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## Enlightenment, Love and Compassion

### From the *Ring* to *Parsifal*

*Durch Mitleid wissend*, – ‘enlightened through compassion’ - was the motto theme of *Parsifal* almost from its conception. In the Spring of 1857, Wagner jotted down ideas inspired by Wolfram von Eschenbach’s medieval romance *Parzival*, linking the compassionate themes in that story with Christ’s compassion for humanity on the cross. In the following year, shocked at witnessing acts of cruelty towards animals, he declared in a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck that the theme of fellow suffering was central to his art as well as to his philosophy of life.

The philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer and the teachings and legends of the Buddha loomed large in Wagner’s thinking during the creation of *Parsifal*, as they did during the creation of *Tristan und Isolde* and much of the *Ring*. Schopenhauer’s great work, *The World as Will and Representation* came to Wagner’s attention in 1854 while he was composing *Die Walküre*. It seemed to him that this book articulated his deepest and, hitherto, barely expressed feelings. Schopenhauer wrote of compassion as the source of morality, of the nothingness of the world of phenomena with its inevitable frustration, suffering and death, and of the act of renunciation as the only authentic act of free will.

In Buddhism, Wagner found an affirmation of the sanctity of life. The Buddha had also taught that desire was at the root of suffering, but that victory over suffering could be won by the ‘blowing out’ (*nirvana*) of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion, an extinction of ‘self’. In Buddhism, Wagner also found the concept of reincarnation that became so important to the character of Kundry. In an extraordinary confession to Mathilde Wesendonck he wrote: ‘Only thoughtful acceptance of the idea of transmigration of souls has been able to show me the consoling point at which all in the end converge at an equal height of redemption after their differing paths through life, which in Time have run divided alongside one another, but which outside Time come together in full understanding.’<sup>i</sup>

During the course of the *Ring* there is an increasing preoccupation with psychological and metaphysical issues. The mythology of the *eddas* and *sagas* evolves into Wagner’s own mythology, one that finds definitive expression only after the curtain has fallen on *Götterdämmerung* and risen again on *Parsifal*. When the smoke clears from the ruins of Valhalla, it is Monsalvat that comes into view.

Wagner created his own myths through a synthesis of old tales and new sensibilities, although the latter were far from static. At first, love manifests itself in the so-called ‘Feuerbach ending’ to *Götterdämmerung* in which Brünnhilde rejects possessions, wealth and divine splendour in favour of love’s redeeming power. However, increasingly it is not ‘passionate’ love so much as ‘compassionate’ love that becomes the prime catalyst for change.

In May 1856, after finishing *Die Walküre* but before taking up *Siegfried*, Wagner sketched out a proposed Buddhist music drama, *Die Sieger*, (The Victors). The title was inspired by the Jinas, Indian holy men whose name in Sanskrit means ‘victors’. Their victory was over human

passions. *Die Sieger* dealt with an event in the legendary life of the Buddha, one of whose titles was Jina – the Victor. For many years, Wagner intended to work on *Die Sieger* after he had finished *Parsifal*, and it was only in 1882 that a combination of exhaustion and realism led him to abandon the idea for good. He also felt that he would be duplicating much of what had been said in *Parsifal*. He had been attracted to the story for a number of reasons, not the least of which was its theme of reincarnation which, metaphysics aside, he saw as an ideal vehicle for his compositional technique of Emotional Reminiscence. ‘Only music’ he said, ‘can convey the mysteries of reincarnation’.<sup>ii</sup>

In July 1878, Cosima wrote the following in her diary: ‘When I was looking through some papers with him yesterday, I came upon the original theme for *Sangst du nicht, dein Wissen*; I tell Richard that the present theme (meant at first for the Buddha) pleases me far more.’<sup>iii</sup> What is this theme that was composed originally for the Buddha in *Die Sieger*? It first appears in Wotan’s final scene with Erda in Act Three of *Siegfried*, and is used to express his new-found wisdom in accepting the coming of a new order and the demise of the gods.

Wotan tells Erda that he is no longer concerned about the inevitable end of the gods and, in fact, consciously wills it. What he once resolved in despair, he will now do gladly. At that point, we hear in the orchestra the majestic theme once intended for the Buddha. All the burdens of self-interest and denial are lifted from Wotan’s shoulders, and we share with him a tremendous sense of release and relief. During the first rehearsals, Wagner said that this passage ‘must sound like the proclamation of a new religion’.<sup>iv</sup> Indeed it does.

The theme occurs again shortly afterwards when Wotan makes a connection between Brünnhilde’s wisdom, and the freeing of the world. The next significant entry comes after Brünnhilde’s awakening, when she tells Siegfried: ‘What you would know, know it from me, for I am wise because I love you’. So, Brünnhilde’s wisdom flows directly from her love for Siegfried. Finally, when Brünnhilde’s fears overwhelm her, Siegfried offers reassurance: ‘Didn’t you tell me’ he says, ‘that all of your wisdom came by the light of your love for me?’ This is the phrase to which Cosima had been referring. Brünnhilde therefore is ‘made wise through love’; and isn’t that suspiciously close to being ‘made wise through compassion’, the distinguishing attribute of Parsifal? Remember Wagner’s words: ‘It must sound like the proclamation of a new religion’.

A better-known Buddhist connection with the *Ring* came with Wagner’s 1856 version of the closing scene of *Götterdämmerung*, which was written contemporaneously with the sketch for *Die Sieger* and within months of the first sketch for *Parsifal*. In this, Brünnhilde proclaimed her redemption from the endless cycle of suffering and rebirth. Cosima commented that some of the words in the 1856 text sounded rather artificial,<sup>v</sup> and so Wagner changed his mind about setting them. In the margin of the orchestral sketch we read: ‘Enough! Anything to please Cosel!’<sup>vi</sup> More to the point, he sensed that a symphonic orchestral passage would be more effective in bringing the whole cycle to a close. In his 1872 definitive edition of the poem, he offered an explanation for not setting all of the words, which were, nevertheless, still printed as a footnote: ‘The musician had in the end’ he said, ‘in the act of composition, to sacrifice this passage, as its meaning is already conveyed with the greatest precision in the musical expression of the drama’.<sup>vii</sup> So, far from denying the Buddhist imagery, he affirmed it; for, as he told Cosima, ‘only music can convey the mysteries of reincarnation’.

In the original 1848 sketch for the ending, Brünnhilde, once more the Valkyrie, is seen rising above the flames and leading Siegfried heavenwards to his place in Valhalla – a suitably Scandinavian ending. There is no cataclysm, and the old order survives. Subsequently, in 1851,

the idea of *Ragnarök* ('twilight of the gods') was introduced, in which the gods are to be destroyed, although the Norse mythological account is very different from Wagner's version. However, in the accounts of the death and cremation of the Buddha, which attracted Wagner's attention in the mid 1850's, we learn that when the Sage entered *nirvana* the earth trembled and firebrands fell from the sky; the heavens were lit up by a preternatural fire and the rivers boiled over.<sup>viii</sup> It is not difficult to recognise in a conflation of these images the amazing stage directions at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. Nor is it difficult to understand why Wagner referred to the exquisite closing theme (first used as Sieglinde's paean to Brünnhilde in Act III of *Die Walküre*) as 'the glorification of Brünnhilde' or 'the theme in praise of Brünnhilde'. By embracing mortality and achieving wisdom through love, Brünnhilde had revealed the path to a better existence; one that was to be expressed definitively in the Christian/Buddhist syncretism of *Parsifal*.

Brünnhilde then, had been made wise through love, in the crucible of her personal suffering. Parsifal, on the other hand, is made wise through compassion - identifying with the suffering of others. That was Wagner's final message to the world: we feel compassion towards other beings because we are, at the deepest level, all one and the same.

Thus, *Parsifal* may be regarded as the working out of ideas alluded to in the closing pages of the *Ring*. 'He, truest of all men, betrayed me', says Brünnhilde of the dead Siegfried, 'that I in grief might grow wise', to which Parsifal is now able to respond: 'Blessed be your suffering that gave compassion and wisdom to the timid fool!'

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<sup>i</sup> *Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendonk*, ed. W. Golther (Berlin 1904, p. 242). Trans. Lucy Beckett.

<sup>ii</sup> *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, ed. M. Gregor-Dellin and D. Mack; trans. G. Skelton, New York 1978-80, vol. i, p.215, May 1 1870.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.* vol. ii p.117, July 20 1878.

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted by Curt von Westernhagen, *The Forging of The Ring*, trans. Arnold and Mary Whittall, Cambridge University Press 1976, p.169.

<sup>v</sup> *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, op. cit. vol ii, p.448, January 10 1872.

<sup>vi</sup> Westernhagen, op.cit. p.235.

<sup>vii</sup> See Deryck Cooke *I Saw the World End*, London, Oxford University Press, 1979, p.22.

<sup>viii</sup> *Buddhist Scriptures*, selected and translated by Edward Conze, Penguin 1959, p.63.