Richard Wagner on Suffering and the Problem of Evil

1. Wagner as theologian

Richard Wagner (1813-83) made a significant contribution to theology. One way of accounting for this is that he read the great dramatists and poets such as Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Schiller; he read philosophers such as Plato, Hegel, and Schopenhauer; he read the great works of medieval literature (e.g. Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*; Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*); he knew his New Testament and he took a keen interest in theologians such as Luther and in recent theological developments. All this he internalised and then metamorphized to create his own stage works, employing his artistic sensibilities. Creating them involved working on pre-existing material, forging his own version of the story (e.g. *Tristan*, *Parsifal*), composing his own libretti, some of which can stand alone as works of great poetry, working out the stage direction and sets, and of course composing the music whose relation to the poetry is thoroughly thought through.[1]

One aspect of his creative genius is addressing and reflecting on suffering and the problem of evil. But this is no conventional way of addressing the issues. As we shall see he can relate the deepest understanding of suffering to kissing a beautiful woman as in *Parsifal* Act II; indeed suffering, the quest for knowledge, coming to maturity, and the 'erotic' are all inextricably intertwined for Wagner. He presents a complex and nuanced picture of suffering and evil. Although there are a few characters who are completely evil (one could name Ortrud, Hunding, and Hagen, all of whom call on the 'pagan' gods), Wagner usually presents 'evil' characters with some sympathy (e.g. Alberich, Klingsor). One of his finest presentations of evil entering the world is in *Rhinegold* Scene 1, where 'fall' does not occur by some outside agency but by an imminent process; so the Rhinemaidens have a certain 'innocence' but also a certain seductiveness to which Alberich succumbs.[2]

Suffering and the problem of evil is a theme found to a greater or lesser extent in every stage work of the so-called Wagnerian canon of ten works (that is the works from *The Flying Dutchman* through to *Parsifal*). I will discuss all these stage works (in roughly chronological order) but I will focus on the later artworks which, I think, portray suffering in its most profound form: first, *The Valkyrie* and *Twilight of the Gods*, these being the second and fourth operas of the *Ring of the Nibelung*; second, two works which are very much related, *Tristan and Isolde*, and *Parsifal*.

2 *The Flying Dutchman*; *Tannhäuser*; *Lohengrin*

The first three operas of the Wagnerian canon were products of the 1840s. Suffering in the *The Flying Dutchman* (1841) is evident in the tormented figure of the Dutchman, doomed to sail the seas but who has the opportunity to land every seven years in search of a woman who, if faithful, will redeem him. The Dutchman is like 'Ahasuerus', a 'wandering Jew', a

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[1] Wagner held no consistent understanding on this but two examples are worth mentioning. In his 'Opera and Drama' (1851) music is related to the poetry as a sexual union (*Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Volume II: Opera and Drama*, translated by William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 235-36; *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen von Richard Wagner*, 10 vols (Leipzig: E.W. Fritzsch, 1897), 4:102-3). In a later work, 'On the Name Musikdrama' (1872), music is seen as the fundamental driving force such that his dramas were '*deeds of music that have become visible*' (*Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Volume V: Actors and Singers*, translated by William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 303 (translation modified); *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 9:306).

[2] The process at work corresponds to Hegel's 'diremption' or 'bifurcation' ('Entzweiung'). Cf. Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 36-37.

figure with whom Wagner himself identified;[3] strange though this may appear for an antisemite, it makes sense of the composer who was certainly a 'wanderer' for a significant part of his life, frequently having to flee his creditors, and living in exile for thirteen years, having been banned from Germany because of his part in the Dresden revolution of 1849. The major source of suffering in *Flying Dutchman* is Satan, and it is significant that of the fifteen occurrences of the word 'Satan' and derivatives I have located in Wagner's extant works and writings, six are in *Flying Dutchman*.[4] The redeeming woman, Senta, although having some resemblances to Gretchen of Goethe's Faust,[5] certainly does not share her innocence or naïvety, and it is ironic that she could be considered to have what one could call 'diabolical' characteristics.[6] The work ends in a dramatic but also beautiful resolution: the Dutchman departs in his ship, believing himself to be eternally damned; but Senta jumps from a cliff into the sea whereby the Dutchman's ship sinks; then the stage direction tells us '[i]n the glow of the rising sun, the transfigured forms of the Dutchman and Senta, clasped in each other's arms, are seen rising over the wreck and soaring into the sky'.

His next stage work, *Tannhäuser* (1845), also concerns the redemption of a sinful man by a woman, but this time it is the simple saintly figure of Elizabeth (based on Elizabeth of Thuringia) rather than the complex Senta of the previous opera. The work lacks the sense of existential anxiety we find in the *Dutchman* and was revised for performances in Paris (1861) and Vienna (1875) and just three weeks before Wagner died he expressed his dissatisfaction, telling his wife Cosima that 'he still owes the world *Tannhäuser*'.[7] But whatever problems one finds with the work it nevertheless expresses fresh aspects of suffering. Two sources of suffering come from two polar opposite figures: Venus and the Pope. Although it may be questioned whether the sensuous and 'pornographic' pleasures of the Venusberg count as 'suffering', Tannhäuser clearly finds the whole place oppressive, disorienting, and without any sense of time or the seasons. He longs to feel the sunshine, to glimpse the stars, and hear the nightingale (Act I Scene 2). Act III Scene 2 expresses another type of 'hell': despite begging for forgiveness the unmerciful Pope declares that just as his staff will never blossom, so Tannhäuser will never find forgiveness. However, the power of Elizabeth's prayer is such that 'the staff has put forth leaves of freshest green'.[8]

Of all the stage works it is the next, *Lohengrin* (1848), that presents the most devastating ending. Whereas in other stage works redemption is achieved, *Lohengrin* is a story of failed redemption. Although the work superficially suggests that the knight from the realm of the Holy Grail, Lohengrin, is sent to redeem a woman in distress, Elsa, the whole point is rather the reverse: she is meant to redeem Lohengrin, who is seeking to become fully human through marriage. Evil is represented by the figure of Ortrud, a worshipper of the pagan Germanic gods Wodan and Freia. Through her work she destroys not only what could have been a happy marriage but also destroys Lohengrin's hopes of 'incarnation'. This points to a key theological theme in Wagner that the divine has to find human form.

3. *Jesus of Nazareth* and the *Ring*

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[3] Martin Dürrer (ed.), *Richard Wagner: Sämtliche Briefe, Band 11* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1999), 137.
[4] Wagner's preferred term for the adversary is 'Teufel' ('devil'); I have found over 600 occurrences of 'Teufel' and derivatives in Wagner's extant works and writings.
[5] John Deathridge, 'Pale Senta', *Opera Quarterly* 21.3 (2005) 452-64.
[6] Daniel Albright, 'The Diabolical Senta', *Opera Quarterly* 21.3 (2005) 465-85.
[7] *Cosima Wagner's Diaries, Volume II*, edited by Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, translated by Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt Brace Jonanovich, 1977), entry for 23 January 1883.
[8] Translation of Rodney Blumer, in *Tannhäuser: Richard Wagner* (London: John Calder), 93.

This theme of the divine finding human form was a central point in Wagner's projected opera *Jesus of Nazareth* (1849). This was never completed and had it been it may well have been in the style of *Lohengrin*, including great choruses (the one musical sketch happens to be found on the reverse side of a sheet from the score of *Lohengrin*). Although it was never completed the material did not go to waste for much of it ended up on the stage of the *Ring* cycle, a work that occupied him on and off for 26 years (1848-74).

The most significant theological aspect of the *Jesus of Nazareth* sketches and the *Ring* is the 'death of God'. Jesus' death comes about because of his love for humankind. The death of the Valkyrie Brünnhilde in the *Ring* comes about in a similar way. The second opera of the *Ring* is called *The Valkyrie* because the opera revolves around the fact that this young woman for the first time in her life observes and is overcome by the sacrificial nature of true erotic love. This is the love between the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde, children of the god Wotan and a mortal woman. They have been separated after birth, Sieglinde is forced into a loveless marriage with Hunding, but Wotan has seen to it that the twins meet and he blesses their union. Wotan himself is trapped in a loveless marriage with Fricka and in fact Wagner sees their 'mutual torment of a loveless union' as 'the germ of […] evil'.[9] Fricka forces Wotan to see to it that in the combat between Siegmund and Hunding that the wronged husband prevails. Brünnhilde reluctantly sets out to call Siegmund to Valhalla, knowing that this contradicts Wotan's own wishes but nevertheless thinking that he will relish the joys of everlasting bliss. She is dumbfounded that he refuses to follow her to Valhalla simply because he does not wish to be separated from Sieglinde. But soon after Brünnhilde comes to a realisation of the power of their love. She decides to disobey her father and is intent that Siegmund should live. But the battle does not go according to her plan for Wotan intervenes and arranges that 'his only son' (cf. John 3.16),[10] Siegmund, falls. Wotan's suffering is essentially of his own making and it only intensifies when in the final scene he punishes his daughter. He tells Brünnhilde that she will lose her Valkyrie status, and will never ride again with her father; she will now become 'incarnate', deprived of her divinity, and is to be put to sleep and be vulnerable to the hero who will eventually awaken her. In this scene one feels it is Wotan who is the one who suffers most as he prophesies: 'On a happier man / [the stars of her eyes] shall shine: / on the hapless immortal [Wotan] / they must close in parting!'[11] The irony of this scene is that it precipitates the end of the gods: power is going to move from the gods to Brünnhilde and her awakener, Siegfried. But by time we reach the final opera of the *Ring*, *Twilight of the Gods* (*Götterdämmerung*), matters do not go well for the two lovers and Brünnhilde is betrayed and comes to be 'god-forsaken'.[12]

Towards the end of *Twilight of the Gods* Brünnhilde comes to understand all that has happened, including her betrayal by Siegfried, and the work ends on a 'theodicy'. Brünnhilde recovers her divinity and offers her life as a redemptive sacrifice. Her death is the 'death of God'. It can be said to be modelled on the death of Christ in the proposed opera *Jesus of Nazareth*. Just as Jesus' spirit is given to the community at the end of the *Jesus* sketches, so

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[9] Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (ed.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (New York/London: W.W. Norton, 1987), 307; Hans-Joachim Bauer and Johannes Forner (ed.), *Richard Wagner: Sämtliche Briefe, Band 6* (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1986), 67 (letter to August Röckel, 25/26 January 1854).

[10] Whereas in the Norse sources Odin has many sons, Wagner presents Wotan (Odin's equivalent) as having just one son.

[11] Translation of Stewart Spencer in Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (ed.), *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 191.

[12] Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, 310; Bauer and Forner, *Sämtliche Briefe 6*, 71.

Brünnhilde's spirit fills the cosmos. The close of *Twilight of the Gods* is ambiguous and deliberately so but one way to understand what happens after the curtain goes down is that a new heaven and a new earth come into being (cf. Revelation 21.1). Wagner's theodicy, despite his unconventional Christian views, corresponds to much found in the Christian tradition.

4. *Tristan and Isolde*; *Parsifal*

The close of *Twilight of the Gods* is dramatically powerful but one wonders whether it has satisfactorily dealt with the problem of suffering. The world is redeemed and reborn but one could say there is something unrealistic about the way Brünnhilde courageously goes to her death.

The answer to the existential anguish of suffering is, I suggest, to be found in two other operas, *Tristan* (1859) and *Parsifal* (1882). To some extent Wagner's more profound depiction of suffering can be attributed to the deeper understanding of Schopenhauer he gained in 1852-54 and after.[13] Schopenhauer has coloured certain scenes of the *Ring* which were revised after Wagner read his work, one of which is *Siegfried* Act III Scene 1, where we find Wotan as the Wanderer, looking to 'the end of the gods' ('Der götter ende') 'in gladness and joy',[14] reflecting Schopenhauer's idea of renunciation. But both *Tristan* and *Parsifal* have a far stronger Schopenhauerian colouring, the vast amount of work being done on these works after 1852. But I think there were also other factors informing his understanding of suffering: his growing sense of despair during the years of exile (1849-63), his disappointments in love (especially regarding the unattainable Mathilde Wesendonck), his deteriorating health, and the growing appreciation of the suffering God.

One of the most devastating experiences in the theatre is *Tristan* Act III. Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck: 'Child! This Tristan is turning into something terrible! This final act!!! – – – – – – – I fear the opera will be banned – unless the whole thing is parodied in a bad performance –: only a mediocre performance can save me!'[15] It is in Act III that Wagner presents what I consider to be his most powerful portrayal of suffering such that one needs a fairly strong constitution to cope with the agony of Tristan. 'Against the fearful torture / of my agonies / what balm / could bring me relief?'[16] Nietzsche claimed that it was not so much the words or images that were devastating but rather the music. Indeed he argued myth 'shields us from music'. Alluding to Schopenhauer he wrote: 'How could anyone fail to be shattered immediately, having once put their ear to the heart of the universal Will, so to speak, and felt the raging desire for existence pour forth into all the arteries of the world as a thundering torrent or as the finest spray of a stream?'[17] It is in experiencing true musical

[13] Many argue for a 'discovery' of Schopenhauer in the Autumn of 1854. I date his reading of Schopenhauer for the first time in 1852 (Richard H. Bell, *Theology of Wagner's Ring I* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 238-45) and in fact he most likely knew something of Schopenhauer's ideas back in the early 1840s evidenced by his 1841 novella *A Happy Evening* (*Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Volume VII: In Paris and Dresden*, translated by William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 81; *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*,1:148.
[14] The re-worked libretto of 1852 (quoted in Bell, *Ring I*, 247).
[15] Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, 452; Wolfgang Golther (ed.), *Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendonk: Tagebuchblätter und Briefe 1853-1871* (Berlin: Duncker, 1908), 123 (letter of mid-April 1859).
[16] 'Libretto for Tristan and Isolde,' translated by Lionel Salter, in Booklet accompanying the Compact Disk recording, conducted by Leonard Bernstein, Philips, 1993, 141.
[17] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (CTHP; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 100-1; *Friedrich Nietzsche: Die Geburt der Tragödie;*

tragedy that one is 'elevated to a kind of omniscience, as if the visual power of his eyes were not merely a power to attend to surfaces, but as if it were capable of penetrating to the interior, as if, with the help of music, he were now able to see before him, in sensuously visible form, so to speak, the undulations of the Will, the conflict of motives, the swelling current of passions, and as if he could dive down into the most delicate secrets of unconscious stirrings.'[18] Nietzsche's analysis of *Tristan*, based on Apolline and Dionysiac imagery (which Wagner had actually introduced earlier),[19] brings us to the essence of what he called 'the actual *opus metaphysicum* of all art',[20] a work that can be unbearably painful to experience but which at the same time enables one to plumb the depth of the world, even down to the 'noumenon', which Wagner and the Nietzsche of the *Birth of Tragedy*, following Schopenhauer, identified with the world as 'will'.

Wagner's answer to the problem of evil in this drama (he calls is not an 'Oper' but a 'Handlung', literally an 'action') was that with death the lovers are reunited as they enter the world of the noumenon, where space, time, and causality do not apply. As Isolde hints at the close of Act II: 'Now you lead the way to your own land / to show me your heritage: / how could I flee from the land / that spans the whole world? / Isolde will dwell / where Tristan's house and home is: / now show Isolde the way that, / loyal and gracious, / she must follow'.[21] But it is important to stress that Wagner deals with the problem of suffering by transcending Schopenhauer. The lovers are not enveloped in some world of non-individuation as a Schopenhaurian analysis would suggest; rather they are reunited as individuals in the world beyond.

The opera that presents the most profound insight into suffering is his final stage work *Parsifal*. Wagner even went to the point of saying this concerning the suffering of Amfortas (Anfortas) in *Parsifal*: 'It suddenly became dreadfully clear to me: it is my third-act Tristan inconceivably intensified. With the spear wound and perhaps another wound, too–in his heart–, the wretched man knows of no other longing in his terrible pain than the longing to die.'[22] Whether this is what the one experiencing the work perceives is open to debate (as mentioned above I find Tristan's suffering the most unbearable). But the work can be said to portray suffering from the very beginning, namely the Prelude to Act I.[23]

Whereas in *Tristan* the suffering comes about because of an exalted and sacrificial sense of erotic love, in *Parsifal* suffering, at least for Klingsor and Amfortas, comes about because of some form of sexual misadventure. Klingsor tells of his 'hell-inspired impulse' (sexual urge)

Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen I-IV; Nachgelassene Schriften 1870-1873, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 135 (§21).

[18] Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 104; *Geburt der Tragödie; Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen I-IV*, 140 (§22).

[19] See 'The Destiny of Opera' (1871) (*Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Volume V*, 138-39; *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 9:137-38).

[20] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, edited by Daniel Breazeale (CTHP; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 232 ('Richard Wagner in Bayreuth', §8); *Friedrich Nietzsche: Die Geburt der Tragödie; Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen I-IV*, 479.

[21] Salter, 'Tristan and Isolde,' 130.

[22] Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, 457; Dürrer, *Sämtliche Briefe 11*, 104 (letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, 30 May 1859).

[23] The opening slow motif contains elements related to suffering (see Richard Bell, *Wagner's Parsifal. An Appreciation in the Light of His Theological Journey* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 96). It could be said that pain is especially evident in bars 28-33, where the main opening theme occurs in a minor key, being played by violins, trumpet, and three oboes. For a guide to the musical themes of *Parsifal*, see Lionel Friend, 'Thematic Guide,' in *Parsifal: Overture Opera Guides* (London: Oneworld Classis, 2001), 95-104.

which he 'throttled to deathly silence' (i.e. he castrated himself).[24] Kundry suffers because she laughed at the crucified Christ and although I think there is no sexual element here, she is named 'Herodias' and 'rose of hell' both of which could imply a perverted sexual attitude. She tells Parsifal: 'If you knew the curse / which afflicts me, asleep and awake, / in death and life, / pain and laughter, / newly steeled to new affliction, / endlessly through this existence!'[25] Amfortas falls and suffers because he was seduced by Kundry. He, like Tristan, longs to die but cannot. In his final despair in Act III he cries 'Already I feel the darkness of death enshroud me, / and must I yet again return to life? / Madmen! / Who would force me to live? / Could you but grant me death!'[26] But the key figure of suffering is the one who never appears on stage: the suffering figure of Jesus Christ. He is never named as such but is referred to as the 'redeemer', 'saviour', 'He on the cross,' or simply 'Him'. One of the most profound commentaries on *Parsifal* is Wagner's 1880 essay *Religion and Art*. He writes that Christ's body 'stretched out upon the cross of pain and suffering' was an 'image (Bild), a real copy (wirkliches Abbild) of the divine'.[27] Christ being such an 'Abbild' of the divine parallels Schopenhauer's idea that music is an 'Abbild' of the world-will.[28] Hence Christ crucified is not a symbol depicting reality but rather is reality itself. And in *Parsifal* the 'Schopenhauerian night' of *Tristan and Isolde* whereby the lovers enter the world of the 'noumenon' becomes the 'Christian night' of holy communion.[29]

Parsifal is in fact linked to *Tristan* in a number of ways. In an early sketch Parsifal was to visit the suffering Tristan in Act III, an idea Wagner later abandoned. The two works are linked by a variety of means and one way is through the 'cup of suffering'. Tristan's agony is the love potion which in Act III he calls '[t]he terrible draught!' He tells Kurwenal: 'How madly it surged / from heart to brain! / No healing, / no sweet death, / can ever free me / from the pain of yearning.'[30] For Amfortas, though, the cup is the Grail, which functions to give him solace but at the same time prolongs and indeed intensifies his unbearable suffering. As Wagner explains to Mathilde Wesendonck: 'in order to retain this supreme solace, [Anfortas] demands repeatedly to be allowed a glimpse of the Grail in the hope that it might at least close his wounds, for everything else is useless, nothing – nothing can help him: – but the Grail can give him one thing only, which is precisely that he *cannot* die; its very sight increases his torments by conferring immortality upon him'.[31] The Grail in Wagner's sources was a dish (Chrétien de Troyes) or a magic stone (Wolfram von Eschenbach) which the composer christianises and he elaborates its significance as follows: 'The Grail, according to my own interpretation, is the goblet used at the Last Supper, in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the saviour's blood on the cross. What terrible significance the connexion between Anfortas and this miraculous chalice now acquires; *he*, infected by the same wound as was

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[24] 'Parsifal Libretto,' translated by Lionel Salter, in *Parsifal: Overture Opera Guides* (London: Oneworld Classis, 2001), 163.
[25] Salter, 'Parsifal Libretto,' 199.
[26] Salter, 'Parsifal Libretto,' 233.
[27] *Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Volume VI: Religion and Art*, translated by William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 217 (translation modified); *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 10:215.
[28] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Volume I*, translated by E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 257; Wolfgang von Löhneysen (ed.), *Arthur Schopenhauer Sämtliche Werke I: Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung I* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004), 359.
[29] The stage direction for Act I bars 1445-46 is: 'While Amfortas bows devoutly in silent prayer before the chalice, an increasingly dark twilight extends over the hall.' Then at bars 1456-57: 'Beginning of complete darkness.'
[30] 'Tristan and Isolde', 141. On this passage see Eric Chafe. *The Tragic and the Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 258.
[31] Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, 457; Dürrer, *Sämtliche Briefe 11*, 104 (letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, 30 May 1859).

dealt him by a rival's spear in a passionate love intrigue, – his only solace lies in the benediction of the blood that once flowed from the Saviour's own, similar, spear-wound as He languished upon the Cross, world-renouncing, world-redeeming, and world-suffering!'[32] I suggest that this language of the cup in both *Parsifal* and *Tristan* alludes to the 'cup of suffering' of which Christ speaks in the Gethsemane scene of the synoptic gospels.[33] Examining this we can perceive a shift in Wagner's view of the Gethsemane scene. In his *Jesus of Nazareth* sketches Wagner tends to follow John's Gospel which presents a Jesus largely in control of events.[34] Likewise at the end of *Twilight of the Gods* Brünnhilde faces her death with similar unrealistic courage. However, the references to the cup of suffering in *Tristan* and *Parsifal* reflect the suffering Christ whom we know from the synoptic gospels.[35]

If *Parsifal* is to be seen as Wagner's 'third-act Tristan inconceivably intensified', then I suggest it is best seen in the way Wagner presents the whole of the created order participating in the sufferings of Christ. According to notes made by Heinrich Porges during rehearsals for *Parsifal*, Wagner said that with Parsifal's words 'O torment of love' ('Oh! Qual der Liebe'), uttered after Kundry kisses him: 'Now all at once Parsifal sees how the whole world is a sacrificial slaughter'.[36] Wagner therefore brings together knowledge of suffering with the sexual urge that accompanies kissing a beautiful woman. Very much at the centre of his view of suffering was that of animals, and Parsifal's shooting of the swan in *Parsifal* Act I and Gurnemanz' extended rebuke is a powerful reminder of Wagner's care for animals. He attempted vegetarianism in his later life and one reason he despised Judaism was his understanding of how the tradition viewed and treated animals.[37] He writes about the suffering of animals in his open letter against vivisection and it is significant that this is his most systematic writing about the atoning death of Christ. 'The monstrous guilt of all this life a divine and sinless being took upon himself, and expiated with his agony and death. Through this atonement (Sühnungstod) all that breathes and lives should know itself redeemed, so soon as it was grasped as pattern and example to be followed.'[38]

5. An answer to evil and suffering?

Wagner is certainly extremely skilled in *presenting* the problem of suffering in his stage works. The question is though whether he is able to *address* the problem of suffering and evil. I have already hinted at some ways he does this but I now deal with this more systematically. One key theological point in Wagner's stage works, articles, letters, and diaries, is the focus on the God who suffers, namely the figure of the crucified Christ. Here

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[32] Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, 457 (translation modified); Dürrer, *Sämtliche Briefe 11*, 104-5.
[33] Luther's translation has 'Kelch' for 'cup'; Isolde refers to the cup as 'Schale' (Salter, 'Tristan and Isolde,' 89) and in *Parsifal* the terms for the grail are 'Gral', 'Kelch', 'Krystalschale' ('crystal vessel'), and 'Heilsgefäß' ('sacred vessel') (Salter, 'Parsifal', 148-49, 194-95).
[34] Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM, 1989), 71, notes how John 12:27 directly contradicts the Gethsemane account in Mark. So in Mark 14:34 Jesus says 'I am deeply grieved, even to death' and in 14:36 asks 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want.' But in John 12:27-28a Jesus says 'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – "Father, save me from this hour?" No it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father glorify your name.'
[35] Although a later addition to the Gospel, Wagner would know a text such as Luke 22.44 from his Luther bible: 'In [Jesus'] anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling on the ground'.
[36] See Martin Geck and Egos Voss (ed.), *Dokumente zur Entstehung und ersten Aufführung des Bühnenweihfestspiels Parsifal* (Mainz: B. Schott, 1970), 203.
[37] Wagner went as far as attributing the negative treatment of animals in Germany largely to the Pentateuch. See *Richard Wagner's Prose Works VI*, 199, 203; *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 10:198, 202.
[38] *Richard Wagner's Prose Works VI*, 203; *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 10:202.

he is influenced by Luther and by Hegel's idea of the death of God. One of the clearest instances of this in his prose is a letter to Ludwig II on 14 April 1865 which deserves to be quoted at length. 'Today is Good Friday again! – O, blessèd day! Most deeply portentous day in the world! Day of redemption! God's suffering!! Who can grasp the enormity of it? And yet, this same ineffable mystery – is it not the most familiar of humankind's secrets? God, the Creator, – he must remain totally unintelligible to the world: – God, the loving teacher, is dearly belovèd, but not understood: – but the God who suffers (Gott der Leidende), His name is inscribed in our hearts in letters of fire; all the obstinacy of existence is washed away by our immense pain at seeing God suffering (Gott im Leiden zu sehen)! The teaching which we could not take in (Die Lehre, die wir nicht *begreiffen*), it now takes hold of us (sie *ergreift* jetzt uns): God within us, – the world has been overcome (überwunden)! Who created it? An idle question! Who overcame it? God within our hearts, – God whom we comprehend in the deepest anguish of fellow-suffering (der im tiefsten Schmerz des Mitgefühles *begriffene* Gott)!'[39]

In this passage two fundamental theological elements can be discerned. The first is the Hegelian idea of the death of God, which was a development of Luther's idea of the suffering God. Wagner may be alluding to a passage in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a work he read (most likely in 1846). In the third part of chapter 7 Hegel writes of 'manifest religion' and in §784 there is a word play on Begreiffen/Ergreiffen which, as in Wagner's letter to Ludwig, occurs in the context of the death of Christ. This section and the next one (§785) may well have informed Wagner's understanding of the death of Christ and the parallel death of Brünnhilde. So first in § 784 Hegel writes: 'Comprehension (Begreiffen) is, therefore, for that self-consciousness not a grasping of this [concept] which knows superseded natural existence to be universal and therefore reconciled with itself; but rather a grasping (Ergreiffen) of the imaginative idea, that by bringing to pass its own externalisation, in its historical incarnation and death, the divine Being has been reconciled with its [natural] existence. The grasping (Ergreiffen) of this idea now expresses more definitely what was previously called the spiritual resurrection in this same context, i.e. the coming into existence of God's individual self-consciousness as a universal self-consciousness, or as the religious community. The *death* of the divine [Human], *as death*, is *abstract* negativity, the immediate result of the movement which ends only in *natural* universality. Death loses its natural meaning in spiritual self-consciousness, i.e. it comes to be its just stated [concept]; death becomes transfigured from its immediate meaning, viz. the non-being of this *particular* individual, into the *universality* of the Spirit who dwells in His community, dies in it every day, and is daily resurrected.'[40] In the next section (§785) Hegel then takes up an idea he had earlier introduced of the death of God (§§753, 763) and quotes a line from Johann Rist's passion hymn 'O Traurigkeit, O Herzeleid' ('O Great Woe, O Heart's Pain'):[41] 'Gott selbst liegt tot' ('God Himself is dead').[42] Hegel's logic is taken up by Wagner in that with the death of God as the death of Christ (or Brünnhilde) we have a 'resurrection as Spirit',[43] such Spirit being at work within our hearts and within the community.

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[39] Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, 641-42 (translation modified); Otto Strobel (ed.), *König Ludwig II. und Richard Wagner: Briefwechsel, Band I* (Karlsruhe: G. Braun, 1936), 82.
[40] A.V. Miller (ed.), *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 475 (§784) (translation modified); G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, edited by Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1999), 418.
[41] The first verse was composed by Friedrich von Spee (1628) and verses 2-8 by added by Johann Rist (1641).
[42] Miller, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, 476; §785; Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 419.
[43] Miller, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, 471; §779; Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 415.

The second theological element that can be discerned in this letter to Ludwig is Wagner's own idea of suffering with Christ and union with Christ in his suffering. This is a key theme in *Parsifal* and Wagner provides another link to *Tristan and Isolde*. The very first chord in the work, the so-called 'Tristan chord' (F B D sharp G sharp), evokes the union of the two lovers and recurs throughout the whole opera. In *Parsifal* exactly the same chord occurs when Kundry kisses Parsifal in Act II; but, perhaps rather surprisingly, it is also used in relation to union with Christ. In Act II Kundry relates how she laughed at Christ. After the words 'I saw Him … Him … / and laughed … / His gaze fell upon me!' ('Ich sah Ihn … Ihn … / und lachte … / Da traf mich sein Blick!') the four trombones play almost imperceptibly the Tristan chord. The word 'Blick' ('look') also provides a link to *Tristan* where such a 'Blick' is central for the union of the lovers; indeed in *Parsifal* Act II as Kundry sings 'sein Blick' the cellos play precisely the two same notes used in the Tristan prelude (A sharp to B) to represent the lovers' 'Blick'.[44] Another significant use of the chord is in the Good Friday music of Act III when immediately before Gurnemanz sings 'Him Himself on the cross can she [nature] not see' the timpani and double basses play F B and flutes and oboes etc play D sharp and G sharp. In the Good Friday music Gurnemanz makes clear that the death of Christ issues in the redemption of the whole created order, to some extent reflecting Romans 8.21-22. But Wagner can be said to make a more organic connection between the redemption of human beings and the subsequent redemption of creation. The Good Friday music follows directly from Kundry's baptism and faith in Christ. Since, according to Schopenhauer, 'The world is my representation (Vorstellung)',[45] Kundry's renewed mind can be seen as forming a renewed creation.

6. Wagner as suffering man

Wagner certainly enjoyed undoubted joys and successes although what are often considered successes (such as the first Bayreuth festival of 1876 with the three performances of the entire *Ring* cycle) were also unbearably painful for him. But much of his life was plagued by money worries, anguish in matters of love, and despair concerning his public career. Then he was dogged by ill health such as erysipelas (a skin problem visible in some photographs) and especially later by angina pectoris where in these attacks 'his face suddenly turned blue, he fell with heart spasms on the sofa, and made violent movements with his hands as though wrestling with an invisible enemy'.[46] But despite these problems and despite his love of Schopenhauer, the so-called 'philosopher of pessimism',[47] he had a remarkably positive outlook on life and many relate what good company he was! The close of his operas, all of which end on a major chord, point to a future hope. Even *Lohengrin*, despite the desperate ending with Elsa falling 'lifeless' ('entseelt') to the ground and Lohengrin leaving unredeemed, does offer a future hope for the people of Brabant in the figure of Gottfried; and it is worth emphasising that although this work and others can be called 'tragedies', the

[44] Bell, *Parsifal*, 95, presents the annotated music.
[45] Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation I*, 1; *Welt als Wille und Vorstellung I*, 31.
[46] C.F. Glasenapp, *Das Leben Richard Wagners, Sechster Band* (Liechtenstein: Sändig, 1977), 647, referring to the witness of Emil Scaria (who sang Gurnemanz in *Parsifal*).
[47] See Frederick Copelston, *Arthur Schopenhauer: Philosopher of Pessimism* (London: Search/New York: Harper & Row, 1975 (second edition)).

ending is not necessarily 'tragic'.[48] Indeed the *Ring* can be understood as an 'optimistic tragedy'.[49]

Wagner not only suffered a great deal; he was also responsible for the suffering of others.[50] One example is the set of circumstances in which he entered his second marriage to Cosima von Bülow. There is also the difficult matter of his antisemitism, something that is integrally incorporated into the one mature work I have not yet mentioned, *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. This was originally conceived as a 'comic opera'[51] and in its final form can still be experienced as such. But laughter not only restores and heals; it can also function to 'ostracize and wound'.[52] The figure of Beckmesser, modelled on Eduard Hanslick, the Viennese music critic who had turned against Wagner, is a figure of ridicule: he is a failed singer, a failed lover, and a social outcast.[53] Although Hanslick considered himself Catholic, Wagner played on the fact that his mother was Jewish. Although Wagner's attack on Hanslick could be understandable as a response to Hanslick's series of explicit negative reviews of Wagner from 1858, the ridicule of the 'Jewish' figure of Beckmesser is cruel and casts a shadow over what is otherwise a work full of love, human warmth, and joy. But Wagner's antisemitism should not, in my view, disqualify him as one of the greatest artists of all time who engages with theology through his artworks and thereby addresses the deepest matters of suffering and the problem of evil.[54]

For further reading:

Primary texts

Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Volume VI: Religion and Art, translated by William Ashton Ellis. New York: Broude Brothers, 1966.
Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (ed.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*. New York/London: W.W. Norton, 1987.

Secondary literature

Richard H. Bell. *Wagner's Parsifal. An Appreciation in the Light of His Theological Journey*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013.
Richard H. Bell. *Theology of Wagner's Ring Cycle*. 2 vols. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020.
Eric Chafe. *The Tragic and the Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

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[48] See, e.g., Hegel's comments that the *Eumenides*, the final play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, 'does not end with the death of Orestes or the discomforture of the Eumenides' (*Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T.M. Knox, Volume II (Oxford: Clarendon, 2019), 1218; G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik III*, edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2018), 550).

[49] Cf. Wolfgang Perschmann, *Richard Wagner: 'Der Ring des Nibelungen'. Die optimistische Tragödie* (Graz: Österreicher Richard-Wagner-Gesellschaft, 1986).

[50] It is worth adding that I consider the popular image of Wagner as a particularly wicked person to be unfair. The degree to which he was responsible for the suffering of others can no doubt be matched and indeed overtaken by the lives of some Christian theologians and Church leaders; and at least Wagner made no pretence of personal piety.

[51] Originally it was to be a 'comic opera' ('Komische Oper') then a 'Great Comic Opera' ('Große komische Oper')

[52] Klaus van den Berg, 'Die Meistersinger as Comedy: The Performative and Social Signification of Genre,' in Nicolas Vazsonyi (ed.), *Wagner's Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation* (Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 163.

[53] Berg, 'Meistersinger,' 161.

[54] I am grateful to Roger Allen and Lionel Friend for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.