The Wondrous Realm of Night - Poetic and Dramatic Imagery in Tristan und Isolde

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‘I have been rebuked’ said Wagner, ‘for not introducing into the second act of *Tristan und Isolde* a brilliant court-ball, during which the hapless pair of lovers might hide themselves at the proper time in some shrubbery or other, where their discovery would create quite a startling scandal, with all the usual consequences. Instead there passes little more than music in this act….’

On another occasion, he noted that the work was more thoroughly musical than anything he had done up to that time, and he admitted that its sound was in his head before he had written a word of text. In fact, he had sketched some of the music - including the important motif of ‘yearning’ - eight months before starting work on the poem. So, there is no doubt that the leading creative impulse for *Tristan* was musical. But the music – brilliant, bold and revolutionary as it is – exists to express a non-musical idea so unexpected that no composer but Wagner would have contemplated it.

Robert Schumann, whom Wagner had known from his Leipzig days and to whose music journal he contributed, had, as early as 1846, considered writing a Tristan opera based on an epic by one Karl Leberecht Immermann. He had gone as far as commissioning a detailed scenario from the poet Robert Reinick. Schumann, incidentally, had also planned operas on the Wartburg song contest, the Nibelung legend, a Grail-related Arthurian romance and a story called *The Mines of Falun*, for which Wagner also prepared a scenario ten years afterwards. Felix Mendelssohn was an enthusiastic supporter of Schumann’s Tristan project and gave him a copy of Gottfried’s version of the romance. The twenty-year-old Eduard Hanslick also lent his support. But in the end, nothing came of it. Schumann was diverted to another project, and the result was his one and only opera about Genevieve of Brabant and her husband Siegfried, with a libretto by Reinick and the composer.

It is interesting to consider what Reinick and Schumann had in mind for their unfinished Tristan, and I’d like to take a moment to look at this, for two reasons. Firstly, it throws into relief the magnitude of Wagner’s achievement, and secondly, it provides evidence not only of Reinick’s borrowing from *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, but also of Wagner’s borrowing from Reinick for *Die Walküre* and *Parsifal*. In *Mein Leben* Wagner is slightly evasive about the origin of his interest in Tristan and Isolde, saying only that he had become familiar with the story from his Dresden studies.

Wagner and Schumann saw a lot of each other in Dresden in 1845-46, when Schumann was, in Wagner’s words, ‘busying himself with the drafts of opera libretti, which finally led to his *Genoveva*’. Hanslick, who knew them both in the 1840s, wrote an amusing memoir on how they regarded each other. He

once asked Schumann whether he had much to do with Wagner, to which Schumann replied: ‘for me, Wagner is impossible; there’s no doubt that he’s an intelligent person, but he never stops talking. You can’t talk *all* the time.’ On the following day Hanslick met Wagner and asked what he thought of Schumann. ‘On a superficial level we’re on excellent terms’ said Wagner, ‘but you can’t converse with Schumann: he’s an impossible person, he never says anything.’

In Reinick’s five-act scenario we find, in addition to Marke, Tristan, Isolde and Brangane, a Queen of Ireland called Gimella, a magician called Thinas (the father of Brangane), Morolt (Isolde’s uncle as in Gottfried’s account, not her betrothed as in Wagner’s), and various other characters including fairies and ghosts. The work begins with celebrations of Tristan’s victory over Morolt. Then, King Marke’s marriage to the Irish princess Isolde is predicted by the magician Thinas, who – like Klingsor – is discovered in his tower surrounded by instruments of magic and astrology. Thinas calls up a vision of Isolde (anticipating Klingsor’s summoning of Kundry), and Marke, smitten by her beauty, decides to make her his wife. Tristan leaves for Ireland.

Morolt’s body is returned to his homeland amidst great lamentation and, shortly afterwards, Tristan is shipwrecked off the Irish coast and washed ashore. Isolde identifies him from his name conveniently written on his sword, and realizes she has Morolt’s killer in her power. She is about to exact revenge when her mother and Brangane intervene to stop her. Here Reinick is following Gottfried. Tristan woos Isolde for King Marke, and Queen Gimella compels her daughter to accept the king’s hand in marriage. Isolde reluctantly agrees but is soon attracted to Tristan who, though not immune to her charms, remains nobly committed to his uncle’s cause.

Soon afterwards in Cornwall, Isolde’s marriage to Marke takes place, preceded by a *Lohengrin*-like procession to the cathedral. Whilst the wedding is under way, Brangane and her magician father remain outside, plotting to neutralize Isolde’s feelings for Tristan. This sounds uncannily like Ortrud and Telramund’s machinations in Act Two of *Lohengrin*, which Wagner had read to Schumann and other acquaintances seven months earlier. After another bridal procession, Tristan asks permission to join the crusades, but Marke insists that he remain at court.

The scene changes to a valley of the fairies where Thinas casts his spells and creates a love-potion with which to shore up Isolde’s marriage to Marke. During the ensuing wedding banquet, the love-potion is accidentally consumed by Isolde and Tristan, and the inevitable happens. Brangane is paralysed with fear whilst Tristan jumps to his feet and – Tannhäuser-like – sings an ardent love song to Isolde, resulting in uproar. A furious Marke banishes his nephew from the country. The magician learns of what has happened, laments his involvement with the magic arts and resolves to go on a pilgrimage to Rome to do penance. We know that Schumann was familiar with *Tannhäuser*, which he discussed at length with Wagner, and that he attended one of its performances in 1845, along with Clara and Hanslick.

Back to Reinick's scenario. Before the magician leaves on his pilgrimage to Rome, his magic tower collapses in ruins and his spirit helpers vanish with it – imagery that anticipates the ending of Act Two of Parsifal. Then, like the Volsung twins, Reinick's lovers flee into the night, leaving the cuckolded Marke and his supporters to follow in hot pursuit. The lovers press on through a rocky valley until Isolde collapses with exhaustion. While Tristan is off looking for a path, King Marke arrives with his knights, draws his sword and is about to kill the sleeping Isolde when he is captivated by her beauty and pardons her instead. The Wotan/Brünnhilde confrontation comes to mind. Tristan returns and attacks Marke (think Siegmund/Hunding). Isolde tries to separate them but is accidentally stabbed by Tristan and killed. Tristan falls on her corpse with a cry and he too dies, whilst everyone else is left to mourn the dead.

Despite the cross-fertilization of ideas between Schumann and Reinick on the one hand and Wagner on the other, it would be hard to imagine a greater difference in approach to the old tale of Tristan and Isolde. Relations cooled between Schumann and Wagner when the latter, in typically forthright manner, spoke his mind about the libretto of *Genoveva*. Schumann intended to return to the Tristan project if *Genoveva* was a success, but it wasn't and he wrote no more operas.

If Wagner didn't pull any punches with Schumann in Dresden, neither did he hold back with his young friend Karl Ritter in Zurich. In 1854, Karl expressed interest in dramatizing the Tristan story, focussing particularly on its adventurous elements. Wagner by then recognized the innate tragedy of the story, and he believed that everything else should be stripped away from this central theme. He wasn't interested in fussy preparatory events but - as he put it - in 'the simplest, but most full-blooded, musical conception'.

In the opera, we are plunged immediately into the inner lives of the characters as events approach a crisis. Tristan's ship plies the Celtic Sea between Ireland and Cornwall and the Princess Isolde is in despair. The empty seascape mirrors the emptiness in her heart, and the heaving ship – hostage to wind and waves – reminds her that she too is a hostage: to a king she doesn't love and to his nephew for whom she suffers the pangs of desire. Stung into action by a sailor's song and the sighting of land, she lashes out at those who had brought her to this pass. She invokes the tempest, commanding it to rouse the sleeping ocean to wreck the ship, devour its fragments and consign its hapless passengers to the winds.

This outburst – just a few minutes into the first act - is the earliest indication we have that Isolde is contemplating a joint death with Tristan for, if the ship goes down, they'll both go with it. The music is ferocious, punctuated by evocations of the raging sea and the frantic efforts of the sailors. But it's all in Isolde's mind for, in reality, they are sailing calmly onwards to the waiting Marke.

This baroque imagery wouldn't have been out of place in the operas of Lully and Rameau, and we find something similar in Weber's *Oberon*, an opera that

Wagner knew well, having conducted it in Würzburg and Riga in the 1830s. The aria *'Ocean, thou mighty monster'* from *Oberon* - a Wagner concert favourite in the mid 1850s – is embellished with joyous vocal leaps when the shipwrecked heroine catches sight of a vessel on the horizon. Surely, Wagner remembered this when he wrote the Shepherd's whooping signal of joy when Isolde's ship is sighted in Act Three of *Tristan*.

Weber's focus is on the destructive power of nature, whereas Wagner's, in Act One, is on Isolde's state of mind. After all, nothing happens in *Tristan und Isolde* that isn't directly concerned with the protagonists. A precursor to Isolde's outburst can be found in *Der fliegende Holländer*, when the Dutchman, in *Die Frist ist um*, describes his attempts to end his life by drowning and by running his ship onto the rocks. When he declares: 'How often into the sea's deepest abyss have I hurled myself in yearning!' the Dutchman and Isolde are not far apart.

Amongst the most important imagery in the first act of *Tristan* is that of people on boats in the middle of the ocean - Isolde in her black mood of despair and the story of Tristan, once near death, drifting in a small boat onto the coast of Ireland. The fathomless void on which the action begins is also the ocean of existence, described by Schopenhauer in his philosophical masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*, which Wagner read for the first time in October 1854:

'Just as on a raging sea which stretches boundlessly in every direction and, howling, causes a mountainous swell to rise and fall, there sits a boatman in his small boat trusting the frail vessel, so sits the human individual, serene amid a world of torment, propped up by and relying only on the way in which he knows things as phenomenon. The boundless world full of suffering, both in the infinite past and the infinite future, is alien to him, indeed for him it is a fantastic tale; only his infinitesimal person, his extensionless present, his momentary comfort, has reality for him; and he does everything to maintain this, as long as truer insight does not open his eyes.'

In *Tristan und Isolde* this truer insight comes with the drinking of the love-potion. In Gottfried's 13th Century account, it was the potion that *caused* Tristan and Isolde to fall in love, whereas in Wagner's version they were already in love (though neither admitted it), and it is the expectation of impending death that sweeps away their inhibitions. In these circumstances, they might as well have been drinking pure water, as Thomas Mann observed.

When Tristan offers his sword to Isolde and gives her the opportunity to avenge the death of Morold, she brushes it aside, feigning concern for King Marke's feelings. But her displays of bitterness and sarcasm are hollow because, in truth, she is passionately in love with Tristan, and nothing she does or says can alter this fact. So, in the absence of a shipwreck, and rejecting Tristan's offer of his sword (because vengeance is not what she really wants), Isolde resorts to the death-potion - the only draught that can quench the pain of her longing.

Tristan too harbours a secret – his love for Isolde – disguised not by hostility but by duty to his uncle. Nevertheless, when Isolde offers him the drink of atonement and he guesses her true intentions (something he admits openly in the second act), he endorses the only remedy that honour permits: joint suicide. For the time being, he speaks in riddles: 'The Lady of silence keeps me silent. I know what she conceals; what I conceal she cannot tell.' But Isolde *does* understand his meaning, assuring him: 'I grasp your silence!'

The idea that death provides a solution to their dilemma originates with Isolde but, ironically, it is she who, in the end, chastises Tristan for embracing death without her. The so-called *Liebestod* is all about her need to restore him to life so they can pass together, transfigured, into the wondrous realm of night.

What is this place for which Tristan and Isolde long, and which causes them to behave so unpredictably? Marke certainly wants to know, but Tristan tells him: 'O King, what you ask you can never learn.' Then he turns to Isolde and says something that baffles everyone but her: 'Wherever Tristan is now going, will you, Isolde, follow him? In the land of which Tristan speaks, sunlight never shines; it is the dark land of night from which my mother sent me when, in death, she received me and in death let me go to reach the light. I awoke from where she bore me in the refuge of her love: the wondrous realm of night. That is what Tristan offers you, and where he goes on ahead.'

Isolde's reply is equally cryptic: 'Now you are returning to your own land to show me your inheritance. How could I flee a land that spans the whole world? Wherever Tristan's home may be, there Isolde will dwell.'

So why then does she stay behind in Cornwall instead of going with the wounded Tristan to his family seat at Kareol? The literal answer is because Marke prevents her from leaving, and only relents when Brangäne reveals the truth about the love-potion. But the deeper reason is that 'being together' doesn't involve going anywhere in particular in the physical world. The land of which Tristan and Isolde speak - where sunlight never shines and which spans the whole world - is beyond temporal existence. Of course, this means nothing to Kurwenal, who thinks his master has fallen victim to that dreadful sorcery: love, the world's fondest illusion. 'See now what thanks love has won for him' he says, 'the thanks that love always wins!' But it isn't 'love' that's the illusion; the illusion is the world that Kurwenal, Marke, Brangäne - and *we* - mistake for reality.

The future that Kurwenal and the Shepherd have mapped out for Tristan and Isolde is a quiet life together, managing a sheep property on a cliff-top in Brittany! But Tristan's yearning for Isolde, and his excitement when she finally arrives is not for their life together, but for their death together. That is why it is so important for her, cradling the dead Tristan, to imagine him alive again: smiling tenderly and gently, his eyes softly open, his heart bravely swelling, a sweet breath escaping his lips. 'Do you see it friends? Don't you see it?'

For much of the opera, a struggle is taking place between the outer and inner worlds and, for most of the time victory seems to be going to the former - the world of duty and propriety, loyalty and appearance. But eventually, it is the inner world, accessible only through the gates of death that triumphs. We are aware of this struggle from the moment the curtain rises, when the unaccompanied voice of the young sailor intrudes on Isolde's brooding, and rouses her to fury. Soon afterwards, the cries of other sailors punctuate her confrontation with Tristan and provoke him into snatching the goblet and swallowing death. But Brangäne's misplaced devotion deprives the lovers of the death they had sought and, by the end of the first act, the outer and inner worlds are once again clamouring for attention. So distracted have the suicidal pair become that they barely know what is happening. 'Where are we?' asks Tristan, unable to remember who is waiting for them on the quay. 'Which King?'

'Where am I?' stammers Isolde, 'Am I living?'

The curtain falls on the apparent triumph of the outer world of society, politics and power. But, amidst the excitement, shouting and fanfares, the two lovers - with eyes only for each other - hardly notice that the world exists at all.

In Act Two, it seems that the lovers have, at last, caught a glimpse of the realm of perfect union and timeless reality - until the world of honour and jealousy reasserts itself. The act begins stridently with the motif of day, followed by expressions of the lovers' impatience, and then Isolde's longing. The feverish orchestral activity falls away and we hear the evocative sounds of distant hunting horns, which, in turn, melt into the sounds of a summer's night. Never before had music conveyed such a wonderful transition from day to night, from the harsh glare of the outer world of reason to the soft embrace of the private world of emotion.

If the second act is an apostrophe to the night, the third act returns to the world as we know it – the world of illusion, of separate existences, of yearning and suffering. At Kareol, Tristan suffers unimaginable torment in the full glare of the day. He had wanted to die but Melot's sword had inflicted only a hideous wound. Melot's crime – like Brangäne's before it - had been to cheat Tristan of death.

Isolde too remains in the realm of day, as Tristan knows only too well. 'I heard the crash of death's door closing behind me' says Tristan, 'but now it stands ajar. I must break forth from night to take her back with me….ah, Isolde, when will you quench the flame…when will the light die out?' It seems, on first hearing, that he is reliving his interminable wait for the torch to be extinguished in Isolde's garden – the signal for their physical reunion. But in fact it is another flame to which he now refers – the flame of unsatisfiable yearning.

Wagner's reading of *The World as Will and Representation* in October 1854 helped him to see how the old tale of elicit love could be given an undreamt-of significance, and he immediately prepared a prose sketch, now lost. He didn't

doubt the impact of Schopenhauer's work on his own life: 'The effect that it was gradually taking upon me was extraordinary' he wrote, 'and, in any case, became decisive for my entire life.'

But it would be wrong to think that this revelation was entirely of Schopenhauer's doing, for Wagner himself had already been moving towards some of the ideas that his idol dealt with so comprehensively in his writings. This explains his joy in receiving confirmation from a man he described as: 'the greatest philosopher since Kant'.

Before looking at specific examples, let's review two general ideas underlying Wagner's approach to *Tristan*. These go to the essence of the opera, and answer King Marke's anguished question at the end of his great monologue: 'Who will make the inscrutable, deep, mysterious reason known to the world?' Wagner's answer, without a doubt, would be: 'Schopenhauer'.

Following in the footsteps of Immanuel Kant and, more distantly, Plato, Schopenhauer had written of the illusory nature of the world as we perceive it, with its inevitable frustration and pain - equated in *Tristan und Isolde* with the all-deceiving 'day'. Here, the world of daylight belongs not the realm of actuality but to the realm of illusion. This is because, as human beings, we can only have an incomplete *perception* of reality, brought to us via our senses and mental faculties. Beyond that *perception* of reality is the reality itself ('the thing-in-itself'), which we do not and cannot know directly. 'Night' in *Tristan und Isolde* is not the realm of ignorance but that of timeless reality. It symbolizes the true but inaccessible being of what we perceive as the world of phenomena, and is therefore a desirable refuge from the unsatisfiable longing of this life.

The second notion of fundamental importance to *Tristan* is expressed in Schopenhauer's treatise *On Death and its relationship to the Indestructibility of Our Inner Nature*. This expresses the view that dying is a moment of liberation from one-sided 'individuality' – an individuality that can never constitute the innermost kernel of our true being.

In Shopenhauer's philosophy – and therefore Wagner's – the will to live (which is an instinctive force in human nature) is a cosmic error, for it perpetuates the endless process of yearning, disappointment and yearning again. This is the cycle of desire and suffering, whose interdependence was identified by the Buddha, and expressed musically by Wagner in the so-called *Tristan* chord, which occurs where the motifs of suffering and yearning overlap.

The most intimate knowledge of the *will to live*, said Schopenhauer, is to be found in the ecstasy of sexual love – which is one of the most powerful images in the opera. However, the will to live is essentially selfish. So, how can sexual love be an impulse towards a timeless reality in which there is no 'self'? Wagner maintained that sexual love was not just an impulse to maintain life – an expression of the will to live - but a longing for the transcendence of individual boundaries and union with the universe. '*Then I myself am the*

world' sing the lovers at the height of their passion. Wagner believed he had made an important advance on Schopenhauer's theory on this point, and he even wrote a letter to the philosopher on the subject, but never sent it.

So, in *Tristan und Isolde* we have the story of a sexual love so intense that even the physical bodies of the lovers are a barrier to its fulfilment. Its driving force is a yearning for union beyond the constraints of time, the fluctuations of physical passion and even separate existences; an opportunity to be 'one forever' rather than 'you' *and* 'I', 'Tristan' *and* 'Isolde'. The little word 'and' which Isolde values because it seems to *join* the lovers, is in fact keeping them apart. In the realm of night there is no separate existence – no need for 'and' - only the ultimate unity of being. Tristan gives her a little lesson in Schopenhaurian philosophy when he says: 'So let us die undivided, forever one, without end, never waking, never fearing, embraced namelessly in love, given entirely to each other, living only in our love!' This is perfect love: the extinction of selfishness, the disappearance of self, total identification with each other.

'Plurality' said Schopenhauer, 'is merely illusory, and in all the individuals of this world there is made manifest only one, single, truly existent Being, present and ever the same in all…' I have no doubt that, ultimately, this was Wagner's *credo*, and that *Parsifal* was his manifesto. *Tristan* was the first great flowering of this belief, a belief so compelling that it warranted the interruption of the Nibelung project.

It is fascinating to see how Wagner was thinking his way towards a Schopenhauerian position long before he encountered the philosopher's writings, and how he was already emersed in Tristonian concepts years before jotting down that first sketch in 1854. His philosophical position seems to have been entirely at one with the way in which he understood and composed music - indeed, it might be said to have grown out of his musical sensibilities. Listen to the language he uses in his essay *My Recollections of Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld* of 1868, to describe the musical processes at work in Act Three of *Tristan*. The observer should pay close attention to the orchestra, he says, 'and follow carefully the ceaseless play of musical motives, emerging, unfolding, uniting, severing, blending anew, waxing, waning, battling each with each, at last embracing and well nigh engulfing one another; then let them reflect that these motives have to express an emotional life which ranges from the fiercest longing for bliss to the most resolute desire of death, and therefore required a harmonic development and an independent motion such as could never be planned with like variety in any pure symphonic piece.'

We should compare this analysis with his essay *The Artwork of the Future* written twenty years earlier, soon after fleeing Dresden, in which he wrote: 'In the kingdom of Harmony there is therefore no beginning and no end; just as the objectless and self-devouring fervour of the soul, all ignorant of its source, is nothing but longing, yearning, tossing, pining and therefore everlasting falling back upon itself.' He is describing a process of musical composition as

much as a philosophical idea, and he identified this musical process long before he encountered the philosophy.

In *A Communication to my Friends* he wrote: ‘What, in the end, could this love-yearning - the noblest thing my heart could feel – what could it be than a longing for release from the present, for absorption into an element of endless love, a love denied to earth and reachable through the gates of death alone?’ Again, the language is poetic and philosophical but it is also a way of describing the harmonic processes that are characteristic of Wagner’s music and which appeal to our deepest sensibilities; and this was written in 1851 when *Tristan* was still years into the future.

So, these were the issues that caused him to redefine what was possible on the operatic stage, and to find an appropriate vehicle for its expression. The association between music and metaphysical ideas takes other forms too. In the diary that he called the Brown Book, he creates a dramatic correlation between night, ‘untroubled harmony’ and the Buddhist concept of *Nirvana* - literally the ‘blowing out’ of the flame of desire, the extinction of self. It is no coincidence therefore, that Tristan’s dying cry is: ‘*The torch is put out’*.

Some of the most beautiful and poetic imagery in *Tristan und Isolde* is drawn from another eastern source: the *Upanishads* of the Hindus. Schopenhauer was extravagant in his praise of these mystical treatises written in Sanskrit between 800 and 400 BC, sometimes called the Himalayas of the Soul. For most of his life, Schopenhauer read a few pages of the *Upanishads* in translation each night before going to sleep, and of them he wrote: ‘It is the most profitable and sublime reading that is possible in the world; it has been the consolation of my life and will be that of my death.’ It is hardly surprising that Wagner too came under the spell of these ancient writings.

Schopenhauer praised them especially for their recognition (expressed poetically) that our senses are only able to grasp a representation of the world, and that this representation stands like a veil between the subject and the hidden world of timeless reality. This ‘veil’ the Hindus called *Maya*. Schopenhauer noted: ‘The ancient wisdom of the Indian philosophers declares. “It is *Maya*, the veil of deception, which covers the eyes of mortals, and makes them see a world of which one cannot say either that it is, or that it is not: for it is like a dream; it is like the sunshine on the sand which from afar the traveller mistakes for water, or the piece of rope cast to the ground, which he mistakes for a snake.” But what all these thinkers mean, and what they are talking about, is nothing more than what we, too, at this moment are considering – the world as representation subordinated to the principle of sufficient reason.’

The love-potion opens the eyes of the lovers to a truer insight, something that the mythologist Joseph Campbell described in these terms: ‘…as [Tristan and Isolde] have already renounced psychologically both love as lust and the fear of death, when they drink, and live, and again look upon each other, the veil of *Maya* has fallen.’

In a revealing personal observation, Wagner too, spoke of the veil of Maya as it fell over his own life and work, casting him, he said, into the world of deception 'where I then allow myself to become entangled, often to the point of utter distraction.'

When Tristan and Isolde sing: 'then I myself am the world', they are drawing on one of Schopenhauer's favourite passages in the *Upanishads*: 'I am all these creatures, and besides me there is no other being', illustrating how someone contemplating nature necessarily draws nature into himself, transcending individuality and joining with the sublime. This image also finds an echo in the Good Friday scene in *Parsifal*, when Gurnemanz draws even the humblest things in nature - the grasses and flowers of the meadow - into a greater reality.

When the lovers seek to merge their personalities ('Tristan you, I Isolde, no longer Tristan!' and so on) they are echoing yet another verse of the *Upanishads*: 'As the flowing rivers disappear in the sea, discarding their name and their form, thus the illuminated one, freed from name and form, enters the divine spirit, who is greater than the great.'

When they sing: 'heart to heart, mouth to mouth, bound together in one breath', the *Upanishads* are there again. The Sanskrit word âtman – 'breath' or 'soul' - is often used in conjunction with truth, infinity and the supreme deity – something beyond comprehension. Âtman is related etymologically to the German word for breath, Atem, and we find the most vivid expression of this connection in Isolde's final vision, in which the once-living Tristan is transmuted into the 'immensity of the world's breath'. Indeed a passage in the *Upanishads* that reads: 'The Âtman is beyond sound and form, without touch and taste and perfume' clearly inspired other lines of the *Liebestod*:

'How they swell and
clamour around me,
shall I breathe them,
shall I hear them?
Shall I taste them,
dive beneath them?
Breathe my last
in sweet perfume?'

There are so many beautiful images in *Tristan und Isolde*, including the invocation of the night and Brangäne's lullaby-like warning in Act Two, and Tristan's vision in Act Three, when he wakens from his trauma to imagine Isolde coming to him across a sea of flowers. In *Die Meistersinger*, a rather different knight, Walther von Stolzing, invokes a similar vision of 'Eva im Paradies'. On an ocean of sound that bears him up, Tristan rejoices: 'Ah, Isolde, Isolde, how beautiful you are'. In the loneliness of suffering, this is the reality that becomes his consolation, to be matched at the end by Isolde's own vision of the transfigured Tristan.

It is usual to regard *Tristan* and *Meistersinger* as being poles apart, but there are more connections than we might think. The concept of illusion (*Wahn*) is one of them. Everybody knows Sach's reply to Eva that he doesn't want to emulate King Marke in the sad tale of *Tristan und Isolde*, while the orchestra slips for a moment into the *Tristan* idiom. But in Act Three of *Tristan*, Wagner gives us a few minutes of pure *Meistersinger*, several years before the latter was written. It comes at the point when Kurwenal tells his master that although he might appear simple, he had thought about how the wound inflicted by Melot could be healed and had concluded that she who had once healed the wound caused by Morold might do it again. He had sent word for Isolde, the best physician in Cornwall, and a trusty man was bringing her across the sea. Tristan, beside himself with joy, draws Kurwenal to him and sings a most moving paean to friendship, and it is while we are in this warm and generous mood – this sharing of suffering and love - that the writing anticipates *Die Meistersinger*.

The relationship between Tristan and Kurwenal passes through so many vicissitudes and expressions of mutual dependence and affection. At one moment Kurwenal is lauded as being 'unfailingly true', the next he is a 'stupid wretch', and all the while he flies between passions of unabashed joy, bitter resentment and deepest misery. This rich display of emotions is set in counterpoint to Tristan's own extraordinary oscillations of feeling and insight. The result is a scene that is one of the great achievements of the operatic stage.

Wagner maintained that passages dealing with suffering always held him up and he could only complete a very little at a single sitting. He described how, even during the technical working out, he lived through every moment. The third Act, he said, was an intermittent fever, involving unprecedented suffering and yearning, followed immediately afterwards by unprecedented triumph and jubilation. His mind dwelt concurrently on the sufferings of Amfortas in *Parsifal*, a work still twenty-two years away from completion. He clearly associated the suffering Amfortas with the suffering Tristan and, indeed, contemplated having Parsifal visit the wounded Tristan at Kareol.

The first part of the final scene, with the sudden arrival of Marke and Melot and their men, is dominated by Kurwenal, who is beyond reasoning and assumes the worst. This scene moves with startling speed as Kurwenal hurls himself at the supposed enemy in a final maniacal gesture of defiance. The poison that had surged from Tristan's wound to his brain seems to have spread to Kurwenal, who is struck down before he can hear Marke's message of forgiveness. Perhaps he wouldn't have wished it otherwise, for he lived only for Tristan who was now no more.

It is easy to suppose from the frenetic activity of this scene, an inclination by Wagner simply to bring the drama to a close as quickly as possible, but such a view overlooks another factor at work here. Tristan is dead and Isolde is unconscious. For the first time since Isolde was roused from her torpor at the start of Act One – some four hours earlier – neither of the main characters is actively engaged in proceedings. Until then, one or other or both had been at

the centre of events on stage, with the brief interlude of Tristan's unconsciousness at the start of Act Three, when the orchestra – apart from the cor anglais - has little or nothing to say. We have had no scene between Kurwenal and Brangäne comparing notes and making plans; no conspiratorial meeting between Melot and Marke; no hand-wringing confession by Brangäne in the king's chamber. Instead, as Wagner himself noted, life and death, the whole meaning and existence of the outer world, have hung on nothing but the inner movements of the soul. The whole decisive action materialised, he said, when the innermost soul demanded it. Now the innermost soul no longer demanded anything, for Tristan was dead and Isolde senseless. The outer world has reasserted itself, as it had for the equally frenetic ending of Act One and the harsh and painful ending of Act Two.

But when Isolde stirs at last, she is completely oblivious to the outer world. Her eyes are fixed on Tristan and – as the music tells us – on that wondrous realm of night into which, together, they are about to pass.