Plato versus Wagner

> Sit igitur, judices, sanctum apud vos, humanissimos homines, hoc poetae nomen. . . Saxa et solitudines voci respondunt; bestiae saepe immanes cantu flectuntur atque consistunt. Nos instituti rebus optimis non poetarum voce moveamur ? - Cicero[1]

Had Wagner lived in the days when the gods on Mount Olympus were still actively embroiled in human affairs, when it was customary that poets should sing of deity and demon as well as of arms and of men, he would have been criticised far more fiercely than today. Undoubtedly Plato, the Athenian philosopher, would have been Wagner's sharpest critic. Surely Wagner would have been a more vulnerable target than Homer for Plato's virulent criticism.

Wagner is the classic example of the poet whom Plato would have banished from his utopian Republic.[2] Plato criticised Homer for undermining philosophy, for appealing to the base emotions of mankind,[3] even as critics today condemn Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen to be decadent and immoral. The mysticism that pervades Parsifal and Tannhäuser is accepted indicative if the irrational ideology for which Plato chastised poetry. Surely Plato could have found no musician to whom his censure would have been more applicable, nor could Wagner have found a more convincing critic.

The charges with which Plato would confront Richard Wagner are the same as those which he advanced against Homer: 1.) that he appealed to the base emotions of mankind, 2.) that by presenting immoral ideas he undermined the efforts of philosophy, 3.) that he deceived mankind by portraying unreality. Wagner stands almost helpless before the onslaught of such charges. The ignobility of his own character only confirms the accusations against

him. Still we must realize that the arguments dwarf the organs through which they are expressed. We are the spectators of far more than a bout between two men; we are witnesses of a struggle between two ideologies, between two ways of life.

Richard Wagner can do nothing better than to defend himself with his music. It is his all, the most concrete and the most direct expression of his soul. That is why, had he been faced with the necessity of defending himself against Plato's accusations, Wagner would have chosen to raise his baton, and with a magic movement of his hand to evoke the strains of the prelude to Parsifal.

One may immediately object that it is unfair to assume Parsifal to be representative of Wagnerian music, that in the final years of his life Wagner forsook the banal hero-worship of mystic gods and supermen for a state of mind of emotional Nietzscheism. Let us ask ourselves whether we would select The Taming of the Shrew or A Comedy of Errors rather than King Lear or Othello as typical of Shakespeare's work. We would hardly chose L'Allegro rather than Paradise Lost as the most perfect expressionsof Milton's genius and the noblest achievement of his intellect.

When the curtain rises on the first act of Parsifal, it rises also on the last act of an even greater drama, the drama of the evolution of a human soul from spiritual darkness. The true greatness of Parsifal lies in the fact that it is the culmination of a lifelong search. In the idealism that gave birth to the 'guileless fool', Parsifal, Wagner has found hisredeeming goal. The opera is the logical end of a path that begun in the eroticism

of a Tristan, that led from Bruennhilde to Elisabeth of the Tannhäuser, a path that culminated only after a life-time of struggle. Not unlike Faust, Wagner has demonstrated the truth of the words which Goethe places into the mouth of God: "Man errs so long as he doeth seek. . . And yet who e'er strives toward his goal, 'tis him we shall redeem."[5]

An effective foil to the character of Wagner himself is Amfortas, who, according to the story of the opera, lost the Holy Spear in Klingsor's enchanted garden. Plato must realize, as only a philosopher can, the significance of all that Amfortas abandoned in yielding to the sensual temptations of Kundry and Klingsor's magic. Amfortas' downfall represents not merely the fulfillment of a single moment's lust, but rather the cessation of moral ambition. This moral ambition was Wagner's redemption; its absence was Amfortas' destruction.[6]

As Plato sees the suffering of King Amfortas he cannot help feeling pity for a wound so deep that only a miracle can heal it. For centuries to come the despair of Amfortas will move the hearts of thousands of listeners to pity. They will see in him, as in a mirror, the image of their own misguided existence. Indeed each day they are overcome, and each day the Holy Spear is wrested from their faltering hands, even as it was wrested out of the hands of the king whose anguish moves them to think, to pity, and to pray.

In a sense Plato himself is praying as in silence he stares at the temple of the Holy Grail. His eyes are fixed on the Grail itself, as in deep carmine it glows in the hands of Amfortas. The

impassioned moaning of the choir, and the voice of the suffering king recall to Plato's mind the oft ignored anguish of Athenian slaves, as they will bring to the mind of every listener the realization of his own peculiar shortcomings.[7] Is the reverence with which he bows his head so evil an emotion that because of it Plato should wish to expel from his Republic the stocky man in the orchestra pit? As the strains of the chorus rise to new spheres of pathos, as the man on the litter raises his heavy head, and as the columns of the temple stretch upward in their gothic simplicity, Plato is suddenly reminded of the death of his teacher Socrates in the caverns of an Athenian jail. Perhaps Socrates is gesturing to Plato signs of approval. Perhaps that is why Plato's throat is so dry, why he bows his head in abject silence.

Plato himself is prepared to admit the emotional purification[8] inherent in the music. Never had he maintained that emotion was intrinsically evil, but neither had he seen it to be of much value. Only when he himself had been touched by the tender hand of pity, only when the events of his own life had been recalled to him by the drama on the stage, was Plato certain of the good effected by emotion.

In the first act Plato's emotional experience had been narrowly restricted to isolated events in his own life. Now emotion takes an even firmer grip on him. As with his eyes he follows Parsifal to the enchanted castle of Klingsor, the very same emotions that are aroused in the youth inflame Plato's mind. Theres

There is something real and personal in Parsifal's temptations. Perhaps Plato only senses the danger that threatens Parsifal; perhaps Plato once was threatened by the same danger. Parsifal's cause suddenly becomes his own. Had Klingsor thrown the Spear at Plato himself, the Athenian would have cringed no more than he did. In temptation, in danger, and in triumph, Parsifal and Plato have become the same. When Plato sees the Spear hover over the head of the youth, a sensation much more powerful than a dozen dissertations of the ethics of chastity constricts his throat. To him Parsifal has become the symbol of purity, and Parsifal's triumph, the victory of virtue.

To assign the purity of the "guileless fool" to ignorance would be folly. His rejection of Kundry's charms was conscious and deliberate. Wagner expresses ethical values which are identical with those of Plato and, indeed, with those of Western philosophy in general.[9] The intellect chose between right and wrong; surely Parsifal's rejection of Kundry anything but emotional. Only if Parsifal had yielded to the temptations of the flesh would the critics be justified in accusing Wagner of emitonalism. Nothing less than intellectual purity shielded Parsifal from ignominy that befell Amfortas. Parsifal grasps the Spear hovering over his head and makes with it the sign of the cross. "Now with this sign I ban thy cursed magic,"[10] he proclaims to Klingsor. Plato understands the significance of those words; he admires the composer for the magnitude of his achievement.

To the thunder of Wagnerian crescendos the castle falls into ruins, and Plato wipes the sweat of his brow. As he sits with

his head bowed in his hands, he has forgotten the accusation he made against Richard Wagner. He is awed by the beauty and feeling of the music, by the triumph of the violins that accompany Parsifal as he proclaims to Klingsor:

"As the wound shall be shut
Which with this thou didst cut,
To dust and to ruin
Falls thy unreal display." [11]

The freshness of spring greets Plato as the curtain rises on the last act. Amid blooming shrubs and trees Parsifal returns from his journey. He has wandered through the world for many years; it was the curse of Kundry that he must. Even as he walks, the breath of spring stirs to life all that was dead during the long winter, when the Spear was in Klingsor's possession.

The sudden change reminds Plato of his third accusation against Wagner. He muses that he, Plato, was right after all, that art did portray things unreal, that poetry distorted life into an imaginary pattern. The sudden change, the lapse of months and years, was proof of the deception that drama perpetrated upon the human mind.

As Plato maps in his mind a summary of the charges against Richard Wagner, he is distracted by a certain theme in the music to which, until now, the rapid sequence of dramatic situations had made him oblivious. For the first time he is aware of the recurrence of the Leitmotif that has accompanied Parsifal throughout the opera. Already the music has begun to assume to Plato a greater significance. Tensely he waits until the Leitmotif returns

again. The chords and variations associated with Parsifal's long journey have become symbols of his struggle. To the initiated they are the expression of ideals, of faith, of victory.

As the final triumphant bars reverberate in the recesses of the hall, Plato is dumbfounded. A sledgehammer-blow could not have stunned him more. As he stares at the bright red curtain that conceals the stage from which a moment ago music and drama had moved his soul, a single thought races through Plato's mind. Is it not much better that poets should write, that composers should orchestrate, that singers should sing poetry that is nobler than the pettiness of daily life . Until now it had never occured to Plato how utterly wrong his theories of realism might be.

The picture of a man who through purity of mind and soul conquered the pitfalls of other men fascinated Plato. He was about to storm into the orchestra pit, to embrace the conductor, to invite Richard Wagner to his Academy, but twenty-three centuries separated them.

Notes

1. Cicero, Marcus Tullius, Pro Archia, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1935, p. 26, ll. 19 - 24.

2. Plato, Republic, translated by A. D. Lindsay, New York, Dutton, 1945, pp. 296 - 312.

3. Ibid., p. 309.

4. Ibid., pp. 296 - 312.

5. Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, Faust, Berlin-Zehlendorf, Merian, n.d.
   cf. p. 12, "Es irrt der Mensch so lang er strebt."
   cf. p.439, "Wer immer strebend sich bemueht,
   Den koennen wir erloesen."

6. Cf. Ibid. p. 60. The idea is expressed by Faust when he writes the one redeeming clause into his contract with Mephistopheles:

   Kannst du mich mit Genuss betruegen
   Das sei fuer mich der letzte Tag. . .
   Werd' ich zum Augenblicke sagen:
   Verweile doch ! Du bist so schoen !
   Dann magst du mich in Fesseln schlagen,
   Dann will ich gern zu Grunde gehn !
   Dann mag die Totenglocke schallen,
   Dann bist du deines Dienstes frei,
   Die Uhr mag stehn, der Zeiger fallen,
   Es sei die Zeit fuer mich vorbei !

   Canst thou deceive me with desire
   Be that for me the final hour. . .
   If I should say to any moment:
   Linger awhile! So fair art thou ! — my own translation.
   Then mayst thou cast me into torment,
   Then gladly to my end I go !
   Then let the bells of death start calling,
   Then of thy service be thou free.
   The clock shall stop. The pointer falling
   Shall indicate my end for me!

7. Cf. Aristotle's definition of tragedy.
   "Tragedy is an imitation of one entire, great and probable action, . . . which, by moving in us fear and pity, is conducive to the purging of those two passions in our minds."

8. Ibid.

9. A notable exception is of course Friederich Nietzsche.

10. Wagner, Richard, Parsifal, A Festival Drama, translated by H. L. and F. Corder, New York, Tretbar, n.d., p. 34.

11. Ibid.

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Dear Mr. Meyer:

Your highly provocative first draft of your long paper, Plato versus Wagner, has prompted me to drop you a line with a few suggestions as to how it might be tightened up. You see, I qualify well as a critic because I'm a Wagnerphobe (unfortunately for myself) and I should like to toss more fuel into the fire of argument on the side of Plato.

Plato, you say, makes three accusations against Wagner. That the German has undermined the efforts of philosophy (2) that his music has appealed to the base emotions of mankind and (3) that he has deceived mankind by portraying unreality instead of reality. I assume from these three tenets that you have set out to prove Wagner did not deserve any of the accusations.

In the first place, you have chosen unfairly when you select Parsifal. The Ring has been judged both emotional and amoral by many, and although I have heard unconvincing arguments supporting the Ring's intrinsic "Christian" philosophy, I am inclined to take a reverse attitude and interpret Parsifal's "Christian" philosophy as emotional Nietszcheism. Honor to Plato and honor to Parsifal are two different things. And without passing moral judgement on either, it is only fair to realize that Plato was striving towards a lofty and Godlike mind, while Wagner was aiming towards a lofty and Godlike emotion.

Examining Parsifal act by act, we find Plato being touched by Klingsor's tragedy of having lost honor. What honor? What actual virtue does the sacred spear symbolize? Is this "honor" any more to be interpreted honor of the mind than honor of the saint? Or honor of the superman? However, we shall accept your definition of honor so that we can get on to Plato's giving in to the very emotion he rejects when he sees the temple of the Holy Grail. Passion and moaning intoxicate him. I doubt this. I know it doesn't intoxicate me, and I'm sure Plato was even less susceptible than I am to demonstration of emotion.

Next we have temptation of the flesh. Wagner again sublimates one emotion with another. Plato does not. He would substitute reason for lust and Wagner has no answer to that. Again, purity to Wagner might well be ignorance to Plato, and the impotence of the magician against Parsifal would be pure nonsense to the thinker.

The change of seasons I accept. I find it a powerful scene, and I daresay Wagner's reasons for nature's cycle are as valid as anyone's, speaking philosophically. Now you mention Plato being bored by the lengthy procedure in which Parsifal removes his armor. And I quite agree