

Roger Scruton
DEATH-DEVOTED HEART

Sex and the sacred in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*
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Tristan and the toothless lion

Roger Scruton's new book is an engrossing attempt, intensely argued throughout, to persuade the reader that Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* is a religious work, not only in the vague sense that it elevates our feelings into an exalted condition that strikes the non-religious as "religious", but in the precise sense that it incarnates, as the Eucharist incarnates the doctrine of Christianity, a doctrine that would give our meaningless lives a sufficient meaning if we were to believe and follow it. Nearly half a century ago, Joseph Kerman, in *Opera as Drama*, called *Tristan* "a religious drama" and suggested an analogy between it and Bach cantatas dealing with religious conversion and conveying religious experience. Twenty years later, Michael Tanner, a resolutely acute writer on Wagner, described *Tristan* and Bach's St Matthew Passion as the two supreme examples of works "of which it is a prerequisite that one suspends disbelief... in the ethos which the work embodies and promulgates". At the same time he admitted that the love unto death of *Tristan and Isolde* is not "a kind of living that can be rationally valued". More recently and less cautiously, in his *Wagner*, he calls *Tristan* "the one work of Wagner's which seems to be making an unconditional demand on our capacity to embrace a new, redeeming doctrine". Scruton's book is both a confirmation, a working out, of this "unconditional demand" and, in the rational case it makes for the work's "new, redeeming, doctrine", a response to Tanner's earlier challenge.

The book is also a closely detailed study of the text and the score, and of how, together, they deliver one of the most gripping psychological and emotional dramas ever written. The long chapter on the music has some passages wonderfully evoking the actual sound of *Tristan* and its purposes. To say that "Wagner's chromatic harmony ... involves no renunciation of tonality and its logic but instead a refined exploration of its unpoliced regions", or to describe the *Tristan* chord as "ill at ease yet stationary, standing isolated in the music like an outsider at a gathering", is to shed much light in few words. The general and often the particular explanations of the use of leitmotif in the work could not be improved on. There are also stretches of harmonic analysis so minute and literal as to be incomprehensible (ie, inaudible) without both a score and a piano; and even with them of doubtful use to those who could not manage analysis, score and keyboard for themselves.

It is not, however, Scruton's intention to reveal only how this most inward of operas works in the theatre. An eccentric chapter connects it to Greek tragedy

through the notion of the sacrificed scapegoat. (The sacrifice of Iphigenia is more significant as the original sin of the *Oresteia*, while Oedipus' unwitting murder of his father is not in any sense a sacrifice. Othello may believe he is restoring purity to Desdemona by killing her, but the whole burden of the play is that he is wrong.) Scruton's overriding intention, however, is to persuade us that *Tristan and Isolde* is a representation of a kind of love - consuming erotic passion - which has a philosophically coherent justification as an ideal to be aspired to, and which, in accordance with the doctrine it incarnates, has to culminate in a double ritual death understood as a redeeming sacrifice. The book truly is as odd as it sounds and the case it makes as seductive and as perilous as many listeners have found a good performance of *Tristan* to be, before daylight clears the music of the night from their heads.

To unravel the strands of Scruton's argument, it helps to detach from each other, as he does not, the three periods across which it extends. The first is the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the time of Gottfried von Strassburg, who died in about 1210, leaving his *Tristan* poem unfinished. This was the period of practically universal Catholic orthodoxy in Latin Christendom, and also of more than 500 Cistercian abbeys founded in the previous hundred years, four of them within a few miles of Strasbourg. St Bernard, the inspiration of the Cistercian monastic revival, had used in his eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs erotic love as the humanly understandable image of the spousal union between the soul and Christ which is the goal of mystical prayer. In this context, Gottfried's church-like marble "cave of love", in which his *Tristan and Isolde* feast on love and beauty on a bed in the place of the altar, is a consciously transgressive fantasy intended, in Gottfried's words, "for the pleasure of the world and the delight of lofty spirits", of whom there are very few. It is thoroughly misleading to confuse, as Scruton does, this subversive vision - "There was a time", Gottfried adds, "when I too led such a life and I thought it quite sufficient" with the ordinary medieval view, evident elsewhere in Gottfried's poem, of erotic passion as a temptation and an affliction, as if the sublimated love of Dante for Beatrice or the renounced love of Lancelot for Guinevere were the same as the consummated unrenounced love of Paolo and Francesca or of *Tristan and Isolde*. There is no love-death in Gottfried's unfinished poem. Wagner used the movingly simple last fragment of Gottfried's source, the *Tristan* of Thomas of Britain, where there is grief and pity in the

deaths of the lovers but no suggestion whatever of "sacrifice", either of religion or of parody religion.

The second period is the 1850s, when Wagner wrote *Tristan and Isolde*, the only one of his mature works to emerge from a single creative impulse rather than from decades of gestation. With the revolutionary hopes of 1848 dashed and Christianity for most intellectuals in disregarded pieces, the elevation of the erotic to the one attainable meaning of life was not uncommon. *La Traviata*, *Les Troyens* (with its own cave of consummated, doomed love), *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* were all written within a few years of *Tristan*, cruel reality supervening on passion in each case. Scruton wants Kant's philosophically grounded valuation of persons as ends to underpin the absolute commitment to each other of Wagner's lovers. Wagner had picked up some idea of Kant from Feuerbach and then from Schopenhauer, first read with delighted enthusiasm while he was planning *Tristan* and reread for the rest of his life. But the rational justification for erotic obsession sketched by Scruton is his own rather than Wagner's: nothing so grand as Kantian ontology is needed to explain the all-consuming passion of Wagner's characters.

That Schopenhauer regarded the erotic as the most acute manifestation of the struggle of individual existence, and therefore as that from which the good man must most urgently seek release through renunciation, was so evident to Wagner that, in his *Tristan* period, he even drafted a letter to the elderly philosopher explaining that he had got sex all wrong. Within a very few years Wagner came to agree with Schopenhauer's view; had he agreed with Scruton's, he would not have had Sachs nobly renouncing Eva, nor Parsifal acquiring through compassion the kind of knowledge that makes it possible for him to rescue Kundry into mortality by resisting the erotic temptation that she embodies. Further, although Schopenhauer thought death the much-to-be-desired end to the chaos of the individuated will, he was adamant in his opposition to suicide, and would have taken a dim view of *Tristan's* provoked and *Isolde's* self-induced death.

Scruton's third period is our time, which he castigates, with justice, for its cheapening of both art and sex, its reductive presentations of Wagner, its "demythification of desire" to the point where there prevails "an easygoing market in sexual commodities - a market that can be entered without shame and left without damage", and finally for its overwhelming, by "a culture of desecration", of the modernist "task", which he takes *Tristan* to have inaugurated, "of resacralizing a desacralized world". But the world is not sacred unless God made it, and the attempt to "resacralize" it in art can deliver only the *religio intransitiva* Erich Heller diagnosed in Rilke and Nietzsche: they do not "praise the praiseworthy. They praise. They do not believe the believable. They believe. And it is their praising and believing itself that become praiseworthy and believable".

The period to which Scruton's argument really belongs, in fact, is not the twelfth or midnineteenth or the twenty-first century but the early years of the twentieth, when Rilke was writing and Nietzsche being read, and when D. H. Lawrence was explicitly replacing Christianity with a new religion of exalted sexuality.

Birkin and Ursula in *Women in Love* are locked into precisely the "encounter between subjects" that Scruton finds in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, and are as far removed as they from the daylight tiresomeness of "marriage, household, budgets, children", which Scruton says of Wagner's characters, "would pollute this heroic love". Scruton insists that *Tristan* is on the side of "life", "in its fullest sense of achieved and outward-going individuality". He is therefore placing it in "the tradition of moral vitalism" for which Michael Tanner long ago claimed Wagner, the tradition of Nietzsche, Lawrence and Leavis, in which man in a meaningless universe creates his values, or the artist creates our values, rather than discovering what is good (as Sachs and Parsifal undeniably do).

Wagner, according to Scruton, teaches us "that man makes himself by sacralizing himself". Scruton is sure that there is no God; that, in particular, Christianity consists only of "baseless promises that offer redemption from a point outside our human world". Therefore, if we want "the sacred" we must find it in whatever makes *us* feel "holy", for example the sacrificial love-death of *Tristan and Isolde*. But if the death of Christ is not unique in its real carrying of real redemption, then it, with its re-enactment in the Eucharist, is no more than one of many sacrificial rituals now all meaningless. In this case, how can the *Tristan* lovedeath be said to be a redeeming sacrifice, or the, re-enactment of one, by which we are "brought into the presence of the sacred"? Only by borrowing from Christianity and its "baseless promises" the force of terms such as "sacrament", "atonement", even "sanctity", which have no meaning unless they are anchored to a transcendent reality "outside the human world". Scruton is playing what George Steiner calls "the language-games of the sacred"; Allan Bloom described those who dispense with God but insist on talking about The sacred" as "like a man who keeps a toothless old circus lion around the house in order to experience the thrills of the jungle".

The literal meaning of the word "religious" is "firm binding" or "re-binding" of the human to the divine. To cut the word loose from divinity, and from truth, and to use it for any experience or represented experience that gives us the subjective feeling that we are "in the presence of the sacred" is either archly elitist, in the knowing manner of Gottfried - Scruton says of modernist art that its "mysteries are encrypted in a language that is not accessible to the profane" - or actually dangerous. In the new religion Scruton finds in *Tristan*, self-generated meaning, meaning that is "its own reward", is to be found in self-sacrifice: "By enfolding this sacrifice within the sacred aura of the erotic, Wagner offers the final proof that man can become holy to himself with no help from the *gods*". Some may find the meaning of everything in erotic love; those who do are here seriously recommended to die with the one they love: "love can be fulfilled in death, where death is chosen and... this fulfilment is a genuine redemption". At Mayerling, for example? Others, as Roger Scruton does not mention, have found a sense of the sacred, or self-sacrifice for a meaning that is its own reward, in laying down their lives for a crazy guru, or Hitler, or historical inevitability. The real theme of this book, in

other words, is idolatry, or the worship of what is not God.

Wagner indulged from time to time in a variety of grandiose ideas, but that in *Tristan* he was giving the world a new religion was never one of them. "Wagner", Joseph Kerman said in the chapter *on Tristan* that started the religious hare, "was a big talker, but as an artist he was practical and opportunistic, a fact that his critics do not always keep firmly enough in mind". Wagner realized later that what he had created in *Tristan* was frightening stuff, but he embarked on it, as his letter to Liszt in 1854 makes clear, in a spirit of imaginative experiment, like Gottfried's, and not even half-serious self-dramatization. "As I have never in life felt the real bliss of love, I must erect a monument to the most beautiful of all my dreams, in which, from beginning to end, that love shall be thoroughly satiated With the 'black flag' which floats at the end of it I shall cover myself to die." In his next sentence he asks Liszt to send *Rhinegold* to the Dresden chorusmaster so that he can get its copying finished.

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