclaim: 'What charlatans all these *Hegels* etc. are beside him.'<sup>28</sup> His dramatic instinct would always prove more surely dialectical; the imprint of Young Hegelian self-consciousness would mark him and his dramas for ever. Yet, from 1854, when the poet Georg Herwegh, himself an erstwhile revolutionary and collaborator with Marx, introduced Wagner to Schopenhauer's writings, Wagner's attitude towards social and political progress became ambivalent.

History is ever present in *Parsifal*, just as it had been in the *Ring*. In the early stages of the *Ring* project, Wagner had depicted Beethoven's great orchestral works as 'real poems, in which an attempt is made to represent a real object'.<sup>29</sup> He subsequently extended this analysis to the motivic transformation of Liszt's symphonic poems, portraying them as an intermediary stage between Beethoven and music drama.<sup>30</sup> This sits somewhat uneasily with the chronology but points to the continuing importance for Wagner, even after his acquaintance with Schopenhauer's metaphysics of music, of the musical 'idea' and its manifestation. Preparing for his 1870 Beethoven centenary essay, suffused with Schopenhauerian aesthetics, Wagner noted: 'Sculptors and poets give nation what it would like to seem, – what it really is. [...] Beeth. = Schopenhauer: his music, translated into concepts, would produce that philosophy.'<sup>31</sup> So Beethoven is still there, a few years before the composition of *Parsifal*, but now allied to Schopenhauer rather than to Hegel and his progeny.

The shift had begun in the *Ring*, an important turning point both musically and dramatically, coming with resumption of work on *Siegfried*. The Prelude to Act III bears all the marks of the intervening composition of *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger*. The interplay of motifs and their counterpoint is now far more intense, providing the overwhelming impression of matters being brought to a head, of a world-historical moment, even if, in its apparent rejection or transcendence of world-history, it represents an anti-Hegelian turn. Prior to this, that recurrent and influential theme of Schiller's dramas – that man

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, 'On Philosophy and its Methods', *Parerga and Paralipomena*, tr. E.F.J. Payne, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1974), ii.15.

<sup>28</sup> Letter to Liszt of 16 (?) Dec. 1854, SL 323; *Sämtliche Briefe*, i–ix, ed. Gertrud Strobel, Werner Wolf and others (Leipzig, 1967–) [SB], vi.298.

<sup>29</sup> Letter to Uhlig, 13 Feb. 1852, SL 250; SB iv.285.

<sup>30</sup> 'Über Franz Liszt's Symphonische Dichtungen. (Brief an M.W.)', SS v.192–4.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Wagner, 'Beethoven and the German Nation', *The Diary of Richard Wagner 1865–1882: The Brown Book*, tr. G. Bird, ed. Joachim Bergfeld (London, 1980), 177.



must forge his own destiny – had been steadily acquiring a more marked anti-theological emphasis; indeed Schiller himself had claimed that even the Greeks had ‘transferred to Olympus what was meant to be realised on earth’.<sup>32</sup> For man, Wagner had written in notes upon Achilles, ‘is God perfected’. The eternal gods were merely the elements of man’s creation; man brought Creation to its conclusion. Achilles was therefore ‘higher, more complete than the elemental Thetis’.<sup>33</sup>

### **Heroic deeds**

Deeds or acts (*Taten*) had played a crucial role in determining the Volsungs’ fate. They should be understood in the context of the Young Hegelian elevation of the historical dynamism in Hegel’s dialectic, and into something with relevance not only for the past, not only for the present, but for the future. The teleology of Beethovenian symphonism, so crucial to Wagner’s own compositional practice, fused with its philosophical counterpart. Indeed, Wagner had claimed that the content of Beethoven’s ‘poetic idea’, even if this were not the composer’s intention, presented to the audience a ‘philosophical idea’.<sup>34</sup> As Fichte, principal begetter of much of the Young Hegelian prospectus, had written: ‘You act, and your will itself constitutes an act [*Tat*].’<sup>35</sup> There emerged a *Philosophie der Tat*: ‘philosophy of the deed’ or ‘philosophy of action’. ‘Tat und Tod’ (deed and death), Siegmund cries, as he prepares to draw the sword from the tree. Siegfried’s great act is fearlessly and unconsciously to shatter Wotan’s spear of state, enabling the hero to reach Brünnhilde on her rock and apparently to usher in a Feuerbachian revolution of *Liebeskommunismus*. Brünnhilde then ecstatically sends him out into the world, with the words, ‘To new deeds [*Taten*], dear hero; how could I love you – if I did not allow you to do so?’ Yet, although the deeds seem heroic and just, each of them ultimately fails – as, of course, had the revolutions of 1848–9, in which Wagner had fought on the barricades with the ‘real-life’ anarchistic hero, Bakunin.

For Wagner had come to believe that the charismatic hero as portrayed in the figures of Siegmund and Siegfried – also Tristan and Walther – could never live up to the revolutionary role designed for them. This was not, however, to say that charismatic heroes as such were to be abjured. Adorno was quite right to remark that the attempt at ‘changing the world is unsuccessful, but changing the world remains the point’.<sup>36</sup> Parsifal stands, as Tim Blanning has shown, in a long line of Wagnerian charismatic heroes, whose authority lies not in tradition or in law, but in the authority of a personal gift of grace, in the inspiration of particular, personal, revolutionary devotion.<sup>37</sup> This is

<sup>32</sup> Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, tr. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford, 1967), 109.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Bruchstücke eines Dramas “Achilleus”’, SS xii.283. It is uncertain whether these notes were intended theoretically or as a sketch for a drama. To ascribe so strong an opposition may in any case mislead.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Ein glücklicher Abend’, SS i.145.

<sup>35</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, ‘Die Bestimmung des Menschen’, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. I.H. Fichte, 10 vols. (Bonn and Berlin, 1834–46), ii.303.

<sup>36</sup> Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 2nd edn (Frankfurt am Main, 1981), 110.

<sup>37</sup> Tim Blanning, ‘Richard Wagner and Max Weber’, *wagnerspectrum*, ii (2005), 93–110 (pp. 96, 107–9).

of course a form of authority especially suited to heroes, and which is always likely to be problematical in the modern world, ever wary of and yet constantly hankering after such a potent form of power. Whatever his dark, Schopenhauerian thoughts regarding withdrawal from society, Wagner continued to engage with the external, political world. In Feuerbach's words, 'a man existing absolutely alone would lose himself without any sense of his individuality in the ocean of Nature.'<sup>38</sup>

Like Christ, Siegfried heralds 'freedom', as 'a new religion, the religion of our time', to quote Heine, an important influence upon Wagner.<sup>39</sup> Yet he is possessed of a fatal flaw; he is 'the rebel without consciousness'.<sup>40</sup> Siegmund was conscious, at least in part, of the meaning of his deeds, but Siegfried never is and therefore falls victim to Hagen's snares. Fafner accurately addresses Siegfried: 'You bright-eyed boy, who do not know yourself'. This is not in itself a problem, for self-knowledge, as in Parsifal's case, can be acquired. Yet, in Siegfried's case, it never is. If ever there were a community in need of redemption, it is that of the Gibichungs, yet Siegfried goes native and apparently achieves nothing, regaining his nobility only in death.

Parsifal is very different, his difference signifying an attempt to resolve the difficulties raised by Siegfried and Siegmund. What will become of Monsalvat, the grail castle and community, under his leadership remains unclear, but the drama is that of its rescue or salvation. A letter from 1862 is instructive. Wagner had broken off composition of *Siegfried* and was already thinking about *Parsifal*:

the myth of a Messiah is the most profoundly characteristic of all myths for all our earthly striving. The Jews expected someone who would liberate them, a Messiah who was supposed to restore the Kingdom of David and bring not only justice but, more especially, greatness, power, and safety from oppression. Well, everything went as predicted, his birth in Bethlehem, of the line of David, the prophecy of the three wise men, etc., his triumphant welcome to Jerusalem, palms strewn before him, etc. – there he stood, everyone listened, and he proclaimed to them: 'My kingdom is not of this world! Renounce your desires, that is the only way to be redeemed and freed!' – Believe me, all our political freedom fighters strike me as being uncannily like the Jews.<sup>41</sup>

Parsifal manages to discover whatever he needs through his own historical experience and the transformative influence this exerts; yet he does not appear to control his historical experience, so this is certainly not the freedom of the Jews or the 'political freedom fighters'. Despite Nietzsche's anti-*Parsifal* venom, it is very close to his portrayal of Jesus in *Der Antichrist*:

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. [...] One must not be led into error, however great the temptations lying in Christian, or better Church, prejudices [...] his 'wisdom' is precisely the pure ignorance [*reine*

<sup>38</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, tr. George Eliot (Buffalo, NY, 1989), 82.

<sup>39</sup> Heinrich Heine, 'Englische Fragmente', *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Oscar Walzel, 10 vols. (Leipzig, 1911–15), iii.501.

<sup>40</sup> Wapnewski, *Der traurige Gott* (note 7), 169.

<sup>41</sup> Letter of 15 June 1862 to Malwida von Meysenbug, SL 546.

Thorheit] of all such things. Culture is something he has never heard of; to make war upon it is not necessary for him.<sup>42</sup>

Yet there is a difference, for this Jesus, unlike Parsifal, acts. Indeed, Nietzsche recognises something akin to this distinction a few pages earlier, when he remarks:

Herr Renan [whom Wagner had read], this *Hanswurst in psychologicis*, has contributed the two most unseemly concepts to the explanation of the type of Jesus: the concept of the genius and that of the hero ('héros'). But if anything is not of the Gospel, it is the concept of the hero.<sup>43</sup>

If not only the heroism of Siegmund and Siegfried fails but that of the *Ring* itself does too, then *Parsifal* tells a different story, going beyond what Adorno interpreted as 'bourgeois triumph's drowning out the lie of heroic deeds [*Heldentaten*]'.<sup>44</sup> History may return in a less mendacious guise. Gurnemanz's narrations play an interesting and interconnected dual role here. In the first instance, *Parsifal's* prehistory is revealed to the audience, both verbally and musically. Were it not for Gurnemanz's account, we should know very little of Titurel's reign, and should hardly be justified in considering it to conform to the proper, or at least original, form of Monsalvat's constitution. At the same time, Gurnemanz's retelling of the story so far plays a crucial contemporary role *within* the drama, imparting a sense of communal history to an increasingly fractured society. The brotherhood would fall apart without its sense of history, which also provides a utopian hope for the future.<sup>45</sup> This is a Young Hegelian understanding of history, as exemplified by August von Cieszkowski, who had asked in 1838 whether the Hegelian philosophy of history might lead to a philosophy of the future, indeed to a political programme of social transformation, which he called 'historiosophy'. Cieszkowski had contended that philosophy in general must 'become a practical philosophy or rather of practical activity, of "praxis", which would exercise a direct influence upon social life and development of the future'.<sup>46</sup> Yet Schopenhauer makes his presence felt, for history is not enough. Gurnemanz's narrations may help prevent the community from collapsing, but they cannot enable it to flourish. This necessitates the noumenal world of the grail and the *deus ex machina* of the spear's suspension in mid-air at the sign of the Cross, which we might call the (historically necessary?) intervention of grace. Parsifal may have resisted Kundry, but he is not able alone to halt the negative progress of Klingsor.

There is a similar ambiguity in the music. There seems, however, to be less violent tension here and more fulfilment or reconciliation. This would have been anathema to Adorno's relentlessly negative dialectics, if not necessarily to Hegel. Such a reconciliation is doubtless partly a semblance, for the dialectic will not miraculously disappear at the sign of the Cross, but reconciliation perhaps also relates to the nature of the music. Motifs are less object- or idea-bound than those of the epic *Ring*; its tone is more variegated than that of *Tristan's* noumenal – perhaps even solipsistic – night. Alfred Lorenz

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, 'Der Antichrist: Fluch aus Christenthum', *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vi, §32, 204.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, §29, 199.

<sup>44</sup> Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner* (note 36), 47. Adorno refers to Wagner's music but one might also make a dramatic point.

<sup>45</sup> John Bokina gives an interesting account of *Parsifal* as a utopian, not historical opera: *Opera and Politics from Monteverdi to Henze* (New Haven and London, 1997), 86–110.

<sup>46</sup> August von Cieszkowski, *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* (Berlin, 1838), 129.

claimed that, having ‘mastered a [Wagnerian] work in all its detail’, the listener could sometimes thereby ‘experience moments in which consciousness of time disappears, and the whole work becomes what one might call “spatial”, that is, with everything simultaneously and precisely present in the mind’.<sup>47</sup> This we might consider to be the resistance of Schopenhauer to Hegel, a real, noumenal presence in the drama. It does not supplant ‘historical’ goal orientation; the two forces interact and do battle.

### The workings of grace and compassion

In *Parsifal*, then, we deal with a complex interaction between compassion (Schopenhauer), grace (Christianity) and the cunning of historical reason (Hegel). Christian grace, in all its ambiguity, mediates between compassion and history. It leads us to an attempted solution, both Schopenhauerian and Hegelian, to the Kantian problem of divine truth. Theoretical reconciliation of the noumenal and phenomenal words at that level might through grace be knowable to mortals. The more ‘dramatic’ music of the second act is in some ways a Hegelian foil to the ritualism of the first and third acts. As Arnold Whittall has noted, ‘the music of *Parsifal* reflects the greater concern with those more passive states of mind that rituals encourage.’<sup>48</sup> Yet development and ritual coexist and indeed cohere throughout the work to an extent unique in Wagner’s oeuvre, perhaps a reflection of the extraordinarily difficult task of dramatising renunciation. Moreover, even Adorno could see that the ‘simplicity’ (his inverted commas) of *Parsifal*’s orchestration was not merely reactionary, not merely ‘fallaciously sacral’, but carried out a ‘legitimate critique’ of the surviving ornamentalism in Wagner’s earlier orchestration. This critique presented itself as much in ‘a lugubrious dimming of sound’ (*eine düstere Abblendung des Klangs*), foreshadowing late Mahler, as in the ‘religiose’ brass choirs suggesting Bruckner and the Church.<sup>49</sup> Reconciliation of the dialectic between history and ontology, between time and space, is far from complete, as we shall see upon considering more closely the stage action – and non-action – of *Parsifal*.

Amfortas too is unable to do anything to rectify his plight; he must simply wait. He has acted – with disastrous results – and Klingsor impotently continues to act. The *locus classicus* of the contrast in *Parsifal* comes at the end of the second act, when Klingsor’s spear of ambition is stopped in its tracks by the sign of the Cross, making possible the spear’s transformation into an agent of healing. Parsifal makes the sign, but the agency comes from beyond.

For if Amfortas’s suffering and Parsifal’s discovery may be understood in some sense as related to the workings of grace, then there is a higher power at work: a higher power which one neglects or disavows at great cost to understanding of the work. For instance, Ruth Berghaus in her 1982 Frankfurt production had Parsifal and Kundry roll back grey canvases in order to reveal the green meadow of Good Friday: a crucial ‘deed’ on their part.<sup>50</sup> Yet, as she would have been only too aware, this deed that not only

<sup>47</sup> Alfred Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1924–33), i.292.

<sup>48</sup> Arnold Whittall, ‘The Music’, *Parsifal*, ed. Beckett (note 2), 85.

<sup>49</sup> Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner* (note 36), 75.

<sup>50</sup> See Barry Millington, ‘Parsifal: Facing the Contradictions’, *Musical Times*, cxxiv (1983), 97–8 (p. 98); Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven and London, 2006), 367–8.

desacralises but dechristianises the work stands at odds with Wagner's conception. A good thing, some might say, weary with sanctimony and ritual. However, to downplay, let alone to remove, the role of Christianity actually obscures rather than clarifies; the *telos* of the action becomes less comprehensible, the characters' actions arbitrary. For the moment, we can say that, should there be a higher power, then at least it appears to be the right one: God transcendent, rather than a Feuerbachian projection and inversion of human needs into the all-too-human gods of the *Ring*.

Lorenz, subsequently celebrated and vilified as the author of a vast four-volume study of the Wagner music dramas – the fourth devoted to *Parsifal* – and their allegedly absolute musical forms, wrote in 1901 an article entitled 'Parsifal as *Übermensch*'.<sup>51</sup> He claims that Nietzsche found the first form (*Gestalt*) of the idea of the *Übermensch* in the figure of Siegfried, after which Wagner's erstwhile disciple discerned in Parsifal 'Wagner's reversal, a turning away from enthusiasm for the harshness of heroism'. However, Lorenz argues that the development of the idea of the *Übermensch* is logically consistent (*folgerichtig*) from Siegfried to Parsifal.<sup>52</sup> Parsifal begins as a Siegfried-like figure: 'he also unknowingly carries out countless heroic deeds'. Yet he gains the strength, which according to Nietzsche he lacks, through *Mitleid*, the Schopenhauerian concept of pity or fellow suffering, thereby developing into the 'most glorious victor'.<sup>53</sup> For Schopenhauer and Wagner, *Mitleid* was closely connected, though not exclusively so, with Christianity, at least as properly understood. Cosima records in 1880: 'R. talks about sainthood and the withdrawal from life, in Schopenhauer's sense, and in connection with that he plays the Prelude to *Parsifal*'.<sup>54</sup> Again, she writes, a year later: 'Our conversation concerns Brahmanism, which R. praises as the religion of intelligence, but then he places Christianity above it as the religion of suffering.'<sup>55</sup>

Some of Lorenz's analysis is questionable. To speak of the *Übermensch* clouds the issue. Moreover, it is far from clear that Parsifal initially carries out countless *Heldentaten*. If his mindless shooting of an innocent swan, condemned by Gurnemanz as an 'unprecedented act', is heroic, then this already represents further deconstruction of the heroic idea as initiated in the *Ring*. The connection between fear (*Bang*) – or rather the lack thereof, which translates into lack of consciousness – and heroic deeds (*Taten*) has returned, but is presented negatively from the outset. If the *Ring*'s boy without fear has failed, Wagner does not need to show us this again; it may be assumed that, without development, the same thing would happen again, and this is not the stuff of a drama that goes further.

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<sup>51</sup> Alfred Lorenz-Gotha, 'Parsifal als *Übermensch*', *Die Musik*, i (1901–2), 1876–82; Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form* (note 47). Lorenz would subsequently attain notoriety on account of his enthusiastic support for National Socialism, not least in his 1930s articles on music and race. This does not mean that one should shun insights gleaned from earlier writing. On Lorenz, see Stephen Mc Clatchie, *Analyzing Wagner's Operas: Alfred Lorenz and German Nationalist Ideology* (Rochester, NY, 1998).

<sup>52</sup> Lorenz, 'Parsifal als *Übermensch*' (note 51), 1876.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1877.

<sup>54</sup> *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, tr. and ed. Geoffrey Skelton, 2 vols. (London, 1978–80) [CT], 24 Feb. 1880.

<sup>55</sup> CT, 25 March 1881.

GURNEMANZ

You did [*tatest*] this?And you are not anxious in the face of the deed? [*Und bangt' es dich nicht vor der Tat?*]

[...]

Act unheard of!

You could murder, here in the holy forest,  
whose silent peace surrounded you?

This is certainly an unknowing act. Lorenz is right to point to the turning point in Act II of Parsifal feeling Amfortas's agony and to the general developmental tendency in Wagner's presentation. He is also right to see Parsifal as a development of what is 'positive' in Siegfried, and not, whatever Nietzsche might say, as 'a weakening'. Lorenz provocatively declares that it is 'incomprehensible' to associate the word *Mitleid* with weakness.<sup>56</sup> Schopenhauer's denigration of the phenomenal world notwithstanding, this Schopenhauerian notion of pity or compassion is perforce social; it entails sympathy with (*mit*) others' sorrow (*Leid*). Parsifal's mother was called Herzeleide ('Heart's Sorrow'). Her tragedy had been her separation from society, to the extent that even Parsifal had forgotten about her and left her to die. There had been no *Mitleid* to leaven the sorrow of her heart.

Absent from Lorenz's article and from many other treatments is consideration of grace as the fount of what Parsifal might accomplish through true strength rather than toy-soldierish deeds. Parsifal's initial 'Whatever flies I hit in flight!' is the equivalent of Siegfried's proclamation, arriving at the court of the Gibichungs: 'Now fight me, or be my friend!' But this is a starting point for Parsifal, whereas it encapsulates Siegfried's fatal flaw. Wagner is exploring Christian as well as Schopenhauerian critiques of Siegfried's heroism. Christianity is not merely a formal shroud cast over Schopenhauerian content, although a distinction between style and idea may in some cases be valid.

### Deeds of grace

The question must be asked what it is that Parsifal actually does in order to rejuvenate the decaying community rather than fall prey to it. The answer lies not in shooting a swan, nor even in felling Klingsor's men and defeating their master. We are helped again by recalling the *Ring*. Wagner had taken words of Feuerbach's Young Hegelian confrère, Max Stirner – 'The unique person will work himself forth out of society all right, but society brings forth no unique person' – as an indication that Siegfried must, like the heroes of old, have a birth and upbringing unlike those of other men.<sup>57</sup> Some of this remains in Parsifal: his sheltered, fatherless upbringing by Herzeleide and ensuing development through self-defence in the deserts and dales. Following its 1882 performances, Wagner wrote that the work *Parsifal* itself 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, organised and legalised through lying, deception, and hypocrisy,

<sup>56</sup> Lorenz, 'Parsifal als Übermensch' (note 51), 1877–9.

<sup>57</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego and its Own*, tr. Steven Byington, ed. David Leopold (Cambridge, 1995), 238.

without having to turn away, shuddering in disgust? Whither 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.<sup>58</sup>

Couched in the language of post-Schopenhauerian metaphysics, there nevertheless remains here a Bakunin-like anger at the world of lies, deception and hypocrisy, tempered by Christian redemptive prophecy.

This, however, is but a prelude to Parsifal's development as witnessed onstage. Wagner realises that if society brings forth no unique person, then some form of external intervention may be necessary. Even the oddest upbringing cannot evade the dialectical relationship between the monad-like bourgeois individual and civil society. The relationship is not that of the vulgar Hegelian thesis and antithesis; rather the historically developing nature of each is inextricably linked to that of the other. This is why, in *Die Meistersinger*, a 'later' work than is often credited, mediation is required for the proper exercise of aesthetic judgement: Hans Sachs – or Wagner – both returns art to the people and transforms popular art into something far more valuable. Grace, however frustratingly undefined, might act similarly, on a more metaphysical level, providing redemption to the redeemable. This is not a mere return of Erda's Fate under another name; though there may be something of Fate *aufgehoben*, there is also something quite new and spontaneous. It is quickening, to use an appropriately Christian term, or, if one prefers, it appertains to the spring (*Lenz*) of Wotan's initial hopes for Siegmund and Sieglinde's union. If the Incarnation were the world-historical event which for Hegel had changed everything, then another divine intervention, perhaps to some extent related to that singular event, might exert a transformative effect for one of Hegel's followers on the left. Thus Wagner was not being disingenuous, nor was he simply changing his mind, when, having described *Parsifal* in 1879 as 'this most Christian of works', he could then write quite differently, or at least more ambiguously, more dialectically, a year later.<sup>59</sup> This is very much a Young Hegelian writing, albeit one who has managed to a certain degree to reconcile the god-man with Schopenhauerian metaphysics:

I am almost afraid that we shall have difficulty in reaching an understanding with our friends and patrons on the future meaning and significance of the incomparably and sublimely simple and true redeemer who appears to us in the historically intelligible figure of Jesus of Nazareth, but who must first be cleansed and redeemed of the distortion that has been caused by Alexandrine, Judaic and Roman despotism. Nevertheless, although we are merciless in abandoning the Church and the priesthood and, indeed, the whole historical phenomenon of Christianity, our friends must always know that we do so for the sake of that same Christ whom – because of His utter incomparability and recognisability – we wish to preserve in His total purity, so that – like all the other sublime products of man's artistic and scientific spirit – we can take Him with us into those terrible times which may very well follow the necessary destruction of all that at present exists.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> 'Das Bühnenweihfestspiel in Bayreuth 1882', SS x.307.

<sup>59</sup> Letter of 25 Aug. 1879 to Ludwig II, SL 897.

<sup>60</sup> Letter of 17 Jan. 1880 to Hans von Wolzogen, SL 898–9.

Parsifal, it is worth stressing, is not Christ, nor even Jesus of Nazareth. Wagner criticised Hans von Wolzogen, in an essay on *Parsifal* he otherwise admired, for ‘calling Parsifal a reflection of the Redeemer: “I didn’t give the Redeemer a thought when I wrote it”’.<sup>61</sup> The latter claim ought probably to be taken with a large pinch of salt, but the anxiety to avoid identification should be noted, however we may account for it. Indeed, in a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, Wagner had long before forecast the work’s final, enigmatic line, ‘Erlösung dem Erlöser!’ (Redemption to the Redeemer!). Wagner here makes clear a Feuerbachian, or perhaps better David Straussian, understanding of what this might entail, albeit through *echt*-Schopenhauerian language and understanding of suffering. He wishes somehow to retain the impulse to transcend without its attainment, almost presaging a Nietzschean morality of strenuousness:

But I am also clear in my own mind why I can even feel greater fellow-suffering for lower natures than for higher ones. A higher nature is what it is precisely because it has been raised by its own suffering to the heights of resignation [think of his Wotan], or else has within it – and cultivates – the capacity for such a development. Such a nature is extremely close to mine, is indeed similar to it, and with it I attain to fellow-joy. That is why, basically, I feel less fellow-suffering for people than for animals. For I can see that the latter are totally denied the capacity to rise above suffering, and to achieve a state of resignation and deep, divine calm. And so, in the event of their suffering, as happens when they are tormented, all I see – with a sense of my own tormented despair – is their absolute, redemption-less suffering without any higher purpose, their only release being death which confirms my belief that it would have been better for them never to have entered upon life. And so, if this suffering can have a purpose, it is simply to awaken a sense of fellow-suffering in man, who thereby absorbs the animal’s defective existence, and becomes the redeemer of the world by recognising the error of all existence. (This meaning will one day become clearer to you from the Good Friday morning scene in the third act of *Parzifal*.)<sup>62</sup>

That is the moment at which Parsifal is ready to act not as Christ in any divine sense, but through his increased capacity for compassion in Christ’s stead as an earthly redeemer to Kundry and thereafter to the moribund community of the grail. We can understand in Young Hegelian *and* Schopenhauerian terms such deputising, demystification, or transformation. (The precise characterisation depends on how one interprets the undeniable fact that Christ, unlike God, is never named in the drama.) Those positive attributes man had once denied himself by granting them to the deity are now returned to earth: this is pure Feuerbach. In more metaphysical terms, because, as Ulrike Kienzle points out, ‘every individual represents the whole of existence, each individual can become, according to Schopenhauer, either Adam (fallen mankind) or Christ (the Redeemer)’.<sup>63</sup> Beyond naive supernaturalism and reductive rationalist naturalism lay what David Strauss had called the ‘new viewpoint’, the ‘mythical’.<sup>64</sup> In *Parsifal*, the two views are united and indeed extended, for through Parsifal’s redemption of others he himself may be redeemed.

<sup>61</sup> CT, 21 Oct. 1878.

<sup>62</sup> Letter to Mathilde Wesendonck of 1 Oct. 1858, SL 423–4.

<sup>63</sup> Ulrike Kienzle, ‘*Parsifal* and Religion: A Christian Music Drama?’, tr. Mary A. Cicora, *A Companion to Wagner’s ‘Parsifal’*, ed. Kinderman and Syer (note 7), 81–130 (p. 93).

<sup>64</sup> David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, 2 vols. (Tübingen, 1835–6), ii, p. iv.





A Christ-like Parsifal heals Amfortas. Franz Stassen illustration for *Parsifal*

That awakening of fellow suffering of which Wagner writes to Mathilde Wesendonck has earlier been portrayed onstage, when Gurnemanz chides Parsifal for his wanton shooting of the swan:

GURNEMANZ

Act unheard of!

[...]

What did that innocent swan do to you?

[...]

Here – look! – here, you struck him;

his blood is still congealing, his wings hanging feebly,

his snowy plumage darkly stained –

his eyes are glazed over, can you see his look?

(*Parsifal has heard Gurnemanz with growing emotion: now he breaks his bow and throws away his arrows.*)

[Now] do you feel your sinful deed [*Sündentat*] from within?

I described this earlier as an unknowing act, yet it is also the first stage, if only in retrospect, of Parsifal's awakening to suffering and to consciousness. Grace comes to play a greater part in *Parsifal* than those words of Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck might suggest, yet there remains a battle between transcendence and its opposite. However, even there, that 'capacity to rise above suffering' – and we should note that it is a 'capacity' rather than an attainment of all – does seem to point towards grace. The ability of some, such as Wotan, the saints, or of course Wagner himself, to rise above is not so very far removed from Christian mysticism. And Wagner, both before and during his writing of *Parsifal*, would evince increasing interest in that tradition, not least in the writings of Meister Eckhart, also greatly admired by Schopenhauer. 'Our conversation leads us to the mystic Meister Eckhart', Cosima records. '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!'<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, Wagner, again in conversation with Cosima, contrasted Christ with the founders of other religions and saints in that he was without sin; others 'started as sinners and became saints'.<sup>66</sup> This set Wagner at odds with Renan. Strauss and other predecessors had not really offered a 'life of Jesus'; theirs had been works of biblical criticism. Renan, however, had produced a biography, albeit a biography that made it difficult to understand why Jesus might have been considered, let alone might yet be considered, the Son of God. If anything, success appears to have gone to his head, and therefore the hero, like Siegfried, has been corrupted by civilisation, as is most starkly illustrated in the fraudulent 'resurrection' of Lazarus. 'Everything, in fact, seems to lead us to believe that the miracles of Bethany contributed sensibly to hasten the death of Jesus.'<sup>67</sup> We may recall that Siegfried's death had been hastened by recounting his 'miracles' to Hagen and the vassals. However, Parsifal, by the grace of grace, never succumbs to such hubris.

<sup>65</sup> CT, 26 Oct. 1873.

<sup>66</sup> CT, 12 May 1877.

<sup>67</sup> Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus*, tr. unknown (London, 1904), 124–5.

Yet the lack of development distinguishes Wagner's Christ from Parsifal too. For Hegel, in this at least an orthodox Christian, the Incarnation had been a unique event, both historical and so utterly transformative that it might just as readily qualify as coming from without history altogether, that which is necessary to enable modern history to commence.<sup>68</sup> This has nothing to do with Parsifal, who is but a man. Like Siegfried, Parsifal must at least commence his journey with Stirnerian 'uniqueness' and only thereafter be enabled, whether by grace or destruction – perhaps the distinction is false – to accept such 'redemption'. And so, Parsifal arrives upon the scene knowing nothing and shoots dead a swan, to music as hapless in its (mock?) heroism as that of Siegfried entering the Gibichung court. Parsifal's deed achieves nothing except first to rouse the ire of those he meets and to expose his ignorance. The latter, it seems, may have fortunate consequences, but that hope is dashed when Gurnemanz realises that Parsifal is not the pure fool required, but just a fool. In any case, none of this was Parsifal's intention, if indeed he had one, when shooting the bird; it seems far more of a Siegfried-like unconscious deed. Parsifal then reacts to Kundry during Act II, and thereby experiences Amfortas's pain; yet once again, he does not really *do* anything himself.

The exception, arguably, is making the sign of the Cross with the spear and thereby annihilating Klingsor and his magic garden. This is worth returning to, but at the moment it should be emphasised that it is not a straightforward exception: Parsifal is able to do this only because of some miraculous, supernatural intervention, which suspends the spear hurled by Klingsor in mid-air. We seem here to be in the realm of symbolism, or at least closer to the realm of symbolism than elsewhere. In fact, Wagner, as Robin Holloway has pointed out, is in practice stubbornly realistic, even when the content is symbolic.<sup>69</sup> There are no instances of Bachian number-play, no Brahmsian ciphers in Wagner: he calls a spear a spear, even if the Hegelian concept (*Begriff*) of the spear is far more complex than its initial representation (*Vorstellung*) might suggest. Those Hegelian words with which Wagner opened his contemporaneous essay, *Religion and Art*, should always be borne in mind:

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 [*eigentlich*] sense, may be comprehended through their symbolical value, in order to discern therein, via an ideal presentation, the concealed profound truth.<sup>70</sup>

At any rate, Pierre Boulez is right to say that Kundry's calling of Parsifal's name and the kiss are '*revelations* that help Parsifal first to understand and then to cast himself in his true role'.<sup>71</sup> The mature Parsifal certainly does not lie 'beyond good and evil', however ingenious Lorenz's portrayal of Titurel as 'representative of the customarily good [*Sittlich-Guten*]' and Klingsor of 'the customarily evil [*Sittlich-Bösen*]', with a third way all too readily available for the Wagnerian *Übermensch*. Lorenz remarks that Parsifal

<sup>68</sup> Hegel, 'Philosophie der Geschichte' (note 22), 385–93.

<sup>69</sup> Robin Holloway, 'Motif, Memory and Meaning in "Twilight of the Gods"', *Twilight of the Gods / Götterdämmerung*, ed. Nicholas John (London and New York, 1985), 13–38.

<sup>70</sup> Wagner, 'Religion und Kunst', SS x.211.

<sup>71</sup> Pierre Boulez, 'Approaches to *Parsifal*', *Orientations*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, tr. Martin Cooper (London and Boston, 1986), 247.

must symbolically ask in Act I who is good and who is evil.<sup>72</sup> True enough, but this is but his point of departure. Parsifal must go beyond his ignorance on this matter, and realises perfectly well after his moment of recognition that Kundry's blandishments are evil and therefore to be resisted. He is no longer a *reine Tor*, nor a *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (man without qualities); part of the urgency for resisting Kundry is to reach Amfortas, a goal announcing itself through the transformative epiphany of compassion.

However, Boulez goes a little too far to say that these are 'the revelations', implying that these accomplish rather than point the way. What actually accomplishes Parsifal's transformation occurs between acts, or during the Prelude to Act III. Whilst Robert Morgan has rightly pointed to a circularity in this prelude, related to Parsifal's as yet fruitless search for the grail, there is an equally important dynamism, as noted by William Kinderman.<sup>73</sup> What Parsifal subsequently learns on his travels – which may still in some sense encompass the knowledge gained from the envisaged visit to Tristan – is not to be attributed to his own agency, nor even perhaps that of any other mortal. Whether secular or atheist commentators like it or not, and whether indeed *Parsifal* 'is' a Christian work, this is the realm not just of self-realisation, but also and primarily of that divine gift known as grace, which might alleviate the sorry lot of man's sinful existence. Grace supplants or at least permits self-realisation. Michael Tanner argues that there is 'no point in Parsifal's development at which one could say that without the intervention of divine grace he would have remained powerless to accomplish his mission'.<sup>74</sup> Yet this is to ignore the several, far-from-incidental references to *Gnade* in Wagner's text – its first theological usage in a Wagner drama since *Lohengrin* – and to transform the terms of his drama. This is perfectly permissible as an idea for a production of *Parsifal*, but more questionable for an interpretation of the work itself, a concept to which Tanner certainly holds.<sup>75</sup> It is more difficult to consider the ongoing, developing role in the drama of grace as merely symbolic than it is, say, the grail or Klingsor's sorcery. Boulez and Wieland Wagner agreed in correspondence on the importance of 'desacralisation' of *Parsifal*, and were probably right to do so; those last gasps of early 20th-century 'Bayreuth Idealism', which had somehow survived the 1951 institution of 'New Bayreuth', could hardly have been perpetuated beyond the death of Hans Knappertsbusch.<sup>76</sup> It does not follow, however, that *Parsifal* has no theological message to impart. When, in Act III, the hero 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 this and this alone

<sup>72</sup> Lorenz, 'Parsifal als Übermensch' (note 51), 1880.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Morgan, 'Dissonant Prolongation: Theoretical and Compositional Precedents', *Journal of Music Theory*, xx (1976), 49–91 (pp. 62–72, esp. 72); William Kinderman, 'The Third-Act Prelude of Wagner's *Parsifal*: Genesis, Form, and Dramatic Meaning', *19th-Century Music*, xxix (2005–6), 161–84 (p. 180).

<sup>74</sup> Michael Tanner, *Wagner* (London, 1996), 198.

<sup>75</sup> Nikolaus Lehnhoff's English National Opera production presented a fine if problematical case for a production which entirely dispensed with Christian aspects of the work, taking as its starting point *The Waste Land*. It may be seen in its Baden-Baden incarnation on Opus Arte DVD OA 0915 D.

<sup>76</sup> Boulez, 'Wieland Wagner: "Here space becomes time"', *Orientations* (note 71), 243.

that enables him finally to carry out his deed, to heal Amfortas's wound, and thereby to put Amfortas out of his eternal agony and, crucially, to rejuvenate the community. Carl Dahlhaus therefore writes that Parsifal 'does not act, nor direct himself towards a goal (except in his search for the Grail, which he finds through grace not effort) [...] he comes to himself through reaction, not resolution'.<sup>77</sup>

There is much truth in this claim, and it sheds interesting light upon the question of the later Wagner's relationship towards Christianity. Wotan's deeds have failed owing to his power-lust and his concomitant desire to perpetuate any achievement beyond its natural life-span; Siegmund's deeds have failed owing to his lack of actual freedom, Wotan still hovering in the background, and Siegfried's deeds have failed owing to his lack of consciousness. Parsifal may yet succeed through the intervention of something transcending that exclusively human agency upon which the Young Hegelian Wagner had insisted in his tale of the gods' downfall. Cosima records Wagner, whilst at work on the score in 1878, sounding as atheistic as Schopenhauer or Feuerbach:

Our final words yesterday had to do with the Godhead; I: 'I must believe in it – my unworthiness and my happiness lead me to believe.' He: 'The first part, your unworthiness, you can cross out; Godhead is Nature, the will which seeks salvation and, to quote Darwin, selects the strongest to bring this salvation about.'<sup>78</sup>

Yet there is something mystical even here, as indeed there is in different ways in Schopenhauer and Feuerbach, about the force at work. Indeed, a few months later, Wagner condemned 'this trivial cult of atheism'.<sup>79</sup> And when it came to his dramatic composition, it seems that he was able and willing to go further along a Christian route than in such comments. To accuse him of disingenuousness places the burden of proof upon the accuser. The dramatic imperative of going beyond the *Ring* wins out over his hostility towards the Church. Almost despite himself – on account, we might say, of the Will's striving towards salvation – he is drawn or driven towards Christianity, or at any rate towards important elements of Christian teaching. In this respect, Wagner resembles Wotan and Kundry: '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.'<sup>80</sup> Yet both, whether through the urgings of the Will or through the mediating agency of grace, go beyond their respective rebellions and are saved, Kundry less ambiguously so than Wotan. 'I do not believe in God,' Wagner said, 'but in godliness, which is revealed in a Jesus *without sin*.'<sup>81</sup> This is certainly not orthodox Christianity, but it is inconceivable without Christ, or indeed without Christianity.

### **Community and ritual**

This comes close to Wagner's meaning when telling Ludwig II of the 'purity of content and subject-matter of my *Parsifal*'. To that end, he wished to restrict performances to Bayreuth or, better understood, to protect the work from 'a common operatic career'.

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<sup>77</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, tr. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1979), 147.

<sup>78</sup> CT, 24 Jan. 1878.

<sup>79</sup> CT, 6 Aug. 1878.

<sup>80</sup> CT, 5 June 1878.

<sup>81</sup> CT, 20 Sept. 1879.

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 self-same boards in which, yesterday and tomorrow, frivolity sprawls in luxuriant ease'.<sup>82</sup> Boulez understood this when he admiringly portrayed Wagner loathing a system in which 'opera houses are [...] like cafés where [...] you can hear waiters calling out their orders: 'One *Carmen*! And one *Walküre*! And one *Rigoletto*!' This was not simply a matter of offended *amour propre*, but the incompatibility of Wagner's works with existing theatrical conventions and norms.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, Cosima writes of Wagner 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.'<sup>84</sup> The religious nature of Attic tragedy is to be renewed by, not in spite of, the fruits of (Christian) modernity. Wagner assumes the place Goethe had allotted to Shakespeare, when writing that the Englishman combined old and new to an 'extravagant' degree: whilst each character 'must' (Greek fate, or tragic necessity), he also 'willed' (modern subjectivity).<sup>85</sup> The essential nature of Wagnerian music drama was as much at odds with the apparent trivialities of contemporary 'opera' as was its subject matter. *Parsifal* presents the *ne plus ultra* in both respects.

Wagner, it should be noted, does not claim that *Parsifal* itself is a sacred rite, but that it presents such a rite, namely Holy Communion, onstage. The rite, however, is not merely staged, but re-presented at a time of profound crisis for the community of Monsalvat. Amfortas, not only king but high priest, has succumbed to the blandishments of Kundry and therefore been caught offguard by Klingsor, wounded, apparently irreparably, by his own spear, captured by Klingsor and yet the only weapon that can heal the wound. Without the spear, moreover, the grail, which the increasingly frail Amfortas can hardly bear to uncover, stands in danger of capture by the community's adversaries. As Suzanne Stewart points out, this crisis is intensified by Wagner's continual diverting of the audience's gaze towards Amfortas's wound.<sup>86</sup> This, in accordance with his musico-dramatic precepts, he does gesturally, verbally, and musically. The second-act cry of recognition, 'Amfortas! – the wound!', is preceded by Kundry's kiss and its *Tristan*-chord: 'love's first kiss,' according to her trivial (Flowermaiden) or warped (Klingsor) understanding of 'love'. The *Tristan* chord marking the kiss makes the connection with Wagner's earlier drama and its Nietzschean 'voluptuousness of hell' far more profoundly than *Parsifal* appearing onstage in it could ever have done.<sup>87</sup> *Parsifal* recoils in terror. 'His demeanour', read Wagner's stage directions, 'expresses

<sup>82</sup> Letter of 28 Sept. 1880, SL 903.

<sup>83</sup> Boulez, 'Time Re-explored', *Orientalisms* (note 71), 262.

<sup>84</sup> CT, 5 April 1881.

<sup>85</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Shakespeare und kein Ende!', *Sämtliche Werke, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, 39 vols. in 43, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer and others (Frankfurt am Main, 1985–99), xix.641–5.

<sup>86</sup> Suzanne R. Stewart, 'The Theft of the Operatic Voice: Masochistic Seduction in Wagner's *Parsifal*', *Musical Quarterly*, lxxx (1996), 597–628 (p. 607).

<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, 'Ecce homo', *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* (note 3), vi: 'Warum ich bin so klug', §6, 290.

a terrible change; he presses his hands forcefully against his heart, as if to overcome a rending pain [*wie um einen zerreißenden Schmerz zu bewältigen*]. This pain is not only verbalised but also sounded in the screams of the orchestral sequences, both harmonically and melodically, of more or less unresolved diminished 7th chords, their dissonance enhanced and their tonal function complicated, though not eliminated, by added notes. In fact, these mixture chords both loosen the bonds of tonality and bind the chords on their own terms more closely together, thereby anticipating Schoenberg. As Adorno noted, in Parsifal's cry Wagner exceeded in power even Tristan's curse upon love, 'so he placed eight bars in the centre of his work, which, in their total structure, stand immediately upon the threshold of atonality'.<sup>88</sup> Yet it is only, as Adorno then reminded us, upon the threshold. This is not *Erwartung*, nor even the atonal flirtation of Liszt; it is more akin to late Mahler. Scruton rightly objects to the understandable tendency to view *Tristan* as a 'final jettisoning' of tonality, even though it points the way in retrospect.<sup>89</sup> The same holds for the expanded and at times floating tonality of *Parsifal*. Reconciliation – societal, liturgical and tonal – is still held out as a hope, however pious, and will be attempted both within this act and within the work as a whole.

The agony of the wound intensifies and symbolises the crisis of Monsalvat; it is worth noting that the intensity of this *Mitleid* is such that it passes, in Arnold Whittall's words, 'beyond relationship into identification. Parsifal's memory of Amfortas's lament and the Grail ceremony is so acute [...] that his own motifs do not appear at all'.<sup>90</sup> Yet the crisis itself has not suddenly presented itself; it lies in the modern, subjectivist decay or degeneration of the ancient community. I therefore dispute Stewart's claim that the principal question concerning *Parsifal*, assuming that such a question should exist, is 'not so much [...] of its thematics (*Parsifal* is clearly *about* religious themes) but rather a question regarding its status as ritual, its performative impact'.<sup>91</sup> This distinction is false, for the 'performative' impact partly relies upon the 'thematics'. It is indeed the crisis of ritual within the drama that provides a starting point for the greater success of ritual, certainly onstage and perhaps as a rite in some ambiguous sense incorporating the audience, in Act III. Parsifal as well as the audience needs the agony of Amfortas's wound, although it will take divine intervention for the fool to feel it, to be enlightened through fellow suffering: 'durch Mitleid wissend, der reine Tor'. These words and their music are repeated in ritualistic fashion, but at the same time develop in their meaning, owing to the development of the drama. Only after grace imparts to Parsifal the *Mitleid* concerning this impediment to Communion will he gain the understanding necessary to save Monsalvat and its rite, and thus to fulfil and to resolve the 'durch Mitleid...' prophecy, however ambiguously.

The drama and its hero may therefore redeem, or at least appear to redeem, the rite onstage and renew, or at least appear to renew, the communal, religious, and indeed political role of Attic tragedy, without sacrificing – and this is unambiguously Hegelian – the introduction of Christian subjectivity into the world. Wagner had attempted this

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<sup>88</sup> Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner* (note 36), 62.

<sup>89</sup> Roger Scruton, *Death-devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's 'Tristan and Isolde'* (Oxford and New York, 2004), 79.

<sup>90</sup> Whittall, 'The Music' (note 48), p. 77.

<sup>91</sup> Stewart, 'The Theft of the Operatic Voice' (note 86) '598.

in the *Ring* and makes a further attempt, starting from where he had left off, in *Parsifal*.<sup>92</sup> Aeschylus's Herald in *Agamemnon* had been able to ask: 'who, except the gods, can live time through forever without any pain?'<sup>93</sup> For Hegel and his followers, the subjectivity of the modern world rendered such a standpoint untenable; the agony of the god-man upon the Cross was a paradigmatic case in every sense. Amfortas's agony, with which Parsifal through grace may come to sympathise, is not, given the uniqueness of the Incarnation in Hegel's case and of Jesus' perfect example for Wagner, identical with this paradigm. The agonies experienced in *Parsifal* are, however, dependent upon this subjectivist agony of Christ. It is no coincidence, moreover, that Kundry's agony of reincarnation dates back to her laughter at the foot of the Cross. This original moment of laughter, in philosophical, historical and dramatic terms, remains the defining moment of fracture, which she is doomed to relive throughout eternity, that is, beyond history, unless grace should revivify history and its concomitant of death. James Plaskitt observes that Wagner grants death 'a positive value of the sort given to life itself by the Romantics', a thoroughly Hegelian transformation.<sup>94</sup> In fact, similar thoughts are voiced, or at least pointed to, by some of the Romantics themselves, such as Novalis: 'Life is the beginning of death. Life is for the sake of death. Death is at the same time an ending and a beginning, a parting and closer reunion with the self. Through death purification is completed.'<sup>95</sup> Both Amfortas and Kundry long for death and, before them, Wotan's salvation had lain in acceptance of death, personal and political. Kundry's curse is a negation demanding a reconciliation, whose discovery is modernity's challenge; the curse is visited upon her in every modern (Christian) generation and upon those generations themselves.

### The Eucharist and society

For Suzanne Stewart, Wagner's 'entire theological and aesthetic system for *Parsifal* comes together in the Eucharist'.<sup>96</sup> If so, this raises questions rather than answers them, for we must consider the historical state in which the Eucharist now finds itself, in terms both of Monsalvat and of the 19th century. In 1865, following the birth of his daughter Isolde von Bülow, Wagner held a number of discussions with a Benedictine priest, Father Petrus (Anton) Hamp, expressly to further his understanding of the Mass, its origins and the doctrine of transubstantiation.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, Wagner's friendship with the Abbé Liszt would be closer than ever once the breach over Cosima had been put right.

<sup>92</sup> Mark Berry, 'Richard Wagner and the Politics of Music Drama', *Historical Journal*, xlvii (2004), 663–83 (pp. 666–70).

<sup>93</sup> Aeschylus, 'Agamemnon', tr. R. Lattimore, *Greek Tragedies*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago and London, 1991–), i, lines 553–4.

<sup>94</sup> James Plaskitt, "'The language of passion': Wagner and Romanticism", *Wagner 1976: A Celebration of the Bayreuth Festival*, ed. Stewart Spencer (London, 1976), 156–65.

<sup>95</sup> Novalis, 'Pollen', *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, tr. and ed. Frederick Beiser (Cambridge, 1996), §14, 11 (translation slightly modified).

<sup>96</sup> Stewart, 'The Theft of the Operatic Voice' (note 86), 603.

<sup>97</sup> Anton Hamp, *Ein Blick in die Geisterwerkstatt Richard Wagners: Von einem alten geistlichen Freunde des Meisters von Bayreuth zur Erinnerung an dessen Schwanengesang – den 'Parzival'* (Berlin, 1904), 14; Kurt Küppers, 'Richard Wagner und der christliche Gottesdienst', *Forum katholische Theologie*, viii (1992), 38–59 (pp. 51–2).



However, the Eucharist is not for Wagner an ahistorical given; its status and meaning change, in Young Hegelian style, through history. A Lutheran, however heterodox, Wagner had, through profound study, 'taken the trouble to find out all that he could – in so far as it was possible at the time – about the genetic development and structure of the Roman Mass, but at the same time he penetrated its problems'.<sup>98</sup> He then re-presents the rite, *aufgehoben* through the agency of some intervention equating either to grace or to the movement of the world-historical spirit. (For many a Hegelian, the two would be difficult to disentangle.) The Church authorities might justifiably raise 'an entirely legitimate protest' against such heterodoxy, though Wagner does not say so. Nevertheless, Cosima records him stating his belief 'that Christianity can still be rescued for future ages and that up till now it has only experienced its barbarian epochs'. This he remarked whilst reading Renan's *Life of Jesus*. The following day, contrary to Cosima's request, he attended her daughter Blandine's Communion.<sup>99</sup>

It is not only the Eucharist whose *Aufhebung* Wagner attempts, but that of Christianity and even of society itself. Wagner never quite surrenders his Hegelian view of purpose to the essential meaninglessness Schopenhauer saw in the world and its representation, although the latter certainly complicates the quest for the former. Monsalvat (*mons salvatoris*) is more a realm 'in need of salvation' than 'of salvation' – just as the meaning of the final motif in *Götterdämmerung* had been closer to redemption *of*, rather than *through* love.<sup>100</sup> Monsalvat is equivalent to the *Ring's* decaying Valhalla and Gibichung Hall; Parsifal must renew and transform it. Goethe's 'eternal youth of the Greek gods' could hardly be more distant from this world of late Christian practice.<sup>101</sup> It seems that the conventional Christian understanding of God may have been true for previous historical epochs. Radical renewal will, however, be needed, if indeed it is not too late already. As Heine, one of Wagner's fellow exiles in Paris, had written:

Our hearts are thrilled with compassion, for it is old Jehovah himself who is making ready to die. We have known him so well, from his cradle in Egypt [...] We saw him bid farewell to those companions of his childhood, the obelisks and sphinxes of the Nile, to become a little god-king in Palestine to a poor nation of shepherds [...] We saw him move to Rome [...] he obtained power and, from the heights of the Capitol, ruled the city and the world, *urbem et orbem*. [...] We have seen him purify himself, spiritualise himself still more, become paternal, compassionate, the benefactor of the human race, a philanthropist [...] But nothing can save him!

[...]

Do you not hear the bell? Down on your knees! The sacrament is being administered to a dying God!<sup>102</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Küng, 'Wagner's *Parsifal*' (note 10), 322.

<sup>99</sup> CT, 15 and 16 June 1878.

<sup>100</sup> Berry, *Treacherous Bonds* (note 4), 260–64.

<sup>101</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Maximen und Reflektionen', *Goethes Werke*, 9th edn, ed. Erich Trunz, 14 vols. (Munich, 1981), xii, §748, 470.

<sup>102</sup> Heinrich Heine, 'Of Germany since Luther', *Revue des Deux-Mondes*, iv (1834), 408. Translated in Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, tr. Edith M. Riley (London, 1949), 21 (translation slightly modified).

This seems an apt metaphor for Monsalvat, especially by the time of the third act, when Titurel is dead and the tainted Amfortas can no longer bear to uncover the grail. It is the world in which the Church, not Jesus, holds sway. Cosima records:

Renan's book [*L'Eglise chrétienne*] provides him with another opportunity to talk about 'the most horrible thing in history', the church, and the victory of Judaism over all else: 'I can't read two lines of Goethe without recognising the Jewish Jehovah; for him Jesus was a problematical figure, but God was as clear as crystal.' He explains how Plato's Theos paved the way for the Jewish God.<sup>103</sup>

In this, Wagner stands close to Schopenhauer and his denigration, in the light of Kant's critical philosophy, of Judaism on account of its doctrine of creation in time.<sup>104</sup>

### Recreation of community

Still firmly in the tradition of German idealist aesthetics, Wagner saw the Athenian *polis* as an embodiment of harmony between the individual and society, private and public. Art and its performance were not merely part of this, but the most important part, the supreme manifestation of harmony. Indeed, in terms of modern scholarship, Paul Cartledge has written that tragedy was 'an active ingredient, and a major one, of the political foreground, featuring in the everyday consciousness and even the nocturnal dreams of the Athenian citizen'.<sup>105</sup> The cultic tendencies of Bayreuth notwithstanding, this conception of tragedy remained Wagner's dream. The problem was how to achieve it in modern society, itself the product of the Christian subjectivity that had introduced fragmentation into the world. Could this negation yet be negated? *The Waste Land's* 'heap of broken images' is thus for Wagner and for *Parsifal* the starting point, not the end.<sup>106</sup> To choose to dwell on the negativity of Monsalvat's breakdown is to miss what has to modern minds become the more difficult, indeed problematical, half of the story. Christianity would help to rebuild society, and vice versa. The Buddhism of Wagner's projected drama *Der Sieger*, which undoubtedly left its mark upon *Parsifal*, could never have done this by itself. Just as much as when he penned the following words in Zurich, Wagner was involved in creating a 'new religion [...] containing the necessary conditions for the artwork of the future'.<sup>107</sup> But now, unlike in Zurich, Christianity could both be redeemed and act as redeemer: 'Erlösung dem Erlöser' indeed. This is strongly related to the Christian incorporation of time into eternity, or perhaps vice versa.

In this connection, there is in Kundry and her previous incarnations an element of the 'surreal simultaneity' that Mary Cicora identifies as a hallmark of the drama. The 'succession of generations' has not, however, 'yielded' to this simultaneity; like leitmotif technique itself, it provides a weight of developmental memory that supports, questions and conflicts with the present.<sup>108</sup> The partial simultaneity is in fact quite real:

<sup>103</sup> CT, 10 Feb. 1880.

<sup>104</sup> Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (note 26), i.614–15.

<sup>105</sup> Paul Cartledge, "'Deep plays": Theatre as Process in Greek Civic Life', *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P.E. Easterling (Cambridge, 1997), 3–35 (p. 3).

<sup>106</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London, 1963), 63.

<sup>107</sup> 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft' (note 12), 123.

<sup>108</sup> Cicora, 'Medievalism and Metaphysics' (note 7), 40.

the mark of existence and its perpetual conflict between past, present and future. This is how we experience them all. The Prelude to Act I portrays, like a drama in miniature, this conflict between the near-stasis of ritual and development, both of which will gain the upper hand at various points during the work, but neither of which will vanquish the other. The action of Act II and of the period prior to Act III prepares the way for the transformed circumstances of that act, with its symphonic synthesis and hard-won resolution of the various grail motifs in the opening tonality of A flat major. Yet this relies upon existing forms, rejuvenated yet far from radically original. Good Friday is detranscendentalised and the Eucharist is more ambiguously rescued from decay, but Good Friday and the Eucharist they remain – just as Feuerbach had wished, in the *Essence of Christianity* – to preserve the essence of that faith and its rituals in a fashion appropriate to the dictates of history. *Parsifal* itself benefits from such treatment, though to remain true to the work's developmental spirit, this should not be taken as an excuse for mere reductionism.

Moreover, Wagner intends to use Christian myth and Christian history to correct their errors. Thus Cosima records: 'Much about church and state; he says, "For me Christianity has not yet arrived, and I am like the early Christians, awaiting Christians, awaiting Christ's return." – But in the search for ideality, he adds, things look different!'<sup>109</sup> Not only religion, not only Christianity, but even theology might be *aufgehoben*. Hegel – the philosophy of history – might yet vanquish Feuerbach, or at least render him less one-sided in his apparent atheism. Wagner, whilst lauding in 1851 the 'ability of Christian myth to enthral our minds' via its depiction of '*transfiguration through death*', had also condemned it for having distorted and denied the anthropomorphism of Germanic myth and having constructed instead a new theology. Rendered incapable of necessary regeneration, myth – like political and artistic unity – had 'fragmented into its individual, self-contained, component parts [...] its dramatic nucleus broken down into a plethora of unrelated deeds'.<sup>110</sup> Now Christian myth and Christian theology, even if of questionable orthodoxy, might help renew that initial unity. If the *Ring*, despite its incidental Teutonism, had pointed the way, then *Parsifal* would recognise the necessity of religion in general and of Christianity in particular for any post-Incarnation society. Christ is reintroduced to a community that has abandoned him. Whilst discussing the issue of Hermann Levi as conductor of *Parsifal*, Cosima told her husband: 'the community into which the Israelite would be accepted has itself abandoned Christ, whereas previously blood was shed and everything sacrificed on his behalf'. Wagner responded that he had certainly remained true to Christ. "'The trouble is", he exclaims, "that all great personalities reveal themselves to us in time and space, and are thus subject to change".'<sup>111</sup> Hegel and history once again intervene, even when the Schopenhauerian language of time and space is invoked.

This conflict is redramatised in the dialectical opposition in *Parsifal* between the characteristic, indeed almost normative, chromaticism and diatonicism of *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger* respectively. It is noteworthy that the most 'advanced' music is given

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<sup>109</sup> CT, 15 July 1879.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama*, ed. K. Kropfingher (Stuttgart, 1994), 167–74.

<sup>111</sup> CT, 19 Jan. 1881.

to Klingsor, Amfortas and Kundry, not to Parsifal, just as it had been to Alberich and Hagen. This diatonic–chromatic opposition takes concrete form in the opposition of the two worlds of Monsalvat and Klingsor’s realm. It is heightened by the incursions of the latter into the former, notably the agonising chromaticism of Amfortas’s wound and Kundry’s kiss, which renders Parsifal able to sympathise with Amfortas’s agony. As Kinderman points out, ‘Kundry’s kiss serves [...] as the point of connection between the heavenly, diatonic realm of the Grail and the diabolical, chromatic realm of Klingsor; from her kiss comes the “pollution of the sanctuary,” reflected in the chromatic contamination of the third bar of the Communion theme.’<sup>112</sup> Yet this ‘pollution’ is enabling too, in a very real sense a *felix culpa*, for without it redemption could never occur. Grace needs it, as well as vice versa.

And so, when reconciliation, the ultimate driving force of Hegel’s philosophy, comes, it is, despite some appearances, dialectical. Kinderman observes:

The arrival of this final tonic chord of A-flat major thus provides the simultaneous resolution of the Grail and Communion motives, standing in place of the dissonance that had represented a primary source of musical tension from the very beginning of the work, four hours earlier. In these closing bars, both motives are subsumed into the final subdominant cadence, completing and perfecting the musical form as an audible symbol for the utopia of redemption.<sup>113</sup>

Perhaps, however, it remains but a utopia; it can hardly be the end of the story. We cannot be any more sure of the outcome than at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. Such a plagal cadence was closely associated, especially during the historicising 19th century, with the great tradition of sacred music. The music, in a sense, is intoning ‘Amen!’ to the words ‘Redemption to the Redeemer!’. This is not to suggest that Wagner is straightforwardly assenting to the dogmas upon which that sacred tradition is based. He remains for that both too much a Young Hegelian, adamant upon the time-bound nature of supposedly eternal truths, and too much a Schopenhauerian, with a metaphysical though not aesthetic bent of atheism. Rather, Wagner is daring to subsume the truths of that tradition into the world of musical drama; he portrays the ‘truest’ elements of Christian mythical tradition onstage and in the orchestra, and thereby contributes to their development. He subsumes the truths, partial though nevertheless real, into a greater, post-Hegelian search for systematic truth: a vain attempt perhaps but an impulse to renewal.

### Parsifal and thereafter

The struggle delineated above may in turn be seen to be part of the general dialectic of modern music drama, between the objective demands of the material and the subjective demands of the composer’s creative voice. Both are of course mediated by history, yet together they remind us, in the celebrated words of Marx, also building upon and battling with Hegel, that: ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under

<sup>112</sup> William Kinderman, ‘Wagner’s *Parsifal*: Musical Form and the Drama of Redemption’, *Journal of Musicology*, iv (1985), 431–46 (p. 441).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 446.

circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.<sup>114</sup> A few twists of the dialectic later, in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, we see:

Leverkühn's progress in music, contingent on a brilliant pact with a devil who cites from Adorno's musicological writings, goes hand in hand with an alienation from human relations. The specifically non-communicative aesthetics of hermetic art seems to mirror the imperviousness of the dictatorial Nazi regime; yet at the same time, only that same rigorously hermetic art is capable of a mournful expressivity which can articulate suffering in an adequately uncompromising manner. [...] The problem of the subject, diagnosed to be so helpless in [Döblin's] *Berlin Alexanderplatz* or so vulnerable in [Schnitzler's] *Fräulein Else*, finds its ultimate formulation here.<sup>115</sup>

A problem rather than a solution it nevertheless remains. Either one heeds the Frankfurt School and sees that Enlightenment must somehow be deflected in order that it might confront its increasingly violent inadequacies, or one turns with Heidegger – Spengler even – against rationalism altogether, a course turning us back towards a 'timeless' mythical understanding of the world Enlightenment was held to have vanquished. What tends to happen is that the two paths come into conflict. Perhaps this is the only course now open; modern reality cannot fail to be agonistic. To evoke *Doctor Faustus* again, there is something of Adrian Leverkühn and Serenus Zeitblom in all of us – if only because there remains some residue of Zeitblom's world in Leverkühn. Even Boulez, whom many would suspect of strenuous insistence upon the demands of the material, is quite 'Romantic' in this respect. His persuasiveness as a conductor of Wagner and of *Parsifal* in particular is far from incidental here:

There is no such thing as historical inevitability. History is what one makes of it. I hold very firmly to this principle. When someone speaks of being compelled by historical necessity it means he is no longer capable of acting for himself; in one sense history is something we enact, not something to be submitted to.<sup>116</sup>

This is not so far removed from Wagner's presentation of the problematics of grace, agency, history and redemption. Just, then, as in Mann's novel and in *Parsifal*, elements of the past and indeed of the future are not only with us in the present, but are dramatically created both by and in the present. This understanding also informs Boulez's conception of *Die Meistersinger*:

the Romantics rediscovered the Gothic style. At the end of the nineteenth century there were Gothic churches in profusion. This was the most striking example of stylistic reference. On the other hand, although in *The Mastersingers* there are no end of references to the *Minnesänger* and to the forms of sixteenth and – even more so – fifteenth century music, Wagner's music actually has nothing to do with the historical truth about the town of Nuremberg. This is why I feel really ill at ease when people try to depict the historical town on the stage when it is absent from the music.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, 3 vols. (Moscow, 1969), i.398.

<sup>115</sup> Russell A. Berman, 'The Subjects of Community: Aspiration, Memory, Resistance 1918–1945', *Philosophy and German Literature, 1700–1990*, ed. Nicholas Saul (Cambridge, 2002), 197–244 (p. 242).

<sup>116</sup> Pierre Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*, tr. Robert Wangermée (London, 1976), 33.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

The case of *Parsifal* is more complex: here there are very real nods to sacred musical tradition from Palestrina onwards. Yet they are undeniably transformed and subsumed into a 19th-century dramatic and harmonic reality, holding out the prospect of historical reconciliation. Indeed, as Boulez has written:

The words of Gurnemanz ['You see, my son, here time becomes space'] are of vital significance [...] because they bring these two fundamental constituents together to form a unity. This is an idea adumbrated but never really pursued, though it reappears incidentally in the magic transformation of Klingsor's domain, in the evoking of Kundry and in the narrative of Parsifal's wanderings. On each occasion place and time are linked by a kind of osmosis, explained superficially by clairvoyance and magic but implicit, at a deeper level, in the very stuff of the dramatic action.<sup>118</sup>

Boulez is wrong to say that the idea is never really pursued, yet the pursuit is, in his words, 'implicit, at a deeper level' and it appears more than 'incidentally' in the instances he presents. The conflict is not merely re-presented, but dramatised, as is always Wagner's tendency; this is in some sense the dialectic of Enlightenment.

What could still approach at least an illusory reconciliation in *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal* had no chance of doing so by the time of Schoenberg and his successors; the antagonism between objectivity and subjectivity has become a necessary part of the modernist artwork, a crucial component of that creative enactment of history of which Boulez speaks. This is not simply an aesthetic but, all the more importantly, a social deed, a deed which must not, moreover, be misunderstood as some kind of archaism (neoclassicism, so far as Boulez is concerned). *Parsifal* would barely be a drama at all if one removed the second act and its *Taten*, although it might stand as a closer model for Messiaen's *St François d'Assise*. The deed is an imperative, a post-Fichtean connection of the alienated self with the world through action: the Young Hegelian *Philosophie der Tat*. In this sense, it is the subject or ego – in both a Fichtean and a modern, Freudian sense – which actually posits its opposite, the world of objects. Young Hegelianism is far from dead, although absolute subjectivity certainly is. Martin Scherzinger writes perceptively regarding postmodernist denial of modernism's social praxis:

The separation of art from social functions during the first half of the twentieth century was less an absolute denial of a relationship between the two and more a forging of a peculiar linkage between the two that was complex and dialectical. [...] The *antagonistic* side of aesthetic autonomy, which was tied to notions of critique and negation, has largely been forgotten. [...]

[...] Modernism sought to heighten the tension between various extreme dialectical tendencies in an effort to arrest critical space in an increasingly administered world. While it insisted on its self-sufficiency and its ability to disclose truths about the world (principally in negative terms), modernism's adversarial impulse also acted as an agent for social change (or resistance to unwanted change).<sup>119</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Pierre Boulez, 'Approaches to *Parsifal*' (note 71), 249.

<sup>119</sup> Martin Scherzinger, 'In Memory of a Receding Dialectic: The Political Relevance of Autonomy and Formalism in Modernist Musical Aesthetics', *The Pleasure of Modernist Music: Listening, Meaning, Intention, Ideology*, ed. Arved Ashby (Rochester, NY, and Woodbridge, 2004), 68–102 (p. 69).

It hardly matters in this respect whether one understands modernism to be purely aesthetic, or condemns modernism for its failure to be purely aesthetic. Both errors embrace a monistic, emotionalist irrationalism, which does not beg the question but evades it.<sup>120</sup> Subjectivism is not enough; its claims to autonomy are severely overstated. History, neither rigidly deterministic nor haplessly arbitrary, will continue to demand recognition. *Parsifal* with all its necessary contradictions stands in this sense as an exemplar and crucible.

Three entries from Cosima's Diaries are instructive in this regard, returning us to the legacy of Kant's attempt in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* to establish the absolute ideality of time and space. Cosima records in 1880:

Prof. [Johann Karl Friedrich] Zöllner sends him his book on transcendental physics with a very nice letter, and in this connection R. remarks on how a misunderstanding of Kant and Schopenhauer can lead to such aberrations as the assumption [Zöllner's, which led him to defend the séances of the American psychic Henry Slade] of a fourth dimension; ideality, he says, is difficult to grasp, and particularly difficult to keep in mind, and people are constantly losing sight of it. 'If Schopenhauer and Kant were really understood, how could new philosophical books possibly keep on emerging?'<sup>121</sup>

New books – and dramas – kept on emerging because there remained many difficulties to be resolved, not least when the writer, even should he refuse to acknowledge this, retained a great influence from Hegel and his school. A couple of months later, we read: 'After breakfast he talks about philosophy and says that Kant found something eternal in his quiet avenue in Königsberg, an ideality of time and space, like Jesus in Galilee: "My Kingdom is not of this world".'<sup>122</sup> The contemporary attempt at reconciliation in *Parsifal* will heighten rather than abjure the countervailing stream in Wagner's thought. Cosima also has Wagner, whilst at work on this drama, announce: 'Today I have set a philosophical precept to music: "Here space becomes time".'<sup>123</sup> It may be on the way to the Castle of the Grail that time becomes space but this is also the arena in which space becomes historical time.



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<sup>120</sup>It would be as if the Prussian government's appointment of the ageing Romantic Schelling to the chair of philosophy of Berlin, 'to slay the dragon-seed' of Hegelianism, had succeeded. For an interesting recent treatment, see Warren Breckmann, 'Politics in a Symbolic Key: Pierre Leroux, Romantic Socialism, and the Schelling Affair', *Modern Intellectual History*, ii (2005), 61–86.

<sup>121</sup>CT, 11 Nov. 1879. See Johann Carl Friedrich Zöllner, *Die transcendente Physik und die sogenannte Philosophie: Eine deutsche Antwort auf eine 'sogennante wissenschaftliche Frage'* (Leipzig, 1879); Tom H. Gibbons, 'Cubism and "The Fourth Dimension" in the Context of the Late Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century Revival of Occult Idealism', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xlv (1981), 130–47.

<sup>122</sup>CT, 31 Jan. 1880.

<sup>123</sup>CT, 21 Dec. 1877. The English translation has the inaccurate 'hence space becomes time', for 'hier wird der Raum zur Zeit' (i.1098.)