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Salvation in Love. *'Tristan und Isolde' by Richard Wagner*

In his book *L'Amour et l'Occident*, Denis de Rougemont wrote:

While composing *Tristan*, Wagner broke a taboo: he said everything; he disclosed everything in the libretto and, even more, in the music. He sang the Night of the diffusion of shapes and beings and the liberation from the power of desire, he cursed lust and extolled the glory of dusk, hugely plaintive in its lament, and at the same time the blessed glory of the soul, saved thanks to a lethal wound of the body. However, in order to welcome the enchanting sense of this mission, it had to be contradicted. It had to be dressed in a different robe, interpreted in an acceptable way, that is, in the name of common sense. The stunning mystery of the Night and the destruction of bodies had to be changed into the 'sublimation' of the poor secret of the full of the Day: sexual appeal, the purely savage right of the body, whatever a towny needs in order to feel the rhythm of life... The fact that it could be accomplished so quickly and completely does not prove any extraordinary social vitality, but rather the frivolity of the ordinary theatre-going public, its ponderous sentimentality and – if truth be known – exceptional ability to misunderstand what is being sung to them. It all made the operation even easier. In this way Wagner's *Tristan* can be played with impunity before affected auditoria. There is no risk involved; for such is the general certainty that no-one will grasp the essence of the work.¹

Although de Rougemont's harsh and insightful opinion – showing how Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* was treated – may seem a little exaggerated today, and in some minds it might even arouse the suspicion that he was ostentatiously underestimating the analytical capacities of theatrical thought as broadly understood, capable, after all, of appreciating the value of a great dramatic-musical work, it cannot be denied that it characterises very accurately the essence of the problem under discussion. It makes us acutely aware of how the deepest meaning of *Tristan und Isolde* – that unusual 'mystery of the Night and the destruc-

¹ Denis de Rougemont, *Miłość a świat kultury zachodniej* [Love and the Western World; Fr. orig. *L'Amour et l'Occident*, 1939], trans. Lesław Eustachiewicz (Warsaw, 1999), 175-176.

tion of bodies' – was distorted. De Rougemont simply refused to leave the mythical dimension of Wagner's work on the margin of his reflections. In his concept, Wagner's *Tristan* was to be the moment of a distinct turning point. When we try to elaborate a more objective standpoint, it is not surprising that the conclusion which de Rougemont reached did not immediately arouse the interest which it certainly deserved. Its significance could not have been fully taken in for a long time, since it is also difficult to grasp all those things that Wagner's drama is really about. Most importantly, however (and this is what we should begin with here), de Rougemont's opinion was a clear contradiction of a view which itself was already a contradiction of another view that was even more critical towards the literary material itself and, consequently, towards the message of the medieval legend.

That view, widespread in the nineteenth century (before it was eventually rejected, persistent efforts were made to assimilate the dramatic conflict between bourgeois morality and the morality of Tristan and Isolde), was related directly to the rediscovery of Gottfried of Strassburg's epic, and indirectly to the birth of German philology in Germany. And to this day, it has been an outstanding example from the history of the reception of medieval artistic material. For irrespective of the enthusiasm that the actual literary work has generated, its message was always severely criticised. From the point of view of bourgeois morality, it was impossible to accept, it was insulting to accepted mores and endangered the 'civic theology' (*theologia civilis*)² of the time. Tristan and Isolde's story is not only the most famous love story which 'survived for centuries and is retold and performed again and again',³ but also... a story of adultery. Egon Voss says: 'The more impressed that leading Germanists and literary scholars were with Gottfried's style and his way with words, the more they reproved the events he depicted.'

Karl Lachmann, one of the architects of early German philology, wrote about Gottfried in 1820: 'the main parts of his salacious, effeminate story do not offer anything except for exuberance and blasphemy'.⁴ Georg Gottfried Gervinus concurred in his *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur*, well-known to Wagner: 'What comes now is unable to evoke anything else but revulsion. If we were finally to add some judgment [about this work], we would be unable to give any other save that

² The term 'civic theology' is used here in the sense which Thomas Hobbes gave it, in accordance with the terminology used by political philosophy. See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, 1952).

³ Egon Voss, 'Tristan: Die Liebe als furchtbare Qual', in *Wagner und kein Ende. Betrachtungen und Studien* (Zürich, 1996), 91.

⁴ *Ibid.*

which Dante gave on things of this sort: we must curse [them], but also admire and regret'.⁵ Karl Goedecke, a representative of the younger generation of Germanists of that time, also did not conceal how impressed he was by Gottfried as a wordsmith and stylist: '[...] however, similarly to Lachmann and Gervinus, he wrote, complaining about the content: "all these plays are devoted to one type of material, which is indecent". Thus, the opinion would appear to have been widespread.'⁶

Just how widespread it was may be proved not only by everything which was written after the first night of Wagner's *Tristan* in Munich (1865), or by the opinion expressed by Wagner's first wife, Minny, in 1861 ('They are and will be a couple too much in love and too disgusting'), but also by the events which took place in opera and drama at that time, and which must evoke astonishment. Voss quoted two meaningful examples, although it would not be difficult to find more of the same. The first is Gaetano Donizetti's comic opera *L'elisir d'amore*, where Isolde is presented as 'a terribly beautiful woman who rejects with increasing force a Tristan who courts her gamely and is distressed by her rejection'.⁸ Tristan and Isolde will not become a couple even under the power of a (false) elixir, 'offered' to Tristan by an itinerant quack, Dulcarnum. Voss remarks that the title of Donizetti's opera refers directly to *Tristan and Isolde* and that the opera itself is rather a meaningful distortion of the main idea of the medieval legend.⁹ The case of the other example does not seem any better. *König Mark und Isolde* by Juliusz Mosen, which was well-known to Wagner, also presents a meaningful distortion. In this version of the legend, Isolde arrives at King Mark's court and immediately admits the love that the love potion has inspired in her for Tristan: 'She accuses herself, and Mark punishes her and turns his back on her. The last strophe of the poem, uttered by Mark, sounds as follows: 'Give her a hair shirt,/ Cut off her locks,/ Give her a lamp,/ As the grave is dark'. It is not clear what the punishment is like, but one thing is certain: Isolde is excluded from the community. She alone is to blame, as Tristan is not mentioned. This corresponds to bourgeois morality as practiced in the nineteenth century.'¹⁰

Such is roughly the background against which we can examine the creation and the meaning of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, although we must not assume that Wagner was the first composer who dared to break a social taboo, adapting the story of the most popular couple of lovers for

⁵ Cit. after Voss, 'Tristan', 91.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cit. after Voss, 'Tristan', 92.

⁸ Ibid., 92.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 93.

the stage. In 1846 Robert Schumann intended to do just that. The poet Robert Reinick wrote him a script in five acts, but these plans were never realised. Nevertheless, it cannot be excluded that Wagner was aware of these plans. It can even be assumed that he may have witnessed them, as the events took place in Dresden, where he was working as a conductor at the opera house. Wagner might have discussed the same problems with Schumann, in the circle of Dresden artists whose patron in 1845–1846 was Ferdinand Hiller. It is known from other sources that in this very circle the composer read the dramatic text of his *Lohengrin* for the first time. Apparently, discussing artistic plans was not rare, and engendered no fear about rival artists. In the story of the composing of *Tristan*, we should not overlook the fact that – leaving aside the troublesome relationship between Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck, as well as the trouble connected with the increasingly complicated process of composing *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* (the music written by Wagner at the time did not suit the character of the music of *The Ring*, according to Werner Breig¹¹) – Wagner received the most important impulse for his work on *Tristan* from Karl Ritter, who was, *nota bene*, Schumann's apprentice. His dramatised *Tristan* has not survived, but we are familiar with a description of the text included in Wagner's *Mein Leben*, which tells us, among other things: 'while I immediately felt drawn to the deep tragedy, he stopped at the frivolous stages of the story'.¹² Wagner, as Voss concludes, 'not only took up the literary material, as happens when an epic is dramatised, but he also tried to make it noble, interpreting the events, which were generally considered indecent, to be deeply tragic. A love tragedy took the place of a story of adultery'.¹³

Probably at that moment, the change mentioned by de Rougemont, quoted at the beginning of this text, became gradually visible. Wagner may have broken a social taboo, but the opinion about the salaciousness of the legend of Tristan and Isolde was soon replaced with a new view, equally extreme, in which a decisive role was played by the connection of the Tristan myth with the sphere of 'pure sensuality': 'The stunning mystery of the Night and the destruction of bodies had to be changed into the "sublimation" of the poor secret of the full of the Day: sexual appeal, the purely savage right of the body, whatever society needs to multiply and strengthen itself'.¹⁴ For de Rougemont, this was synonymous with a new

¹¹ See Werner Breig, 'Wagners kompositorisches Werk', in *Richard-Wagner-Handbuch*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski (Stuttgart, 1986), 435–436.

¹² Cit. after Voss, 95.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ See above, n. 1.

attempt to distort the deep message of the medieval myth, all the more harmful because, although the role of 'sexual appeal' as an irresistible power manifested in interpersonal relations was readily emphasised (and who knows whether Sigmund Freud's later statements were not just a testimony of the historical 'climate of ideas'), the spiritual dimension of the message was completely misunderstood. It was necessary to reduce it, to replace it with something which the bourgeois consciousness could accept. Thus, the fact that the most important role in Wagner's *Tristan* is played by the interior, rather than the exterior, action, as Wagner himself did not fail to emphasise in the subtitle of his drama, '*Die Handlung*', which was only a rare way of Germanizing the Greek word *drama*¹⁵ had to remain marginal. The primacy of the internal action made Stefan Kunze, discussing the relationship between the internal and the external in Wagner's *Tristan*, state the following: 'Wagner's drama is aptly considered a work which with unusual consequence and even in an extreme way enters the sphere of the internal'.¹⁶ Isolde's final song in Act III is certainly the best confirmation of these words.

The conviction, regarded by de Rougemont as fundamental, that 'Wagner restored the lost sense of the legend in its very venomousness',¹⁷ doubtless also escaped the attention of many observers interested in the problem. De Rougemont did not think that it required any proof, concluding: 'it need not be advanced as a thesis, for it is a certainty eloquently declared by the music and the text of the opera. Thanks to the opera, the myth became complete. However, this statement contains an ambiguity that is so characteristic of almost all the terms of the dictionary of human existence when they try to describe existence in the state of action, and not objects. Completion means the full expression of the existence of a living creature, the full expression of a myth or an artistic work, but on the other hand it means death. In that way the myth "completed" by Wagner died.'¹⁸

¹⁵ Cf. Peter Wapnewski, *Richard Wagner. Die Szene und ihr Meister* (Munich, 1978), 35.

¹⁶ Stefan Kunze, 'Innenwelt und Außenwelt im "Tristan"', *Programmhefte der Bayreuther Festspiele*, 1983, vol. 6, 1. Wagner saw it in the same way when he wrote in *Zukunftsmusik*: 'I am certainly immersing myself only in the depths of intimate states of the soul; beginning at the most intimate centre, I am shaping the world of exterior forms [...] the world of life and death, the whole meaning and existence of the outside world, dependent here in everything on the internal emotions of the soul. The whole of the staggering action is manifest through the fact that it is desired by that which is most internal in the soul; it is revealed insofar as it is shaped from inside [by the soul - K.K.]'. Cit. after Kunze, 'Innenwelt', 1.

¹⁷ Rougemont, *Miłość a świat kultury zachodniej*, 178.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

'The time of its ghostly reflections'¹⁹ began. These reflections were increasingly manifest in numerous, albeit artistically highly diverse, editions. Outstanding works were ultimately displaced by works that were entirely ineffectual, in which 'a willingness to play with the myth, but without paying too high a price'²⁰ was strongly manifest. Earlier, however, there came an intermediate phase, in which efforts were made to bring about 'the normalisation of passionate feelings' and to 'create their conventional expression, which might be accepted in the conditions of social order. This is what the theatre from Alexander Dumas (*films*) to Georges Bataille is like. The famous 'triangle' – a model used by almost all dramatic authors before 1914 – is just an adaptation of the myth about Tristan in the mould of modern society. King Mark became a cuckold, Tristan a romantic lead or 'gigolo', and Isolde an unsatisfied wife, leading the idle existence of a romance reader.

Here once again two moralities are confronted. The treacherous barons of legend become guardians of a conformist morality. They defend bourgeois marriage, inheritance, conventions and order. They are on the side of the husband, and are therefore amusing. However, it is the opposite morality that triumphs. And what is more, it triumphs regularly – even if it's at the cost of a gunshot. That opposite morality is Romanticism, the rights of love not included in the code, according to which the 'spiritual' superiority of a lover over a wife is assumed.²¹

It is not difficult to notice, however, that this line of thought strays from the vital content of Wagner's *Tristan*, and one would rather be obliged to put it aside were it not for the fact that, as a 'ghostly reflection' of the Tristan myth, it is in distinct contrast to that content. The contrast is significant enough to let us see what Wagner's *Tristan* is not, and how its uniqueness should be comprehended. It also shows in an interesting light the origin of numerous interpretational clichés still functioning today. Abandoning these clichés may lead us to 'the lost sense of the legend in its very venomousness'... without the need to express our opinion as to whether the historical perspective of the problem proposed by de Rougemont is correct and whether it is really as closely connected with Wagner's work as he himself suggests.

The most important issue is only the question as to what extent that mythological 'lost sense of the legend' can be captured in the musical drama; only later may the further question arise as to what Wagner himself might have expected. Constantin Floros wrote of Wagner most aptly that his 'central theme'²² was 'the love which saves the world' – a love

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Constantin Floros, 'Der "Beziehungsauber" der Musik im "Ring des Nibelungen" von Richard Wagner', in *Musik als Botschaft* (Wiesbaden, 1989), 38.

which, as Oskar Miłosz poetically puts it, imparts a sense of ‘terrifying and latent affection’²³ to the music he created. Moreover, in Floros’s opinion all Wagner’s dramas, ‘from *Der fliegende Holländer* to *Parsifal*, are ultimately nothing else but a variation on the same theme’.²⁴ In order to comprehend this in the case of *Tristan*, which also means understanding its mythical message, we need to look more closely at those scenes of the work in which the interpenetration of the music and the dramatic text, as well as the theatrical vision contained immanently in both of these (not only in the dramatic text), seems to be of definitive significance for the work.

On account of the musical idea presented at the beginning of the drama (the Vorspiel) and in the conclusion, it will be best to start from Isolde’s last ‘song’ or, even better, from the climactic point of that ‘Verklärung im Liebestod’ (bar 1676 ff). This is because everything that happens in the musical and literary dimensions of the work, as well as on the stage (unless the producer intends to stand in blatant contradiction with the immanent ‘performer’s plan’²⁵), is the culmination of a long process, ceaselessly aiming at the unattainable, which – as it may be concluded on the basis of the previous harmonic course – becomes forever connected with unfulfilled yearning (Example 1).

‘The harmonic foundation for the “Verklärung im Liebestod” – as William Kinderman wrote in ‘Das “Geheimnis der Form” in Wagners “Tristan” – replaces the Tristan chord with the delay of a chord in B major [Vorhalt-Akkord], closely related to it. This delay shares all its notes with the Tristan chord, with one significant exception: F, the lowest sound of the Tristan chord, is here replaced with F sharp’.²⁶

This difference means the character of the whole chord alters, and, as a consequence, the key of this passage alters too. According to Kinderman, the fact that F disappears in the structure of the Tristan chord means that it becomes clearer and simplified.

²³ Oskar Miłosz, ‘*Ars Magna*’, in *Storge*, trans. and introd. Czesław Miłosz (Kraków, 1993), 44.

²⁴ Floros, ‘Der “Beziehungszauber”’, 38.

²⁵ See Jerzy Ziomek, ‘Projekt wykonawcy w dziele literackim a problemy geneologiczne’ [The performer’s plan in a literary work vs. geneological problems], in *Powinowactwa literatury. Studia i szkice* [Literary affinities. Studies and sketches] (Warsaw, 1980), 114 ff.

²⁶ William Kinderman, ‘Das “Geheimnis der Form” in Wagners “Tristan”’, *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 40/3 (1983), 185. In the corresponding moment of the early part of the Liebestod ‘we can hear a chord in B major, which is preceded by a subdominant – a harmonic formula which points to the closing plagal cadence’ (ibid., 185–186).

Example 1

Süß in Düften mich ver_hau - chen? In dem wo - genden
 Schwall, in dem tö - nenden Schall, in des Welt -
 A - themis we - hen - dem

cresc.
mf
rit.

Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III, bars 1676–1683

We do not have here the extraordinary cadence in B major (which – as we know – was moved to the last bars of the work). Its long-awaited, but far from obvious, appearance is preceded by a reminiscence of the Tristan chord (bar 1695), which will not now evoke the chromatic progression so frequent in *Tristan* and which, it should be emphasised, will be presented in its original form and characteristic instrumentation (oboe, cor anglais, bassoon, first and second violins);

a novelty here is the use of the harp, which rested for almost the whole of Act III.²⁷ However, this time – unlike previously – the Tristan chord is clearly connected with the key of B major. This is clearly, and at the same time gently, shown by the note B in the bass, which lends an appearance of stability and ‘prevents the Tristan chord from being led onto the dominant seventh in A minor, as occurred in the opening bars of the drama. Instead, it is led onto a triad in the E minor of the plagal cadence. ‘The Tristan chord’, as Kinderman recapitulates, ‘the symbol of the lovers’ unfulfilled longing, which is present throughout the whole drama, is resolved together with the appearance of an explicit chord in B major’²⁸ (Example 2). According to Hermann Levi, the first conductor of *Parsifal*, it was the chord in B major which was orchestrated in the most beautiful way.²⁹

Example 2

segnet die Leichen.)

morendo

pp

rallentando

(Der Vorhang fällt während der letzten Fermate.)

V. A. 524.

Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III, bars 1692–1699.

Considering the composition of the work, this means that, if we take seriously Wagner’s confession in a letter to Wesendonck of 29 October 1859, referring to his own musical art as ‘an art of passing’ (‘Kunst des

²⁷ See Egon Voss, *Studien zur Instrumentation Richard Wagners* (Regensburg, 1970), 220 (*Studien zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhundert*, 24).

²⁸ Kinderman, ‘Das “Geheimnis”’, 186.

²⁹ Cf. Martin Vogel, *Der Tristan-Akkord und die Krise der modernen Harmonielehre* (Düsseldorf, 1962), 134.

Überganges'), then we perceive here (from a macroformal perspective) a kind of 'gigantic passing' or 'dualism of tonality encompassing the whole work'.³⁰ Alfred Lorenz, who tried to avoid it at all costs and, at the same time, was really surprised by the fact that Wagner had concluded his *Tristan* in a different key from the implied initial key, attempted to suggest that the proper key of the work (its 'ideal key') is the key of E major. The trouble is that in the whole work this key appears very seldom (according to Lorenz, only once) and that the work does not sound as if it had a dominant (in E major) at the end. Of course, this is not the proper place to settle – if it is at all possible – the dispute in any way. Suffice it to say that Kinderman's concept seems to suggest a better solution, considering the entirety of Wagner's work. Therefore, Wagner's attempt at a transition into B major appeared earlier, namely in the love duet in Act II. If the transition is ultimately unsuccessful, this is because it was interrupted by an external event: the arrival of King Mark and Melot and the light of the breaking day. There was too little time, as Wagner needed to create a situation for making the dramatic tension even greater and, in particular, for highlighting as much as possible the internal action. 'If Wagner', adds Kinderman, 'delays introducing the key of B major until the climax of the Liebestod, he thereby creates a powerful formal relation which encompasses the whole dramatic course'.³¹ It is additionally enhanced by the fact that both elements, i.e. the love duet and the climax of the Liebestod, present

the metamorphosis of an important musical idea, which could be heard for the first time at the beginning of the Vorspiel in Act I. The love duet and the Liebestod contain the introduction shaped in a totally new way, such that [in the Liebestod] it gains stability and is presented in a complete formula. The movement towards stability results in Tristan and Isolde's deepest yearning being identified with the desire to become immersed in the everlasting night.³²

In the climax of the Liebestod (Example 1), as in the introduction, we hear that chromatic progression, beginning from G sharp. In spite of some contrasts (above all, the chromatically rising melodic line is not led either by the strings or by the woodwind instruments alone, but is simultaneously complemented by both groups of instruments), its similarity to the initial sequence of the first seventeen bars is obvious (Example 3).

³⁰ Kinderman, 'Das "Geheimnis"', 187.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

³² *Ibid.*, 182–183.

Example 3

Langsam und schmachkend.

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system begins with the tempo marking 'Langsam und schmachkend.' and a piano (pp) dynamic. The second system includes a crescendo (cresc.) marking and a piano (p) dynamic. The third system features a piano (pp) dynamic and a pizzicato (pizz.) marking. The score is written for piano and bass staves.

Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Vorspiel to Act I, bars 1–17

It becomes clear what this means when we examine the role played by this sequence in the crucial moments of the action, disregarding the Tristan chord, the appearance of which ceaselessly summons, or – depending on one’s view – generates, the sequence. As a matter of fact, Wagner introduced this sequence at the end of all the acts of the drama. In Act I it accompanies Isolde’s words ‘Ich trink’ sie dir’³³ (bar 1649) and – taken in total – it stretches out to forty-five bars, twenty-six of which include a direct repetition. Its second repetition appears immediately after King Mark’s complaint (Act II, Scene 3), when Tristan is about to answer a number of questions:

Dort mit der Waffe / quälendem Gift, / das Sinn und Hirn/ mir sengend versehrt, /
 das mir dem Freund/ die Treue verwehrt, / mein offnes Herz / erfüllt mit
 Verdacht, / daß ich nun heimlich / in dunkler Nacht / den Freund lauschend
 beschleiche, / meiner Ehren Ende erreiche? / Die kein Himmel erlöst, / warum

³³ Richard Wagner, ‘Tristan und Isolde’, in *Musikdramen. Sämtliche komponierten Bühnendichtungen* (Berlin, 1914), 201. In this text I have used the following edition of the score: *Wagner, Tristan und Isolde* (Leipzig: Edition Peters, no. 3448, n.d.).

mir diese Hölle? / Die kein Elend süht, / warum mir diese Schmach? / Den unerforschlich tief / geheimnisvollen Grund, / wer macht der Welt ihn kund?³⁴

The sequence is repeated for the third time in Act III, during Tristan and Isolde's last encounter, just before Tristan's death. It is interesting that the very moment of his death (bars 1323/1324) is emphasised by Wagner with a sudden halt to the musical progress. As regards the orchestration, one should note that it is an unusually enlightening example of Wagner's highly sophisticated use of violins. 'All three places', says Kinderman, 'repeat the Vorspiel in the original A minor and preserve the fundamental features of instrumentation'.³⁵

The progression under discussion therefore presents what is, from a dramaturgical point of view, a fundamental element in the shaping of form – one that is crucial to the whole composition in its dramatic, as well as musical, aspect.³⁶ Wagner used it in the most important places of the drama, which suggest his conscious use of a compositional rule involving neither the construction of lucid 'poetical-musical passages' (we should rather agree with Wolfgang Osthoff's claim that Wagner's musical drama is formally dependent on a sequence of associations and distinguished by a smooth evolution from one mood into another³⁷) nor the exclusive use of leitmotifs as the basic elements of form creation. The close relationship between form creation and harmony, as well as the manner in which Wagner treats them, sometimes makes it impossible to find a clear answer to the question as to what is and what is not a leitmotiv. If this fact is not considered, we might occasionally end up stating that in *Parsifal*, for instance (and this is what Theodor W. Adorno claimed), relatively few leitmotifs occur in comparison with earlier or mature works.

³⁴ Wagner, 'Tristan und Isolde', in *Musikdramen*, 221.

³⁵ Kinderman, 'Das "Geheimnis"', 177.

³⁶ In general terms, it can be divided into three parts. The first begins with G sharp and passes through a seventh dominant in A minor, finishing with B¹. Part two ascends from B¹ to D², and part three from D² to F² sharp, passing respectively through the seventh dominant in C and E major. The last of these, raised by an octave, occurs only fragmentarily, because the semitone transition E sharp – F sharp, repeated five times altogether, is released. 'In bar 16', adds Kinderman (p. 176), 'the chromatic progression from G to G sharp is audible, again through the seventh dominant in A minor. [...] However, in bar 17 – as well as in the whole work – when that passage is repeated, it leads to a deceptive cadence. The chord in A minor is avoided. The progressing chromatics, together with the deceptive cadence, symbolises the subject of longing for the unattainable which touches the essence of the drama.'

³⁷ See Wolfgang Osthoff, *Monteverdistudien I. Das dramatische Spätwerk Claudio Monteverdis* (Tutzing, 1960), 173–175 (*Münchener Veröffentlichungen zur Musikgeschichte*, 3).

The point is that the compositional rule employed by Wagner rather referred to the rule used by Romantic composers after the year 1830, who, in full consciousness, renounced an unambiguous defining of key in their compositions, thereby breaking with the rules of classicistic poetics, which postulates a closed frame to a work. Kinderman writes:

Charles Rosen particularly singles out the first part of the Fantasy in C major by Robert Schumann, in which a tonic chord in C major in its fundamental form appears only at the end. This is only one example. Many composers, from Chopin to Mahler, had the blatant tendency not to stabilise the key at the beginning of a work but to resolve the tonally unstable material only later, in another moment of the composition. This process was advanced before 1830 and may be observed in the works of Joseph Haydn and Ludwig van Beethoven.³⁸

It is very clear in Beethoven's String Quartet in C sharp minor, Op. 131, which caught Wagner's attention especially in the years leading up to his composing of *Tristan*. It may be assumed that his attention was riveted by the fact that seven different sections of the quartet had been united in the same tonal plan. 'As is proved by Op. 131 [Kinderman again], this principle did not mean that formal unity had to be dissolved, but, on the contrary, it was an effective way to make a long – or at least longer than was practised at that time – musical work formally unified'.³⁹

That manner of artistic thinking does not apply to the music alone, but is also noticeable in the literary aspect of the composition, as this is not (as in Claudio Monteverdi's realistic music theatre⁴⁰) a fully-fledged element of the dramatic-musical work, an object independent of the music which the music attempts to realise as part of a musical form built a priori (i.e. objective, autonomous). In relation to the music, the literary and theatrical aspects are only secondary. They are indispensable to the creation of the music, but they are not something fully objective or realistic in relation to it. They are like a phenomenon in relation to a 'thing in itself' ('Ding an sich'), to which only the music has access. As Osthoff repeated after Friedrich Nietzsche, in Wagner's music theatre there is no bridge which would lead to 'the heart of things. Only music speaks from the heart'.⁴¹ Other components of the Gesamtkunstwerk remain outside. This means that – in defiance of Wagner's intentions – the dramatic action does not 'oppose' the music, which would enable it to create, together with the music, a work of a higher order – the postulated drama of the future. On the contrary, it should be emphasised that there is something

³⁸ Kinderman, 'Das "Geheimnis"', 181.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴⁰ See Osthoff, *Monteverdistudien I*, 173.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

earlier than that, something which, after Osthoff, may be named the 'musical mood'. Of greater importance than the external events (in Act III, beginning from Scene 2, they play no role whatsoever; the arrival of King Mark and Brangena is a classic example of theatrical parenthesis) is what happens inside the drama's protagonists (their frame of mind, as Wagner wrote in 'Zukunftsmusik'⁴²), and what they themselves do not perceive as entirely dependant on their will. (We should rather talk about a will which they are unable – or unwilling – to oppose.) Wagner's music does not make the action real 'in the sense of an impulse which is independent of it; not once does it realise in itself types of affects which are separated from each other in the architectural sense, as occurred in Georg Friedrich Handel or Christoph Willibald Gluck'.⁴³ The words of the dramatic text lose any kind of clarity, syntactic-euphonic lucidity and formal coherence. Everything is fluid (it undergoes constant change, like the harmony, instrumentation or melody); everything except the 'musical mood', which 'creates words, characters and action'; it should come as no surprise, therefore, how Isolde's 'song' ends, a song conceived from a very simple motive and very mysterious harmony (incipit: 'Mild und leise'):

In dem wogenden Schwall,
 In dem tönenden Schall,
 In des Welt-Atems
 wehendem All –
 ertrinken,
 versinken –
 unbewußt –
 höchste Lust.⁴⁴

Therefore, the dramatic text and the stage situations confirm the fact that Wagner consciously postponed the final message of his work. Dependent on the 'musical mood' or, even more appropriately, on the protagonists' state of mind, they express its most vital content. In order to recognise this content, however, we need to evoke the poetic vision which is set in the dying Isolde's mind. Just as the climax in the music of the Liebestod referred to everything that appeared in it at the beginning, so Isolde's last words draw together all the earlier musical moods and dramatic events. Nothing is omitted, everything returns, albeit sometimes in a configuration which is difficult to recognise. Thus we see how ingeniously Wagner builds up the tension between Acts II and III of his drama. It has already been mentioned that, for reasons which are inde-

⁴² Wagner, 'Zukunftsmusik', in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, vol. 7 (Leipzig, 1871–1883), 87–137.

⁴³ Osthoff, *Monteverdistudien I*, 174.

⁴⁴ Wagner, 'Tristan und Isolde', in *Musikdramen*, 240.

pendent of the interior action (King Mark's arrival, daybreak), he did not bring the transition into B major to a conclusion. We now need to add that this was actually made impossible (the events of the interior action being decisive) by the lovers' remaining alive (their aim was supposed to be the destruction of their bodies, as de Rougemont stated with great perceptiveness). After all, the love potion was also a potion of death, and was drunk as such by the ignorant lovers. Carl Dahlhaus reminds us, not without reason, that "Tristan and Isolde's love, which death meets half-way, is a mystery expressed by Isolde at the beginning, although she was not forced to mention the love potion:

Mir erkoren, – / mir verloren, – / hehr und heil, / kühn und feig –: / Todgeweihtes Haupt! / Todgeweihtes Herz.⁴⁵

Therefore, the whole action of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* comes down to the evolution of that love over the course of the drama and what it ultimately brings.

Isolde's final song, beginning with the words 'Mild und leise', refers to a situation which is certainly worth reflecting on. Rousing herself from her lethargy immediately after Tristan's death (which takes place at the end of Act III, Scene 3 and which – as already mentioned – clearly alludes to the love duet in II.2), Isolde sees Tristan's body brought back to life:

Mild und leise / wie er lächelt, / wie das Auge / hold er öffnet.⁴⁶

As everything dissolves in an atmosphere of delight, which is accompanied by the melody of the love motive, the sense of the event may escape our attention, all the more so since we do not know exactly to whom refer Isolde's words

Seht ihr's, Freunde? / Seht ihr's nicht?, / [...] Freunde! Seht!⁴⁷

If we take the remarks included in the stage directions literally, and nothing – especially in Wagner – entitles us to disregard them ('Isolde, die nichts um sie her vernommen, heftet das Auge mit wachsender Begeisterung auf Tristans Leiche'⁴⁸), it is clear that they are directed neither to Brangena and King Mark (Melot was killed in a duel with Kurnewal), nor to the audience. Isolde, in a state of ecstasy, seems to transcend all the limitations of her body. We have the impression that her soul is preparing to leave her body. For her, death becomes a necessary condition

⁴⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagners Musikdramen* (Stuttgart, 1996), 81.

⁴⁶ Wagner, 'Tristan und Isolde', in *Musikdramen*, 238.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 238–239.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

to pass to another form of existence, which becomes manifest before her as something supremely real in the shape of Tristan's revived body:

Wie das Herz ihm / mutig schwillt, voll und hehr / im Busen ihm quillt? / Wie den Lippen, / wonnig mild, / süßer Atem / sanft entweht.⁴⁹

However, the question arises as to the nature of that which she plunges into with the last words of her remarkable monologue:

In des Welt-Atems / wehendem All – / ertrinken, / versinken – / unbewußt – / höchste Lust,⁵⁰

although the word 'plunges' is not the best term in this case, as the octave leap from F¹ sharp to F² sharp in the melody implies rather a kind of rising (*anabasis*). (Of course, the coalescence of these two pictures is also possible.) Yet, if the words about plunging into that unknown reality are perceived literally, it should be emphasised that *de facto* the whole universe appears here. Meanwhile, Tristan's body has undergone a process of anthropocosmicisation, becoming sea, breath and a limitless world of sounds and delights – something along the lines of pre-established harmony, which is expressed by the music in the best, if not the only, possible way:

Hör ich nur / diese Weise, / die so wunder- / voll und leise / wonneklagend, / alles sagend, / mild versöhnend / aus ihm tönend, / in mich dringet, / auf sich schwinget, / hold erhallend / um mich klinget? / Heller schallend, / mich umwallend, / sind es Wellen / sanfter Lüfte? / Sind es Wogen / wonniger Düfte? / Wie sie schwellen, / mich umrauschen, / soll ich atmen, / soll ich lauschen? / Soll ich schlürfen, / untertauchen? / Süß in Düften? / mich verhauchen? / In dem wogenden Schwall'.⁵¹

That state in which the dying Isolde finds herself was defined by Dieter Borchmeyer as a state of 'being beyond oneself'.⁵² He also reminds us that Wagner himself had described it in his theoretical writings. 'It is a state of clairvoyance ("Stand des Hellsehens"), in which the real world falls apart before the inner eye like a wall and allows one to see the deeper, real existence', writes Borchmeyer, and he immediately asks the question mentioned above: 'who are the friends whom Isolde addresses with the almost ritual call "Seht ihr's Freunde?" – "Seht ihr's nicht?"'⁵³ Would it be superficial to note an association with that 'look' (*eidete*) 'with which the heroes of Greek

⁴⁹ Ibid., 239.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 240.

⁵¹ Ibid., 239-240. In the first versions of the libretto, this was stressed even more clearly, because the later phrase 'In dem wogenden Schwall' had the following form: 'In des Wonnemeeres' (ibid., 240).

⁵² Dieter Borchmeyer, *Das Theater Richard Wagners. Idee – Dichtung – Wirkung* (Stuttgart, 1982), 281.

⁵³ Ibid.

tragedy, in scenes full of pathos, address the chorus (just as Antigone in her last complaint)⁵⁴ Not in the least. It is neither incorrect nor superficial. Isolde, as Borchmeyer concludes, addresses 'an invisible chorus of the initiated in the mystery of the night. What they see is inaccessible to an ordinary eye. Here to see means to perceive with all the sublimated senses'.⁵⁵

Thus, Isolde is given something which allows her to overcome the desire for an individual life and makes her similar to the figures familiar from the religious works of Western art which have risen above their natural state. Certainly, there is nothing scandalous or strange in this, since, as Étienne Gilson wrote, 'the religious element can be found in every great work of art, even in the works of atheists or people who wished to be, and indeed were, regarded as such. As soon as he ceases being a pot-boiler, an artist always uses the language of religion.'⁵⁶ This is no paradox. To confirm Gilson's words, let us remember that many years after writing *Tristan*, Wagner himself was perfectly aware of the fact. This is what we read in *Die Tagebücher* by Cosima Wagner, who related her husband's views about religious painting: 'Richard denies that *Assunta* [by Titian – K.K.] was God's mother; she is my Isolde – in the *Liebesverklärung*'.⁵⁷ Incidentally, this sentence causes numerous interpretative problems. After all, it does not clearly state what kind of 'love splendour' it concerns. It cannot be examined separately from the relationship between art and religion, as Wagner understood it in the last years of his life. Peter Wapnewski was inclined to believe (although mainly in the context of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*) that this sentence alludes to the subject of sacrifice, in Arthur Schopenhauer's sense of the word. On the other hand, Dieter Borchmeyer opposed this opinion: he put forward the thesis that 'according to Wagner, *Assunta* illustrates, not the subject of the denial of volition, but the mythical appearance of Eros, as Isolde's *Liebestod* makes us aware'.⁵⁸

And this thesis would appear to be closer to the intention of the work itself. Life (symbolised by the day and the body) was here presented as an obstacle which has to be surmounted in order that the soul be granted initiation in the mystery of love; death, meanwhile, was presented as the last stage of life and, at the same time, a transition to a different form of existence. Yet redemptive love assumes not so much the destruction of

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Étienne Gilson, *Szkota Muz*, trans. Barbara Majchrzak (Warsaw 1965) [Fr. orig. *L'Ecole des Muses*, 1951], 14.

⁵⁷ Cosima Wagner, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. and comm. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, vol. 4, 2nd edn (Munich, 1982), 1029.

⁵⁸ Borchmeyer, *Das Theater*, 282.

volition but more – as de Rougemont wrote – the ‘destruction of bodies’, in the sense of subjectivity. The only possible intermediary in the realisation of this love is Eros, yet Eros as perceived more in the Greek way than in a manner related to the bourgeois mentality of the nineteenth century. Only Eros has the power to resist the temptation of escape and to accept the perspective of the unfortunate King Mark. The forgiveness granted by him to Tristan and Isolde at the end of the drama does not come too late, as in a Greek drama; it cannot even find its way into Tristan and Isolde’s world, as the gulf that divides these two worlds is impossible to overcome. King Mark renounces only his own volition, manifesting an attitude of inner reconciliation. Thus, he approaches asceticism, as recommended by Schopenhauer. Wagner, however, goes further. He does not order his protagonists to renounce their volition; he does not even force them to abandon the path they have chosen. He knows that if they follow their path, they may attain the goal to which they ceaselessly head. Therefore, *Tristan und Isolde* ends with the elevation and salvation of volition (‘Entzückung und Erlösung des Willens’) and not its contradiction. This ending – contrary to the widespread interpretations which often overestimate Schopenhauer’s influence on Wagner – makes us aware of the fundamental difference in the way the two men perceived the will of life. ‘Schopenhauer’s pessimism’, as Borchmeyer remarks, ‘makes way for the fascinating idea of deeper existence which is manifested in the musical-poetical conclusion of *Tristan*’.⁵⁹ It is manifested primarily because – after many attempts undertaken in earlier periods, as well – Wagner succeeded in recreating the message of the medieval myth ‘in its very venomousness’, in illustrating most expressively the soteriological function of love – perhaps in the same sense as the *Fedele d’amore*⁶⁰ of the thirteenth century.

There is one issue that remains to be discussed. In reconstructing this message around the mid nineteenth century, Wagner, with the death of Tristan and Isolde, caused ‘the gateway of Romanticism’,⁶¹ as Richard Strauss expressed it, to close. Following the same interpretative path, Kunze wrote: ‘No other composition revealed with such relentlessly tragic consequence that the exaggerated elevation of subjectivity, violating the boundary of the physical I, inevitably entails the annihilation of individual existence. Therefore – not only because of its artistic character – the music drama *Tristan und Isolde* can be named a key work of the nineteenth century.’⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid., 286.

⁶⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: the Mysteries of Birth and Re-birth*, trans. Willard Trask (London, 1958).

⁶¹ Borchmeyer, *Das Theater*, 286.

⁶² Kunze, ‘Innenwelt’, 2.

As the concurrence of Strauss and Kunze's opinions about the end of Romanticism is no mere coincidence, it is worth remembering that even Strauss was convinced of the extraordinary part played by Wagner's work in European art. Thus, writing about Eichendorff, who could not even sense that a few years after his death a work would be created which 'would absorb all romanticism, lead it to the culmination point and immortalize all the songs of the night by the August Wilhelm Schlegels, Novalis, Brentano, Achim von Arnim [...] in the immortal love duet in A flat major, the final point of all romanticism, making the tonic chord in B major the most beautifully instrumented chord in the history of music',⁶³ he notes in the margin of a book (*Tragik und Größe der deutschen Romantik*) borrowed from Rudolf Bach the following four bars which, in respect to the cadence in B major may constitute the best musical summary of the whole of *Tristan*:



He then adds the comment: 'The beginning and the end of all music'.⁶⁴

Translated by John Comber

⁶³ Borchmeyer, *Das Theater*, 286.

⁶⁴ The quotation and the musical example after Borchmeyer, *Das Theater*, 287.

