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1 *The sources*

The quest [for sources] tends to operate in one direction only – away from the masterpiece. . . The effort to retrogress towards the source remains largely gratuitous if the procedure is not inverted and pressed forward to appreciate the point at which source and influence are subsumed in the final synthesis.

P. Mansell Jones, quoted in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. S. Loomis, p. 546

Wagner's *Parsifal* is, among many other things, a modern re-working of the legend of the Holy Grail, the mystical cup of the Last Supper in quest of which the Christian knight must journey through the tribulations of the world. English readers are familiar with the outlines of this legend from the late version of it given in Malory's *Morte Darthur* and reproduced with the muted melancholy of Victorian romanticism in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. It is important to realize at the outset that although Wagner's Grail is indeed the cup of the Last Supper, Wagner's principal source, the Middle High German poet Wolfram von Eschenbach, portrays the Grail as a magic stone without specifically Christian significance. Wolfram's own chief source, the twelfth-century French poet Chrétien de Troyes, has at the centre of his *Perceval* a magic dish which, equally, has no association with the Last Supper or with the cup in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood of Christ. The text of Chrétien's *Perceval* which Wagner eventually read, however, included later continuations in which the Grail had acquired its Christian history. The point of outlining this somewhat complicated genealogy of sources is to establish that Wagner's imagination was seized by a Grail legend full of striking scenes and dramatic encounters but with no eucharistic connotations, and that even when he found in Chrétien confirmation of his desire to give the Grail its Christian force he was in fact reading a later version of the tale than Wolfram's and not an earlier one.

Wagner first read Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* in the summer of 1845. He was staying at the time in Marienbad, on holiday from

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Dresden. Three months earlier he had finished the orchestration of *Tannhäuser*, the first performance of which took place the following October. During his few weeks of relaxation in Marienbad he wrote the detailed prose sketch of *Lohengrin*, drafted a comedy on the Nuremberg guild of Mastersingers, and saw in Wolfram's epic the distant prospect of his last work, of which he was to write the text in 1877, thirty-two years later.

Gradually, and with many intervals during which his mind was full of other things, the vision took definite shape. In 1860 – almost half-way through those thirty-two years – Wagner wrote from Paris to Mathilde Wesendonk:

> Parzival is again very much coming to life in me; all the time I see it more and more clearly; when one day it is all finally ripe in me, the bringing of this poem into the world will be for me an extreme pleasure. But between now and then a good few years may yet have to pass. . .I shall put it off as long as I can, and I concern myself with it only when it forces me to. But then this extraordinary process of generation does let me forget all my troubles.[1]

One cannot discuss the 'sources' of Wagner's works in the same way as one may describe, in the history of other operas, a play or a tale turned by a librettist into an operatic text which is then 'set' by a composer. Wagner conceived each of his works as, from the beginning, a created fusion of words and music; he was capable of maintaining the generative process within himself over decades of his life – *Parsifal* is the most extreme case – until the work was 'finally ripe'; meanwhile his own experience, his changing ideas, books that he read, and the writing of his other works, were brought to bear on the original idea, influencing its complete form in various ways. The process that gave *Parsifal* its eventual dramatic life, the evolution in Wagner's mind of this particular plot and set of characters, this particular imaginative world, is the subject of this chapter.

Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* is a chivalric romance of almost 25,000 lines of verse, written at the beginning of the thirteenth century. It tells, in the rambling and episodic manner characteristic of the period, the story of Parzival's knightly life, from his fatherless childhood in the forest, where his mother keeps him from the perilous world in ignorance, to his final triumph as Lord of the Grail. Wagner, a long while after he had read the poem, and from within the new realities constructed by his own imagination, was very scornful of Wolfram. As he wrote to Mathilde Wesendonk in 1859:

> You see how easy Meister Wolfram made it for himself. Never mind that

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he understands nothing whatever of the real content; he strings incident to incident, adventure to adventure, makes the Grail the centre of odd and peculiar goings-on, blunders about, and leaves the serious reader wondering what he is really up to. . .Wolfram is a thoroughly raw phenomenon, for which his barbaric and muddled period must take the blame, slung as it was between ancient Christendom and the newer order of the secular state.[2]

But Wolfram's *Parzival* is the masterpiece of Middle High German poetry. For all its apparent discursiveness, there is a striking symmetry in its organization, and it reflects a world – that bounded by the conventions of Christian knighthood – in its way as orderly and civilized as any that came after it. What is more, it is clear from all that followed in the development of his own *Parsifal* that Wagner responded strongly not only to the poem's surface, the lively dialogue and glittering description, but also to its substance. For substance Wolfram expresses and understands, even if Wagner later wanted to believe that all the substance was in his own interpretation of a legend naively presented by the poor confused medieval poet.

The real subject of Wolfram's poem is the contrast between constancy and inconstancy, faithfulness and uncertainty, truth and wavering, or however one chooses to translate 'triuwe' and 'zwivel' ('Treue' and 'Zweifel' in the modern German in which Wagner read the poem). The poem opens; 'If inconstancy is the heart's neighbour, the soul will not fail to find it bitter.'[3] And in the long course of the story the ignorant boy has to learn faithfulness to something – the Grail – which at first sight he has understood not at all, and which he then has to find again through the faithfulness he has learnt. Three short quotations will give some idea of the atmosphere with which Wolfram surrounds Parzival's quest.

When the hideous messenger of the Grail, the Loathly Damsel of the English Arthurian tales, curses Parzival for his careless silence in the castle of the Grail, Parzival is stricken:

> I cannot cast off my sorrow. . .I can find no words for my suffering as I feel it within me when many a one, not understanding my grief, torments me, and I must then endure his scorn as well. I will allow myself no joy until I have seen the Grail, be the time short or long. My thoughts drive me toward that goal, and never will I swerve from it as long as I shall live.[4]

Several times, later in the poem, he leaves some scene of victory or comfort unrecognized in his armour as he travels on, his lonely departures conveying, through many adventures, the melancholy of his quest. On one of these occasions Wolfram says: 'They thanked him and

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begged him to stay with them. But the goal he had set lay far away, and the good knight turned his course to where great ease was rare; strife was all he sought. In the times when he lived no man, I think, ever fought so much as he.' [5]

At the conclusion of the whole poem Wolfram sums up Parzival's fidelity: 'A life so ended that God is not robbed of the soul through guilt of love, and which can obtain the favour of the world with honour, that is a worthy work.' [6]

Here was a poet who kept the real content of his story firmly in view, whatever the picturesque sprawl of his narrative. And here was a hero truly after the heart of the composer who had already written *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser,* who hankered obsessively for the purity of renunciation, and who all his life not only pursued with fierce resolution the goals he had set himself but watched himself doing so with pride. It is clear that the steadfast and tormented wandering at last expressed by the sixty-five-year-old composer in the prelude to the third act of *Parsifal* had been, whatever his intervening denials, the deeply sympathetic theme which had seized the imagination of the young man of thirty-two.

There were also, of course, more straightforward debts to Wolfram. Wagner's *Parsifal* – he eventually adopted this spelling, just as he changed Wolfram's Anfortas to Amfortas – has four characters of intense counter-balancing individuality: Parsifal, the naive hero who through compassion comes to understanding; Amfortas, the guilty and suffering king, unwilling lord of the Grail; Klingsor, the evil enemy of the Grail who has corrupted Amfortas; and Kundry, the woman torn by complex psychological strife in whom the destinies of the other three meet and are resolved. Gurnemanz, though his role is the longest in the work, will, as a character outside the intense emotional geometry connecting these four, be considered later.

In Wolfram's *Parzival* only the hero himself is a rounded character seen from the inside, and allowed to develop and change under the pressure of experience; indeed, as we have seen, this development is the central theme of the poem, which might well be called the archetypal *Bildungsroman.* The character of Parsifal Wagner took from Wolfram without essential modification. The poet's several dozen other characters are two-dimensional and without growth; even the knight Gawan, whose adventures form a long digression from, and foil to, the history of Parzival, is unaltered by the ordeals from which he emerges with unfailing bravado. As for Anfortas, we see his pain and – on Parzival's victorious return to the Grail – his cure. We are not made to feel that he

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suffers also from guilt, and we are told only in the most sketchy and external fashion of how he came to grief. He is not a character in the dramatic sense, but a mere figure in the legendary machinery through which Parzival arrives at his triumph. Nevertheless, Wolfram provides the material of Wagner's Amfortas. For example, Wolfram presents the vivid surface detail of the confrontation, full of irony and latent significance, between Parzival and Anfortas, in a word the *scene* from which Wagner could build his character outwards and backwards. Examination of this scene in Wolfram suggests, indeed, that here was the primary spark which fired Wagner's dramatic imagination.

Parzival, brash, impulsive and innocent, blunders into the luxurious splendour of the castle of the Grail.

> The lord of the castle was brought into the hall and placed as he bade, on a couch facing the central fireplace. He had paid his debt to joy; his life was but a dying. Into the great hall came the radiant Parzival. . .The sorrowful host, because of his illness, kept blazing fires and wore warm clothing. The coat of fur and the cloak over it were lined outside and in with sable skins wide and long.[7]

When Wagner first read this, his Wotan and Siegfried, his Sachs and Walther, were all in the future. But the dramatic contrast between an old man laden with knowledge and grief and the careless, ignorant young man who is to be his heir clearly had for him some deep emotional appeal. It is a strong theme of all his mature works, and in *Parsifal,* for which he eventually devised a plot in which the young man must undergo the very same experience as the old, it reached its purest form. This plot is not in Wolfram. For the moment the point is only that in this scene, where the foolish boy sees the wounded king languishing in the castle hall and understands nothing of what he sees, Wagner found the germ of his drama. When he came at last to write it he reproduced Wolfram's scene exactly, and one may even say that the rest of his work is a psychological extrapolation from it.

Wagner's eye for a scene, a telling stage-picture in which characters are suspended in significance like flies in amber, is fundamental to his genius as a dramatist. For years he saw Siegfried, the dead hero, carried from the stage; and from the picture grew the whole of the *Ring.* For years he saw Wolfram's hall of the Grail, the wounded king, the silent, clumsy boy, and from the picture invented the story which binds the two characters together. There is a second scene in Wolfram's *Parzival* which obviously struck him with almost equal force: the knight concealed in his armour who arrives alone in a forest clearing and is asked by a grey old man why he is bearing arms on Good Friday. This scene

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also is reproduced in the opera, its emotional essentials expanded but not changed. Between what became Act I Scene 2 and Act III Scene 1 of Wagner's *Parsifal*, between the ignorant youth of the Grail hall and the weary knight of Good Friday morning, there had to lie Act II, the transformation of the one into the other. To dramatize this transformation Wagner fused into one remarkable encounter several disparate episodes and characters in Wolfram and other versions of the Grail legend.

In a notebook of 1854, where Parzival is mentioned for the first time since the Marienbad holiday of 1845, the pilgrim knight puts in a brief appearance in the third act of a preliminary sketch for *Tristan*. In *Mein Leben* Wagner said of this soon abandoned plan: 'The picture of Tristan languishing, yet unable to die of his wound, identified itself in my mind with Anfortas in the Romance of the Grail.'[8] At this point Parsifal and Amfortas, in their relation of healer and sufferer, are the still active residue of the first reading of Wolfram, gathering significance from the now powerful influence of Schopenhauer. 'Parzival's Refrain = the whole world nothing but unsatisfied yearning', says the notebook entry.[9]

Three years later, the peace of a spring morning in his little house at the bottom of Mathilde Wesendonk's garden reminded Wagner of the second essential Wolfram scene, the homecoming of the pilgrim knight, and he dashed off a sketch for a three-act *Parsifal* drama which has not survived. Houston Stewart Chamberlain in his 'Notes sur *Parsifal*' in the *Revue wagnérienne* of August 1886 says that his sketch contained important scenes to be found in the finished work and also fragments of musical motives. Whether he had actually seen the sketch himself is not clear. A fragment of music written down for Mathilde Wesendonk the following year (1858) and reckoned to be the 'Parzival's Refrain' of the *Tristan* note-book, contains a faint foreshadowing of the eventual Grail theme, and a few words expressing the longing of the traveller who must journey from his first vain encounter with the Grail to its ultimate re-discovery:

> Wo find ich dich, du heil'ger Gral
> dich sucht voll Sehnsucht mein Herze.[10]
>
> Where shall I find you, Holy Grail,
> full of longing my heart seeks you.

Shortly after sending this note to Frau Wesendonk, Wagner was forced to leave Zurich by the explosion of his complicated domestic situation. In the following two years – summer 1858 to summer 1860 –

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in Venice, Lucerne, and finally Paris, he composed *Tristan* and nursed the conception of *Parsifal.* The connection between the two was above all his constant reading of Schopenhauer. In his commentary on this period (his diary for Mathilde Wesendonk and long letters to her) can be traced the progress of his *Parsifal* from its two seminal scenes to almost complete dramatic shape.

By the autumn of 1858 Parsifal's journey from innocence to wisdom is becoming involved, in Wagner's mind, with Schopenhauer's philosophy of pity as the learning and transcendence of suffering. Paraphrasing Schopenhauer, Wagner in his diary contrasts compassion (*Mitleid*) with love, the will to live at its most acute. Whereas love (*Mitfreude*) fastens upon the individual, the particular, and, when raised to its height, is most extremely a matter of the self and the single other (the theme of *Tristan*), compassion is general and undifferentiated and may be extended to the whole of creation. It has to do with learning: 'the point here is not what another suffers, but what I suffer if I understand his suffering. We know what exists outside us only in so far as we can imagine it for ourselves, and as I imagine it for myself, so it exists for me.' At the same time compassion has to do with salvation. 'If the suffering [of animals] can have an object, it is only through the awakening of pity in man, who takes upon himself the flawed existence of the animals and becomes the liberator of the world, above all by recognizing the error of all existence. (One day, in the third act of *Parsifal,* the meaning of all this will become clear to you.)'[11] The place of animals in the argument was important to Wagner and is not irrelevant to *Parsifal,* as we shall see.

In Wolfram's poem, Parzival, on his first visit to the castle of the Grail, fails only to ask Anfortas a simple question that will heal his wound. In all this theorizing on the quasi-religious and epistemological significance of compassion, Wagner, with the help of Schopenhauer, is deepening and making more subtle the relation between his two central characters. The dramatizing of this relation – the filling of the gap between the first great scene and the second with a single convulsion of plot and character – remains a nebulous problem. One hint of its solution is given in a letter of December 1858: '*Parzival* has much occupied me: in particular an idea for a singular creation has come to me, a marvellous woman, a demonic force (the messenger of the Grail), who grows more and more alive and striking.'[12] But in the next long discussion of the slowly evolving *Parsifal* idea, in May 1859, this woman is not mentioned. Parsifal and Amfortas alone are still preoccupying Wagner. He has re-read Wolfram (this is the letter in which he speaks so

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contemptuously of his principal source) and explored other Grail legends. The project now seems beset with difficulties. The Grail, in Wolfram a mere magic stone fallen from the sky, must be given the weight of the stories which make it the chalice of the Last Supper and the vessel in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood of Christ on the cross. This will raise the suffering of Amfortas to a quite different level and give to his guardianship, his wound and his inability to die a moral and religious value of which Wolfram had no conception: 'my Tristan of the third act,' as Wagner says, 'with an inconceivable increase'. At the same time the 'flat and meaningless matter of the question' in Wolfram is only one of the difficulties surrounding the character of Parsifal. 'If Amfortas is to be set in the true light due to him, he acquires such powerful tragic force that it is practically impossible to set a second major character over against him, yet Parsifal must carry the interest of a major character if he is not to arrive at the end as a coldly resolving *deus ex machina.* So that Parsifal's development. . .must be brought back to the foreground.' Here Wagner reaches the nub of his problem. 'And for this I have no option, no broad scheme such as Wolfram could command; I must so compress it all into three main situations of drastic substance that the profound, ramifying meaning is presented clearly and distinctly; for *thus* to work and put across material is, after all, *my* art.'[13]

The second act was the crux, and a third major character the instrument by which Parsifal and Amfortas should be kept in balance and the philosophical content, the learning of and redemption through pity, compelled into dramatic form. By August 1860 Wagner had found his solution. 'Have I told you before that the fabulous wild messenger of the Grail is to be one and the same being as the seductive woman of the second act? Since this struck me, almost all my material has become clear to me.' There follows a long, detailed description of Kundry as she was indeed to appear in the finished work. She is to be the mysterious, haggard servant of the Grail, cowering in corners yet scornful of the knights,

> her eye apparently always seeking the right one. . .but she does not know what she seeks: it is only instinct. When the stupid Parsifal arrives she can't take her eyes off him. . .She is in a state of unspeakable agitation and anxiety. . .Does she hope – to be able to reach an end? What does she hope from Parsifal? Surely she fastens on him some unheard-of claim? But it's all shadowy and dark: no knowledge, only stress, twilight. . .Now can you guess who the marvellous bewitching woman is, whom Parsifal finds in the mysterious castle?[14]

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The excitement of these paragraphs is understandable. Wagner has found his connecting character, by means of whom Parsifal is to be linked to Amfortas by identical experience; and in finding his character he has solved the problem of his plot and its dramatic presentation. Kundry, who has been the agent of Amfortas's fall, will be the instrument of Parsifal's triumph, whereby both Amfortas and she herself will be saved. Parsifal (and the audience) will learn from her the meaning of Amfortas's wound; they will also learn of Parsifal's own past cruelty, in carelessly deserting his mother for the glamour of the knightly life, for the consequence of Kundry's magic ubiquity is deep knowledge. She passes, in a condition of cataleptic trance, from her existence as the haunted, driven servant of the Grail to her role as seductive temptress (though here too haunted and driven) corrupting the knights of the Grail from their chaste guardianship. From her own despair she can be rescued only by one who resists her: thus, as a character in her own right and no mere agent, she has sunk still further into misery through Amfortas's fall, and will be saved for ever by Parsifal's victory over her.

This extraordinary woman, certainly the strangest and perhaps the most profound of all Wagner's characters, is the result of creative meditation at who knows what conscious or unconscious levels of his mind. It is possible, however, to trace some of the elements which fused to produce her, and to show how they came together to meet what Wagner felt to be the underlying psychological requirements of the relationship between Parsifal and Amfortas, as well as the simple dramatic needs of his second act.

In Wolfram's poem, Kundry is the Loathly Damsel of other Arthurian tales. Hideous and deformed, but endowed with magic powers and great learning, she appears at Arthur's court to curse Parzival for his hard-hearted silence at the castle of the Grail. Much later, after all Parzival's faithful wandering, she reappears with the news that words magically written round the Grail have revealed Parzival as its new lord, who will return to heal Anfortas by his question. On this occasion, most strikingly, she is full of sorrow and contrition and weeps before Parzival, begging his forgiveness. The reason for her shame is obscure, since even if she had been wrong to curse Parzival earlier, it was her curse which first showed him that he must seek the Grail again, and which successfully tested his fidelity through his travels. In any case Parzival 'lost his anger toward her and forgave her, but without a kiss.'[15] This is all that Wolfram tells us of 'Cundrie la sorcière'. She is a messenger of sinister aspect whose news is of the Grail and scarcely at all of Parzival's soul. Several other characters in Wolfram's poem, however,

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contribute something to Wagner's Kundry. Parzival meets his cousin Sigune, a sad maiden mourning the death of her love, four times in the course of the poem. The first time she tells him his name, by which his mother had never called him; the second time she reproaches him for his failure at the castle of the Grail; the third time she is a penitent hermit whom at first he does not recognize: she recognizes him only when he takes off his helmet; the fourth time she is dead. All of these encounters are reproduced by Wagner in the relationship between his Kundry and his Parsifal.

The news that he has caused his mother's death from grief by deserting her – the news that Wagner's Kundry gives him in such a way as to prepare his emotions for her own assault upon them – comes to Wolfram's Parzival from Trevrizent, an old knight retired alone to the forest. Immediately afterwards Trevrizent tells Parzival the whole story of Anfortas's wound and how he may not die because the Grail keeps him alive, and may not be cured until he is asked the magic question. Parzival's guilt at his mother's death is therefore instantly compounded and confused with his guilt at having failed Anfortas.

Wagner's Kundry as teacher, bringer of news (*Kunde*), has in her something of Wolfram's Cundrie, Sigune and Trevrizent. As a woman of compelling sexual power she has qualities drawn from other characters in the poem. Wolfram's Parzival, in this at his furthest distance from Wagner's hero, wins himself a wife early in the story and has almost at once to leave her. In the nineteenth-century translations, her name is spelt Kundwiramur. Parzival's longing to return to her is throughout the tale bound up with his quest for the Grail, and his faithfulness to her leads him to avoid all other courtly entanglements. But for all her beauty his first night with her is passed in chaste innocence, and something of the atmosphere of this scene Wagner retains in Parsifal's encounter with Kundry. In contrast to Parzival's demure wife, Wolfram's poem also contains an untameable seductress, the Lady Orgeluse, who, after the conquest of many knights, at last yields to the dashing Gawan whom she taunts with Kundry-like devilment. Parzival himself, anonymous in his armour, coldly rejects her, and, very late in the poem, we are told that she is the lady responsible for Anfortas's downfall. Wolfram sets no high value on absolute chastity, nor does he associate with it the guardianship of the Grail. The tale of Anfortas's wounding is lightly told and Orgeluse herself is a peripheral character in the story of Parzival. Nevertheless, as with all these components of Wagner's Kundry, the surface detail suggested to the composer depths quite remote from the world of the medieval poet. The

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