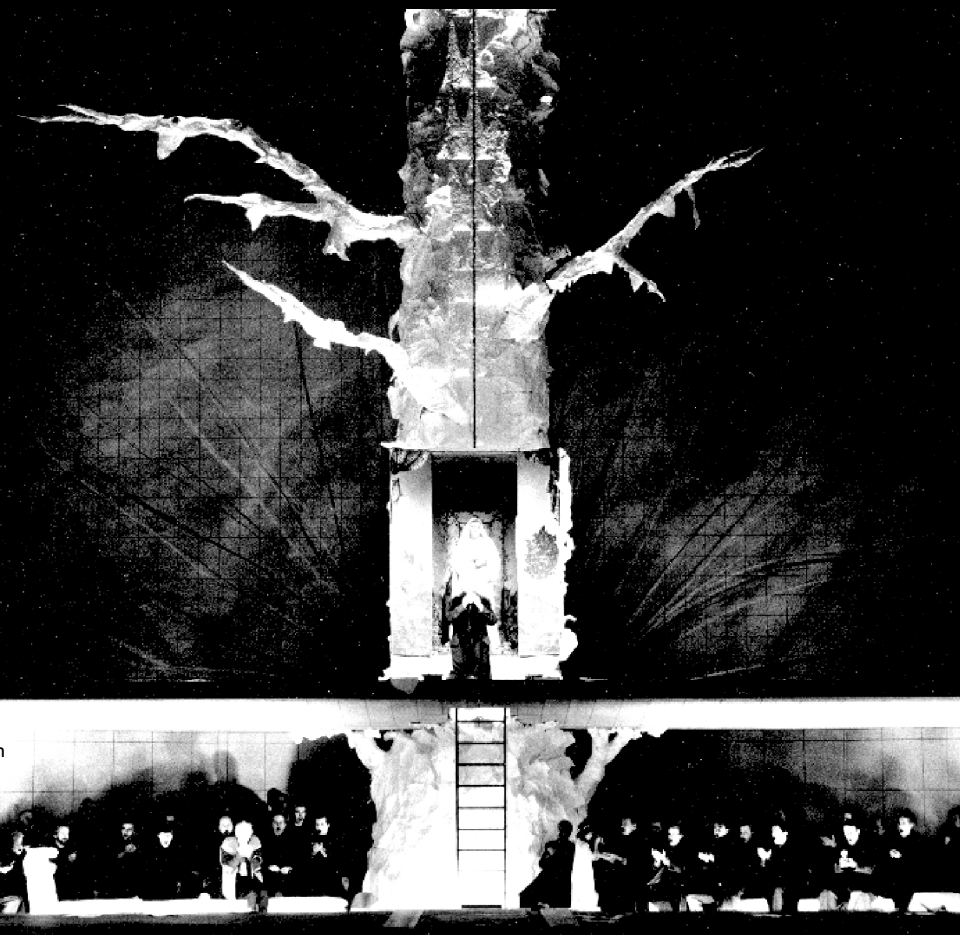
# A Companion to Wagner's *Parsifal*



**Edited by**
**William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer**

*A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal

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# Introduction: The Challenge of Wagner's *Parsifal*

*William Kinderman*

MORE THAN ALMOST ANY OTHER WORK, Wagner's *Parsifal* merits reevaluation. The literature on it, although quite extensive, is often unbalanced and contradictory. To an unusual degree, commentators have promoted perspectives on the work that conform to divergent assumptions and preconceptions. Such polarization has been encouraged by the controversies that continue to surround Wagner, and especially by the religious aura of *Parsifal*. Michael Tanner has observed: "Difficult as it is to believe, *Parsifal,* Wagner's work of peace and conciliation, has been and remains the subject of even more bitter contention than any of his other works."[1] More recently, Dieter Borchmeyer has claimed: "As a rule, artists who were violently controversial in their own day sooner or later achieve classic status, no longer sparking dissent . . . Wagner's works, together with his artistic personality, continue to provoke disagreement and militate against their becoming classics."[2]

In his essay "Religion and Art" of 1880 Wagner wrote that

> da, wo die Religion künstlich wird, der Kunst es vorbehalten sei, den Kern der Religion zu retten, indem sie die mythischen Symbole, welche die erstere im eigentlichen Sinne als wahr geglaubt wissen will, ihrem sinnbildlichen Werte nach erfaßt, um durch ideale Darstellung derselben die in ihnen verborgene tiefe Wahrheit erkennen zu lassen.[3]
>
> [When religion becomes artificial, it remains for art to rescue the essence of religion by perceiving its mythical symbols — which religion would have us believe to be the literal truth — according to their figurative value, enabling us to see their profound, hidden truth through idealized representation.][4]

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[1] *Wagner* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 184.

[2] *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2003), vii.

[3] Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen,* vol. 10 (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1912–14), 14.

[4] All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

As this statement indicates, Wagner was not interested in glorifying orthodox religion through art. Although he assimilates many Christian elements in *Parsifal,* the name "Christus" never appears, and some aspects of the work draw on pagan and Buddhist traditions. Wagner rejected assertions from both followers and opponents that Parsifal was a reflection of Jesus Christ; he stressed instead that Parsifal was not free of sin, and was at most a saint.[5] The work is far from a straightforward exemplification of Christian doctrine, and Nietzsche's comment that "Wagner . . . sank plötzlich, hülflos und zerbrochen, vor dem christlichen Kreuze nieder . . . " (Wagner . . . sank down suddenly, helpless and broken, before the Christian cross), is misleading.[6] Wagner's main source for the text, the thirteenth-century epic poem by Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170–1220), shows deep piety but scant evidence of formal religion. Here, as elsewhere, Wagner was not subservient to a single religious framework in his shaping of the text and music. On the other hand, the highly tensional relation of this artwork to religious issues rewards detailed attention.[7]

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[5] A point emphasized by Geoffrey Skelton in *Wagner in Thought and Practice* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus, 1992), 198. Wagner stressed the "Sündenlosigkeit" ("sinlessness") of Christ, and, according to Cosima Wagner's diary entry from 12 May 1879, claimed that "Alle anderen Stifter und Heilige, wie z.B. Buddha, beginnen mit der Sünde und gelangen dann zur Heiligkeit, Christus aber kann nicht sündigen." (All other religious founders and holy persons, like Buddha, begin with sin and progress toward holiness, but Christ is incapable of sin.) Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner: Die Tagebücher,* 2 vols., ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 1982; hereafter *CT*), 2:348. On 20 October 1878, Cosima quotes Wagner as rejecting Hans von Wolzogen's view of Parsifal as an embodiment of the savior, saying "'Ich habe an den Heiland dabei gar nicht gedacht.'" (I didn't think at all of the savior in that respect; *CT* 2:205).

[6] This comment appears in the 1886 preface to the second volume of *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (*Human, All Too Human*), section 3 (*Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe,* ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, IV:3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967), 6). A discussion of the break between Wagner and Nietzsche centering on Nietzsche's response to the *Parsifal* poem, which he received in January 1878, and the first publication that spring of *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* is found in Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner,* vol. 4 (New York: Knopf, 1946), 587–91. The account of this conflict in Curt von Westernhagen, *Wagner: A Biography,* trans. by Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978), 533–38, while containing some valid points, is slanted against Nietzsche and should be balanced against the very different assessment in Joachim Köhler, *Nietzsche and Wagner: A Lesson in Subjugation,* trans. Ronald Taylor (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998), 127–38.

[7] A contribution in this vein is Ulrike Kienzle's analysis of Wagner's "religious atheism" against the background of Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will. See Kienzle's *Das Weltüberwindungswerk: Wagners "Parsifal"* (Laaber: Laaber, 1992), especially 54–68, and her chapter in the present volume.

Reassessment of this "Bühnenweihfestspiel" (stage consecration festival play), as Wagner designated it, can best be undertaken if we view *Parsifal* in the broad context of his evolving career. In many ways it is his culminating work, a project that displays points of connection to every one of his major preceding operas and music dramas. The idea of redemption, which looms so large in *Parsifal,* had of course preoccupied Wagner ever since *The Flying Dutchman,* an opera completed forty years earlier. The direct mythic precursor, on the other hand, is *Lohengrin,* the last of his German Romantic operas and the work completed immediately before his long period of political exile in Switzerland, which started in 1849. The origins of *Parsifal* go back to this period, and notably to the summer of 1845, when, as Wagner relates in his autobiography, he studied Wolfram's *Parzival* while on vacation at the resort spa Marienbad in Bohemia.[8] (This spelling of the name [Parzival] was used by Wagner throughout the early phases in the genesis of the project.) Decades passed before the work gradually took shape. His thoughts returned to *Parzival* during the 1850s, in connection with his labors on *Tristan und Isolde.* The first surviving prose draft for what became *Parsifal* dates from 1865, but the complete text was finished only in 1877 and the music written mainly between 1877 and 1879, with the full score finished in January 1882, thirteen months before Wagner's death.

This "letzte Karte" (last card; *CT* 2:718), as Wagner once described *Parsifal,* thus underwent a genesis even more protracted than that of the *Ring* cycle, and became a final work that manifests his ripest and most advanced style. *Parsifal* also stands apart in that it is the only work whose music Wagner conceived with the unique acoustics of the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus* in mind. The first Bayreuth Festival took place in the summer of 1876, with performances of the cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen,* but the huge resulting deficit placed future performances in jeopardy. The renewal of the Festival with the "stage consecration festival play" *Parsifal* in 1882 placed the enterprise on a sound footing for the first time, enabling it to prosper after Wagner's death. For a generation thereafter, performances of *Parsifal* were virtually confined to Bayreuth. Only with the so-called "*Parsifal* theft" to New York in 1903 and the formal expiry of copyright ten years later was this monopoly broken. On January 1, 1914, just eight months before the outbreak of the First World War, the exclusive claim of Bayreuth officially expired, and in that year a flood of *Parsifal* performances took place in many of the world's leading opera houses.[9]

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[8] Richard Wagner, *My Life,* trans. Andrew Gray (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 302.

[9] The first of these performances, in Barcelona, actually began as early as December 31, 1913. Nora Eckert explores the juxtaposition of these events in her recent book *Parsifal 1914* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2003).

Since that time, two world wars and the appalling consequences of the Hitler regime have affected the reception of Wagner's works. The most detailed analytical study of *Parsifal* appeared in 1933, the year Hitler came to power in Germany, and its author, Alfred Lorenz, was aligned with the National Socialist cause.[10] Since then, Lorenz's confident claim to have uncovered the "secret of form" in Wagner's music by segmenting its vast continuities into symmetrical forms has been met by widespread skepticism, as found in the writings of scholars such as Carl Dahlhaus and Anthony Newcomb,[11] as well as by attempts to approach the issue of large-scale form on a somewhat different basis.[12] Yet these differences pale next to the wildly divergent views of *Parsifal* advanced by other commentators. For instance, Robert Gutman describes it as a "*pasticcio* of freakish elements — at first glance a seemingly serene and ample frieze whose figures under closer examination reveal themselves as grotesques, moving puppet-like before backgrounds realized in a strange discontinuous perspective" and finds it "amazing that *Parsifal* was ever considered a Christian work,"[13] whereas Lucy Beckett finds that "The Good Friday scene is the most moving of all modern celebrations of, precisely, 'the world as created without the poet's intervention' " and that "The Grail in *Parsifal* . . . demands to be taken in its full Christian sense as the perpetually renewed chalice of the Last Supper which represents Christ's continuing presence among men."[14]

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[10] This book, *Der musikalische Aufbau von Richard Wagners "Parsifal"* (Berlin: Max Hesses Verlag, 1933), is the fourth volume of the series *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner,* which includes studies of *Tristan und Isolde, Die Meistersinger,* and the *Ring.* In his study *Analysing Wagner's Operas: Alfred Lorenz and German National Ideology* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 1998), Stephen McClatchie seeks to show how Lorenz's work acted as a "musical metaphor" for German nationalist ideology during the Nazi era. Lorenz also contributed an essay on *Parsifal* to the *Bayreuther Festspielführer 1933,* ed. Otto Strobel, a volume that opens with an enthusiastic double tribute to Wagner, fifty years after his death, and to Hitler, the new chancellor of Germany.

[11] See especially Newcomb, "The Birth of Music out of the Spirit of Drama," *19th-Century Music* 5 (1981): 38–66, who offers an overview of the post-war debate in German scholarship over the work of Lorenz.

[12] In this regard see the chapter "Analytical Positions" in Warren Darcy, *Wagner's "Das Rheingold"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 45–58, and my review of Darcy's book in *Music Theory Spectrum* 19 (1997): 81–86.

[13] *Richard Wagner: The Man, his Mind, and his Music* (New York: Knopf, 1968), 432, 439.

[14] *Richard Wagner: Parsifal* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 148, 140. A comparable interpretation is contained in Heinrich Reinhardt, *Parsifal: Studien zur Erfassung des Problemhorizonts von Richard Wagners letztem Drama* (Straubing: Donau, 1979).

A fresh approach to interpretation properly begins with Wagner's original engagement with the *Parzival* myth, which surely even predated his summer vacation at Marienbad. In view of the considerable fame of Wolfram's *Parzival* and Wagner's early familiarity with this poet, it seems unlikely that he came to know *Parzival* only in 1845. This was presumably not the time of his initial acquaintance but rather the occasion when Wagner first took time to study the poem in detail.[15] As early as 1840, while leading a struggling existence in Paris, he had met Gottfried Engelbert Anders, a curiously isolated German scholar from the Rhineland who was employed as a librarian at the Bibliothèque Royale.[16] Although otherwise impoverished, Anders owned a fine collection of books and possessed a keen bibliographic knowledge in the field of music.[17] Through Anders, Wagner formed a lasting friendship with the Prussian philologist Samuel Lehrs, which he describes in his autobiography as "einem der schönsten Freundschaftsverhältnisse meines Lebens" (one of the most beautiful friendships of my life).[18] Lehrs was the younger brother of a noted literary scholar from Königsberg, and he showed Wagner stimulating sources on medieval saga material, contained in part in the 1838 *Jahresheft der Königsberger Deutschen Gesellschaft* (*Proceedings of the German Society of Königsberg*). Wagner's study of these sources soon bore fruit. Through Lehrs, he first came into contact with the material for the Wartburg singing contest so important to *Tannhäuser,* including the text in the original language, which, as Wagner put it, "zeigte [er] mir doch das deutsche Mittelalter in einer prägnanten Farbe, von welcher ich bis dahin keine Ahnung erhalten hatte" (indeed

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[15] Beckett, in *Richard Wagner: Parsifal,* 1, writes that "Wagner first read Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal* in the summer of 1845", but Wagner states merely, "I had therefore chosen my summer reading with care," not that the work was unfamiliar to him. Wagner's personal library at Dresden included copies of editions and translations of *Parzival* by Lachmann (1833), Simrock (1842), and "San Marte," or Albert Schulz (1836), as has been documented by Curt von Westernhagen in his book *Richard Wagners Dresdener Bibliothek 1842 bis 1849* (Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1966).

[16] "Anders" was a pseudonym, meaning "unlike" or "different," conveying a self-image that Wagner too would have shared, particularly during his time in Paris.

[17] Following the appearance of Anton Schindler's flawed *Biographie von Ludwig van Beethoven* in 1840, Anders and Wagner planned to write a Beethoven book in two volumes, and Wagner submitted a proposal to three German publishers, none of whom embraced the project.

[18] Wagner's account of his acquaintance with Anders and Lehrs is found in his autobiography, *Mein Leben* (Munich: Paul List Verlag, 1963), 203–5; in English as *My Life,* trans. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittall (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 170–71. Quotation from 205; 171. Although the autobiography is not always reliable, there seems no reason to question this part of his account.

showed me the German Middle Ages in a significant coloring I had not yet dreamed of). In turn, the historical figure of Wolfram von Eschenbach became a major character in *Tannhäuser.* Furthermore, the same book with the Wartburg poem also contained "ein kritisches Referat über das Gedicht vom *Lohengrin,* und zwar mit ausführlicher Mitteilung des Hauptinhalts dieses breitschweifigen Epos (a critique of the poem *Lohengrin,* together with a lengthy narrative of the principal contents of this rambling epic).[19]

One source led to another in Wagner's diligent reading. The *Lohengrin* saga material is closely bound up with *Parzival,* and the conclusion of Wolfram's *Parzival* poem contains the account of the *Lohengrin* legend that formed the basis for that opera. In the mythic sources, Lohengrin is the eldest son of Parzival, and succeeds him as King of the Grail. In the last act of Wagner's opera, at the climax of Lohengrin's narrative in response to Elsa's having asked the forbidden question about his origins, Lohengrin reveals this suppressed information to the assembled populace:

> Nun hört, wie ich verbot'ner Frage lohne!
> Vom Gral ward ich zu euch daher gesandt:
> Mein Vater Parzival trägt seine Krone,—
> Sein Ritter ich — bin Lohengrin genannt.
>
> [Now hear how I reward the forbidden question:
> I was sent to you from the Grail;
> my father, Parzival, wears its crown.
> I am his knight, Lohengrin.]

Hence Wagner's composition of *Lohengrin* itself served as preparation for his final work. Through his prolonged engagement with Wolfram's poem and treatment of related material in *Lohengrin,* Wagner was already poised to contemplate *Parzival* as a serious operatic subject by the time of his period of exile in the 1850s. Yet the process of envisioning the work unfolded slowly. Wagner had to greatly condense the contents of the medieval epics on which he drew. While reshaping the saga material, he was influenced not only by the colorful array of incidents and by the narrative and language of these sources, but also by other, overriding qualities of the original poems that helped shape his own basic conception.

The most impressive of all the medieval epics that captured Wagner's attention were surely Wolfram's *Parzival* and Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan.*[20] In Gottfried's masterpiece, the depiction of Tristan as a musical

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[19] *My Life,* 213.

[20] For studies of these works, see *A Companion to Wolfram's Parzival,* ed. Will Hasty (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1999), and *A Companion to Gottfried von Strassburg's "Tristan,"* ed. Will Hasty (Rochester: Camden House, 2003).

artist rather than as merely a knight, as well as the musical abilities of his pupil Isolde, must have fascinated Wagner.[21] And although their musical endeavors are not mentioned as such in Wagner's narrative text, the full-blooded *musical* conception of *Tristan und Isolde* represents a logical outcome of Gottfried's distinctive treatment, conjoined with the emphasis on music as a revelation of inner reality that Wagner found articulated in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer.

Wolfram von Eschenbach's story focuses on the quest for an ideal and goal for aspiration higher than knighthood; the inability of individuals to choose the right path is reflected in the key notion of "zwivel" (related to "Zweifel" or "doubt" in modern German). Some passages taken over by Wagner from Wolfram show Parzival at first unable to find the right path, as when he fails to show compassion by asking a question of the ailing Grail King Anfortas.[22] In Wolfram's version, it is Anfortas who informs Parzival of the death of his mother, Herzeloyde, and who forgives him his sins, reminding him of the importance of humility. Another common theme is the love of one's fellow creatures, which begins to dawn on Wolfram's Parzival when he weeps over the death of birds slain by his arrows. Wagner incorporates this moment into the killing of the swan, and deepens the quality of humility into compassion. This compassion (*Mitleid*) eventually broadens in its scope as Parzival becomes an instrument of higher spiritual forces.

It is revealing to consider other affinities between *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal,* the two Wagnerian works associated with the Grail legend. These affinities extend to aspects of the textual and musical treatment, as well as to the larger dramatic structure. One obvious point of contact is the role of the swan. The otherworldly Grail Knight Lohengrin approaches and departs from the action with the swan, and the special importance of the creature is unveiled at the conclusion, as the swan is transformed into Gottfried, Elsa's long-lost brother. A venerable mythic symbol, the swan would later assume signal importance for Wagner's indispensable patron, King Ludwig II (1845–86) of Bavaria, himself descended from an Order

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[21] For a discussion of these attributes, see Will Hasty, "Performances of Love: Tristan and Isolde at Court," in *A Companion to Gottfried von Strassburg's "Tristan,"* ed. Will Hasty, 159–81, esp. 167–72.

[22] Wagner's sources used the spelling Anfortas, which he followed until he wrote the complete poem of *Parsifal* in 1877, when he changed it to Amfortas. Parzival's failure to intervene by posing a question at the Grail Temple results in the wounded king being condemned to continued agony and grief, as is emphasized in Wolfram's *Parzival* and also in Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval*. In this regard, see among other studies the recent book *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* by Richard Barber (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004), esp. 20–21, 78.

of Swan Knights, as is reflected in the names of his castles Hohenschwangau and Neuschwanstein. Ultimately, Ludwig's fascination with Lohengrin as divine Swan Knight grew into an unhealthy obsession: at Linderhof (yet another of his castles) the king indulged in rides in a swan-boat in a private subterranean grotto adorned by scenes from Wagner's operas.

In *Parsifal,* the swan symbol from *Lohengrin* is turned on its head dramatically, with the naïve hero appearing as a swan killer, committing the shocking "murder" of the sacred bird in a realm of the Grail. The logic of this treatment rests in the character development of Parsifal, whose role as a "pure fool," who gains knowledge through compassion had been foretold. When his misdeed is pointed out to him, Parsifal demonstrates his capacity for compassion for the first time and discards his bow and arrow. The act of killing the swan is dramatically significant, and in act 3, when Parsifal returns years later to the realm of the Grail, Gurnemanz recognizes him as "the one who once killed the swan."

An intriguing connection exists between the musical motive employed in the passage beginning "Mein lieber Schwan!" in act 1 of *Lohengrin* and the same idea employed at the slaying of the swan in act 1 of *Parsifal.* Wagner reinterprets the preexisting motive with considerable subtlety, especially when Gurnemanz describes the graceful flight of the swan before it was struck by Parsifal's arrow. The delicate textures of this passage surpass the version in *Lohengrin* and match well to the text, with its references to the circling motion of the swan over the lake. Other motivic affinities exist between these works. The music heard when Gurnemanz describes the descent of the heavenly heralds to Titurel is quite similar, in its descending stepwise contour and dotted rhythm, to the soft descending theme heard near the end of the *Lohengrin* prelude, beginning eighteen bars from the conclusion. In this instance, the kinship is not created by a quotation but rather is an outcome of stylistic and symbolic procedures that reach beyond the level of an individual work. The passage in *Lohengrin* clearly has a symbolic import similar to the more concentrated "heavenly descent" in Gurnemanz's narrative.

There are also parallels in the dramatic construction of *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal* on the largest scale. In both works, the outer acts are most concerned with ritualistic events, whereas the middle act is dominated by darker, ominous characters. In both cases, the key event in the opening act is the astonishing arrival of an external agent. The dramatic problems that these agents need to solve differ considerably. Although Parsifal's first visit to the Grail is unsuccessful, it nevertheless launches him on his gradual path toward maturity and enlightenment. Lohengrin's arrival, on the other hand, is a quick fix to the dramatic problem — a solution that will not withstand the vicissitudes of real life, of human doubt and fallibility.

Of all Wagner's dramas, *Lohengrin* is the most tragic. The otherworldly character of the hero, and his dependence on Elsa's blind faith,

prove no match for the shrewd and dishonest manipulations of Ortrud. The straightforwardness of Lohengrin and the innocent gullibility of Elsa are bound to be undone. Psychologically, the most penetrating character is Ortrud, whose bitter hatred has deep roots in an opposing ideological outlook that scornfully denies the existence of a monotheistic god. "Gottes Kraft? Ha, ha!" (Heavenly powers? Ha, ha!) she exclaims in her galvanizing response to the despairing Frederick von Telramund in act 2. The character of Ortrud invites comparison to Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth or Iago. Her "Credo" in act 2, in which she invokes the pagan gods in wild exultation to grant her vengeance, foreshadows the demonic confession of Verdi's Jago in his *Otello*.

In this context it is striking to observe the many musical and dramatic affinities that exist between Ortrud in *Lohengrin* and Klingsor and Kundry in *Parsifal*. There can be little doubt but that Wagner, when he initially fashioned the dramatic scenario for *Parsifal* in prose sketches in the 1850s and 1860s, must have envisioned prominent aspects of the music in a general way. What *Lohengrin* offered, in particular, was a framework in which the dark chromaticism of a distinctive minor key could serve as the vehicle for a corrosive, manipulative force. Ortrud's associative tonality of F♯ minor is especially predominant at the outset of act 2. In *Parsifal*, it is act 2 that is set away from the realm of the Grail, in Klingsor's Magic Castle, and Klingsor's associated tonality of B minor (itself closely related to F♯ minor) serves as the framing key for the act as a whole.

The scornful laughter of Ortrud corresponds to Kundry's mocking laughter, which, in its original incarnation as mockery of the Redeemer on the cross, resulted in her curse. The symbol of scornful laughter is developed further in *Parsifal*, and one of the main musical motives for Kundry is evocative of her laughter. Another point of contact is the dramatic function of Klingsor as the opponent of the Grail Knights, one who through magic and cunning has already damaged the Grail Order and who is intent upon its complete destruction. Ortrud's analogous role in *Lohengrin* offered a preexisting framework, and Wagner was probably conscious of not wanting to come too close to his earlier setting in composing the music to *Parsifal*. The broader family resemblance of Ortrud's music to the Klingsor-Kundry realm emerges if we compare the beginning of act 2 of *Lohengrin* to several passages in *Parsifal*. Notable in this regard is the chromatic motive that is associated with Kundry's deathly sleep but also with her attempted seduction of Parsifal. This musical idea is often described as the "Magic" motive (*Zaubermotiv*) in recognition of the influence of Klingsor, but Wagner once aptly described its character at Kundry's kiss as "Ein Augenblick dämonischen Versenkens . . . worin das tragische, wie Gift sich schlängelnde Motiv der Liebessehnsucht vernichtend wirkt" (a moment of demonic possession . . . in which the tragic, serpentine

motive of love's desire acts destructively, like poison).[23] Here, as elsewhere, a single motive in Wagner takes on a range of dramatic meanings. It is this "serpentine motive of love's desire" that bears a tangible similarity to the haunting repeated phrase with cellos and bassoons heard at the outset of act 2 in *Lohengrin*. The winding contour, exposed dissonant tritones, and other shared features of these musical ideas point to a deeper dramatic affinity. In context, the obsessive patterning and heightened dissonance of such motives convey a sense of ill intent and destructive potential.

Soon after completing *Lohengrin,* Wagner fled Saxony and eventually found political refuge in Zurich, Switzerland. For several years, he was primarily occupied with various prose writings and with the gigantic cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. However, for an extended period during the ensuing genesis of his following work, *Tristan und Isolde,* the character of Parzival surfaced again, as Wagner reflected upon dramatic parallels between the final act of *Tristan* and the *Parsifal* drama. As he put it in retrospect, "Dieser an der empfangenen Wunde siechende und nicht sterben könnende Tristan identifizierte sich in mir nämlich mit dem Anfortas im Gral-Roman" (The picture of Tristan languishing, yet unable to die of his wound, identified itself in my mind with Anfortas in the Romance of the Grail).[24] This identification dates from 1855, and is recorded in a notebook from that year.[25] Four years later, in May 1859, Wagner writes in a similar vein to Mathilde Wesendonk describing the figure of Anfortas as "mein Tristan des dritten Aktes mit einer undenklichen Steigerung" (my Tristan of the third act with an inconceivable intensification).[26] Later in the same letter he writes:

> Und noch dazu hat's mit dem Parzival eine Schwierigkeit mehr. Er ist unerläßlich nötig als der ersehnte Erlöser des Anfortas: soll Anfortas aber in das wahre, ihm gebührende Licht gestellt werden, so wird er von so ungeheuer tragischem Interesse, daß es fast mehr als schwer wird, ein zweites Hauptinteresse gegen ihn aufkommen zu lassen, und doch müßte dieses Hauptinteresse sich dem Parzival zuwenden, wenn er nicht als kalt lassender Deus ex machina eben nur schließlich hinzutreten sollte.
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> [And yet there is still another difficulty with the character of Parzival: he is absolutely indispensable as the chosen redeemer of Anfortas: but should Anfortas be shown in a true, revealing light, he will be of such enormous

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[23] See the entry in Cosima Wagner's diary dated 3 June 1878. This passage is cited in Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Werke,* vol. 30, ed. M. Geck and E. Voss (Mainz: Schott, 1970), 33.

[24] Wagner, *Mein Leben,* 594.

[25] Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Werke,* 30:12.

[26] Wolfgang Golther, ed., *Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendonk: Tagebuchblätter und Briefe 1853–1871* (Berlin: Alexander Duncker Verlag, 1910), 207.

> tragic interest that it will be more than difficult to create another main interest against him, and yet this principal interest must be centered in Parzival if he is not to appear at the end as a cold deus ex machina.][27]

How then did Wagner successfully create "another main interest" in the character of Parsifal? Here his assimilation of the thought of Schopenhauer during the 1850s was pivotal. Seen as "durch Mitleid wissend, der reine Tor" (knowing through compassion, the pure fool), Parsifal could be treated initially as a raw youth at the outset of a long path toward enlightenment. Consequently, Wagner's *Parsifal* may be understood as a special type of *Bildungsroman,* with the education of the hero prolonged over the course of the drama. The guiding concept has a Schopenhauerian cast, involving an overcoming of the *principium individuationis* through an attainment of mastery over the individual will. In Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation,* which Wagner read and re-read many times, starting in 1854, the principle is described as follows:

> Schon die Heiligkeit, welche jeder rein moralischen Handlung anhängt, beruht darauf, daß eine solche im letzten Grunde aus der unmittelbaren Erkenntnis der numerischen Identität des inneren Wesens alles Lebenden entspringt. Diese Identität ist aber eigentlich nur im Zustande der Verneinung des Willens (Nirwana) vorhanden, da seine Bejahung (Sansara) die Erscheinung desselben in der Vielheit zur Form hat. Bejahung des Willens zum Leben, Erscheinungwelt, Diversität aller Wesen, Individualität, Egoismus, Haß, Bosheit entspringen aus *einer* Wurzel, und ebenso anderseits Welt des Dinges an sich, Identität aller Wesen, Gerechtigkeit, Menschenliebe, Verneinung des Willens zum Leben. Wenn nun, wie ich genugsam gezeigt habe, schon die moralischen Tugenden aus dem Innewerden jener Identität aller Wesen entstehen, diese aber nicht in der Erscheinung, sondern nur im Dinge an sich, in der Wurzel aller Wesen liegt, so ist die tugendhafte Handlung ein momentaner Durchgang durch den Punkt, zu welchem die bleibende Rückkehr die Verneinung des Willens zum Leben ist.
>
> [The holiness attaching to every purely moral action rests on the fact that ultimately such action springs from the immediate knowledge of the numerical identity of the inner nature of all living things. But this identity is really present only in the state of denial of the will (Nirvana), as the affirmation of the will (Samsara) has for its form the phenomenal appearance of this in plurality and multiplicity. Affirmation of the will-to-live, the phenomenal world, diversity of all beings, individuality, egoism, hatred, wickedness, all spring from *one* root. Now, as I have sufficiently shown, moral virtues spring from an awareness of that identity of all beings; this, however, lies not in the phenomenon, but in the thing-in-itself, in the root of all beings. If this is the case, then the virtuous action

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[27] *Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendonk,* 210.

> is a momentary passing through the point, the permanent return to which is the denial of the will-to-live.][28]

Hence it is a decisive shift away from egoistic affirmation of the self in the phenomenal world that represents progress toward enlightenment. The hero's distance from this goal is made clear in the early stages of the action. Parsifal's very first words, "Gewiss! Im Fluge treff' ich, was fliegt!" (Of course! In flight I shoot everything that flies!) convey a sheer abandonment to the chase, with complete lack of concern for the creatures who fall victim to the hunt. In similar unthinking obliviousness, he fails to contemplate the consequences of his absence from his mother, Herzeleide (Heart's Sorrow), causing her death. Moreover, when Kundry tells of Herzeleide's death, Parsifal loses all control, and throttles her. "Schon wieder Gewalt!" (Violence again!), exclaims Gurnemanz.

Wagner's greatest difficulty was determining how Parsifal's further psychological progress could be adequately motivated in dramatic terms. Since a prose sketch allegedly made by Wagner in 1857 has not survived, we are somewhat at a disadvantage in judging his plans for *Parsifal* from this period. Houston Stewart Chamberlain claimed in his 1886 essay "Notes sur *Parsifal*" in the *Revue wagnérienne* that the sketch outlined a drama in three acts, containing scenes familiar from the completed work as well as fragments of musical motives.[29] To judge from the extant sources, however, it seems certain that some crucial aspects of the drama still remained undeveloped.

Around this time Wagner made a musical sketch for Parzival as wanderer seeking the Grail, an idea presumably identical with "Parzival's refrain" as mentioned in an earlier notebook entry from 1855. The relationship between *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parzival* fascinated Wagner, and his notion of introducing the character of Parzival into the third act of *Tristan* provides the context for this musical sketch. The theme is in the key of E major, and was ultimately replaced by Tristan's vision of Isolde, in the same key, as Robert Bailey has observed.[30] Although this musical idea was originally intended for *Tristan,* and not *Parsifal,* it bears a family resemblance to the complex of themes for the Grail in the later work, and belongs, broadly considered, to the genesis of the music for *Parsifal.* Nevertheless, Wagner's initial fixation on Parzival as wanderer seeking the

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[28] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, ed. Heinrich Schmidt (Leipzig: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1911), 2:338; in English: *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), 2:609–10.

[29] "Notes sur Parsifal," *Revue wagnérienne* 7 (1886): 220–26; here, 222.

[30] See Robert Bailey, "The Genesis of 'Tristan und Isolde' and a Study of the Sketches and Drafts for the First Act" (PhD diss., Princeton, 1969), 30–31. A transcription of this sketch is found in chapter 4 of the present volume.

Grail was somewhat downplayed when he worked out the details of the drama. There was to be no independent episode devoted to Parsifal's prolonged and tortuous return to the Grail. Instead, Wagner concentrated his depiction of this journey in the music of the prelude to act 3 and in the corresponding parts of Parsifal's narrative later in that act. Nevertheless, it is striking that Wagner repeatedly turned to the "Dresden Amen" motive, with its stepwise rising contour, when he conceived music associated with an arduous pilgrimage. The last act of *Tannhäuser* and the musical sketch for "Parzival's refrain" both use variants of this figure, which is absorbed as well into the so-called Grail motive in *Parsifal* and employed in the prelude to act 3 to signal Parsifal's eventual approach to the Grail realm, after his path has been blocked by Kundry's curse.

A crucial missing ingredient in Wagner's evolving dramatic scenario in the 1850s was that character who would serve to connect Amfortas and Parsifal, while motivating the downfall of the one and triumph of the other. This was of course Kundry, a fascinating amalgam who absorbs content from several of Eschenbach's characters. These include "Cundrie la sorcière," a Grail messenger of mysterious and sinister aspect; Orgeluse, a seductress held in the power of the sorcerer Clinschor; and Parsifal's cousin Sigune, a melancholy maiden and penitent. These three characters serve as models for Wagner's Kundry in each of the three acts.[31] Wagner's Kundry as a bringer of news (*Kunde*) also borrows from Eschenbach's character Trevrizent, an old knight who also served as one model for Gurnemanz. Yet there are dimensions of Kundry that have no basis in Eschenbach's *Parzival,* and her dramatic relationship to Parsifal rewards close attention.

Kundry also reflects aspects of the character of the young woman Sawitri in Wagner's unfinished Buddhist drama *Die Sieger* (The Victors), from 1856. The plot of *Die Sieger* centers on the relation of sensuous and godly love, of Eros and Agapē. In a previous incarnation, the beautiful Sawitri had spurned, with mocking laughter, a Brahmin's son. She passionately loves the chaste young man Ananda, but is influenced by the Buddha to renounce him when she is admitted into the Buddha's community. The notion of Kundry's many incarnations and her divided existence between the Grail and Klingsor suggests a connection to this unfinished project.[32]

More suggestive still is an important letter Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonk from Paris at the beginning of August in 1860. Following

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[31] Cf. Beckett, *Richard Wagner: Parsifal,* 10; and Wolfgang Golther, *Parzifal und der Gral in der Dichtung des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1925), 359–60.

[32] A recent discussion of related issues is contained in Bernd Zegowitz, *Richard Wagners unvertonte Opern* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), 257–71.

a discussion of the transmigration of souls related to *Parzival, Lohengrin,* and *Die Sieger,* Wagner turns to a detailed analysis of the character of Kundry in the *Parzival* drama, a passage that needs to be quoted at length:

> Viel ist wieder der "Parzival" in mir wach gewesen; ich sehe immer mehr und heller darin; wenn alles einmal ganz reif in mir ist, muß die Ausführung dieser Dichtung ein unerhörter Genuß für mich werden . . . Sagte ich Ihnen schon einmal, daß die fabelhaft wilde Gralsbotin ein und dasselbe Wesen mit dem verführerischen Weibe des zweiten Aktes sein soll? Seitdem mir dies aufgegangen, ist mir fast alles an diesem Stoffe klar geworden. Dies wunderbar grauenhafte Geschöpf, welches den Gralsrittern mit unermüdlichem Eifer sklavenhaft dient, die unerhörten Aufträge vollzieht, in einem Winkel liegt und nur harrt, bis sie etwas Ungemeines, Mühvolles zu verrichten hat, — verschwindet zuzeiten ganz, man weiß nicht wie und wohin?
>
> Dann plötzlich trifft man sie einmal wieder, furchtbar erschöpft, elend, bleich und grauenhaft: aber von neuem unermüdlich, wie eine Hündin dem heiligen Grale dienend, vor dessen Rittern sie eine Heimlich Verachtung blicken läßt: ihr Auge scheint immer den Rechten zu suchen, — sie täuschte sich schon — fand ihn aber nicht. Aber was sie sucht, das weiß sie eben nicht: es ist nur Instinkt.
>
> Als Parzival, der Dumme, ins Land kommt, kann sie den Blick nicht von ihm abwenden: Wunderbares muß in ihr vorgehen; sie weiß es nicht, aber sie heftet sich an ihn. Ihm graust es — aber auch ihn zieht es an: er versteht nichts . . . — Dieses Weib ist in einer unsäglichen Unruhe und Erregung: der alte Knappe hat das früher an ihr bemerkt, zu Zeiten, ehe sie kurz darauf verschwand. Diesmal ist ihr Zustand auf das höchste gespannt. Was geht in ihr vor? Hat sie Grauen vor einer abermaligen Flucht, möchte sie ihr enthoben sein? Hofft sie — ganz enden zu können? Was hofft sie von Parzival? Offenbar heftet sie einen unerhörten Anspruch an ihn? — Aber alles ist dunkel und finster: kein Wissen, nur Drang, Dämmern? — In einem Winkel gelauert wohnt sie der qualvollen Szene des Amfortas bei: sie blickt mit wunderbarem Forschen (sphinxartig) auf Parzival. Der — ist auch dumm, begreift nichts, staunt — schweigt. Er wird hinausgestoßen. Die Gralsbotin sinkt kreischend zusammen; dann ist sie verschwunden. (Sie muß wieder wandern.)
>
> Nun raten Sie, wer das wunderbar zauberische Weib ist, die Parzifal in dem seltsamen Schlosse findet, wohin sein ritterlicher Wut ihn führt? Raten Sie, was da vorgeht, und wie da alles wird. Heute sage ich Ihnen nicht mehr![33]

> [Parzival has become much more alive in me; I see it more and more, and more clearly; once my ideas come to fruition, the execution of this poem will be an unheard-of pleasure for me . . . Did I tell you already that the

[33] *Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendonk,* 243–44.

> legendary wild messenger of the Grail should be one and the same being as the seductive woman of the second act? Almost everything about this material became clear to me once I realized this. This wonderfully haggard creature, who serves the Grail Knights with inexhaustible eagerness, performing the most unheard-of tasks, lies in a corner, and just waits, until she has something extraordinary and difficult to do — sometimes disappearing totally for a time, so that one knows not how and where?
>
> Then suddenly one encounters her again, terribly exhausted, wretched, pale and grim: but again she is indefatigable, serving like a dog the Holy Grail, toward whose knights she signals a secret disdain: her eye seems always to seek the right one — she has failed before, and not found him. But what she is seeking, she doesn't exactly know: it is only instinct. —
>
> When Parzival arrives, the stupid one, she can't take her eyes off him: something wonderful must take place in her; she doesn't know it, but she is bound to him. He dreads it — but it also fascinates him: he understands nothing . . . — This woman is in an unspeakable state of disquiet and agitation: the old knight had noticed that about her at times, shortly before she vanished. This time her state is at the highest point of tension. What takes place in her? Does she fear some age-old curse, does she yearn to be freed from it? Does she hope — to finally end it? What does she hope from Parzival? Clearly she has some extraordinary expectation of him? — But everything is dark and obscure: no knowledge, just compulsion, twilight? — Huddled in a corner she witnesses the torturous scene with Amfortas: she looks with wonderful penetration (sphinx-like) at Parzival. He — is also dumb, understands nothing, stares — is silent. He is thrown out. The messenger of the Grail sinks down groaning; then she disappears. (She must continue her wandering.)
>
> Now, can you guess who the wonderful magical woman is whom Parsifal finds in the strange castle to which his knightly courage has let him? You imagine what happens there, and how all of that will be. Today I'll tell you no more! —]

What stands out here is Wagner's inquiry into the existential state of Kundry — her deeper, hidden motivations, hopes, and fears.[34] One detail of his description suggests a new line of interpretation: the description of Kundry's "sphinx-like" regard of the "pure fool," Parzival.[35] A sphinx is a mysterious compound being — part human, part animal. The character of Kundry, as we have seen, is also a compound of characters drawn from Eschenbach's *Parzival.* Inasmuch as she consists of a complex amalgam of

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[34] One consequence of this focus on Kundry's complex psychology is the rich array of gestural directions for this character in the score.

[35] Kundry's contemplation of Parzival was to have occurred in the Grail Temple, where, in the finished work, she is no longer present; yet her strange fascination with Parzival is clearly reflected in the first half of the act as we know it.

conflicting character types, Kundry does seem mysteriously "sphinx-like." Yet that in itself sheds but little new light on her character.

More revealing is the context that springs to mind from Kundry's "sphinx-like" aspect. The classic tale of the sphinx is Sophocles' play *Oedipus,* and a crucial encounter in that famous work is the confrontation of Oedipus with the sphinx. In other words, it is not just the bare analogy of Kundry with the sphinx that deserves attention here, but the *entire* relationship of Oedipus to the sphinx. For Parsifal displays some Oedipus-like traits, as Wagner must have been keenly aware. Parsifal's mother-fixation is signaled at once in his music in act 1, when Herzeleide's theme is played while Gurnemanz poses questions about Parsifal's name and background, none of which he can answer. Kundry's seduction attempt in act 2 relies heavily on her assuming the role of mother, and her kiss is "a last mother's greeting" as well as a "first kiss of love." The seduction scene derives much power from this incest motive. In Sophocles' play, by comparison, Oedipus actually commits incest, marrying his mother after killing his father.

A sphinx is a creature that guards gates and cemeteries, a dangerous opponent who devours victims who fail to answer the riddles she poses. Kundry too is capable of posing uncomfortable questions, even to her self-castrated master Klingsor, whom she torments with the biting retort: "Are you chaste?" The famous question of the sphinx, "What goes on four feet in the morning, on two at midday, on three in the evening?" is correctly answered, "man," by Oedipus. Yet, as Wagner claims in the long commentary on *Oedipus* in his treatise *Oper und Drama* of 1851, Oedipus failed to assert his humanity when he put out his own eyes in response to the social taboos he had violated. In so acting, he followed the sphinx into oblivion. Wagner demands instead that "*wir* haben dieses Rätsel zu lösen, und zwar dadurch, daß wir die Unwillkür des Individuums aus der Gesellschaft, deren höchster, immer erneuernder und belebender Reichtum sie ist, selbst rechtfertigen" (*we* must solve this riddle, and precisely by justifying the emancipation from society of the individual, its highest and always renewable and vital treasure).[36]

In the long history of this "Symbol gleichsam des Symbolischen selber" (symbol of the symbolic itself), in Hegel's words,[37] it is rare for a commentator to probe the soul of the sphinx-like protagonist, as Wagner

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[36] Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama,* ed. Klaus Kropfinger (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984), 192.

[37] Hegel, *Aesthetik, Sämtliche Werke,* vol. 12, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Fromanns, 1949–63), 480; in English: *Aesthetics,* trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975), 360. For a comprehensive survey of the symbol of the sphinx in cultural history, see Willis Regier, *Book of the Sphinx* (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2004).

does. This unusual perspective helped him to fill out the dramatic psychology of *Parsifal* in unprecedented fashion, moving far beyond Wolfram von Eschenbach. The timeless, primeval aspect of Kundry, who had already been discovered by the Grail founder, Titurel, and whose incarnations included Herodias and Gundryggia, belongs to this symbolic context, as does the suggestion, in act 1, of her possessing animalistic features. (The squires accuse her of being a beast, to which she replies "Are the animals not sacred here?") The notion of another kind of compound being — part human and part flora — is developed in the Flowermaidens of act 2, whose leader and supreme embodiment is Kundry.[38] Yet most significant is the mysterious deepening of the encounter between Parsifal and Kundry in act 2. Her electrifying call "Parsifal, hier weile!" (Parsifal, linger here!) — the first time the hero's name is heard — bears comparison with a god's summoning of Oedipus "from many sides at once: 'Ho Oedipus, Thou Oedipus, why are we tarrying?' "[39] As a major threshold event in Parsifal's character development, Kundry's kiss occupies a central dramatic position. Her seduction attempt is the most formidable of all Parsifal's psychological challenges on his path toward the role of redeemer: its success would doom him. A normal human being should be unable to resist her, to see beyond the sensuous entanglement of Klingsor's magic realm. Parsifal's compassion for Amfortas enables him to resist Kundry, whereby the sphinx riddle of Kundry's seduction is answered by Schopenhauerian renunciation, ultimately setting her free from her curse. Herein lies the cause for her keen fascination with Parsifal in act 1: she instinctively yearns for the end to her servitude to Klingsor. In Sophocles' drama, Oedipus follows the sphinx to the abyss. Parsifal, by contrast, offers to his sphinx-like companion a release from her bondage and a promise of salvation.[40]

When Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonk in August 1860, he was occupied with the revision of *Tannhäuser* for Paris. This revision involved his writing new text and music for the Venusberg scene, in which

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[38] Kundry's relation to the Flowermaidens is made clear in the music toward the end of act 2, where she reverts to the Flowermaidens' music after the failure of the seduction has become evident.

[39] From *Oedipus Coloneus,* 1615–17, as cited in the chapter "Woman as the Temptress" in Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972), 122.

[40] Interesting in this context is Robert A. Davis's recent suggestion that Parsifal's refusal of Kundry's embrace involves a "renunciation of the Oedipal symbolic order with its fatalistic account of split subjectivity and the dualism of spirit and flesh." ("The Truth Ineffably Divine: The Loss and Recovery of the Sacred in Richard Wagner's *Parsifal,*" in *Voicing the Ineffable: Musical Representations of Religious Experience,* ed. Siglind Bruhn (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2002), 118).

Tannhäuser resolves to leave the garden of delights, despite Venus's efforts to block his departure. The contrast between ascetic spirituality and sensuality, Elisabeth and Venus, the Wartburg and the Venusberg, remains a stark dichotomy in *Tannhäuser.* It seems hardly coincidental that the ripening of his ideas for Kundry occurred around the time he wrote these additions to *Tannhäuser* for the Paris production. In *Parsifal,* the enigmatic figure of Kundry allows for a bridging of these opposing realms in what is probably the most symbolically rich character in all Wagner's works.

The ensuing years were the most turbulent and stressful of Wagner's life, and the fulfillment of his artistic goals must often have seemed remote. However, in 1864 the timely intervention of "Parzival" (Wagner's nickname for King Ludwig II) rescued his career, and it was at the urging of the king that Wagner wrote out an extremely detailed prose draft of *Parzival* in August 1865. This draft was written into the "brown book," the diary that Wagner began using shortly after the beginning of his relationship with his future wife Cosima von Bülow. On August 31 Wagner sent a copy of the draft to Ludwig II, who offered thanks a few days later in a highly exaggerated tone to his "worshipped, holy friend!"

For the most part, this prose draft resembles the finished work closely. In certain respects, it is even more detailed than the text of the completed poem. A conspicuously undeveloped section is Amfortas's lament in act 1, yet Parsifal's reexamination of this scene after Kundry's kiss in act 2 is richly elaborated. This suggests that in devising the text for Amfortas's lament, Wagner was guided by the later episode in which Parsifal's insight, which remained private and mute in the Temple Scene, becomes fully articulate. Sandra Corse relates this dramatic framework to the duality of the Apollonian and Dionysian in Nietzsche's book *Die Geburt der Tragödie* of 1872, seeing "the primordial pain externalized in *Parsifal* as Amfortas's wound, which the character of Parsifal enters into sympathetic relationship with, [as] a contradiction within a unity, the inevitable irruption of the Dionysian into the priests' dream of Apollonian order." Unlike the Knights, Parsifal is the "pagan observer who sees the literal blood rather than ignoring its obvious, material meaning . . . as the priests do"; his "stubborn refusal to see [the] religious significance [of the Grail] helps him later to have the insight that it, along with everything else in the world of the knights, is just representation."[41]

In the prose draft, unlike in Wolfram's version, the Grail is identified with the cup that received the blood of the redeemer.[42] The companion

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[41] *Operatic Subjects: the Evolution of Self in Modern Opera* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2000), 73, 72.

[42] In Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival,* the Grail is a precious stone that gives nourishment to the Grail Knights.

piece to the Grail is the holy spear, but Wagner was uncertain how to handle the lance in his draft, and wrote out two different interpretations, asking Cosima "which is better?"[43] The difference lay in whether or not the spear was to have been given originally to the Knights of the Grail. In the version finally adopted by Wagner, the spear was bequeathed together with the Grail, but was lost to Klingsor after Amfortas carried it recklessly into combat against the sorcerer. This version has the advantage of showing how Amfortas's aggressive misuse of the spear permits both its loss to Klingsor and Amfortas's own wounding by the very instrument that had pierced the redeemer.

Ultimately, it is the spear itself, in Parsifal's hands, that will heal Amfortas's wound. In Wagner's prose draft, the closing scene of act 3 was envisioned quite differently than in the completed work. One difference consists in the more active role of Amfortas: after his healing by Parsifal, he helps lift the Grail from its shrine. Even more remarkable is the temporary revival of the dead Titurel in the draft, who momentarily stirs in his coffin. This unsettled nature of the conclusion of *Parsifal* during its genesis is striking in view of the approaches of modern opera directors, who have explored a variety of possibilities for the end of the drama, often departing from Wagner's stage directions.

One major stage in Wagner's evolving engagement with *Parsifal* during the period up to 1877 remains:[44] his use of preexisting musical material in connection with the central dramatic idea of the Grail. In devising the music for the Grail, which is for the most part harmonically stable and diatonic, Wagner drew heavily on musical materials with sacred associations. The most obvious of these is the "Dresden Amen" motive, which stems from Johann Gottlieb Naumann, Wagner's predecessor as court *Kapellmeister* at Dresden in the late eighteenth century. Mendelssohn had used the "Dresden Amen" in his "Reformation" Symphony in D minor, op. 107, of 1830. For Mendelssohn, as for Karl Loewe and Ludwig Spohr, the "Dresden Amen" is emblematic of Catholic church music.[45] In *Parsifal,* this traditional musical motive, which features the interval of a stepwise rising fourth (or fifth), is incorporated into the second part of the Grail motive. In turn, the prominent rising contour of the "Dresden Amen" is neatly complemented by the so-called Faith motive, which inverts this

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[43] Joachim Bergfeld, *Richard Wagner: Das braune Buch: Tagebuchaufzeichnungen 1865 bis 1882* (Zurich: Atlantis, 1975), 76. The prose draft is found on pages 53–70.

[44] A detailed discussion of the evolution of the music, based on Wagner's numerous sketches and drafts, is offered in chapter 4 of the present volume.

[45] See R. Larry Todd, "Mendelssohn," in *The Nineteenth-Century Symphony,* ed. D. Kern Holoman (New York: Schirmer, 1997), 86.

intervallic shape, emphasizing a stepwise descent of a fourth. These two motives are often heard in conjunction with one another, and together with the opening Last Supper or Communion theme and its composite motives they form the most important body of music associated with the Grail in *Parsifal*.

The Communion theme heard at the very beginning of the work displays considerable complexity in its structural and expressive components, consisting as it does of a synthesis of several motives, each of which is capable of detachment and independent development. The beginning of the Communion theme, with its suspended rise through the notes of the tonic triad followed by another ascending step to the sixth scale degree, was also adapted by Wagner from a preexisting source — a rather obscure choral work composed by his father-in-law, Franz Liszt. In this instance, as with the Grail motive, the original context and associations of the music were clearly instrumental in drawing Wagner's attention. The connection is important yet unfamiliar in writings about *Parsifal,* so we shall describe it here in some detail.

The story begins on New Year's Eve of 1868 with a meeting between Liszt and the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Liszt had become an abbé and was then living at the monastery of Santa Francesca Romana in Rome. Longfellow met Liszt that evening in the company of the American painter George Healy, who captured the occasion in a fine oil portrait of the composer that now hangs at the former Longfellow residence in Cambridge, Massachusetts.[46] Healy recalled:

> The Abbé himself came down to greet us, a Roman candlestick held aloft to light the way. His characteristic head, with its long, iron-grey hair, sharply etched features, and penetrating black eyes, and his tall, slim figure shrouded in priestly vestments produced so impressive a picture that Longfellow let out an involuntary whisper: "Mr. Healy, you must paint that for me!"[47]

The warmth of this personal encounter between Longfellow and Liszt was reflected in further meetings in early January 1869, gatherings that included Liszt's longtime companion Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein and the poet's sister, Alice Longfellow, who wrote enthusiastic reports about Liszt's extraordinary piano playing. An outcome of these encounters was that Liszt soon regarded Longfellow's verse with an eye to a musical setting. The work in question was a German translation of

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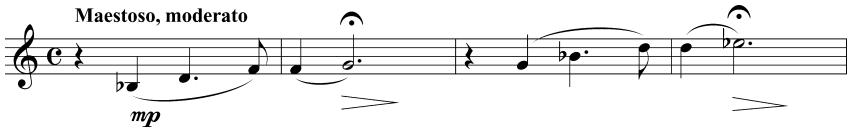
[46] See Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 3:168, and the reproduction of the painting on p. 167.

[47] G. P. A. Healy, *Reminiscences of a Portrait Painter* (Chicago: 1894), 219–21, cited in Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt,* vol. 3, *The Final Years 1861–1886* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 167–68.

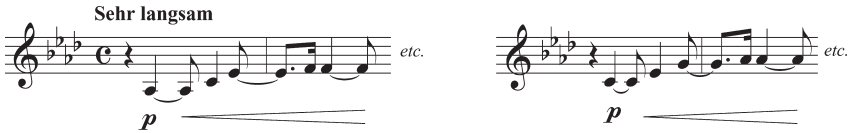
Longfellow's famous poem *The Golden Legend*. Five years later, in 1874, the collaboration bore fruit in the form of Liszt's cantata *The Bells of Strasburg Cathedral,* for orchestra, chorus, and baritone soloist.[48]

On its completion, Liszt sent a copy of the cantata to Wagner and Cosima, and she recorded its arrival in her diary on January 28, 1875. Cosima wrote that it was "sehr effektvoll gemacht, uns aber so fremd" (written very effectively, but so alien to us), yet subsequent events reveal its impact on Wagner. The triggering event was a joint concert by Liszt and Wagner in Budapest on March 10, 1875. The concert had been brought about by Hans Richter, who was conductor of the Budapest National Theater and who had been chosen by Wagner to conduct the first performances of the *Ring* cycle at the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876. The idea was to raise funds for Bayreuth, and the program accordingly included excerpts from the *Ring,* conducted by the composer. Another work on the program was *The Bells of Strasburg Cathedral,* conducted by Liszt himself.

Liszt's cantata clearly engaged Wagner's attention in the immediately ensuing period, when he turned to the sustained composition of the music for *Parsifal* in 1877. Evidence of the connection is provided by the shared rising contour of the motive that dominates the prelude to Liszt's cantata, with its association to the single Latin word "Excelsior!" and the head of the Communion theme in Wagner's *Parsifal* (exx. 1a and 1b).




*Example 1a: Liszt,* Excelsior! *Prelude*




*Example 1b: Wagner, Prelude to* Parsifal

[48] Liszt's cantata was first published as *Die Glocken des Strassburger Münsters* with a text in German and English and a dedication to Longfellow (Leipzig: J. Schuberth & Co., 1875).

It is notable in this regard that the earliest preserved sketch for this theme in *Parsifal,* as shown in ex. 4.3 of chapter 4 of the present volume, shows a more striking resemblance to the "Excelsior!" idea, since the fourth note of the motive is placed on a downbeat, as in Liszt's work. There are reports of Wagner acknowledging his borrowing or even his "theft" of this motive from Liszt, and although the details remain obscure, it seems that Liszt was aware of Wagner's assimilation of the "Excelsior!" motive into *Parsifal* by the time he visited Bayreuth in April 1878.[49] By then, the first act of *Parsifal* was complete in Wagner's drafts. The common ground between Liszt's "Excelsior!" prelude and Wagner's *Parsifal* is significant, and illuminates not only details of compositional genesis but also features of the expressive meaning and musical symbolism of these works.

As Arthur Marget pointed out,[50] it was surely the poetic intention stemming from Longfellow's work that fascinated Liszt and Wagner, and that helps explain their enthusiasm for the notion of "Excelsior!" Longfellow presumably explained his idea to Liszt at Rome, and elsewhere he specified his poetic intention as follows:

> This was no more than to display, in a series of pictures, the life of a man of genius, resisting all temptations, laying aside all fears, heedless of all warnings, and pressing right on to accomplish his purpose. His motto is Excelsior — "higher." He passes through the Alpine village — through the rough, cold paths of the world — where the peasants cannot understand him, and where his watchword is in an "unknown tongue." He disregards the happiness of domestic peace and sees the glaciers — his fate — before him. He disregards the warning of the old man's wisdom and all the fascinations of woman's love. He answers to all, "Higher yet!" The monks of St. Bernard are the representatives of religious forms and ceremonies, and with their oft-repeated prayer mingles the sound of his voice, telling them there is something higher than forms and ceremonies. Filled with these aspirations, he perishes; without having reached the perfection he longed for; and the voice heard in the air is the promise of immortality and progress ever upward.[51]

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[49] See in this regard Arthur W. Marget's article "Liszt and *Parsifal,*" *Music Review* 14 (1953): 107–24, especially 108 and note 8. There is a reference in Cosima Wagner's diary from December 28, 1877 to the effect that Wagner "sah noch die 'Glocken v. Strassburg' des Vaters sich an, um zu sehen, ob er kein '*Plagiat*' begeht" (looked again at father's "Glocken v. Strassburg" to see whether there was "plagiarism"), although this was during his work on the Transformation music of act I with its use of the motive of the bells. (*CT* 1:1100). Commentators on *Parsifal* have often paid insufficient attention to the influence of Liszt on Wagner.

[50] "Liszt and *Parsifal,*" *Music Review* 14 (1953): 107–24.

[51] Longfellow's *Complete Poetical Works,* 19, cited in Marget, "Liszt and *Parsifal,*" 120.

The notion of "ever upward" — the proverbial "Blick nach oben" as a symbol for unceasing striving — lends itself well to the spiritual aspiration associated with the Grail, and an ascension in pitch through the notes of the triad to the sixth degree becomes a musical counterpart to this idea. At the same time, in *Parsifal,* the initially unharmonized line, with its suspended rhythm and avoidance of stress on the downbeat, evokes the aura of Gregorian chant — an impression conveyed again toward the framing close of the Communion theme. Wagner also evokes Gregorian intonations in another prominent thematic idea associated with the Grail: the rising whole step and third of the first phrase of the Grail motive, immediately preceding the "Dresden Amen." Liszt had used these inflections too, in various works, and is supposed to have said that "these are intervals well known to us," adding that "these are *catholic* intonations, which I myself did not invent either."[52]

Apart from this specific affinity between the "Excelsior" motive and the Communion theme, there is a broader expressive duality that deserves attention. Longfellow's *Spire of Strasburg Cathedral* in his *Golden Legend* and Liszt's *Bells of Strasburg Cathedral* both center on a conflict between evil and good, as the forces of Lucifer, bent on destroying the cathedral, are confounded by spiritual powers invested in part in the church bells. One likely point of connection here rests in the role of the temple bells in *Parsifal,* but another even more fundamental affinity lies in Liszt's penchant for devising music that reflects the competing influences from both opposing realms. This type of duality appears in various compositions by Liszt, but the "Faust" Symphony springs particularly to mind. Since Mephistopheles is "der Geist, der stets verneint" (the spirit who always negates), in Goethe's words, Liszt withholds original music material from his realm, and instead fills up the final movement of the symphony, entitled "Mephistopheles" and marked "ironico," with parodistic distortions of themes drawn from the opening "Faust" movement.

Wagner, for his part, follows a parallel procedure in devising certain of the motives and themes in *Parsifal.* Hence the "serpentine" motive associated with Kundry's seduction involves a kind of chromatic distortion of the basic shape of the Communion theme, whereas the bleak "Öde" (wasteland) motive heard in act 3 when Gurnemanz describes the desolation of the Grail community is a compressed, dissonant version of the motive of

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[52] This report stems from August Göllerich's book *Franz Liszt* from 1908, as cited in Marget, "Liszt and *Parsifal,*" 112. As these examples show, Egon Voss is mistaken in stating that "Wagner avoids in striking fashion a connection with traditional church music." See "Wagners 'Parsifal' — das Spiel von der Macht der Schuldgefühle," in *Richard Wagner: Parsifal; Texte, Materialien, Kommentare* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1984), 16.

the Temple Bells. In these instances, Wagner allows a basic intervallic shape to assume different and even antithetical meanings, depending upon whether the thematic contour manifests a consonant diatonic stability, or if that shape is distorted through dissonant chromaticism. The special richness of the *Parsifal* music depends crucially on such configurations that reflect the powerful oppositional forces at work in the drama.[53]

The sense of a collective redemption at the conclusion of *Parsifal* has provoked debate and sometimes denunciation; Arnold Whittall writes that "the apparent conviction of its integrative resolution is the most disturbing thing about it."[54] On the other hand, Dieter Borchmeyer has recently argued that Amfortas's replacement by Parsifal involves a cyclical return or restitution, but not "the prospect of a wholly new world." In Borchmeyer's view, "Parsifal sees himself not as the instigator of redemption but as its agent."[55] It is true that Wagner refrains from presenting Parsifal in a priestly role, and apart from illustrating the prophesied correct path through his capacity for compassion and avoidance of aggression, Parsifal's deed seems to consist in a restoration of the threatened Grail and not in the foundation of some new order. Nevertheless, the reunification of spear and Grail stands for a symbolic integration of male and female principles,[56] and a qualitatively new situation arises at the conclusion for Kundry, who is as ancient and archetypal as any of the characters in the drama.

Clues to Wagner's intentions at the pivotal moment of Kundry's death are found in reports from witnesses at the 1882 rehearsals at Bayreuth. According to Heinrich Porges, Wagner associated Kundry's earlier gaze at Parsifal as Grail King sustained by "Mitleids höchste Kraft" (the highest

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[53] An author sensitive to such expressive polarities based on a single underlying configuration is Kurt Overhoff, whose study *Richard Wagners Parsifal* (Lindau im Bodensee: Werk-Verlag KG Franz Perneder, 1949) surely exerted influence on the 1951 Bayreuth staging of the work by his pupil, Wieland Wagner. For his discussion of the polarity of the Communion theme and the "serpentine" motive, which he terms the motives of "Gottesliebe" (divine love) and "Triebliebe" (compulsive desire), see pp. 89–91, and his book *Die Musikdramen Richard Wagners* (Salzburg: Verlagsbuchhandlung Anton Pustet, 1967), 361–63.

[54] "Wagner and Real Life," *The Musical Times* 137 (June 1996): 9.

[55] *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner,* 239, 240.

[56] Recent interpretations of this aspect include Kurt Hübner, *Die Wahrheit des Mythos* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1985), 390–92; Eckhard Roch, *Psychodrama: Richard Wagner im Symbol* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 1995), 401; and Sven Friedrich, *Richard Wagner — Deutung und Wirkung* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004), 39–41. For Jean-Jacques Nattiez, the character of Parsifal himself becomes "the symbolic embodiment of an angelic androgyny, proclaiming a new civilization and culture." *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation,* trans. Stewart Spencer (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 170.

power of compassion) with her discovery of him whom she has sought, "von Welt zu Welt" (from world to world).[57] Kundry's curse, and her subsequent bondage to Klingsor, stemmed from her mocking laughter at the Redeemer on the cross; it is this original encounter for which she has sought absolution "from world to world," as her narrative to Parsifal in act 2 makes clear. Accordingly, it seems that it is not simply Parsifal himself with whom she is to be reconciled at the conclusion, but with that undisclosed redeemer of whom Parsifal is the representative or agent. The final words in the chorus "Erlösung dem Erlöser!" (the Redeemer redeemed!) not only confirm the fulfillment of the prophecy but also recall and resolve the distressed cry from the undisclosed realm that had led Parsifal to Monsalvat and which is quoted by him after Kundry's kiss: "Erlöse, rette mich, aus schuldbefleckten Händen!" (Redeem, rescue me from hands sullied by guilt!). Parsifal's capacity for Schopenhauerian compassion allows for a selfless identification with the Other, creating a kind of transparency whereby the *principium individuationis* is negated and the boundaries between separate beings are overcome.

Thus, for Kundry, Parsifal creates a bridge to that other sphere, the realm of the undisclosed redeemer. Regarded in this way, Kundry's death at the end of *Parsifal* stands for her disappearance from the level of the visible action to another, metaphysical level, not so unlike Isolde's seemingly inexplicable death at the end of *Tristan und Isolde,* when she joins Tristan in the realm of Night.[58] The music heard at this juncture, marked by a crescendo at the shift from a major triad to a minor chord a third lower, corresponds to passages in each of the preceding acts associated with the revelation of the Grail: when Amfortas sets down the Grail in act 1, and at Parsifal's words "das Heilsgefäß" (the healing cup) after Kundry's kiss in act 2. According to Julius Kniese, Wagner asked for the curtain to begin to close three measures earlier than is indicated in the printed score, at this A-minor chord that marks Kundry's death; this gesture could reinforce the sense of her departure to another realm.[59] Moreover, Kundry's definitive release from the

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[57] Heinrich Porges entered Wagner's comments at the rehearsals into a vocal score, which is held at the Wagner-Archiv at Bayreuth. At the passage in question, he writes "Kundry mit dem Ausdruck der Verklärung im Angesicht: 'Das ist der, den du gesucht hast von Welt zu Welt.' " See Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Werke* 30:226.

[58] Nevertheless, the dramatic emphasis is quite different from that in *Tristan und Isolde,* and some will feel, as Joseph Chytry puts it, that "there are good reasons for finding distasteful a redemption of woman which, to be blunt, first renders her dumb and then liquidates her." *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of C Press, 1989), 309.

[59] Kniese's comment is as follows: "NB. Der Vorhang müßte hier fallen, an der Wendung nach a-moll." (NB. The curtain really ought to fall here, at the key change to A minor.) See Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Werke* 30:228.

cycle of reincarnations removes her once and for all from Klingsor's grip, diminishing his sway. To McGlathery's proposal, in his chapter in this volume, that Kundry, having become Mary Magdalene, dies of a broken heart, we may suggest another possibility: she does indeed become a spiritual bride, but in a noumenal realm beyond outward appearances. Controversy about the ending of *Parsifal* will continue, but this assessment of the situation seems consistent with Wagner's known intentions as well as with his penchant for providing large-scale resolutions within the drama, such as Parsifal's healing of Amfortas's wound with the same weapon that smote him.

During afternoon coffee on April 29, 1879, after having recently completed the music of *Parsifal* in his drafts, Wagner told Cosima: "Eigentlich hätte Siegfried Parsifal werden sollen und Wotan erlösen, auf seinen Streifzügen auf den leidenden Wotan (für Amfortas) treffen — aber es fehlte der Vorbote, und so mußte das wohl so bleiben." (*CT* 2, 339; Siegfried ought really to have become Parsifal and redeemed Wotan; he should have encountered the suffering Wotan (in place of Amfortas) in the course of his wanderings — but there was no augury for it, and so it had to remain as it is). While viewing *Parsifal* as a fifth installment of the *Ring* cycle that evades the resignation of *Götterdämmerung,* commentators such as Hans Küng and Udo Bermbach part company over the religious implications of the closing utopian vision.[60] Yet in the music, at least, Wagner's strategy of creating an analogue for desire in the long-deferred resolution of harmonies and themes accords to the character of Parsifal a facilitating role that clearly transcends that of a "cold deus ex machina."[61] His reopening of the shrine can be understood as reclaiming subjectivity not merely as rationality but as a newly integrated state of feeling,[62] rejecting both the ascetic dogmatism of the Grail Knights and the manipulative egoism of Klingsor. The closing music then becomes the primary means of conveying this enhanced integration as a communal experience.

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[60] Bermbach, *Der Wahn des Gesamtkunstwerks: Richard Wagners politisch-ästhetische Utopie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994), 311; Küng, "Was kommt nach der Götterdämmerung? Über Untergang und Erlösung im Spätwerk Richard Wagners," in *Programmhefte der Bayreuther Festspiele: Parsifal* (1989), 49. Also see Küng's centenary essay "Wagner's *Parsifal:* A Theology for Our Time," originally published in the Bayreuth *Programmheft* for the 1982 production and reissued in revised form in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* 23 (1984), 311–33.

[61] The role Wagner was afraid he might fall into — see the quote earlier in this chapter from Wagner, *Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendonk,* 210.

[62] See in this regard Sandra Corse, "*Parsifal,* Wagner, Nietzsche, and the Modern Subject," *Theatre Journal* 46 (1994): 98, 109.

# I. The Text: Sources and Symbols