

Richard Wagner and Buddhism

Tristan and Isolde and The Victors

DOROTHEA WATANABE DAUER

RICHARD WAGNER'S influence on the cultural developments of the nineteenth century was probably more profound and more diverse than that of any other artist of that period. Wagner became the object either of ardent enthusiasm or bitter contempt, and this has remained unchanged to this day. Again and again Wagnerians and anti-Wagnerians have confronted each other over the works of this great but controversial artist and thinker.

Since World War II these confrontations have become more belligerent, and this alone may suffice to secure for Wagner's works and ideas a recognition as long as interest in Western art and music, as we have known it, continues.

The Renaissance focussed the cultural interests of the Western World almost exclusively on antiquity. Up to 1854 Wagner was no exception to this trend. However, he made a rigorous distinction between the world of Greece and the world of Rome, and had praise only for Greece and its ideal of the self-confident man.

The young Wagner, until 1848, was an enthusiastic admirer of Feuerbach, Bakunin, Prudhomme and other March Revolutionaries. After the failure of the revolution and because of his participation in the movement that led to the so-called May Uprising, a warrant for the arrest of the former Hof-Kapellmeister at the Dresden Staatstheater was issued. With a passport bearing the name of a Professor Widmann,¹ he fled to Zürich. At that time the thirty-six year old Wagner was firmly convinced of the need for a political reorganization of Germany, since he could also expect a comparable transformation in the arts

¹ Guy de Pourtalès, *Richard Wagner, Mensch und Meister* (Berlin: Th. Knauer Nachf., 1933), 226.

as a result of such a revolution. His essays on art, written between 1849–1852, reveal definite traces of the philosophy of Feuerbach and the Neo-Hegelians. As a matter of fact, the first edition of his *Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1851) was dedicated to Feuerbach.

Within a short space of time, Wagner made the acquaintance of a number of outstanding personalities in Zürich. Among them was a wealthy businessman, Otto Wesendonk and his young spouse Mathilde. Both Wesendonks immediately took an active and enthusiastic interest in Wagner's art. Mathilde, however, felt herself especially drawn, not only to the artist, but also to his warm personality. Wagner, for his part, considered it his duty to introduce this young woman, who was so responsive to art, to the world of his new ideas. "I came to Zürich quite uninstructed," Mrs. Wesendonk recounted later in her *Memoirs*, "Wagner himself called me a *tabula rasa* and undertook to write on it. . . . The Maestro began to acquaint me with his intentions. He rejoiced when I was able to follow him and his enthusiasm ignited mine."²

Soon Wagner saw in Mathilde his ideal of woman. In a letter dated March 20, 1852 to his friend Uhlig he wrote: "It is as ever this 'Eternal Feminine' that fills me with sweet illusions and warm shudders of love of life. The moist, shining eyes of a woman often pervade me again with new hope."³ In May of 1853, the famous three-day long Musical Festival was given in Zürich. The expenses were for the most part covered by Otto Wesendonk, and, as his good friend Mrs. Wille expressly states, "upon the insistence of his wife Mathilde, who in these days had already taken a great interest in Wagner."⁴ Almost at the same time, on May 30, 1853, Wagner wrote to Liszt: "I laid the entire festival at the feet of a beautiful woman."⁵

In the two years of their acquaintance, Wagner's relationship to the young Mrs. Wesendonk had become decidedly more personal, as a letter of April 9th,

² A. Heintz, "Allgemeine Musikzeitung" (Zürich: 14th February 1896); Eberhard Kretschmar, *Richard Wagner, Sein Leben in Selbstzeugnissen, Briefen und Berichten* (Berlin: Im Propyläen Verlag, 1939), 85. Hereafter referred to as *Sein Leben*; *Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendonk, Tagebuchblätter und Briefe 1853–1871*, ed. Wolfgang Golther (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1915), 11–12. Hereafter referred to as *Tagebuch*.

³ Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner's Briefe an Theodor Uhlig, Wilibrod Fischer, Ferdinand Heine* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1888), 175.

⁴ Hans Bélar, *Richard Wagners Beziehungen zu Francois und Eliza Wille* (Dresden: Carl Reissner Verlag, 1914), 18.

⁵ *Briefwechsel zwischen Wagner und Liszt*, ed. Erich Kloss: (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1910), 1, 237, Letter 108. Hereafter referred to as *Briefwechsel*.

1854, again to Liszt, quite unambiguously makes clear: "Give me a heart, a spirit, a womanly soul in which I might submerge myself, and which would embrace me entirely—what little need would I then have of this world."⁶ "Frau Wesendonk had precisely that remarkable understanding of art that (his wife) Minna was lacking," wrote Praeger in his book, *Wagner As I Knew Him*.⁷

In September of 1854, in a moment of deep depression, Wagner was introduced to Schopenhauer's major work *The World as Will and Idea* through the poet Georg Herwegh.⁸ Having been prepared for this by his study of Calderon and out of his own deep, innermost feeling, Wagner, in spite of having been such an ardent admirer of the world-affirming, materialistic doctrine of Feuerbach, almost overnight became an enthusiastic admirer of the world-negating doctrine of Arthur Schopenhauer. Now Wagner's ideal was no longer that of the Greek, the self-asserting human being, but rather that of the gentle and self-renouncing Indian. Words like "I will crush the power of the mightiest, of the law and of property"⁹ were forgotten. In him, the artist and thinker, the two concepts to which Schopenhauer ascribed the world—will and idea—took shape immediately. This newly-won Schopenhauerian view fascinated him to such an extent that he read the book thoroughly four times in the space of one year,¹⁰ and on the whole remained faithful to this new ideology for the rest of his life. Mathilde Wesendonk, too, was introduced right away to this new philosophic path. Three months after the beginning of his study, Schopenhauer and the plan for a Tristan drama were first mentioned in a letter to Liszt: "Apart from the—slow—progress of my music, I have occupied myself solely with a man, who—if only through his writings—has come into my loneliness like a gift from heaven. It is Arthur Schopenhauer, the greatest philosopher after Kant, whose thought he—as he himself puts it—was the first to think through to its ultimate conclusions. The German professors have—very wisely—ignored him for forty years. Recently, however, to Germany's shame, he was discovered by an English

⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 20.

⁷ Ferdinand Praeger, *Wagner, Wie Ich Ihn Kannte* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1892). Translated into English and published under the title of *Wagner, As I Knew Him* (New York: Longmans Green, 1892).

⁸ Eliza Wille, née Slowman, *Fünfzehn Briefe von Richard Wagner. Nebst Erinnerungen und Erläuterungen* (Berlin: Verlag von Gebrüder Paetel, 1894), 50–51.

⁹ *Richard Wagners Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Julius Kapp (Leipzig: Hesse & Becker Verlag, n.d.), Volume XII "Der Revolutionär," 32. Hereafter referred to as *Gesammelte Schriften*.

¹⁰ *Mein Leben*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin (München: List Verlag, 1969), 523. Hereafter referred to as *Leben-List*.

critic. What charlatans all these Hegels and the like are compared with him! His main thought, the final negation of the will to live, is of terrifying earnestness, but is the only thing that brings redemption."¹¹ In the same letter there is a deepening of his own experience: "Since I have not as yet enjoyed the true happiness of love, I would like to build a monument to this fairest of all dreams, in which, from beginning to the end, this love shall once and for all be completely satiated. In my mind I have conceived a plan for a *Tristan and Isolde*."¹²

Wagner recommended Schopenhauer's work, that "gift from heaven," to all his friends. He also discussed with Jakob Sulzer the possibility of a new chair for Schopenhauerian philosophy at the University of Zürich. In spite of all the enthusiasm, however, Wagner was initially alarmed by Schopenhauer's morally oriented end of the whole universe, since, according to Schopenhauer, only extermination of the will, total renunciation, would bring true redemption. Wagner did not believe that he could so quickly give up his "serene" Grecian view, on the basis of which he had until now viewed his "art-work of the future." On this point Herwegh explained to him that all tragedy is dependent on insight into the futility of the world of phenomena. Both now recognized in amazement the riddle of the world that was so simply and yet so lucidly solved by Schopenhauer. For the first time, Wagner realized that, basically, even if unbeknown to himself, he had always been a Schopenhauerian. Six years later he wrote to Mathilde Wesendonk from Paris: "But I have one friend of whom I become ever fonder. That is my old Schopenhauer, so morose-looking, and yet so deeply loving."¹³

From March until June of 1855 Wagner was with the Philharmonic Society in London to conduct eight spring concerts. Since his communication with the outside world was restricted on account of an attack of erysipelas, he engaged in intensive reading about Indian intellectual life and wrote to Mathilde that Otto should immediately buy her the *Indische Sagen* by Adolf Holzmann, since this book was his only delight. "All of them are lovely: but—Savitri is divine, and if you want to get to know *my* religion, then read *Usinar*. How ashamed our whole civilization looks beside these purest revelations of noblest humanity in the old Orient!"¹⁴ In a letter to Liszt he also praised the sublime and uniquely

¹¹ *Briefwechsel*, 523.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³ *Tagebuch*, 283.

¹⁴ Julius Kapp, *Richard Wagner an Mathilde und Otto Wesendonk* (Leipzig: Hesse & Becker, n.d.), 64. Hereafter referred to as *An Mathilde und Otto*.

satisfying doctrine of Brahmanism as well as that of Buddhism.¹⁵

In July of the same year Wagner was again in Zürich, where for several months he suffered a renewed attack of erysipelas. Because he found composing impossible at such times, he occupied himself again with reading, this time in particular, Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction à l'Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*, to which he had been directed by Schopenhauer's book.¹⁶ The legend of Prakriti, the chāṇḍala-girl, and Ananda, Buddha's favorite disciple, attracted him especially.¹⁷ It almost intoxicated him, since this legend, too, taught redemption by negation of *samsara*,¹⁸ the world of suffering. Wagner now sought a mystic sedative in a longing for non-existence, for it was becoming ever clearer to him that a union with Mathilde was condemned to hopelessness, and the theme of resignation began to play an increasingly prominent role in his conceptions. But at that time he could not yet give her up, hence despairing and hoping at once, he sought a solution to this conflict. His open adherence to Schopenhauer's principles, Buddhism and India, and his deep love for Mathilde Wesendonk became from then on the determining factors of his new outlook, whose kernel of thought was planted in *Tristan* and in the sketch for *The Victors*. In this regard Wagner wrote to his friend Liszt, as he so often did, on July 20th, 1856: "If you will get me into a really good mood, perhaps I will then trot out my *Victors* for you; although at this very moment it will present quite some difficulties. I have been carrying the idea with me for a long time, but the material to embody it has just struck me like a flash of lightning, indeed with the highest clarity and distinctness, but not as yet ready for communication. You must first have digested my *Tristan* Then only might *The Victors* become clearer."¹⁹

Through torments of this love, and by the overcoming and renunciation of it, Wagner in the next six years attained the peak of his creativity. "It is quite clear to me that I will never again experience anything new: that highest blossoming has brought forth in me such a profusion of buds, that now I need only draw from what I have stored up,"²⁰ wrote Wagner later to Otto Wesen-

¹⁵ *Briefwechsel*, Vol. II, 78, Letter 186.

¹⁶ Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction à l'Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Cie., 1876).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁸ *Samsara* is the chain of rebirths, the antonym of *nirvana*.

¹⁹ *Briefwechsel*, Vol. II, 132.

²⁰ *An Mathilde und Otto*, 9.

donk. It is now clear why the *Tristan* drama came into being at about the same time as the sketch for *The Victors*, since both sketches concern the same highly personal experience about the renunciation of love. Important here is only the fact that in both sketches the Wagnerian idea of redemption through love is fundamentally Buddhistic. The will to live which at some point in time transforms itself into the will to die is a theme of Buddhism interpreted according to Schopenhauer, which for the most part belongs to the Hinayana school. In *Tristan*, sensual love is by no means intended symbolically, but rather should be understood as the outcome of a difficult inner conflict. Wagner had based his *Tristan* on the epos by Gottfried von Strassbourg, but only a pupil of Schopenhauer could recreate this epos as a sublime tragedy of guilt and expiation, as a voluntary denial of life. The love for Isolde, gradually purified and transfigured, becomes a symbol of redemption through entry into nirvana, which lies beyond time and space.

Remarkably, but still quite understandably, two concepts stand opposite each other in these two sketches, synonyms, so to speak, of the revolving of an inner conflict, as the ultimate way to redemption: death in *Tristan* and victory in *The Victors*.

In a letter to Uhlig, Wagner expresses his wishes for a small house, away from all noise.²¹ He was enchanted when the Wesendonks provided him with a little country cottage next to their newly-built, princely appointed residence. Here, for a small rent, he might be able to live the rest of his life and create his work in peace. "I belong to you for the rest of my life," wrote Wagner to Otto Wesendonk out of deepest gratitude.²² He moved into the house which he christened the "Asyl" at the end of April 1857. On August 22nd of the same year, the Wesendonks also moved into their finished villa, called Wahlheim.²³

But the Norns were not idle; they went on spinning their threads of fate ominously and without interruption, and only too soon his love demanded not only its rights, but also a final decision—either total union or total separation. In desperation, he immediately wrote a letter to Liszt: "I am at the end of a conflict which comprises all that can be sacred to man. I must decide, and every

²¹ *Sein Leben*, 89.

²² *An Mathilde und Otto*, 89.

²³ Curt von Westerhagen, *Wagner* (Zürich und Feiburg i. Br.: Atlantis Verlag), 226. Mathilde had named it Wahlheim, probably following a suggestion by Wagner in reference to Goethe's *Werther* which says: "About one hour away from the city is a place that they call Wahlheim . . ."

choice I have before me is so cruel, that I must have my friend at my side when I make my decision. . . . In hopes of finding a way by which I might cause the least damage, I am considering going to Paris for the time being."²⁴

Wagner journeyed to Paris on January 15th, 1858, and remained there until February 3rd. When Mathilde and Wagner faced each other again after he returned from Paris, both had recognized the absolute necessity of a mutual renunciation as the only possibility. A few months later the intimate ties were broken forever by the well-known catastrophe.²⁵ On August 17th, 1858, Wagner left the Asyl, alone. The tragic denouement of this very personal conflict could only have been delayed for a while, but no longer avoided. "It is a peculiar turn of fate," writes Julius Kapp in his book *Wagner und die Frauen*, "that in such a decisive hour, shortly before the most critical upheavals in Wagner's life, the three women who had such a hold on his earthly life, Minna, Mathilde and Cosima, were together here [at the Asyl]."²⁶ Wagner had already completed his great masterpiece, the *Tristan* epic, on September 18th, 1857. Almost forty years later, Mathilde Wesendonk writes: "Wagner left his new home . . . in pain and grief . . . left it voluntarily; why? idle question; from this period we have the work *Tristan and Isolde*; the rest is silence and bowing in reverence."²⁷

With a short stop in Geneva, Wagner traveled to Venice. There in solitude and seclusion he hoped to find himself again. Some weeks before his departure, he had written in detail to Mathilde of the many feelings which overwhelmed him: "The tremendous struggles which we endured, how could they end but with victory over all desire and endless craving? Did we not know, in the warmest moments of intimate meeting, that this was our goal? Because it was so unprecedented and difficult, could it be achieved only after the most severe struggles. . . . I am longing for peace, and an end to all ardent yearnings! Appeasement to every craving! Noble, worthy victory! Living for others. . . . Let us consecrate ourselves to this serene death which shelters and stills all our yearning and craving! Let us die blissfully, with peacefully transfigured coun-

²⁴ *Briefwechsel*, II, 184.

²⁵ Hans B elart, *Richard Wagners Liebestrag odie mit Mathilde Wesendonk, Die Trag odie von Tristan und Isolde* (Dresden: Verlag von Carl Reissner, 1912). Part II of this book describes in detail that which is known as the catastrophe.

²⁶ Julius Kapp, *Richard Wagner und die Frauen* (Berlin-Halensee: Max Hesses Verlag), 151. Hereafter referred to as *Die Frauen*. Translated into English under the title of *The Loves of Richard Wagner* (London: W. H. Allen, 1951).

²⁷ *Tagebuch*, 15.

tenance and the holy smile of a beautiful sublimation! And—no one shall lose, if we—conquer.”²⁸

In a letter from Venice, of September 13th, 1858, the idea of victory is taken up again: “We shall be victorious—we are already in the midst of victory.”²⁹ The Buddha-fragment, *The Victors*, is built on this victory, won only by such heavy sacrifice as the renunciation of all sensual love. Sensuality must be understood here as guilt versus purity, as redemption.

Wagner could not always agree with the life-negating philosophy of his master. In the concept of love, philosopher and artist had to part ways, and as a consequence, Wagner deepened and glorified this conception in his own fashion. In his diary of December 1st, 1858 we read: “I have recently read slowly through friend Schopenhauer’s major work again and this time he has extraordinarily stimulated me to amplification and—in some particulars—even to correction.”³⁰

Wagner had, in fact, without being aware of it, introduced in *The Victors* a Mahayanistic idea which in his days was scarcely known in Europe: namely, that the way to redemption must take, not a direct path, through perfect denial of sensual love, but rather an indirect path, first through the affirmation of sensual love, in order to arrive at the ultimate overcoming of it. This idea is essentially Mahayana and is found neither in Christianity nor in Hinayana Buddhism. Wagner had, so to speak, perceived through artistic intuition ideas which run parallel with Mahayanism. For that reason, I would like to quote further from the diary pages of December 1st: “. . . and perhaps it had to be reserved for my very special disposition to gain insight here, which no other could conceive of in this very special time of my life. The point is to show the way to salvation, recognized by no philosopher, nor, for that matter, by Schopenhauer, which leads to the perfect appeasement of the will through love, and, to be sure, through no abstract humanitarian love, but one emerging from the depth of sexual love, i.e., from the attraction between man and woman.”³¹

In this light we can now better understand the letter written in August of 1856 to his friend Röckl: “. . . beside the Nibelung pieces I have a *Tristan and Isolde* (love as a dreadful torment) and my newest material *The Victors* ([as an] ultimate redemption, [a] Buddhist legend) on my mind . . .”³²

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 79–82.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Richard Wagner, *Briefe an August Röckel* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1894), 72.

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The Venetian diary of February 22nd, 1859, reveals: "According to the law of the all-glorious and perfected Buddha, the man with a burdened conscience confesses his guilt aloud before Buddha's community, and by this alone he is absolved. You know how I instinctively became a Buddhist."³³ It might indeed be said that Wagner confessed his guilt before all humanity in his *Tristan and Isolde* and in the fragmentary *Victors*.

In Wagner's autobiography we read: "From Burnouf's *Introduction à l'Histoire du Bouddhisme [Indien]* I went so far as to take the material for a dramatic composition which has since endured within me, albeit in the roughest of outlines and which hopefully might still be developed. I gave it the title of *The Victors*; it was based on the simple legend of the acceptance of a chāṇḍāla-girl³⁴ into the sublime mendicant order of Cakyamouni. She becomes worthy of this honor through her love for Ananda, the Buddha's chief disciple, a love which was now intensified and purified through greatest suffering."³⁵

To the legend of the chāṇḍāla girl was added the force of his own experience; both were brought into harmonious accord in *The Victors* fragment and hastily drafted on May 16th, 1856. The rough draft agrees in general with the legend of the chāṇḍāla girl. Considered from an artistic and psychological viewpoint, however, the dramatist Wagner undertook a very significant alteration by transferring the guilt from the father to the daughter. Wagner had learned well the doctrine of *karma* from Schopenhauer.³⁶ Both aspects of *karma* were clearly explained by Schopenhauer: "The moral significance of metempsychosis, in all Indian religions, is not merely that we must atone in a subsequent rebirth for every wrong which we have committed; but also that we must regard every wrong done to us as well-deserved because of our misdeeds in an earlier existence."³⁷

According to the legend, it was not Prakriti who transgressed, but her father, in that he refused his daughter's hand to the chāṇḍāla king, who was wooing

³³ *Tagebuch*, 154.

³⁴ The chāṇḍālas were those who belonged to the lowest, reprobate class. They were outcastes, the untouchables. Sakyamuni became their liberator. According to the traditional teaching of the Brahmans, only they, the Brahmans, could be redeemed from death. All other castes could attain salvation only through reincarnation as Brahmans.

³⁵ *Leben-List*, 541-542.

³⁶ Dorothea W. Dauer, *Schopenhauer as Transmitter of Buddhist Ideas* (Berne: Herbert Lang & Co., 1969), 18-19.

³⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena, Kleine Philosophische Schriften* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1877), II, 429-430.

her on behalf of his son, and ridiculed him in addition. In Wagner's version the proud Brahman's daughter rejects the chāṇḍāla king's son, who had fallen violently in love with her and mocks him when she sees how unhappy he is. For this she must atone; it becomes her fate to be reborn as a chāṇḍāla girl.

On the basis of the Buddhist doctrine of *karma*, Wagner felt the drama would have had to develop into something musically exalting. While reading the legend, Wagner was captivated by the idea that the previous births as well as the present life of every living creature lies fully exposed in the mind of Buddha. Intuitively he knew how to present "the ever-present reverberant musical reminiscence of this dual existence."³⁸

How Wagner would have worked out the meeting at the fountain remains an open question. Perhaps he would have related it to the biblical story of the Samaritan woman at the well, thereby placing Christianity, i.e., primitive Christianity, alongside Buddhism as a world religion. In an aphorism in his posthumous works he speaks of Jesus and Buddha as being one and the same, as "he who overcomes the world."³⁹

Three years after Wagner sketched *The Victors* fragment, his thoughts turned again to this draft. Now the idea of resignation had become a decisive reality. According to a letter to Mathilde from the diary of October 5th, 1858, *The Victors* fragment was "expanded and intensified." The idea of human sanctity, which had nothing to do with the orthodox priesthood of his days, was in ever greater evidence in this period immediately following the final departure from the Asyl.

In the meantime Wagner had read Köppen's newly published book, *Geschichte der Religion des Buddha*.⁴⁰ Although he quickly laid the book aside—in his words "an unpleasant book"⁴¹—it nonetheless stimulated him to a further deepening of his thought:

"Cakya-muni was at first against admitting women into the community of the saints . . . It was his favorite pupil Ananda, the one to whom I assigned the role in *The Victors*, who finally prevailed upon the master to depart from his strictness and open the community to women. In this I gained something of an uncommon importance. My plan is broadening greatly and powerfully, without any strain."⁴²

³⁸ *Leben-List*, 542.

³⁹ *Gesammelte Schriften*, XIV, 208.

⁴⁰ Karl Fr. Köppen, *Geschichte der Religion des Buddha* (Berlin: F. Schneider, 1857).

⁴¹ *Tagebuch*, 108.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 108–109.

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It had been difficult for Wagner to adapt the man freed from every passion, the Buddha himself, to a dramatic as well as musical role. However, Wagner solved this problem by letting his Buddha achieve a higher level of insight into the truth through his great, pantheistic compassion—in sorrow and in joy—for Ananda, and through spiritual empathy for Prakriti. As a result, the Buddha is in a position to test Prakriti's readiness to renounce the world and to share Ananda's oath of chastity, for only a chastened love could redeem her. When Prakriti first heard the conditions of her union with Ananda, she was honest enough to break down helplessly.⁴³

While the Buddha told the Brahmans of Prakriti's earlier birth, her grievous fate manifested itself so clearly in his soul, and his compassion mounted at the same time "to such intensity," that he was now ready to grant Ananda's plea "to draw his beloved one close to himself and let her share in the ultimate salvation." At the same time, Prakriti recognized the entire immensurable relationship between universal suffering and her own suffering and was now ready to take her vows joyfully. She had thereby expiated her trespasses, and the Enlightened One, in the very hour of his own final perfection, could receive her as the first woman in the community of holy men, and Ananda was allowed to greet her as his sister. "Happy Sawitri! Now you may follow your loved one everywhere, always be near him, always with him. Happy Ananda! She is near you; you have won her, never to lose her."⁴⁴ Wagner now had the most ardent desire to become a saint: "and as a saint I might say to you; come, leave everything to which you are attached; break the fetters of nature: at such a price I shall show you the way leading to salvation!—Then we would be free, Ananda and Sawitri!—Oh, you foolish scholars if you only could understand the great and kind-hearted Buddha!"⁴⁵

To the above fragment of *The Victors* I would like to append the last paragraph of yet another letter, this one to Princess Wittgenstein, dated January 1857, which reflects the inner struggle of both Wagner and Mathilde. At that time Wagner visualized the emotional breakdown of Prakriti-Savitri before the vow as far more passionate than the fragment depicts it: "In *The Victors* the following will take place: the girl (presumably Sawitri) [or Prakriti], in the second act, burrows herself, in a frenzy, into flowers, sun, forest, birds, water—into everything, absorbing voluptuously all of nature. After she has taken the fateful vow,

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

she is urged by Czakya (*sic*) to look around and above her, and is then asked: 'What do you think about all that?' 'No longer beautiful,' she says gravely and painfully for she now sees the other side of the world."⁴⁶

One year later, in the diary of the fifth of October 1858, the above description is missing. One might interpret this, perhaps, as a new stage of development of his idea. Now the central motif of *The Victors* was no longer the final perfection of the Buddha, or the redemption of the two who were so deeply in love with each other, Wagner and Mathilde; their love had now rather become an example of the idea of redemption of mankind through universal love: visually represented in the macrocosmos by the Buddha, and in the microcosmos by Ananda and Prakriti-Sawitri. Here Wagner dreamed of a world which no longer changes constantly, which self-recreating no longer destroys itself, a world which has become universal love through purification of love and which has found peace through deliverance from becoming. The Dionysian in *Tristan* is here spiritualized, beautified, deified—it has become the Apollonian.

According to Glasenapp, once when the conversation turned to the topic of India, Wagner narrated in the most touching fashion the content of his *Victors* and said again that he would complete writing this work in his advanced age.⁴⁷

Wagner had never been able to free himself entirely from the concept he had begun to develop in his *Victors* fragment: "victory—the most sacred of all things—the complete salvation."⁴⁸ He always wanted "to reserve for himself the beloved task of completing this composition."⁴⁹

While Wagner was writing *Parsifal*, his concept about *The Victors* interacted repeatedly with that of *Parsifal*. When he came to the Klingsor scene, it became quite clear to him that he was now opposed to magicians and evil beings; he even believed that this scene would after all motivate him to complete both text and music for *The Victors* because in it everything was to be gentle.⁵⁰

The Victors remained a fragment. Unfortunately, nothing is extant either of its music, "the ever-present reverberant musical reminiscence of this dual

⁴⁶ *Sein Leben*, 111. In this letter Wagner recommended the princess read the newly published book *Stimmen des Ganges* (Voices of the Ganges) but with reservation since Wagner did not think that those poems belonged to the most noble poetry of India.

⁴⁷ Carl Fr. Glasenapp, *Das Leben Richard Wagners* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Hartel, 1911), VI, 111. Hereafter referred to as *Das Leben*.

⁴⁸ *Briefwechsel*, II, 126.

⁴⁹ *Leben-List*, 542.

⁵⁰ *Das Leben*, VI, 595.

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existence"⁵¹ as Wagner phrased it, or of Sakyamuni's final perfection of which he had such a clear idea in his mind.⁵²

Many of Wagner's most interesting fragments were unfortunately never developed in detail. In *The Victors*, as Wagner explained, the difficulty of execution lay in the locality and in the language. Besides that, in Christianity everything is simplicity itself whereas in Buddhism much depends on "schooling," and schooling is inartistic. "The repeated mention of lotus ponds, fragrant mangos, graceful palmyras which rise high above the rest of the foliage," prompted him one day to remark how impossible it would be to compose the words and the music for *The Victors*, because he would still have to deal with mango trees, lotus flowers, and so forth, things with which he simply was not familiar, and which consequently must turn out to be rather artificial. Even if it were only for this reason, *Parsifal* had to remain his last work.⁵³

Sixteen years after Wagner had completed *Lohengrin*, and had become well-versed in Schopenhauerian-Indian-Buddhist ideas, he gave his *Lohengrin* an altogether new interpretation, as we learn from a letter written to Mathilde early in 1860 from Paris: "Yesterday *Lohengrin* took very much a hold of me, and I cannot but regard it as the most tragic poem, because reconciliation is really to be found only if one casts an extremely penetrating glimpse into the world. . . . Only the profound assumption of the transmigration of the soul could give me the solace that everything converges on the same level of redemption, after the various courses of life, which though separated in time are flowing side by side, have come to a confluence with a mutual understanding outside the framework of time. According to the joyous Buddhist assumption the immaculate purity of Lohengrin is accounted for simply by the fact that he [Lohengrin] is the continuation of Parsifal, who first sought to achieve such pureness. Elsa, in her rebirth, would likewise ascend to the height of Lohengrin. Thus the plan for my *Victors* appeared to be the concluding continuation of *Lohengrin*. Here 'Savitri' attains the height of 'Ananda.'"⁵⁴

After his recovery from an illness, he again had a flicker of hope. He was

⁵¹ *Leben-List*, II, 542.

⁵² The author had corresponded with Mrs. Gertrud Strobel, archivist of the Richard Wagner Archives in Bayreuth, and in the summer of 1971 personally met Mrs. Strobel and Mr. Wolfgang Wagner in Bayreuth. Both confirmed that there is no music extant for *The Victors*.

⁵³ *Das Leben*, VI, 699.

⁵⁴ *Tagebuch*, 285.

feeling so well that he wanted to start working on *The Victors* immediately, upon the completion of the *Parsifal* performance at Bayreuth. During the third act of *Parsifal* he was again reading Burnouf's story of the chāṇḍāla girl.⁵⁵

His health, however, did not improve and now he had also a distinct premonition that his life would not give him much more time. His thoughts about Buddha, Ananda, and Prakriti-Sawitri lived on in his mind; they were still with him at his hour of death. On the day he died, the thirteenth of February 1883, Wagner was writing the treatise "On the Feminine in Human Nature," which reads: "It is a beautiful feature of the legend that prompts the Victorious-Perfect One [The Buddha] to decide to admit women [into the Holy Order]. All the same the process of women's emancipation takes place only under ecstatic convulsions. Love—Sorrow." And those were Richard Wagner's last written words: "Love—Sorrow."⁵⁶

Wagner died in the arms of Cosima. But it was Mathilde, his immortal beloved one, his Muse, his victorious one, who alone gave poetic expression to the deep grief at the death of the Master:

When our longing, hoping—our loving—
Is but a breath that mourns for you!
Of death you talked often and gladly.
From earliest time I well recall,
When you, calming the beating of the heart,
Praised peace of death as victory!
And longing for death echoes from Tristan's love,
The longing for death from Amfortas's agony,
And Parsifal on Kundry's forehead
Presses the sacred kiss of death!
Your entire life was nothing
But one long day of creation [on this earth].
The evening came and with it came the night;
The peace of the grave embraces your noble head.
Thou celebrateth! Hail to thee, Hail! It is finished!

The seventeenth of February 1883.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Das Leben*, 44 ff.

⁵⁶ *Gesammelte Schriften*, XII, 205–206.

⁵⁷ *An Mathilde und Otto*, 459.