

P A R S I F A L

Notes from a lecture given by

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(Translation by Mary Adams)

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I want to speak to you today about the truths of occultism and of theosophy, relating what I have to say with Richard Wagner's Parsifal. For there is a deep connection between the artistic work of Wagner and the spiritual movement of the present day that is known as Theosophy. That there is in Wagner and in his works a very large measure of occult power, is something that mankind is gradually learning to realize. And in the future something further will also become clear to us; namely, that there lived in Wagner a great deal more than he himself could have knowledge of. This is, in truth, the secret of many a work of art, that a force and a power live in it of which its creator knows nothing.

When this has come home to us; namely, that more — much more — was living in Wagner than he himself was conscious of, we must at the same time not forget that Wagner was never able to reach the last stages of wisdom. On this account the art of Richard Wagner has for the occultist quite a unique character; for while he knows that something more, something of deep mystery, is hidden behind it, he knows on the other hand that one can be in danger of looking in Wagner for something that is not there. The fact that a great deal more is to be found in Wagner than is generally perceived was well expressed by Richard Strauss, who said somewhat as follows:

“When I hear people perpetually declaring that we ought not to add anything from our own thought to what Wagner has created, it seems to me we might just as well say we should refrain from adding anything from our own thought when we contemplate a flower! We would certainly never discover the secret of the flower that way; and it will surely be the same with those who are unwilling to allow themselves to add anything from their own thought to the works of a great artist.”

Richard Wagner concerned himself with themes of sublime significance. Always in his works you will find names that are connected with ancient, holy traditions. What he achieved in “Parsifal” is intimately connected with the spiritual power that has been active in such a striking manner in and since the last third of the Nineteenth Century.

In order to understand the figures and motifs that we meet with in Wagner, we need to probe into deep mysteries of the evolution of mankind. Wagner made an intensive study of man and his place in the great world, and of the mystery of the human soul. As a young man he tried research into the mysteries of reincarnation. We have evidence of this in his draft for a drama called “Die Sieger” (“The Victorious,” or, “The Conquerors.”) He abandoned the attempt, because the music for the drama proved to be an insoluble problem. As drama alone he could have succeeded with it. The story is as follows. A youth in the Far East, in India, Ananda by name, belonging to the Brahman caste, is beloved by a Chandala maiden of the very lowest caste, who is called Prakriti. Ananda is a pupil of Buddha. He does not respond to Prakriti's love. She is accordingly thrown into the utmost distress and sorrow. Ananda withdraws from the world and devotes himself to the religious life. An explanation of her destiny is

then given to the Chandala maiden by another Brahman. She had, he told her, in an earlier life been a Brahman and had rejected the love of this very youth who was at that time in the Chandala caste. Deeply impressed with the teaching conveyed in this explanation, the girl then attaches herself also to the Buddha, and the two become followers together of the same teacher.

This theme was sketched out by Wagner in 1855, with the intention of elaborating it. He did not succeed, but a year later the same impulse presented itself to him in a new way. In 1857 the great ideal contained in Parsifal suddenly entered into Wagner's soul. It happened on Good Friday, 1857, in Villa Wesendonk on the shores of the Lake of Zurich. Wagner was gazing out upon the world of nature, with all its fresh young life in the full beauty of springtime. And in that moment he saw with perfect clarity the connection between the upspringing of all the budding new life of nature and the death of Christ on the Cross. This connection is the secret of the Holy Grail. And from that moment onward Richard Wagner knew in his soul that he must send forth into the world this secret of the Holy Grail, he must send it out into the world of music.

If we would really understand this remarkable and unique experience that Richard Wagner underwent, we shall have to go back a few thousand years in the evolution of Europe. (His own noble and exalted thoughts on the evolution of man Wagner has put forward in his work entitled Heathendom and Christianity). What was the nature of the teaching that was given long ago in the so-called Mystery Fellowships or Mystery Brotherhoods? Let us consider for a little this teaching as it was to be met with in Europe right up to the Sixteenth or Seventeenth Centuries; let us see what form it took in these times.

Mysteries have existed in all ages. In the mysteries, man received a knowledge that was at the same time religion, and he received a religion that was at the same time wisdom.

It is impossible to have a correct conception of a mystery if one has no conception of a spiritual world. We are surrounded here by the various kingdoms of nature; minerals, plants, animals and human beings. We regard the human kingdom as the highest of the four. But now just as man has thus around him kingdoms that are lower than himself, so has he above him higher beings in many stages. The beings that stand at different stages higher than man have from time immemorial been designated as "Gods." The kind of wisdom imparted to man in the mysteries enabled him to hold conscious intercourse with the Gods. He was then called an initiate. Such an initiate possessed no more wisdom of words; he had, in the mysteries, experienced facts. Even still today there are mysteries, although they are of another kind than those of olden or medieval times.

At the time when the Crusades were beginning, and even a little before, we find in a district in the North of Spain an important mystery. The mysteries that were still extant in that time have generally been known as the later Gothic Mysteries. Those who were initiated were called the Templars, or the Knights of the Holy Grail. Lohengrin was one of these. The Order of the Knights of the Grail had a different significance from another order or brotherhood which had its location in England and Wales; all the stories that are told of King Arthur and his Round Table relate to this other order of initiation.

In ages long ago, long before Christianity, a migration took place from West to East. Very long ago, there was land in the region of the Atlantic Ocean — the so-called land of Atlantis, where dwelt the Atlanteans, our ancient ancestors. All the people who lived later on in Europe and also in Asia as far East as India, were descendants of the Atlanteans. The Atlanteans lived under entirely different

conditions from those that prevailed in later times. Life was hierarchically ordered. All control and rule was in the hands of the initiates.

In the North of what is today Russia a famous school of initiation existed in earlier times. The initiates of this school were known as “Trotten.” In the West of Europe were other initiation schools, and in them the Druids were the initiates. The whole social life of the people was still even then ordered and regulated by these initiates.

When we look back to these ancient schools of initiation, what sort of a teaching do we find there? What was the Mystery that was taught in them? It is after all only the forms of the teaching that change with the passage of time. Astonishing as it may seem, we actually find that in these very ancient schools of initiation the secret, the mystery that Parsifal discovered, is brought to its highest development — the secret; namely, of how the new budding life of nature in Springtime is connected with the Mystery of the Cross. We have to understand it in the following way.

The power of reproduction which we recognize in the animal and human kingdoms is also to be seen in the plant kingdom. In the springtime of the year the divine active power of creation shoots up out of Mother Earth. For we have to recognize that a deep connection exists between the power that manifests when the Earth clothes herself with her robe of green, and the divine creative power. The pupils in the initiation school were taught as follows: “All around you in nature you see the opening flower buds, and within them a power at work which is then later concentrated in the small grains of seed. Countless seeds will come forth from the flowers — seeds which, if laid into the earth, will be capable of bringing forth new plants. And now receive what I am about to say into your heart; take it deeply into your soul. The process that is taking place out there in nature is the very same as takes place in human beings and in the animal kingdom, only in nature it takes place without desire or passion. It goes forward in perfect purity and chastity. The boundless and chaste innocence that sleeps in the flower buds of the plants — this, it was felt, must enter right into the soul of the pupils.

And then they were told further: “It is the sun that opens the blossoms. The ray of the sun calls forth the power that rests in them. Two things meet — the opening flower and the ray from the sun. Between the plant kingdom and the divine kingdom stand the two other kingdoms — the animal kingdom and the human. These latter are really no more than a kind of pathway leading from the plant kingdom to the divine kingdom. In the divine kingdom we have again a kingdom of innocence and chastity, as in the plant kingdom. In the animal and human kingdom we have kingdoms of desire and passion.” But then it was told to the pupils that in the future “all passion and desire will at length disappear. The chalice will then open (even as the chalice of the flower opens) — will open from above downwards and look down to man. And as the ray from the sun goes right down into the plant, so will man's now purified power unite itself with this divine chalice. It can actually come about that the chalice of the blossom is spiritually reversed so that it inclines downwards from heaven, and the sun's ray, too, is reversed so that it lifts itself up from man to heaven.” And this reversed flower chalice which was told of in the mysteries as an actual fact was called the Holy Grail. The flower chalice of the plant that we have before us in material reality is the reversed Holy Grail. And the ray from the sun — all who have true occult knowledge learn to recognize it in the “magic wand.” For the magic wand is a symbol, in the language of superstition, for a spiritual reality. In the mysteries it was called the “bloody

lance.” So here we have before us, on the one hand, the origin of the Grail and on the other hand the original “magic wand” of the genuine occultist.

I have given you here slight indications of profound truths, deeply significant truths that played a part in men's lives in the North and West of Europe.

Richard Wagner had a deep intuitive feeling for these truths, and so had his friend Graf Gobineau.

If one wanted to express what was behind the mysteries of which we have been speaking, one could say it was the knowledge of what flows in the veins of animal and man. True indeed are the words that are so often quoted from Goethe's “Faust”: “Blood is a very special fluid.” We shall come to perceive what blood really signifies when we learn to understand a great revolutionary change that took place once in the mysteries.

In the olden times of the European peoples it was known how much depends in human life on blood relationships. On this account the continuance of humanity was never left to chance. All such matters were in those times regulated out of an occult wisdom. It was known that when further evolution was restricted within small racial communities and no other blood was allowed to come in from outside these communities, then the human beings who were born within them would possess certain higher powers. In the mysteries it was understood what effect the mingling of different kinds of blood would have. The initiates had quite exact knowledge, also, of which family or clan would be rightly suited for a certain region of the earth. And they knew that where a union of common blood takes place, there certain powers are bestowed on the human being that is born.

When the ancient blood relationships began to be broken, a significant event took place in the mysteries. Something else was substituted in place of the parents having common blood in their veins.

In the high mysteries, blood relationship was replaced by the partaking of two spiritual “preparations.” In the lower mysteries outward symbols were used instead of these; and the outward symbols were Bread and Wine. In the two spiritual preparations was a substance that was like blood. They were substances that worked spiritually in a somewhat similar way to the way blood works physically in the veins. As the old clairvoyance gradually disappeared, men began instead to partake of these spiritual preparations. When they had learned all that is contained in the whole wisdom of theosophy, they received these symbols out of Ceridwen's Cup. That was the purified blood that could be given to man from the chalice that opened down to him from above. This Mystery in this true essence passed into the care of a very small community. In other parts of Europe the mysteries became decadent and were horribly profaned. For we find on every hand as the symbol of sacrifice a dish on which a bleeding head has to be laid. It was thought that something can be awakened in man by the spectacle of this bleeding head. What was at work there was nothing but black magic. It was the downright opposite of the Mysteries of the Holy Grail.

It was known in the Mysteries that what streams upwards in the Chalice of the Flower lives also in the blood of man. The blood needs, however, to be made clean and pure again, it must be as chaste as the sap that flows in the blossom. And in these Mysteries that had become depraved, this was brought to expression in a gross and materialistic manner. (In Northern Europe sublimated blood was used as a symbol, and in the Eleusinian mysteries were the wine of Dionysus and the blood of Demeter.) The

Vessel of the Grail turned into an abomination by being made to hold within it the bleeding head — this we find again in the story of Herodias who uses for the head of John the Baptist, making mock in this way of the Mysteries. The essential secret of the high mysteries passed into the hands of Templars in Northern Spain, the Guardians of the Grail.

While the Knights of King Arthur concerned themselves rather with the events and affairs of this world, The Templars were able to be prepared to receive a still more sublime Mystery — even to understand the Great Mystery of Golgotha, which is the secret of the history of the world.

Christianity had its beginning among the people of Galilee — a mixture of strikingly different races, thus a people who stand entirely outside all blood relationship. The Saviour is One who does not base His kingdom in the very least on blood relationships; He founds a kingdom that is quite remote from any such bond. The blood that has been sublimated, the blood that has been purified, gushes forth from the sacrificial death — for that is the cleansing process. The blood that gives rise to sensual desires has to be shed, has to be sacrificed, has to flow right away.

The Holy Vessel with the purified blood was brought to Europe to the Templars on Monsalvatsch. The venerable patriarch Tituel received the Grail; he had been chosen for this beforehand. The victory had now been won. The spiritual in the blood had overcome that which was merely physical.

As long as we regard blood merely as a substance that is built up of various chemical component parts, we cannot understand what took place on Golgotha. How was it that Wagner was able to find the right mood for his Parsifal? It is most important for us to recognize that Wagner was able to do this because he knew that what happened on Golgotha had especially to do with the blood, he knew that we had to see there not only the death of the Saviour but we had to see what took place there with the blood, how the blood was purified on Golgotha and became something quite different from ordinary blood. Wagner has spoken of the connection of the Saviour's blood with the whole of mankind. In his book "Paganism and Christianity" we read these words: "Having found that the capacity for conscious suffering is a capacity peculiar to the blood of the so-called white race, we must now go on to recognize in the blood of the Saviour the very epitome, as it were, of voluntary conscious suffering that pours itself out as divine compassion for the whole human race."

And in another place Wagner says: "Because His will to save was so tremendously strong, the blood in the wine of the Saviour was able to be poured out for the redemption of all mankind when even the noblest races among men were falling into decay — poured out for their salvation, as divine sublimation, the blood that is associated with family or species." The Saviour having come from a mingling of many different peoples, His blood was the symbol of compassion and blood in purified form.

Hardly has anyone even come so near to this mystery as Wagner did. It is indeed the power with which he approaches this mystery that constitutes his greatness as an artist. We must not think of him merely as a musician, but as one who possesses deep knowledge and understanding and whose desire it is to resuscitate for the people of modern times the mysteries of the Holy Grail. Before Wagner wrote his Parsifal little was known in Germany of the mysteries and of the characters of whom he tells.

When men were brought into the mysteries, there were three distinct stages through which they had to pass:

The first was stupidity, simple-mindedness.

The second was doubt.

The third was blessedness.

The first was the stage when man was led right away from every prejudice that prevails in the world, and was made to depend upon the power he had in his own soul, made to depend upon his own power of love, so that he might be able to behold the inner light, to see it light up within him.

The second stage was that of doubt. This doubt comes to all when they are at the second stage of initiation, and is then resolved and raised up to a higher stage, even to the inner brightness and splendor known as “Saelde” or blessedness. That was the third stage where man was brought — consciously — together with the Gods.

Parsifal (“through the vale”) was the name given in medieval times to all such candidates for initiation, and “Parsifal” had to undergo these three stages in inner experience. With the insight of a genius, Wagner saw on that Good Friday, 1857, the guiding thread that must run through the whole development of Parsifal.

The Templars were those who stood for true Christianity as distinguished from Church Christianity. In the Middle Ages remnants were still left of the old degenerate mysteries. All that belongs to those is grouped together under the name of Klingsor. He is the black magician in contrast to the white magic of the Holy Grail. Wagner places him in opposition to the Templars.

Kundry is the modern version of Herodias, the symbol of the force of reproduction in nature, the force that can be chaste or unchaste, but is uncontrolled. Beneath chastity and unchastity lies a fundamental unity; everything depends on the way of approach. The force of reproduction that shows itself in the plants, within the chalice of the blossom, and right up through the other kingdoms of nature, is the same as in the Holy Grail. Only, it has to undergo purification in that noblest and purest form of Christianity which manifests in Parsifal.

Kundry has to remain a black enchantress until Parsifal releases and redeems her. In the polarity of Parsifal and Kundry we can sense the working of deepest wisdom. Wagner, more than anyone else, took care that men should be able to receive what he had to give without knowing that they were doing so. He was a missionary who had a most significant message to deliver — to deliver, however, in such a way that mankind was not aware of receiving it.

Wolfram von Eschenbach wrote an epic on “Parsifal.” It was inartistic, but it sufficed for his time; for there were in those days men who had a measure of clairvoyance and could accordingly understand Wolfram. In the Nineteenth Century it was not possible to make clear to man the deep meaning of that great process of initiation in a drama. There is, however, a medium through which man's understanding can be reached, even without words, without concepts or ideas. This medium is music. Wagner's music holds within it all the truths that are contained in the Parsifal story. His music is of such a unique character that those who listen to it receive in their ether body quite special vibrations. Therein lies the

secret of Wagner's music. One does not need to understand it — not in the least! One receives in one's ether body the benign and healthful effect of the music. And man's ether body is intimately connected with all the movements and throbbings of the blood. Wagner understood the mystery of the purified blood. In his melodies are rhythms and vibrations that must needs beat in the ether body of man if he is to be cleansed and purified so as to be ready to receive the Mysteries of the Holy Grail.

We can only arrive at a full understanding of the quite individual way in which Wagner expresses himself in his writings when we look carefully into what lies behind it. Wagner was convinced that the human will receives a special illumination from the spirit. He said that the will is — to begin with — rude, clumsy, and instinctive; then it grows gradually more and more refined, the intellect begins to cast its light upon it, and man becomes conscious of suffering and through his becoming conscious of suffering, a purification is able to come about.

(Dr. Steiner here quotes a passage from Wagner where he is writing of his friend Gobineau, who held that this consciousness of suffering was the distinctive mark of the white race, and that man was able thereby to rise to clairvoyance and to a higher moral life.)

(Dr. Steiner continues:)

Wagner is here describing the process that consists in the reflection of the intellect upon the will, and of how man becomes thereby clairvoyant.

Wagner's creative work consists, in its essence, of a religious deepening of art; ultimately it is concerned with the deepening of man's understanding of Christianity. Wagner knew that Christianity can be shown forth to the world, best of all in music.

Through raising himself up to the contemplation of the inner mysteries of the world order, man can attain on the one hand knowledge and on the other hand also true piety. A path of development stands open for him, which will teach him to know the meaning of the fact of Christianity.