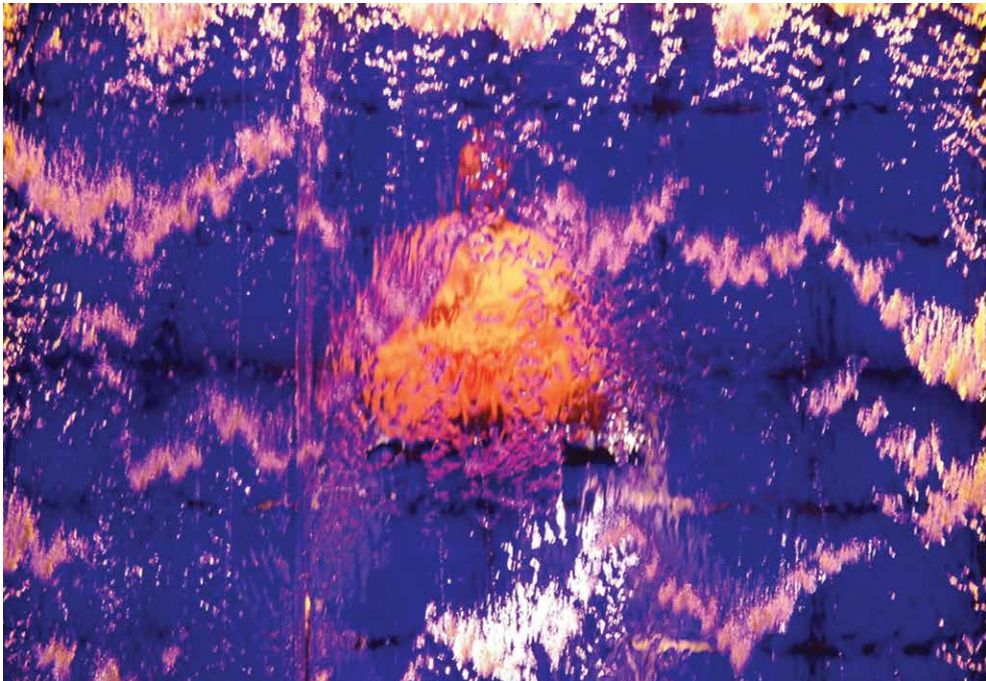


The Use of Eastern Concepts in Wagner's Stage Works

Peter Bassett



The Rhinegold glowing in the waters of the Rhine in the first scene of *Rheingold*, suggestive of the meditating Buddha, in the State Opera of South Australia's 2004 Adelaide *Ring*, directed by Elke Neidhardt and designed by Michael Scott-Mitchell. Photo: Michael Scott-Mitchell

Richard Wagner's greatest works were composed during the last three decades of his life, from the mid-1850s onwards, and it was no coincidence that during that time he embraced both the philosophical writings of Arthur Schopenhauer and the religious insights of ancient India. Nine months after declaring that he had become preoccupied with Schopenhauer 'who [...] has entered my lonely life like a gift from heaven',¹ he wrote to Franz Liszt in June 1855 extravagantly praising 'the oldest and most sacred

¹ Letter to Liszt, 16. Dec. 1854, in *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, tr. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London, 1987) [SL], 323.

religion known to man [...] Brahman teaching, and [...] its final transfiguration in Buddhism, where it achieves its most perfect form'.²

In the years after 1854, Wagner read a wide array of Buddhist and Brahmanic material including the *Ramayana*, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, and he drew on these works in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Tristan und Isolde*, an unfinished Buddhist opera *Die Sieger* and *Parsifal*. So imbued was he with the spirit of these ancient texts that as late as June 1878, twenty-three years after his 1855 letter to Liszt and within five years of his own death, his wife Cosima wrote in her diary:

then he goes to the summerhouse, reads the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and then reads to me a fragment from it which I feel could have been written by him: he, too, is quiet in deed, active in repose; he, too, creates free from desire.³

What was it that predisposed Richard Wagner to these Eastern influences and ideas in the middle of the 19th century? Any thoughtful person growing up in the Saxony of Wagner's youth would have been aware of Orientalism and chinoiserie in local architecture, *objets d'art* and the literature of the day. Eastern curiosities abounded in Pillnitz castle on the Elbe, the summer residence of the Electors and Kings of Saxony. Wagner had known its park as a boy when living in Dresden between 1814 and 1828, and he returned there in the 1840s in his capacity as Kapellmeister to Friedrich August II. The great trading companies of the 17th and 18th centuries brought Chinese and Japanese export porcelain to Europe for the collections of kings and connoisseurs. These exquisite and, for a long time, mysteriously



The diorama of the Indian Mughal court during celebrations for the 50th birthday of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, by Johann Melchior Dinglinger and his family, 1701–8, from the collection of Augustus the Strong in The Green Vault, Dresden.

made objects inspired the founding in 1710 of Europe's first hard-paste porcelain factory at Meissen at the initiative of Augustus the Strong. A priceless, jewel-encrusted diorama of the Indian Mughal court was offered to Augustus in 1707,⁴ and it can still be seen in the Green Vault in Dresden.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, operas and plays with oriental themes were highly fashionable. Between 1801 and 1866, no fewer than eight German playwrights and composers made use of the story of Turandot, including Friedrich von Schiller, Carl Maria von Weber and Karl Gottlieb Reissiger. Reissiger, who composed his *Turandot* after Schiller in

² Letter of 7 Jun. 1855, *ibid.*, 346.

³ *Cosima Wagner's Diaries 1869–1883*, tr. and ed. Geoffrey Skelton (London, 1978–80) [CT], 21 Jun. 1878. The *Bhagavad Gita* (The Song of the Blessed) forms part of the great Hindu epic the *Mahābhārata* the supreme work of Hinduism. Two and a half thousand years old, it is arguably India's greatest gift to the world.

⁴ Fashioned over seven years, this relatively small diorama cost more than the construction of the opulent Moritzburg Castle.



Part of the Wahnfried library as it is today. Wagner's preoccupation with Eastern ideas and legends was very much text-based, as it was for virtually all European scholars in the 19th century.

1834 (ninety years before Puccini), was First Kapellmeister at the Dresden court and nominally Wagner's superior.

The Turandot story originated in Persia, and its principal source was a collection called *The Thousand and One Days*, or *The Persian Tales*, a counterpart to *The Thousand and One Nights*, or *The Arabian Nights*. Wagner dipped into the latter in 1837 when, as a 24-year-old, he began work on, but did not finish, a comic Singspiel called *Men's Cunning is Greater than Women's Cunning*, or *The Happy Bear Family*.⁵ This was his first engagement with the literature of the East, but it would not be his last.

There were other influences on the young Wagner when it came to Indian subject matter. As music director in Magdeburg in 1836, and then in Königsberg and Riga from 1837, he conducted performances of Louis Spohr's opera *Jessonda* which had been completed in 1822. This opera is set in Goa and the plot involves the heroine, Jessonda, facing Suttee – being burned to death on the funeral pyre of her husband, the former rajah. (Thoughts of Brünnhilde's immolation come to mind.) Prior to her marriage, Jessonda had been in love with a Portuguese general whose name is Tristan (Tristan d'Acunha, that is). She is rescued in the nick of time. Admired by Wagner,⁶ *Jessonda* was banned in Nazi Germany because it depicted a European hero in love with an Indian

⁵ On this Singspiel and Wagner's source material, see Barry Millington, 'Happy Families: A Wagner Singspiel Rediscovered', *The Wagner Journal*, i/3 (2007), 3–18.

⁶ Richard Wagner, *My Life*, tr. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1983), 109.

princess. Spohr had once lived in a spare room of the Wagner family home in Dresden when Richard was a boy⁷ and, much later, he conducted the earliest performances of *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser* in Kassel. In his autobiography, Spohr recalls a dinner party in 1846 given at Wagner's suggestion by his brother-in-law, the oriental scholar Professor Hermann Brockhaus. 'We were most pleased with Wagner', wrote Spohr, 'who seems every time more and more amiable, and whose intellectual culture on every variety of subject is really wonderful.'⁸

Jessonda uses motifs of reminiscence and recitatives. It has a phrase anticipating the opening bars of *Tristan und Isolde*, as well as a soft timpani passage prefacing the announcement of Jessonda's impending death, like the passage leading to Brünnhilde's annunciation of death to Siegmund. There are similarities between Spohr's first finale and the scene in the last act of *Siegfried* where the hero awakens Brünnhilde. Nevertheless, these links are slight, and Wagner recognised Spohr's dramatic limitations.⁹

Wagner was not interested in the quaint and patronising Orientalism that attracted other composers from Mozart to Richard Rodgers. Instead, he was drawn to a school of thought that linked German intellectual achievements with those of ancient India. His interest had been stimulated particularly by Hermann Brockhaus,¹⁰ who had married Wagner's sister Ottilie in 1836. Another sister, Luise, had married Hermann's older brother Friedrich Brockhaus, who ran the family's publishing firm. In 1848 Hermann was appointed to the chair of ancient languages and literature at Leipzig University, specialising in Persian and Sanskrit. He was active in organising the first German Orientalists Convention at Dresden in 1844 at a time when Wagner was Second Kapellmeister at the Saxon court. In 1852 he founded the German Asiatic Society, and in 1856 he became editor of the immense *Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste* (Universal Encyclopaedia of Sciences and Arts), with responsibility for volumes 62–99. This *Encyclopaedia* represented an attempt to capture all knowledge about life, the universe and everything. In many ways, it was a kind of updated *Weltchronik* – the 'Nuremberg Chronicle' of 1697 to which Hans Sachs refers in his *Wahn* Monologue in *Die Meistersinger*. Begun in 1813, the year of Wagner's birth, and abandoned at volume 167 six years after his death, the *Encyclopaedia* encapsulated the intellectual universe within which Wagner's works were created. With its enormous scale (the article on Greece alone ran to 3,668 pages in 8 volumes), it was a statement of 19th-century self-confidence in the mastery of knowledge and learning.

The Brockhaus firm had published Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* in 1818. Wagner's autobiography notes that his long-dormant interest in higher

⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸ *Louis Spohr's Autobiography, translated from the German*, first published 1865 (Cambridge, 2009), 277.

⁹ Richard Wagner, 'On German Music', in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, tr. and ed. William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols. (London, 1892–9; facsimile repr. 1993–5), vii.99.

¹⁰ Hermann Brockhaus (1806–77) was the son of the publisher Friedrich Brockhaus. Hermann studied at the universities of Leipzig, Göttingen and Bonn, where he specialised in oriental languages, and later in Copenhagen, Paris, London and Oxford. Returning to Germany, he settled in Dresden. In 1839 he was appointed extraordinary professor at the University of Jena, and two years later accepted a position at the University of Leipzig before being given a full professorship there in 1848.

learning¹¹ was reawakened by Hermann, to whom he turned regularly for advice, and it was in Hermann's presence, no doubt, that he first read the *Encyclopaedia*. He held Hermann in the highest esteem, and when news of the latter's death in January 1877 reached Wagner and Cosima in Bayreuth, they wept.

Philologists like Schlegel and Brockhaus and their French and English counterparts had discovered that Sanskrit – the liturgical and scholarly language of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism – had much in common with European languages; all are members of the Indo-European linguistic family. Some scholars went further, arguing that there were also cultural connections via a common Indo-European ancestry. Wagner's enquiring mind was attracted to this idea, and the more he thought about it, the more he was convinced it must be right.

In 1872 the Danish historian and critic Georg Brandes offered his own explanation for the German fascination with Indian culture. 'It was not a surprise', he wrote, 'that there came a moment in German history when they – the Germans – started to absorb and to utilize the intellectual achievements and the culture of ancient India. It is because Germany – great, dark and rich in dreams and thoughts – is in reality a modern India. [...] Nowhere else in world history has metaphysics bereft of any empirical research achieved such a high level of development as in ancient India and modern Germany.'¹²

The American scholar Suzanne Marchand has written that the Germans were 'the most important orientalist scholars between about 1830 and 1930, despite having virtually no colonies in the East'. The effect of this, she maintains, was that German Orientalism, especially the study of Zoroastrian Persia, India and Mesopotamia, helped to destroy Western self-satisfaction, and to provoke a momentous change in the culture of the West: the relinquishing of Christianity and classical antiquity as universal norms.¹³

Wagner's view was that Christianity had become a contradictory phenomenon, known only 'through its contamination by narrow-minded Judaism and through its resultant distortion'.¹⁴ This view was consistent with intellectual trends at the time. Schopenhauer, for instance, was convinced that the *Upanishads* and the *Vedas* offered Westerners a more intimate basis for understanding spirituality than either the Old or New Testaments. He wrote:

We find what we have called 'the denial of the will to life' still more fully developed, more comprehensively expressed, and more vividly presented in the ancient Sanskrit writings than could be done in the Christian Church and the Western World. [...] [This] is perhaps to be ascribed chiefly to its not being restricted by an element quite alien to it, as is Jewish doctrine within Christianity. [...] Thus Christianity is made up of two

¹¹ His earliest interest in intellectual pursuits had been encouraged by his paternal uncle, Gottlob Heinrich Adolf Wagner (1774–1835), a scholar of repute and an acquaintance of Goethe, Schiller and other literary figures.

¹² Georg Brandes, *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de aarhundredes litteratur* [Main Currents in Nineteenth-Century Literature], 6 vols. (Copenhagen, 1872–90) i., based on lectures at Copenhagen University. Published in German as *Die Hauptströmungen der Literatur des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, tr. Adolf Strodtmann (Berlin, 1872–90), i.270. English tr. by Michael Steiner, German Ambassador to India, in a speech on 1 Feb. 2013.

¹³ Suzanne Marchand, 'German Orientalism and the Decline of the West', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, cxlv (2001), 465–573.

¹⁴ Letter to Liszt, 7 Jun. 1855, in SL (note 1), 347.

very different elements, of which I should like to call the purely ethical part primarily, and indeed exclusively, the Christian, and distinguish it from the Jewish dogmatism which preceded it.¹⁵

Towards the end of Wagner's life, Cosima recalled her husband telling her: 'By giving much attention to B.[uddhism] one learns to understand Christianity, and people were surely now beginning to realize that the greatest heroic power lies in resignation.'¹⁶ The blending of Christian legends and sacraments with Buddhist legends and teachings is an extraordinary idea, but Wagner saw no conflict in this at all. There are, after all, many common elements in Christian and Buddhist morality, if not theology.

Wagner cited modern research 'proving that pure, uncontaminated Christianity is no more and no less than a branch of that venerable Buddhist religion'.¹⁷ Schopenhauer had subscribed to this view as early as 1813, writing: 'Whatever anyone may say, Christianity has Indian blood in its veins.'¹⁸ The argument went that Buddhist ideas had flowed westwards after the spread of Alexander's empire to the Indus in 327 BC and had influenced Christian doctrine. Certainly, in the 3rd century BC the Buddhist Indian emperor Ashoka, who had close links with the Greeks, sent missionaries not only to lands adjacent to India but also to Syria, Egypt and Greece. Whether or not Buddhism did, in fact, have any influence on Christianity, all that matters for our purposes is that Wagner believed that it did, and this belief shaped his works, especially *Parsifal*.

The composer's real awakening, so to speak, to the literature of the East can be traced to the early 1850s. In 1852 he wrote to his former assistant August Röckel, languishing in Waldheim Prison after the failed Dresden Uprising, about the poetry of the 14th-century Persian mystic, Hafiz, whose works were then being edited by Hermann Brockhaus.

I would also introduce you to a poet whom I have recently recognized to be the greatest of all poets; it is the Persian poet 'Hafiz' [...]. Familiarity with this poet has filled me with a very real sense of terror: we with our pompous European intellectual culture must stand abashed in the presence of this product of the Orient, with its self-assured and sublime tranquillity of mind.¹⁹

He also wrote to Theodor Uhlig in Dresden, saying:

Study Hafiz thoroughly; he is the greatest and most sublime philosopher. No one has ever been so cognizant of the *Great Thing* as positively and incontestably as he. There is only one thing which he eulogizes: and everything else is not worth a brass farthing, no matter how high and sublime it may call itself. Something similar will also become manifest in my *Nibelungen*.²⁰

¹⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, tr. Jill Berman, ed. David Berman (London, 1995), 243.

¹⁶ CT (note 3), 19–20 Sep. 1882.

¹⁷ Letter to Liszt, 7 Jun. 1855, in SL (note 1), 347.

¹⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, tr. E.F.J. Payne (LaSalle, IL, 1974), 187.

¹⁹ Letter of 12 Sep. 1852, in SL, 270.

²⁰ Letter to Theodor Uhlig, 14 Oct. 1852, in Richard Wagner, *What does Richard Wagner Relate Concerning the Origin of his Nibelungen Poem and how does he interpret it?*, ed. Sebastian Röckl, tr. Constance de C. Parrish (London, 1907), 22. The 'Great Thing' refers to love.



A page from a diwan or poetry collection by Hafiz, showing lovers enjoying dancing and music, c.1533

Perhaps he had the following words of the poet in mind when working contemporaneously on the text of *Das Rheingold*: 'Man of self, raised up with endless pride, we forgive thee – for love's to thee denied.'²¹ In 1814, Goethe had also been drawn to the poetry of Hafiz and used it in his collection of twelve lyrical poems *West-Eastern Divan*, symbolising exchanges and mixtures between the Orient and the Occident.

'My sleep is dreaming, my dreaming brooding, my brooding the mastery of knowledge.'²² With these words, Erda addresses the Wanderer in Act III of *Siegfried*, and her words associate her with the Eastern practice of meditation. She implies that through intuition or meditation it is possible to abandon the world of the mind and senses – the world of time and space – and achieve wisdom. Wotan thinks that success, life and power are all that matters, but Erda has already told him in *Rheingold* that 'all things that are – will end',²³ he is not the ultimate controller of his fate. Hafiz describes the futility of resisting an appointed destiny and offers only one solution: 'Cast the world aside, yea, abandon it!'²⁴

Arthur Schopenhauer's knowledge of some of the Eastern texts had dated from the end of 1813, but by that time his principal insights had already been set out in his doctoral dissertation *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, published in 1813. He was astonished and delighted to discover that his views had much in common with key doctrines of Hinduism and Buddhism, and happily proclaimed this in his later writings, notably *The World as Will and Representation*. This led some people to think that the ancient texts were the source of Schopenhauer's ideas, which was not the case. Working in the central tradition of Western philosophy, and especially in the footsteps of Plato and Kant, he had arrived independently at similar conclusions.

There is an interesting parallel here with the relationship between Wagner's ideas and Schopenhauer's writings. The impact of these writings on the composer was great; not because they were the source of his ideas but because they clarified notions that had already occurred to him and yet he found difficult to explain. He first read *The World as Will and Representation* in September 1854 and found in it a coherent explanation of his treatment of Wotan.²⁵ His intention had been to show nothing less than the breaking of the god's proud spirit, not by an external and greater force but by 'willing his own destruction',²⁶ something that Schopenhauer would call the annihilation of the will – the negation of compulsive wanting, striving and yearning that leads inevitably to disappointment and pain. The Buddha would have called it the renunciation of craving and desire which lies at the root of suffering. We find a celebrated musical reference to the indivisibility of suffering and yearning in the opening bars of *Tristan und Isolde*, conjured up in their earliest form in December 1856.

²¹ 'Man of Self', in *Fifty Poems of Hafiz*, ed. and tr. Arthur J. Arberry (Cambridge, 1974), 126. Retrieved from <<https://archive.org/stream/FiftyPoemsOfHafizTransl.A.J.Arberry>> (accessed 8 Apr. 2020).

²² Author's translation; see also Wagner's '*Ring of the Nibelung*': *A Companion*, ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London, 1993) [WRC], 255.

²³ Author's translation; see also *ibid.*, 112.

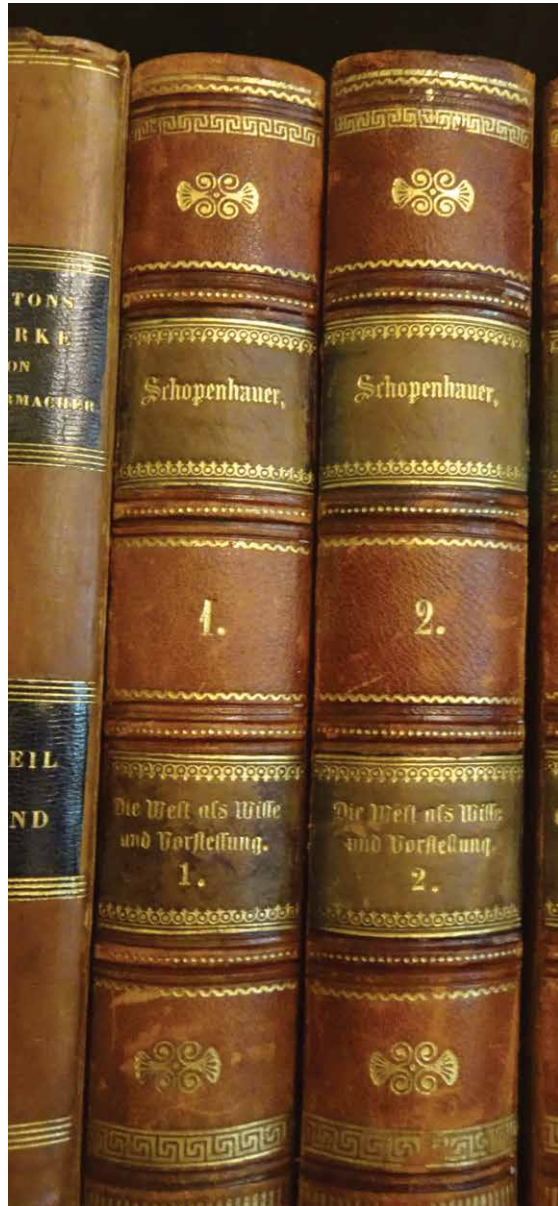
²⁴ The final line of the poem 'Love Less Easy', in *Hafiz: The Mystic Poets*, tr. Gertrude Bell (Woodstock, VT, 2004).

²⁵ Called Wotan at that time.

²⁶ Letter to August Röckel, 25–6 Jan. 1854, in SL (note 1), 307.

Schopenhauer was extravagant in his praise of the *Upanishads*, Hindu treatises written in Sanskrit between 800 and 400 BC and sometimes called the Himalayas of the Soul. He praised them especially for their recognition that our senses are only able to grasp a representation of the world, and that this representation (let's think of it as the illusory world of 'day') stands like a veil between the subject and the hidden world of timeless reality, which *Tristan and Isolde* would call the world of 'night'. In the mid-17th century, the *Upanishads* were translated from Sanskrit into Persian, at that time the most widely read language of the East and understood by many European scholars. Subsequently they were translated into Latin and published in 1801–2.

Of particular relevance to *Tristan und Isolde* was Schopenhauer's treatise 'On Death and its Relationship to the Indestructibility of Our Inner Nature', a supplement to Book IV of *The World as Will and Representation*,²⁷ which expresses the view that dying is a moment of liberation from one-sided 'individuality' – an individuality that can never constitute the innermost kernel of our true being. In *Tristan*, the text (which, for long passages, is nothing more than poeticised Schopenhauer) and its vehicle, the human voice, are merely parts of a great symphonic texture, in which the lovers submerge themselves and transcend individuality. For



The bound volumes of Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* in Wagner's Wahnfried library. The care with which they are bound and decorated testifies to their importance to Wagner.

²⁷ *The World as Will and Representation*, tr. Richard Burdon Haldane and J. Kemp, 2nd edn (London, 1844), available at <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_World_as_Will_and_Representation> (accessed 21 Apr. 2020).



Stefan Vinke as Parsifal in the Act III Good Friday Scene with a field of Buddha figures, in the 2006 Oper Leipzig production of *Parsifal*, directed and designed by Roland Aeschlimann. Photo: Andreas Birkigt

them, this is perfect love: the extinction of selfishness, the disappearance of self, total identification with each other. As Tristan tells his beloved: 'So let us die undivided, forever one, without end, never waking, never fearing, embraced namelessly in love, given entirely to each other, living only in our love!'²⁸ And above them floats the warning voice of Brangäne, Isolde's maid, telling them to beware, for night is already giving way to day. In this world, their dreams cannot last.

When Tristan and Isolde sing: 'Then I myself am the world',²⁹ they are drawing on one of Schopenhauer's favourite passages in the *Upanishads*: 'I am all these creatures, and besides me there is no other being',³⁰ illustrating how someone contemplating nature necessarily draws nature into himself, transcending individuality and joining with the sublime. This image also finds an echo in the Good Friday Scene in *Parsifal*, when Gurnemanz draws even the humblest things in nature – the grasses and flowers of the meadow – into a greater reality. In both instances the music achieves an overwhelmingly beautiful 'untroubled, pure harmony',

to use Wagner's phrase.³¹ When, in *Tristan und Isolde* the lovers sing: 'Heart to heart, mouth to mouth, bound together in one breath',³² Wagner is alluding to the Sanskrit word 'âtman' – 'breath' or 'self' – often used to express truth, infinity and something beyond comprehension. Âtman anticipated the German words 'atmen' (to breathe) and 'Atem' (breath), and the Greek word 'atmos'. We find the most vivid expression of this in Isolde's final vision, in which the once-living Tristan enters 'in des Welt-Atems wehendem All' – into the 'immensity of the world's breath'. A passage in the *Upanishads*, reading 'the âtman is beyond sound and form, without touch and taste and perfume',³³ appears to have inspired Isolde's rhapsodic words in her 'transfiguration':

²⁸ Author's translation, from Peter Bassett, *Richard Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde', complete German text with original stage directions, English translation and commentary* (Kent Town, South Australia, 2006), 119.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁰ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea* (note 15), 105.

³¹ *The Diary of Richard Wagner 1865–1882: The Brown Book*, tr. George Bird, ed. Joachim Bergfeld (London, 1980), 148.

³² Bassett, *Richard Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde'* (note 28), 111–13.

³³ *The Upanishads*, tr. Juan Mascaró (London, 1965), 61.

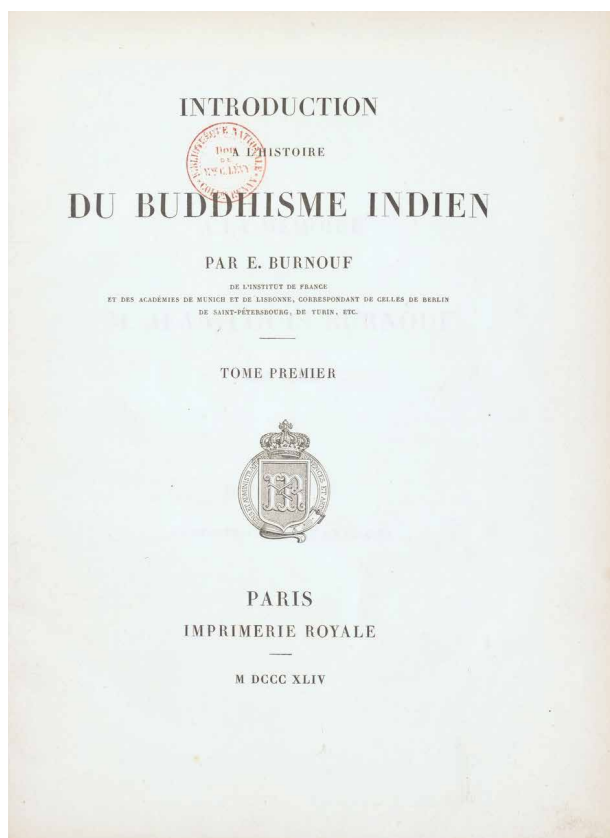
How they swell and
 clamour around me,
 shall I breathe them,
 shall I hear them?
 Shall I taste them,
 dive beneath them?
 Breathe my last
 in sweet perfume?³⁴

In 1860 Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck, telling her that he yearned 'for a glimpse of the land of nirvana, but nirvana quickly turns back into *Tristan*'. Resignation – relinquishing the world – however desirable, was impossible for him, compelled as he was to give musical and dramatic form to his visions. 'You know the Buddhist theory of the origin of the world', he wrote. 'A breath clouds the clear expanse of heaven [...] it swells and grows denser, and finally the whole world stands before me again in all its impenetrable solidity.'³⁵ Thus, Wagner associated the world of phenomena – the world of 'day' – with attachment to

worldly existence and unsatisfiable yearning, the source of all unhappiness from which the lovers long to escape. For the characters of the *Ring*, no less than Tristan and Isolde, the world of day and light offers nothing but separation and pain.

Wagner was also impressed by the idea of transmigration of souls, telling Liszt: 'the Buddha's teaching relating to the transmigration of souls almost certainly expresses the truth'.³⁶ Five years later he wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck:

Only a profound acceptance of the doctrine of metempsychosis has been able to console me by revealing the point at which all things finally converge at the same level of redemption, after the various individual existences – which run alongside each other in time – have come together in a meaningful way outside time. According to



The title-page of the first volume of Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien*. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France

³⁴ Bassett, *Richard Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde'* (note 28), 189.

³⁵ Letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, 3 Mar. 1860, in SL (note 1), 486. The ellipsis here denotes a musical quotation of the beginning of the *Tristan* Prelude.

³⁶ Letter of 7 Jun. 1855, *ibid.*, 347.

the beautiful Buddhist doctrine, the spotless purity of Lohengrin is easily explicable in terms of his being a continuation of Parzifal – who was the first to strive towards purity. Elsa, similarly, would reach the level of Lohengrin through being reborn. Thus my plan for the 'Victors' struck me as being the concluding section of Lohengrin.³⁷

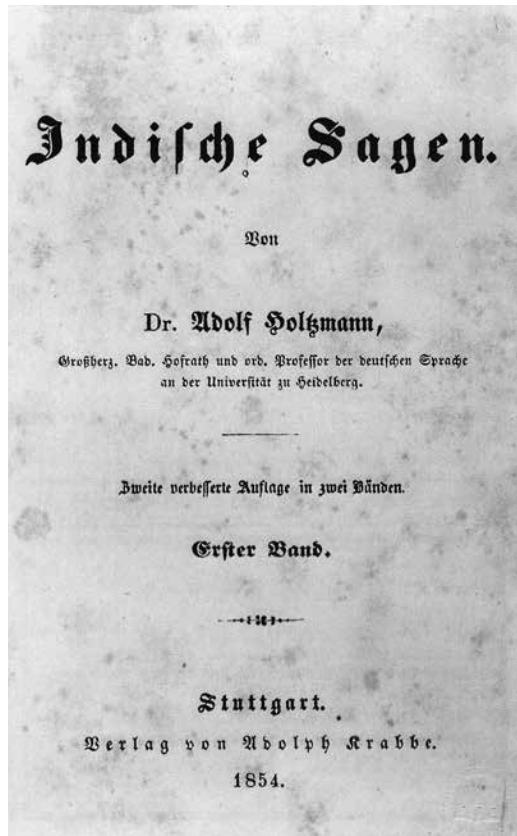
Parts of the *Tripitaka* the texts that make up the Buddhist canon, arrived in Europe in the 19th century somewhat later than the *Upanishads*. The first European scholar to provide a comprehensive and informed account of Buddhism was the Frenchman Eugène Burnouf, who in 1844 published his *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien*. It was this book that Wagner devoured during a period of convalescence in Zurich in the winter of 1855, before sketching out an opera called *Die Sieger* (The Victors) on 16 May 1856, inspired by Burnouf's material. 'How ashamed our whole civilisation looks', he told Mathilde Wesendonck, 'beside these purest revelations of noblest humanity in the old Orient'.³⁸ When he wrote those

words from London, he was reading Adolf Holtzmann's *Indische Sagen*. Decades later, in 1888–9, Mathilde herself put some of the legends of the Buddha into verse form. No wonder Wagner regarded her as a soulmate.

The title 'The Victors' was inspired by the Jinas, Indian holy men whose name in Sanskrit means 'victors'. Their victory was over human passions. *Die Sieger* dealt with an event in the legendary life of the Buddha, one of whose titles was Jina – the Victor. Wagner himself described the sketch as being based on a simple legend of a low-caste maiden, called Prakriti, who is received into a pious order of mendicants 'as a result of her painfully intense and purified love for Ananda, the chief disciple of the Buddha'.

³⁷ Letter of early Aug. 1860, *ibid.*, 499.

³⁸ Letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, 30 Apr. 1855, in Julius Kapp, ed., *Richard Wagner an Mathilde und Otto Wesendonck* (Leipzig, n.d.), 64. Translated in Dorothea Watanabe Dauer, 'Richard Wagner and Buddhism: *Tristan and Isolde* and *The Victors*', *The Eastern Buddhist*, New Series, ix/2 (October 1976), 118.



The title-page of the first volume of Adolf Holtzmann's *Indische Sagen*, published in 1854

Wagner was especially attracted to the story's secondary theme of reincarnation as a vehicle for his compositional technique of emotional reminiscence, usually referred to by the German term 'Leitmotiv'. 'Only music', he said, 'can convey the mysteries of reincarnation.'³⁹ *Die Sieger* was never developed beyond a sketch but some of its ideas were used again in *Parsifal*, and Prakriti reappeared (transformed) as Kundry. There are parallels too between Ananda and Parsifal.

For many years, Wagner spoke of completing *Die Sieger* in old age after he had finished *Parsifal*. The two works were linked in his mind, and his affection for the Buddhist story was strong. *Die Sieger*, he thought, would be 'gentler' than *Parsifal* and, unlike the Grail stories, involve fewer references to blood. A Munich Festival programme prepared for Ludwig II in 1865 included plans for *Die Sieger* for 1870, 1871 and 1873, together with *Parsifal* which was still awaiting libretto and music and would not be completed until January 1882. Occasionally, Wagner spoke of writing only the text of *Die Sieger* and leaving it for his son Siegfried (b. 1869) to set it to music!⁴⁰

However, in the end, it remained unfinished. *Parsifal* had taken its place and was the more substantial drama, but there was also another, practical consideration – Wagner had no direct knowledge of India and found it hard to imagine the specific culture, atmosphere, plants and so on to which he could relate. Most of the Sanskrit scholars of Wagner's day, including Hermann Brockhaus, had no direct knowledge of India either, even though they knew the ancient texts intimately. Their conception of India was abstracted and idealised. Wagner had told Cosima: 'My difficulty there [with *Die Sieger*] is the locality and the speech. Christianity is all noble simplicity, but in Buddhism there is so much education, and education is very inartistic.'⁴¹ In other words, he had wanted a narrative framework with more familiar (European and Christian) imagery, and *Parsifal* offered such a framework. It was also the case that parallels existed not only in respect of *Parsifal* but also in relation to *Tristan und Isolde* and the *Ring* from Act III of *Siegfried* onwards.

Wagner's notions of Buddhism were expressed in the context of familiar European (operatic) narratives and settings. However, he believed that ancient India had provided the cultural roots of German thought. This might strike us today as curious, but 160 years ago it was no more curious than Charles Darwin's theory of the universal common descent of species through evolution. Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, the year of *Tristan und Isolde*.

This interest in Buddhism was no passing fad, and as late as October 1882, just four months before his death, he told Cosima that Buddhism was a flowering of the human spirit, against which everything that followed was decadence.⁴² It has been said that for Wagner, who lived in exile for much of his creative life and had become seriously disenchanted with politics, Buddhism was a way of answering his three most fundamental questions: What does it mean to be German? What does it mean to be

³⁹ CT (note 3), 1 May 1870.

⁴⁰ Wolfgang Osthoff, 'Richard Wagners Buddha-Projekt *Die Sieger*: Seine ideellen und strukturellen Spuren in *Ring* und *Parsifal*', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, x1/3 (1983), 189–211; tr. William Buchanan with minor revisions as *Richard Wagner's Buddha-Project* (Zurich, 1996), 9.

⁴¹ CT, 6 Jan. 1881.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1 Oct. 1882.

Christian? What is art? In his view, Buddhism was not remote from German thought but intrinsic to it.

This connection can be demonstrated by one piece of music composed for *Die Sieger* that ended up in the *Ring*. According to Cosima Wagner's diary entry for 20 July 1878, it had been written for the Buddha himself. She wrote: 'When I was looking through some papers with him yesterday, I came upon the original theme for "*Sangst du nicht, dein Wissen*"; I tell R. that the present one (meant at first for the Buddha) pleases me far more'. These days, 'the present one' is misleadingly labelled as 'the motif of the world's inheritance', but it was described by Wagner's assistant Heinrich Porges as the 'Redemption theme'.⁴³ The official biographer Carl Friedrich Glasenapp asserted that he had heard this account of the 'origin of the solemn, elevated theme of a joyful renunciation from the Master's own mouth'.⁴⁴ The theme in question is first heard in its grandest form in the Wanderer's final scene with Erda. He desperately wants answers to one question in particular: 'how to stop a turning wheel'.⁴⁵ In Buddhist teachings, the turning wheel of Karma (moving in the reverse direction to the Wheel of Dharma, the Buddha's Law and ethical code) is the inexorable working out of the consequences of one's actions, the destiny of suffering that is shaped by one's deeds. Erda is baffled and unable to help him. The Wanderer pauses to collect his thoughts and then he says that he is no longer concerned about the end of the gods and, in fact, consciously wills it. What he once resolved in despair he will now do gladly. At that point, we hear in the orchestra the majestic theme once intended for the Buddha.



The so-called 'world's inheritance motif', called the 'redemption theme' by Heinrich Porges, and originally meant for the Buddha

During the first rehearsals, Wagner said that this passage 'must sound like the proclamation of a new religion'. Indeed it does. It is heard again in the final scene of *Siegfried*, in which it accompanies the hero's words when addressing a hesitant and confused Brünnhilde: 'Sang'st du mir nicht, dein Wissen sei das Leuchten der Liebe zu mir?' (Did you not sing to me that your wisdom was the light of your love for me?),⁴⁶ which is the text to which Cosima was referring. A music sketch of this phrase in embryonic form is located among other sketches in the Bayreuth archives dated late 1863 or early 1864, long before work on the score of Act III of *Siegfried* had begun, so there can be little doubt that it was originally associated with *Die Sieger*, as Cosima indicated. At one point, Wagner contemplated using it again in the context of Brünnhilde's final scene in

⁴³ Heinrich Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the Ring*, tr. Robert L. Jacobs (Cambridge, 1983), 103.

⁴⁴ Carl Friedrich Glasenapp, *Das Leben Richard Wagners*, 6 vols (Leipzig, 1905–12), iii.119.

⁴⁵ Author's translation; see also WRC (note 22), 255.

⁴⁶ Author's translation; see also *ibid.*, 271.

Götterdämmerung and included it in a specially concocted setting for piano and voice in response to Ludwig II's repeated requests in 1874 and 1875 for a 'private' version of the abandoned 1852 'happy ending' text – usually known as the 'Feuerbach ending'.⁴⁷

In *Parsifal* we find a veritable cornucopia of Buddhist images. Parsifal's journey towards enlightenment follows that of the Buddha who, in his younger life as the Prince Siddhartha, had left the sheltered environment of his father's palace and encountered the sufferings of the world in the form of sickness, old age and death. Parsifal too, having left his mother's protection, encounters these truths in the form of the wounded Amfortas, the immensely old Titurel, and Kundry's shocking revelation that his mother Herzeleide had died pining for him.

A collection of Buddhist legends dating from the first century AD contains the story of a wounded swan. The story is presented as a childhood experience of the Buddha in which a swan suddenly dropped from the sky and writhed on the ground in front of him in great pain. It had been hit by an arrow. The young Siddhartha (as the prince who later became the Buddha was then called) pulled the arrow out and was caring for the bird when his cousin Devadatta ran in excitedly, clutching his bow and arrows. The cousin ran towards the swan to claim it, but Siddhartha stopped him, much to the boy's annoyance. The cousin then received a lecture on the need for compassion and its role in easing the suffering of all beings.

Mathilde Wesendonck, in her 1888–9 metrical versions of the Buddha legends, dealt with the wounded swan story in 'Unter schatt'gen Mango-Bäumen' (Under the shady Mango-trees). Her poem includes lines echoing Gurnemanz in Act I of *Parsifal*: 'Did you do that and feel no regret? Are you even boasting about your deed? Just look how the beautiful limbs convulse awkwardly, twisted in pain [...] Look here, look into its eyes: a world full of pain and woe returns your gaze!'⁴⁸ The first European mention of the wounded swan legend is to be found in an 1848 paper by Anton Schiefner, deposited in the Central Library of Zurich, where Mathilde Wesendonck and Richard Wagner may have encountered it in the 1850s.⁴⁹

An almost identical event takes place in Act I of *Parsifal*. A wounded swan falls to the ground and a knight draws an arrow from its breast. Parsifal is brought before Gurnemanz clutching his bow and arrows and joyfully admits to his skill in hitting the swan in flight. Gurnemanz then impresses on him the heartless nature of his action and does so with such poignant effect that the remorseful Parsifal breaks his bow and hurls away his arrows. In this way he learns his first lesson in compassion. The swan, used in both *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*, also has another significance – as a symbol of the transmigration of souls which Wagner said, 'almost certainly expresses the truth'. The swan in *Parsifal* is given the same distinctive music as the transformed swan in *Lohengrin*, which implies that it too may be a reincarnation of a human soul. 'The orchestra must be like an invisible soul' said Wagner, referring to this scene at the time of the *Parsifal* rehearsals in 1882.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Osthoff, tr. Buchanan, *Richard Wagner's Buddha-Project* (note 40), 14–15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁹ For more on this, see *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Noted by Heinrich Porges who kept a record of the *Parsifal* rehearsals in 1882, as he had with the 1876 *Ring* rehearsals. *Dokumente zur Entstehung und ersten Aufführung des*



Mara's beautiful daughters tempting Prince Siddhartha. Sculpture from the Gandhara region in present-day Pakistan, 2nd–4th century AD, in the Museum Rietberg in Zurich – formerly the Villa Wesendonck – which holds a major collection of Buddhist sculpture.

In the Buddhist legends we also find the story of Mara, the tempter figure who, with the help of his seductive daughters, had tried to prevent the sage Siddhartha from achieving enlightenment. The imagery in Act II of *Parsifal*, including that of Klingsor and the Flowermaidens, owes much to the Mara legend. This story, preserved in Sanskrit, describes how Mara (anticipating Wagner's Klingsor) tells his followers: 'Look over there at that sage, clad in the armour of determination, with truth and spiritual virtue as his weapons, the arrows of his intellect drawn ready to shoot. If he should succeed in overcoming me and proclaiming the way to final benediction, then my realm would be empty. So far, he has not won the eye of full knowledge and is within my sphere of influence. While there is time, I will attempt to break his solemn purpose.'⁵¹ But, continues the legend, Mara, his army and his seductive daughters were defeated and fled in all directions – 'their rocks, logs and trees scattered everywhere'.

In the course of his quest, Wagner's *Parsifal* encounters Klingsor and his beguiling Flowermaidens. Klingsor says to Kundry: 'Now today we have the most dangerous to

Bühnenweihfestspiels Parsifal, ed. Martin Geck and Egon Voss (Mainz, 1970, vol. xxx of the *Richard Wagner Sämtliche Werke*), 176.

⁵¹ *The Buddhist Scriptures*, selected by and tr. Edward Conze (London, 1959), 48.

meet; the shield of foolishness protects him.⁵² Watching Parsifal in his magic mirror, he comments: 'Whatever the prophecies say, too young and foolish, you fall into my power. Once stripped of your purity you will become my slave!'⁵³ The connection between Wagner's text and the Mara legend is obvious. Parsifal overcomes the knights, resists the maidens, and recovers the Holy Spear when Klingsor hurls it at him. Miraculously, the spear remains poised above Parsifal's head. In Buddhist legend, it was not a spear but a discus (some say thunderbolt) that was thrown by Mara at the meditating Buddha. This missile was transformed into a canopy of flowers that remained suspended over the Buddha's head. Klingsor, like Mara, is defeated and, according to the stage directions, the castle sinks 'as if by an earthquake' and the garden withers to a desert; or as the Mara legend puts it 'rocks, logs and trees are scattered everywhere'. The Buddhist legend says: 'The great seer, free from the dust of passion, victorious over darkness's gloom, has vanquished him [...] while a rain of sweet-scented flowers, filled with moisture, fell down on the earth from above.'

The Buddhist texts contain graphic descriptions of Paradise, a place where beings go as a reward for especially worthy past lives, before returning to the world and the inevitable cycle of suffering. One account describes the giant flowers that grow in that celestial place 'some half a mile in circumference, others up to ten miles'. Another account tells how 'celestial nymphs with their playfulness captivate the wearied minds of those ascetics who had, in their life on earth, decided to purchase Paradise by first paying the price in austerities'. We read of the nymphs' 'soft words, tremulous calls, wanton swayings, sweet laughter, butterfly kisses and seductive glances'. The descriptions could easily apply to Klingsor's Magic Garden and its inhabitants.

Kundry is a tormented creature, longing for sleep and death but condemned to endless rebirths. In the first act, Gurnemanz wonders aloud whether she carries a burden of sin resulting from actions in a previous life, which is a curious remark for a Christian knight to make. In time we learn that in a former life she had laughed at the Saviour on the cross, which is the very antithesis of compassion. His own compassionate gaze fell on her, she says, and now she seeks him again 'from world to world' – which is to say, from life to life. Even the innocent fool declares in the final act: 'Ah! what transgression, what burden of guilt must my foolish head have borne from eternity.'⁵⁴ In the first act, Parsifal reveals that he has had many names but has forgotten them all; and in the third act he speaks of all that lives and will live again. Reincarnation is definitely woven into the *Parsifal* story.

The parable of Kundry, Amfortas and Parsifal is an illustration of those fundamental truths recognised by the Buddha: that worldly existence is suffering and that the cause of this suffering is desire and an attachment to worldly things. However, the Buddha also taught that release from suffering is possible through the 'blowing out' of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion. Klingsor had revealed the means by which Kundry could achieve this release when he told her: 'He that rejects you will set you

⁵² Author's translation; see also Richard Wagner, *Parsifal* (libretto), tr. Lionel Salter, Overture Opera Guides in association with ENO, ed. Gary Kahn (London, 2011), 161.

⁵³ Author's translation; see also *ibid.*, 167.

⁵⁴ Author's translation; see also *ibid.*, 221.

free.⁵⁵ By rejecting every stratagem and enticement that Kundry could devise, Parsifal not only frees himself from the wounding affliction of desire but also 'blows out' the fires of Kundry's suffering. He is, therefore, truly the instrument of her redemption. In *Parsifal* we find the notion that salvation is to be found not in the satisfaction of selfish desires but in the ability to share the sufferings of others. It is in our shared sense of compassion that we can recognise the fundamental unity of all beings – of all creation.

In May 1868, in the diary he called 'The Brown Book', Wagner jotted down some correlations between Hindu and Buddhist concepts, dramatic imagery and modes of musical expression. He identified truth and reality with night, and selfishness and illusion with day – both central to *Tristan und Isolde*. Interestingly too, Wagner equated nirvana with 'untroubled, pure harmony',⁵⁶ the most perfect example of which comes in the final bars of Isolde's *Verklärung* (transfiguration), the so-called *Liebestod*, when she is joined at last with her Tristan in mystical union. No wonder Richard Strauss described it as the most beautifully orchestrated cadence in all music. It could be no less. Far from nirvana, the troubled and illusory world of appearances and unsatisfiable longing – the world of 'day' – is harmonically at the other extreme.

The clearest and perhaps most important Buddhist connection with the *Ring* came with a change in 1856 to the text for the closing scene of *Götterdämmerung*, written contemporaneously with the sketch for *Die Sieger* and within months of the first sketch for *Parsifal*. The link between the conclusion of *Götterdämmerung* and *Die Sieger* in Wagner's mind is beyond question, as an entry in his 'Annals' for 1856 shows. He wrote: 'Buddhism: Introduction à l'histoire du B. – *Die Sieger* conceived after a Buddhist legend in Burnouf. Conceive new ending for *Götterdämmerung* on the sick bed.'⁵⁷

The 1852 version of the ending of *Götterdämmerung* – the so-called 'Feuerbach ending' – had depicted the survival of the gods and the triumph of love over wealth and power. By 1856, however, the goal was no longer redemption through love but redemption through renunciation. In a prose draft for the new ending, Wagner made clear that his inspiration was a Buddhist one. He wrote: 'Brünnhilde, having set fire to the pile of wood, turns to those left behind: she wishes him who has fallen [that is, Siegfried] no re-birth; in contrast, she prophesies for Hagen a long series of re-births, before he attains the salvation to which she is now going; for she knows that she will not be re-born. To the other survivors she offers the choice between her fate and Hagen's: "If you love life, turn your gaze from me and fix it on him".'⁵⁸

In the metrical version intended for singing, Brünnhilde refers to herself as the 'enlightened one' and she anticipates her own release from the cycle of suffering and rebirth. The unset text reads: 'To the holiest chosen land [she means nirvana], free from desire and delusion, the goal of world-wandering, redeemed from rebirth, the enlightened one now goes.'⁵⁹ Hers has been the same world-wandering of which Kundry speaks in *Parsifal*. Cosima convinced her husband that his language in the final scene

⁵⁵ Author's translation; see also *ibid.*, 163.

⁵⁶ *The Brown Book* (note 31), 148.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁸ Osthoff, tr. Buchanan, *Richard Wagner's Buddha-Project* (note 40), 27.

⁵⁹ *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music*, ed. Barry Millington (London, 1992), 298.

Wahrheit = Muvāna = Nacht

Musik. = Bramā = Dämonen

Dichtkunst = Sansāna = Tag.

Neue Weltbildung: aus der Thýāne
 steigen die Wesen wieder in ^{die} Welt hinab,
 welche dort die Belohnung für früheren
 Tugend-Dienst im irdischen, nun erfülltem
 Maasse empfangen haben, um jetzt von
 neuem in der Welt des Irdischen, zur
 Erreichung noch größser Vollkommen-
 heit, einzutreten. Ein süßes Laß
 entquillt der Erde; an dem laßt
 sich die Lehnwühl bis zum Einsaugen
 neuer Lebenslust = dem Saft
 des Laß; Reid quillt ungesät empor,
 Laßjung bis zur Fülle & dann versiegt
 es. Nun faßt selbst gepflanz, gepflügt
 & gesät werden. Die Blüte des Lebens-

beginnt, des Paradieses zu verlieren. Die
Musik der Bramâ will muß es der
Gegenwartigkeit zurück; sie führt zur
Wahrheit. Aber versteht sie, die
Musik die reiner Ruhe entfließen? —

— Bramâ — wird zum Verlangen,
als Musik; die der Sansâra zu-
gewandte Musik, Dichtkunst;
welches ist die andere, der Sansâra
abgewandte Seite? Nirvâna —
ungetrübte, reine Harmonie? —

Page from Wagner's diary, *The Brown Book*.

Note the opening 'Wahrheit = Nirvâna = Nacht / Musik = Bramâ = Dämmerung / Dichtkunst = Sansâra = Tag' (Truth = Nirvana = night / Music = Brahma = twilight / Poetry = Samsara = day).

Note also the final paragraph: 'Bramâ — wird zum Verlangen, als Musik; die der Sansâra zugewandte Musik, Dichtkunst; welches ist die andere, der Sansâra abgewandte Seite? Nirvâna — ungetrübte, reine Harmonie?' (Brahma becomes desire, as music; the music which is turned towards samsara, poetry; which is the other, the side which is turned away from samsara? Nirvana — untroubled, pure harmony?).

was becoming somewhat artificial and so, in the end, he used the orchestra alone for the stupendous finale to the whole drama. Nevertheless, he printed the text as a footnote in his 1872 definitive edition of the poem, with the explanation that 'its meaning was already conveyed with the greatest precision in the musical expression of the drama'. It may be that he recalled his comments to August Röckel in a famous letter of 25–6 January 1854: 'I believe it was a true instinct that led me to guard against an excessive eagerness to make things plain, for I have learned to feel that to make one's intentions too obvious risks impairing a proper understanding of the work in question; in drama – as in any work of art – , it is a question of making an impression not by parading one's opinions but by setting forth what is instinctive.'⁶⁰

So, unlike the earlier endings, it wasn't the meaning that changed but the means of conveying it. The nature of Brünnhilde's insight which had transformed her from an insanely angry woman at the end of Act II to the redeeming figure at the conclusion of Act III is explained in a remark by Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck in 1858, about his difficulties in depicting the Buddha in *Die Sieger*. 'I have now solved the problem', he wrote, 'by having him reach one last remaining stage in his development whereby he is seen to acquire a new insight, which – like every insight – is conveyed not by abstract associations of ideas but by intuitive emotional experience; in other words, by a process of shock and agitation suffered by his inner self; as a result, this insight reveals him in his final progress towards a state of supreme enlightenment.'⁶¹

Those words can equally be applied to Brünnhilde, whose insight was born of her overwhelming, grieving love for Siegfried⁶² – and also to Parsifal who tells Amfortas: 'Blessed be your suffering that gave compassion and wisdom to the timid fool!'⁶³ So Brünnhilde and Parsifal both, in their own ways, exemplify Wagner's application of the Indian religions to his greatest works for the stage.

Music setting by Matthew Rye



⁶⁰ SL (note 1), 308.

⁶¹ Letter of 5 Oct. 1858, *ibid.*, 425.

⁶² The final musical theme in *Götterdämmerung*, usually, though misleadingly, labelled 'redemption by love', had previously conveyed the ecstasy of Sieglinde – 'O hehrstes Wunder!' – on learning from Brünnhilde that she would give birth to Siegfried. At the conclusion of the *Ring*, we hear this ecstatic theme again. However, its object now is not 'redeeming love' but Brünnhilde's 'great awakening' to the only goal that matters – renunciation of the world of desire and delusion, 'the annihilation of the will', graphically symbolised by self-immolation.

⁶³ Author's translation; see also Wagner, *Parsifal* (note 52), 235.