

Image and Idea – *Tristan* and the *Upanishads*

'Say, what wondrous dreams hold my soul captive...' Mathilde Wesendonck, *Träume*, 1857.

'In the evening...finished the *Upanishads*. Found Schopenhauer's dream theory in it.' Cosima Wagner, 16 January 1874

Some of the most beautiful and poetic imagery in *Tristan und Isolde* is drawn from 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, he 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 to Jakob Sulzer in 1855, 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 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* enters into the 'immensity of the world's breath'. Indeed a passage in the *Katha Upanishad* 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?'

When they 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.'

In *Tristan und Isolde* we have the story of a love whose 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 provided the intellectual justification for interrupting 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 emerged 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. In his essay *The Artwork of the Future* written soon after fleeing Dresden, 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.' Here 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 characteristic of Wagner's music; and this was written in 1851 when *Tristan* was still years into the future.

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