

# Laughing at the Redeemer: Kundry and the Paradox of *Parsifal*

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“People will say,” [Wagner] remarks jokingly, “that if Amfortas had seen the vision of the Grail and heard the lament, he could have carried out the task of salvation as well as Parsifal!” “But just as a professional task,” say I, “and if Parsifal had listened to Kundry, then she would have laughed, and then everything would have been all right, too!” – Lengthy discussion about this new miracle.

– Cosima Wagner (2:215/2:186)<sup>1</sup>

## I) Opera’s Human Comedy

“I have big hips, and Covent Garden has a problem with them.”<sup>2</sup> Thus Deborah Voigt, after receiving word of Covent Garden’s decision to break her contract to perform the title role in *Ariadne auf Naxos* in March 2004. Director Christof Loy intended to update the Strauss opera in a manner that emphasized sleek forms and placed the protagonist in a little black dress, and Voigt’s remarkable size destroyed the concept. There was an outcry, and it was predictable: fury over the insult to the diva on one hand, defence of the director’s prerogatives on the other. The debate, in fact, soon broke down along lines familiar to any historian of opera, with voice battling text, music battling *mise-en-scène* for supremacy. Yet if the conflict was an old one, then the solution was decidedly contemporary: a year later Voigt went in for gastric bypass surgery, lost a hundred pounds, and was rehired.

Voigt, of course, is not alone, as so many of our greatest singers are oddly proportioned for the roles they play. Jane Eaglen’s Isolde has a large body and a crystalline voice; Placido Domingo’s Parsifal is a husky sixty-something voicing a lost child; Bryn Terfel’s Wolfram is monumentally lyrical. There are beautiful dissonances in opera between ungainly frames and the agile sounds that emerge from them, between aging bodies and the young ones they play. And if a comedy occasionally emerges from such juxtapositions, then it is a very human one; most of us have soaring souls in awkward flesh. It is a wonderful subject for art, this valiant, humbling struggle of bodies and voices, but it was never a subject for Wagner’s art. At least, not by intention. In practice, however, the new wine in the old cask and the canary in the big-boned cage are some of the central features of the Wagnerian stage. And this serious, delightful, profoundly moving human comedy is particularly germane to that music-drama that resists it most strongly.

The profundity and the preposterousness of *Parsifal* are inseparable from each other. Indeed, they are the identical form, seen in different ways, and for at least some of us the experience of watching *Parsifal* can be an uneasy balance of rapture and bemusement, absorption and abstention. Thus can almost any Wagner opera become Wittgenstein’s optical illusion: looked at one way a duck, another way a rabbit. This duck-rabbit doubleness, rising and falling abruptly between heaven and earth, is especially common to the work that is arguably Wagner’s most Schopenhauerian, and therefore most precariously balanced between idealism and biology. Alongside much else that Wagner gained from that bleakest of philosophers, he gained an unintentional comedy of bodies and wills.

## II) The Weight of Genius

There are two kinds of Wagner critics: those who care about Schopenhauer and those who don’t. The former group tends toward a cultural conservatism of the high-modernist sort.<sup>3</sup> Take for example Bryan Magee: “[w]hat has bred such confusion in much of the Wagner literature of recent generations, especially in the literature about *Parsifal*, is that Schopenhauer has remained a closed book to so many people who have chosen to write on the subject.”<sup>4</sup> For Magee, the problem is not simply one of ignorance, but of a general decline of cultural values. Scholars’ obsession with “politico-social programmes” has made them lose touch

with “serious and deep concerns” (279). Thus the short-shrifting of Schopenhauer becomes but one particularly egregious “example of attempts to explain the greater in terms of the less, art in terms of journalism, the subtle and sophisticated in terms of the crude, the insightful and revealing in terms of the imperceptive, and altogether the profound in terms of the superficial” (279).

And Magee is right to worry, if only because the latter group, the ones who don't spend much time writing about Schopenhauer, has become the larger of the two. Catherine Clément, Slavoj Žižek, Carolyn Abbate, Marc Weiner, David Levin – to name just a few recent critics – all mention Schopenhauer sparingly, if at all, in their work on Wagner.<sup>5</sup> And one takes their implied point: what more is there to say? After a century-and-a-half of influence studies, beginning with Wagner's own writings about himself, Wagner's relationship to his philosophic mentor has perhaps become a tiresome topic of conversation, maybe even a false lead: what's *really* going on must surely be elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

The lines, then, are clearly drawn. Or are they? Schopenhauer, after all, was not simply the philosophical inspiration of Wagner and of Symbolism; he also developed a number of ideas (the existence of the unconscious; the relation of the unconscious to repression; the importance of the body generally and sexuality in particular) that would prove central to psychoanalysis.<sup>7</sup> To a degree never before seen in a philosopher, and rarely seen since, Schopenhauer was the thinker of the gross material body, of genitals and guts. More than many of the critics Magee excoriates, and certainly long before them, it was Schopenhauer who attempted to explain “the greater in terms of the less,” “the sophisticated in terms of the crude,” “the profound in terms of the superficial.” Schopenhauer's whole philosophy of the will, indeed, might be understood as precisely this inversion carried out on a universal scale.

There is something almost paradoxical about Schopenhauer's thought, at once vertiginously abstract and as meaty as a bloody wound. On one hand, it would be hard to find a more thoroughly elusive, utterly intangible category than Schopenhauer's omnipresent “will,” the single reality behind the veil of illusion that passes for the world. On the other hand, Schopenhauer's most important development of Kant is this: that he brought the body to bear on the mind, and thus on the world. While, for Kant, we have access to the world only through the lens of the transcendental categories, for Schopenhauer we are able to perceive the world immediately and directly only through our own bodies. It is through the body that we discover the will; as Schopenhauer writes, “My body and my will are one . . . or, My body is the *objectivity* of my will.”<sup>8</sup> Without a body, the “purely knowing subject” might imagine the operations of the world to be merely causal, and would have no access to the inner force beneath all phenomena. For it is only by analogy with the perception of our own bodies that we are able to discover the truth of the will in all things (2:125/1:105).

Schopenhauer struggles throughout *The World as Will and Representation* with a dissonant cultural condition by attempting to reconcile German idealism with the discoveries of nineteenth-century biology (most of all, with the emergent biology of mind).<sup>9</sup> The philosophy that results from this effort can read like unintentional comedy.<sup>10</sup> In his chapter “On Genius” (*World 2*, ch. 31), for instance, Schopenhauer begins in a high-idealist vein that reflects his years of immersion in Plato and Kant. He defines genius as the “predominant capacity” for the perception of “(Platonic) *Ideas*,” the ability to “perceive a world different from [that of the rest of humanity], since [the world] presents itself in his mind more objectively, consequently more purely and distinctly” (3:430/2:376). Just a few pages later, however, Schopenhauer's idealist account of the abstract consciousness of genius turns suddenly, grotesquely corporeal. In order for genius to be possible, we are told, “the cerebral system must be clearly separated from the ganglionic by total isolation,” “even a good stomach is a condition on account of the special and close agreement with this part of the brain,” “the texture of the mass of the brain must be of extreme fineness and perfection, and must consist in the purest, most clarified, delicate and sensitive nerve-substance.” Drawing on post-mortem evidence of Byron's brain, he tells us that “the qualitative proportion of white to grey matter . . . has a decided influence” on genius, while, ruminating on Goethe's shortness, he concludes that “a short stature and especially a short neck” are favourable for genius as “the blood reaches the brain with more energy” (3:449-50/2:392-3). Thus is the German-Romantic cult of the *Künstler* forced into marriage with physiological determinism.

Cultural change is such a complex process that it is difficult to assign a single set of reasons for the sudden emergence of Schopenhauer into popularity in the 1850s, after decades of languishing in obscurity. Certainly the collapse of the revolutionary movements of 1848-49, the consolidation of conservative power under Bismarck, and the upheavals of the Second Industrial Revolution created a more fertile ground for Schopenhauer's relentless historical pessimism than existed in the far more hopeful days of the previous three decades. In light of such sweeping transformations, Schopenhauer's murder of the romantic promethean-man

myth suddenly seemed sensible, even attractive, to a number of intellectuals and artists. His writings have a Gothic sensibility not only in their singular gloominess but also in their reversal, through extension, of romantic idealism. If Kant's crowning of subjective perception was treated as an elevation of the artist to semi-divinity by so many romantics, then Schopenhauer's relentless pursuit of Kantian logic ended up in a frigid landscape littered with body parts and haunted by a single, insatiable ghost. Perhaps most disturbingly of all, Schopenhauer swept aside that centre-piece of bourgeois virtue and that backbone of modern masculinity: willpower. In the face of the Schopenhauerian will, such concepts as "willpower" and "free will" come to be seen as so much flotsam atop a great sea, and consciousness itself is shown to be "the mere surface of our mind, and of this, as of the globe, we do not know the interior, but only the crust" (3:149/2:136).

It is a commonplace that Wagner was never the same after reading Schopenhauer in October of 1854.<sup>11</sup> Critics who discuss Wagner's transformation generally focus on three or four themes: his turn away from the relative optimism of, say, *The Artwork of the Future* or *Siegfried's Death*; his embrace of an ideal of renunciation and the annihilation of the will to live; the central ethical importance he would give to compassion [*Mitleid*] for all living things; and, finally, the increasing centrality of music in the construction of the music-dramas. All of these changes in his ethics and aesthetics were inspired, or at least reinforced, by Schopenhauer's writings, a debt Wagner was the first to acknowledge. Largely unexplored, however – and unacknowledged by Wagner because almost certainly unconscious – is a less thematic and more formal transformation. This transformation may be described as a paradox in Wagner's work: increasing attention to the material body uncomfortably coupled with an increasing disembodiment of the stage. What Wagner's most Schopenhauerian music-dramas (*Tristan and Isolde*, *The Twilight of the Gods*, *Parsifal*) recall is the philosopher's juxtaposition of vile bodies with the most intangible abstractions of consciousness.

This transformation marks not merely the introduction of a new idea or technique in Wagner's work, but a whole new discourse of selfhood. More than this, the discourse it inaugurates will become central to the development of theatrical modernism, taken up and transformed by Strindberg and thereafter by Wedekind and the artists of the Expressionist stage. But to return to the moment of transition, we find this new discourse entering Wagner's writings soon after his discovery of Schopenhauer. Having written to Liszt six months earlier announcing his discovery of the philosopher who has "entered my lonely life like a gift from heaven,"<sup>12</sup> Wagner writes again on June of 1855. The letter opens with a paean to Liszt's artistry and to the miraculous powers of creativity in general. The terms are textbook *Künstlerkult*.

Allow me, best of men, to begin by expressing my amazement at your *immense creativity!* So you are planning a Dante Symphony? And you hope to show it to me, already completed, this autumn? Do not take it amiss if I sound amazed at this marvel. When I look back on your activities during recent years, you strike me as being quite superhuman [*ganz übermenschlich*]! There must indeed be something quite unique about it. But it is entirely natural that we should find pleasure only in creative work, indeed only in that way can we make life at all tolerable: only when we create do we become what we really are . . . (7:203/343)

The letter continues as a celebration of Liszt's genius – indeed, a hymn to the power of creativity itself – until the beginning of the second paragraph, where Wagner suddenly begins to voice his qualms.

And so – a "Divina Comedia"? It is certainly a most splendid idea, and I am already looking forward to enjoying your music. But I must discuss certain details of it with you. That the "Inferno" and "Purgatorio" will be a success I do not doubt for a moment: but I have some misgivings about the "Paradiso," and you yourself confirm these misgivings when you tell me that you are planning to include choruses in the work. In the Ninth Symphony (as a work of art), it is the last movement with its chorus which is without any doubt the weakest section, it is important only from the point of view of the history of art since it reveals to us, in its very naïve way, the embarrassment felt by the real tone-poet who (after Hell and Purgatory) does not know how finally to represent Paradise.

Wagner's reservations here are a long way from his essays of the previous decade, essays such as "Beethoven's Choral Symphony at Dresden 1846," in which he rhapsodizes about the last movement above all else ("we clasp the whole world to our breast; shouts and laughter fill the air, like thunder from the clouds,

the roaring of the sea; whose everlasting tides and healing shocks lend life to the earth, and keep life sweet for the joy of man to whom God gave the earth as home of happiness," and so on [2:64/7:255]). In the intervening decade – and here we must particularly recall the failed Dresden revolution of 1849 – much of Wagner's joy had been shattered. For Wagner in 1856, the trouble with the fourth movement of the Ninth lies not in the limitations of Beethoven's imagination but rather in the impossibility of convincingly representing Paradise at all. Over the course of the second paragraph of his letter, therefore, Wagner attempts to transplant Dante's Paradise in the soil of Schopenhauer. He imagines "sinking into rapt contemplation of Beatrice, [in order that] I might cast aside my entire personality, devoid of will" (7:204/343). Arguing that Dante's vision can only be appreciated now as a historical artefact, he nevertheless expresses the "wish that I could have lost my private consciousness, and hence *consciousness in general* [*das Bewusstsein*], in that refining fire" (7:205/344).

The revision is radical: it is not, as for Dante or for Liszt, sin that must be burned away, but simply consciousness itself. The juxtaposition of Wagner's two highlighted phrases – "amazement at your *immense creativity*" and "wish that I could have lost . . . *consciousness in general*" – neatly epitomizes Wagner's crisis. In the former phrase, he is gazing up at the peaks of the artist-gods, while in the latter he plummets into the abyss of *Thanatos*. What they have in common is vertigo.

At this point in the letter, Wagner is still expressing his death-drive in idealist terms, as a crisis of abstract consciousness. While the influence of Schopenhauer can already be seen in the desire to annihilate the will, the more thoroughgoing influence of the philosopher comes in the third paragraph of the letter, when Wagner suddenly abandons his idealist vocabulary in favour of an instrumentally materialist one. Human organs, writes Wagner,

are created to meet various needs, and one of these organs is his intellect, i.e. the organ for comprehending whatever is external to it, with the aim of using such objects to satisfy life's needs, according to its strength and ability. A *normal* man is therefore one in whom this organ – which is directed outwards and whose function is to perceive things, just as the stomach's function is to digest food – is equipped with sufficient ability to satisfy a need that is external to it, and – for the *normal* person – this need is exactly the same as the most common beast, namely the instinct to eat and to reproduce; for this will to live, which is the actual metaphysical basis of all existence, demands solely to live, i.e. to eat and reproduce itself perpetually . . . (7:206/344-5)

At a stroke, Wagner has reduced the whole panoply of mental functions to mere appetite, and placed the mind on the level of the gut. And while this bleak materialism holds true for "*normal*" people, with geniuses the light shines no brighter.

[S]o we also find (albeit rarely, of course) *abnormal* individuals in whom the cognitive organ, i.e. the brain, has evolved beyond the ordinary and adequate level of development found in the rest of humanity, just as nature, after all, often creates monsters in which *one* organ is much more developed than any other. Such a *monstrosity* [*Eine solche Monstruosität*] – if it reaches its highest level of development – is *genius*, which essentially rests on no more than an abnormally fertile and capacious brain. (7:206-7/345)

The artist-genius, "*übermenschlich*" at the beginning of Wagner's letter, has degenerated into "*eine Monstruosität*" by the end. And not grandly monstrous in a manner that might recall Milton's Satan, but merely a freak of nature, a big-brained baby. An object that speaks more of pity than of awe.

### III) The Paradox of *Parsifal*

For all its attention to the pains of the physical body, *Parsifal*, like the Festival Theatre it was intended to consecrate, strains toward the incorporeal. The Festspielhaus, after all, was designed in large part to eliminate the sight of unwanted bodies, and the three most significant innovations of the Festspielhaus are all connected to this project of dematerialization. According to Wagner's "Bayreuth" essay (1873), the decision to bury the orchestra beneath the stage stems from the need that his new theatre make "invisible the technical source of

its music" – more specifically, that it conceal the bodies of the musicians (9:336/5:333). Further, the decisions to eliminate box seating and to extinguish the house lights arises from Wagner's desire to neutralize the audience's eyesight "by the rapt subversion of the whole sensorium," which "can be done only by leading [the eye] away from any sight of bodies lying in between" it and the stage (9:336/5:333).

In no other modern drama is *Mitleid* so central and so corporeal as in *Parsifal*. For this reason, the usual translation of the oft-repeated "*durch Mitleid wissend*" as "knowing through pity" is insufficient; more accurate would be the more literal "knowing through shared suffering," or "knowing through compassion" (with "compassion" taken to its etymological roots). In *Parsifal*, suffering is passed like a virus across the stage, and its mark is the wound. Two wounds prefigure the action of the drama: the evil sorcerer Klingsor's self-castration, and Klingsor's wounding of the Grail King Amfortas. These wounds, passed from Klingsor to Amfortas, pass again to Parsifal, first as a flesh-wound, later as a deep penetration. The flesh-wound comes at the end of Act 1, when Parsifal witnesses Amfortas lying in his litter, his wound "bursting out afresh": "Parsifal, on hearing Amfortas' last cry of agony, clutches his heart and remains in that position for some time" (10:345). Parsifal's compassion for Amfortas means that he catches Amfortas' wound – not by means of a spear but by means of the eye, not in the thigh but in the heart. The wound returns again as a much deeper cut in Act 2, when Parsifal is in the moment of consummating his oedipal union with the maternal seductress Kundry: "*Amfortas! – – / Die Wunde! – die Wunde! – / Sie brennt in meinem Herzen. –*" (10:358). Here, the experience of the burning wound of Amfortas – or, one might more accurately say, the wound of Klingsor-Amfortas-Parsifal – becomes the catalyst of Parsifal's sexual renunciation and ascension to sanctity. The wound, vaginal in form and grammatically feminine (Parsifal's cry literally reads: "Amfortas! – / The wound! – the wound! – / She burns in my heart. –"), travels from one male host to another. As it travels it mutates, turning from literal castration (removal of the genitals) to quasi-castration (a wound to the side that renders impotent) to symbolic castration (an invisible wound "straight to the heart" that recalls these previous wounds and likewise cuts off sexual passion). This motion from the somatic to the symbolic underlies the work as a whole.

More broadly, both the Festspielhaus and *Parsifal* reflect many aspects of Wagner's post-Schopenhauerian aesthetics. Whereas Wagner had, in his Zurich writings (1849-1857), argued that music should serve drama, he sharply revised that view in the decades following his turn to Schopenhauer. The *Beethoven* essay of 1870 may serve as a mark of this transformation in its maturity. He insists there on the subordination of all three-dimensional arts to the supreme art of music, which is uniquely capable of expressing the universal. Music's superiority to plastic arts is particularly seen in its avoidance of mere gesture. Whereas a three-dimensional art-form

fixes gesture [*Gebärde*] with respect to space, but leaves its motion to be supplied by our reflective thought, music speaks out gesture's inmost essence in a language so direct that, once we are saturated with the music, our eyesight is positively incapacitated for intensive observation of the gesture, so that finally we understand it without our really seeing it. (9:76-7/5:76)

Music, then, does more than obviate physical gesture. It does what gesture cannot: it takes us directly to the heart of that which gesture more clumsily attempts to capture. Blinding our vision of the body, music shows us the body in its innermost form.

A distinction needs to be drawn here between Wagner's turn away from physical gesture in his late works, especially *Parsifal*, and his broader commitment to theatricality. The distinction is necessitated by the fact that the terms "gesture" and "theatricality" have become deeply intertwined within the critical lineage running from Nietzsche through Adorno. As Martin Puchner writes in *Stage Fright*:

Nietzsche and Adorno agree that Wagner's art suffers from being too gestural and that his fixation on gestures, even and especially in music, is an effect of both his theatricality and his excessive reliance on vulgar mimesis . . . Gesture becomes a shorthand for the mimetic actor lingering at the heart of the theatre and, due to the general slippage between anti-mimesis and anti-theatricality, for the theatrical effects the theatre imposes on the other arts.<sup>13</sup>

Particularly in Adorno's use of the term, "gesture" generally refers to a reified mimetic expression, with the *Leitmotiv* seen as the heart of Wagner's regressively allegorical technique. This is so even for motifs that are

meant to represent abstract themes (such as “Fate” or “Grace”), the names of which become allegorical emblems, and so operate gesturally: “[a]llegorical rigidity has infected the motif like a disease. The gesture becomes frozen as a picture of what it expresses.”<sup>14</sup> Adorno is thus able to preserve the term “gesture” even for – in the case of thematic *Leitmotive*, especially for – aspects of music-drama quite removed from the embodied action of the stage.

For our purposes, the trouble with this approach is that it elides important distinctions between stage gestures and the broader category of mimesis. While this elision serves Nietzsche’s and Adorno’s larger attacks on theatricality (understood as mimesis *in extremis*), it obscures a significant transformation in Wagner’s aesthetics. Simply put: Wagner’s theatrical practice in his early music-dramas places music largely in the service of stage action, often making physical gesture the driving force of the total effect.<sup>15</sup> In Carolyn Abbate’s account, the transformation begins with *Tristan and Isolde*, which “introduced mirror effects that led to a radical separation of voice from body.”<sup>16</sup> The voice, Abbate argues, enters the orchestra, which becomes a sort of gramophone *avant la lettre*; the onstage bodies, by extension, are overshadowed by the orchestral creature that sings beneath them. While the *Ring* marks a half-step back from the extremity of the disembodiment of voice in *Tristan*, one might argue that the end of *The Twilight of the Gods* and the entirety of *Parsifal* push the experiment forward once more. Abbate’s argument is complemented by that of Carl Dahlhaus’s 1969 lecture on Wagner’s use of gesture, in which Dahlhaus identifies a transition in Wagner’s work from “outer drama” (centering on physical gesture) to “inner drama” (centering on states of consciousness). Though he sees intimations of the turn in *Tristan*, he ultimately places the moment of transition with the *Beethoven* essay of 1870.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the precise date, what is clear from both Abbate and Dahlhaus is that Wagner’s theory and practice turn against corporeal gesture in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and do so especially in his most Schopenhauerian works.

Of all Wagner’s works, only *Tristan* and *The Twilight of the Gods* are comparable to *Parsifal* in their emphasis on music over theatrical action, yet these two works ultimately rely more on physical gesture than does Wagner’s final opera. (Take, for example, the finales of each opera: Isolde’s love-death, Brünnhilde’s leap into the flames.) Moreover, *Parsifal*’s music tends even more strongly toward the symphonic than does either of these earlier works, and offers a degree of harmonic complexity without equal in Wagner’s oeuvre. The harmonic complexity of *Parsifal*’s score is significantly detached, not only from the action of the drama, but from action itself. Reflecting the concern of the work as a whole with meditative, ritualistic consciousness, the score of *Parsifal* is substantially unrelated to the physical business of the stage. Consider for example the prelude to Act 1, which begins with a somewhat arrhythmic phrase played on reeds and strings, an amorphous theme made more mysterious when joined by A-flat chords. The theme bursts forth for a moment like some hothouse orchid, then just as suddenly dies, before returning again transposed into C minor, altered now by chromaticism, and dying away twice more. While identified by Wagner as a theme of “*Liebe*” (*Sämtliche Schriften* 12:347), the love it suggests is no physical gesture of intimacy – is not kissing, hugging, nor (like the *Liebestod*) explosive orgasm followed by collapse – but rather, like Parsifal’s wound, a disembodied symbol into which the body has been transmuted.

Wagner was concerned, in fact, that his *Parsifal* preludes not be confused with gestic music of any sort. On October 31, 1878, Cosima seems to have made just such an error and was corrected. “He plays the prelude to me . . .” she writes. “It begins like the lament of an extinguished star, after which one discerns, like gestures [*wie Gebärden*], Parsifal’s arduous wanderings and Kundry’s pleas for salvation.” Wagner seems to have corrected her on this point, as Cosima adds the following in the margin:

That is to say, not the lament, but the sounds of extinction, out of which lamenting emerges. – “My preludes must be elemental [*elementarisch*], not dramatic like the *Leonore* Overtures, for that makes the drama superfluous.”

Reading Cosima’s entry, Wagner seems to have been at pains to stress that it is not any dramatic gesture (whether of lament, wandering, or pleading) that the prelude expresses, but rather something “elemental.” Wagner’s new attitude toward gesture is not a rejection of mimesis so much as a shift from the imitation of the body by means of musical motifs to an imitation of that which underlies the body, that immaterial reality of which the body is (like drama itself) a superfluity. Significantly, Cosima notes of the prelude that “none of this could be sung – only the ‘elemental’ quality can be felt here, as R. does indeed emphasize.” Unlike, say, the role of Isolde, which stretched the vocal capabilities of the human body beyond what seemed the limits of

possibility, much of *Parsifal* is meant not to expand the vocal range but to exceed it, and thus further humble the body before dematerialized music.

*Parsifal*'s obsession with the body, a body rendered at once grossly material and profoundly mysterious, reminds us that the work's premiere is roughly contemporaneous with the development of psychiatry. More precisely, the period between Wagner's libretto (1877) and the premiere of *Parsifal* (1882) coincides with the modern medicalization of hysteria. As Elaine Showalter recalls, the modern diagnosis of hysteria largely developed out of Jean-Martin Charcot's quasi-theatrical stagings of hysterical subjects at the Salpêtrière in the 1870s and 1880s, stagings that made a particularly profound impression on Freud, who studied at the Salpêtrière in 1885 and 1886.<sup>18</sup> This connection of hysteria with theatricality was one that Nietzsche had in mind when he accused Wagner of hysterical stagecraft in *The Case of Wagner* (1888).<sup>19</sup>

Wagner's art is sick. The problems he presents on the stage – all of them problems of hysterics – the convulsive nature of his affects, his overexcited sensibility, his taste that required ever stronger spices, his insatiability which he dressed up as principles, not least of all the choice of his heroes and heroines – consider them as physiological types (a pathological gallery)! – all of this taken together represents a profile of sickness that permits no further doubt. *Wagner est une névrose*. (6:3:16)<sup>20</sup>

Nietzsche, of course, knew the potent implications of this charge. Hysteria, after all, was not seen simply as a histrionic disease; it was more specifically a disease of women and Jews.<sup>21</sup> The repressed, Nietzsche suggests, returns in the very form of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. With Nietzsche as a guide, we might say that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a hysterical discourse that displaces its own troubles of bodies and wills onto hysterical characters such as Kundry.

The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, like any totalizing project, relies on a necessary Other, a figure or figures who must be present in order to be excluded. "Given Wagner's commitment to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to a program of seamless aesthetic totalization," argues David Levin in his essay on *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*,

the Jew functions as the structural guarantor of that totality by representing, within the work, that which does not belong, which must be exorcised. We might think of Jews, then, as the "I don't" that guarantees a series of polygamous unions: the reconciliation of language and nature in a non-Jewish artwork of the future; the union of the arts in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; or, more concretely, the union of Walther and Eva, which is, of course, repeatedly (if only temporarily) marred by what must nonetheless be seen as its guarantor.<sup>22</sup>

While there has been some critical debate about how strongly to read the Jewishness of Wagner's Beckmesser, Kundry is a more straightforward case, explicitly identified with the Wandering Jew in the text of *Parsifal* as well as in other writings of Wagner.<sup>23</sup> In her Jewishness – though not only in her Jewishness – Kundry represents the Other upon which the *Gesamtkunstwerk* relies, the Other whose purpose it is to *not belong*. Moreover, since the form of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is late-Wagnerian – that is, is particularly shaped by the late-Wagnerian project of the extinction of corporeal gesture – Kundry's otherness is particularly centered upon her embodied theatricality.

Kundry is a great caldron into which all the necessary exclusions of the late-Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* are thrown. Having taken many forms throughout time, Kundry functions as a Wagnerian totality in negative, assuming and incorporating all the marginalized and rejected elements of Bayreuth into a pseudo-organic whole. Her "special form of neurosis," like that of "woman" generally according to Luce Irigaray's reading of Freud, is therefore "to 'mimic' a work of art, to be a *bad (copy of a) work of art*," "a counterfeit or parody of an artist process."<sup>24</sup> When we first encounter Kundry, she is a wildwoman, the very antithesis of the liturgical *Gesamtkunstwerk*. "*Kundry bursts in, almost staggering; wild clothes tied high; a snakeskin belt hanging low; loose locks of black, fluttering hair; dark brownish-red complexion; piercing black eyes, sometimes wildly blazing, but more often glassy and as rigid as death*" (10:326). From the outset, Wagner clearly marks Kundry – with her fixed and glassy eyes, her loose hair, her wild laughter, her sudden exhaustions, her screaming, and her manic contortions – as a hysteric, an illness that further emphasizes her singular position as woman and Jew on an otherwise male, gentile stage. As Act 1 continues, the Grail Knights refer to Kundry as a "heathen" and a "sorceress," "burdened with a curse" (10:329). In Act 2, Klingsor calls her a "nameless creature," "first sorceress," "Rose of Hades," "Herodias," and "Gundryggia" (a wild huntress of Nordic myth)

(10:345-46). Her identities proliferate still further, as she plays the roles of lover and mother while attempting to seduce Parsifal, and reveals herself, in the opera's climax, as the Wandering Jew, eternally cursed for laughing at Christ. Wagner's decision to make the Wandering Jew a woman of course goes against tradition, and may seem odd until placed in the context of Kundry's overall dramatic function, which is to serve as the receptacle of all that which the opera must ultimately exclude. Through Kundry, Wagner is able to unify the eternal *femme fatale* (itself combining deadly seductress and deadly mother) and the eternal Jew in a single hysterical figure; he is able, too, to stage the rejection, the shattering, and the redemption of this creature, whose last words are "*dienen, dienen*" ("to serve, to serve") before she falls silent and dies. The apotheosis of *Parsifal*, with its unification of Spear and Grail, celebrates an androgynous totality that is a *mise en abyme* of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* itself.<sup>25</sup> But redemptive androgyny is here a discourse that occurs exclusively between men and between gentiles; "woman" and "Jew" must be broken and redeemed, and finally die, in order to be preserved in the higher synthesis of Monsalvat.

Kundry's bodiliness – and therefore her threat to the obsessively sublimated Grail community – is in large part manifested through her hysteria. Certainly her manic gestures throughout the first Act ("*Kundry rushes in, almost reeling*"; "*She throws herself on the ground*"; "*She trembles violently; her arms drop powerlessly*," etc.) keep our attention on Kundry as fleshly creature, half human and half "wild animal" (10:329). Noting that "hysterics force us to pay attention to their bodies," Mary Ann Smart shows that Wagner's music tightly shadows Kundry's movements in Act 1.<sup>26</sup> When she fetches water in Act 1, for instance, the music captures her physicality.

(Kundry ist sogleich, als sie Parsifals Zustand gewahrt, nach einem Waldquell geeilt, bringt jetzt Wasser in einem Horne, besprengt damit zunächst Parsifal und reicht ihm dann zu trinken.)  
(Kundry, as soon as she perceives Parsifal's condition, hastens to a spring in the wood: she brings water in a horn, sprinkles Parsifal with it, and then hands it him to drink.)

The sequentially ascending four-note motif –

captures Kundry's agitated movements. After four repetitions, Wagner increases the intensity by shortening the phrase to its final gesture, and repeats that twice before the climactic chord:



Of the fourth measure of the six-measure section, Smart writes that “we might imagine Kundry turning and rushing back toward Parsifal; the pivot of this gestural arch is marked by a reiteration of Kundry’s motive, hurtling downward and coming to rest as she reaches her goal.”<sup>27</sup> By musically echoing her bodily gestures in this way, Wagner goes against the grain of his late style, making the music, in at least these instances, subservient to physical action. By Act 3, however, Kundry’s metamorphosis from shrieking hysteric to silent supplicant is mirrored in the almost complete silencing, too, of her bodily presence in the music. Recalling Act 1, Kundry goes to fetch water again in Act 3, but now the action produces a very different orchestral response.

The only remaining traces of bodily mimesis are the repeated cello tattoos that punctuate the early part of this scene, suggesting fluttering breath or a weak heartbeat. Once Kundry exits for the water, a gentle rising line is initiated by clarinet and continued by the oboe, and as Gurnemanz comments on Kundry’s transformation, wondering if this is the effect of Good Friday, we hear hints of both the motive of Amfortas’s suffering and the Grail motive, the first time in the opera that Kundry has been associated with any of these crucial musical symbols of meaning and redemption.<sup>28</sup>

Kundry’s journey, from a performance that emphasizes her body to a performance that transmutes her body into an abstraction, reiterates the wound’s journey from corporeal to symbolic form. It is a process that is reiterated time and again over the course of the opera; ultimately, it is the journey of the Grail quest itself – a prize that, as Gurnemanz tells us, cannot be attained by any earthly route.<sup>29</sup>

The curious thing about Kundry’s hysteria – about, more precisely, the hysteria that afflicts the whole Grail community and is displaced onto Kundry – is that it at once focuses attention on the body and renders the body radically mysterious. As Elisabeth Bronfen argues in her study of Kundry, hysteria is a diagnosis that “eludes any precise nosology” and has thus “proven itself a useful screen for the diagnostic fantasies of the doctors faced with their own impotence and helplessness while confronting this medical enigma.”<sup>30</sup> Hysteria serves, then, as an emblem of the problem of the body and the will first wrestled with by Schopenhauer. Performing hysteria – whether on- or off-stage – at once foregrounds the performer’s body and radically destabilizes it, raising the question of who the true actor is: the visible person or the invisible mystery lurking beneath. On one hand, it is this question that *Parsifal* aims to answer by means of the wholesale substitution of symbols for bodies. On the other hand, Wagner, reflecting Charcot’s own practice at Salpêtrière, attempts to cure the hysteria of his stage by means of hypnosis and electricity.<sup>31</sup>

Hypnosis and electricity are unified in the curtain-closing culmination of *Parsifal*, the moment when Parsifal holds up the electrically illuminated Grail. George Davidson, a member of the Bayreuth Patrons’ Association and another observer of the original production of *Parsifal*, describes the effect.

I don’t think it will take anything away from the experience of future audience members if I tell how the wonderful illumination of the Grail is accomplished. When the boy, who carries the shrine of the Grail ahead of King Amfortas, has placed it on the tabernacle in the middle of the rotunda, an invisible wire connection is established that runs between a small Siemens electrical bulb inside the red chalice and a motor [i.e., a battery] inside the tabernacle. This connection is established by a man who has been placed next to the motor and who is also hidden behind the tabernacle. In this way, the previously dark chalice suddenly glows in a red light, while Amfortas in the first and Parsifal in the last act kneel to pray in front of the uncovered Grail. This incandescence continues when both take the goblet into their hands, raise it slowly, and gently sway it in all directions. The effect remains a wondrous one, even if the means by which it is accomplished are known.<sup>32</sup>

Wagner was making use of novel stage technology for this illusion; it was only a year previous that London’s Savoy had been the first theatre to be lit by electricity. If there is any truth to Nietzsche’s charge that Wagner was a master-hypnotist, then this surely is one of the Master’s grandest effects, intended to enthrall both the

Grail community and the Bayreuth audience – intended, indeed, to make the former an idealization of the latter. The moment is Wagnerian theatricality at its grandest, and it is, significantly, an electrified, hypnotizing symbol rather than an actor’s body that is the focus of the last stage image of Wagner’s career. The moment completes the transfiguration from corporeal theatricality, still present in Acts 1 and 2 in the gestures of Kundry, to more fully dematerialized theatricality. The music that plays above it, dominated by the quiet strains of the Faith and Grail motifs, is as far as possible from the explicitly hysterical, musically accompanied shriek of Kundry’s laugh.

What would Kundry be without her laugh? It is not quite the only laughter we hear in *Parsifal* (Gurnemanz laughs at Parsifal’s misunderstandings; Parsifal marches on Klingsor with rosy-cheeked laughter; the Flowermaidens laugh as they seduce), but Kundry’s dominates the drama as no other. It is integral to her character, and was so from the outset. Cosima records that Wagner told her the following on February 16, 1877: “I have made a note: Kundry can only laugh and scream, she does not know true laughter’.” And seven months later, on September 27, as again recorded by Cosima: “I also have some accents for Mademoiselle Condrie, I already have her laughter, for instance.” Curious, here, that Cosima, in transcribing Wagner’s words, should (mis)spell the witch’s name this time with the first two letters of her own name: is it only a French jest, or is it a sign of a more significant desire? If Kundry’s false, screaming laughter was one of her first “accents” to emerge, then it seems to have arisen together with its antithesis, the sighing smile of servility. Wagner’s comment on “Condrie”’s laugh is immediately followed, in Cosima’s account, by another exchange. “You and I will go on living in human memory,” he exclaims. ‘You for sure,’ I exclaim with a laugh.” Thus does Cosima’s laugh replace Condrie’s, and one woman’s blasphemous cackle gives way to another’s worshipful trill.

Kundry’s laughter marks her as a hysteric and a *femme fatale*, and it is central to her character for another reason as well: it is central because Wagnerian theatricality calls it forth. In an opera distinguished by its lack of such connections, Kundry’s laughter binds music closely with gesture. In Act 1, her slander of Parsifal’s mother – “*die Törin!* [*Sie lacht!*]” – is caught in the musical phrase which captures her first laughter of the opera.

The musical score is presented in four staves. The top staff is for Kundry, with the label 'KUNDRY' above it. It begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (D major), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody starts with a quarter note on E4, followed by quarter notes on F4, G4, and A4, then a half note on B4, and finally a quarter rest. Above the staff, the lyrics are '(er)zog sie ihn zum To - ren: die Tö - rin!' and '(Sie lacht.) (She laughs.)'. The second staff is for Parsifal, with the label 'PARSIFAL' above it. It begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps, and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is mostly rests, with a quarter note on G4 at the end. Above the staff, the lyrics are '(der mit jäher Aufmerksamkeit zugehört.)' and 'Ja! Aye!'. The third and fourth staves are for the piano accompaniment. The third staff is a treble clef with a key signature of two sharps and a 4/4 time signature. It features a melody with a dynamic marking of 'ff' and a performance direction of 'Heftig'. The fourth staff is a bass clef with a key signature of two sharps and a 4/4 time signature. It features a melody with a dynamic marking of 'sfz' and a performance direction of 'rallent.'. The score concludes with a double bar line.

Already we find the sudden drop (here from E-flat to F) that will come to characterize Kundry’s laugh throughout the work. In this first instance of her laugh, however, the descending seventh actually represents not the laugh itself but her spoken mockery (“*die Törin!*”). Her laughter, by contrast, is represented in the vocal line by five beats of rest, and is presumably meant to be either pantomimed or improvised (though often, in performance, the stage direction is simply ignored). The transition from speech (“*die Törin!*”) to

Smith, 'Laughing at the Redeemer'

laughter (*Sie lacht*), meanwhile, is marked by a transition from vocal to orchestral scoring. Thus, in this first instance of her laughter, it is not Kundry who laughs, but the orchestra that laughs for her. As might be expected in the light of the *Beethoven* essay, music gives us Kundry's bodily gestures in their innermost form.

It is not until Act 2, when she recalls her original blasphemous act, that her laughter begins to return from its orchestral sublimation. Now it enters the vocal line with tremendous force, and does so in a fashion that unifies vocal and orchestral lines. "*Ich sah Ihn – Ihn – und – lachte...*" ("I saw Him – Him – and – laughed ..."), she sings, making the last word howl.

KUNDRY

Ich sah Ihn Ihn  
I saw Him Him

*trem.* *p* *sf* *p*

*p* *cresc.* *3* *3* *3* *3*

Etwas beschleunigend. und and

lachte... da traf mich  
mocked Him... He gave me

*f* *p* *piu p*

Wieder sehr langsam.

Kundry's huge drop of an octave and a seventh ("lach-te") recalls the drop of a seventh in the example from Act 1, but the line is now, for the first time in the opera, unambiguously one of vocalized laughter. While, in the earlier instance, her laughter was expressed through the orchestra alone, here her laughter is rooted in her body through her voice. Moreover, in what may be the most precipitous vocal descent in all Wagner, he very nearly delineates the singer's range in the space of two beats. Finally, Wagner brings Kundry's voice together with the orchestral line, unifying voice and orchestra on high B, before having the voice plummet unaccompanied into the depths. Kundry's laughter now returns us, forcefully, to the corporeality that defines her, and brings that corporeality into union with the orchestra.

This is the outrageously gestural Kundry who erupts, taking the orchestra with her, at the end of Act 2. Examples could be multiplied, but consider the return of her laughter some minutes later in the scene:

KUNDRY

Un - sel' - gen, Schmach - lü - ster-nen, den ich ver-lach - te, —  
 shame - seek - er, — woe - wast - ed, whom I de-rid - ed, —

*fp*

lach - te — lach - te — ha-ha! Ihn traf ja der  
 laugh - ing — laugh - ing — ha-ha! He fell by his

*cresc.* — — — — — *cresc.*

The sudden drop that characterizes Kundry's laughter has now become a descending, partly arpeggiated line ("Ich verlachte, lachte, lachte, ha-ha!"), but one that once more unifies voice and orchestra, in their unison descents from E to G, from F to A-sharp, and from G-sharp to C-sharp, and in their parallel ascent from G to B ("ha-ha!"). Here the orchestra no longer embodies the "real" drama of which the staged bodies are but shadows; instead, we find voice and orchestra, text and music, drama and will brought into something close to a single expression without subordination. It is this final passage of Kundry's laughter that reintroduces the vocal body most strongly into *Parsifal*, that brings Wagner furthest away from the Schopenhauerian aesthetics of the Beethoven essay, and that returns Wagner most forcefully to the sister-arts theories of his Zurich period. These passages embody Kundry's aesthetic (and more than aesthetic) threat to Wagner's newly Schopenhauerian conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is no accident that these most threatening vocal

gestures immediately precede Parsifal's rejection of Kundry in favour of the Grail, and the shattering of her power over the Grail Knights and the opera as a whole.

While the main thrust of *Parsifal* is toward the translation of bodies into symbols, a demand partly expressed through the dominance of thematic over gestural motifs throughout the work, the emphatically corporeal motif of Kundry's laugh poses an increasing threat to the first two acts.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, Kundry's laugh not only threatens Wagner's larger aesthetic project, but is also produced by it. It is produced by it precisely because that project's obsession with the body and the body's extinction tends toward the ludicrous. Ironically, no one has understood the comedy that arises from a disjunction between consciousness and the body better than Schopenhauer. It is Schopenhauer, in the end, who provides some of the sharpest insights into the threatening necessity of Kundry's laugh.

#### IV) The Ludicrous Remainder

We return to Schopenhauer not because he grasped some eternal truth of humour, but because his theory best captures the ludicrousness of the same totalizing discourse that gave it birth, and that helped to form Wagner's late *Gesamtkunstwerke*. "The ludicrous [*das Lächerlich*] is always the paradoxical, and thus unexpected, subsumption of an object under a concept that is in other respects heterogeneous to it. Accordingly," Schopenhauer writes,

the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a concept and the real object thought through it, and hence what is abstract and what is perceptive. The greater and more unexpected this incongruity in the apprehension of the person laughing, the more violent will be his laughter (3:99/2:91).

In the light of Schopenhauer's theory of laughter, his entire corpus may be seen as a particularly long-winded example of the ludicrous. *The World as Will and Representation* offers the reader all-encompassing abstractions (chiefly the "will" itself) apprehensible only through sensuous particularities. Time and again, Schopenhauer's central claim that we must "judge all objects which are not our own body according to the analogy of our own body" leads him, as it does Wagner, to incongruous juxtapositions of abstract concepts and sensuous objects of perception.

Schopenhauer's theory of laughter has particular resonance for the study of the late-nineteenth-century theatre because it was during this period that the relationship between the abstract and the perceptual became particularly fraught. The developing crisis of representation that would come to define modernism was felt with peculiar vigour in the late-nineteenth-century stage, a medium far more beholden to sensuous material representation (bodies, props, costumes, sets, lighting, stage architecture, etc.) than is the written word. The two most influential avant-garde movements of the *fin-de-siècle* stage, Symbolism and Naturalism, exemplify two very different responses to this crisis. Symbolist theatre would attempt to avoid the increasingly ridiculous juxtaposition of the perceptive and the abstract by entirely subordinating the former to the latter – a movement for which *Parsifal*, and *La revue wagnerienne*, would prove especially influential. Naturalist theatre, on the other hand, would attempt to solve the same crisis by going in precisely the opposite direction, subordinating the abstract to the perceptive such that concrete particulars of environment and heredity, rather than immaterial symbols, would determine stage action. While Symbolism and Naturalism were locked in mortal combat at the threshold of the twentieth century, each captured an element of that increasingly ludicrous concatenation of idealist and materialist discourses called the modern bourgeois subject. The two movements were, as Adorno would later remark of mass-culture and the avant-garde, "the torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up."<sup>34</sup>

It is likely that in none of the *fin-de-siècle* arts was the distance between the abstract and the perceptive so great as in the theatre, a condition to which Schopenhauer's discussion of the ludicrous at least partly testifies. Over the course of his argument, Schopenhauer provides eighteen comic examples, drawn from sources ranging from poetry to oral tales to newspaper reports, to prove his case. Tellingly, almost half the examples – eight in total – are drawn from the theatre. The theatrical anecdotes, by and large, draw attention to the unintentionally comic slippages created by live performance. Consider, for example, the following three examples Schopenhauer uses to illustrate his theory of laughter.

[1] The audience at a theatre in Paris once asked for the Marseillaise to be played, and as this was not done, they began shrieking and howling, so that in the end a police commissioner in uniform came on to the stage, and explained that for anything to be done in the theatre other than what appeared on the play-bill was not allowed. A voice then shouted: “*Et vous, Monsieur, êtes-vous aussi sur l’affiche?*” [“And you, sir, are you on the playbill?”], a hit that raised universal laughter (3:101/2:93).

[2] After [the actor Unzelmann] had been strictly forbidden to improvise at all in the Berlin theatre, he had to appear on the stage on horseback. Just as he came on the stage, the horse dunged, and at this the audience was moved to laughter, but they laughed much more when Unzelmann said to the horse: “What are you doing? don’t you know that we are forbidden to improvise?” (3:102/2:93).

[3] There is the case of the laughter into which Garrick burst in the middle of playing a tragedy, because a butcher, standing in front of the pit, had put his wig for a while on his large dog, so as to wipe the sweat from his own head. The dog was supported by his fore-feet on the pit railings, and was looking towards the stage (3:107/2:97).

While Schopenhauer uses such anecdotes to argue for his general theory of humour, he also suggests, without quite meaning to, that the theatre is a space that particularly lends itself to the ludicrous. It does so because of the many opportunities it offers for accident, and thus for the sudden, unintentional interruption of the particular into a general concept alien to it (a police announcement seen as a part of the playbill, a defecating horse seen as an improvisational actor, a bewigged dog seen as a spectator). In European theatre, the unique capacity for live performance to produce such disorienting juxtapositions has stood metonymically for a broader crisis of representation at least since *Hamlet*, and perhaps even as far back as *The Bacchae*, but never before was this capacity explored so relentlessly as on the modernist stage. Schopenhauer’s theory succeeds, in other words, less as a general theory of humor than as a presentiment of the theatre of the absurd.

At the root of such absurdity is the problem of the body, and indeed all laughter for Schopenhauer is a kind of revolt of flesh against reason:

[I]t is the concepts of thinking that are so often opposed to the satisfaction of our immediate desires, since, as the medium of the past, of the future, and of what is serious, they act as the vehicle of our fears, our regrets, and all our cares. It must therefore be delightful for us to see this strict, untiring, and most troublesome governess, our facility of reason, for once convicted of inadequacy. Therefore on this account the mien or appearance of laughter is very closely related to that of joy. (3:108/2:98)

Predating Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* by over half a century, Schopenhauer describes laughter here as a cruel delight taken by the bodily perceptions in the humiliation of their “troublesome governess,” reason. Though he does not use the word in this passage, the essence of laughter becomes, in his account, a sort of *Schadenfreude*. The irony is that *Schadenfreude* is precisely the emotion that Schopenhauer elsewhere most forcefully rejects. Calling it “the worst trait in human nature,” Schopenhauer writes in *Parerga and Paralipomena* that “*Schadenfreude* is diabolical and its mockery is the laughter of hell” (6:229-30).<sup>35</sup> Schopenhauer’s disgust with *Schadenfreude* is no idiosyncrasy, but follows of necessity from his ethics as a whole, since *Schadenfreude* marks the very antithesis of *Mitleid*. As with Schopenhauer, so with late Wagner. Indeed, it is *Parsifal*’s message of *Mitleid* (in the person of Parsifal) and rejection of *Schadenfreude* (in the person of Kundry) that is perhaps that work’s most obviously Schopenhauerian aspect.

If Schopenhauer’s grand metaphysical project often produces precisely the laughter it attempts to exclude, and does so for reasons accounted for by the theory of laughter his work itself offers, then much the same can be said of Wagner’s own totalizing creation. *Parsifal* may be sublime and ridiculous by turns, but it can only admit laughter in order ultimately to banish it. The ridiculousness of *Parsifal* is created by precisely the extreme juxtaposition that we find in *The World as Will and Representation*: the collision of the most idealist conception of consciousness with the most materialist conception of the body. It is a juxtaposition exacerbated by *Parsifal* in performance, since theatrical performance, with its often ungainly bodies, imperfect voices, and awkward mechanics, always threatens to widen the divide between conceptual and

perceived reality. The stronger the aspiration toward idealist totality, the sharper the threat of that totality's becoming suddenly, unexpectedly undone by the intrusion of alien corporeality. While a defecating horse might amuse audiences at a Berlin theatre ("don't you know that we are forbidden to improvise?"), at Bayreuth it would be an outrage. One can easily imagine the audience response: either fury, or a desperate attempt to ignore the intrusion, or – what else? – laughter. It is this profound sense of dissatisfaction with theatricality that provoked Wagner's famous remark to Cosima about wanting to create an "invisible theatre." Though the joke is frequently cited, often unmentioned is the fact that it was occasioned by Wagner's frustration with the performance of *Parsifal* in particular – and especially with the performance of Kundry.

[Wagner] comes to his *Parsifal* and says: "Oh, I hate the thought of all those costumes and grease paint! When I think that characters like Kundry will have to be dressed up, those dreadful artists' balls immediately spring to mind. Having created the invisible orchestra, I now feel like inventing the invisible theatre! (2:181/2:154)

*Parsifal*, in its attempt to move dramatic representation away from bodies and actions and towards a direct expression of eternal symbols, pursues a thoroughgoing subsumption of concrete perception to abstracted representations. Such a strategy of high seriousness, ironically, replicates precisely the dynamic at the root of laughter and so, like Schopenhauer, Wagner risks becoming risible through sheer profundity. Kundry stands for the necessary exclusions of *Parsifal* not only by virtue of her gender and her race, but also of her laughter, which is (unlike that of, say, Siegfried, Brünnhilde, or Gurnemanz) essentially anti-Wagnerian. Not quite speech, not exactly an act, Kundry's laughter is nevertheless a speech-act, one that condemned her at the moment of its utterance to tortured exile. The moment she laughed at her redeemer is the moment that transformed her to the allegorical form of eternal *femme fatale* and Wandering Jew. Her moments of laughter in *Parsifal* are but further iterations in her age-long recycling of that primary speech-act, reiterations that will end only with her conversion from cruel laughter to high seriousness, and from allegory to symbol, a conversion marked by her silent servitude and followed shortly by her death.

Kundry, in short, haunts *Parsifal* not only as woman and Jew, but also as the specter of corporeal theatricality. Indeed, the combined threat of her femininity, her Jewishness, her corporeality, and her theatricality are inseparable from one another, are in fact mutually reinforced through nineteenth-century discourses that constructed "woman" and "Jew" as distinctly bodily and mimetic types. Through the hysterical gestures that draw attention to her body, through the mimetic relationship between her gestures and the music, through her laughter that brings together music, voice, and gesture, Kundry operates as the anti-type to *Parsifal*'s drive towards dematerialization. She is the unintentional but inevitable ridiculous at the heart of the Schopenhauerian-Wagnerian sublime. Though anti-type, however, she is never allowed to become antidote. Instead, the cure that is offered in *Parsifal* for the crisis of corporeality is always and everywhere sublimation forced to neurotic extremes. The Grail-Spear becomes, in other words, a paradoxical object, simultaneously a product of sublimation and of repression: an obsessive and symptomatic sublimity.<sup>36</sup>

With remarkable if not fully self-recognized insight, what Wagner shows us toward the end of *Parsifal* is nothing less than an addiction to symbols, an addiction that threatens, if left unsated, to turn blood-brothers into fratricides. Before Parsifal returns to the Grail Temple at the end of the opera, Amfortas refuses to perform his office as Grail King, provoking his own order of Knights to turn on him. "*The Knights press nearer to Amfortas,*" demanding that he "Uncover the Grail! / Serve now your office! / Your father commands you: / You must! you must!", and Amfortas reacts by rushing about in "mad despair," screaming, laughing, tearing open his clothes. It is a scene usually directed with foreboding, as the compassionate order, deprived of their symbol, becomes suddenly brutal.

FIRST CHORUS OF GRAIL KNIGHTS

SECOND CHORUS OF GRAIL KNIGHTS

Du mußt! — Du mußt! — Du  
 Thou must! — Thou must! — Thou

Dich mah - net dein Va-ter: du mußt! Du  
 Thy fa - ther doth will it: thou must! Thou

*cresc.* — — — — — 3 — — — — — 3 — — — — — *più f.* — — — — — 3

mußt!  
 must!

(Amfortas springt in wütender Verzweiflung auf, und stürzt sich unter die zurückweichenden Ritter.)  
 (Amfortas springs up in mad despair, and rushes among the recoiling Knights.)

AMFORTAS

Nein! — Nicht mehr! Ha!  
 No! — No more! Ha!

**Lebhaft.** *f* *f* *f* *dim.*

Thus does the hysteria, formerly displaced onto Kundry, come home to the Grail Knights, in their mob-like desperation for symbolic relief, and it centres even more strongly upon their King, whose insane death-drive seems the only alternative to supernatural succour. Kundry's laugh, too, returns, in Amfortas' hysterical "Ha!", marked by a single quarter-note ejaculation. Further, Amfortas' laugh is linked, like Kundry's, to the exposure of his body, suddenly revealed as he tears open his clothes. We hear the return of the unredeemed

Kundry, too, in the “*lebhaft*” (“animated”) orchestral line beneath Amfortas’ “No! / No more! / Ha!”. This orchestral line recalls Kundry’s motif from the example given above from Act 1, most obviously in the rhythmically identical descending lines shaped as a duplet plus a triplet (notated in sixteenth-notes in Act 1 and in eighth-notes here) ending chromatically in both passages. For a moment – but only for a moment – the virus of the wound reverts back to its corporeal origin, and the old, bad Kundry risks returning in the shape of the Grail King himself.

## V) Laughing at the Redeemer

The modernist debate over the theatricality of opera has occasionally been framed as one between two camps, with Wagner and Stravinsky standing as advocates of theatricality on one hand and Nietzsche and Adorno opposing it on the other.<sup>37</sup> Yet the dichotomy, eliding the highly ambiguous and fluid positions of each of these figures, obscures as much as it reveals. While our understanding of all of these figures is compromised by the opposition, our understanding of Wagner suffers the most. Nietzsche’s caricature of Wagner as actor-showman-hypnotist was so evocatively expressed, and captured so much of the truth, that it has become difficult ever since to recall the sheer complexity of Wagner’s position on theatricality. Ironically, the late Wagner, with his sharp rejection of spectacle and gesture, and his insistence on the internalization of music, actually comes uncomfortably close to Adorno. One possible response to this disconcerting proximity would be to argue, as Puchner does, that Wagner’s late rejection of theatricality is essentially a feint.<sup>38</sup> While Puchner’s response is largely correct when applied to many of Wagner’s only superficially anti-theatrical elements (such as the character of Mime, with its displacement of “bad” mimesis onto anti-Semitic stereotype), there are still genuine transformations in Wagner’s views on theatricality when it comes to his more distinctly Schopenhauerian works. These transformations are particularly linked to the role of the performing body, which is subjugated to the increasingly symphonic voice arising from the “mystic gulf” beneath the stage. Kundry is the mark of the performing body, a body that haunts the opera that is its exorcism.

*Parsifal* marks the extreme of Wagner’s effort to close the gap between idealized and real performance, and to do so by excluding the body, so far as possible, from theatrical performance. The opera as a whole is a liturgy in celebration not so much of Christ as of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and more particularly of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* now understood in a particularly Schopenhauerian fashion.<sup>39</sup> The totality that *Parsifal* at once celebrates and attempts to achieve, in other words, is based upon the thoroughgoing translation of drama to music, of the visual to the aural, of the body to the symbol. Unsurprisingly, Wagner intended to have done with music-drama after *Parsifal*, and looked forward to devoting himself instead to the composition of symphonies. The remnant of corporeal theatricality still occupies the stage, however, in the character of Kundry, whose redemption, silence, and death are Wagner’s ritual sacrifice. Kundry’s laughter not only draws attention to her body and reminds us of her hysteria, it also points to the unavoidable ludicrousness of Wagner’s project of idealist totality. In a period when fissures between idealism and corporeality were destabilizing modernist subjectivity even at the moment of its formation, Kundry’s laughter threatens to turn against the redemptive project of the Festival Theatre itself.

It was Wagner’s wish that *Parsifal* never be performed anywhere except at Bayreuth, and to be performed in precisely the same manner, fixed forever like a ritual or a movie reel. Despite Wagner’s wishes, however, his “stage-consecration festival play” has now been performed in places far from its birth, in stagings of which he never would have dreamed, and it has been revived by both transgressions. Theatricality, with its inevitable slippages between text and performance, is often most strongly felt in those works that struggle most fervently against it. While Wagner’s redemptive vision now seems impossible at best and apocalyptic at worst, Kundry’s fleshly laughter at the redeemer continues to be reborn.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> When citing German-language primary sources, I have included the volume and page number of the German text, followed by a slash, followed by the volume and page number of the translation. In cases where I provide my own translation, I have referenced the German source alone. Unless otherwise noted, all excerpts from Wagner's prose writings are taken from the *Gesammelte Schriften*. For the sake of accuracy and readability, I have occasionally modified W. Ashton Ellis' translations of Wagner's prose writings.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Dyer, "In Opera, Size Matters," *Boston Globe* 28 March 2004. For more on the controversy, see also Tommasini's 14 Nov. 2004 and 27 March 2005 articles in the *New York Times*.

<sup>3</sup> Not all critics who take an interest in the relations between Wagner and Schopenhauer tend toward the culturally conservative, however. Exceptions include Lydia Goehr, Paul Lawrence Rose, and James Treadwell.

<sup>4</sup> Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy*, (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 278.

<sup>5</sup> Clément's *Opera: The Undoing of Women*, Abbate's *Unsung Voices*, Levin's *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen*, and Žižek's "The Wound is Healed" (in Levin, *Opera through Other Eyes*) offer some of the most provocative insights of the past quarter-century into Wagner particularly and opera generally, and none contains a reference to Schopenhauer. Similarly, Weiner's important *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* contains just three references to Schopenhauer (despite his influential anti-Semitism) over the course of roughly 400 pages. While the diminution of Schopenhauer's importance among Wagner scholars may be at least partly attributable to simple Schopenhauer fatigue, the same cannot be said for his neglect among theatre scholars. Despite Schopenhauer's enormous influence on the development of the modernist stage, his omission from theatre history is almost total. Oscar Brockett's *History of the Theatre* (8<sup>th</sup> Ed.), John Russell Brown's *Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*, and Christopher Innes' *Avant Garde Theatre*, all works of impressive scope and depth, omit the philosopher. J. L. Styan's three-volume *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) mentions Schopenhauer just once, in a sub-clause on Wagner's indebtedness to "Schopenhauer and German metaphysics" (2:5). Nor is Schopenhauer to be found in more focused studies (such as Frantisek Deak's otherwise excellent *Symbolist Theatre*) of theatrical movements where his influence was particularly central. Even setting Wagner aside, Schopenhauer's importance for such central figures of the modern stage as Turgenev, Nietzsche, Zola, Strindberg, Wedekind, O'Neill, and Beckett has been largely forgotten.

<sup>6</sup> There is another implied reason behind much of the scholarly silence, which is that Schopenhauer's complete dismissal of Hegel in particular and historicism in general puts him beyond the pale of much contemporary literary theory. Added to this was his excoriation by the late Nietzsche and Adorno, and his almost complete neglect by Heidegger and Levinas.

<sup>7</sup> Schopenhauer's anticipation of Freudian theory was occasionally acknowledged by Freud himself. E.g.: "What [Schopenhauer] says [in *The World as Will and Representation*] about the struggle against acceptance of a painful part of reality fits my conception of repression so completely that I am again indebted for having made a discovery to not being a wide reader." Sigmund Freud, "On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement," *Collected Papers*. Vol. 1, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Basic Books, 1959). See also Freud, *Collected Papers IV*, 355.

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<sup>8</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke*, 7 vols., ed. Arthur Hübscher (Wiesbaden: Eberhard Brockhaus, 1946-50), 2:122. English modified from Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), 1:102-3.

<sup>9</sup> The fascination with the brains of “geniuses” was relatively common among European intellectuals in the nineteenth century, with the skulls and brains of Kant, Schiller, Byron, and Schopenhauer, among many others, studied, debated, and held up as evidence for the physiological roots of intellectual superiority. (Indeed, the first biography of Schopenhauer, published in 1862, featured a portrait of his skull alongside those of illustrious figures such as Kant, Schiller, Talleyrand, and Napoleon.) The brains of Heinrich von Kleist and Friedrich Hölderlin were also examined, the latter for evidence of insanity (Michael Hagner, “Skulls, Brains, and Memorial Culture: On Cerebral Biographies of Scientists in the Nineteenth Century,” *Science in Context* 16, no. 1/2 (2003), 206). By the late nineteenth century, “brain-clubs,” in which distinguished men bequeathed their brains to science, were founded in Munich, Paris, Stockholm, Philadelphia, Moscow, and Berlin (Hagner 215). Two excellent studies of nineteenth-century developments in the biology of mind are Hagner and also Robert M. Young, *Mind, Brain, and Adaptation in the Nineteenth Century: Cerebral Localization and Its Biological Context from Gall to Ferrier* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970). The relationship between such developments and romantic idealist conceptions of consciousness, however, is a subject that merits further study.

<sup>10</sup> While much of the humour that results from reading Schopenhauer is unintentional, it should be added that Schopenhauer was also, when he wanted to be, among the most Swiftian of philosophers. The cream of Schopenhauer’s dark wit may be found in his *Aphorisms*.

<sup>11</sup> In his letters and autobiography, Wagner emphasized the “vast importance” of Schopenhauer for his development as a thinker and artist (see, e.g., *Selected Letters* 323, 338; *My Life* 508). The overwhelming majority of critics have agreed with this self-assessment. Magee of course emphasizes the centrality of Schopenhauer to Wagner’s later work (see esp. *Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, ch. 17; *Tristan Chord*, chs. 8-11), as do Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer (Richard Wagner, *Selected Letters*, trans. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 163) and Michael Tanner (Michael Tanner, *Wagner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 100). Ernest Newman is somewhat more nuanced in his verdict, arguing that “Schopenhauer merely reinforced [Wagner’s] emotions and intuitions with reasons and arguments. That, and that alone, was Schopenhauer’s ‘influence’ upon him: but it was the most powerful thing of the kind that his mind had ever known and was ever afterwards to know.” (Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1946), 2:431).

<sup>12</sup> Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 10 vols. (Leipzig: C. S. W. Siegel, 1907), 6:298. English translation modified from Richard Wagner, *Prose Works*. 8 vols. Trans. W. Ashton Ellis. (London: Keagan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1895-96), 343.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 34-35.

<sup>14</sup> Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 1991), 46.

<sup>15</sup> Several of these musical imitations of physical gestures are traced in H. E. Reeser, “Audible Staging: Gesture and Movement in the Music of Richard Wagner,” *Essays on Drama and Theatre*, (Amstardam/Baarn: Moussault’s Uitgeverij bv Antwerpen, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Abbate, “Immortal Voices, Mortal Forms,” *Analytical Strategies and Musical Interpretation: Essays on Nineteenth-and Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. Craig Ayrey and Mark Everist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 296.

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- <sup>17</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Die Bedeutung des Gestischen in Wagners Musikdramen*. (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1970).
- <sup>18</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture* (London: Virago, 1985), 147-148.
- <sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967).
- <sup>20</sup> In his essay "The Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner" (1933), Thomas Mann rendered a similar verdict on *Parsifal*, which he described as "one advanced and offensive degenerate after another," though a work largely redeemed by the "sanctifying, mythologizing power" of its music; Thomas Mann, "Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner," *Essays of Three Decades*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1947), 336-337.
- <sup>21</sup> For the construction of hysteria as a specifically female and Jewish disease, see, e.g., Showalter *Female*; Elaine Showalter, "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender," Sander Gilman et al., eds., *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 286-344, or Sander Gilman, "The Image of the Hysteric," Gilman et al., 345-452.
- <sup>22</sup> David Levin, "Reading Beckmesser Reading: Antisemitism and Aesthetic Practice in *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*," *New German Critique* 69 (Autumn 1996), 131.
- <sup>23</sup> On the Jewishness of Beckmesser, see Barry Millington, "Nuremberg Trial: Is There Anti-Semitism in *Die Meistersinger*?" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3, no. 3 (1991), 247-60; Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 112; Marc Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 66-72; Dieter Borchmeyer, "The Question of Anti-Semitism," *The Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. Stewart Spencer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); David Dennis, "'The Most German of All German Operas': *Die Meistersinger* through the Lens of the Third Reich," *Wagner's Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002).
- <sup>24</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 125.
- <sup>25</sup> The "grand united artwork," Wagner wrote in *Religion and Art*, is a unity of "the masculine principle" of "the poet's work" (i.e., the text) and "the feminine" principle of "music" (10:167/6:165). The most important study of Wagner's interest in androgyny is Nattiez. See Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne*, trans. Stewart Spencer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- <sup>26</sup> Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-century Opera* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 2004), 196.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 197
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 198
- <sup>29</sup> It is worth noting, too, that religious mysticism (especially that of Jansenists and Eastern Jews) was often associated, in late-nineteenth century studies, with hysteria (Gilman 367-79). In this regard, *Parsifal's* lavish veneer of Roman Catholic mysticism may again raise the threat of hysteria (and indeed Nietzsche's attacks on *Parsifal* for its hysteria are linked to his attacks on it for its pseudo-Catholicism). If so, then the Jew may serve in the opera as a way of displacing the hysteria called forth by the opera's embrace of mystical rapture.

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<sup>30</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, *New German Critique*, No. 69, Richard Wagner (Autumn, 1996), 149.

<sup>31</sup> The reflection is clearly unintended, since Wagner seems to have been unaware of Charcot's experiments. But this is not to say that the coincidence of Wagner and Charcot's parallel stagings of hysteria, hypnotism, and electricity is accidental. Both are drawing on broader nineteenth-century discourses of the curative properties of electricity and hypnotism. For more on the development of these discourses, see Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Timothy Lenoir, "Models and Instruments in the Development of Electrophysiology, 1845-1912," *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences* 17, no. 1 (1986), 1-54; Felicia McCarren, "The 'Symptomatic Act' circa 1900: Hysteria, Hypnosis, Electricity, Dance," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 4 (Summer 1995), 748-74.

<sup>32</sup> George Davidson, *Bayreuther Briefe. Augenblicksbilder aus den Tagen der Patronatsaufführungen des "Parsifal"* (Leipzig: publisher unknown, 1882).

<sup>33</sup> In this way, *Parsifal* essentially duplicates Freud's own gendering of sublimation as work from which women are largely excluded, repression and hysteria being more congenial to women. See esp. Irigaray's critique of Freud on this point (123-27).

<sup>34</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Correspondence with Benjamin," trans. Harry Zohn, *New Left Review* 81 (1972), 66.

<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that Wagner read the *Parerga and Paralipomena* as well as *The World as Will and Representation* (Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1946), 2:431).

<sup>36</sup> I am particularly influenced here by Doane's critique of the Freudian opposition between sublimation and repression (249-67).

<sup>37</sup> This dichotomy is well expressed in Puchner 39.

<sup>38</sup> "[W]e should not understand [the depiction of Mime's deceptive theatricality], or any of Wagner's other doubts [about theatricality], as a revocation of his total theatricalization of the work of art. Mime does not prove that Wagner envisions an essentially nonmimetic and nontheatrical art. What he shows instead is Wagner's anxiety about false mimesis and false theatricality, an anxiety that is deeply rooted precisely because Wagner's entire conception of the work of art is based on such theatrical and mimetic gestures. Wagner and the audience can safely laugh about the dilemma in which Mime is caught without having to acknowledge that perhaps a similar kind of theatrical mimesis, theatrical gestures, and gestural music lies at the heart of Wagner's entire oeuvre" (Puchner 51).

<sup>39</sup> For more on *Parsifal* as a liturgy in celebration of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, see my *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), ch. 2.