

Wagner at the Venusberg

When he was in his late teens, Richard Wagner came under the spell of a literary and political movement that called itself Young Germany. The activists in this movement, looking to invigorate the German kingdoms and principalities after the trauma of the Napoleonic wars, rejected reactionary political systems and bourgeois morality in favour of a life of political and sensual freedom. Liberty in both the erotic and political spheres was seen as a single, indivisible goal.

Rebellions and revolutions such as the Greek War of Independence of 1821-31, the July 1830 Revolution in Paris that swept away the absolute monarchy, and the Polish Uprising of 1830-31 against Russian rule were lauded in the same breath as calls for uninhibited expressions of individuality and free love. A universal Utopia was advocated, one that transcended national boundaries and was free from outmoded convention, church orthodoxy and ownership of property. These were all views with which the young Wagner sympathised wholeheartedly.

In the Young German scheme of things, the artist was expected to play an active role in society's affairs and to portray contemporary realities rather than romantic fairy realms or classical fantasies. Sexual licence was seen as a powerful instrument of subversion against ossified social behaviour, politics and religion. No wonder the Young Germans wanted their art to be freely and frankly erotic.

With these ideas in mind, the twenty-one year old Wagner began work on *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love), which adapted Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* to extol the virtues of unrestrained sexuality in the face of social and political oppression. The action was relocated from Vienna to Palermo, smarting under German rule. Thus Wagner was able to depict the spontaneous, pleasure-loving people of the sunny Mediterranean being oppressed by a dour German authority-figure, Friedrich (Shakespeare's Angelo) who bans fornication on pain of death but is undone by his own hypocrisy, leading to a new era of unfettered sensuality.

Against this background, *Tannhäuser* (first performed in 1845) can hardly be seen as a conventional tale of the triumph of sacred love over profane debauchery, let alone the glorification of Catholicism. And yet the fact remains that, in this work, the pursuit of sexuality almost destroys Tannhäuser, and he is saved at the last moment by the pure love of a woman who sacrifices her life for his.

What had happened to the Young German, for whom sensual freedom was a measure of an enlightened society?

The reality, it seems, is that a second and dominant strand in Wagner's psyche had begun to emerge in the work that had preceded *Tannhäuser* - *The Flying Dutchman*. In this work (inspired by a story by Heinrich Heine, himself a member of Young Germany and author of one of the sources for *Tannhäuser*) the Dutchman is motivated by a desire to escape an intolerable existence. His goal of total oblivion is achievable only through the compassionate action of somebody else – a theme to which Wagner returns again and again in later works.

Tannhäuser too repudiates *his* intolerable existence in this world, an existence torn between the demands of dedication to his art and the demands of sexual love. Ultimately, he no longer wishes or needs to live at all. Elisabeth is prepared to share this non-existence with him, and it is her death that opens the way to his own release in death.

Despite the emergence of this new and powerful theme of renunciation, compassionate self-sacrifice and redemption, Wagner was not willing to repudiate the transforming role of sexual love. Indeed, he regarded this as being at the source of all love. 'We can only love' he said, 'if we have the capacity to love. This a man learns only through a woman.' In *Tristan und Isolde* sexual love is supremely important in enabling the lovers to achieve their release from worldly existence.

At the time of writing *Tannhäuser*, Wagner was still a decade away from discovering the philosophical writings of Schopenhauer but he was already attuned to some of their key principles. Schopenhauer believed that dying was a moment of liberation from one-sided 'individuality' – an individuality that could never constitute the innermost kernel of our true being. In Schopenhauerian terms, the will to live – that instinctive force present in all beings - is a cosmic error, for it perpetuates the process of yearning, disappointment and yearning again - the endless cycle of desire and suffering familiar to Buddhists. The most intimate knowledge of the will to live, said Schopenhauer, is to be found in the ecstasy of sexual love. 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 in *Tristan und Isolde* at the height of their passion. In this way, Wagner was able to reconcile his earlier belief in the positive role of sexual love and the Schopenhauerian need to renounce the illusory world of individual existence.

The place of erotic love in the grand scheme of things is given ultimate Wagnerian expression in *Parsifal*. Here we find Kundry in her Act 2 flowery bower, so reminiscent of Venus in her Venusberg. Each of these sirens appears in alluring form, reclining on the couch of desire and bent on seducing the man who kneels before her. Venus gets her man, only to lose him at the end to death. Kundry, despite her formidable wiles and stratagems, fails to ensnare Parsifal, although he is greatly enamoured of her and can barely control his lustful feelings. Parsifal resists Kundry because he knows that by doing so he will free her from the curse of eternal wandering – the endless cycle of yearning and suffering.

Thus, the tension that had existed for so long in Wagner's art between the forces of erotic love and compassionate renunciation – the forces of Venus and Elisabeth – is resolved in favour of compassion. The ardent Young German had, after a lifetime's reflection, come to realise that it is through compassion for the sufferings of others that our common humanity is most clearly revealed.

PETER BASSETT