

„Erlösung dem Erlöser“

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„Aber ich leide und litt mit ihnen: Gefangene sind es mir und Abgezeichnete. Der, welchen sie Erlöser nennen, schlug sie in Banden:
 — In Banden falscher Werthe und Wahn-Worte! Ach dass Einer sie noch von ihrem Erlöser erlöste!“

–Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, „Von den Priestern“ (KSA 4, S. 117)

„Erlösung dem Erlöser“ are the words with which Wagner’s *Parsifal* closes (Wagner 1898, S. 375). It is certainly a work about the redemption of a redeemer. Yet what redeemer is it who is supposed to be redeemed? And what form does the redemption take? A specifically Christian redemption, to many, is the obvious answer. The word ‚redemption‘, after all, has most obvious purchase in that religious framework of sin, atonement, and deliverance. Parsifal, on this reading, is God’s agent, who after turning away from the temptations of the flesh, in turn leads the way for Amfortas and Kundry to be redeemed from their past sexual sins and for things to be made right for the Grail Order, with its lost purity restored. In this brief essay, I would like to challenge this standard reading and explore another option for the sort of redemption that might be at work in *Parsifal*.

My reading is in part inspired by an unlikely source: namely, Nietzsche. In his published work anyway, he speaks of *Parsifal* with scathing disdain. He describes Wagner, in writing *Parsifal*, as slumping prostrate at the foot of the cross and championing a life-poisoning form of chastity (KSA 6, S. 429-32). But I think there is an interpretation of *Parsifal*—admittedly against the grain—that takes a cue from Nietzsche and that makes good sense of the sort of redemption that the opera shows the Grail Order as really needing. The strenuously anti-sexual form of asceticism is the Grail Order’s basic problem, not their route to salvation. They, in a sense, stand in need of redemption *from* their perceived redeemer, insofar as they need to get out from under the system of self-flagellating guilt-mongering that would interpret natural sexual activity and desire in general as sinful in the first place. This religious outlook has been their undoing.

Yet it is not a matter of dispensing with their current redeemer entirely. In *Parsifal*, we see that the Grail Knights' form of religion needs to be fundamentally transformed, not wholly discarded. The opera portrays the existential succor that their liturgical ritual offers as something that is vital in human life. Its spiritual force must be preserved, while distancing it from key aspects of the moral system with which it is entwined. In this way, the redeemer must be redeemed, saved from a destructive obsession with chastity and asceticism. The opera's suggested solution, as I see it, is for the spiritual sustenance of Christianity to be transmuted into Wagnerian *Kunstreligion*. We don't see this transformation happen within the confines of the narrative. The work sets up the problem and makes it vivid, and then, I want to argue, presents *itself* as the solution to this problem, manifesting this replacement for religion in the form of *Bühnenweihfestspiel* that it itself is.

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Let us begin by softening up the terrain for a non-Christian reading. To those who still stubbornly insist that *Parsifal* is a devout Christian work, one must point to its most blatant suggestion to the contrary: Surely it is significant that the day of redemption in the opera comes on Good Friday. Yet if it were really a Christian work, as some contend, wouldn't Easter Sunday be the day of redemption? Good Friday is a day of great religious significance, true. But in the Christian tradition, it is Christ's *resurrection*, not his death, that is the pivotal point for human redemption. Indeed, of all the days in the calendar to pick as the day of redemption, Good Friday in fact seems a very odd choice. It is usually commemorated as a day of mourning, with the church crucifix draped in black. It is not celebrated, as Wagner iconoclastically does, as a day of verdant beauty and blooming flowers, with bright, vernal music to match.

But the baptisms in Act III, surely, one might retort, *those* are Christian. Yet given what happened with Wagner's Good Friday choice itself—invoking the exalted Christian image of the death of Christ and turning it upside down by celebrating the resplendence of pagan nature, we should read the baptism similarly, also as an *inverted* Christian ritual. Rather than being an initiation into the Christian church, it is more naturally understood as a purification by water of the soul *from*

the weight of sin. „Washing away“ sin would acquire a new meaning. A large swath of it is really removed, because the worldview that countenances it would be supplanted. Though traditional baptism purports to be a freeing from original sin, it is in fact an *initiation* into a system, at least in the form it takes in the Grail Community, where sexual sin becomes a central and organizing category of one’s life; far from lessening the weight of sin, it only serves to intensify it.

This dual recognition that we see suggested in *Parsifal* as a whole—that consoling ritual is deep and important, and the demonization of sexuality highly detrimental—is one mirrored in the wisdom that the character Parsifal, as I see it, himself acquires. The standard story would of course maintain the contrary. Parsifal’s enlightenment, on such a view, involves being awakened to the need for turning away from sexual desires in order to secure one’s redemption. His rejection of Kundry’s advances is usually interpreted as the pivotal moment when Parsifal allegedly sees the need to embrace a form of chastity. He remains pure, on this account, because he resists the temptations of sexuality. But this reading is questionable. After all, we know that Parsifal is Lohengrin’s father, so if he does embrace chastity, he must later give it up. I would advocate reading this key scene differently: Parsifal is not rejecting sexuality in general as sinful. Quite the contrary. He comes to realize how awful it is to live one’s life, and to experience the world, in thrall to these notions of sexual sin.

What is it that provokes this intense reaction on Parsifal’s part, when he bursts out with “Amfortas! Die Wunde!”? (Wagner 1898, S. 358) Parsifal and Kundry, we should notice, are in essence psychologically re-enacting the fall of Amfortas, with Kundry reprising her role and Parsifal playing the disgraced knight. Parsifal becomes so engrossed in this role that he imagines he can feel Amfortas’s pain as his own. „*Die Wunde seh’ ich bluten / nun blutet sie in mir!*“ (Wagner 1898, S. 358). It is this intense quasi-artistic sort of *Mitleid*, of intense compassion, that the prophecy foretells, and that ultimately leads to Parsifal’s enlightenment. („*Durch Mitleid wissend / der reiner Thor*““) (Wagner 1898, S. 333). With the imaginative identification this intense, for the first time can Parsifal see in piercingly vivid terms how things seem to Amfortas and the rest of the

Grail Knights. Up to this point, Parsifal seems basically oblivious of the very idea of sexual sin. He here, though, gets a sudden glimpse of the sort of worldview that sees sin as all-pervasive, and sexuality, and indeed even desire as such, as the source of evil:

Das Sehnen, das furchtbare Sehnen

Das alle Sinne mir fasst und zwingt

O! Qual der Liebe!

Wie alles schauert, bebt, und zuckt

In sündigem Verlangen (Wagner 1898, S. 358-9)

This is not an outlook Parsifal advocates. It is instead one from whose wanton infliction of suffering he recoils.

Parsifal's thoughts right away double back to Grail ritual he was awed by in Act I:

Es starrt der Blick dumpf auf das

Heilsgefäß

Das heil'ge Blut erglüht

Erlösungswonne, göttlich mild

durchzittert weithin alle Seelen

nur hier—im Herzen will die Qual

nicht weichen (Wagner 1898, S.359)

For the first time he is able to see that although „redemptions's rapture“—the sort he experienced while watching the Mass in Monsalvat in Act I—has the capacity to uplift the soul, it is mixed with something else in the hearts of the Grail Knights. In his newly-gained empathy and the attendant compassion for Amfortas and the Knights, he at last sees what it is like to be trapped in the worldview of seeing the entire world trembling in sin and the huge weight of suffering this puts on a person. This realization floods Parsifal's body with pain. He now sees that he must free the Grail Knights from the destructive ideology they have foisted on themselves and mankind. His language here has a juridical edge:

Das Heilands Klage da vernhem' ich

die Klage, ach die Klage!

um das entweihte Heiligtum

„Erlöse, rette mich!

Aus Schuldbefleckten Händen“

So rief die Gottesklage

furchtbar laut mir in die Seele (Wagner 1898, S. 359).

The Grail Order, is, so to speak, in the dock. *They* are guilty, and guilty of a real sin, not of the pseudo-sin of having sexual desires and acting on them. They, for reasons that are unclear but pervasive, have taken the profound elevations and consolations of religious ritual and weighed it down with the futile anti-sensual apparatus of sexual guilt and sin. A benevolent God, Parsifal's lines suggest, has a legitimate grievance against the tremendous human suffering they wrongly perpetuate in His name. The original locus of religious worship has now become an „*entweihete Heiligtum*,“ literally a *de-sacralized* holy place, in the hands of these sinning and sin-obsessed preachers of asceticism and chastity. Parsifal now recognizes that in order to save the Grail Order from themselves, their holy place must be re-consecrated. It must keep the sacral *spirit* of the Catholic Mass without including the system of sexual sin that has been characteristic of their worldview thus far.

Now what, on this unorthodox reading I am proposing, are we to make of the opera's seeming villain, the „evil“ sorcerer Klingsor? He is our foremost object lesson in why the Grail's strictures against sexuality are so destructive. What we know about Klingsor's fall from grace is limited to what we learn from Gurnemanz, who warns us of his own relative ignorance on the matter. We at minimum know from Gurnemanz that Klingsor either was or wanted to be a member of the Grail community. Yet he was unable to master his desires: „*Ohnmächtig, in sich selbst die Sünde zu ertöten / an sich legt er die Frevlerhand*“ (Wagner 1898, S. 332). Now, to what does Gurnemanz's euphemism „turning the sinning hand on himself“ refer? This is usually taken to point, rather obliquely, to Klingsor's self-castration, the supposed source of his nefarious power, in

what we assume to be a tremendous redirection of sexual energy. Yet this ambiguous phrase of Gurnemanz's is at once interestingly suggestive of masturbation, that great 19th century bugbear, as well: Unable to master his sinful sexual desires, Klingsor is tempted to self-pleasure—and then out of his extreme guilt, to self-retribution.

In any event, putting aside the question of exactly what his sins are, if we are to make sense of Klingsor's sexual economy, we must give special attention to the curious strategy he takes up in order to get the spear. Presumably this theft is intended to be a kind of revenge once he has been barred from the Grail Order for his sexual transgressions. But he doesn't *fight* Amfortas for the spear, as one might expect from an ordinary evil-doer. Instead he wants to ensnare Amfortas with Kundry when the two of them are *in flagrante delicto*. For Klingsor, I take it, the satisfaction is not just in getting the spear but in the vicious pleasure of getting to mock the paragon of virtue who has now fallen into sin, as the „evil” magician himself once did. And maybe things are even more complicated than this. Given this acquisition plan of Klingsor's, one has to on some level suspect that his motives are overdetermined. How many men, put in Klingsor's place, would choose to get the spear *vis à vis* a plan that called for spying on their male enemy *having sex*, when there were a number of strategies open that did not call for this sort of sexual spectatorship? Maybe voyeurism, or perhaps even latent homosexuality, is lurking somewhere in Klingsor's unconscious and influencing what he does. Cigars may sometimes just be cigars, and spears may sometimes just be spears. But Klingsor's obsessive goal is to get his hands on Amfortas's phallus-like spear—a point which, if nothing else, is rather suggestive.

After he has grabbed the spear, he goes on to stab Amfortas. Presumably, with Amfortas weaponless—and, we presume, naked as well—Klingsor could have killed him, if he wished, and still have kept the spear for himself as a trophy. But Klingsor wants to demoralize the grail community. And what better way to do it than to send Amfortas limping back with a perpetually suppurating wound? Indeed, perhaps even with a bleeding wound in the genitals, if some sources are to be believed—the Scarlet Penis, as it were. Though it is often supposed that the wound is in

Amfortas's side, paralleling Christ's made by Longinus, as Mike Ashman points out, in the Celtic versions of the myth:

...Amfortas is wounded in the genitals, not in the side—a fact hinted at in Wagner's first prose draft of the drama and seemingly confirmed by rehearsal accounts of the Wagner family (such as that of Daniela von Bülow when directing Herbert Janssen in the late 1930s.) It is hard to say whether prudish conventions or a deliberate desire for ambiguity stopped Wagner from establishing this fact. Either way there is a profitable gain in suggestive imagery and the parallel between Klingsor and Amfortas...becomes even clearer... (Ashman 1986, S. 9-10)

In light of all this, it would be wrong to see Klingsor as *innately* evil. He begins as a normal human being, with the standard human range of sexual desires, if maybe a bit more exotic than most. But the Grail Knights demonize his sexual desires as sinful. The pull of their ascetic ideals on him is so strong that he castrates himself. But once he regrets this extreme self-punishment, his counter-reaction to the Knights' Christianity is a gross overcorrection. Since he no ideals of his own to strive for, he can't carve out any sort of positive character for himself; the only thing he can do is negative—he must react against his former order in the most hysterical fashion. But even as he does this, he remains in the grip of the Grail's asceticism: Far from turning into the Dionysian celebrant of bodily life, dancing ecstatically in the Magic Garden now that he is free from Christian morality, Klingsor is left with nothing to live for except to plot the demise of his previous tormenters. He, as much as Amfortas, is a victim of the Grail's morality.

And what of Kundry herself? What is her fundamental sin? We learn in the course of the drama that she laughed, presumably at Christ when he was on the cross—although here, as elsewhere, Wagner assiduously avoids mentioning Christ by name. We know that her behavior can be impetuous and insensitive in other ways as well. She has little concern for Parsifal's feelings

when she just bursts out with the announcement in Act I that his mother is dead. She, of course, also becomes an arch manipulator once she is forced to do Klingsor's bidding. But that cannot be counted against *her* as a character flaw either. Yet at the same time, we see that she has a tremendous innate capacity for sympathy and kindness. Her example of Christian charity in fact upstages the Grail Knights. She's the one trekking to Arabia to get the balsam for Amfortas, not the Grail Knights, save for Gawan, whom we never meet and only hear about. In lieu of Balsam fetching, the Grail Knights, or at least the puerile ones we encounter in Act I, mock Kundry. They degrade her as of less worth than a wild animal. At least Gurnemanz, a person whose gravid music suggests his fundamental goodness, has the decency to parry their attacks and to come to Kundry's defense. But even after his benevolent intervention, they still see her as „*eine Heidin...ein Zauberweib*“ (Wagner 1898, S. 329). And most disturbingly of all, when Gurnemanz mentions, in the sketchiest terms, that Kundry is atoning for some sort of guilt, one knight, on this scant evidence alone, tries to turn Kundry into the scapegoat for the community's woes: „*So ist's wohl auch jen' ihre Schuld / was uns so manche Not gebracht*“ (Wagner 1898, S. 330). The Sunday school stories of Eve and Delilah have obviously made an impression: Woman is man's undoing; and so no further evidence for Kundry's culpability is necessary for this knight to accuse her.

But we could ask the question more rigorously ourselves: Is Kundry responsible for Amfortas's downfall? We don't know from the text whether she was in league with Klingsor from the start. Even if she were, it's not clear whether she would have been acting under her own volition, or if dazzled by Klingsor's magnetic force, whether she instead would have been acting as the instrument of *his* will. Much more likely the latter, given what we know from Act II about his bewitching powers over her. Her main „sins“, so far as I can tell, are the misfortunes to have fallen under Klingsor's mind control and to be a woman in the misogynist, homosocial world epitomized by the Grail Order and its outlook.

Parsifal is the one to save her at last. In sprinkling her with water, notice that he doesn't tell her to have faith in God or in Jesus. He tells her to have faith simply in *the Redeemer* (Wagner

1898, S. 371). And it is left open who—or what—that redeemer is. But moments later we learn, for we see that her redeemer is Parsifal himself. Her redemption comes simply in being looked upon as a human being, precisely what has so far been refused her in her centuries of wandering the earth and what, I suspect, has precluded her from developing, up to this point, the depth of compassion that Parsifal himself eventually gains. To the extent that she has outbursts demonstrating gross insensitivity to the claims of others, it is largely attributable to the fact that she has *never been treated as truly human herself* (Vgl. Leslie 2012). The Knights demonized her as a heathen and a sorceress, going so far as to blame her for their downfall. Without Gurnemanz's intervention, they might well have burned her at the stake for witchcraft. But Parsifal sees the goodness in her—goodness that, miraculously, has persisted undiminished in the face of her demeaning mistreatment.

Many more points might be explored here. I have used the case studies of these three characters as the start of an interpretation cutting against the conventional wisdom about how *Parsifal* should be read. My reading is bracingly heterodox. I certainly don't offer it as what Wagner himself intended. But I think it brings out potent undercurrents in *Parsifal* that have been hitherto neglected.

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Pointing out the superficial, in their view, similarity between the central image in *Parsifal*—the spear healing the wound it smote—and the oft-quoted Hegelian dictum, Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar suggest in *Opera's Second Death* that a Hegelian interpretation of the opera is precisely the wrong one. They say:

In contrast to Hegel, Wagner's *Parsifal* does not sublimate the Fall in a later reconciliation-through-synthesis; rather, he travels back in time retroactively to undo the Fall. In short, the Wagnerian formula 'the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you' means that the only way to undo the Fall (the wrong turn of events) is to return back to the moment of wrong decision and *repeat* the choice, this time making the right decision (Žižek and Dolar 2002, S. 164).

They are not alone in thinking that redemption in *Parsifal* involves a return to the original state of things—or at least to the time before the fall of Amfortas. A related sort of reading—more general in theme, but similar in spirit—would hold that *Parsifal* is in its essence *cyclical*. The world is redeemed by a „*restitutio in integrum*“, as Dieter Borchmeyer calls it, in which the „end is the beginning“ (Borchmeyer 2003, S. 238).¹ Amfortas’s wound is closed, the spear is returned to Monsalvat to be reunited with the Grail, and the Brotherhood is reinvigorated, through Parsifal’s intervention, to its original spiritual calling. It could be that this redemption is final—cyclical, but with only one revolution. Or it could be that this restoration is only temporary relief, and that, some time in the future, another Fall will come, necessitating once more the process of redemption. But either way, the idea shared by Borchmeyer, Žižek, Dolar, as well as many other interpreters, is that at the end of *Parsifal*, things are returned to the way they were before the fall.

Yet the world in *Parsifal*, I have argued here, is one that the opera primes us to think would be better off changed. Rather than simply erasing the fall, our hope is that Parsifal, based on his newly found wisdom, will lead Amfortas and the Knights of the Grail to a transformed state. What we see gestured toward throughout *Parsifal* is not the need for a restitution of the *original* Grail Order, but rather the far more dire need to move from a problematic, ascetic form of the Christian religion to something else. And the opera, it seems to me, implicitly suggests itself *to be* that something else, in keeping with the 19th-century ambition that art might fill that gap that crumbling religion left behind.

As the opera draws to a close, choral lines intertwine together in the most exquisite way to the words, „*Höchsten Heiles Wunder! / Erlösung dem Erlöser!*“ (Wagner 1898, S. 375). Those final words float up ethereally, and to the sound of twinkling harps, the opera performance itself and the fictional world within it come together at last: What was a church choir singing in exultation in

¹ Borchmeyer 2003 writes: „In short, the ending of Wagner’s *Bühnenweihfestspiel* (literally, „a festival play with which to dedicate the stage“) cannot be interpreted as part of a linear development that ends with the prospect of a wholly new world, a prospect suggested by many recent stagings of the work,“ S. 239. I have tried to call into question that conventional wisdom here.

Monsalvat we now come to see as an opera chorus in Bayreuth, one whose hymn fills us, and them, with the hope that the Knights' Christianity can heal the wound it smote by raising itself to *Kunstreligion*.²

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