

Of Tristan, Isolde und Unbearable Itches

(Of his music:)

One commentator calls Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, "the definitive expression of yearning and unsatisfiable desire . . ." ¹ "A triumph of irresolution." "Relentless in its modulations." "A fine use of the cor anglais, a mournful horn, in the evocation of grief, mortification and soul-wrenching longing."

(Of the libretto:)

Isolde, who may accurately be described as being besotted, betrothed, beside herself, and/or stricken in the worst way, is sprawled on a couch as the action begins. She plots revenge for the death of her beloved. Tristan, who has, rather uncouthly, slain said beloved, reclines elsewhere on the ship. Isolde never has her revenge, however; her maid, sensing disaster, substitutes the Love for the Death potion. Tristan and Isolde drink; they become hopelessly, helplessly, irreparably enslaved by Passion. Isolde is given to griping (for her hand has been promised to the King of Cornwall); Tristan, to outpourings of grief (often accompanied by the cor anglais).

(But what of the composer himself?)

He does not lack for certain things: decadent silks, benefactors (Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck), women, whom he is continually wooing, often in "hysterical streams of letters," ² proclamations of (un)adulterated longing. Still, he is bereft. Scratching himself, for his eripsylis is severe, he writes of the havoc of love and the relief of death.

He is enamored of an Italian chorus girl. But she hums *La Taviata* in her sleep, a constant irritation for Wagner, who thinks the Italians barbarians, hopelessly infatuated with coloratura and the Neopolitan sixth chord. No, while she snores the mezzo, hoarding her virtue, he thinks only of Mathilde Wesendonck.

¹The Wagner Compendium, Barry Millington, ed. (Schirmer Books 1992), p.120.

²Id., p. 13.

Mathilde's letters arrive daily, redolent of her bathwater. She seduces him with words: "In des Tages eitlem Wahren bleibt ihm einzig Sehnen."³ Wagner is, irresistibly, infatuated. He composes lush cascades of notes, frolicsome arpeggios. Lo, he forsakes the following: absinthe, anarchy, vainglorious comparisons to Beethoven, bemoaning of Life, a thicket of misery and unfulfilled longings.

(He writes Liszt: *I am overcome with a scintillating joy; I am breathless; my heart leaps within me. I am light inside, as if filled with the stuff of dandelions. I am uncharacteristically civil. I refrained even—is it possible?—from disparaging Brahms. Is this Love?*)

Still, there is something in him that will not be consoled. Even as he sews the sinuous humps of her name—"MW"—on his handkerchief, he is melancholic. Distressed by his latest compositional efforts, hopelessly indifferent to this month's dalliance, a ravishing but easily-fatigued duchess, he broods.

In his sumptuous boudoir, beeswax candles aflame, he sniffles on his silk sheets and despairs of ever writing anything comparable to Beethoven's *Grosse Fugue*. He is (they say) unmelodious, plodding, an inartful librettist, dissonant, a dissident, a pilferer of Legends and Women alike, a man with a frighteningly large cranium, somewhat crazed in appearance. He has an exquisite pain in his scrotum, which he ascribes to unrequited love.

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He thinks that he hears Mathilde's seductive soprano, straining from 13 Zeltweg, but it is only the maid, transposing (he realizes) the Hun's slave Uldino. He abjectly roams the streets of Zurich, pondering Fate, Ruin, and sundry subjects. Mathilde, he croons, there is no Life without you.....

Od und leer das Meer (*Empty and desolate the sea*), sings his parrot.

He devours the work of Gottfried von Strassburg, a depraved German poet. Nightly, he sips rosewater and reads of Fateful potions, fervent desire and the futility of life. He shuns his second truffle. Finding solace in Schopenhauer's philosophy of annihilation, he dreams of an end to suffering, an end to longing, an end to debtor's exile, disagreeing (on principle) with the more ascetic elements of Schopenhauer's creed. The only pure desire, he reasons, is that of man and woman.

³Loosely translated: "When the day is brightly burning, naught is there left but yearning."

He writes Mathilde, telling her of his new vision, of lovers who yearn for consummation, of deadly betrothals, an Act's worth of delirium. He has set aside the Ring, he writes; he has forsaken Valhalla, corpulent contraltos, subplots involving treacherous dwarves. He lives only for the promise of love. He keeps a vial of Mathilde's bathwater on his nightstand, watching its milky essence in the moonlight.

Consummation, however, is not to be had. Her husband's business dealings have taken them far and wide. Wagner, despite the glorious excess, the orgiastic brass of Die Walkure, is often morose. The trifles of duchesses mean nothing to him. He writes, exaggerating sparsely, of the exasperation of Love: *What am I but a damned soul, one doomed to this foul earth, without Hope of Love, of progressing beyond the booming vanity of the Ring, of achieving the perfection of the Ninth, with not even a delectable toe to suck?*

For three years Wagner tries to forget Mathilde. But it is useless. He broods more than is his custom. He wishes blight upon himself, some gross affliction: deafness, lameness, crippling deformity, missing digits, revoltingly bad breath. For genius, he believes, must spring from a depraved part of the soul, from a particularly ravaged humanity. He saves his tears in bottles. What if nothing ever comes of this?

(Time passes.)

Wagner dreams that Beethoven recognizes him as his one true musical heir. They are at Bayreuth. All of Wagner's debts are forgiven by King Johann of Saxony. Brahms appears in the dream as a deaf donkey. Wagner has a sensation of conceiving the Ninth Symphony, as palpable as the rapping upon his door. It is Mathilde. Radiant, humming Schiller's *Ode to Joy* in a fetching duple meter, she lifts her hand to Wagner's lips, letting him inhale her gloved finery.

She is the consummate muse: attentive, inspirational, accustomed to unremitting doom & gloom.

Mathilde confides in Wagner her inmost yearnings. She can no longer bear the life of merchant's wife. She longs for upheaval, anguish, passion to abrade her.

Wagner feels the lure of the perfect cadence, the fifths tumbling to perfect resolution, the godawful sonority of it. He is unable to modulate for days. Unsyncopated, sick with love, he remains imprisoned in E Major, cadencing without cease.

Happy endings, however, are not for him.

Next morning he writes Mathilde: *You are my truest love, my companion, my confidante. This yearning is so expansive, so great, it threatens to consume all of me. What am I to do, love, when my every waking moment is filled with thoughts of you, your blissful fingers, your tender lips, the peculiar spasm of your little toes.*

Before Mathilde arrives the next day, Wagner is gone. Only traces of his steps (in talcum) and the parrot (singing *Od und leer das Meer*), remain. Bereft, Mathilde falls to the floor.

All this yearning was good for his art. As was Venice, where he composed Act II of his opera, maintaining certain clandestine correspondences and wandering the canals, humming the motif of Longing and scratching his testicles, which were known to itch.⁴ Venice, then as now, was a haven for macabre longings and unseemly affections. Not that Wagner, behind his silken drape, knew such gratification. No, if we are to believe his biographers, his passion for Mathilde was never given expression; theirs was a "chaste union," unfettered by mortal bonds.⁵

Tristan is the story of a love so intense that it can only be consummated in death. Fatally wounded at the end of Act Two, Tristan expires after an entire Act of Delirium. Dogged by the cor anglais and melancholy shepherds, he awaits his beloved. In the meanwhile, he sits forlornly under a lime tree and castigates himself for his fetish for Irishwomen.

⁴R. Wagner, *Diary Since the Time of My Flight from the Asyl on 17 August 1858*

⁵Millington, *ibid.*