Unravelling Wagner's *Parsifal*

In February 1883, Richard Wagner died in Venice, a few months short of his seventieth birthday. Seven months earlier, *Parsifal* had received its first performance in the festival theatre at Bayreuth.

As a young man, Wagner had been an enthusiastic advocate of social and political reform to the point of involving himself with violent revolutionary movements. The operatic stage, he thought, could be used to create a vision of an ideal society, one governed by love rather than by privilege, property and power. Even for those idealistic times, his views were hopelessly unrealistic, as he came to recognize in exile after 1849.

In the mid-1850s, Wagner's focus began to move from politics to metaphysics. We can see this happening in the *Ring* from *Die Walküre* onwards. It certainly happens in *Tristan und Isolde*, where the lovers' goal is to escape from the harsh glare of separate existences into the perfect union of night and death. Scratch the surface of *Die Meistersinger* and we find metaphysics even there. But most of all we find it in *Parsifal*, which is based on transcendental notions such as the denial of the will and rejection of the world. It has nothing to do with politics of any kind. Wagner himself said that *Parsifal* owed its conception to his flight from the world and from a soul-less age of unfeeling utilitarianism.

Of course, like all great works of art, it can be appreciated on many levels, and the sheer beauty of its music is one such level. Debussy described it as "one of the loveliest monuments of sound ever raised to the serene glory of music."

Wagner's initial encounter with the work's subject matter came in 1845, when he read the 13th century courtly epic *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach. Twelve years later, in the spring of 1857, he was moved by a tranquil scene on the Wesendonck estate in Zurich to think of the world's 'new beginning', achieved through Christ's sacrifice on the cross on Good Friday. His mind went back to Wolfram's poem with its references to Good Friday, and the juxtaposition of these ideas provided the spark that ignited his imagination.

From Wolfram, Wagner took many details concerning the Grail and the knights who guard it. What exactly is the Grail?

Wolfram tells of a host of angels bringing it into the world: "A host of angels left [the Grail] on the earth" he says, "and then flew away up over the stars…. since then baptised men have had the task of guarding it, and with such chaste discipline that those who are called to the service of the grail are always noble men."

In the earliest legends, the Grail was neither a chalice nor the cup of the last supper. Those associations came later. In some accounts it was a serving dish or, in Wolfram's version, a magic stone. Even before the Grail was given its Christian gloss, it was

described as possessing miraculous powers, including the ability to provide all kinds of food and drink and to extend the life of those who gazed on it. Its prototypes in fact were the magic cauldrons and cornucopias of pagan antiquity, and the alchemist stones of the east.

The Grail itself came to symbolize divine power at work in the world, and it was but a simple step to link the Grail to the body and blood of Christ present in the Eucharist. The medieval church was happy to encourage this (unofficially of course) as a means of propagating the doctrine of the real presence of Christ's body in the sacrament. Some of the later Grail stories were probably invented by Cistercian monks for this purpose.

The drama is set in the domain and castle of the Grail. According to the stage directions, the scenery is like that of the northern mountains of Christian Spain. Later, we move to the magician Klingsor's enchanted castle on the southern slopes of the same mountains, facing Moorish (ie Muslim) Spain. The setting reflects the fact that the original romances were written at the time of the Crusades, when Christian Europe was coming to grips with alien influences from the Middle East and beyond. What's more, Wolfram says that his information about the Grail came from a document found in Toledo in Spain, a city occupied by the Moors until the eleventh century.

Wagner describes the costumes of the Grail knights as resembling those of the Knights Templar, the famous religious/military order founded during the Crusades. In medieval accounts, the Grail Knights were often thought of as the spiritual equivalent of the Templars, and the Grail castle as a kind of heavenly Jerusalem.

In the hall of the Grail, the knights share a 'meal of love' of bread and wine, provided by the Grail itself. The bountiful feasts of the Grail are colourfully documented by Wolfram, although Wagner devised his own mystical atmosphere, again linked to Christ's passion.

In 1854, while composing *Die Walküre,* Wagner encountered the writings of the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. These made an enormous impression on him because he recognised in them a view of the world to which he was already being drawn. Towards the end of his life he said that he regarded his Schopenhauerian philosophy and *Parsifal* as his crowning achievements. The two are inextricably entwined.

Schopenhauer wrote of the nothingness of the outer world of phenomena with its inevitable frustration, suffering and death, and of the act of renunciation of this world as the only authentic act of free will. For Schopenhauer, compassion was the source of morality.

Schopenhauer's views had much in common with Buddhism, and Wagner too became strongly attracted to Buddhism during the last three decades of his life. Not long before he wrote the first sketch for *Parsifal* in 1857, he had drafted a sketch for a music drama to be called *Die Sieger* (The Victors). *Die Sieger* dealt with an event in the legendary life of the Buddha, one of whose titles in Sanskrit is Jina – the Victor. His victory was over human desire. The Buddha taught that worldly reality is suffering, that the cause of

suffering is desire or attachment to the things of the world, and that release from suffering is possible through the achievement of *nirvana*, the 'blowing out' of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion, the extinction of 'self'. *De Sieger* was never developed beyond a sketch but some of its ideas ended up in *Parsifal,* especially those concerned with renunciation, reincarnation, and compassion.

The blending of Christian and Buddhist teachings and legends is an extraordinary idea but Wagner saw no conflict at all. He identified many common elements in Christian and Buddhist thought.

Klingsor's unfortunate predicament in the drama was not entirely Wagner's invention. Clinschor, his equivalent in Wolfram's poem, had also suffered castration, although not by his own hand. In the thirteenth-century version, we are told that the magician was once a great noble of Capua, who offered himself in service to the Queen of Sicily. That is, until the King of Sicily discovered them together and took his revenge with a knife! Clinschor then fled to a city called Persidia, where magic was first invented, and returned equipped with his magic arts. Because of the shame he had suffered, it became his greatest pleasure to rob the happiest people of their joy, especially those who are honoured and respected.

What should we make of the symbolism of the spear in *Parsifal*? Its origin too lies in the medieval romances, although it was not usually identified with the so-called spear of Longinus, found by the Crusaders at Antioch. Wagner introduced this notion to provide a focus for Parsifal's quest. In Wolfram's poem, a bleeding lance is regularly displayed as a reminder of the king's wound and of the country's descent into famine and despair. From time to time that lance is laid against the wound to relieve the king's pain.

Gurnemanz's narration in Act One is interrupted by cries from the direction of the lake, and a wild swan flutters to the ground with an arrow in its breast. The thoughtless youth Parsifal is dragged before Gurnemanz to account for his action. He is pleased with himself at being able to hit anything that flies. However, the knight's description of the swan, struck down while searching for its mate over the sacred lake, moves the boy so much that he breaks his bow and flings away his arrows. Thus he learns his first lesson in compassion.

The events surrounding the shooting of the swan in act one of *Parsifal* follow almost exactly those to be found in a collection of Buddhist legends dating from the first century AD. In both cases, the incident is used to provide a lesson in compassion. One of the principal injunctions to a would-be follower of the Buddha is to refrain from harming living creatures. Wagner vigorously opposed scientific experiments on animals, and spent time and money during the composition of *Parsifal,* supporting campaigns to prevent such experiments. He contrasted such activities with "the scientific spectre of a soul-less age which extended from the dissecting table to the small arms factory, and made itself the patron spirit of that utilitarian cult on which the state alone looks kindly."

In the hall of the Grail, Parsifal witnesses amazing things. He hears the voice of the ancient Titurel who can be kept alive only by the regular unveiling of the Grail. This idea is taken directly from the medieval sources, in which it is said that a person would not die for a week after gazing on the Grail. Life could be prolonged indefinitely this way, although one's hair would become increasingly white.

On the other hand, every time the wounded Amfortas uncovers the Grail (as he must as Grail king) he suffers extreme agony from the wound – the fruit of his desire - which bleeds afresh. Amfortas too is a character taken from medieval sources – the maimed king or the Fisher King - called Anfortas, a name derived from the old French word for 'infirmity'.

The Grail is an 'actor' in its own right. For Titurel, this miraculous, heavenly object is a giver of life; for Amfortas it is a source of humiliation, mortification and suffering, and for the knights it is a provider of physical and spiritual sustenance. The youth who stands in a corner observing proceedings is exposed to the Grail's mysterious workings. Gurnemanz hopes that if the young simpleton really is the one they have been waiting for, he will reveal this by displaying some compassion for the wounded Amfortas. However, he just stands there like a dolt, and says nothing.

Act two opens with the agitated, dazzling music of the magician Klingsor who is in his tower, sitting before a mirror, surrounded by instruments of sorcery. In the mirror, Klingsor sees Parsifal approaching and summons a reluctant Kundry to work her wiles on the innocent boy.

Klingsor reminds Kundry of her previous lives as the biblical Herodias and the Nordic messenger Gundryggia. She is a tormented creature, longing for sleep and death but condemned to endless reincarnations. When she pleads for an end to this eternal wandering, Klingsor tells her: "He that rejects you will set you free".

In the Buddhist legends we find the story of Mara, the tempter figure whose baits are the pleasures of the senses. He had tried to prevent the Buddha from achieving enlightenment by putting obstacles and temptations in his way. But, according to the legend, Mara, his army and his seductive daughters were defeated and fled in all directions. There can be no question that the imagery in Act Two of *Parsifal* owes much to the Mara legend. Parsifal overcomes Klingsor's guards (the fallen Grail knights), resists his Flower Maidens, and recovers the holy spear when the magician hurls it at him. Miraculously, the spear remains poised above Parsifal's head. In the Mara legend, it was not a spear but a discus that was thrown at the meditating Buddha. This missile was transformed into a canopy of flowers that stayed suspended over the Buddha's head.

Klingsor, like Mara, is defeated and, according to the stage directions, the castle sinks 'as if by an earthquake' and the garden withers to a desert. The magic garden is as transitory as the Buddhist notion of paradise.

The prelude to Act Three took western music into regions that were even stranger and more remote than those of *Tristan*. Today we can recognize in it a path to the music of Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg. When the curtain rises, some years have passed. It is Good Friday and a pleasant spring morning in a flowery meadow at the forest's edge. Good Friday was a day of miraculous happenings when, according to the gospels, the veil of the temple was rent, the earth quaked, graves were opened and saints arose. It seems to have been an especially propitious day in early literature. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the poet set out on his spiritual journey on the vigil of Good Friday. In Wolfram's *Parzival* we read that each Good Friday, a dove brings a wafer from heaven to lay upon the Grail and renew its powers. This is the origin of the final stage direction in Wagner's *Parsifal*, according to which (on Good Friday) a white dove descends and hovers over Parsifal's head.

Parsifal laments his own foolishness and his failure to do anything to prevent the misery that has befallen the knights. Realizing that the youth is indeed the one for whom they have been waiting, Gurnemanz and Kundry (now a calm and silent acolyte) help him to a spring, where Kundry bathes his feet. Gurnemanz scoops up some water and sprinkles it on Parsifal's head. Kundry pours oil on his feet and dries them with her hair, and the old knight anoints him as the new Grail king. Many of these details, so reminiscent of gospel accounts, were carried over from an unfinished drama that Wagner sketched in 1849, called *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Parsifal's first duty is to baptize the kneeling Kundry. He then remarks on the beauty of the meadow, contrasting it with Klingsor's rank garden, and Gurnemanz tells him that he is experiencing the magic of Good Friday. It is at this point that we hear the serene diatonic music of Good Friday, contrasting wonderfully with the troubled chromaticism of Klingsor's sorcery. Parsifal thinks that this should be a day of sadness, when all that blooms and breathes must weep, but Gurnemanz replies that this is not so. The tears of repentant sinners have sprinkled the meadow, and nature no longer sees the Saviour in agony on the cross but man redeemed through God's loving sacrifice. Thus all creation gives thanks and gains its day of innocence.

Notwithstanding the Christian imagery of this and other scenes, *Parsifal* is not a drama about Christianity. Nor is it a drama about Buddhism despite the many examples of Buddhist imagery. Wagner called *Parsifal* a festival play for the consecration of the stage, not because he had succumbed to religiosity in his old age (as Nietzsche and others asserted) but because it demonstrated that profound truths – religious, philosophical or what you will – could be revealed in a uniquely expressive way through music and drama. When religion becomes artificial, said Wagner, it is for art to reveal its hidden truths. He had never given up the idea that the stage could be used for much more than the story being performed upon it.

At the heart of *Parsifal* is the notion that salvation is to be found not in the satisfaction of selfish desires but in the ability to share the sufferings of others. In our shared sense of compassion we can recognize the fundamental unity of all beings – of all creation. This is

the insight that Parsifal, with child-like simplicity, brings to the community of the Grail, and the message that Wagner in his ‘crowning achievement’ left to the world.

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