AQ1

7 Eros and the Redemption of the Gods[1]

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Roger Scruton's *Death-Devoted Heart* is probably the most satisfying musical, critical, and philosophical interpretation of *Tristan und Isolde* in the English language.

One of the most illuminating aspects of this book lies in Scruton's original charting of the streams of Kantian philosophical anthropology running through *Tristan und Isolde*. Of course, it has long been commonplace to understand Wagner as a Schopenhauerian acolyte, who came to the sage of Frankfurt by way of Hegel and Feuerbach, but Scruton is the first to lay the groundwork for the Kantian framing of *Tristan und Isolde*. He writes:

> According to Kant, human beings stand in a peculiar metaphysical predicament – one not shared by any other entity in the natural world. We see ourselves, he argued, in two contrasting ways – both as objects, bound by natural laws; and as subjects, who can lay down laws for themselves. The human object is an organism like any other; the human subject is in some way 'transcendental', observing the world from a point of view on its perimeter, pursuing not what is but what ought to be… [A]ll human distinctness and all human dignity reside in our transcendental freedom. To abuse that freedom is to degrade human nature; to respect it, in both self and other, is to enter the ideal 'Kingdom of Ends' that is our abstract and mystical reward. (*Death-Devoted Heart*, p. 123)

Human existence embodies a metaphysical paradox, which Kant resolves by way of the distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal: on the one hand we are animals bound by the laws of the empirical or phenomenal world, yet in ourselves we are inescapably

free, rational, and moral subjects of experience. The deepest moral commandment is to recognise the embodied noumenal freedom of human beings, to treat oneself and others as subjects rather than objects, as ends rather than means.

Scruton interprets *Tristan und Isolde* through this Kantian lens, a lens which is further tinted by his phenomenological understanding of erotic love as deeply revelatory of the other's embodied freedom, an understanding developed in detail in his well-known work, *Sexual Desire*.

While there is nothing in Wagner's intellectual formation which would explicitly mark him as a Kantian, Wagner is unquestionably influenced by Hegel, Feuerbach, and Schopenhauer, and it would not be surprising if he had recovered the central Kantian vision from these thinkers. Here I wish to set aside the issues of actual historical influence and focus instead on the fertility of this Kantian framing of erotic love as it appears in Wagner. This philosophical conception of the erotic is beautifully evoked in Scruton's analysis of *Tristan und Isolde*, and forms the foundation upon which Scruton's main insights rest. This essay begins by amplifying Scruton's characterisation of the erotic as it figures in *Tristan*, and then considers Wagner's two other mature tragedies – *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and *Parsifal* – in this light. Are Scruton's insights in *Death-Devoted Heart* limited to *Tristan*, or do they penetrate something more general and profound in Wagner's world view? I argue that Scruton's Kantian erotics provide a backdrop against which all three of Wagner's mature tragedies should be interpreted, and that this way of viewing them resolves some long-standing puzzles about the meaning of the *Ring* and *Parsifal*. This in itself lends support to Scruton's analysis in *Death-Devoted Heart*, as it shows his insights not to be restricted to this single opera. In doing so, I present novel interpretations of the *Ring* and *Parsifal* – interpretations that avoid the pitfalls that plague the 'standard' conceptions of the works. In particular, this interpretative framework allows us to understand *Parsifal* as continuous with the moral and philosophical spheres of Wagner's earlier work, instead of representing a strange and even disturbing about-face, as critics since Nietzsche have so often maintained.

But first let us examine just how Scruton's 'Kantian erotics' – the idea of the erotic as the celebration of the incarnation of the noumenal – helps illuminate *Tristan und Isolde*.

1 *Tristan und Isolde*

If erotic love is to be *love*, it must be essentially directed to the embodied *subject*. Sexual love plays on our dual nature – we are not disembodied

spirits, nor are we simply objects. Erotic engagement between pure transcendental agents is unthinkable, since the bodily aspect of erotic activity is essential. Desire is directed towards the incarnate person, the subject-made-flesh:

> ... the body exalts and reveals the person, shows the subject in the object, and makes of that subject an object of desire – of the desire to be united with *this person* ... Our sexual emotions are founded on individualising thoughts: it is *you* who I want and not the type or pattern. This individualising intentionality does not merely stem from the fact that it is persons (in other words, individuals) whom we desire. It stems from the fact that the other is desired as an embodied subject and not as a body. (*Death-Devoted Heart,* pp. 141–2)

Erotic love brings the other as an embodied Thou most starkly into view; on pain of the pornographic degrading of the sexual act, the other's body cannot be seen as a mere object, but rather must be seen as the flesh-and-blood house of the soul. In the sphere of free erotic love, we come in contact with the sacred: the subject incarnate in the flesh before us. But in the grip of the pornographic attitude we encounter the flesh as an obscene but fascinating means to our own pleasure, and this precisely because the embodied subject is removed from view. The erotic is desecrated by the pornographic.

By treating the pornographic attitude as a profanation of the embodied subject, Scruton thereby suggests that our sense of the erotic is deeply tied to our sense of the sacred. The sacred appears when we see an item in this world as housing or incarnating something not wholly of this world; we experience something in the phenomenal realm as pervaded by the transcendental. True religion and true morality consist in the recognition of the transcendental in the phenomenal, and hence of the subject in the flesh – a recognition manifested in the accompanying refusal to treat the other as a mere replaceable thing.

If erotic desire is one sphere of the sacred, then forced sexual relations constitute a particularly vile profanation or 'sin'. Following this devolution of the erotic to its conclusion, we arrive at the ultimate sacrilege, against which Wagner rages both in *Der Ring* and *Tristan*: a person robbed of all vestiges of subjecthood, forced to submit repeatedly to unwanted sexual advances, forever in the bondage of objecthood: the institutionalised rape of forced marriage.

We first encounter Isolde en route to such a fate. She is being forcibly dragged from her homeland to marry Tristan's uncle, King Marke. She

has been chosen by others as a suitable bride because of her looks and station. Had another met these criteria, that other would have done just as well as a bride for the King. It is not Isolde's inherent nature as an individual, free, and irreplaceable subject that is prized here, but rather something cruder and more familiar. Isolde's autonomy is being trampled: she wants no part of this marriage. She is being shipped to Cornwall as a spoil of war, an object among objects, an alluring cargo unable to determine her own fate. The impending desecration infuriates Isolde throughout the opening scene of the opera.

Forced marriage, and forced sex more generally, are recurrent themes in Wagner's works. In contrast to these dehumanising horrors, Wagner offers us movingly rendered visions of true erotic love, most notably the love of Siegmund and Sieglinde, and that of Tristan and Isolde. In their love Tristan and Isolde are purged of any compromising sense of objectification, and any corresponding tendency to admit of substitutions. The lovers stand subject-to-subject, eye-to-eye, I-to-I. Each to the other is the irreplaceable core of life, the embodied noumenal. Thus, Scruton argues, *Tristan und Isolde* offers us an image of the sacred in the context of erotic love.

What, then, of the shattering ending of the opera? What is to be made of the lovers' joint sacrifice? One can easily feel that this is the only possible resolution of the opera: Tristan and Isolde's love is too pure and uncompromising for this world. Tristan and Isolde are transfigured in love and death, and this transfiguration has redemptive power: they thereby redeem love itself from the crimes that their social world has perpetrated against it – crimes of objectification, substitution, and subordination. Through their love, and its culmination in death, Tristan and Isolde redeem themselves and their world, as King Marke's final peroration makes clear. The sacred is recovered through the quintessentially human. As Scruton puts it:

> When writing of the 'redemption' achieved by his lovers, Wagner is using this term in its true religious sense, to mean a regaining of the sacred in a world where sacrilege is the prevailing danger … the message of Wagner's greatest works is that man makes himself by sacralizing himself, and that by sacralizing himself he also sacralizes the world … By setting aside the empirical world and its claims, by scorning death for the sake of a goal that only free beings can embrace or conceive, the act of sacrifice sanctifies the one who performs it. It brings the sacred into being … The sacred moment, in which death is scorned for the sake of love, casts its light back over the entire life

> that had led to it. Redemption ... consists in a changed conception of the empirical world – a recognition that freedom really does exist in this world and that we too possess it. And this freedom is discovered in the most earthbound of our passions – the passion of erotic love. As with the Christian vision, redemption requires incarnation; but in Wagner incarnation is no longer God's means to redeem us *from* the world, but *our* means to redeem ourselves *in* it. (*Death-Devoted Heart*, pp. 182–3)

Read this way *Tristan* thus embodies a deeply religious sentiment. It is one in which the human being is his or her own redeemer, and in which the key to redemption is seeing another I-to-I, as erotic love enables us to do. Through their awed perception of the other, the lovers glimpse the sacred, and are led to prefer perfect union with the other in death to any of life's inevitable compromises:

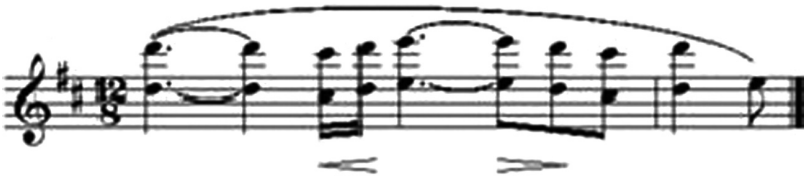
> Love leads us to sacrifice precisely through that aspect of it that nourishes our sense of the sacred: the individualizing intentionality that is disclosed in the look of love, and which we desecrate through all our compromises and substitutes. This sacrifice offers a kind of proof that we can transcend our mortal condition, that even in this passion that robs us of our freedom we are supremely free ... Death accepted for love's sake is a triumph over the empirical world, a final proof of freedom and personality against the meaningless flow of causes ... through their sacrifice [Tristan and Isolde] restore belief in our human potential and renew in us the will to live. Hence the redemption of the lovers in death is also a renewal of the community in life. And that is the religious meaning of *Tristan und Isolde*. (*Death-Devoted Heart,* pp. 193–4)

By taking love to its extreme conclusion, Tristan and Isolde do more than let us merely glimpse the sacred; we ourselves are sanctified through their sacrifice.

2 *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

How far can the moral and religious frame of *Tristan*, as Scruton constructs it, be usefully applied to Wagner's other mature works?

If the moral and religious vision of *Tristan* is anticipated in the *Ring*, we must, I claim, accept Brünnhilde as the cycle's central salvific figure. Even as things lie on the surface of the *Ring*, this should come as no



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Example 1 The 'Glorification of Brünnhilde' leitmotiv

great surprise, for it is Brünnhilde who ultimately frees the world from Alberich's curse. Brünnhilde accomplishes what no man or god has been able to do: she relinquishes the ring to the Rhinemaidens, thus returning it to its rightful owners, purified of its curse. She brings to an end the cycle of horrors that had fanned out from Alberich's renunciation of love and theft of the gold. It is Brünnhilde who takes the stage in the final scene of *Götterdämmerung*, and frees man and god alike from the scourge of the ring.

The *Ring*'s final leitmotiv – the last heard before the curtain falls – also suggests Brünnhilde's salvific prominence. This leitmotiv (see Example 1) occurs only once before the final scene: as a blessing for Brünnhilde. As her parting words in Act III, Scene I of *Die Walküre,* Sieglinde sings 'O hehrstes Wunder! Herrlichste Maid!', and so introduces the leitmotiv that will end the opera cycle. Since the leitmotiv is not heard again until the final scene of *Götterdämmerung*, it does not pick up any other meanings or associations along the way – it remains wholly associated with Brünnhilde, and with the blessing bestowed upon her by the hapless Sieglinde.

This soaring motif is often referred to as the 'Redemption Motif' (or 'Redemption by Love') in contemporary musical analysis. This is a perfectly adequate title, however it is not Wagner's own: he named this final leitmotiv the 'Glorification of Brünnhilde'. This more explicit designation makes vivid the motif's attachment to our heroine. (Though of course its musical history makes the same point and in a deeper and more telling way.) It is no misnomer to call it the 'Redemption Motif', but this description suggests that the motif can be detached from the character of Brünnhilde – that it belongs to the more abstract notions of fate and salvation rather to this flesh-and-blood woman. The motif is one of redemption only because Brünnhilde herself redeems the world. The final musical word, in the language of the leitmotivs, belongs to Brünnhilde the Redeemer.

The only other character that one might reasonably be tempted to regard as the central salvific figure in the *Ring* is Siegfried, the hoped-for 'free being'. To be sure, Siegfried plays an important enabling role in the world's salvation: he wrests the ring from Fafner, thus paving the way for Brünnhilde to ultimately return it to the Rhinemaidens. This contribution is indispensable, but we must not mistake that for his actually performing the ultimate redemptive act, for that belongs to Brünnhilde alone. Siegfried also figures essentially in Brünnhilde's transformation, first by joining with her in the transfiguring bond of love – *and* by betraying her and mistreating her in a shockingly callous, instrumental way. Ultimately, Siegfried's transgressions are too great for him to be a world-redemptive figure, and he lacks the self-knowledge required to see his own role in the events which engulf him. If we suppose that Brünnhilde is the *Ring*'s central salvific figure, we no longer need to view the *Ring* as a work deeply compromised by Siegfried's banality. That Brünnhilde eclipses him as the redeemer is not merely a matter of musical and dramatic fact; it is a matter of necessity from the point of view of the redemption of the gods.[2]

Brünnhilde is the child of the Father-God Wotan – his favorite child, his beloved. But the path of redemption requires the god to give up his child to the world of man. Certain pains and humiliations are known only to mortal man, but these pains and humiliations must be borne by the once-divine, if salvation is to be possible. The child of god must be made flesh.

In the Christian narrative, the Son of God is made flesh to redeem mankind; the divine does not partake of this salvation. As Scruton's discussion of *Tristan* makes so vivid though, Wagner has no interest in portraying man's salvation as lying in the hands of the divine. In *Tristan*, salvation is a purely human affair: as Scruton puts it, 'Wagner is presenting in dramatic outline the image of man as his own redeemer' (p. 185). In the *Ring* Wagner takes this vision a step further: man – or more precisely, woman – redeems the divine.

Nothing in the text or stage directions suggests that the world of man is particularly affected by Brünnhilde's actions. The Gibichung vassals survive the final fire and flood, and presumably continue on their way once the fire dies and the water recedes. They are bequeathed a world free of the ring and its curse, but otherwise we are given no indication that they are particularly affected by the eschatological events of *Götterdämmerung*.

Rather, it is the gods themselves who are redeemed. It is their sins – symbolised by the ring and its curse – that Brünnhilde takes upon herself, that she expiates with her own death and suffering:

Mein Erbe nun	Now I take up
nehm' ich zu eigen. –	my inheritance.
Verfluchter Reif!	Accursed ring,
Furchtbarer Ring!	terrible ring,
Dein Gold fass' ich	I take your gold
und geb' es nun fort …	and now I give it away …
Das Feuer, das mich verbrennt,	The fire that consumes me
rein'ge vom Fluche den Ring![3]	shall cleanse the ring from the curse!

(*Götterdämmerung*, Act III, Scene III)

As she is devoured by fire, the ring is purified of its curse. The ring here represents the accumulated objectifications it has helped encourage, among them the objectifying misdeeds of the gods. Brünnhilde takes up these sins and dies to atone for them by proxy. As Scruton puts it:

> Yet, in another way, the gods can achieve redemption, namely, through the agency of a mortal. The great sacrifice of which mortals alone are capable, since it is a sacrifice motivated by mortal love, can spread its radiance over the immortals, provided they too participate. In this way Brünnhilde's incarnation as a mortal becomes the instrument for the salvation of the gods, by rendering them mortal too. The significance of her immolation is that it is a willing renunciation of consciousness by the transcendental perspective itself – in other words a self-immolation of the divine. (*Lectures on Wagner's* Ring)

The Christian narrative is thus tellingly turned on its head. The child of god becomes incarnate in mortal flesh, takes up the sins of others, and then suffers and dies to expiate them – but here it is not the sins of man that are atoned for, but rather the sins of the gods.

What precisely are these sins of the gods – those which require such a redemption? I would suggest that they too, are sins of objectification. Scruton's elucidation of *Tristan*'s moral world applies equally to the world of the *Ring*: both are worlds in which the fundamental moral commandment is to see and treat others as Thous, not things; as means, not ends. These are the counts on which the gods are to be charged – these are the sins that cry out for redemption.

From his first appearance in the *Ring*, Wotan is enmeshed in a profoundly instrumental view of those around him.[4] When we first meet him in *Das Rheingold* he has bartered away his sister-in-law in exchange for his grand castle, Valhalla. We are quickly reassured that he does not intend to keep to the bargain; it was *merely* a manipulative gambit to induce the giants to work for him. He sees the giants as foolish brutes, there to be tricked and manipulated into doing his bidding. He is also quite unconcerned about the anxiety and humiliation this episode causes Freia – he blithely uses her as a bargaining chip in his bid to use to giants to build his castle.

This original episode of instrumentality has been set in motion before Wotan even appears on stage, but its ramifications endure until the very end of the cycle. It is Wotan's original act of using Freia to manipulate the giants that necessitates his first wresting the ring from Alberich (thus precipitating the Nibelung's curse), and then, more significantly, necessitates his giving the ring to the giants, instead of returning it to the Rhinemaidens. Had Wotan's false bargaining not boxed him into a corner, all manner of horrors could have been avoided. Here is the Fall that sets the stage for what is to come, but it is the Fall of the Gods; Man has nothing to do with it.

This is no isolated incidence of instrumentality either. Wotan's description of Valhalla and its heroes – confided to Brünnhilde in his Act II monologue in *Die Walküre* – is a candid description of purely instrumental, objectifying relations:

Dass stark zum Streit	So that enemies would find us
uns fände der Feind,	strong in battle,
hiess ich euch Helden mir schaffen:	I told you to fetch heroes to me,
die herrisch wir sonst	such as once we masterfully
in Gesetzen hielten,	subjected to our laws;
die Männer, denen	men whose spirits
den Mut wir gewehrt,	we curbed,
die durch trüber Verträge	and, through shady treaties
trügende Bande	deceitfully binding,
zu blindem Gehorsam	held them to us
wir uns gebunden,	in blind obedience.
die solltet zu Sturm	You were to spur them
und Streit ihr nun stacheln,	to storm and strife,
ihre Kraft reizen	tempt their strength
zu rauhem Krieg,	into bitter war

dass kühner Kämpfer Scharen ich sammle in Walhalls Saal!

so that hosts of bold warriors would gather in Valhalla's hall.

The assembled heroes of Valhalla are there not as a reward for deeds done in life, but to defend Wotan against his enemies. These heroes, once curbed by 'shady treaties', are roused by the Valkyries into mortal conflict with each other – so that Wotan may collect the dead for his army. (However stately the Valhalla theme may seem, there remains something hollow in it, not just musically but dramatically.)

And what of Wotan's treatment of Siegmund and Sieglinde, whom he purports to love dearly? He allows Sieglinde, his daughter, to be abducted, raped, and abused by Hunding and his ilk (let us note in passing that he later desires to inflict a similar fate on another daughter, Brünnhilde herself). He abandons Siegmund to a life of lonely adversity, hunted and despised by all he meets. All this he does to his own children in the hope that Siegmund will be able to recover the Ring from Fafner. But then – then! – when he realises that Siegmund will never be free enough from him to obtain the ring, *he condemns him to death*. If the plan fails to work, so much the worse for Siegmund. Better to accede to Fricka's demands, and so at least reap the small benefit of having mollified the wife.

These are the sins that must be expiated. Wotan of course never goes so far as to renounce love, but he is rightly called Licht-Alberich because his sins are sins against love – sins of treating others as objects, instead of as the subjects true love requires us to recognise. (We might note that even Wotan's erotic encounters serve a purpose beyond union with the other: Erda was seduced for wisdom, and the Walsungs' mother for the sake of begetting a free being.) Along with the gods, love itself must be redeemed – redeemed from the abuses and curses it has endured.

The ring represents these crimes against love. As Scruton writes,

> Marx's thoughts in *Das Kapital* about the fetishism of commodities ultimately derive from the Kantian contrast between treating people as ends and treating them as means. The same contrast animates Wagner's vision of love and desire in *Tristan* and also in the *Ring*. Indeed the Nibelung's ring epitomizes this contrast: it is the object obtained by foreswearing love, so putting the transactions of the market in the place of personal union. (*Death-Devoted Heart*, p. 144)

The ring is the fruit of Schwartz-Alberich's original crime against love, and so comes to stand for all such crimes, including those committed by Licht-Alberich Wotan. Only with the fires of Brünnhilde's pyre and the flood of the Rhine can the ring be purified; only thus can love be redeemed.

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Valhalla's world – a world of lofty ideals built on crude objectification – is the only world Brünnhilde has ever known before she encounters Siegmund in Act II, Scene IV of *Die Walküre*. This scene is the pivot point in Brünnhilde's transformation into a mortal woman, for here she sees something she has never before seen: pure love.

She goes to Siegmund reluctantly, compelled by the henpecked Wotan to grant victory to Hunding. She is puzzled by Wotan's command – she has always believed that he loves Siegmund, yet since Wotan 'cannot will a free man to life' she is told she must fight for 'Fricka's slave', Hunding.[5] Siegmund cannot play the required role of recapturing the ring, so Wotan has thrown him over in capitulation to his wife. Such is the way of Wotan's Valhalla – everyone has their use in the divine chess game, and their use-value trumps love every time. Wotan has cast untold afflictions on Siegmund for the sake of making him 'free', but Wotan's plan of salvation by indirection has failed, so Siegmund is left to die.

Brünnhilde leaves Valhalla to seek Siegmund on earth. As she greets him and speaks of the afterlife promised to him, Valhalla's lofty theme plays throughout the orchestra. Brünnhilde is stately, serene, otherworldly – a goddess descended from above to appear to a lowly mortal. It all sounds splendid, says Siegmund, but will he find his beloved Sieglinde in this other world?

When Brünnhilde responds in the negative, the orchestra dies back, and in place of Valhalla's pomp, we hear a lonely instrument playing the theme of the Walsungs' love. Siegmund considers his reply for a moment, and then sings:

So grüsse mir Walhall,	Then greet Valhalla for me,
grüsse mir Wotan,	greet Wotan too,
grüsse mir Wälse	greet Volsa for me
und alle Helden,	and all the heroes,
grüss' auch die holden	greet the lovely
Wunschesmädchen:	wishmaidens too.
zu ihnen folg' ich dir nicht.	I will not follow you to them.

Siegfried will not leave Sieglinde. In a last attempt, Brünnhilde tries to get Siegfried to see Sieglinde in objectual terms:

So wenig achtest du	So little do you value
ewige Wonne?	everlasting bliss?
Alles wär' dir	Is she everything to you,
das arme Weib,	this poor woman
das müd' und harmvoll	who, tired and sorrowful,
matt von dem Schosse dir hängt?	lies limp in your lap?
Nichts sonst hieltest du hehr?	Do you think nothing else glorious?

This sort of objectification is what Valhalla is built on, but Siegmund will have none of it. Because of his love for another mortal, Siegmund is above it all; he is better than the god and his hero-vassals.

The divine thus finds itself shamed by mortal man. The god has abused Siegmund and – since he is of no use now – intends to betray and abandon him. But Siegmund himself will not betray and abandon his true love. Sieglinde is without price for him, she admits of no substitutions, precisely because she is for him not an object but a subject. She serves no *purpose* for him, and so cannot be traded or replaced. The love that has escaped the gods has found root in a lowly mortal. Siegmund sees something the gods have not – he sees another as a Thou.

Brünnhilde recognises this and is ashamed of herself and her divine kinsfolk. This flesh-and-bone human man has unknowingly raised himself above the gods: he is their moral superior, and he has seen what they cannot see. Brünnhilde realises at that moment – perhaps unconsciously – that if the gods are to be redeemed, they must be transformed into flesh. They must take on human form and embrace human love, else they will be forever morally below man.

Following the similar theme in Carl Jung's *Answer to Job*, we might call this Brünnhilde's *Answer to Siegmund*. In Jung's vision, Job shames the god when, after being needlessly tormented by Yahweh, he remains steadfast and faithful. Yahweh, Jung supposes, recognises the moral superiority of this decent human being, and so sees that in order to save Himself He must become flesh. Only by taking on human aspect can the divine atone for His misdeeds; only by becoming a man can Yahweh be redeemed.

Brünnhilde takes the same path. She sides with the man over the god, and backs Siegmund in battle. This predictably enrages Wotan, who

responds by stripping her of her godhead and locking her in sleep. She will awaken as a mortal woman, and she will be roused by a mortal man. With this mortal man, she will have the chance to find love – to attain the transformed consciousness that so inspired her in Siegmund. All this must happen if the gods are to be redeemed.

Love alone, though, is not enough to effect Brünnhilde's transformation into a world-redemptive figure. As there are sins that must be expiated, suffering is demanded. Brünnhilde's suffering, however, is only possible because of her love for Siegfried; her trauma is the lover's trauma, the trauma of the spurned and rejected.

The role of love's pain is evident in the final words of the so-called Schopenhauerian ending:

Alles Ew'gen	The blessed end
Sel'ges Ende,	of all things eternal,
wisst Ihr wie Ich gewann?	do you know how I reached it?
Trauernder Liebe	Deepest suffering
tiefstes Leiden	of grieving love
Schloss die Augen mir auf:	opened my eyes:
enden sah Ich die Welt.[6]	I saw the world end.

Wagner never set these words to music, but this was not because he rejected their import – rather he deemed that their meaning was contained in the music itself, and so the words were unnecessary.[7]

It is Siegfried who inflicts this pain on her when he drinks the memory-sapping potion and abandons her for Gutrune. That, however, is only the beginning. Siegfried then takes it upon himself to drag her from her mountain home, and force her to marry Gunther against her will. The very person whom she loves – whom she most wishes would treat her as a subject – forces upon her the ultimate objectification. She is distraught, humiliated, enraged.

Her situation recalls Isolde's in Act I of *Tristan*. Of this Scruton writes:

> We discover Isolde wrestling with the awareness that the man consecrated in her desires is nevertheless treating her as a mere means and at the same time forcing upon her the loathsome vision of herself as object. Her anger at Tristan is thus also a longing to regain possession of herself, to be once again a free subject in her own eyes and in his. (*Death-Devoted Heart*, p. 152)

And again:

> The perspective on Isolde that is above everything loathsome to her [is] the view of her as sexual object, when her overwhelming and unconfessed desire is to be a sexual subject, freely giving to the other who freely gives in turn. (*Death-Devoted Heart*, p. 151)

Both women are not only to be forced to marry against their will – to be forced to submit sexually to men they do not care for – but are forced to do so by men they love. These men who most of all have the duty to meet them I-to-I, as Scruton puts it, are instead meeting them I-to-It, Thou-to-Thing – binding them as mere objects to be used as others wish.

We quickly see that Tristan is as much a victim of the phenomenal world as Isolde, and that he soon rises to meet her squarely I-to-I. The same cannot be said for Siegfried, and he thus forfeits any claim to be the world-redeeming hero we might have hoped he would be. On the surface it seems that he is bound by events beyond his control – he did not willingly forget Brünnhilde, but was rather tricked by Hagen's Drink of Forgetting. That things are perhaps not so simple, however, is demonstrated by commentator Warren Darcy's devastating question: 'Can we imagine a drink that would make Siegmund forget Sieglinde?'[8]

Such a drink strikes us as impossible; their love is too profound, too transcendent. Love aspires to take us beyond the phenomenal realm, beyond the world of causally determined objects. When love is found in its purest form – as exemplified by Siegmund and Sieglinde, and by Tristan and Isolde – the phenomenal world cannot defeat it; love endures even the obliteration of its objects.

Such is the love between Siegmund and Sieglinde, but the same cannot be said for their son. A drink – an empirical force acting on him as object – suffices to drive all memory of Brünnhilde from his mind. He accepts Gutrune as an immediate substitute, then after meeting the Rhinemaidens declares, 'And yet/had I not given Gutrune my word/I would cheerfully have chosen for myself/one of these pretty women!'[9] As Scruton writes, 'The crime against love is the admission of substitutes'.[10] Siegmund would have no substitutes – he preferred death to eternal life without Sieglinde. Not so for Siegfried: his love for Brünnhilde could be dissolved with a potion, and a Rhinemaiden would do just as well as Gutrune. (Indeed, one cannot but worry that Siegfried, had the Valkyrie appeared to him as she did to his father, would have

wanted to know exactly how appealing Valhalla's wishmaidens were before making his decision.)

Even if we decide that Siegfried should not be held accountable for the effects of the drink, his subsequent treatment of Brünnhilde would still be inexcusable, since more is owed to even a stranger than Siegfried grants to her. No person ought to be abducted and forced into an unwanted marriage; this is an indefensible act of objectification, of desecration. Siegfried's father finds himself wounded and weaponless at Hunding's door precisely because he fought to spare an unknown girl this fate. He single-handedly fights and kills the kinsmen who are pressing her into a forced marriage. Siegmund willingly risks his life to defend a stranger against this horror.

What, then, is to be said of his son, who dons the Tarnhelm to deceive his victim, physically overpowers her to take her ring, and forces her into submission overnight, then drags her off down the Rhine to be married and subsequently raped the next day? The drink here cannot afford Siegfried a defense, for this is appalling and repulsive behavior regardless of one's personal connection to the victim. At the wedding scene he continues to be completely unmoved by her plight – he gives no indication of any human sympathy towards this strange woman he has abducted, and who is clearly utterly distressed. Rather, the scene ends with Siegfried remarking, '*Lasst das Weibergekeif'!/Als Zage weichen wir gern/gilt es mit Zungen den Streit*'[11] ('Enough of scolding women!/As cowards we gladly give way/when tongues wage war'), then skipping gaily off the stage, singing his happy tune.

The moral sphere of Wagner's operas is not one in which such acts are treated lightly. This extreme objectification of another person is condemned: Siegfried's acts necessitate his death. To be sure, he falls as a result of Hagen's plotting, but Hagen's designs only succeed because of Siegfried's moral failings. We cannot imagine a drink that would make Siegmund forget Sieglinde, and we certainly cannot imagine a plot, however dastardly, that would lead Siegmund to then unperturbedly drag her back to be raped once more by Hunding.

In his final moments, Siegfried manages some degree of awakening to the truth. At the moment of death, he sees Brünnhilde Self-to-Self. '*Brünnhilde*, *Heilige* Braut', with its haunting, otherworldly quality, shows that Siegfried is not wholly lost. He is still capable of love, and at death his love for Brünnhilde emerges more clearly than ever before. Here, perhaps, Siegfried attains something of the purity of love his father Siegmund felt for Sieglinde. This moment helps to redeem Siegfried at a personal level; we must be careful not to read too much into this.

It might go some ways towards redeeming Siegfried, but it is hardly enough to redeem the world.

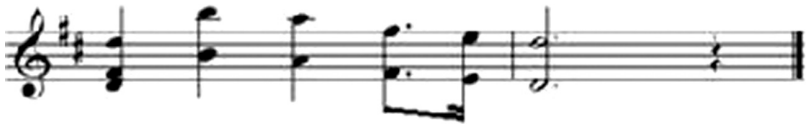
Wotan himself has such a personal redemptive moment when he bids farewell to Brünnhilde. Until this final scene of *Walküre*, Wotan has never truly seen anyone as a pure subject, as a pure end-in-themselves. His relationships have all been deeply instrumental – even his relationship with Brünnhilde, whom he calls the 'blind instrument of his will'. Throughout the final scene he has been intent on punishing her disobedience in a rather vile way, and she has apologetically begged him not to do so. In her final entreaty, however, she casts off her apologetic, submissive aspect and for the first time she *commands* Wotan:

Auf dein Gebot	At your demand
entbrenne ein Feuer;	let fire blaze up;
den Felsen umglühe	round the rock let it burn
lodernde Glut;	with flaring flames;
es leck' ihre Zung',	let its tongues flicker,
es fresse ihr Zahn	its teeth devour
den Zagen, der frech sich wagte,	any coward who rashly dares
dem freislichen Felsen zu nahn!	To approach the fearsome rock.

Musically she assumes entire authority, proudly and boldly telling the god what must be done. As her vocal line ends, the orchestra swells with the theme of the Valkyrie's Ride – here majestic, shorn of its previous roughness – and then answers with a new motif, triumphant, tender, and transfiguring (Example 2).

This is the one and only time Wotan ever sees another as a complete Thou. He finally sees his daughter Self-to-Self, but scant moments later her eyes must close on him forever.

Both Wotan and Siegfried open themselves to redemption in these final moments. If the one they both finally see can fulfil her destiny, Wotan and Siegfried can be redeemed, along with love itself. Brünnhilde herself sees both father and husband, complete with their sins and



Example 2 Sleeping Brünnhilde motif

failings, and she forgives them. She takes the gods' original sin – the sin against love – upon herself, and in her death expiates it.

In this way, the goddess-made-flesh redeems the divine, and cleanses the gods of their original sin of objectification.

3 Parsifal

What, though, are we to make of *Parsifal*? At first blush its moral world, its understanding of where salvation lies, seems profoundly at odds with that of Wagner's other mature works. In those works, as Scruton suggests, the deepest moral commandment is to view others as Thous, and erotic love is embraced as the best means of accomplishing this. Women and the erotic bond are likewise both exalted, and they play central redemptive roles in the operas. And more profoundly, this insight into another – the ability to see another as a wholly free subject – belongs to humanity, not to the gods. In this way humanity is set above the divine, and the latter are redeemed only by assuming human form.

A natural and widespread reading of *Parsifal* sees Wagner as abandoning all this in his final opera. Friedrich Nietzsche famously sees *Parsifal* this way, as Wagner's final 'groveling before the cross'. Inflamed by the apparent valorisation of chastity, Nietzsche writes,

> Parsifal is a work of perfidy, of vindictiveness, of a secret attempt to poison the presuppositions of life – a bad work. The preaching of chastity remains an incitement to anti-nature: I despise everyone who does not experience *Parsifal* as an attempted assassination of basic ethics.[12]

AQ2

The moral hierarchy of *Parsifal* appears to be headed by the Christian God conventionally conceived, to whose perfection humans can only aspire. The human hero Titurel once came close, but now is so aged that he lies in a living grave, his life maintained by the impossibly exalted Holy Grail. However, Titurel's son and successor, Amfortas, has sullied himself by having sexual contact with a woman, and so is sunk in filth, sin, and self-loathing. Amfortas and the knights of the Grail are saved only by the pure hero Parsifal, who proves his worth by spurning the sinful temptress that is Woman.

It is, of course, a bare biographical possibility that Wagner might have had such an about-face, rejecting his previous tenets and 'groveling before the cross'. It is possible that Wagner, in the years following his composition of the *Ring*, came to believe that his early intellectual

hero, Feuerbach, was deeply mistaken: that mortal man could not be his own savior, let alone the savior of the divine. It is possible that Wagner came to see an all-male order of chaste knights idolising disembodied holiness as the highest of ideals, and that he came to regard woman as a desecrating, corrupting influence to be demeaned, subjugated, and, most of all, avoided. It is possible that Wagner came to affirm a world in which Sieglinde's deepest fear would be justified: that she defiled Siegmund's purity by sleeping with him, filthy and polluted as she was from Hunding's rape. A world in which the '*spröden Wonnen*' ('frigid joys') of a loveless, sexless gathering of near-dead men is to be prized above all else. A world in which Siegmund would have been wrong to choose Sieglinde over Valhalla.

A more promising alternative is that the standard interpretation of *Parsifal* is misguided, and that a deeper, more revealing analysis will find in it the same moral vision that animates his other mature works. *Parsifal*, I shall argue, retains the underlying moral structure of the earlier operas: the fundamental commandment is to see others as subjects, not objects, and treat them as ends, not means. While erotic love itself does not play so central a role as it does in the other operas, what gives erotic love its core significance remains central: we are redeemed only when we see and treat others as free and perfect Thous. The original sin in *Parsifal* is still the sin of objectification, and, as in the *Ring*, divinity itself is guilty of this sin. The Redeemer, Christ himself, is in sore need of redemption, and this redemption can only come from mortal man.

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Let us linger a moment on the Grail Knights. A sickness fills the order, but it is not a sickness that is solely due to Amfortas – it is a deeper and more pervasive sickness. The Grail Knights are not far from Valhalla's world, a world of lofty ideals built on crude objectification.

The knights idolise the Grail; it fascinates them as the ultimate redeeming means. They demand that it be disclosed, and that the life-giving communion be distributed, so that their strength may be renewed – indeed so that they may avoid decline and death. When Amfortas is reluctant to unveil the Grail, the knights clamor around him insisting that he do so. Their demeanor is more like that of addicts desperate for a fix than of holy men tending the sacred for its own sake. There is an unnerving kind of obscenity in their demand for the manna of the Grail.

With the notable exception of Gurnemanz, the knights as we first encounter them are idolaters or, more precisely, *spiritual materialists*. A

spiritual materialist is one who sees the promises of religion as primarily a means of fulfilling their ordinary desire for advantage. In *Saving God*, Mark Johnston characterises the spiritual materialist in these terms:

> The spiritual materialist is inauthentic in his engagement with religion, and with his spiritual quest of search, precisely because he simply turns his ordinary unredeemed desires toward some supposedly spiritual realm. (p. 16)

Spiritual materialism is a way of objectifying the sacred, and thus of desecrating it.

This disposition is most clearly exemplified by Titurel. His chilling, vampiric presence in the first act is possibly the most disturbing conceit employed on any operatic stage. Titurel is so desperate to cling to life at all costs that he demands to behold the Grail even though he is too feeble to leave the grave. He is a living corpse, entombed but not yet deceased. He forces Amfortas to reveal the Grail so that he may continue his undead existence – despite the agony that the sight of the Grail causes in his son. Titurel is pitiless in his pursuit of endless life.

The music of the Grail Knights in the first act has a tense and disquieting feel. Its undertones are sinister, and its apparently otherworldly quality evokes a dark and disturbing realm. The religion itself is poisoned, and one senses that the poison runs far deeper than Amfortas's transgression and his fixation on his own 'impure blood'. The poison is the poison of spiritual materialism; the knights have objectified the Grail, and thereby have objectified the Redeemer. It is from this sin that the order must be saved.

The relationship of the knights to the Grail dramatises spiritually materialistic religion, including debased Christianity. After all, the endless life granted by Wagner's Grail is no more than a literal manifestation of the promise of eternal life inherent in debased understandings of the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion. The latter guarantees eternal life in another world to those who partake of it; the former grants deathlessness in this world. In the Christian faith, our corpses are to be reassembled and reanimated on Judgement Day; here, Titurel's corpse is continually animated. But it is fundamentally sacrilegious to engage with the sacrament as a mere means of avoiding death. To do so is ghoulish, disturbing, and ultimately horrific. It is as far removed from the truly salvific as we can imagine. This is spiritual materialism in its essence: the holy is only of interest insofar as it can help us deal with our fears. The sacred is no more than a means to *another* end.

Indeed, it does not seem forced to see in the knights' open eroticisation of the Grail a pornographic conceit, this time directed upon the sacred itself.[13] But contra Nietzsche, this 'poisoning of the presuppositions of life' is not valorised by Wagner, it is something which Parsifal – 'the innocent one, made wise by compassion' – has come to redeem and transform.

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The objectification of the Grail is not the only sin of objectification in *Parsifal*: another sin pervades the opera, and it is for this sin that the greatest atonement is demanded. To see what sin this is, we must understand Wagner's attitude in this opera to the erotic. At first glance, it looks as though Nietzsche is right. Wagner – who once saw erotic love as a path to salvation – now presents it as sinful, as a near-insurmountable obstacle to salvation. But if all erotic encounters in the realm of the Grail are sin, how was Titurel able to father Amfortas? How is Parsifal able to go on to father Lohengrin? A blanket condemnation of all sexual acts does not sit easily with the facts of the opera. But if not all sexual acts are rejected, what then is so shameful about Amfortas's dalliance with Kundry? And what is so redemptive about Parsifal's abstention?

As Wagner's other operas keenly reflect, sexual acts are far from being morally equal. The moral gulf between Hunding's forcing himself on Sieglinde and her loving union with Siegmund could not be greater. Brünnhilde's freely giving herself to Siegfried at the end of the eponymous opera stands in stark contrast to Gunther's unwanted attentions (if one believes that Gunther dared come near her). The same contrast would have arisen in *Tristan* if Isolde's marriage to King Marke had been consummated.

Kundry's relations with Amfortas are no more consensual than the consummations of any of these forced marriages. This is a point on which we must be absolutely clear. She is compelled by Klingsor to sleep with Amfortas against her will, just as he tries to make her sleep with Parsifal. Kundry tries her upmost to resist Klingsor in this, but cannot. Her resistance is manifest throughout the first scene of Act II, for example:

Kundry	*Kundry*
Ich will nicht!	I ... will not!
Klingsor	*Klingsor*
Jetzt schon erklimmt er [Parsifal] die Burg.	He [Parsifal] is already mounting the tower.

Kundry	*Kundry*
Oh! – Wehe! Wehe!	Oh! – Alas! Alas!
Erwachte ich darum?	Did I wake for this?
Muss ich? Muss? –	Must I? Must I?
Klingsor	*Klingsor*
Ha! – Er ist schön, der Knabe!	Ha! The boy is handsome!
Kundry	*Kundry*
Oh! – Oh! – Wehe mir!	Oh! Woe is me![14]

Here Kundry is a miserable instrument of Klingsor's will. She fights desperately to resist, but Klingsor overpowers her by his dark magical power. (Recall that this is a power he has gained by castrating himself; it is clear from Klingsor's musical signatures that Wagner regards this as a perversion, even though it leaves Klingsor technically chaste.) Kundry must do as Klingsor commands, and his command is that she prostitute herself to serve his ends. One of the most disturbing aspects of the scene is Klingsor's repeated insinuation that Kundry must enjoy these acts of rape-by-proxy – for example, '*Er ist schön*', as quoted above. These comments are disturbing because they are psychologically realistic depictions of the mentality of rape: deep down, the victim must really want it.[15]

Nor was Amfortas's sexual encounter with Kundry a meeting of free subjects. Amfortas was just another in what we may infer was a string of men to whom Klingsor has forcibly pimped Kundry. It was not the free giving of the embodied self to another. They did not meet I-to-I, Thou-to-Thou. There was no erotic love in their encounter – the mere possibility of that was destroyed at the outset by Klingsor, since Kundry does not come to these meetings as a free subject, but rather as a compelled object. Their entanglement was an obscenity – forced, impersonal, alienated.

This was the nature of the act that led to Amfortas's downfall. Erotic love is not maligned in *Parsifal*; it simply does not figure. To suppose that it is frowned upon in these operas is to confuse a union of free subjects with the obscenity of forced prostitution. This is as gross an error as confounding Hunding's rape with Siegmund's love.

Klingsor is the primary transgressor here to be sure, but Amfortas bears the guilt of participating in such an act. He engaged in sex as a union of objects, not subjects – obscene, pornographic sex. He did not – could not – see Kundry as a Thou, since she came to him as a wholly determined object. Just as the john degrades himself with his actions, so has Amfortas.

There is a profound sense in which Amfortas *could not* have slept with Kundry under those circumstances had he been antecedently inclined to treat her as a Thou. Here it is instructive to consider which counterfactual emendations to the plot would be coherent, and which would not. In Act I, Kundry is widely objectified, particularly by the young Grail knights, who liken her to a beast. (Even Parsifal physically attacks her in this early act.) Only one person resists objectifying her: Gurnemanz. He protects her from the young knights, and rebukes them for addressing her in such demeaning terms. Now: we can readily imagine the young knights succumbing to her compelled seductions, but can we imagine Gurnemanz doing the same? This seems unthinkable: Gurnemanz would not be susceptible. His resistance to objectifying her would bar him from participating in such an act. (Similarly, if we do not mind crossing the boundaries between operas, is it not clear that Siegmund would be immune to such advances, even before he ever laid eyes on Sieglinde?) Amfortas, had he not been susceptible to the original sin of objectification, would never have fallen into Klingsor's trap.

This is Amfortas's transgression – the one for which he must atone. It is not sex that is sin, but rather objectification. This is the deep stain that sullies Amfortas. However – and this will lead to the most surprising point in the opera – the story of this sin does not end here, but rather reaches all the way to the One who first condemned Kundry to this existence, to the One who first punished her laughter with His curse.

Kundry's forced prostitution is depicted as a direct consequence of her curse. For example, in the opening scene of Act II, she and Klingsor have the following exchange:

Klingsor	*Klingsor*
Gefiel er dir wohl, Amfortas, – der Held,	How did you like the hero Amfortas
den ich dir zur Wonne dir gesellt?	whom I ensnared to your charms?
Kundry	*Kundry*
Oh! Jammer! Jammer!	O anguish! Anguish!
Schwach auch er! – Schwach – alle! …	He too was weak! Weak are they all!
Meinem Fluche mit mir	All fall victim with me
alle verfallen!	to my curse!

The curse is here presented as the root of the unfortunate episode with Amfortas: it is the curse that lies at the root of their degrading encounter.

On one level of understanding, the episode is due to Klingsor's plotting, but there is still a deeper level at which Amfortas must bear the blame, since the episode could not have happened if he had not been antecedently inclined to objectify Kundry. Now a third level of understanding emerges: the whole miserable episode was caused by *the curse*. Kundry's later remarks suggest a similar interpretation:

Kenntest du den Fluch,	If you knew the curse
der mich durch Schlaf und Wachen,	which afflicts me, asleep and awake,
durch Tod und Leben,	in death and life,
Pein und Lachenpa	in and laughter,
zu neuem Leiden neu gestählt,	newly steeled to new affliction,
endlos durch das Dasein quält! …	endlessly through this existence! …
da kehrt mir das verfluchte Lachen wieder,	The accursed laughter assails me once again:
ein Sünder sinkt mir in die Arme!	*a sinner sinks into my arms!*
Da lach' ich – lache,	Then I laugh – laugh –
kann nicht weinen:	I cannot weep,
nur schreien, wüten,	can only shout, rage,
toben, rasen	storm, rave
in stets erneuter Wahnsinns Nacht,	in an ever-renewed nightmare
aus der ich büssend kaum erwacht.	from which, though repentant, I scarcely wake.

(Emphasis added)

These acts of loveless, objectifying sex are part of Kundry's curse. One might distill the curse to its essence: her curse is to be endlessly treated as an object, never as a subject.

The curse has another aspect to it: it prevents Kundry from dying, condemning her instead to an endless string of reincarnations. The themes of death, redemption, and subjectification are so interwoven in Wagner that they may be seen as aspects of the same phenomenon. Tristan and Isolde are led to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their I-to-I erotic love, and the same may be said of Brünnhilde. The converse plight

is that of the Flying Dutchman and – I would suggest – Kundry. The Flying Dutchman is condemned to eternal life, with only one hope of finding release: he must find a loving wife who remains faithful until her death. Only a woman who engages with him as a free and perfect subject will be capable of such a redemptive act. To the extent that a woman falls short of loving him for the unique and irreplaceable embodied Thou that he is, she will be vulnerable to the crime of substitution – that is, infidelity.

Kundry's curse echoes that of the Flying Dutchman. She too cannot die until she is seen and treated as an embodied subject. The double-edged nature of her curse both guarantees she will be objectified by those she meets, and also binds to endless life as a consequence.

Kundry's own original sin was to mock Christ on the cross. A terrible thing, to be sure; we should not be misled into thinking of Kundry as an angel. But what of her punishment, and what of the one who inflicted it? To condemn a person to endless objectification – this in itself is surely a profound sin, in itself a failure to treat that person as a subject. This is the Redeemer's sin. It is for this that the Redeemer Himself must be redeemed, hence the last line of *Parsifal*, '*Erlosung dem Erloser*' ('the Redeemer

redeemed'), which tamer interpreters of the opera have long found so paradoxical.

We might think of Kundry's curse as symbolic of the original religious separation of men and women – the original conception of woman as sinful, and so to be avoided and demeaned – the root of the idea that only an all-male group of chaste knights could be worthy of the Grail. From the first Fall, woman is condemned to be objectified, and so man must shrink from her if he is to avoid committing the sin of objectification. If *Tristan* and the *Ring* show how erotic love can overcome this original rift, *Parsifal* confronts the rift at its source. Before this was man's sin, it was God's sin.

Kundry, in an otherwise obscure moment, subtly equates the Redeemer with Klingsor. Parsifal asks, '*Wer durft' ihn [Amfortas] verwunden mit der heil'gen Wehr*?' ('Who dared to wound him [Amfortas] with the holy weapon?'), to which the factually correct answer is indisputably 'Klingsor'. However, the music recedes and darkens at the moment, and Kundry quietly replies: '*Er – Er – der einst mein Lachen bestraft*' (He – He who once punished my laughter').

This description can only apply to the Redeemer, to Christ on the cross – no one else punished Kundry's laughter. The sudden solemnity in the orchestra and in the vocal line further indicate that this is no casual assertion.[16] Her remark is not to be interpreted literally,

but at a depth-psychological level it leads us to compare Klingsor and the Redeemer. Both are sinners, both are objectifiers; both have sinned against Kundry, both have transgressed against the feminine.

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Amfortas's sin recapitulates the Redeemer's sin. It is the symbol of this deep, primordial error. Amfortas's wound – which so perfectly parallels the Redeemer's own wound – cannot be healed until this ill is addressed. On the exoteric level, it cannot be healed until Parsifal retrieves the spear; on a more esoteric level, it cannot be healed until the wrong done to Kundry is redressed. It cannot be healed until her curse is broken – until she is treated as a Thou.

Parsifal accomplishes this: the curse is undone when he refuses to bow to its power. Of course, he does not have an easy time doing so. Towards the end of Act II, the curse manifests itself in a particularly brutal way: Kundry objectifies *herself*, begging Parsifal to do the same. This is a particularly harrowing scene to watch, but Parsifal – enlightened through compassion – resists and rebukes her thus:

Die Labung, die dein Leiden endet,	The solace to end your sorrows
beut nicht der Quell,	comes not from the source from
aus dem es fliesst,	which they flow:
das Heil wird nimmer dir gespendet,	grace shall never be bestowed on you
eh' jener Quell sich dir nicht schliesst.	until that source is sealed to you.

In this scene Parsifal is able to do what even Kundry herself cannot do. He sees her and treats her as Thou, and understands that this is what is needed for the salvation for all involved. He indicates this to her in the final line of Act II:

Du weisst,	You know
wo du mich wiederfinden kannst!	Where you can find me again!

When she does indeed find him again in Act III, Parsifal baptises her – an act symbolic of the Redeemer himself acknowledging her as a subject after untold centuries.

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If the fundamental sin in *Parsifal* is the sin of objectification then the opera's underlying moral structure is continuous with the moral worlds of *Tristan* and the *Ring*. Scruton describes this moral sphere beautifully in *Death-Devoted Heart*, and uses it to lay out a deeply satisfying analysis of *Tristan* – perhaps one of the most satisfying interpretations on offer. The *Ring*, as this essay argues, is naturally interpreted against this same moral backdrop. *Parsifal* is at first blush more recalcitrant, yet this is only a superficial seeming. Scruton's original insight into *Tristan* extends elegantly to cover the totality of Wagner's mature tragedies. The deepest commandment in these operas is to see others as Thous and treat them as ends in themselves. As in the *Ring*, in *Parsifal* divinity is guilty of transgressions against subjecthood, and can only be redeemed by a human being. The capacity of mortal man to see others I-to-I outstrips that of the gods. Scruton's vision of Wagner's moral landscape can encompass all of Wagner's mature tragedies, including *Parsifal*.

By refusing to objectify Kundry, Parsifal breaks the cycle of sin, and by baptising her, he redeems the one who originally condemned her. This is how the Redeemer is redeemed. At the superficial level of dramatic action, there is no reason why Parsifal must treat Kundry in any particular way in Act III; he already has the Spear, and that alone – at his level of understanding – should suffice to redeem Amfortas and the knights. Yet at a more profound level, we sense that Parsifal could not proceed to redeem the order without treating Kundry as he does. If he simply did not encounter her in Act III, or if in doing so he mistreated her, or even simply failed to release her from her torment, we sense that redemption of the order would not be possible. This is because the order must be redeemed from something deeper than Amfortas's transgression: it must be saved from the primordial sin of the Saviour, and from the knight's woman-reviling collaboration in the Saviour's act of objectifying Kundry.

The sin of objectification manifests itself throughout the order, infecting even the knights' relationship with the Grail itself. They no longer treat it as a sacred item to be revered for its own sake, but rather view it primarily as a means of boosting their vitality and avoiding death. Amfortas has denied them the Grail in the intervening years between the events of Act I and those of Act III, though, and the symbolic head of this objectification of the Grail, Titurel, has died at long last. His ghoulish, undead existence has come to an end, which is perhaps a sign of hope for a new relationship between the knights and the Grail. At the beginning of the final scene of the opera, however, the order is still unredeemed, and this manifests itself in the knights'

aggressive behavior towards Amfortas – they circle him, demanding to see the Grail, and the threat of violence sits heavy in the air. They crave their vitality boost; they want to ensure death is kept at bay.

When Parsifal presides over the opera's final act of Communion, the Grail music is subtly changed; it no longer has the tense, disturbing, ghoulish quality it did before. Its feel is now more genuinely hopeful, raising the possibility that the knights' relationship to the Grail will no longer be as it once was. A further sign of a new future is that, for the first time, someone who beholds the Grail nonetheless dies: Kundry. She 'slowly sinks lifeless to the ground' while Parsifal holds the Grail aloft. While there are many ways to view this event, it raises the possibility that the Grail can no longer be used to stave off death – that was something that occurred only in the order's earlier, unredeemed state. The knights will be forced to alter their relationship with the Grail; they will no longer be able to treat it as a means of quieting their fear of death. The more esoteric meaning of this presents a vision of how man's relationship to the divine must evolve if the divine is to be truly salvific. Man cannot simply transfer his earthly desires to the heavenly realm if he is to achieve true salvation. Spiritual materialism must be rejected, and the divine must be approached on its own terms, as a whole and perfect end.

Kundry's presence in this final scene also signifies other changes in the order. For the first time, a woman is present when the Grail is disclosed. She enters their inner sanctum and beholds the Grail they are charged to tend. Man and woman are no longer kept artificially apart from each other. The curse on the feminine is now broken – man is no longer bound to objectify her, and so man and woman can intermingle without sin. The original rift is healed; the sexes are united in their redemption.

Notes

1. I am extremely grateful to Andy Hamilton, Andrew Huddleston, Mark Johnston, Alexander Nehamas, Jan Perkins, and Nick Zangwill for their helpful comments. The greatest debt of gratitude is, of course, owed to Roger Scruton, whose brilliant work on Wagner forms the foundations of this essay.
2. That Brunnhilde rather than Siegfried is the *Ring*'s central redemptive figure seems to me quite obvious, and it is an interesting question why so many commentators have missed this. Warren Darcy – to pick just one example – describes Siegfried as 'the gods' redeemer' in his 'The Metaphysics of Annihilation: Wagner, Schopenhauer, and the Ending of the Ring',

Music Theory Spectrum 16(1), 1994, pp. 1–40. Scruton himself seems to adhere to a similar view in his *Lectures on Wagner's Ring* (Council of Humanities Lecture Series, Princeton University). It is not that these commentators offer *arguments* that Siegfried rather than Brunnhilde must be the central salvific figure; they simply assume without argument that it must be so. (That Wagner himself may have been under a similar illusion is no great defense – the operas speak for themselves.) One notable exception in this regard is J. Wentzel van Huyssteen ('Building Effective Bridges to Culture: God and Redemption in the Work of Richard Wagner', in P. Middleton (ed.), *The God of Love and Human Dignity: Essays in Honor of George M. Newlands* (London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2007).

3. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of the *Ring* are by Lionel Salter and William Mann.
4. For an exemplary analysis of the character of Wotan, see work by Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht, *Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner's* Ring (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
5. 'Einen Freien kann ich nicht wollen: für Frickas Knechte kämpfe nun du!' (Act II, Scene II).
6. Translation by Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
7. Wagner wrote that 'their meaning is already expressed with the greatest precision in the effect of the musically sounding drama'. For further discussion, see Warren Darcy's 'The Pessimism of the Ring', *Opera Quarterly* 4(2), 1986, pp. 24–48. (The translation is Darcy's.)
8. 'The Pessimism of the Ring', *Opera Quarterly*, p. 47, fn. 41.
9. 'Und doch, – trüg' ich nicht Gutrun' Treu, – der zieren Frauen eine hätt' ich mir frisch gezähmt!' (*Gotterdammerung*, Act III, Scene I).
10. *Death-Devoted Heart*, p. 145.
11. Gotterdammerung, Act II, Scene IV.
12. *Nietzsche Contra Wagner.*
13. As is made dramatically plain in Hans-Jurgen Syberberg's film *Parsifal,* and in the recent Baden Baden production, under the stage direction of Nikolaus Lehnhoff.
14. All English translations of the *Parsifal* libretto here provided are due to Lionel Salter.
15. Scruton describes such forced prostitution in *Sexual Desire*: The fantasy [described in a passage from *Histoire d'O*] is that of a supremely achieved prostitution, in which the woman does not have even the liberty of refusal – in which the market economy has been replaced by an economy of command. In this achieved prostitution, the woman's spirit is wholly overcome by the force of masculine autocracy. At the same time, however, the command destroys the basis of personal relation, and compels her to attach her interests and her joys to the abstract penis, irrespective of who owns it or why he seeks her submission to it. This is the root fantasy of obscenity, and describes the content of the feat which underlies the paroxysm of shame. As it implies, its enactment involves the abrogation of all individualised feeling in the woman; her enslavement is merely, to use the Marxian language, the 'realised' and 'objective' form of this 'subjective' alienation. (p. 159)

16. In addition to the musical and dramatic clues, the capitalisation pattern in the libretto clearly shows that Kundry is here referring to the Redeemer. The full quote is:

Er – Er -	He – He
der einst mein Lachen bestraft:	who once punished my laughter:
Sein Fluch – ha, – mir gibt er Kraft;	His curse – ha! – gives me strength;

Both occurrences of 'Er' are capitalised, as is 'Sein' in the third line. (Other words occurring in comparable grammatical positions throughout the libretto are not capitalised.) The capitals are often not preserved in the English translations, but this, I think, obscures an important point.