Wagner Society of New South Wales
***Amfortas! Die Wunde* … Two Wounded Disciples'.**
Christopher Cook

Thank you Ross. You and I met as all Wagnerians should at. Bayreuth during a Ring Cycle and the company was excellent even if the events on stage were by turn puzzling and often pedestrian. So you might say '***Amfortas! Die Wunde* … Two Wounded Disciples'.** I'm going to explore my own reactions to that pair of wounded protagonists in Wagner's final work, Amfortas and Klingsor. But you will have noticed that I have used the word 'disciple' to describe them. What particularly interests me about Parsifal is it's relationship to Christianity, and in particular to Christian beliefs in the later nineteenth century

I should begin by saying that I am not a musicologist though I hope that my ears are attuned to musical structures and compositional processes. Neither am I a Wagner Scholar, though I have been completely absorbed by both the man and his music for over half a century since I first heard *Siegfried i*n my early twenties in a legendary production of The Ring by English National Opera in London, with Reginald Goodall in the Pitt and Norman Bailey as Wotan, Alberto Remedios, Siegfried, and the redoubtable Rita Hunter who ended her career with you in Australia as Brünnhilde

I am a cultural historian, by which I mean I ask myself why cultural things happen in certain ways at certain times. Or to put it rather grandly how cultural production is rooted in its own age, how a piece of music, a drama, a novel, a poem or a painting belong to a specific historical era - its social as well as its cultural practice, its ideologies, and its politics and economics. But there is another strand to my enquires. How do we in the here and now read a work from another era. I am interested in the creative tension between what was made in the past and what we see and hear in the present, how a work of art is always refracted through the prism of our own age.

Ever since Wieland Wagner parked the traditional horned helmets, flying horses, ram-drawn cart and the rolling Rhine at Bayreuth, every truly satisfying production of Wagner's music dramas has found its place on this continuum from past to present. And that's what I should like to explore in this talk, or rather one specific aspect of the composer's last work, namely the post-Christian world of Parsifal, which is undoubtedly more post-Christian for many people nowadays than it was at the end of the nineteenth century.

However, firstly I want to touch on two aspects of nineteenth century Christian practice that we might think about before we

meet *Der reine Tor*. To judge - certainly in England - by the number of new churches built in the fashionably ecclesiastical Gothic style – damp and draughty and terribly high minded - the Nineteenth Century was a great age of faith. But in reality, it was the great age of doubt, in particular doubts about revealed and received religion that permeated the thoughts of artists and intellectuals.

IMAGE 1 – Matthew Arnold and Dover Beach

Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach,* for example, written on his honeymoon looking at the sea not so very far from where I am talking to you. Arnold writes

> *The Sea of Faith*
> *Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore*
> *Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.*
> *But now I only hear*
> *Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,*
> *Retreating, to the breath*
> *Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear*
> *And naked shingles of the world.*

But what might replace that sense of loss in Arnold's great poem? Where was a rod and staff of faith to be found in a

secular age? It's a question that absorbed a great many serious artist all through the Western world in the closing years of the nineteenth century as they contemplated how the less than Christian consequences of the Industrial Revolution had despoiled green and pleasant lands. Not just Matthew Arnold, but William Morris and Richard Wagner too, who wrote, 'I hate this fast growing tendency to chain men to machines in big factories and deprive them of all joy in their efforts – the plan will lead to cheap men and cheap products.'

The other aspect of Christian practice, or rather scholarship that I want to draw your attention to is how the new disciplines of materialist thought, godfathered by the technology that drove the industrialisation that was seeping across the Western World were applied to theology. Darwin may have undone the notion of the Book of Genesis as history, how difficult it was to understand that your pretty sister or worse your fiancée could be descended from an ape? But it was the new methods of history, pioneered by German scholars like Leopold von Ranke whose dictum was that the historian should represent the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* ("as it actually happened") by assembling the facts and then interpreting them, that a younger generation of Christian writers borrowed. Take Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, *Life of Jesus* published in 1863.

IMAGE 2 – Ernest Renan and *Vie de Jésus*

Taking its cue from the newly fashionable study of eugenics it portrays Jesus making himself Aryan not Jewish and as a man and not God. The miracles are rejected and by insisting that Jesus joins the human race Renan argues that he acquires a greater dignity. The life of Jesus, the Frenchman believes can be written like that of any other historical figure, and the Bible subjected to exactly the same critical scrutiny as any historical document.

Had that omnivorous autodidact that is Richard Wagner read Renan's 'Life of Jesus? There was, and there still is a copy in the composer's Wahnfried library. And as so often it's Cosima Wagner writing in her Diary who confirms that her husband was familiar with the Frenchman's work. On June 11th 1878 when Wagner was working simultaneously on the Preliminary and the Orchestral drafts for Act 2 of Parsifal she writes "We stroll about the garden; R tells me of Renan's Life of Jesus, which does not displease him; among other things he feels that he has depicted the idea of God the Father very well …" So not only is the composer familiar with Renan's biography of Jesus but he mentions it at a time when five days earlier he had begun work on that crucial scene between Parsifal and Kundry, that ends with the kiss that brings him knowledge together

with excruciating pain. That cry "Amfortas! Die Wunde! Die Wunde!" It's tempting to comment on a possible connection between Parsifal's sudden understanding of a shared humanity and the human Jesus proposed by Renan. Tempting, but no more than that.

More to the point is Wagner's draft of for a music drama based on the life of Jesus. In 1848. Wagner sketched out a scenario for a work called *Jesus of Nazareth*. Nothing came of it and the draft slipped into the Wagnerian shadows, However there was a projected scene in which Mary Magdalen on her knees at Jesus's feet on the shore of Lake Gennasareth and consumed with repentance announces that her principal desire now is to serve Jesus's followers as their humblest slave. Later in Wagner's outline she anoints him and washes his feet which led Hans von Holzogen, that snapper up of unconsidered Wagnerian trifles to suggest that Parsifal and Kundry were Jesus and]Mary Magdalene. An idea that was quickly dismissed by Wagner himself.

This begs a question. What did Wagner retain from his own Lutheran upbringing, apart from an ear for the Dresden Amen which plays such an important role in the music of Parsifal. I cannot resist quoting The Master himself, a very personal credo written in 1841

> *"I believe in God, Mozart and Beethoven, and likewise their disciples and apostles;—I believe in the Holy Spirit and the truth of the one, indivisible Art;—I believe that this Art proceeds from God, and lives within the hearts of all illumined men;—I believe that he who once has bathed in the sublime delights of this high Art, is consecrate to Her for ever, and never can deny Her;—I believe that through this Art all men are saved…"*

The conflation of religion and art is a familiar nineteenth century cultural trope with its roots in Romanticism. And I will return to this idea when we have explored aspects of *Parsifal* itself.

In every sense the music that starts Wagner's final stage work is sublime. That long syncopated phrase for strings and reeded woodwind floats us to some other place. The absence of harmony and the indeterminate beat unravel our expectations of where we think we are, which are further unsettled by the chords in A flat which introduce the theme for a second time, played now an octave higher. Twice the theme dissolves into silence. Then comes the measured tread of the Dresden Amen and we think we have recovered our musical bearings. No wonder that Claude Debussy described *Parsifal* as "One of the

most beautiful edifices in sound ever raised to the glory of music."

Parsifal, however, is not just a 'beautiful edifice in sound'. It is not a 'choral symphony'. It is, of course, a music drama with action, characters, a mise-en-scène and above all words that belong to all three of those elements. Here is a text to be given music which the composer shaped and polished and worried over for the best part of seventeen years. Too often we hear the music, but forget, perhaps deliberately ignore the words. And it must be admitted that there are understandable reasons why some refuse to engage with the implications of the drama as it unfolds before our eyes as well as our ears.

From the very beginning *Parsifal* was perceived as being 'different' from Wagner's other music dramas. The composer himself had christened the work a B*ühnenweihfestspiel*, which is usually translated as a 'Sacred Festival Drama', but the writer and director Mike Ashman has written, that a more precise rendering of the word would be 'a festival work to consecrate a stage'. However we understand the word B*ühnenweihfestspiel*, it's clear that Wagner is signalling that this work is different from his previous music dramas. Even one of his fiercest critics Eduard Hanslick understood this as he wrestled with assigning Parsifal a cultural pigeon hole. He called

it ‘a superior kind of magic opera’. Locating it within a nineteenth century tradition that looks back to Mozart’s *Der Zauberflöte*.

The work itself is not sacred in any strict sense of that word though it undoubtedly borrows its narratives from sources steeped in Pagan and Christian religious traditions. The description was Richard Wagner’s way of reserving the work for Bayreuth – the consecrated stage - so leaving his widow and his heirs a legacy that would support them after his death. And while he was writing *Parsifal* Wagner was suffering quite as much as his principal characters; the angina that hinted at the heart attack that would kill him in Venice in February 1883 was already beginning to incapacitate him

If the title is a problem then so are the many interpretations of the work. ‘Wagner has prostrated himself before the Christian Cross’, declared Nietzsche; and explicit Christian meanings of Parsifal continue. This is from an essay by Lucy Beckett who edited the Cambridge Operas Handbook to Parsifal. *“The grail in Parsifal, for all the bits and pieces of pagan legend that Wagner retained, demands to be taken in its full Christian sense as the perpetually renewed chalice of the Last Supper which represents Christ’s continuing presence amongst men. If it is not so taken, many of the words used to describe it and its place at the centre of the*

drama, itself needing redemption from the plight which Amfortas's failure has brought it, become meaningless."

If some were thrilled by an apparently Christian message from the Master, others who chiefly believed in Wagner were repelled. Then there were those for whom Parsifal seemed as palpably anti-Semitic as the composer's own views expressed in the series of writings which include the hateful *Das Judentum in der Musik* (Jewishness in Music – 1850). Who could doubt that Klingsor, the evil sorcerer intent on destroying the Knights of the Grail was Jewish? This reading of *Parsifal* reaches its apogee in the writings of Robert Gutman and others post-1945 and the Holocaust, some of whom hinted that that the road from the Festspielhaus lead directly to the gates the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau. So the argument in *Parsifal* is between the Aryan Knights and the Jewish magician, with the theme of 'blood' in the work read as an appeal for 'racial cleansing' and the whole Kingdom of the Grail a prototypical Nazi state. No wonder we close our eyes deciding that we will just listen to "one of the most beautiful edifices in sound ever raised to the glory of music."

Yet in bypassing the uncomfortable readings that have attached themselves to this work we forgo what Barrie Emslie, with tongue firmly in both cheeks, has called 'the deep and

sensational swindle of *Parsifal'*. (All great art is of course a swindle – a matter of smoke and mirrors.) We risk turning our backs on one of the most infuriating yet somehow satisfying experiences within Western theatre. *Parsifal* is indeed a well nigh perfectly proportioned work dramatically, but it is in Wagner's refusal to let his final work yield up a single unambiguous meaning that its greatest strength lies.

You leave a great performance of this work perplexed as much as pleased. What has really occurred in each of the acts? Where does action end and ritual begin? What does the ritual mean? Why do we seem to 'find' ourselves in these characters? True there is an ending, but is it really a beginning? In *Parsifal* Wagner creates something that no other artist in the Modern period has fashioned with the same measure of success, myth. "A traditional story", to borrow a definition from the Oxford Dictionary, "especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events." To which we might add that Wagner's myths – here and in his earlier works - try to explain ourselves to ourselves by referencing the age in which they were written, the industrial age that we are heir to.

IMAGE 3 – Wagner, Parzival and Marienbad

In the summer of 1845 Wagner, who was resting in the spa town of Marienbad having just completed the orchestration of *Tannhäuser,* began to read Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal.* Here in this High Medieval poem he found the story of the quest for the grail, though in von Eschenbach's version the grail is a magical stone with no clear Christian significance. *Parzifal* was a German version of the French *Perceval* by Chrétien de Troyes, which Wagner may have read later; and in de Troyes we find a magic dish, but this has no connection with either the cup that was used by Jesus and his disciples at the last supper or indeed the vessel in which Joseph of Arimathea caught Christ's blood when hanging on the cross his side was pierced by the spear of the Roman centurion Longinus. It is Wagner who identifies the Grail with these two vessels and it is Wagner who links the Grail to the Spear. (Gifts which in Wagner's telling of the story were brought from Heaven by angels when Titurel was building the castle of the Grail.) As Wagner would write later in the notebook that he kept for his second wife Cosima, "The spear belongs as a relic, with the Grail: in the Grail the blood is preserved which flowed from the Saviour's side, pierced by the spearpoint."

We know from the books in his library and conversations with Cosima that she recorded in her diary that Wagner continued to read around the story of Parsifal and the Grail. There are,

for example, hints in of the traditional Pagan myth of the Fisher King, the story of the ruler who must die in order that this people and lands may live again. Wagner, like Shakespeare, had a genius for finding what he needed amongst his disparate sources and bending them to his dramatic will

Things became clearer in 1857 when Wagner, who was now living in a house in Switzerland at the bottom of Otto von Wesendonk's garden and busy seducing his host's wife, penned a first prose sketch for what he sensed would be his final work. In the years that followed as he finished *Tristan und Isolde,* wrote *Die Meistersinger* and completed *The Ring*, *Parsifal* was never far from his thoughts. In letters to Mathilde Wesendonk and later in Cosima Wagner's diaries we find Wagner worrying away at the work, not yet entirely clear about the shape or the direction of the story he needed to tell. In the meantime, he has read Schopenhauer and convinced himself that renouncing the world is the high road to spiritual fulfilment and he has planned two other operas, one on the life of Jesus and the other, *Der Sieger,* about the Buddha. In retrospect both of these possible projects lack one thing. The dramatic conflict between individuals and so value systems that inform all of Wagner's greatest work. They are passive not active and there is little sense of that abiding dramatic trope that rubs through all of Wagner's mature works the idea of the quest or the journey.

It was not until 1865 that everything was at last clear. Wagner's patron Ludwig II demanded to know what the composer was planning to do about *Die Sieger* and *Parsifal.* This was not the best time to be asking the composer about anything to do with his work. Indeed one can only marvel at Wagner's capacity to turn potential disaster to his own creative advantage. In June of that year Hans von Bulow had conducted the triumphant first performances of *Tristan und Isolde* but within a month Wagner's Tristan, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld was dead, killed, said the composer's critics, by the strain of singing this 'new music'. While the composer might still be the King's favourite His Majesty's ministers and the Munich citizenry were growing angry at Wagner's interference in Bavarian politics and his use the public purse for his own private consumption. Act II of *Siegfried* was only half scored and *Die Meistersinger* only half composed. And there was worse: Isolde his first child with Hans von Bulow's wife Cosima had been born in April and even though husband and wife were still living under the same roof the ménage-a-trois with Richard Wagner was starting to be talked about. The composer retired to his study sat down and in just four days wrote out the complete prose sketch for *Parsifal*. In a glorious understatement he wrote at the bottom "Well! That was help in need!!" before getting back to "reality, whole and naked."

All the elements of Wagner's myth were now in place. Titurel built the Castle of the Grail to house the sacred gifts of the Grail and Spear that had been given him by angels when he founded his order of knights who were to travel through the world doing good deeds. Amfortas, his son, has been wounded by the spear when in attempting to defeat Klingsor, the enemy of the Grail, he succumbs to the sexual temptation of Kundry. It is now an agony for him to perform the office of the Grail. Enter Parsifal, an innocent - Der Reine Tor who will be made wise through pity - who fails to understand what the Grail is all about. He too will be tempted by Kundry but having resisted her blandishments and understood Amfortas's pain is cursed to wander the world searching for a way back to the Kingdom of the Grail. On Good Friday he at last returns. Kundry is redeemed and then Amfortas healed with the tip of the spear that had wounded him. Parsifal now performs the office of the Grail. 'Most high and holy wonder! The Redeemer is redeemed."

Parsifal is to be created from a series of binary oppositions, indeed as I have already said in the completed work the opening Prelude is built around this very structure. And there are opposing versions of time in Parsifal too. In the Kingdom of the Grail Time and Space are collapsed and time stands still as

Gurnemanz and Parsifal make their way to the Temple of the Grail. Even if the music that accompanies their journey has a heavy marching tread, its repetitions suggest walking in a circle not perhaps a straight-line! But when Klingsor first sights Parsifal on his way to his magic castle at the beginning of Act 2 he sings 'Die Zeit ist da!'. The time has come – Klingsor's time is unmistakeably linear. While as he describes it to Gurnemanz , Parsifal's subsequent journey back to the Kingdom of the Grail is anything but a straight line.

The score too resists the idea of resolution, a journey with a destination. As Pierre Boulez wrote in a note on Parsifal, *"This music which is in perpetual evolution is probably the most highly musical invention of Wagner – it places the emphasis for the first time on uncertainty, on indetermination. It represents a rejection of immutability, an aversion to definitiveness in musical phrases as long as they have not exhausted their potential for evolution and renewal."*

More conventionally Carl Dahlhaus notes that the score sets chromaticism for Klingsor and Amfortas's agony against the diatonic for Parsifal and the Grail

As elsewhere in his work Wagner also creates a cast of characters who stand in opposition to each other. Most

obviously Amfortas and Klingsor, and at the start Gurnemanz and Parsifal who palpably fails to understand what the old knight tells him and show him. But one character stands alone. She is entirely Wagner's own creation and it took the composer twenty years to find her

IMAGE 4 – Kundry and Parsifal at Zurich

It is clear that the pivotal figure in the narrative is Kundry quite as much as Parsifal. At its simplest without the kiss between Kundry and Parsifal, how would he have understood the nature of Amfortas's suffering and grasped what must be done to heal the King and restore the Kingdom of the Grail? Indeed, Wagner's invention of Kundry from his sources and the compression of two characters into one, the wild women who is at hand to help the Knights of the Grail and the eternal temptress, is one of the most striking things about the work. And the libretto reminds us that Kundry was quite as much a gift to the Knights of the Grail as the Grail itself and the Spear, appearing in Titurel's new kingdom at the same time as the angels descended with the cup and weapon.

So perhaps we are misguided when we look for meaning in the final pages of the score. Is it the middle that holds a key to the work, the encounter between Kundry and Parsifal in Klingsor's

magic garden? And while undoubtedly, we experience Parsifal in the theatre as a sequential narrative that starts out at the edge of the Graalgebiet, a region resembling the northern mountains of Gothic Spain, before detouring across those mountains to a place that looks south to Moorish Spain and finally arriving in the Temple of the Grail that is ripe for renewal we can also think of this work as triptych with Act II the central and therefore the most significant panel.

Much has been said and much more written about this encounter and what is meant by Kundry's narration 'Ich sah das Kind'. Looked at in one way, Kundry at the behest of Klingsor is seducing an innocent with experience or knowledge, but she is also giving Parsifal the personal history he has lost, In this way there is evidently a dramatic and an emotional elision between her and Herzeleide, Parsifal's dead mother, who is at the heart of the 'history' that Kundry is giving the boy.

We don't need Freud to remind us that this makes the kiss incestuous as well as carnal. But view Kundry's encounter with Parsifal in the cultural context of the late nineteenth century and other things come into focus. She is unmistakeably the *femme fatale,* that merciless destroyer of men who haunts the male imagination in the Late Romantic period. But in Wagner's version a *femme fatale* who yearns for redemption and who

also knows what has happened. She has as much knowledge about the past, more in fact, than the opera's wise man Gurnemanz who only knows her as the wild woman and nothing of her relationship with Klingsor. And in using that knowledge to give Parsifal an identity Kundry maybe represent a response to another of the deep anxieties that runs through so many accounts of the industrial nineteenth century. In the shift from an agrarian to an industrial society people are imagined to have abandoned a settled life that had been naturally regulated by the sun and the seasons for the dystopia of the city where you could never be certain of your place, geographically or socially. Or indeed who in a directly personal sense you were, as families were divided and the relations between children and parents reshaped by the capitalist appetite for labour. As Marx described it we have become alienated from ourselves and from our milieu. We should remember that Parsifal has abandoned his mother to find his way in the world. Has he symbolically shaken the dust of the countryside off his feet?

Kundry is also the wild woman of Act I and Act III, the two wings of Wagner's triptych. (And notice the dramatic symmetry of these two wings, with one the mirror image of the other). The Kundry who brings balsam for Amfortas's wound in Act I, is the Kundry who in Act III pours half the liquid contents of a

phial – drawn from her bosom, note - over Parsifal's feet which she then washes.

The image of the penitent Magdalene bathing Jesus' feet is unavoidable. So is this really a covertly Christian work with Parsifal as the Redeemer. Dietrich Borchmayer goes further, placing Kundry's story within the whole scheme of Christian redemption that begins in the book of Genesis "In Kundry's kiss – that ' archetypal miss' as Wagner once described her to Cosima – we find a re-enactment of Eve's seduction of Adam, and in Amfortas's fall from grace Adam's original sin. Kundry is, as it were, the serpent of Paradise."

But Borchmayer's Kundry, is much more than the worm in the Christian Apple. She clearly belongs to the to the ferment that was Viennese intellectual life at the end of the nineteenth century. She is a sister to those women we encounter in Klimt, whose celebrated painting made in 1907 is called The Kiss. Do I need to say more, Well perhaps that in this painting it is the man who takes the erotic initiative and not the woman?

IMAGE 5 – Klimt *The Kiss*

And so, we arrive at the man that Vladimir Nabokov christened 'The Viennese witchdoctor', Siegmund Freud. It's a truism to

say that there are pre-Freudian fingerprints all over Wagner's works. Sons who are searching for their mothers, sibling incest, daughters who challenge their fathers, heroes like Tristan who struggle to find that past moment that led to his present predicament as he lies dying in the castle of Kareol. To a cultural historian's ear Tristan's Agony, as it used to be called, resembles nothing so much as an abbreviated session on the psychoanalyst's couch.

To return to something I mentioned earlier, it is all but impossible to view the cultural production of the past except through our own contemporary lens, which means that we cannot see and hear Wagner's work without recalling the revolution that Sigmund Freud proposed in understanding the human psyche, even if we choose to dismiss it as a sequence of unprovable propositions.

In 2011 I was fortunate enough to see a new production of Parsifal at the Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona directed by Claus Guth. It was set in a crumbling mansion that appeared to have become a sanatorium for wounded and shell-shocked solders from the Great War. During the prelude Titurel, Amfortas and Klingsor were seated a dining table. When Titurel showed fatherly feelings towards Amfortas, Klingsor rose and stalked

out of the room. But at the end of Act 3 Klingsor and Amfortas seemed to be reconciled.

Image 6 – Claus Guth, Klingsor and Amfortas

This is an image not from Barcelona but when Guth' s production was staged in Zurich. I have been haunted by these stage pictures, and I think that they have coloured the way in which I have understood Parsifal since then. At its simplest, in a kind of Neo-Freudian way Klingsor like Amfortas craves an approving father, and it was this that drove him to want to join the very masculine club that surrounds the Grail. But how does he try to become a member? By demasculinising himself, by castration. In Wagner's terms this is evidently part of the Schopenhauerian prescription that one must abandon desire, but taken literally. However, I want to suggest that in the twenty first century we cannot but read it as part of a continuing debate about Gender and Patriarchy.

Some facts. Klingsor failed in his attempt to join the Grail Knights. He takes his revenge by having his Flowermaidens seduce them when they arrive in his domain. Determined to put a stop to this, Amfortas moves in on Klingsor, but he too is seduced and far worse loses the holy spear that was entrusted

to Titurel for safekeeping along with the Grail and is wounded by it.

The wound never heals. And Amfortas's bleeding wound might be said to signify the menstrual cycle. In other words both Amfortas and Klingsor have been feminised. It is only the all too phallic spear, recovered and wielded by a compassionate Parsifal, awakened to the situation by a woman's kiss that can restore manhood to Amfortas.

And what of Kundry in this reading? If Amfortas and Klingsor quarrel over a father, Parsifal finds his mother Herzeleide through a woman, who both gives the hero his family as well as engendering compassion in him. Kundry a reviled woman, punished for eternity for laughing in Jesus's face, repositions the ideas about gender roles that encountered at the beginning of Parsifal. So, in Claus Guth's production we end with Klingsor and Amfortas as old men sitting in the sun, together now that Titurel is dead.

But – and aren't there always buts in anything to do with Richard Wagner. We should remember that Klingsor had once been a hermit. A Christian Holy man presumably acknowledging Jesus as his saviour. And the idea of 'the redeemer' is woven deeply into the dramatic fabric of Parsifal

Wagner himself was adamant that Jesus took a back seat in his conception, telling Cosima on one occasion, "I didn't give the Redeemer a thought when I wrote [the text]." Of course, he told King Ludwig a different story. But Ludwig only held the purse strings while Cosima had a tight grip on his conscience. Nevertheless, why is the Dresden Amen woven into the score, or a version of Eucharist celebrated twice, and why the Spear and the Grail.

In his appropriation of Christological traditions and rituals Wagner is perhaps responding to those doubts about revealed religion in the great age of materialist thought released by the Industrial revolution which suggested that scientists or technologists were the new priesthood. Deprived of their faith meanings these traditions and rituals can now be viewed as so many myths. Or, if you are a confirmed mythologist like Wagner, as so much raw material to be rewoven into new myth. That perhaps is one the most original things about Parsifal, not that it invites us to see Christianity as a sequence of myths, but that it's a kind of source book for mythologists. And that perhaps is one reason why the work is so unsettling. Wagner presumes to dismantle the core of the Western cultural tradition and reassemble parts of it for his own purposes.

As for the redemptive message at the heart of Western Christianity, that is transferred too art. In the case of *Parsifal,* a work of art assembled from Christian fragments. Remember Wagner's Credo 'I believe that this Art proceeds from God, and lives within the hearts of all illumined men; – I believe that he who once has bathed in the sublime delights of this high Art, is consecrate to Her for ever, and never can deny Her; – I believe that through Art all men are saved.'

One question remains. Who is being saved in *Parsifal* if it isn't fallen Man? There's a line at the beginning of the work when Gurnemanz invites Parsifal to come with him to be 'comforted' and 'refreshed by the Grail. 'Wer ist der Gral?" replies Parsifal, 'Who is the Grail' And we get a short lecture from Gurnemanz on how little we can know of this mystery. And we possibly even congratulate ourselves on our own superiority to the young boy in knowing that the Grail is an object and not a person. But the question is a wise one because the Grail may in fact not be a thing but a person. In a literal sense it is Jesus whose blood courses through the cup when it is revealed to the Knights, or, in the opera's own theology, Parsifal. So what does the Grail/Parsifal redeem? The answer is surely nature itself. Regenerated by the tears of sinners at the beginning of Act III in the so-called Good Friday music. We are back at the

beginning of the Ring before Alberich stole the gold from the Rhine, that terrible alienation of man from nature. Or to borrow another myth, the tragedy of the expulsion from Paradise. The end of *Parsifal* holds out the promise that arts can make us whole again of wholeness in a world where everything is sacred. Or as Kundry tells the squires who have mockingly described her as wild animal in Act I 'Sind die Tiere hier nicht heilig?' 'Are the animals not holy too.' Thank you.