

## Richard Wagner and Mysticism

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On Good Friday, 1857, he (Wagner) was sitting in the Retreat, Villa Wesendonk "the sanctuary on the green hill". Looking out over the fields watching the plants come to life, sprouting from the earth, an inkling arose in him of the Power of the germinating force emerging from the earth in response to the rays of the sun: a driving force, a motivating force that permeates the whole world and lives in all beings; a force that must evolve, that cannot remain as it is; a force that, to reach higher stages, must pass through death. Watching the plants, he felt the force of sprouting life, and turning his gaze across the Lake of Zürich to the village; he contemplated the opposite idea, that of death — the two polar concepts to which Goethe gives such eloquent expression in his poem, Blessed Longing.

*And until thou truly hast,  
This dying and becoming,  
Thou are but a troubled guest  
O'er the dark earth roaming.*

Goethe rewrote the words in his hymn to nature saying: "Nature invented death to have more life; only through death can she create a higher spiritual life."

On Good Friday, as the symbol of death came before mankind in remembrance, Wagner sensed the connection between life, death and immortality. He felt a connection between the life sprouting from the earth and the Death on the Cross, the Death that is also the source of a Christian belief that life will ultimately be victorious over death, will become eternal life and the Good Friday belief in Redemption, the belief that from Death on the Cross springs Eternal Life. This thought is the same as that contained in the Quest for the Holy Grail, where the chaste plant blossom, striving towards the sun, is contrasted with human desire filled nature. On the one hand Wagner recognized that human beings steeped in desires; on the other he looked towards a future ideal — the ideal that human beings shall attain a higher consciousness through overcoming their lower nature, shall attain a higher fructifying power, called forth by the Spirit.

Looking towards the Cross, Wagner saw the blood flowing from the Redeemer, the symbol of Redemption, being caught in the Grail Chalice. This picture linked itself within him to the life awakening in nature. These thoughts were passing through Wagner's soul on Good Friday, 1857. He jotted down a few words that later became the basis from which he created his magnificent Good Friday drama. He wrote: "The blossoming plant springs from death; eternal life springs from the Death of Christ." At that moment Wagner had an inner awareness of the Spirit behind all things, of the Spirit victorious over death.

For a time other creative ideas pushed those concerned with Parsifal into the Background. They came to the fore once more near the end of his life, when, clearer than before, they conveyed to him a person's path of knowledge. Wagner portrayed the path to the Holy Grail to show the cleansing of a human beings' desire nature. As an ideal this is depicted as a pure holy chalice whose image is the plant calyx's chaste fructification to new creation by the sunbeam, the holy lance of love. The sunbeam enters matter as Amfortas' lance enters sinful blood. But there the result is suffering and death. The path to the Holy Grail is portrayed as a cleansing of the sinful blood of lower desires till, on a higher level it is as pure and chaste as is the plant calyx in relation to the sunbeam. Only he who is pure in heart, unworldly, untouched by temptation, so that he approaches the Holy Grail as an "innocent fool" filled with questions of its secret, can discover the path.

Wagner's Parsifal is born out of his mystical feeling for the Holy Grail. At one time he meant to incorporate the idea into his work *Die Wibelungen*, an historical account of the Middle Ages. He wanted to elevate the concept of Emperor by letting Barbarossa journey to the East in search of the original spirit of Christianity, thus combining the Parsifal legend with history of the Middle Ages. This idea led to his wonderful artistic interpretation of the Good Friday tradition, so that it can truly be said that Wagner has succeeded in bringing religion into art, in making art religious.

In his artistic new creation of the Good Friday tradition, Wagner had the ingenious idea of combining the subject of faith with that of the Holy Grail. On the one hand stands the belief that mankind will be redeemed, and on the other, that through perfecting its nature humanity itself strives towards redemption; the belief that the Spirit permeating mankind — a drop of which lives in each individual as his higher self — in Christ Jesus foreshadowed humanity's redemption. All this arose as an inner picture in Wagner's mind already on that Good Friday in 1857 when he recognized the connection between the legend of Parsifal and Redemption through Christ Jesus.

We can begin to sense the presence of the Christ within mankind's spiritual environment when, with sensitivity and understanding, we absorb the story of the Holy Grail. And it can deepen to concrete inner spiritual experience when we sense the transition from the midnight of Maundy Thursday — events of Maundy Thursday — to those of Good Friday, which symbolize the victory of nature's resurrection.

Wagner's Parsifal was inspired by the festival of Easter. He wanted new life to pour into the Christian festivals, which originally were established out of a deep understanding of nature. This can be seen especially in the case of the Easter festival, which was established when it was still known that the constellation of sun and moon affected human beings. Today people want Easter celebrated in an arbitrarily chosen date, which shows that the festival is no longer experienced as it was when there was still a feeling for the working of nature. When the spirit was regarded as a reality it was sensed in all things. If we could still sense what was bequeathed to us through traditions in regard to the festivals, then we would also have a feeling for how to celebrate Good Friday. Richard Wagner did have that feeling, just as he also perceived that the words of the Redeemer: "I am with you to the end of the world," called human beings to follow the trail that led to the lofty ideal of the Holy Grail. Then people who lived the Truth would become redeemers.

Mankind is redeemed by the Redeemer. But Wagner adds the question: "When is the Redeemer redeemed?" He is redeemed when He abides in every human heart. As He has descended into the human heart, the human heart must ascend. Something of this was also felt by Wagner, for from the motif of faith he lets sound forth what is the mystical feeling of mankind in these beautiful words from Parsifal:

*Greatest Healing Wonder  
Redemption for the Redeemer!*

These words truly show Wagner's deep commitment to the highest ideal a person can set himself: to approach that Spiritual Power that came down to us and lives in our world. When we are worthy, we bring what resounds at the close of Richard Wagner's Parsifal: Redemption for the Redeemer.