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Douglas Thomas^a & Elizabeth Eowyn Nelson^a

^a Depth Psychology Program, Pacifica Graduate Institute, Carpinteria, CA, USA

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Wagner's *Parsifal* as ritual theater: approaching the numinous unknown

Douglas Thomas and Elizabeth Eowyn Nelson*

Depth Psychology Program, Pacifica Graduate Institute, Carpinteria, CA, USA

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Richard Wagner spent 37 years developing and refining his final work, *Parsifal*, which he would not call an opera but, rather, a 'Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage'. Critical response to *Parsifal* has historically taken up the work's ambiguous nature as a puzzle to be analyzed and solved, yet treating the opera as a Grail quest for some ultimate meaning reveals more about the seeker than the work and simultaneously errs by distancing the audience from participation in the ritual Wagner orchestrated. *Parsifal* is deeply psychological in the most radical sense of the word. A depth psychological approach finds the essential value of the work through a direct encounter with the dynamic symbols of the archetypal unconscious, which emerge through Wagner's images and music. Then, the light of understanding emanates from within the drama, from within the music, and from within the landscape and its characters as complex and dynamic autonomous beings – so that it becomes, in Nietzsche's description of *Parsifal*, 'an event of the soul'.

Keywords: *Parsifal*; Wagner; Grail legend; opera; dream; ritual; symbolism; ecopsychology; Emma Jung

Parsifal was Richard Wagner's final work for the stage. He spent 37 years of his life developing and refining the piece which, in the end, he would not call an opera but a 'Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage' (*ein Bühnenweihfestspiel*) (Beckett, 1995). As he neared its completion, Wagner wrote to his patron King Ludwig II, paraphrasing Schiller's *William Tell*, 'if ... this falls powerless from my hands, I have no other to send after it' (p. ix). Given the time Wagner spent with this material and his intention to create complex layers of meanings, it is not surprising that, even 132 years after its premiere, *Parsifal* continues to elicit confusion, mistrust, and widely divergent views on what it's about and what Wagner intended. Claude Debussy (as cited in Beckett) called the work 'incomparable and bewildering' (p. 108). In a review for the *New York Times*, Anthony Tomassini (2013) describes *Parsifal* as 'among the most metaphysical, ambiguous and profound, if inexplicable, operas ever written.' As Wagner's final masterpiece, one might expect a summation of the composer's aesthetic and philosophical vision, yet the work is candidly ambiguous: symbols of Christian redemption share the stage with images of chthonic paganism; characters are deeply human in their emotional intensity, yet relate to one another with an iconic masque-like quality; grand depictions of spiritual transcendence are interlaced with ominous declamations implying the virtue of

*Corresponding author. Email: enelson@pacific.edu

nationalist purity. Even today, as we look back on a year that celebrated the bicentennial of Wagner's birth, we find the pundits of the cultural world still asking, 'What do we make of *Parsifal*?'.

This question is not new. Over the years, a number of commentators have supplied dramatically different answers. Beckett's (1995) authoritative survey of critical commendations and detractions range from Nietzsche's invective against the work's pro-Christian sentiments, to Thomas Mann's assertion that characters appear as a 'half-burlesque, half-uncanny impropriety of the romantic school, [disguised] as a miracle play of the highest religious significance' (p. 119). After the monstrosities of World War II, non-German critics assailed *Parsifal* as 'the epitome of disastrous Germanness' (p. 120). Beckett hails Dahlhaus as the most widely accepted contemporary view of the work as psychological allegory: 'the "background" of interior development, symbolic significances and the entanglement of past and present playing a far greater part than the "foreground" of visible action' (p. 126). However, no critical assessment of the work's meaning has had the final word, due in large part to the curious obfuscation built into *Parsifal* itself. As Deathridge (2008) says, any reductionist interpretation of the work's essential meaning misses the mark.

Jung's psychological interest in Wagner and *Parsifal* in particular appears to have been substantial. Haule (1992) notes that the general index to the *Collected Works* reveals more attention to Wagner than any other composer; there are a total of 23 references to various aspects of *Parsifal* throughout the *Collected Works*, more than any other Wagner opera (Forryan & Glover, 1979, p. 712). Examples include Jung's reference to the wound of Amfortas in *Psychological Types* (1921/1974) as a metaphor for the seemingly incurable split in the psyche between its civilized and barbaric aspects, and his invocation of the foolish Parsifal in the Grail Hall in *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (Jung 1955/1989) to emphasize one's essential participation in the experience of the symbolic function. These examples are more than casual passing references by Jung; he invokes these mythic operatic figures with their centuries-old archetypal effect to activate the deeper strata of the reader's psyche. For Jung (1921/1974), the Grail held intimations of a nascent symbol and 'a new orientation to life', which remains *in potentia* into the modern age, explaining in part the great fascination of the myth for both Jung and Wagner (p. 241, para. 409).

What is needed today is not so much a new interpretation of the work, but a new approach to understanding it. This paper draws upon the rich traditions of Jungian thought to propose such a novel approach, one that is both aesthetic and psychological, emphasizing experience and process over analysis. Missing from the longstanding conversation is a willingness to allow *Parsifal* to present itself on its own terms. Depth psychology has cultivated such an attitude for some time, particularly in the post-Jungian work of James Hillman. What might we learn about *Parsifal* if we were to encounter its strange and sometimes disturbing beauty as we would a dream? In entertaining this question, we'd like to focus on three aspects that illuminate the work and illustrate the value of a depth psychological approach: the symbolic function of *Parsifal* as ritual theater, the psychological dynamism of the Grail/Spear duality, and the ecopsychology of land and earth as central characters hidden in plain sight.

Plot synopsis

For readers unfamiliar with Wagner's treatment of the Parsifal legend, a brief synopsis is in order. The opera begins in the troubled kingdom of Amfortas, the ruler of the Knights of the Grail, who is charged with keeping the Holy Grail and Spear from the crucifixion

of Christ. Prior to the opening, Amfortas has lost the Spear while battling the evil sorcerer Klingsor and the enchantress Kundry. During the battle, Amfortas suffers a wound that cannot heal, perpetually reminding the king of his transgression. As a reflection of his spiritual devastation, the kingdom languishes, while his subjects search the globe for a remedy. Among the searchers is Kundry. Eternally cursed for laughing in the face of the martyred Christ, she is divided between untiring service to Amfortas and servitude to Klingsor. Into this world bursts Parsifal, a foolish impetuous youth, whose first act is to kill a swan near the king's castle. An embodiment of ignorance itself, he is unable to say anything about his origins or his identity, and stands in silence as an uncomprehending witness to the mysterious service of the Grail. In the second act, he resists the seduction of Kundry, who has now assumed her alternate role as Klingsor's enchantress. Suddenly Parsifal feels within his own body the searing pain of Amfortas' wound, and he experiences enlightenment through compassion. He seizes the Spear from Klingsor, destroys the enchanting illusions of his dark kingdom, and sets out on a tortuous path back to the land of Amfortas. In the final act, Parsifal fulfills the redemptive prophecy of the Grail by returning to the kingdom, where the land greens and blossoms at his arrival. Parsifal returns the Spear to the Grail, thereby healing Amfortas, breaking Kundry's curse, and proclaiming himself the new keeper of the relics.

The Grail legend in Jungian thought

The Grail legend holds a unique place in Jungian thought for personal and cultural reasons. According to Jung biographer Dierdre Bair (2003), the story was one of the two texts that most fascinated Jung, the other being Goethe's *Faust* (p. 677). Moreover, the Grail text was part of the love story between Carl Jung and Emma Rauschenbach during their courtship. 'A deep and lasting bond formed between them when Emma told him of her interest in the Grail legends' (p. 78). Jung decided never to write of them because 'very early in their marriage he decided they belonged to Emma' (p. 677).

Over the course of three decades, Emma Jung became a formidable Grail scholar, writing a book that was completed after her death in 1955, at Jung's request, by Marie-Louise von Franz. It is clear from the forward to that work, *The Grail Legend* (1970, p. 7), that von Franz respected 'the material collected and sifted by Mrs. Jung' so that the final text suggests the most graceful of editorial touches. Their book, a work of profound insight into the depth psychological significance of the Grail legends, is for Jungians – and for other depth psychologists more generally – a treasure-house of information regarding the Fisher King, the Grail castle, and the young fool Parsifal.

Jung and von Franz describe the rapid fluorescence of the Grail legends over a period of approximately four decades, beginning with Chrétien de Troyes c. 1180, the high Middle Ages. 'As if a subterranean watercourse had been tapped at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries, a great number of different adaptations of the same material was produced in quick succession' (1970, p. 10). Many versions were based on Chrétien, though deviating from him 'in numerous, often important features', which leads the authors to conclude that 'a more or less well-known narrative is being retold and elaborated, as if they expressly referred to a theme that was already very familiar' (p. 11). Across western and northern Europe, this subterranean watercourse surfaced in the works of various Grail authors to satiate the widespread psychological thirst for what the Grail promised. As Jung and von Franz tell us, the Grail legend belongs to a broader tradition of storytelling known as the *contes Breton* or *Romans de la Table Ronde* that remains psychologically and culturally meaningful. 'The feminine symbol

of the Grail,' they assert, 'points to a compensation originating in the unconscious, by means of which the feminine and the soul of nature may once again achieve recognition' (pp. 204–205). Helen Luke (1992) is more psychologically explicit:

The Grail is the cup from which each individual life receives its essential food and drink. ... Without a vessel no transformation on any level can take place – no cooking of ingredients in a kitchen, no chemical experiments or alchemical search for 'gold,' no metanoia in a human soul. (p. 73)

Faral, quoted in Jung and von Franz, tells us that Breton, Welsh, and Anglo-Norman singers were highly popular, producing 'a sense of wonderment through a feeling of strangeness ... [that] carry the reader off into a world of the supernatural where human destiny is liberated from the laws of this world' (1970, p. 20). Jung and von Franz attribute this partly to the influx of eastern mysticism during the Crusades, which 'caused a tremendous activation of the world of fantasy' (p. 20). This point is particularly germane for Jungians since, coterminous with the irrational elements audiences found alluring in the *contes Breton*, Europe saw the activation of fantasy in medieval alchemy. Carl Jung discovered in alchemy a rich metaphor for the dynamic psyche, amassed an impressive library of alchemical texts, and studied it for four decades. 'The conscious mind of the medieval investigator,' Jung asserted, 'was still under the influence of metaphysical ideas, but because he could not derive them from nature he projected them into nature' (1946/1982, p. 230 [para. 440]). Modern psychology discovered 'this human "matter" of the alchemists ... as the psyche' (p. 230 [para. 440]). References like this are sprinkled throughout the collected works, in addition to the three full volumes devoted to alchemy. One might say that both Emma and Carl Jung studied the irrational: she as depicted in the Grail legend, he in alchemy.

The world of fantasy so apparent in the *contes Breton*, the fascination with the supernatural depicted in otherworldly places, people, and events, found a receptive home in the west partly due to its affinity with Celtic fairy tales and myths. Jung and von Franz (1970), speaking about this literary tradition in general, could be speaking quite specifically about the Grail legend. The heroes of the *contes Breton*, like Parsifal and Gawain in the Grail legend, easily moved between worlds: 'It is precisely this traffic to and fro between this world and that which constitutes the quite peculiar magic of the stories' (Jung & von Franz, 1970, p. 23). The emphasis on the supernatural did not then, and does not today, dissuade attempts to claim the Grail legend and locate the Grail castle and Grail objects literally. (Glastonbury, for instance, still does a whopping tourist business as a center of Arthurian fascination.) Jung and von Franz argue that such endeavors mask the symbolic significance of the legend and its otherworldly sensibility. The Grail castle cannot be found because it is not of this world. As Robert Johnson says, the castle is the place of imagination, dream, and vision, 'the miraculous place of healing', available to anyone (1993, p. 40).

Johnson (1993) proposes that the Grail legend symbolizes a wounded feeling function that specifically afflicts males, and also the masculine aspect of both men and women. The chief purpose of the feeling function in Jungian thought is to 'bring a sense of value and worth' (p. 3). Without it, we lack the ability to make those judgments that inform our deepest values. Johnson sees this Fisher King wound as the price we have paid, and continue to pay, 'for the cool, precise, rational, and scientific world' (p. 15). He connects this idea to the symbolic Grail Castle as a place of dream and fantasy by advocating a turn away from the scientific-technological world to the enveloping warmth of 'inner

work'. Just as the Fisher King's pain was partly assuaged through fishing, so we also must fish in the unconscious, 'work[ing] on dreams, meditation, active imagination, drawing, music, or poetry' (p. 26). Johnson reveals his classical Jungian stance, implying that cool, precise rationality and finely differentiated feeling have little to do with one another. In fact, in terms of Jung's (1921/1974) typology they share the same 'rational' axis, since both functions require deliberation. It takes time to know what one thinks and what one feels.

The abiding interest in and cultural relevance of the Grail legend continued strongly into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which saw the birth of industrialism in Europe as both the expression and the extension of the scientific worldview. In scholarship, a new emphasis on the historical context of literary documents inspired new critical editions of the *contes Breton* and the Grail legends. But interest in the Grail was not exclusively scholarly or historical. As Jung and von Franz tell us:

Finally, in the nineteenth century, there was an artistic reshaping of the material. Wagner's *Parsifal* is an extremely gifted revival of the Grail legend, of a pronouncedly psychological character. That Wagner was able to express in this guise the problems of the nineteenth century, whether transiently nationalistic or personally conditioned, is proof of the genuinely symbolic nature of the legend. (1970, p. 12)

They add what many scholars in the twenty-first century know: the Grail legend is 'so real' (p. 12) that it has not lost its fascination either for scholars or for Wagner *aficionados*. In fact, it may be that the opera is even more relevant today in light of the ecological crisis that afflicts Earth and ourselves. Amfortas, the wounded king ruling over a wasted land, may be every one of us – an idea explored later in this essay.

Theater as ritual and symbol

Several years ago, one of the authors attended a performance of *Parsifal* in Los Angeles. At the end of the production, a young man stood up on the arms of his theater seat and cried out, 'Ladies and gentlemen! We have just witnessed the ritual of *Parsifal*. Let's see how you can keep the ritual going forward in your own lives as you leave here today!'. That moment exemplifies the kind of fervor Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* can foment, and it is also an astute observation, that *Parsifal* is itself a ritual about ritual.

The African scholar Malidoma Somé (1999) has described ritual as 'one of the most practical and efficient ways to stimulate the safe healing required by both the individual and the community' (p. 142). Douglas Allen (1998) speaks to the contemporary importance of ritual: 'In the modern mode of being in the world, the sacred is hidden but still functioning on the level of the unconscious' (p. 279). This view is consistent with the writings of Mircea Eliade (1957/1987, 1977): because sacred reality has fallen into the unconscious, we need ritual to reconnect with its deeper truths.

In Somé's (1999) view, ritual has a two-part structure, which involves interaction between the conscious planning and choreography of the human community and an unpredictable encounter with a transpersonal energy source he refers to as Spirit (p. 142). In contrast to ceremonies, which are 'reproducible, predictable, and controllable', rituals require spontaneity and an unknown outcome that is influenced by the community's reaction to the encounter (p. 142). Somé's description of collective ritual healing in indigenous Africa may seem far from the hyper-regulated milieu of Wagnerian opera, yet certain points of comparison are valid. In Wagner's adherence to Schopenhauerian

philosophy, there is an aspiration to dissolve individual identity into a greater collective whole (Magee, 2000), which fosters access to the restorative mythic structures of the collective unconscious. In this sense, when we attend a Wagner opera, we usually hope to lose ourselves in the intensity of a vast saga and forget the narrow concerns of daily life. Perhaps, too, the experience will in some way transform us and thereby improve us. This intuitive sense that the experience can be transformative links Wagner's work (and *Parsifal* in particular) to Somé's indigenous view of ritual. Such a transformation requires a mixture of conscious and unconscious elements in an unpredictable and spontaneous encounter, a process Jung (1958/1981) referred to as the transcendent function. We will return to this idea shortly.

Although there is ample evidence of Wagner's obsession with control and specificity in how *Parsifal* and his other operas were to be performed, his devotion to the principles of Greek drama also includes a reverence for ritual. Magee (2000) has summarized Wagner's analysis of ancient Greek theater into three essential components:

First, the subject matter was rooted in a mythology that was itself rooted in the unique nature of the society. This maximized the range of reference and the expressive potential of the drama's content on both the social and the personal levels, and integrated the two. Second, although we call them plays, in fact Greek dramas made use of all the arts in a single composite art-form: instrumental music, verse, singing, dancing, mime, narration – all came together to articulate a work's content, and thus to give it the fullest possible expression, such as none of the separate arts would have been able to do alone.... Third, human participation also was maximized, in that the whole community was involved. Dramatic performances were accorded the highest possible importance, a significance that was tantamount to religious. (p. 86)

Wagner aspired to improve society by improving its individuals through art as a transformative ritual experience revealing the deepest truths about human nature and the world (p. 177). Similar to indigenous ritual, there is the careful conscious planning by the artistic community as well as by audience members, who set aside five hours or more of their time for the performance. Although *spirit* can be an ambiguous term, many opera patrons would affirm that there are clear spiritual elements to the Wagnerian experience: the overpowering sweep of primal emotions, the serious contemplation of existential and metaphysical questions raised by the drama and, perhaps most importantly, the awe that comes when the music occasions feelings of oceanic transcendent intensity, often referred to as 'numinous' (Jones, 2007). This spiritual dimension that emerges during performances of Wagner is contingent upon the attitudes and reactions of the audience, making for an experience that is unpredictable and spontaneous, consistent with the indigenous view of ritual. As Wagner's final work for the operatic stage, *Parsifal* is deeply involved in this notion of ritual.

Central to the structure of *Parsifal* is the ritual surrounding the Grail. Two climactic scenes occur in the Grail hall in Acts 1 and 3. In Wagner's detailed stage directions for these scenes, there are clear indications of a transcendent spiritual encounter as part of the action. 'No earthly path leads to it [the Grail],' says Gurnemanz to Parsifal and, in a declaration of faith that predates quantum physics, he concludes, 'time here becomes space' (Wagner, 1877/1994, p. 44). Inside the Grail hall, the formal processional movement of the knights and squires is contrasted by the transcendent mystery of a dazzling white light that shines down upon the glowing chalice held aloft by Amfortas. The music Wagner composed for this passage tells us as much as the stage directions about the mystical encounter with the divine that is taking place. The use of silence as a spatial

presence rather than a sonic absence contributes to a mood of awe and anticipation. The tremolo in the lower strings mirrors the trembling within the soul when a dynamic encounter with the divine occurs. The shimmering arpeggiated textures in the strings evoke a sense of beauty, mystery, and longing. It is as if we have been transported out of and suspended over the realm of the everyday. At the conclusion of the work, the ultimate transformation occurs in this same setting as Parsifal returns with the Holy Spear and heals Amfortas at the moment when the established order reaches its apogee of crisis. The weapon that wounds contains the secret that heals. Both of these climactic scenes dramatize a transformative and healing encounter with Spirit as Somé (1999) defines it. However, these pivotal rituals do not reach the limit of their transformative powers within the story depicted on the stage; rather unexpectedly, their power extends over the footlights to reach the audience.

It becomes increasingly clear that, as is always the case with mythic narratives, Parsifal's story is our story and, as Hillman (1975) would insist, it is also the story of the soul itself. This is precisely why the new production at the Metropolitan Opera begins the Prelude with a giant mirror mounted into the proscenium of the stage. The audience begins the performance with the act of reflection by contemplating itself, which emphasizes the point that this is a myth fundamentally of self-discovery, self-understanding, and transcendent compassion leading to a new state of consciousness.

As much as the protagonist of the drama traverses a heroic trajectory, Parsifal's story is ultimately one of inner transformation symbolized by the progression of external events. The inner journey shapes the external narrative. The gaze of Parsifal may begin with an impulsive extraverted predatory glance at a swan flying on the horizon, but his perspective turns increasingly inward as he is enlightened by compassion throughout the drama. In Act 3, he exclaims in intense grief, 'And it is I, I, who caused all this woe!' (*Und ich, ich bin's, der all dies Elend schuf!*) (Wagner, 1877/1994, p. 89). Here Parsifal is referring not to his own misdeeds, but rather to his sense of identification with the archetypal guilt, the septic wound, that has invaded the collective psyche of Amfortas' kingdom. Parsifal has entered into a *participation mystique* with the incurable wound. This is not a moment of narcissistic inflation, but rather a cry of deepening consciousness that feels the hidden interconnection between internal and external events. It is a hallmark of psychological growth, when we can see through our fantasies of autonomy and individualism and acknowledge the harm we unconsciously inflict on others and the world.

The dynamism of Spear and Grail

With this shift in consciousness, Parsifal is able to return to the ritual space of the collective in the final scene as the transformative agent by using the Holy Spear not as an instrument of wounding but of healing. The end of the opera presents a new situation: the old order is now ended, and Spear and Grail together create a living symbol: two contrasting forces joined to create a complementary whole. For some, this may be a symbol of masculine and feminine principles creating a unity; for others, it may symbolize more generally the joining of the conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche to create a third thing, a new attitude, which Jung (1958/1981) referred to as the transcendent function: 'The confrontation of the two positions [conscious and unconscious] generates a tension charged with energy and creates a living, third thing – not a logical stillbirth ... but a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation' (p. 90). The opera concludes at the moment of this living birth. It is wholly appropriate

that the audience should feel perplexed and fatigued upon leaving the theater. What have we seen? What does it mean? How are we to come to terms with what we've experienced? These are Parsifal's questions in Act 1 when he first witnesses the ritual of the Grail.

Jung references Parsifal allegorically to describe this process of self-recognition that occurs as one encounters the autonomous psyche through images (1955/1989, pp. 528–529, para. 753). Transformation is contingent on recognizing one's personal involvement with the images as a psychic fact and as living entities. When we realize that Parsifal's story is our story, that something of our own psychological life is occurring upon the stage, we recognize this 'Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage,' is itself a living symbol, like the Grail and Spear that join at the center of the story's transformational process. Jung (1958/1981) described a symbol as 'the best possible expression for a complex fact not yet clearly apprehended by consciousness' (p. 75). This is in sharp distinction to the more commonplace understanding of a symbol as a sign, an image that references a meaning that is known and understood by the observer.

In *The Philosophical Tree*, Jung (1954/1976) makes a further distinction regarding the nature of the symbol, that its unknown content has a compensatory effect on the development of consciousness for the individual, so long as symbolic images 'are not reduced to something else' (p. 34, para. 397). So it is essential that *Parsifal* as a living symbol remain in partial obscurity to us. Were we to attempt a reductive explanation of its ultimate meaning, the work would become depotentiated, unable to generate psychological growth. Wagner's final opus confronts us with images, characters, and situations that are at once familiar and perplexing: the fool, the king, the high priest, the penitent, the whore, the magician; these are familiar figures. Yet there is something in how these figures arrive upon the stage that challenges us to meet them with fresh eyes.

It is in the unfamiliarity of the familiar that *Parsifal* reveals its gifts and arouses the symbolic function of the psyche as a living entity. The primary characters of the work appear recognizable as archetypal figures, yet each is peculiarly compromised in serving a more iconic role within the story, which irritates our drive to understand them reductively. Gurnemanz is a voice of authority, much as the Greek chorus functioned in the dramas of antiquity. Yet he cannot function as an agent of change, as much as his intelligence and devotion might serve him in this role. Amfortas is king, yet he bears the wound that cannot heal, rendering him a ruler who cannot rule. Similarly, Kundry arrives as a desperate penitent in Act 1, who is unable to escape the perpetual curse of her dual nature, both as servant to the wound of Amfortas and as the enchanted seductress in the service of Klingsor. She is the helper who never helps (*ich hilfe nie*, she sings in Act 1), and the wild temptress in search of the man (or, more precisely, the male incarnation of the God image) who can resist her erotic powers. She is perpetually unsuccessful in both roles, broken from her unending effort. When Parsifal bursts upon the stage, he is an impulsive agent of death and can only articulate his un-knowingness. In a sense, he is the embodiment of the unconscious itself: void of knowledge or understanding, and unable to carry out the basic operations of human consciousness. Such an undeveloped psychological state could easily arouse contempt in others, but Gurnemanz recognizes the innocence in Parsifal, and sees his potential to heal and transform the king and the entire established order of the land. So it is that the greatest transformations in our own lives do not emerge from the established order of the ego, but rather from our unconscious selves, our foolishness.

Wounded king, wounded land: contributions from ecopsychology

In Beckett's masterful study of Wagner's *Parsifal*, she says the symmetry between the wounded Amfortas and the 'Waste Land' over which he rules reflects 'the pagan belief in the connection between the reproductive forces of nature and the potency of the king' (1995, p. 20). Jung and von Franz (1970) discuss this belief. Among indigenous cultures, 'the divine "spirit" of the tribe is incarnated' in the King, and 'on him depend the psychic and physical welfare of the people' (p. 191). They cite two other Grail scholars, Helen Adolf and H.B. Wilson, who argue that the king symbolizes a 'stricken society' and 'mankind in a fallen state' (p. 192). In many versions of the Grail legend and in Wagner's *Parsifal*, 'it is the King's sickness that causes the conflict to break out. ... From this originates the complete devastation of the land, the stagnation of psychic life' (p. 194).

When Parsifal first wanders into the Grail kingdom, his stupefaction borne of naiveté allows him to see but not to know. This crucial gap reveals the nature of the quest. Conscious awareness of 'the condition of the Grail realm and its King, sickly and in need of redemption, is the essential point' (Jung & von Franz, 1970, p. 198). Parsifal is any of us who has forgotten 'that more universal, more eternal man dwelling in the darkness of the primordial night. There he is still whole, and the whole is in him, indistinguishable from Nature' (Jung, 2005, p. 66). Guided by Johnson's interpretation – the Grail King symbolizes the wounded feeling function (1993) – we can surmise that when any of us embodies Parsifal in a similar Waste Land, we need a deeply felt awareness of the sickness infusing it. Awareness is only possible, Jung says, through 'the body, the feeling, the instincts, which connect us with the soil ... [and] the totem ancestors that dwell in the soil' (1988, p. 1541). This is precisely what ecopsychology invites us to do.

In Wagner's earlier operas, for instance his magnum opus *Der Ring des Niebelungen*, nature is animated, often personified, becoming *dramatis personae* in its own right. (One need only remember the formidable and heartbreaking character Erda, earth goddess of wisdom.) Although Wagner began *Parsifal* before composing the *Ring*, Glenn Stanley says 'many of the most important features of the drama as we know it were only developed in the prose drafts from 1865 to 1877, and in the libretto' (2011, p. 151) – that is, after completing the *Ring*. Among those which Stanley cites, two are germane when discussing *Parsifal* from an ecopsychological perspective: the 'respect for all forms of life' and the idea of 'nature as holy and healing' (p. 152). Both of these themes are core principles of ecopsychology, which phenomenologist David Abram describes as 'less a movement than a common sensibility shared by persons who have, in Robinson Jeffer's phrase, "fallen in love outward" with the world around them' (1996, p. 271).

One of the first vibrant, articulate voices of the sensibility belonged to Rachel Carson long before the term 'ecopsychology' entered the language. In her shocking work *Silent Spring* (1962), she describes 'the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials' which is 'now universal' and 'for the most part irrecoverable' (p. 6). Industrial production is 'changing the very nature of the world – the very nature of its life' (p. 6). She poses the question 'whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized' (p. 99). At what point can we continue living in Waste Land and still claim to be living? Or, like the participants in the Grail pageant in Amfortas' realm, are we merely existing, and going through the motions of ritual without the rejuvenation that accompanies it?

A growing number of people have pondered this question, among them Stephen Aizenstat, who has developed a method of working with dream that reflects a deeply ecological sensibility. He speaks about the price of the last millennia of progress:

For all we have gained with our logical, rational view of the world ... the achievements of science have also allowed us to despoil the planet, eradicate countless species, and threaten the survival of life itself. People today live in such an extreme state of alienation from the natural world and one another that it can only be seen as a kind of pathology. (2009, p. 147)

Gary Snyder (1990) alludes to this alienation by saying simply ‘nature is not a place to visit, it is home’ (p. 7), reminiscent of Johnson’s definition of the Grail castle as the place of dream, vision, and imagination that is right here, in the midst of our lives. Visiting it only requires a shift in perspective.

For the ecopsychologist, this shift in perspective begins with the realization that ‘my life and the world’s life are deeply intertwined’ (Abram, 1996, p. 33). The Grail legends depict this reciprocity in beautiful detail, and Wagner’s *Parsifal* dramatizes it – or should. (A key criticism of the 2013 production of *Parsifal* at New York’s Metropolitan Opera is the surprisingly desolate landscape that persists, despite the redemption of Amfortas.) ‘A genuinely ecological outlook’, explains Abram, ‘strives to enter, ever more deeply, into the sensorial present. It strives to become ever more awake to the other lives, the other forms of sentience and sensibility that surround us in the open field of the present moment’ (p. 272). When we adopt such an outlook, we can ‘feel the soil beneath the pavement, to sense – even when indoors – the moon’s gaze upon the roof’ (p. 273). The sensuous feel for the world that Abram advocates shares similarities with Johnson’s emphasis on our wounded feeling function. Both, in different ways, invite us to wake up and shake off the scientific-technological trance before it is too late. ‘Sooner or later’, Abram tells us, ‘technological civilization must accept the invitation of gravity and settle back into the land’ (p. 272).

Perhaps we refuse the invitation of gravity because the world itself is ill: ‘Things are composed of poisonous and flammable substances, stamped out of uniform molds, internally fastened cheaply, quickly with the least care, untouched by the human hand’, says Hillman (1982, p. 83). They have no lasting value, even if they could last. Rather, ‘their existence is hurried by the push of obsolescence as one generation succeeds the next within a few months ... competing by price only, and not by pride or inherent beauty’ (p. 83). Psychotherapy can no longer ignore the reciprocal relationship between human health and the health of soil, tree, creature, and sky, nor stand, Parsifal-like, dumbly witnessing ‘the retarded state of external reality’ that has, in the last century, moved ‘toward brutal uniformity and degradation of quality’ (p. 72). Wagner seems to have intuited this in the late nineteenth century, at least a decade before the advent of depth psychology and 100 years before ecopsychology, judging by the stunning moment in the third act of *Parsifal*. As Parsifal plants the Spear in the soil of the kingdom, the greening of the landscape begins, exerting its effect on the deepest recesses of the psyche held within the natural world first. Then the healing of Amfortas begins. First land, then king. If the world has a soul, as Jung, Hillman, and many others contend, then that world soul is made tangible through the most exquisitely luminous music Wagner ever composed.

The centuries-long journey toward modernity is rooted in the High Middle Ages, the era in which poems and songs of the Wounded King and the Waste Land appeared in such abundance. From a Jungian perspective, the abiding interest in the Grail legends that

depict this sickness is evidence of a living myth, archetypal images – including Amfortas, Parsifal, Castle, Swan, Forest, Grail and Lance – that remain numinous long after their original fluorescence. If Johnson is correct, and the Grail legend bespeaks the imperative to know our deepest values, then it is not enough to be transfixed or transported by Wagner's *Parsifal*. An ecopsychological perspective obligates us to *become* the mature Parsifal, the one who is enlightened by compassion and returns to the Grail castle as an advocate of the earth.

From interpretation to dreaming

The impulse to ask what this strange drama means, what Wagner intends, why the events unfold so slowly with such economy of action upon the stage, is understandable. It is an expression of the conscious personality's drive to make sense of the work as an artistic creation. Yet such an attempt with *Parsifal* always comes up short because what is actually taking place is a sequential presentation of living symbols within a ritual structure. The role of the audience then is not so much to explain, but rather to experience and to contemplate. Wagner offers us a phenomenology of the unknowable in the sacred space of the stage.

This arrangement between the conscious personality's knowledge drive and the ego's necessary unknowingness vis-à-vis the symbolic function is also found in typical reactions to dreams. As soon as the dreaming mind recedes and the conscious mind awakens, the impulse to explain the dream is almost irresistible. Hillman (1975, 1979, 1983, 2007) repeatedly cautioned against this impulse. In his view, the move to interpret the dream as an objective event prevents it from becoming a lived experience, something that the soul is forever working to create. Interpretations place an antagonistic distance between the dreamer and the dream, such that the dream image is depotentiated and rendered lifeless, a specimen of the nocturnal psyche to be dissected by the analytic diurnal mind. Hillman's admonition regarding the waking attitude toward the dream is no less valid when we take up an artistic work of such psychological gravitas as *Parsifal*. What could be gained by lending such a consciously unknowing phenomenological approach to the work?

Let us become innocent fools at the outset, admitting that we are dumb to the deeper meaning presented by the events and the music. Then, we can notice the work emerging slowly, quietly, through the silence of the theater, first through a single melody line rising in the darkness like an ancient plainsong to claim us as its native sons and daughters, and to carry us down into its mysterious dream-like world. Let us sit with the primal emotions evoked through the drama and feel our way into the worlds of pious Gurnemanz, incurable Amfortas, unrelenting Kundry, and dumb Parsifal. Like a dream, let us allow each figure to speak on behalf of something hidden in our own nature and simultaneously on behalf of itself. Let the story on the stage become at once a story about each of us, and something larger. When Gurnemanz shows Parsifal the blood-tinged feathers and the lifeless eye of the martyred swan, the music paints an emotional portrait of the moment that invites both reflection on and remorse for the times we ourselves have thoughtlessly dispatched a precious unconscious part of our own nature. Perhaps we can even amplify such a moment and conjure a deeper understanding of the ecological pathos of the modern world: the swan of Amfortas dies every day at the dumb acquisitive hands of our collective subsistence. Perhaps the wound of Amfortas inducts us into a deep reverie over the incurable wounds we carry personally, and the insoluble problems of the larger world. At the same time, can we attend to his unrelenting agony as the *lingua franca* of the deep psyche itself? It is a language so foreign to the life-affirming, growth-obsessed, 'feel-good' agenda of modern consciousness, yet it speaks a truth that is increasingly unavoidable:

suffering, death, and decay are parts of the natural order and assert a place of privilege in any holistic vision of psychological life. ‘Erbarmen! Erbarmen!’ the king cries inside the great hall in Act 1, ‘Mercy! Mercy!’ he cries out to anyone who will hear him (Wagner, 1877/1994, p. 47). The music swells to a great Wagnerian climax as his voice soars above the orchestra in a searing sustained lamentation. Such is the cry of the soul in its suffering.

Eventually, Parsifal awakens with compassion for the suffering of Amfortas. The king’s own wound suddenly bleeds within him. Can Parsifal’s awakening become our awakening as well? Can we be seized by a living image, as he is seized by the image of the wound? As Henri Corbin (1972), that great thinker who coined the term *imaginal*, was fond of pointing out, ‘the world of the image, the *mundus imaginalis*, [is] a world that is ontologically as real as the world of the senses and that of the intellect’ (p. 7). In this sense, *Parsifal* invites us to cross over into a new ontological order in which the mysterious figures of the drama, their words and their sublime music, confront us with an otherworldly presence that is as real as we are.

At each turn, when the unfolding drama offers a direct emotional experience of the story’s living symbols, the challenge is to awaken our compassion for the plight of each figure, both as an expression of our own deeper nature, and as an archetypal emissary from the greater story of the soul’s condition. Just as in the analytic encounter, the symbolic function in the theater becomes more potent as we ask questions that deepen the experience, rather than providing interpretations that explain it. By allowing *Parsifal* to claim us as its own, we find ourselves deep within the psychoactive field of ritual space, and we are transformed by it in unknown subtle ways. This was precisely Wagner’s greatest desire (Magee, 2000, p. 177). Greater than any intention of creating a treatise on Western Christianity or depicting Schopenhauer’s Buddhist-tinged philosophy, Wagner hoped in his final work to transform the collective through the direct unmediated experience of the theater as ritual space.

Conclusion

The critical response to *Parsifal* has historically taken up the work’s ambiguous nature as a puzzle to be analyzed and solved. This approach commonly leads pundits to find *Parsifal* operating covertly as an exegesis on the nexus between Western civilization, Christianity, and Schopenhauerian philosophy, although there is nothing resembling a consensus on what Wagner intended to say about these topics. Treating the opera as a Grail quest for some ultimate meaning reveals more about the seeker than the work and simultaneously errs by distancing us from participation in the ritual Wagner orchestrated.

A depth-psychological approach to Wagner’s *Parsifal* finds the essential value of the work not through an analysis or interpretation of its peculiar iconographic mélange, but rather through a direct encounter with the dynamic symbols of the archetypal unconscious, which emerge through those images and Wagner’s music. Such an approach bypasses the impulse to reduce the characters and their environs into some recognizable form that interprets them out of existence. Instead, the light of understanding emanates from within the drama, from within the music, and from within the landscape and its characters as complex and dynamic autonomous beings. Despite his infamous contempt for the work, it was Nietzsche (as cited in Beckett, 1995) who recognized upon his first hearing of the Prelude that ‘there occurs in the very depth of this music a sublime and extraordinary feeling, a living experience and an event of the soul’ (p. 115). It is this lived experience of the soul, not its meaning, which helps us understand *Parsifal* as the *logos* of *psyche*, the *lingua franca* of the soul. *Parsifal* is deeply psychological in the most

radical sense of the word. In this final work, whose creation occupied him for 37 years, Wagner has left us with a phenomenology of the soul, of the numinous unknown and its transformative potential.

Notes on contributors

Elizabeth Eowyn Nelson is core faculty and Dissertation Director at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, California, where she teaches a broad range of courses in research process, methodology, and dissertation development along with courses in dream, imagery, and cultural studies. Her own research interests include personal and cultural expressions of the shadow, gender, and power. Most recently, she has been able to bridge her 20 years of professional experience in technology to examine the profound impact of digital technology on contemporary life. Dr. Nelson is the author of two books, *The Art of Inquiry: A Depth Psychological Perspective* (Spring Publications, 2005, coauthored with Dr. Joseph Coppin) and *Psyche's Knife: Archetypal Explorations of Love and Power* (Chiron, 2012). A professional writer and editor for more than three decades, she coaches aspiring authors across a variety of genres and styles.

Douglas Thomas, PhD, LCSW, is a psychotherapist in private practice in Pasadena, California. He also works as adjunct faculty at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, California, where he teaches students in depth psychotherapy, somatics, and clinical psychology. Having obtained a bachelors in music and trained in classical singing at Pomona College in California, he sang semi-professionally in Europe for several years prior to obtaining his masters in social work from USC. His doctoral dissertation explored the archetypal relation between men, music, and intimacy, and he obtained his PhD from Pacifica Graduate Institute in 2010.

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