

A Lay Person's Thoughts on Richard Wagner and his *Tristan*

by

Herman Dooyeweerd

A translation of "Leekengedachten over Richard Wagner en zijn *Tristan*," *Opbouw: Maandschrift in dienst der Christ. Levens-en wereldbeschouwing, van en voor jongeren* (1914) 5-10; 66-68.

Copyright of the Dutch text is held by the Herman Dooyeweerd Foundation. Copyright of the English text is held by the Dooyeweerd Centre, Ancaster, Ontario, and publishing right is held by Mellen Press, Lewiston, New York.

Translated by J. Glenn Friesen

Translator's Note: This was an article written by Dooyeweerd when he was an 18 year old student, published under the name "H. D.," The journal *Opbouw* was founded in March, 1914 by several students, including D.H.Th. Vollenhoven, who was its editor. As its subtitle indicates, the purpose was to provide a Christian world and life-view for young people. Both Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven published many articles in the few years that *Opbouw* was in existence; some articles were published under pseudonyms. J. Stellingwerff has shown how Vollenhoven sometimes published under the names "Th. Voorthuizen," "J.W.," "C. Kampervoort," and "J. Werkhoven." Such *juvenilia* are often important in understanding the later work of a philosopher.

This was the very first article published by anyone in *Opbouw*. It is especially interesting because many passages are clearly echoed in Dooyeweerd's later mature work *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (1935-36), which was translated and revised as *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (1953). In particular, we see an early use of the idea of rays coming from a unified heart source; this anticipates Dooyeweerd's idea of the prism, which we find already in Frederik van Eeden. The article is also important in showing Dooyeweerd's emphasis on intuition, especially his use of "intuitively behold in an inner way" [*schouwde innerlijk*]. We also see that Dooyeweerd's distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian religion, which he used in his Greek religious Ground-motive of form and matter, derives from Nietzsche's discussion of the Greeks. Thus, this early

student article is important in showing how some ideas remained constant for Dooyeweerd.

The original page numbers are indicated in square brackets. Footnotes are Dooyeweerd's except where indicated by my initials JGF.

[5] Anyone who is at all familiar with Plato's world of ideas knows the enchanting myth about man, who with his fiery team of three horses floated in the crystalline etheric spheres of light. But because one of his steeds could not be tamed, he fell back to earth, where he was surrounded by darkness and where were broken the very delicate quivering gold wings, with which his soul had flown like a butterfly in the spring air. But this sad tale still had one comfort for man. When he heard the air waves [*luchtgolven*] breaking around him, and the whole of nature quivering with longing for the life to come, then he also experienced the high "*Sehnsucht*" for the past, for the Beautiful. For a moment his limbs quivered with passion—but then the gold again seemed to glitter on the already withered wings; his wings moved themselves, at first unsure of themselves, then more regularly, and suddenly, as if reborn, man raised himself on high, radiating glory, to meet the Light! Then he joined in the ever murmuring music of the spheres, which he had never understood, but now sensed intuitively.

And so although it was concealed, there still lived in man a memory of the Beauty in which he had once glittered.

This memory can really only slumber in a soul who loves purity. From this time forward, every artist pursues a double law, to strive for the elevation of his soul, so that he may soon stand, in his white flowing robe, as a priest without sin before God's altar, and may with a pure hand burn incense to His honour. If he neglects this, then where shall he be if suddenly that longing breaks through the air around him and makes his limbs quiver? His soul will not be able to accomplish this, because it is black [6] and because it loves the darkness. Then he will glide to the place where the night stretches its veils, and sunk in its embrace, he will forget the Light that called him.

Soon after that the aesthetic trivialities will be born which have nothing in common with Beauty, except for balance of form.

But the soul that loves the Light, turns away in repugnance from such art; its ideals are found much higher:

O, avondneveling, die woele droomen sluiert
hoe haat mijn ziel de omarming, die ge biedt!
De strevenstrage ziel moog ruste in u vinden,
die heimwee heeft naar 't licht voldoen uw lusten niet.

Men zegt "In waden wit ligt schoonheid daar te sluimren.
Haar priesters staan gereed bij 't rookende altaar,"
Dan gaat de ziele stil devoot om haar te aanschouwen,
zij vindt haar sluiers wel, zij zelve is niet daar.

Maar eens o menschenziel, eens zal de morgen dagen
en licht-in-majesteit rijst schoonheids' zon omhoog!
Reeds hoort men overal van harmonie gewagen,
en henen wiekt de nacht, die onze ziel omtoog!

[O evening mist, which veileth turbulent dreams
how my soul hates the embrace that you offer!
The soul with inertia of striving may find rest in you,
Homesickness for the Light has not fulfilled your desires.

One says, "Beauty slumbers in garments white
Her priests stand ready by the altar's smoke."
Then the soul, in quiet devotion, goes to view it
It finds her veils, but Beauty itself is not there.

But one day, o human soul, one day will morning dawn
and light-in-majesty, Beauty's son will rise on high
Already one hears harmony mentioned everywhere
And the night that surrounded our soul has flown away.]¹

With joy we can recognize the great master of Bayreuth [Wagner] among those who have not turned aside from this remembrance of Light. His whole life was devoted to the purification [*verreining*] of art, and his words are prophetic when he speaks of the great rebirth, the regeneration of life.

¹ JGF: This appears to be Dooyeweerd's own poem.

There will come a time, so we hear him say, that life and art will no longer be separated. I preach to you a new kind of art, grounded in the purity of the soul, which blossoms forth from out of the most inner religious emotions.² Art and life are one, religion and art are one: that is the vision of the future that always could be found in his spirit! Is it possible that a soul, which had such high expectations of life, could be darkened by the veil of a pessimistic view of of life? Yet it is true. It was the philosophy [7] of Schopenhauer (whose portrait always hung over his desk), which he embraced at first unconsciously and later in full clarity.

The denial of the will towards life was for him more than a slogan, and in his somber attitude of soul he went hand in hand with that philosopher through the valleys of sorrow. He wrote to a friend: “There is only one thing that can still refresh me: a sleep, so deep, so deep, that I feel no more of life’s pain, which consumes my soul.” That brings with it Schopenhauer’s empathy for the creatures that surround him, since together with him they are all the expression of one world will, which acts on them with mechanical necessity.

So in his opera *Die Feen* [The Fairies], the heart of the hunter Arindal is suddenly affected when he sees the hunted deer, lying wounded and bleeding at his feet, looking in his eyes with ineffable melancholy:

Ich zielte gut, ha, ha das traf ins Herz.
O, seh, das Tier kann weinen
Die Thräne glänzt in seinem Aug’!
O, wie’s gebrochen nach mir schaut!
Wie schön es ist!

[I aimed well, ha, ha, this struck its heart
Behold! The animal can cry
The tears shining in his eyes!
O how as if broken it looks to me!
How beautiful it is!]

Although we find pessimism in Wagner, he holds to this only in relation to historical man; he always refers back to the original man whose life was not bound up with suffering; towards this height of life one must again be raised by the great regeneration of

² The words are not cited literally.

humanity. In this idea, Wagner goes beyond Schopenhauer. Whereas Schopenhauer speaks of a “Verneinung von dem Wille zum Leben” [A denial of the will to life], Wagner elevates the denial of the will as a burning torch in the darkness of pessimism, and he declares it to be the highest expression of the will. That is Wagner’s affirmation of the will [*Willensbejahung*].

If you ask in what direction this idea of regeneration will be realized, I would ask you to first wait a moment and look with me at Wagner’s teaching about art. Art must become a friendly saviour of life for man, and must show him the way to regeneration.

Through art, life must be made an organism as bearable as possible. Where such a high calling is [6] acknowledged for art, it must have first lived in an ideal form for Wagner. It was in Greek tragedy that the ideal was silhouetted for him. At that time, purely human art, common to all, was realized, free from everything conventional and historically formal; a creation not of one great genius, but of the whole people [*volk*], of *the* human being.

All arts were there united, proceeding from out of one motion of the soul [*zielontroering*], from one inner intuitive view [*aanschouwing*], like the rays from the heart of the sun [*zonnehart*].³

The seer intuitively beheld the light within [*schouwde innerlijk in het licht*] and became a poet by the power that urged him to consciously work out in sensory form what he had viewed [*zijn aanschouwing*]. And he became an artist by the mode [*wijze*] in which he fulfilled this.

The performance of such tragedies was a religious duty. When these interpreters of high ideas made their appearance in Athens, they were the first to be followed by the people with respectful piety. And the people [*volk*], which included many simple persons, was able to experience the deeply emotional tragedy of an Aeschylus or a Sophocles. This was possible only because Greek tragedy represented the purely human, i.e. the non-

³ JGF: Compare this with Dooyeweerd’s own vision of all temporal aspects coinciding in the heart center, like rays that have been split by a prism reconverging in the one white light.

conventional, the non-historical/formal. This is because the whole people had in effect worked together in order to bring about the work of art, but especially because this was not just “poetry of the ear,” but also “poetry of the eye.”⁴

And when Wagner, who was deeply trained in classical antiquity, compared the ideal unity of the people and the artist with the miserable circumstances of his own time, he then turned away with aversion from the current art and dreamed deep in his soul a dream of a reborn art and a reborn society.

What was the cause of this regress? That was the great revolution of mankind, which began with the downfall of Greek tragedy and of Greek civilization. That resulted in the breaking up of the arts. No longer did they work together towards a majestic unity; the less developed people crowded into the amphitheaters in order to see the gladiators carry out their bloody sport, whereas the more cultured devoted themselves to separate arts, such as painting, sculpture or poetry. But however high they were able to carry this out, they could never bring it to the ideal, that powerful artistic pleasure, because it was merely the higher expression of the life of an individual and not that of the people. And what became of the wonderful sense of beauty of the people?

Wagner had learned about this in Paris. In that city he had seen the inner filthiness, the lowering of moral standards.

In the great opera house [in Paris], the “*jeunesse dorée*” [golden youth] had given catcalls and boos for his *Tannhäuser* because in the second act there had been no ballet, which was the only thing that managed to gratify their senses. In that city, his ideals were hauled through the mud by unworthy dilettantes, and everything that for him was great and holy had been mocked. He despised the city of Paris, the heart of the modern world, and his eye flamed angrily when he stretched out his hand in judgment and reviled the old opera:

I preach a new art to you...!

⁴ R. Wagner: *Die Kunst und die Revolution (Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen)*, Vol. II, pp. 13ff.

Yet Wagner did not reach this great standpoint all at once. In the beginning he had tried to rescue opera. His first dramatic works and even the later ones from his first period—*Rienzi*, the *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*—were still locked in the trammels of its forms.

For Wagner still supposed that the great limitations that current opera posed for his genius were the consequence of an incomplete mastery of counterpoint and harmony. But when in *Lohengrin* he finally and irrefutably had reached the highest level in music, and had masterfully overcome all the difficulties therein, it became absolutely clear to his spirit that from then on, opera was finished for him.

With wonderful selfconsciousness he now went his own way and became the founder of

GERMAN DRAMA

What this means will first become clear to you when we look at Wagner's time.

It looked bad from a musical-dramatic perspective. Germany had no genre of art to call its own. Its great masters Mozart and Gluck wrote Italian and French operas and although they, as truly musical feeling persons, created glorious parts in their works [10], yet the required forms, the ready-made pegs of arias, duets, terzettos, etc. continued to exert their crippling influence.

There was no mention of unity. The composer created not one musical work, but simply pieces of music, which gave the artists the opportunity of giving voice to their gifts of virtuosity. Especially Italian opera was a fall from the gloriously warm and colourful church music of a Palestrina, “a falling back towards paganism,” as Wagner says in his pithy way.⁵

Then the master of Bayreuth stood up and created a real drama for the first time since Greek tragedy.

And so we come to the discussion of the enchantingly beautiful work *Tristan and Isolde*, in which the old paths are left behind for good.

[Note: The second installment of this article has not yet been translated]

⁵ R. Wagner: “Zukunftsmusik,” (*Gesammelte Schriften und Dichten*), Vol. 7, p. 145.

[66] And yet those readers who are experts in music could point to a distinction in both works, and one that comes in the *denouement*: For Beethoven is here again the old fighter: although he is bittersweet, he has here for a moment lent his ear to the subtle tone in his soul, which has shyly whispered of love in the white-veiled moonlight. In the dreamy *allegretto* he has imitated the airy dance of the daleloen⁶, as it accompanies with fine rhythm and harmonic bodily movements the love song that the night, trembling in the moonlight, has sung for it.

But in the wild *presto agitato* everything falls upon him again and pain shows its face, as the night turns away its blank face and all of nature gives rise to violent conflict, then he elevates himself again as the powerful one, and although his soul still trembles from the passion of love, and seeks far away the dying song of “*Sehnsucht*,” he sings out in a stormy splash of notes, his song of triumph, his triumphal joyful sadness!

That is the heroic conclusion of the *Moonlight Sonata*.

I hear the reader say, “In contrast, in *Tristan*, there is darkness at the end, and no echo of any victory song.” You are correct. The conclusion of *Tristan* is no victory in Beethoven’s sense. But it is certainly a victory, a triumph of love over death.

As Isolde, gazing at Tristan, calls out “*Mir erkoren, mir erloren*” [Chosen to be mine, lost to me], it is undeniable that we are hearing the great “*Willensverneinung*” [Denial of the will]. But it is not that of Schopenhauer, which was based on the deeply felt conviction that everything is merely appearance and that the only outcome is a dissolution of life. No [in Wagner] it is the “*Willenbejahung*” [affirmation of the will] to a higher life, a life of love, even at the gates of death. If I may use a Nietzschean contrast [67], I would characterize the conclusion of *the Moonlight Sonata* as an Apollonian victory in contrast to the Dionysian one in *Tristan*.⁷ For in the *Moonlight Sonata*, the force of organic life wins over the unconscious, passionate love blazing up from the “*Ungrund*” [the dark and

⁶ JGF: I do not know the meaning of ‘daleloen.’ Any suggestions?

⁷ JGF: The contrast between Apollonian and Dionysian was to become the basis for Dooyeweerd’s understanding of the Greek Ground-Motive of form/matter.

irrational abyss].⁸ But in Wagner's drama the unconscious (the force of love) overcomes the logical, the will to life.

There is finally one more question: In his *Tristan*, and in his works in general from his second period, did Wagner intend a reliving of Greek tragedy? Nietzsche spoke of "Greek music-drama," which indicated his strong feeling that the two arts are related. Yet what one with a certain devotion calls the "Bayreuth Idea" goes beyond classical tragedy. First of all in that it wants to make the national element in art disappear, and to make room for a world art, in which only the purely human would be reproduced, thus disposing of nationality.

There is therefore an agreement with the great Beethoven, who at the conclusion of his *Ninth Symphony* had jubilantly expressed his praise of art that unites everyone, *everyone*, in an ideal brotherhood. Now in Greek tragedy, the Apollonian element is rather dominant, whereas Wagner's art, born out of music, is Dionysian in its being. Bayreuth above Athens!

So the temple in Bayreuth stands as a symbol. As Hebbel says, "Every great deed is a symbol," and the erection of the *Festspielhaus* is an act that is so great that we all with wonderment look forward to that indestructible belief in the time when Beauty shall come and with its golden tranquil glance will shine over the white temples of worship that have been built by reborn humanity...

As I finish writing these lines, I feel floating around me the shadows of night...In a great crowd I stand on Bayreuth's wood-fringed mountain before the great *Festspielhaus*.

At the entrance stands Wagner, high up, displaying his sharp, strong characteristics fantastically delineated by the flickering torchlight.

⁸ JGF: From whom did Dooyeweerd obtain this reference to the *Ungrund*? The idea of the *Ungrund* can be found in Jacob Boehme. See N. Berdyaev: *Studies Concerning Jacob Boehme* (Journal *Put*, Feb. 1930, No. 20, pp. 47-79). online at [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1930_349.html]. Berdyaev was deeply influenced by Baader, and we can find the idea developed in different ways, in both Baader and Schelling.

All eyes are excitedly focused on him...Then the master opens his mouth and stretches out his hand to the crowd [68]:

A new art I preach to you! It will unite all of you by one warm love. You all will be co-workers in this pure art work, which like a new light will arise on the world from out of Bayreuth.

While he is still speaking, the darkness at the side of the mountain quivers in fierce emotion. Then the surroundings are lit by the glow of sheet lightning, and at the foot of the mountain a somber procession goes by. On all sides comes the murmuring of the dull tones of Siegfried's funeral march. The noise is still not over; the stillness again quivers with emotion.

Motives from *Die Walküre* sound savagely, and the mounted steeds of the maidens rise on bluish-green flames.

Then above a second mountain, the east breaks into a high-blazing purple and copper coloured flame, and accompanied by the exalted thundering music from the *Götterdämmerung* a man appears on the mountain in the east.⁹

A mad glow is in his eye, and as he raises his hands high, to where the flames climb up, we hear all around his threatening voice to the assembled crowd before the *Festspielhaus*: "Tot sind die Götter, lebe der Mensch!" [The gods are dead, long live man!].

The people look at Wagner, who has listened quietly, and for a moment everything is very quiet all around; everyone is speechless with horror.

But now, as an unconscious emotion shudders through the dark rows, coming up in waves from the motion of the whispering sea of souls and suddenly bursting out on all sides, flying up on wings of faith, the eternally beautiful song of Luther is heard:

Ein fester Burg ist unser Gott! [A mighty fortress is our God]
That was the purely human, not the purely divine art, common to everyone.

And Wagner? Do I see a tear in his eye, do I hear the scornful laughter of the man on the mountain in the east, who mocks him?

⁹ I mean to refer to Nietzsche.

Was it a dream?...

January 6, 1914.

H.D.