

Are Wagner's views of 'Redemption' relevant for the Twenty-first Century?

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1 Introduction

It is universally acknowledged that all the operas in the 'Wagnerian canon' to a greater or lesser extent concern redemption. Strictly speaking redemption ('Erlösung') means freeing a prisoner, captive or slave by paying a ransom. Wagner, like many others, employs the term as a metaphor, often as a 'dead metaphor';¹ but, as will become clear, the essence of redemption for Wagner lies in the realm of 'myth'. Further, for Wagner redemption is multi-dimensional² and sometimes highly ambiguous. This reflects his reluctance to make his intentions too obvious should this impair 'a proper understanding of the work in question'.³

The complexity of his thinking on redemption means that there are many avenues to explore when considering its relevance for the twenty-first century. To make this manageable I restrict my examples to *Das Rheingold*, *Götterdämmerung*, *Tristan und Isolde*, and *Parsifal*, and consider redemption under five aspects, all of which are interrelated: 1. social/political/economic; 2. psychological; 3. existential; 4. cosmological; 5. religious. Since all these ulti-

¹ In a dead metaphor no thought is given to the fact that a metaphor is being employed, e.g. 'leaf of the book'.

² Cf. Claus-Dieter Osthövener, *Konstellationen des Erlösungsgedankens*, in: *wagnerspectrum* 2/2009: *Bayreuther Theologie*, Würzburg 2009, p. 51–80.

³ Wagner's letter to August Röckel, 25/26 January 1854, in: Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (ed.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, London 1987, p. 308; Hans-Joachim Bauer and Johannes Forner (ed.), *Sämtliche Briefe Band VI*, p. 68–69: 'Ich glaube mich dagegen mit ziemlich richtigem Instincte vor einem allzu grossen Deutlichmachungseifer gehütet zu haben, denn meinem Gefühle ist es klar geworden, dass ein zu offnes Aufdecken der Absicht das richtige Verständniss durchaus stört'.

mately focus on the redemption of the human person, I first deal with Wagner's analysis of the human problem.⁴

2 Wagner's analysis of the 'problem'.

A frequent correlate of Wagner's views of redemption is his pessimistic assessment of the human condition, evident right from *Der fliegende Holländer* through to *Parsifal*. Shortly after he completed *Das Rheingold* he wrote these words to Liszt: 'let us treat the world only with contempt; for it deserves no better ... It is evil, *evil, fundamentally evil* ... It belongs to Alberich: no one else!! Away with it!'⁵ His sense of pessimism here is related to human sin. The world 'belongs to Alberich' because he ruined it; even the chief god Wotan has played his part in the desecration of nature by tearing a branch from the World Ash Tree to form his spear, and the resulting wound caused the tree to go rotten. Alberich and Wotan, these 'original sinners', not only have to bear their guilt but are the ultimate cause of the decay of nature and society.

3 Redemption

3.1 Social/political/economic redemption

Although Wagner believed that his music dramas should lead to some sort of 'social/political/economic' redemption⁶ the simple

⁴ An important aspect I am therefore not covering is the redemption of art itself, one of the key concerns of *Die Meistersinger* (and of essays such as *Art and Revolution (Die Kunst und die Revolution)*).

⁵ Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, note 3, p. 319 (Wagner's emphasis), letter of 7 October 1854, in: *Briefe VI*, note 3, p. 249: 'beachten wir die Welt nicht anders, als durch Verachtung [...] Sie ist schlecht, *schlecht, grundslecht*; [...] Sie gehört *Alberich*: Niemand anders!! Fort mit ihr!' These words may well reflect the beginning of Wagner's encounter with Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*.

⁶ Stewart Spencer, *Bayreuth and the Idea of a Festival Theatre*, in: *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music*, ed. Barry Millington, London 1992, p. 167–70, esp. 168, puts it graphically: 'Rarely has an artist shown such faith in the proselytizing potential of his art: a single performance of

fact is that his dream of the renewal of society and its structures through his art does not seem at all realistic and he himself came to see this in later life.⁷ Nevertheless, there clearly have been cases where Wagner's art has driven individuals or groups to political action whether for good or ill⁸ and this is a case where the 'political' and 'psychological' come close together.

But sometimes Wagner can move us to hope for a certain 'utopia' even if it is entirely unrealistic. It may seem strange to relate political redemption to *Tristan und Isolde*, but what this tragedy clearly shows is that life is worth living only by refusing to run our lives by a cost-benefit calculation into which even erotic love can degenerate.⁹ But if we love dangerously, as in *Tristan und Isolde*, we see how life can be worth living and 'the shadow of accountancy disappears' even though such living could be disastrous for the spe-

Siegfried's Tod would be sufficient, he believed, to incite the masses to insurrection'.

⁷ It is instructive to consider how the *Ring* which began as an allegory on social unrest, in the early 1850s 'soon turned into a parable of human destiny dominated by riddles and emotional conflict that dissolved politics into philosophical poetry ... and reached far beyond the Revolution of 1848–49 that first inspired it' (John Deathridge, *Fairy Tale, Revolution, Prophecy. Preliminary Evening: Das Rheingold*, in: *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2008, p. 47–53, esp. 49).

⁸ A fascinating example is the controversial British politician Enoch Powell. He experienced a sense of what one could call 'political redemption' from *Götterdämmerung* Act III Scene 1, and Wagner's own interpretation expressed in his letter to Röckel (25/26 January 1854): '[Siegfried's] highest consciousness manifests itself solely in the most immediate vitality and action: the enormous significance I attach to this consciousness – *which can almost never be stated in words* – will become clear to you from Siegfried's scene with the Rhine-daughters; here we learn that Siegfried is infinitely wise, for he knows the highest truth, that death is better than a life of fear' (Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, note 3, p. 309, Wagner's emphasis; *Briefe VI*, note 3, p. 69–70: '[Siegfried's] höchstes Bewusstsein darin sich äussert, dass alles Bewusstsein immer nur in gegenwärtigstem Leben und Handeln sich kundgiebt: wie ungeheuer ich dieses Bewusstsein, *das fast nie ausgesprochen werden darf*, erhebe, wird Dir aus der Scene Siegfried's mit den Rheintöchtern klar werden; hier erfahren wir, dass Siegfried unendlich wissend ist, denn er weiss das Höchste, dass Tod besser ist, als Leben in Furcht'. It was those final words that spoke to Powell during the period of prime minister Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement in 1938 (Simon Heffer, *Like the Romans: The Life of Enoch Powell*, London 1998, p. 47).

⁹ Roger Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde*, Oxford 2004, p. 10.

cies! Wagner's art could be said to offer a 'social redemption' in that it clears psychic space for us to 'live as if we could make that final sacrifice'. 'This "as if" permeates our daily thoughts and feelings, and reconciles us to each other and the world'.¹⁰

But we are now entering the psychological aspect of redemption and it is to this that I now turn.

3.2 *Psychological redemption*

The second sense in which redemption could be appropriated is on the psychological level. Here we are on surer ground. We know that Wagner's views of 'redemption' have captivated psycho-therapists and indeed many have argued that Wagner anticipated the insights of psycho-analysis. And we do not have to go to the experts to learn of the psychological power of Wagner's music dramas; Wagnerians regularly speak of the transformative nature of the stage works.

What then is going on in this psychological dimension of redemption? One aspect is that the human being recognises that things are not as they should be, something I have already mentioned. Although this understanding may not necessarily help *change* the human situation, at least it helps us come to terms with our dire human condition. This is related to the therapeutic power of myth which can have the power to place us in an archaic history such that the horror of human existence is named and hence expelled:¹¹ 'genannt – gebannt' ('named – banned').¹² Wagner expresses his myth of the 'fall' in *The Artwork of the Future*: 'From the moment when Man perceived the difference between himself and Nature, and thus commenced his own development as *man*, by breaking loose from the unconsciousness of natural animal life and passing over into conscious life [...] from that moment did Error

¹⁰ Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart*, note 9, p. 10.

¹¹ Cf Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A 982b 12–20.

¹² Eberhard Jüngel, *Die Wahrheit des Mythos und die Notwendigkeit der Entmythologisierung*, in: *Indikative der Gnade – Imperative der Freiheit*, Tübingen 2000, p. 40–57, esp. 49.

begin, as the earliest utterance of consciousness. But Error is the [father] of Knowledge [...]'.¹³

Such a mythology of the 'fall' parallels that of Genesis 3. And just as in Christian theology there developed the view that it is better that Adam and Eve fell since only through this sin could a redemption through Christ come to us,¹⁴ so Wagner viewed his 'original sinners' as highly ambivalent.¹⁵ Alberich's stealing of the gold was evil (as was Wotan's 'original sin'); but ultimately one could say it had positive effects. 'Error' gave rise to 'knowledge'; breaking away from nature brought maturity. Conversely redemption can then involve the longing for lost innocence and union with nature.¹⁶ Much of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* involves such a search, and the final union with nature is only finally achieved through Brünnhilde's self-immolation.

There are other sides to this psychological redemption that will emerge as we consider other aspects of redemption, one of which is 'existential redemption' to which I now turn.

3.3 Existential redemption

At the end of the nineteenth century Wagner was to encounter a growing materialism and positivism, something to which Nietzsche turned after his break with Wagner.¹⁷ The legacy of this materialism is found today in various spheres of Western society, a striking example being the reduction of the human person to a 'body' and a

¹³ *The Art-Work of the Future*, in: *Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Volume I: The Art-Work of the Future*, ed. William Ashton Ellis, New York 1966, p. 67–213, esp. 70. (*Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* 3, p. 43: 'Von dem Augenblicke an, wo der Mensch seinen Unterschied von der Natur empfand, somit überhaupt erst seine Entwicklung als Mensch begann, indem er sich von dem Unbewußtsein thierischen Naturlebens losriß, um zu bewußtem Leben überzugehen [...] von diesem Augenblicke an beginnt der Irrtum als erste Äußerung des Bewußtseins. Der Irrthum ist aber der Vater der Erkenntniß [...]'.)

¹⁴ Note the words in the Exsultet: 'O happy fault which merited such and so great a Redeemer!' (*O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem!*)

¹⁵ M. Owen Lee, *Wagner's Ring: Turning the Sky Round*, New York 1990, p. 41.

¹⁶ Lee, *Ring*, note 15, p. 39.

¹⁷ On Nietzsche's turn to positivism, see Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, Cambridge 2010, p. 242–43.

'brain'.¹⁸ Few are willing to speak of the 'soul' or of an aspect of the human person that transcends space and time. Hence death, with the prospect of individual obliteration, can become especially terrifying.

Redemption could therefore involve a process of reconsidering the universe and being open to the possibility of 'eternity' and 'transcendence'. One way of overcoming this materialism with Wagner at one's side is to rethink everything in terms of the transcendental idealism of Kant and Schopenhauer. One would then come to the view that our human existence cannot be reduced to a 'body' and 'brain' made out of 'matter'; indeed one could come to see that 'matter' itself is 'my representation'. One of the central ideas Wagner took from Kant and Schopenhauer is that the world is not only that of phenomena ('representation') but also that of the noumenon, the 'thing-in-itself'. The basis for such a two-tiered view of the universe has been questioned. One of them relates to the possibilities of non-Euclidean geometries (Kant took Euclidean geometry to prove the transcendental nature of the intuitions of space). Ironically it was in 1854, precisely the year in which Wagner discovered Schopenhauer and renewed his interest in Kant, that G.F.B. Riemann delivered a lecture showing that various non-Euclidean geometries are possible ('On the hypotheses that underlie the foundation of geometry'; 'Über die Hypothesen welche der Geometrie zu Grunde liegen'). Anyone defending Kant today

¹⁸ A striking case of 'materialist' views is the way the 'brain' has been related to the 'mind'. Some have simply identified mental states with physical brain states. Less 'reductionist' approaches (but hardly less materialist) are the functionalist theories of mind where the brain and mind appear to be treated like computer 'hardware' and 'software' respectively. For a recent functionalist approach, see the highly acclaimed work on cognitive neuro-science of Tim Shallice and Richard P. Cooper, *The Organisation of Mind*, Oxford 2011. There is awareness of recent philosophical objections to functionalism (p. 430) but there appears to be no awareness of transcendental idealism. Contrast the work of Semir Zeki, *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain: Love, Creativity, and the Quest for Human Happiness*, Oxford 2009, who has a clear admiration for Kant and Schopenhauer (and Wagner, whom he considers to be among the greatest of neurologists, Semir Zeki, *A Vision of the Brain*, Oxford 1993, p. 1). But even in his work there is a tendency to reduce 'mind' to 'brain' (Zeki, *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain*, p. 153).

would have to deal with such a possible objection and it is worth stressing that serious answers have been forthcoming.¹⁹

But if we are to take Wagner's transcendental idealism into the twenty-first century, I think that a two-tiered world is a simplification. It may well be three-tiered²⁰ and in fact is most likely multi-tiered.²¹ But whatever the layering of reality may be, Wagner, following Kant and Schopenhauer, was really on to something in believing that the world is not simply that of the phenomena, something which today may even find confirmation in certain interpretations of quantum physics.²² And one of the things Wagner achieves in his mature music dramas, especially in *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, is to 'teach' that there is a world beyond the phenomena. Towards the end of Act II Tristan invites Isolde to follow him to 'the dark land of night' ('das dunkel nächt'ge Land'),²³ suggesting a realm beyond the world of 'appearance'. The figure of Parsifal is especially 'didactic' since we see him taking a journey into new insights. He starts as a 'fool', who thinks that his 'I' and the 'world' are quite separate,²⁴ to someone who acquires 'knowledge' through compassion and fellow suffering ('Mitleid'/'Mitleiden').²⁵ Further, Parsifal does not simply come to

¹⁹ In defence of Kant's transcendental idealism in relation to space, see Sebastian Gardner, *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason*, RPG, London/New York 2004, repr. ¹1999, p. 103. He distinguishes between two different concepts of space: first a 'transcendental concept', the 'a priori intuition' which is 'transcendentally ideal' and 'indeterminate'; secondly, a concept which 'comprises outer empirical reality', is 'determinate', and is what geometry studies and can be known only a posteriori.

²⁰ Julian Young, *Schopenhauer*, London/New York 2005, p. 202, makes a distinction between the Schopenhauerian thing-in-itself (the 'will') and the Kantian thing-in-itself which is truly unknown and inaccessible.

²¹ Cf. David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, London/Boston/Henley 1981, repr. ¹1980.

²² See especially Michel Bitbol, Pierre Kerszberg, and Jean Petitot (ed.), *Constituting Objectivity: Transcendental Perspectives on Modern Physics*, The Western Ontario Series in Philosophy of Science 74, Springer 2009.

²³ *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* 7, p. 55.

²⁴ Ulrike Kienzle, *Das Weltüberwindungswerk: Wagners 'Parsifal' – ein szenisch-musikalisches Gleichnis der Philosophie Arthur Schopenhauers*, Laaber 1992, p. 175.

²⁵ Cf. Cosima's entry for 11 January 1878: 'R. speaks of the perplexity with which P[arsifal] listens to Amf[ortas]'s complaints; his mysterious, unconscious gestures of fellow suffering, which comes out into the open with Kun-

understand that the world is not just that of the phenomena. He also comes to encounter the Schopenhauerian ‘thing-in-itself’, the ‘world will’ in all its misery.²⁶ One way in which this is achieved is through dreams and a dream-like state.²⁷ In addition, Wagner composes the work such that *we* can be taken along with Parsifal: we can thereby undergo our own existential journey, and we can be taken down into deeper levels since Parsifal in turn identifies with the suffering of Amfortas and of the redeemer, and we can perhaps encounter those ‘noumenal realms’.

I now want to try to be more precise in analysing how, through Wagner’s art, our existential journey, our ‘redemption’ from the empirical world, may be facilitated. There are three aspects. The first relates to Schopenhauer’s aesthetic theory that one can begin to *access* the ‘world will’ with our understanding through great art. Using his framework one could then argue that through the ‘text’, this access is achieved by perceiving the Platonic universals at the boundary of the phenomenal and noumenal worlds; this can only be achieved in that special correlation of ‘subject’ and ‘object’, the ‘aesthetic state’.²⁸ But music, on the other hand, is a direct copy (‘Abbild’) of the ‘will’. Putting these together we could have a problem in making sense of Wagner’s music dramas. As Young writes: ‘In Platonic terms, if music takes us directly to the sunlit world of reality, what possible interest could one have in trying to decipher the nature of that world by looking at the flickering shadows in the cave?’²⁹ However, one could argue that Wagner presents a stereoscopic view of the world, music pointing to *an* inner reality and ‘text’ to the outer reality.³⁰ Considering his creative process *diachronically*, i.e. through time, this nearly always

dry’s kiss and only then becomes clear to him’ (Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack (ed.), *Cosima Wagner’s Diaries, Volume II: 1878–1883*, New York/London 1980, p. 18.) (‘Von der Perplexität spricht R., mit welcher P. die Klagen des Amf. anhört; das Geheimnisvolle, Unbewußte des Gebärens des Mit-Leidens, welches dann bei dem Kuß von Kundry an das Licht tritt, sich ihm selbst offenbart’).

²⁶ See section 3.5 below.

²⁷ Kienzle, *Weltüberwindungswerk*, note 24, p. 188.

²⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Volume I*, New York 1966, repr. ¹1958, p. 178–80 (*Arthur Schopenhauer, Zürcher Ausgabe: Werke in zehn Bänden*, Zürich 1977, vol. 1, p. 231–34).

²⁹ Young, *Schopenhauer*, note 20, p. 154.

³⁰ Cf. Young, *Schopenhauer*, note 20, p. 155.

involves composing the ‘text’ and later adding an ‘inner reality’ of music.³¹ Concerning this ‘addition’ Schopenhauer would then say the music is giving to the ‘scene’ an ‘enhanced significance’, ‘all the greater, the more analogous its melody is to the inner spirit of the given phenomenon’.³² But however Wagner actually crafted his dramas in his ‘workshop’, he came to the view that music was ontologically prior.³³ He could be accused of developing an aesthetic theory which plainly contradicted how he actually composed his dramas. But considering his dramas *synchronically* (rather than *diachronically*) as we experience them in the theatre, perhaps there is substance to his view of the ontological priority of music. Despite the many criticisms raised against his aesthetic theory of music, the fact remains that this largely abstract art has a mystery which seems impossible to fathom.³⁴ Perhaps after all it does point to *an* (if not *the*) inner reality of the world, and this inner reality may even have something to do with ‘will’.³⁵

³¹ See John Deathridge, ‘Reviews’, *19th Century Music*, v (1981–82), p. 81–89, esp. 83, in critical comments on Robert Bailey and Curt von Westernhagen: ‘There is not one scrap of evidence proving that Wagner’s musical ideas were anything but rudimentary when he was writing his librettos’.

³² Schopenhauer, *World I*, note 28, p. 263 (*Zürcher Ausgabe*, note 28, vol. 1, p. 330).

³³ Although his much quoted description of his dramas (1872) as ‘deeds of music that have become visible’ (*On the Name “Musikdrama”*, in: *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works, Volume V: Actors and Singers*, ed. William Ashton Ellis, New York 1966, p. 299–304, esp. 303; *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* 9, p. 306: ‘*ersichtlich gewordene Thaten der Musik*’) has a certain tongue in cheek quality, he certainly does seem to believe in the ontological priority of music elsewhere (see *Beethoven*, in: *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works, Volume V: Actors and Singers*, ed. William Ashton Ellis, New York 1966, p. 57–126, esp. 106–7; *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* 9, p. 106).

³⁴ Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology: I*, London 1978, p. 18: ‘Since music is the only language with the contradictory attributes of being at once intelligible and untranslatable, the musical creator is a being comparable to the gods, and music itself the supreme mystery of the science of man’.

³⁵ Schopenhauer’s link between music and ‘will’ has been developed in various directions, of which I mention two. First, Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart*, note 9, p. 77, suggests that if according to Schopenhauer self-knowledge accesses the will and if music does the same, why not divide through by the will (as Wittgenstein could suggest) and say that when we hear music we are acquainted with *the very same thing* we encounter in self-knowledge. A second approach is offered by Anthony Storr, *Music and the Mind*, London 1997, repr.

For all the profundities of music expressing something of the inner reality of the world, there is a certain limitation involved in the above analysis. It is essentially Schopenhauerian and when speaking of our access to deeper levels of reality, it does so in terms of cognition and in terms of a subject-object correlation. The 'subject', as Wittgenstein puts it, 'does not belong to the world: rather it is a limit of the world'.³⁶ This brings me to the second aspect of 'existential redemption' which, one could say, involves not just the 'subject' on the boundary of the world but also our very being which is rooted in the very depths of the world (which I call the 'soul').³⁷ Wagner effectively invites us to *participate* in the stage action, rather as in Christian theology humankind participates in Adam or in Christ. One is here engaged in the mystery of the ontology of myth whereby the 'soul' is embedded in a mythical reality. Wagner's stage works are so enthralling because he offers this invitation to participate and I suggest that those who accept can find that they access levels of reality deeper than the phenomena, and accessed not simply through cognition but in a sense which involves our very being. And so Wagner truly enables us to 'overcome' the world of phenomena.

A third way of understanding existential redemption relates to the philosophical and scientific issue of causation. One way in which we could be said to overcome the phenomenal world is to be free from the causation which governs it. The overcoming of such causation is discussed by Wagner in his essay *Religion and Art* (1880). Using a Kantian-Schopenhauerian framework he argues that the 'miraculous' is possible by our imposing a new 'causation' on our experience, and this can only come about by a 'superhuman power' ('übermenschlicher Gewalt').³⁸ The miracle Wagner has in mind is 'conversion', which one could term an 'existential miracle'. Wagner's argument in some respects is hampered by his following

¹1992, p. 149. He relates music and 'will' to physiological arousal, a useful antidote to Schopenhauer's cerebral approach to art.

³⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus/Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*, London 1972, ¹1921, p. 117.

³⁷ See Richard H. Bell, *Deliver Us from Evil*, Tübingen 2007, p. 189–229.

³⁸ *Religion and Art*, in: *Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Volume VI: Religion and Art*, ed. William Ashton Ellis, New York 1966, repr. ¹1897, p. 211–52, esp. 215 (*Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* 10, p. 214).

Schopenhauer a little too closely.³⁹ But when Wagner's genius is allowed free play away from his activity as an essayist, we begin to see something that transcends the largely deterministic scheme of Schopenhauer. Scruton, linking *Tristan und Isolde* to a more Kantian view of the person, argues that in this work we see a much more powerful overcoming of the phenomenal world. Central to the drama is the self-sacrifice which is foretold in the look ('Blick') of love. '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'.⁴⁰

3.4 *Cosmological redemption*

This now brings me to what I have called the 'cosmological' aspect of redemption. Wagnerians are well represented among scientists especially theoretical Physicists among whom I once numbered.⁴¹ One reason such people may be drawn to Wagner is that they, like he, plumb the mystery and depths of the world. But through the scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and with the growth of geology, biology and cosmology, it has become almost inevitable that those aware of the timescales involved in the evolution of the universe⁴² (and the magnitudes involved) have come to the uncomfortable realisation of their insignificance. However, in the second half of the twentieth century some

³⁹ See Richard H. Bell, *Wagner's Parsifal: An Appreciation in the Light of his Theological Journey*, Eugene, OR 2013, p. 167–70.

⁴⁰ Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart*, note 9, p. 193.

⁴¹ The most famous British theoretical Physicist who is a committed Wagnerian is Stephen Hawking. In his work on quantum cosmology (developed with James Hartle) he argues that the distinct identities of space and time become blurred, something which becomes highly significant as one goes backwards to the origin of the universe. As the clock is run backwards, $t = 0$ is never actually reached because time starts to adopt space-like qualities. Time does not suddenly change to space but fades away in a continuous manner (Paul Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma: Why is the Universe Just Right for Life?*, London 2007, 12006, p. 90). I am unsure whether Hawking is aware of the remarkable link to Gurnemanz's words: 'time here becomes space' ('zum Raum wird hier die Zeit') (*Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* 10, p. 339).

⁴² The best current estimate for the age of the universe and the earth is 13.7 and 4.56 billion years respectively.

Physicists were suggesting that the human being is in fact a key to the cosmos. This is because the laws of nature are ‘finely tuned’ since, if they were slightly different, it would have been impossible for human life to emerge. This is the so-called ‘anthropic principle’.⁴³ Various strategies have been developed to account for this fine tuning, one of which is that the human mind is somehow written into the very fabric of the universe.⁴⁴ But whichever strategy is adopted, the anthropic principle suggests that the human person and the cosmos, far from being alienated from each other, are actually closely correlated.

One of Wagner’s concerns in *Parsifal* is similarly to bring human beings and nature together. Wagner and contemporary Physicists may have a common element in their view of ‘cosmological redemption’. One of Wagner’s concerns in *Parsifal* is to demonstrate that nature is mediated through the subject,⁴⁵ something which Parsifal himself needs to learn. It may be argued that Wagner’s view simply derives from the first sentence in Schopenhauer’s magnum opus: ‘The World is my Representation’.⁴⁶ However, he anticipates this idea of the union of humans and nature as early as the *Art-Work of the Future* (1849). Earlier I quoted his idea that the ‘error’ of human beings which led to alienation from nature also had a positive outcome: ‘knowledge’. Through this human knowledge ‘Nature grows conscious of herself’ in that she ‘has attained that point where [man] can apprehend her, by making her his “object”’. But this distinction comes to an end when man ‘recognises the essence of Nature as his very own’ and perceives a common ‘Necessity’ in nature and in himself, ‘thus not only

⁴³ As an example, if the ‘strong force’ (the force in the atomic nucleus binding protons and neutrons) were slightly weaker or stronger than it is (perhaps as little as 1 per cent) then it would be impossible for the element carbon to be formed (from beryllium and helium) and hence impossible for life to evolve (Davies, *Goldilocks Enigma*, note 41, p. 157).

⁴⁴ Cf. Davies, *Goldilocks Enigma*, note 41, p. 302–3.

⁴⁵ Kienzle, *Weltüberwindungswerk*, note 24, p. 95, argues on the basis of the melodic lines of the ‘Waldes-Morgenpracht’ and ‘Karfreitagszauber’ ‘daß Natur im *Parsifal* immer vermittelt ist durch das Subjekt, das sie wahrnimmt’.

⁴⁶ Schopenhauer, *World I*, note 28, p. 3 (*Zürcher Ausgabe*, note 28, vol. 1, p. 29).

recognizing the mutual bond between all natural phenomena, but also his own community with Nature'.⁴⁷

'Cosmological redemption' entails coming to a new understanding of our place in the vast cosmos. It is a view of redemption which does not have to assume a pessimistic view of the human person. But as we turn finally to the religious redemption, ideas of 'sin' do come to the fore together with the resulting misery of the created order.

3.5 Religious redemption

Discussing redemption in a religious sense brings us to a 'live' metaphor: redemption comes about by a 'price' being paid; in the case of the sacrifice of Jesus the price is his very life.⁴⁸ In Wagner's dramas the redeemer figures likewise lay down their lives and this is implicitly seen as sacrificial. One of the most obvious redemptive deaths is that of Brünnhilde who 'becomes the true, conscious redeemer'.⁴⁹ Hence it is appropriate that *Götterdämmerung* ends with the leitmotif 'the glorification of Brünnhilde'.⁵⁰

But how can such deaths be viewed as redemptive? What possible logic can there be in such sacrificial deaths? I think the answer has to be that we are here moving away from metaphor to myth.

⁴⁷ Wagner, *Art-Work*, note 13, p. 70–71. (*Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* 3, p. 43: 'Durch diese Erkenntniß wird die Natur sich ihrer selbst bewußt, und zwar im Menschen, der nur durch seine Selbstunterscheidung von der Natur dazu gelangte, die Natur zu erkennen, indem sie ihm so Gegenstand wurde: dieser Unterschied hört aber da wieder auf, wo der Mensch das Wesen der Natur ebenfalls als sein eigenes, für alles wirklich Vorhandene und Lebende, also für das menschliche Dasein nicht minder als für das Dasein der Natur, dieselbe Nothwendigkeit, daher nicht allein den Zusammenhang der natürlichen Erscheinungen unter sich, sondern auch seinen eigenen Zusammenhang mit der Natur erkennt'.)

⁴⁸ Note that in early Christian theology the metaphor was sometimes inappropriately stretched by saying the price was paid to the devil (Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, London 1970, repr. 1931, p. 49).

⁴⁹ See again his letter to Röckel of 25/26 January 1854 (Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, note 3, p. 307; *Briefe VI*, note 3, p. 68).

⁵⁰ See the letter of Cosima to Edmund von Lippmann, quoted in Deathridge, *Reviews*, note 30, p. 84 n 6. However, it has come to be popularly known as the 'redemption' motif.

Myth has its own rationality⁵¹ and ontology.⁵² Further, whereas a metaphor is exchangeable,⁵³ myth is inexchangeable; and whereas metaphor ‘depicts reality’,⁵⁴ myth brings us into contact with reality itself.⁵⁵ It is for such reasons that myth has the power to effect an ‘existential displacement’. But myth can only transform the person if it is received positively (I call this the ‘mythical reception’). By contrast in a myth-critical reception (I call this the ‘mythological reception’)⁵⁶ the myth loses its essential power and becomes just another ‘story’.

Wagner’s myths, like all myths, only work in a mythical reception. And one key aspect of his myths is the presentation on stage of a ‘ritual’ (e.g. the deaths of Isolde or Brünnhilde). But the sacrifice that interested Wagner more than any other was the death of Jesus of Nazareth. We find this in letters, essays, diaries, the sketches for *Jesus von Nazaereth*, and above all in *Parsifal*. He viewed this death as one in which the human person participates; indeed it is one in which the whole creation participates. It is not that creation is forced into a state of suffering by Jesus. Rather there is a mutual identification: Jesus identifies with human misery⁵⁷ and the humans beings related to him identify with his suffering⁵⁸ in a pattern of what Hübner would call ‘identical repetition’.⁵⁹ This mutual identification of the suffering Jesus and nature is also reflected in a remarkable comment Wagner made in the rehearsals for *Parsifal*,

⁵¹ Cf. Hans Heinrich Schmid (ed.), *Mythos und Rationalität*, Gütersloh 1988.

⁵² Cf. Kurt Hübner, *Die Wahrheit des Mythos*, München 1985.

⁵³ E.g., the metaphor ‘Achilles is a lion’ (cf. Homer, *Iliad* 24.41) can be exchanged with another metaphor such as ‘Achilles is an eagle’ (*Iliad* 21.252).

⁵⁴ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, Oxford 1989, repr. ¹1985, p. 97.

⁵⁵ Therefore in describing Jesus Christ as ‘redeemer’ in *Parsifal*, we are dealing not so much with a metaphor but rather with an abbreviated myth: he miraculously came into the world, laid down his life as a sacrifice for sin and lives in the community through his death.

⁵⁶ Cf. Jüngel, *Wahrheit*, note 12, p. 42.

⁵⁷ See the words of the youths (‘Jünglinge’) in *Parsifal* Act I: ‘As once His blood flowed / with countless pains / for the sinful worlds’ (‘Den sündigen Welten, / mit tausend Schmerzen, / wie einst sein Blut geflossen’) (*Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* 10, p. 340).

⁵⁸ The youths continue: ‘... now with joyful heart / let my blood be shed / for the great Redeemer’ (‘dem Erlösungshelden / sei nun mit freudigem Herzen / mein Blut vergossen’) (cf. *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* 10, p. 340).

⁵⁹ Hübner, *Wahrheit*, note 52, p. 135–41.

and noted down by Heinrich Porges, at the words of Parsifal in Act II ‘O torment of love’ (‘Oh! Qual der Liebe’): ‘Now all at once Parsifal sees how the whole world is a sacrificial slaughter’.⁶⁰ Wagner appears to have understood the redeemer’s sacrifice not as one which excludes us (‘ausschließende Stellvertretung’) but rather as one which includes us (‘einschließende Stellvertretung’).⁶¹ This is something Wagner has captured in the words of the youths (‘Jünglinge’) in *Parsifal* Act I: ‘His body, that he gave us strength to purge our sin, lives in us through His death’ (‘Der Leib, den er zur Sühn’ uns bot, / er leb’ in uns durch seinen Tod’).⁶² And Wagner’s great vision is that just as the whole created order participates in the redeemer’s sacrifice, so it will enjoy a redemption which he sublimely expresses in the ‘climax’ of *Parsifal*, the ‘the magic of Good Friday’ (‘Karfreitagszauber’).

Of all the aspects of redemption discussed, the religious is the one most find difficult to appropriate today in the climate of growing secularization. But if one can receive positively the myths of nature’s identification with the redeemer and of nature’s renewal as *Parsifal* is experienced, then we may, even if momentarily, ‘feel better’ about ourselves and the ecological crisis; and if through *Parsifal* we can receive positively the myths of those great redemptive deaths, examples of true self-giving love (‘erotic’ in the highest sense),⁶³ then it may be that human life will be transformed even into eternity.

⁶⁰ ‘Jetzt sieht Parsifal auf einmal, wie die ganze Welt ein Schlachtopfer ist’ (Wagner’s ‘Probenbemerkungen’ for 3.1037–38 (‘Qual der Liebe’) according to the notes taken by Heinrich Porges (Martin Geck and Egon Voss (ed.), *Dokumente zur Entstehung und ersten Aufführung des Bühnenweihfestspiels Parsifal*, in: Richard Wagner, Sämtliche Werke, Band 30, Mainz 1970, p.203).

⁶¹ On these terms see Hartmut Gese, *Die Sühne*, in: *Zur biblischen Theologie*, Tübingen ³1989, ¹1977, p. 97. They are best translated as ‘exclusive place-taking’ and ‘inclusive place-taking’.

⁶² *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* 10, p. 340.

⁶³ In opposition to Schopenhauer’s view that redemption is *from* erotic love, Wagner argued it is *through* erotic love (see especially the letter to Mathilde Wesendonck of 1 December 1858, Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, note 3, p. 432; Wolfgang Golther (ed.), *Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendonck: Tagebuchblätter und Briefe 1853–1871*, Berlin 1904, p. 79–80). In Bell, *Parsifal*, note 39, p. 156–60, I suggest that Wagner believes that erotic love can redeem not only the one who *loves* but also the one who *is loved*.

Abstract

Wie relevant sind Wagners Vorstellungen von Erlösung für das 21. Jahrhundert?

Wagners Idee der Erlösung – in den Bühnenwerken wie in den Schriften – ist komplex, vielschichtig und voller Ambiguität. Die Frage ihrer Relevanz für unser Jahrhundert wird unter verschiedenen, sich überschneidenden Gesichtspunkten betrachtet: einem gesellschaftlich-politisch-ökonomischen, einem psychologisch-existenziellen, einem kosmologischen und religiösen. Die Art und Weise, wie Wagners Idee mit Leben erfüllt werden kann, reicht von der Weigerung, nach dem Prinzip des ökonomischen Vorteils zu leben, bis zur Akzeptanz der Endlichkeit der menschlichen Existenz, der Offenheit für Transzendenz sowie dem lebensverändernden Miterleben der Erlösung bringenden Tode in Wagners fesselnder Vermählung von Musik und Mythos.