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ENACTING KNOWING: BUDDHIST VIJÑĀNA IN THE MUSIC AND DRAMA OF WAGNER'S PARSIFAL

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Abstract
This study argues that the fermatas on rests in the Prelude of Wagner's Parsifal enact, in the medium of music, a cognitive operation structurally homologous with the Buddhist concept of vijñāna—"distinct knowledge"—knowledge that arises not from continuity but from separation. Five fermatas on rests punctuate the Prelude, breaking the sonic continuum into clearly delineated blocks and transforming pre-reflective absorption into reflective distance. Drawing on Eugène Burnouf's Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien (1844), a source Wagner studied from 1855, the analysis demonstrates that the prefix vi- (apart, multiple, diverse) encodes in the term's very etymology the logic that the fermatas perform musically: the breaking of unity as knowing itself. This structural operation is then traced across two further registers of the work—the grammatical shift from first to third person in Parsifal's monologue after Kundry's kiss, and the suspended silence at the beginning of Act III—showing that the same cognitive logic governs the musical, linguistic, and dramatic fabric of the work. The study concludes by reinterpreting the governing formula, "durch Mitleid wissend" ("knowing through compassion"): Wagner reconfigures compassion not as a moral virtue but as the sensory mechanism through which distinct knowledge is produced. What Parsifal makes audible and legible is not Buddhist doctrine transplanted into a Christian legend, but a form of knowing enacted through the structural procedures of the music drama itself.

Keywords
Richard Wagner, Parsifal, Buddhism, vijñāna, temporality, suspension

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Introduction

The question of Wagner's engagement with Buddhism has been a subject of scholarly inquiry since the 1960s. Early studies, such as those by Dorothea Watanabe-Dauer (1964, 1976), established a methodological caution—not every Buddhist-seeming motif in Wagner need derive from direct source study—while also tracing the biographical entanglement of Wagner's Buddhist interests with his relationship to Mathilde Wesendonck.[2] Carl Suneson's monograph *Richard Wagner und die indische Geisteswelt* (1989) brought an Indologist's perspective to the question, reconstructing Wagner's Indian reading and suggesting affinities between his melodic aesthetic and Indian metaphysics.[3] The 1990s and 2000s saw further biographical treatments—Urs App's *Richard Wagner und der Buddhismus: Liebe – Tragik* (1997) and Danielle Buschinger's *Durch Mitleid Wissend: Wagner und der Buddhismus* (2017), which placed the Buddhist concept of compassion at the center of the discussion.[4] The *Wagnerspectrum* thematic issue *Wagner und der Buddhismus* (2007), edited by Ulrike Kienzle, opened new perspectives on Wagner's Buddhist-inflected Christianity, the narrative structure of *Tristan*, and unexpected connections to tantric tradition.[5] The most recent contribution, Douglas T. McGetchin's "The German Study of India and Buddhism" (2024), attends not only to Wagner's reading pathways but to the methodological constitution of the Indology of his time—a consideration that bears on the question of what kind of Buddhist knowledge was available to Wagner in the first place.[6]

Wagner's own encounter with Buddhism, as Douglas T. McGetchin has reconstructed it, occurred in 1854, when he read Schopenhauer.

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[2] Dorothea Watanabe-Dauer, "Richard Wagner's Art in its Relation to Buddhist Thought," *Kentucky Foreign Romance Quarterly* 11, Supplement (1964): 11; "Richard Wagner and Buddhism: 'Tristan and Isolde' and 'The Victors,'" *The Eastern Buddhist* 9, no. 2 (1976): 123.

[3] Carl Suneson, *Richard Wagner und die indische Geisteswelt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989).

[4] Urs App, *Richard Wagner und der Buddhismus: Liebe – Tragik* (Zürich: Museum Rietberg, 1997); Danielle Buschinger, *Durch Mitleid Wissend: Wagner und der Buddhismus* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2017).

[5] Dieter Borchmeyer, "'Sehnsüchtig blicke ich oft nach dem Land Nirwana …' Richard Wagners buddhistisches Christentum," *Wagnerspectrum*, no. 2 (2007): 15–34; Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, "Auslöschung – Richard Wagner und die buddhistische Mythologie des Jenseits," *Wagnerspectrum*, no. 2 (2007): 85–96; Ulrike Kienzle, "Tönendes Nirvana: Von der musikalischen Aufhebung der Zeit in Wagners Tristan und Parsifal," *Wagnerspectrum*, no. 2 (2007): 35–53.

[6] Douglas T. McGetchin, "The German Study of India and Buddhism," in *Wagner in Context*, ed. David Trippett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 267–274.

Schopenhauer's metaphysics—deeply shaped by his reading of the *Upanishads* (Vedic Hindu philosophical texts)—placed music at the summit of the arts as the direct objectification of the will. This framework became the lens through which he first approached Buddhist thought. In the winter of 1855, he began reading Buddhist sources in translation and European interpretation—above all Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (1844), which, as McGetchin notes, first offered him an idealized Buddha as the originator of a "pure and unmixed Christianity," and shortly thereafter Karl Friedrich Koeppen's *Die Religion des Buddha* (1857–1859), which dismantled that "heroic image of the Buddha" in favor of an anti-clerical reformer—a projection shaped by the Protestant assumptions of German Indology.[7] These studies coincided with Wagner's most productive phase: alongside work on *Tristan and Isolde*, *The Valkyrie*, *Siegfried*, and *Parsifal*, he drafted in 1856 the prose sketch for *The Victors*, an unfinished Buddhist opera whose concepts he would later transfer into other works.

What remains less clearly understood is whether the Buddhist concepts Wagner encountered merely furnished his works with isolated motifs and lexical borrowings, or whether they found their way into the structural procedures of the music drama itself—not as represented content, but as operative logic.

The argument proceeds in three parts, followed by a conclusion. The first analyzes the fermatas on rests as a compositional strategy and traces their structural homology with the Buddhist concept of *vijñāna*. The second extends this analysis to two further registers of work—language and dramaturgy. The third follows the conceptual arc from Burnouf's *vijñāna* to Wagner's formula "knowing through compassion."

The method of this study is neither source criticism nor biography. It does not ask whether Wagner "correctly understood" Buddhism, nor does it catalogue the Buddhist motifs that appear in his theoretical writings. Its primary focus lies on the inner functioning of the works themselves: how the musical, linguistic and dramatic operations configure the knowing. Buddhist concepts are introduced not as keys to Wagner's intentions but as analytical instruments: they provide a vocabulary for describing cognitive operations that the musical and dramatic structures already perform. This approach treats Wagner's encounter with Buddhism not as a question of doctrinal fidelity but as a catalyst for formal innovation.

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[7] See McGetchin, "The German Study of India and Buddhism," 270–274.

1. Prelude: Fermata on Rests as Structural Principle

The Prelude to Act I of *Parsifal* is structured by a recurring musical event: fermatas on rests. They are placed at measures 19, 38, 44, 47 and 50 (Example no. 1 shows the first of these).[8]



Example no. 1 – Richard Wagner, Parsifal, Prelude, mm. 17–23 (m. 19 highlighted)

These fermatas on rests raise a threefold question. First, what structural function do they perform in the score? Do they merely articulate sectional boundaries, or do they operate as a compositional principle that

[8] Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, WWV 111, ed. Egon Voss and Martin Geck, Richard Wagner: Sämtliche Werke, vol. 14, I (Mainz: Schott Music, 1972), mm. 17–23.

governs the Prelude's larger formal logic? Second, what transformation of musical temporality does this formal arrangement produce? Third, and most decisively for the present study, how does this compositional strategy relate to Wagner's Buddhist interest?

1. 1. Exhibition Rather Than Development

The *Parsifal* Prelude presents a peculiar disposition: it is not a single, through-composed stream of sound, but is articulated by structural fermatas on rests (mm. 19, 38, 44, 47, 50) into clearly delineated sections. The musical flow is repeatedly interrupted. These interruptions do not function as mere caesuras; through them, the sections are set apart as conspicuously discrete units. What arises here resembles an exhibition: the themes are not motivically processed or contrapuntally interwoven. Instead, they are placed side by side, one after another, at a distance that seems less temporal than ontological: as if between them lay that infinite space (the fermatas on rests) that separates things before they enter into relation. The fermata on a rest is the audible enactment of this separation. It carves out a hollow space within the musical flow, and it is within this very emptiness that the principle of separation becomes the movement's structural law.

In Wagner's conversations with his wife Cosima, a remark recorded on 31 October 1878 gives this principle a name: "Meine Vorspiele müssen alle elementarisch sein, nicht dramatisch, wie die Leonoren-Ouvertüre, denn dann ist das Drama überflüssig"[9] ("My preludes must all be elementary, not dramatic, like the Leonore Overture, for then the drama is superfluous.") What Wagner here calls "elementary" is expressly distinguished from dramatic. The dramatic—as he saw it embodied in Beethoven's overture—lives from causality, conflict, and development. The elementary, by contrast, designates a music that does not enter into this logic but lies before it, in a state of simple givenness. The plural "Meine Vorspiele" ("My preludes") is telling: it suggests that Wagner conceived of his preludes not as organic wholes but as constellations of discrete elements, a plurality that resists subsumption under a single developmental arc.

He becomes more concrete in a further diary entry of September 23, 1879. There he describes the Prelude as a "Vorrede"—a preface—and specifies: "weil die Themen einfach nebeneinandergelegt sind"[10] ("because the themes are simply placed next to one another.") The preface to a sermon gathers themes, presents them, without yet unfolding them.

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[9] Cosima Wagner, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, 2 vols. (Munich: Piper, 1976–1977), vol. 2, 216. Hereafter cited as CT.

[10] CT, vol. 2, 415.

This principle of "placing side by side"—of exhibiting rather than developing—can be observed throughout the score: the themes appear in calm succession, yet are separated by fermatas on rests, without motivic processing, without contrapuntal interweaving—a compositional principle that Adorno would later capture with his characterization of the *Parsifal* score as "statische Partitur" ("static score").[11]

The fermata on a rest thus constitutes not merely a punctuating device; rather, it is a logic of exhibition as opposed to development.

1. 2. The Temporality of the "Dramatic": Pre-Reflective Continuity[12]

To clarify what the fermatas on rests interrupt, a closer look at the temporality in question is necessary; music is a temporal art, and what the fermatas suspend is not only sound, but a particular way of inhabiting time. In studies of the closing passages of *Tristan and Isolde* and *Parsifal*—particularly those following Ulrike Kienzle's "'Tönendes Nirvāna': Von der musikalischen Aufhebung der Zeit in Wagners Tristan and Parsifal"—one repeatedly finds the phrase "Aufhebung der Zeit" ("sublation of time").[13]

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[11] See Theodor W. Adorno, "Zur Partitur des 'Parsifal'," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 17: *Musikalische Schriften IV*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), 47–48. Adorno interpreted this disposition as an expression of a "statische Partitur" ("static score"), in which the motifs are "viel weniger ineinander verwoben" ("far less interwoven"), but rather "absichtsvoll-unbekümmert, bloss wie Bildchen aneinander gereiht" ("deliberately nonchalant, merely strung together like little pictures"). Adorno's diagnosis remains definitional; he does not specify which compositional technique produces this effect. The function of the pauses analyzed here confirms his observation on the level of temporal structure and identifies the fermata on a rest as the precise mechanism through which this "static score" is realized. William Kinderman, in "Gral und Gegengral: Die Klangräume des Parsifal-Dramas," *Wagnerspectrum* 8, no. 1 (2008): 30–47, here 30, argued that the dualistic tension between diatonic Grail and chromatic Anti-Grail spheres undercuts Adorno's characterization. Yet this tension does not refute Adorno's category: what "static" designates is not an absence of polarity but a withdrawal from developmental momentum—a withdrawal that the motivic and tonal polarities Kinderman analyzes articulate rather than undermine. Adorno diagnoses an aesthetic stance—the "withdrawal from appearance" ("Zurücktreten von der Erscheinung"), not a technical flaw. Read in this light, Kinderman's critique addresses Adorno's claim on a level other than the one on which it was made. Adorno's category of "late style" ("Altersstil") is not meant technically, but historically and aesthetically.

[12] These reflections on temporality operate on the level of a phenomenological description of the structures of musical experience. They do not aim to assert an actual effect on reception, but rather to uncover the temporal conditions that the work structurally claims for itself.

[13] Ulrike Kienzle, "Tönendes Nirvāna," 35. Kienzle's analysis focuses primarily on the closing passages of the works and on the harmonic suspension in the *Tristan* prelude; the general pauses with fermata in the *Parsifal* prelude are not examined there.

Kienzle's use of the term presupposes a particular conception of time: a linear, continuous flow that is sublated in certain musical moments.

This conception, while illuminating, rests on a presupposition that has become so self-evident in motivic-thematic instrumental music of the nineteenth century that it tends to escape scrutiny: the assumption that musical time is inherently linear and continuous. Time, however, is not intrinsically linear; that particular modality is one possibility among others. It can also be organized as cycle, as constellation, as eternal present—forms in which succession yields to other principles of temporal organization.

That linear continuity became the self-evident norm, however, is due not to the nature of time but to a particular constitution of the music itself: the harmonic and motivic logic of nineteenth-century music, in which each event arises as the consequence of what precedes it and the condition of what follows—a chain of directional, goal-oriented causality. This is the logic Wagner subsumed under the concept of the "dramatic." Such music not only unfolds along a temporal axis; it generates its own temporal momentum—a directional thrust in which each moment is felt as both effect and cause. In doing so with self-sustaining coherence, it produces a temporal structure whose dynamic unity of retention, attention, and protention is already inscribed into the motivic and harmonic fabric itself.[14] The work does not merely invite this mode of temporal experience; it structurally enforces it. Within this temporal regime, the position that the work addresses is absorbed into its forward momentum: the stream of sound carries itself, so that the structural opening for reflective distance is precisely what the work forecloses.

This condition—in which the forward momentum of the musical fabric absorbs the position addressed by the work into its own movement,

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[14] The terms "retention", "attention," and "protention" are drawn from Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of inner time-consciousness. See Edmund Husserl, *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins*, ed. Martin Heidegger (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2000; originally published 1928). "Attention" renders what Husserl terms "primal impression" ("Urimpression"), the immediate now-point around which retention (the just-past) and protention (the imminent future) are organized. The justification for borrowing these terms is twofold. First, Husserl's model describes the formal structure of any temporal experience and is thus applicable, in principle, to musical temporality as one species of temporal experience. Second, the music under analysis here is itself constituted by a specific mode of temporal organization (the motivic-harmonic chain of nineteenth-century developmental music); the Husserlian vocabulary makes it possible to describe the structural conditions built into that organization without recourse to empirical claims about actual listeners. The present study uses these terms descriptively, without thereby claiming a strictly phenomenological mode of argumentation; they are applied here to the structural organization of the musical fabric, not to the consciousness of an empirical listener.

leaving no structural opening for reflective distance—rests on a single presupposition, which the work itself secures at every moment: continuity. As long as the motivic chain holds, as long as one harmonic event is causally linked to the next, the structure maintains its grip on the temporal field it has established. Such a condition, in which consciousness is carried without needing to apprehend what carries it, is a pre-reflective condition.

1. 3. The Pause as Temporal Reconfiguration

The fermatas on rests withdraw this pre-reflective condition. The consequences of that withdrawal can be specified across three dimensions.

First: the suspension of the continuous flow of sound. The fermatas on rests break the sound continuum. The steady influx of sensory material is suspended. The structural ground of pre-reflective absorption is thereby withdrawn. This suspension creates a void in the musical fabric itself—not as a negation of time, but as an interruption of one temporality in order to open space for another.

Second: the opening of a space of reflection. When the sound object is withdrawn, a distanced relation to what has been heard becomes possible. The motifs that previously appeared in succession can now be held in memory and related to one another. The pauses thus articulate a temporal clearing within the musical structure itself. Motifs that were previously presented in linear succession are, through the intervention of the fermatas, reconfigured in a quasi-spatial present: they stand side by side, their separation enabling a mode of relation that is no longer that of continuous flow. In continuous flow, each event is immediately overtaken by the next, and consciousness, carried forward by the momentum of the motivic chain, has no occasion to arrest its attention on any single element. In the constellation that the fermatas produce, by contrast, each thematic block is released from the obligation to generate its successor. Consciousness is no longer propelled forward; it can dwell, compare, and relate. It is this shift—from being carried to being able to pause—that constitutes the opening of a space of reflection. The structure thus shifts from presenting its material as stream to presenting it as constellation.

Third: the reassignment of synthesis—from the compositional fabric to the addressee, the position of reflective subjectivity that the work structurally summons. In the tradition of motivic-thematic development, the work of linking is performed by the compositional fabric itself. In this Prelude, the fermatas on rests suspend this logic. They intervene at moments where the music, by its own momentum, would otherwise continue—and they stop it. The work of linking is thereby no longer

inscribed in the notated text. The work thus redefines the addressee-position inscribed in its own structure: at this site, the music no longer provides the connection in the form of motivic causality. It falls to the addressee—the position that the work structurally summons—to supply it. What is opened here is, in effect, a space for the addressee's reflective subjectivity: a structural opening in which the one who hears might become the one who knows.

In summary, the fermatas on rests and the continuous flow they interrupt constitute a temporal logic specific to this Prelude, each term inert without the other: the continuous flow supplies the sensory material; the pauses create the space in which this material can be contemplated—and, in that contemplation, reconnected by the one who hears.

1. 4. Enacting Knowing: The Fermata as *Vijñāna*

Unlike the harmonic suspension that, as Kienzle has shown, evokes a sonorous timelessness in the closing passages of *Tristan and Isolde* and *Parsifal*, the fermatas on rests operate through structural interruption. Both procedures aim at a comparable transformation of temporality—yet the fermatas on rests accomplish this not by negating time, but by opening it to its own multiplicity. This opening, moreover, does more than reconfigure temporal experience: it enacts, in the medium of music, a cognitive operation whose structure corresponds point for point to a specific concept in Buddhist thought—*vijñāna*.

Burnouf, whose *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (1844) Wagner studied from the winter of 1855 onward, defines it as a "distinct knowledge"—a knowledge distinguished from pure cognition by its entanglement with feeling and with the nascent sense of individual consciousness.[15] The Indologist Theodor Goldstücker, in a critical note appended to Burnouf's text, sharpened this point in a way that bears directly on the musical operation at issue here: *vijñāna*, he argued, is "the learning of what is *vi*, multiple, diverse, without unity"—a knowledge of the separated, the varied, the apparition-filled world—as opposed to *jñāna*, the knowledge of what is one, of Brahman, which is true knowledge.[16] The prefix *vi-* thus does not merely intensify (as the Tibetan translators rendered it: "totally, completely"); it introduces differentiation into the very structure of knowing. Knowledge becomes possible only through separation, through the breaking of an original continuity.

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[15] Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, trans. Katia Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 463–464.

[16] Theodor Goldstücker, quoted in Burnouf, *Introduction*, 464n1.

What is noteworthy in these definitions is less their accuracy than their shared horizon: both situate *vijñāna* within a framework in which knowledge arises from separation, from the breaking of unity. Wagner, it seems, grasped precisely this point—and saw in it a structural principle. This is the principle that the fermatas on rests set into operation. By interrupting the continuous sonic stream, they break the pre-reflective unity of unreflective absorption; by producing distance between the separated sections, they create the condition under which what has been heard can become an object of contemplation; and by transforming immediacy into reflective distance, they constitute the musical analogue of that "distinct knowledge."

2. Language and Dramatic Form of "Knowing"

The preceding chapter traced a cognitive operation unfolding in the *Parsifal* Prelude. This operation was shown to display a structural homology with the Buddhist concept of *vijñāna*—a "distinct knowledge" that arises from separation. But the Prelude is only one register in which this cognitive operation takes shape. Does it resonate elsewhere in the work? Specifically, does the drama's textual fabric—its handling of language, its construction of narrative events—enact a parallel operation?

2. 1. Grammatical Self-Objectivization in Act II

The cognitive operation traced in the Prelude also operates in the linguistic register of the work. Parsifal's monologue after Kundry's kiss enacts a grammatical self-objectivization that splits the subject in two: the knowing "I" transforms the desiring "I"—the self-entangled in the mother-illusion—into an objectivized, observed "him." The shift is sustained throughout the monologue: the first-person immediacy of desire gives way entirely to the third person, as Parsifal disassembles the illusion into a series of sensory details—voice, gaze, the twitching of lips, the arching of the neck, the caress of the cheek (II. 811–823):

Ja! Diese Stimme! So rief sie ihm; – und diesen Blick, deutlich erkenn' ich ihn, – Auch diesen, der ihm so friedlos lachte. Die Lippe, – ja – so zuckte sie ihm; – so neigte sich der Nacken, –so hob sich kühn das Haupt; – so flatterten lachend die Locken, – so schlang um den Hals sich	Yes! This voice! So she called to him; –and this look, I recognize it clearly, – this too, that laughed at him so restlessly. The lip, – yes – so it twitched for him; –so the neck inclined, –so boldly the head raised itself; – so the locks fluttered, laughing; – so the arm curled around

der Arm – so schmeichelte weich die Wange–! Mit aller Schmerzen Qual im Bund,das Heil der Seele entküßte ihm ihr Mund! – Ha! – dieser Kuß! –	the neck – so the cheek softly caressed –! With all the agony of pain united, the salvation of the soul was kissed from him by her mouth! – Ha! — this kiss! –)

Through this self-objectivization, desire becomes, for the first time, an analyzable object. What Parsifal recognizes, in the disassembly of the sensory details that follows, is that the desire Kundry's kiss stirred was never for her as a woman but for what she represented in the mother-illusion: the absolute consolation and peace of soul ("the salvation of the soul") that the illusion had once promised—a state in which separation is abolished and mother and child are one.

This grammatical operation accomplishes in the medium of language a structurally homologous operation to that of the fermatas on rests in the Prelude. The fermata suspends sonic continuity and opens a reflective distance to the musical flow; the pronoun shift suspends subjective immediacy and opens a reflective distance to one's own desire. In both cases, what was previously enacted in unmediated absorption is transformed into an object of contemplation. Both operations are materially different—here language, there sound—but structurally homologous. They converge in the logic of "knowing": the transformation of entanglement into an object of consciousness.

2. 2. Dramatic Suspension: Silence as Cognitive Aftermath

Parsifal's appearance at the beginning of Act III is defined by silence and deceleration to the threshold of stillness. The stage direction that follows the line 974 reads:

> Parsifal tritt aus dem Walde auf. Er ist ganz in schwarzer Waffenrüstung: mit geschlossenem Helme und gesenktem Speer, schreitet er, gebeugten Hauptes, träumerisch zögernd, langsam daher, und setzt sich auf dem kleinen Rasenhügel am Quelle nieder. (Parsifal steps out of the forest. He is in full black armor: with closed helmet and lowered spear, he strides, head bowed, dreamily hesitating, slowly forward, and seats himself on the small grassy mound by the spring.)

Later, after a further silence, the direction following line 995 continues:

> Parsifal erhebt sich, nach einem abermaligen Schweigen, stößt den

> Speer vor sich in den Boden, legt Schild und Schwert davor nieder, öffnet den Helm, nimmt ihn vom Haupt und legt ihn zu den anderen Waffen, worauf er dann zu stummem Gebete vor dem Speer niederkniet. (Parsifal rises, after another silence, thrusts the spear into the ground before him, lays down shield and sword, opens his helmet, takes it from his head and lays it with the other weapons, then kneels in mute prayer before the spear.)

Every gesture is decelerated to the threshold of stillness. The closed visor, the bowed head, the laying down of weapons, the mute prayer—these are the outward form of a consciousness that has reached its cognitive limit. What the stage direction presents is a consciousness saturated after a long trajectory of experience; the knowledge that Kundry's kiss unlocked—the causal logic of desire and suffering, his own entanglement in the mother-illusion, the weight of a mission whose path he cannot yet find—has saturated his consciousness. The silence and stillness are not a retreat, not a refusal, but a holding-still: a cognitive aftermath in which all inherited frameworks for action have become transparent and no new path has yet emerged.

This silence is the structural condition out of which Parsifal's monologue arises—a monologue that does not proclaim the abandonment of meaning but sinks into an existential interrogation in which the old frameworks of guilt, atonement, and redemption no longer hold (II. 1076–1086):

Und ich—ich bin's, der all dies Elend schuf! Ha! Welcher Sünden, welcher Frevel Schuld muß dieses Toren-Haupt seit Ewigkeit belasten, da keine Buße, keine Sühne der Blindheit mich entwindet, mir, selbst zur Rettung auserkoren, in Irrnis wild verloren der Rettung letzter Pfad verschwindet!	And I—I am the one who created all this misery! Ha! What sins, what sacrilegious guilt must burden this fool's head since eternity, since no penance, no atonement can wrest me from blindness, for me, myself chosen for salvation, wildly lost in errancy, the last path of salvation vanishes!

These terms—the eternal "blindness," the "errancy"—situate Parsifal's crisis within a conceptual field that Wagner understood in terms of illusion—what the Indic traditions, and Schopenhauer after them, call the "veil of Maya": the idea that the world as ordinarily perceived is a fabric

of appearances, and that human suffering arises from entanglement in it. "Blindness" is the condition of one who does not see the fabric as fabric; "errancy" is the condition of one who, beginning to suspect its nature, still moves within it without finding an exit. The knowledge that Parsifal attains is thus a seeing-through—a penetration of this fabric. Yet what his knowledge reveals has a reach that extends beyond the illusion it exposes. To recognize the world as appearance is also to recognize that one's own desires, one's own guilt ("What sins, / what sacrilegious guilt / must burden this fool's head / since eternity"), one's own quest for redemption ("myself chosen for salvation"), are themselves woven into its texture. The framework within which he might act upon his insight is part of the very order he has seen through.

What the monologue lays bare, then, is not merely a personal crisis but the structure of a problem inherent in the act of knowing itself: the inherited frameworks of meaning—guilt, atonement, redemption—belong to the very order that Parsifal's knowledge has penetrated. His insight does not refute them; it renders them inoperative ("since no penance, no atonement / can wrest me from blindness"). They become transparent, and he is left standing in the cleft between clear insight and effective action, with no bridge in sight ("the last path of salvation vanishes!"). Parsifal's silence is thus more than a dramatic pause: it is the structural consequence of a knowledge that has outstripped every available framework for acting upon it.

This state could be interpreted as the expression of a Buddhist-inflected 'nihilism' or Schopenhauerian 'negation of the will', pointing toward a dissolution of meaning and an end of action. It would, however, be premature to qualify the work on this account as nihilistic or pessimistic, for this state by no means represents the telos of the entire music drama but merely the starting point of Act III. What is at issue here is not an empty finality, but a temporary, critical suspension after cognitive saturation—a deep silence, ready for action.

Structurally, this holding-still is the dramatic counterpart to the fermata on a rest, just as the grammatical self-objectivization analyzed above is its linguistic counterpart. In each register—music, language, dramatic form—the operation is the same: continuity is broken, distance is produced, and what was previously enacted in unmediated absorption is transformed into an object of contemplation.

The interruption does not determine what follows from it, but it does demand that something follow. What it creates is the distance through which "distinct knowledge" (*vijñāna*) becomes possible, and with it, the structural condition for an action that is not merely the continuation of the old order.

3. From Burnouf's *Vijñāna* to Wagner's "Knowing through Compassion"

The homology traced in the preceding chapters—between the fermata on a rest, the grammatical shift from "I" to "him," the suspended silence of Act III, and the Buddhist concept of *vijñāna*—raises a question that the analysis has so far deferred. What is the nature of the relationship between Wagner's music drama and the Buddhist sources he read? Did Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* simply supply Wagner with a term, or did something more fundamental take place—a transformation of the concept itself in its passage from philological text to musical structure?

Burnouf's treatment of *vijñāna* remained, in decisive respects, within a cosmological and metaphysical framework. His *vijñāna* is the third link in the chain of dependent origination—a stage in the genesis of consciousness from ignorance and formative impulse. It describes how consciousness arises; it does not offer a theory of how knowledge is produced—a theory that would not appear in Western scholarship until the twentieth century, most systematically in Theodor Stcherbatsky's *Buddhist Logic* (1930–1932).[17] Burnouf's section on the *Abhidharma*, the corpus devoted to the twelve links and their third term, appears under the heading "Abhidharma, or Metaphysics", a rubric that announces his orientation toward general Buddhist philosophy rather than the specific questions of cognition and epistemology that Buddhism also contain. As Donald S. Lopez Jr. has noted, Burnouf's treatment is "concerned not so much with the topics specifically associated with these scriptures, such as epistemology and the function of cognition, but more broadly with Buddhist philosophy."[18] What Burnouf's text could name and define—vijñāna as "distinct knowledge"—it could not theorize as an epistemological operation. The mechanism by which separation produces knowledge remained, in his framework, embedded within a cosmology it did not need to explain.

This is where Wagner's music drama moves beyond the text that supplied its terms. The formula "knowing through compassion"—marks the site of this transformation. Burnouf had defined *vijñāna*; Wagner embeds it in a structure that answers the question "how is knowing possible?" The word "through" is the pivot. It designates compassion as

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[17] Theodor Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic*, 2 vols., Bibliotheca Buddhica 26 (Leningrad: Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1930–1932).

[18] Donald S. Lopez Jr., "Introduction to the Translation," in Burnouf, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, trans. Katia Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 17–18.

the means by which knowing is produced—not a moral virtue to be cultivated, as in the tradition from Schopenhauer onward, but a sensory mechanism to be undergone. The kiss is the concrete form this mechanism takes in the drama: a somatic reenactment of Amfortas' act, an entry into the causal logic of desire and suffering, a break in the continuity of illusion. Compassion, in this configuration, is the name for the sensory practice, a bodily mimesis of the suffering of another, through which distinct knowledge—*vijñāna*— is generated. Wagner thus extracts the epistemological core from Burnouf's metaphysical framework and gives it structural realization: the "how" of knowing, enacted in music, language, and dramatic form.

This is not to claim that Wagner "correctly understood" Buddhism while Burnouf did not. It is to identify a shift in the modality of the concept itself. In Burnouf's text, *vijñāna* is an object of philological and philosophical description—a term to be defined, classified, and situated within a doctrinal system. In Wagner's music drama, *vijñāna* becomes a structural operation—something the work does rather than something it says. The fermata on a rest is *vijñāna* made audible. The pronoun shift is self-objectivization enacted in grammar. The silence of Act III is cognitive saturation given dramatic form. This is the specific mode of Wagner's achievement. That capacity — to transform a definition into an event, a term into a structural procedure—is the kind of knowing that *Parsifal* enacts.

Conclusion

Parsifal stands as a singular case in the history of nineteenth-century cultural transfer: a work in which a Buddhist concept is not represented, not thematized, not dramatized as exotic content—but performed, in the very procedures of the music drama itself. Burnouf's text could name the concept within a metaphysical framework—*vijñāna* as a link in the chain of dependent origination, a stage in the genesis of consciousness. Wagner's *Parsifal* performs it as an epistemological operation: a distinct knowledge generated through the sensory path of compassion. The kiss, the grammatical split, the suspended silence—these are not illustrations of a doctrine. They are compassion's form, through which knowing is produced. In this performance, the Buddhist term ceases to be a philological object and becomes an epistemological event—a kind of knowing that sounds like silence.

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