

Wagner Finds his Voice

'From *Holländer* to *Parsifal* - how long the path and yet how similar the character!'
Cosima Wagner.

Wagner was just 27 when he drafted the prose scenario of *The Flying Dutchman*. In later years he insisted, rightly, that this work marked the true beginning of his career, and he returned to its dramatic themes again and again.

Dreams and illusions

'Am I deep in some wonderful dream?
What I see, is it an illusion?'
Senta, Act II

'In truth, the deepest wisdom known
has always been what dreams have shown.'
Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*

'My sleep is dreaming,
my dreams are thoughts'
Erda, in *Siegfried*

Both Senta and the Dutchman inhabit the realm of dreams. She dreams of redeeming the suffering Dutchman whose fate has obsessed her since childhood, and he yearns for release from centuries of wandering. Daland, Erik, Mary and the others inhabit the prosaic world of a Norwegian seaport. Senta is increasingly alienated from this world although she has never travelled beyond her little community. For her, no less than Parsifal, space and time are one.

The deeply troubled Erik catches a glimpse of Senta's 'dream world' via his own dream, in which he imagines that she falls in love with the Dutchman and shares his watery fate. Erik relates this vision to Senta as a warning, but his words merely strengthen her resolve and fix her course of action.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, written sixty years after *The Flying Dutchman*, Freud describes dreams as 'the royal road to the unconscious' and concludes that 'dreams are the disguised fulfilment of a repressed wish'. Has Erik convinced himself that, if *he* cannot have Senta, then no one else can?

We find references to dreams and illusions in 'Elsa's dream' in *Lohengrin*, in the yearning of the lovers to escape the illusory world of 'day' in *Tristan und Isolde*; in Hans Sachs' *Wahn* monologue and Walther's 'morning dream' in *Die Meistersinger*, and in Sieglinde's nightmare in *Die Walküre* when she anticipates the death of Siegmund.

Nihilism and yearning for death

'How often into the sea's deepest abyss have I hurled myself in yearning!
The Dutchman, Act I

'Only one thing I want now:
The end, the end!
Wotan in *Die Walküre*

'To die – the only grace.'
Amfortas, in *Parsifal*

The Dutchman yearns for oblivion. Although he has tried many times to hurl himself into the ocean, to run his ship onto the rocks and to fall victim to pirates, the sea always rejects him and the pirates flee in terror. In Senta he seeks not a wife but the peace of 'eternal oblivion'. In time, Wagner would find a philosophical explanation for this in Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* and the Buddhist notion of Nirvana – a state of peace that marks the end of desire and the restless workings of the Will.

This theme finds parallels in Tannhäuser's yearning for death; Wotan's desire for 'the end, the end'; Tristan and Isolde's longing for unity beyond separate existences, and Amfortas' determination to end his suffering.

Redemption through the love and constancy of a woman

'The sombre glow that I feel burning here,
Should I, wretched one, call it love?
Ah no! It is the longing for salvation,
might it come to me through such an angel!
The Dutchman, Act II

That for which you yearn, salvation,
Would that you could achieve it, poor man,
through me.'
Senta, Act II

The redeeming quality of a woman's love is a notion with roots in the Faustian idea of the '*ewige weibliche*' - 'the eternal feminine' - which continued to fascinate Wagner for another forty years. He referred to it in a speech after the first performances of the *Ring* in 1876 and, in February 1883, he suffered his fatal heart attack while working on an essay entitled *On the Feminine Principle in Mankind*. Wagner never tired of comparing the 'masculine' and 'feminine' elements in *The Flying Dutchman* with Faust and Gretchen in Goethe's play. His sister Rosalie performed the role of Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust* for the first Leipzig performance in 1829. We find parallels with Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* and Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung*. In *Lohengrin* we witness the calamitous consequences of the absence of constancy. Gender roles are reversed in *Parsifal*. Kundry, condemned to eternal wandering by her failure to show compassion, is redeemed by Parsifal.

There are links too to Beethoven's *Fidelio*. When assuring the Dutchman of her devotion, Senta uses the words: '*Wer du auch seist*' 'Whoever you are' – the same words used by Leonore in the dungeon scene in *Fidelio*. When Senta tells the Dutchman that she would ease his suffering, he, like Florestan in his prison cell

invoking an angelic Leonore, describes her too as an angel. The singer who created the role of Senta – Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient – was also a famous Leonore and had made a lasting impression on the young Wagner.

For all its tenderness, the Act Two scene between Senta and the Dutchman in *The Flying Dutchman* is not a 'love duet' in a conventional sense. Rather it is a moving expression of the Dutchman's hope for salvation and Senta's determination to be the instrument of that salvation – through 'faithfulness until death'. The scene begins in an atmosphere of mutual magnetism but emotional detachment. As it progresses, personal feelings are aroused. Whether these go beyond spiritual feelings is open to interpretation. The Dutchman recognizes that powerful forces are at work and wonders what they mean.

The Dutchman as wanderer

'His waxen wings did mount above his reach, and melting, heavens conspir'd his overthrow.'
Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, 1588.

'He flies on like an arrow, without goal, without rest, without peace.'
Senta, Act II

'I saw Him – Him – and laughed!
Now from world to world I seek him, to meet him once again.'
Kundry in *Parsifal*

The Dutchman is doomed by his own hubris to wander perpetually on the sea. The legend is in the spirit of the ancient story of Odysseus, as Wagner recognized. It also has roots in the medieval story of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, condemned to wander until the Second Coming for taunting Jesus on the cross (also the origin of Kundry's fate). Wagner, quoting Heine, referred to the Dutchman as 'this Ahasuerus of the oceans'. As a struggling young composer in Paris in the early 1840s, he identified with such figures. *The Flying Dutchman* was written during those difficult Paris years.

As Dieter Borchmeyer has noted, the Dutchman is also the maritime equivalent of Faustus, for he represents the hubristic spirit of discovery (voyages to the Dutch East Indies and beyond) that transgressed the boundaries of knowledge and experience laid down by the Bible and the church.

This idea of perpetual wandering in search of salvation finds parallels in Tannhäuser's pilgrimage to Rome; the Wanderer's journeys in *Siegfried*, and Kundry's wandering through time in the course of her many incarnations.

The symbolism of the sea

'Ha, proud ocean!
Your challenge is ever-changing, but my torment is eternal.'
The Dutchman, Act I

'Thus may the load of all guilt be washed away!'
Gurnemanz in *Parsifal*

Water is an ever-present symbol in Wagner's works. Pristine gold is stolen from the Rhine, and the cursed ring is ultimately returned to it; *Tristan und Isolde* begins on the sea and ends within sight of it; in *Meistersinger*, reconciliation (personal and artistic) is achieved on the banks of the River Pegnitz; in *Lohengrin*, the waters of the Scheldt bring the Grail knight to the people of Brabant and then separate him from them, and the sacred lake in *Parsifal* is the site of Parsifal's lesson in compassion.

The image of a ship at the mercy of the sea may be interpreted as the storm-tossed human soul in its earthly existence, and so the Dutchman becomes a metaphor for all mankind. He had emerged from the sea and Senta follows him back into the sea. Thus water, the instrument of his torment, becomes for the Dutchman, as for Parsifal and Kundry, a symbol of redemption.

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