The Wagner Journal, **10**, 1, 26–44

Edward Burne-Jones, George Eliot and Richard Wagner: A Collision of Like-minded Souls

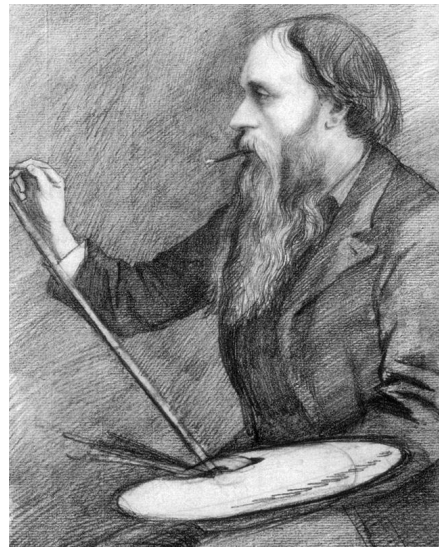
Barry Millington

The plan for Wagner's third and final visit to London was hatched under an inauspicious star. The deficit for the first Bayreuth Festival of 1876 had been 148,000 Marks and renewed approaches to the Reich for assistance had come to nothing. It had been hoped that now the major expenditure in connection with the establishment of the new theatre was out of the way, it would be possible in future to meet annual expenses out of receipts. But it soon became evident that another festival could not be launched until at least 1878.

When Wagner received an invitation from a firm of concert agents in London, Hodge & Essex, to give a series of twenty instrumental and vocal concerts in the recently opened Royal Albert Hall, the prospect of the Bayreuth debt being paid off made it therefore an attractive proposition. A disastrous miscalculation by Hodge & Essex left Wagner at the end of the 1877 London series (only eight concerts were finally given) with a profit of a mere £700 (roughly 14,000 Marks) – not as bad as the deficit that threatened at one point but considerably less than the sum originally envisaged nevertheless.

George Eliot, pencil sketch by Lady Alma-Tadema, March 1877. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

Edward Burne-Jones, drawing by George Howard, Earl of Carlisle



In London, however, where they spent the whole of May and the first few days of June 1877, Wagner and his wife Cosima were received as prestigious international celebrities and were introduced to some of the leading artistic figures of the day, among them the painter Edward Burne-Jones, the poet Robert Browning, the writer George Eliot and her companion George Henry Lewes and the utopian designer William Morris. The present article, part of a broader study of the 1877 London visit, focuses on the fascinating nexus of Burne-Jones, Eliot, Lewes and the Wagners.[1]

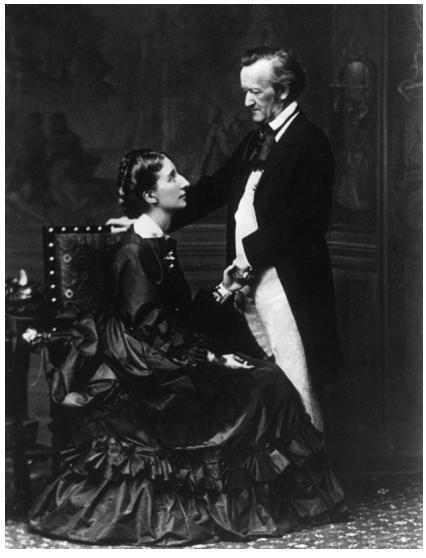
Cosima Wagner sits for Edward Burne-Jones

Eliot and Lewes were close friends of the artist Edward Burne-Jones and his wife Georgina, and it was in fact Eliot who was responsible for introducing Burne-Jones to Cosima Wagner. On Tuesday 8 May she wrote to Burne-Jones as follows:

> Dear Friend
>
> Is the request I am going to make too great? It is, that I may be allowed to bring to you Madame Wagner at a time when you will be personally at liberty.
>
> She is, I think, a rare person, worthy to see the best things, having her father's (Liszt's) quickness and breadth of comprehension. Monday is the day we have conditionally proposed to ourselves. Can you confirm our plan by your permission? Madame Wagner will lunch with us, and we could drive to you afterwards so as to be with you about three – or later, if this were more convenient to you.
>
> Yours always truly
>
> M.E. Lewes[2]

The visit duly took place the following Monday (14 May), as recorded by Cosima in her diary:

> Rehearsal till 1 o'clock, after which I to Mr. and Mrs. Lewes' for lunch and then with them to the studio of the Pre-Raphaelite painter Burne-Jones. Pretty, delicate pictures, he himself very pleasant.[3]



Wagner and his second wife, Cosima, photographed by Fritz Luckhardt in Vienna, May 1872

1 This article was published in bilingual form in R. Pfeiffer-Rupp, J. H. Stens, and J. Poettgen (†) (ed.), *Mensio – Descriptio – Structurarum Analysis – Interpretatio: Eine Festschrift für Konrad Bund zur Vollendung des 70. Lebensjahres* (Gescher, 2015) (Schriften aus dem Deutschen Glockenmuseum, Heft 13), 123–46.

2 *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, vi (New Haven and London, 1955), 368.

3 *Cosima Wagner: Die Tagebücher 1869–1883*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, 2 vols. (Munich, 1976–7); tr. and ed. Geoffrey Skelton as *Cosima Wagner's Diaries 1869–1883* (London, 1978–80) [CT]. Entry for 14 May 1877.

Self-caricature of Burne-Jones holding palette, added as postscript to his letter of 3 June 1877 to Cosima Wagner

A fortnight later, on a further visit to Eliot and Lewes,[4] Cosima records: 'it was decided that I should sit for the painter Burne-Jones'.[5] Burne-Jones agreed and Cosima duly attended the studio on three occasions: 29, 30 and 31 May. No finished portrait eventuated. But what happened to the sketches that Burne-Jones apparently made? They have never been published, so far as I know, and I hope to have further details about them at a later stage of this research project. Suffice to say for the time being that Burne-Jones claims to have been unable to catch Cosima's likeness: 'from my faults not yours', he asserted in a letter, 'for you sat like Memnon'.[6] The complete text of this letter, previously unpublished, reads as follows:[7]

The Grange: Northend

dear Madame Wagner

how thoroughly kind of you – it's true my drawings were very unsatisfactory, but from my faults not yours, for you sat like Memnon. So if it will not fatigue you & if you have two more hours that you could give me I should be glad to use them: but I do not know when you leave ——— if you could come tomorrow (Monday) morning any time in the forenoon – from half past ten or el[e]ven till one I would try again – and even if I fail it will be such a pleasure to remember your visit but then if you travel tomorrow how tired it would make you – or maybe you have to attend some service at the abbey – & I would not for the world interfere with such a sacred purpose – well, if you cannot come you have already been more than kind, and I shall never forget the delight of knowing you – and will remind you of it when I am ninety (which will be in a few years) don't trouble to write but say yes or no to the simple messenger who carries this and so I shall know whether to expect you or not. and if you come I will recover my lost ground in your esteem – and will not say fools are fools and I will admire Lazarus[8] very much, if I must.

Ever yours truly

E Burne-Jones

[postscript] and may the messenger bring me word how that poor baby of Chariclea is.[9] give her my love & I was sorry for her anxiety

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4 The couple cohabited from 1854 to the day Lewes died in 1878 and came to think of themselves as man and wife – as did the world at large.

5 CT, 27 May 1877.

6 Unpublished letter to Cosima Wagner of 3 June 1877, original in Richard-Wagner-Archiv, Bayreuth (Hs 67 Nr. 52).

7 Burne-Jones's idiosyncratic punctuation and capitalisation have been retained.

8 Presumably a reference to Michelangelo's *Study for the Raising of Lazarus* (or just possibly Rembrandt's etching of the same subject), both in the British Museum. Cosima had visited the British Museum on 17 May specifically to see the drawings there, returning on 25 May once again to 'take pleasure in the splendid drawings'. CT, 17 and 25 May 1877.

9 Chariclea Ionides, wife of Edward Dannreuther, the Wagners' hosts in London. Chariclea was the youngest of five siblings born to Alexander Constantine Ionides and Euterpe Ionides, neé Sgouta. Burne-Jones was among the artists patronised by Alexander Ionides.

The Wagners were in fact scheduled to have left London the previous day (Saturday 2 June), but their departure was delayed by a storm. On the Sunday, the day on which Burne-Jones wrote his first letter, they took the opportunity of their extended stay to visit Hampton Court and Richmond. But on the Monday, they finally had to leave, so there was no chance of a further sitting for Burne-Jones. The artist responded as follows:

> dear Madame Wagner
>
> alas! it is good bye then. I tried very hard to go to Mrs Coronio's[10] last night but it was impossible: you are right not to come to-day for it would have tried you to death: I send you back the photograph, very reluctantly because I shall never have it again – and very disappointedly because I thought I was to keep it:
>
> So you were very kind not to ask to see the drawings I had made – they will be of great use to me, but could only annoy your friends to see – it takes me some time to learn how to draw a new face – & I was only very moderately lucky about these studies.
>
> There is more in it than the photograph says, a great deal – but if the clergy will permit any privilege to the laity I still hope to possess one – and if from time to time I do anything I think you would care about I will have it photographed and send it to you – but we all hope that this visit to England which has been such admiration and delight to us will be very often repeated – and for me I will not believe the contrary: this spring will not be forgotten by any of us.
>
> Ever yours truly
>
> E Burne-Jones
>
> [postscript] I shall never get the photograph again, I know. Farewell.[11]

One further letter of Burne-Jones to Cosima Wagner survives. It is undated but appears to have been written later that June. The text was reproduced in abridged form by Geoffrey Skelton in *Richard and Cosima Wagner: Biography of a Marriage*.[12] Burne-Jones begins with effusive apologies for his failure to reply earlier to a letter from Cosima. She had sent him a photograph of herself which 'lives in dear company in my pocket, together with Margaret and Philip' (his children). 'Indeed I am glad of it', he went on,

> for your friendship was a real gift of delight, & you left behind you a longing with many of us that some good fortune would presently bring you back, to renew and strengthen such a happy beginning of friendship – for my part I don't like even to pass that Albert-Hall – for it all went by so quickly, & seems gone so utterly: all the music and the excitement – and the place looks as desolate as its haters could wish for it. But another year you will come back again – and we will make more fuss of you than before.

Burne-Jones goes on to express the wish that he could write in German, as Cosima had written in English for him – 'and it is such faultless pretty English too'. He then

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[10] Aglaia, married to Theodore Coronio, and an elder sister of Chariclea Ionides (see previous note), modelled for Burne-Jones's *The Mill* (1870–82).

[11] Unpublished letter to Cosima Wagner of 4 June 1877, original in Richard-Wagner-Archiv, Bayreuth (Hs 67 Nr 50).

[12] Geoffrey Skelton, *Richard and Cosima Wagner: Biography of a Marriage* (London, 1982), 240–41.

regales Cosima with an incident involving his daughter Margaret that resonates with pseudo-Wagnerian imagery:

> As for what has happened since you left, it is little: I left my maiden [Margaret] in the country – where she rides a horse so big that she looks like a kitten on its back – the last I heard of her was that she had ridden by moonlight to Stonehenge – that is a great circle of stones set up, God knows when, by the Druids – and a funny sight it must have been to see that imp riding under the full moon on a wide heath, as if she were rehearsing for Brynhild –[13]

To understand why Burne-Jones never completed his portrait of Cosima Wagner, despite their cordial relations, we need to look more closely at his career round the time of the Wagners' visit. This investigation will also throw into sharper relief the convergences of the aesthetic values held by Burne-Jones and Wagner respectively.

Burne-Jones and the Grosvenor Gallery

Prior to 1877, Burne-Jones had withdrawn from the public eye following a scandal that had erupted over his watercolour *Phyllis and Demophoön* – not so much over the nudity of the figure of Demophoön, perhaps, as over the suggestion that it is the female figure that is the pursuer. To make matters worse, Burne-Jones's mistress, Maria Zambaco, had modelled for the figure of Phyllis.[14] The ensuing attack by a minor poet called Robert Buchanan on 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' – Rossetti, Swinburne and their circle – also had ramifications for Burne-Jones, who did not exhibit publically in England at all from 1870 to 1877 (with the exception of two pictures shown at the Dudley Gallery in 1873) but sought refuge, and inspiration, in Italy. Burne-Jones had previously visited Italy in 1859 and 1862, but now made two more trips, in 1871 and 1873, in the course of which his exposure to painting of the Italian Renaissance precipitated an evolution in his own style. Henceforth his passion for medievalism was to be fused with his empathy for the Italian Renaissance and Greek sculpture. The latter, incidentally, makes for an important point of reference with Wagner, whose preoccupation with Greek culture was to colour his entire aesthetic outlook, though he had considerably less enthusiasm for the Renaissance, which he regarded as a regression from the Greek ideal of an integrated artwork.

By 1877, however, Burne-Jones was ready to resurface into London society and the spark for this re-entry was provided by the opening, on 1 May 1877, of the new Grosvenor Gallery – an independent private gallery at 135–7 New Bond Street. The Grosvenor was founded by Sir Coutts Lindsay, an enterprising Scottish landowner, himself a painter. The intention was to provide an alternative to the Royal Academy: a more fashionable space that was less formal, more welcoming to the general public. Artists were invited by Lindsay, 'the Charles Saatchi of his day,[15] and his co-administrators Charles Hallé and Joseph Comyns Carr. The launch of the Grosvenor Gallery, on the

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[13] Undated letter to Cosima Wagner, original in Richard-Wagner-Archiv, Bayreuth (Hs 67 Nr 51).

[14] At the height of Burne-Jones's affair with Zambaco at the end of the 1860s, the couple were rumoured to have made a suicide pact, determining to effect it by wading into the Serpentine in Hyde Park, across the road from the Royal Albert Hall. The coldness of the water taking them by surprise, however, they turned round and came out again. See Christopher Wood, *Burne-Jones: The Life and Works of Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898)* (London, 1998), 49.

[15] Fiona MacCarthy: *Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination* (London, 2011), 281.

top The Grosvenor Gallery in 1877. *Illustrated London News*

bottom Sir Coutts Lindsay. *Vanity Fair* (1883)

very day that Wagner arrived at Dover, feeling 'utterly seasick',[16] transformed Burne-Jones, who from the start became the Grosvenor's leading artist, into something of a cult figure.

In the estimation of Fiona MacCarthy, Burne-Jones became the 'central figure of the so-called "Aesthetic Movement" ',[17] and it was surely this aspect of his work – the prioritising of mood and atmosphere over literal representation, along with his fusing of the mythological and the medieval – that appealed to Wagner and Cosima. His paintings were regarded by many as unintelligible, idiosyncratic and demonstrating contempt for public taste; these qualities too might well have exerted an appeal to the Wagners.

The Aesthetic Movement was in fact effectively launched with the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery. Peacock feathers, lilies and sunflowers sprouted everywhere. Appreciation of Art – even if it was only affected – became fashionable, as did a tendency to become 'intense'. Just as Wagner and his music were coming to the Royal Albert Hall, Kensington was becoming known as 'Passionate Brompton', which is where the beautiful people, known as 'PBs', resided.

Burne-Jones and the 'Wagnerian' imagination

By the late 1870s Burne-Jones was moving in the most distinguished circles of London society. He was invited to join the eminent Athenaeum Club and summoned to one of Gladstone's celebrated London breakfasts. At the same time, his work has rightly come to be seen as a critique of the materialism of Victorian society. His friendship with William Morris brought social and political issues to his attention, and although he was by no means an activist in the sense that his friend was, one may see his immersion in medievalism as a search for a better world untainted by the sordid realities of the present. 'I mean by a picture', he once declared, 'a beautiful romantic dream of something that never was, never will be – in a light better than any light that ever shone – in a land no one can define or

[16] CT, 1 May 1877.
[17] MacCarthy, *Edward Burne-Jones* (note 15), 284.

remember, only desire.'[18] Wagner's music dramas, notably *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, engaged more directly with the socio-political issues of the day, though his *Weltanschauung*, with its harking back to a mystic, idyllic past, has much in common with Burne-Jones's aesthetic outlook.

Burne-Jones had been profoundly impressed by the experience of Siena Cathedral – the arresting interior of black and white marble, the mosaic floors, the bell tower, the remarkable decoration round the dome – which he visited in 1859 on his first Italian journey. The drama and ambition of the scale of the edifice all made an impact on the artist, as they were to on Wagner when he saw them for himself on 21 August 1880: 'R. moved to tears, the greatest impression he has ever received from a building'.[19] The sets for the Hall of the Grail in the first production of *Parsifal* were indeed modelled on the cathedral interior by the designer Paul von Joukovsky.

Many of Burne-Jones's pictures reflect motifs and preoccupations analogous to those of Wagner in his operas – it's difficult not to think of Siegfried when one sees Burne-Jones's *Saint George and the Dragon* (see cover) or his *Perseus* series – but a handful of paintings of this period deserve particular mention. The first, *Laus Veneris*, completed in 1878, was inspired by Burne-Jones's friend Algernon Swinburne's poem of the same title, published in an 1866 collection dedicated 'affectionately and admiringly' to the artist. (The latter must have been familiar with the poem prior to its publication, for a watercolour version of *Laus Veneris* dates from as early as 1861.)[20] Swinburne's poem was derived from the medieval legend of Tannhäuser, on which Wagner's opera was based. Burne-Jones's canvas shows the figure of Venus, dressed in a brilliant orange gown, sprawling languidly on a couch. A group of her attendants, dressed scarcely less strikingly, sing songs to their own musical accompaniment in praise of Venus. A further group of knights riding by on horseback is seen through a horizontal window in the rear. The wall to the side of the window is dominated by a Venusian tapestry.

One of Burne-Jones's most celebrated canvases, *King Cophetua and the Beggar* (1884), is also worth a moment's reflection from a Wagnerian perspective. Based on a traditional ballad, and also a poem by Tennyson, 'The Beggar Maid', it depicts a king who falls in love with a beautiful beggar and marries her. In the picture, the king sits holding his crown and gazing up at the girl, sitting on a cushioned pedestal. As with most of Wagner's characters, Burne-Jones's king does not belong to a specific time and place: rather he belongs to a mythic world of make-believe. The beggar-girl, meanwhile, is a representative of that species somewhere between humans and the spirit world. Like the water-sprites that haunted the Romantic imagination, her pallid skin and mesmerising eyes pierce the heart of the onlooker (her gaze is fixed firmly on the viewer rather than the king). Cophetua's abasement before this vision of beauty expresses the ideal of renunciation of material wealth in favour of truth and beauty. It was an ideal central to Wagner's aesthetic too, forming the central theme of his *Ring*.

Mention should also be made of the works inspired by the story of Sir Tristram in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. An 1862 commission from a Walter Dunlop of Bradford resulted

[18] Quoted in Frances Spalding, *Magnificent Dreams: Burne-Jones and the Late Victorians* (Oxford, 1978), 42.

[19] CT, 21 Aug. 1880.

[20] Christopher Wood, *Burne-Jones* (note 14), 60.

top Burne-Jones, *Laus Veneris*, completed 1878

left Burne-Jones, *King Cophetua and the Beggar*, 1884 (detail)

right Burne-Jones, stained glass window representing *The Marriage of Tristram and Isoude Les Blanches Mains*

in a series of stained glass windows representing four scenes from the story: *The Marriage of Tristram and Isoude Les Blanches Mains*, *The Madness of Tristram*, *The Attempted Suicide of La Belle Isoude* and *The Tomb of Tristram and Isoude*. The second of these was subsequently developed into a watercolour depicting Sir Tristram driven mad by false reports of Iseult's love for Sir Kay Hedius, living like a wild man in the forest, fed by herdsmen and shepherds.

Significant also is the fact that the legend of the quest for the Holy Grail provided the inspiration for Burne-Jones's masterpiece, *The Sleep of King Arthur in Avalon* (1881–98), in which Arthur is portrayed in death, awaiting the summons to rise again and perform his acts of faith in the world. On the side of the bier above him are represented scenes from the Grail legend.

And finally there are the *Quest of the Holy Grail* tapestries, which Burne-Jones was prevailed upon by William Morris to provide for the walls of the house of W.K. D'Arcy, an Australian mining millionaire: Stanmore Hall, near Uxbridge. Burne-Jones drew cartoons for a series based on the Holy Grail legend, the set consisting of 'five large panels, a smaller one of a ship, and a dado of verdure with the knights' shields hanging from the trees'.[21] The tapestries took a number of years to execute, the first completed in 1894.

Referring to the mellifluous allure of Celtic poetry, Burne-Jones once said: 'I wanted to track that blissful sweet song piteous into the thick of the forest and I did it at last.'[22] But did Burne-Jones find similar inspiration in the music of Wagner? It seems not – or at least only occasionally. In general he showed little interest in Wagner's music, though he and his wife Georgina did attend several of the 1877 concerts and also one of the morning rehearsals, which were open to invited guests. That Burne-Jones should interrupt his schedule to attend the latter was remarked upon by Georgina: it was 'an extraordinary thing for Edward to do', she said.[23] But the only other reference to Wagner in her *Memorials* is the occasion in 1884 when a friend took Burne-Jones to hear a concert performance of *Parsifal* at the Albert Hall. The event was unenthusiastically received by the music critic of *The Era*: 'We may safely predict that *Parsifal* will never find many admirers in this country, in spite of the occasional beauties of the composition', he concluded, reporting that 'About the middle of the second act the audience began rapidly to disappear, and ere the close patient listeners were few and far between.'[24] Burne-Jones was one of those patient listeners, however. According to his account of the time, later recorded by his wife: 'I heard Wagner's *Parsifal* the other day – I nearly forgave him – he knew how to win me. He made sounds that are really and truly (I assure you, and I ought to know) the very sounds that were to be heard in the Sangraal Chapel, I recognized them in a moment and knew he had done it accurately.'[25]

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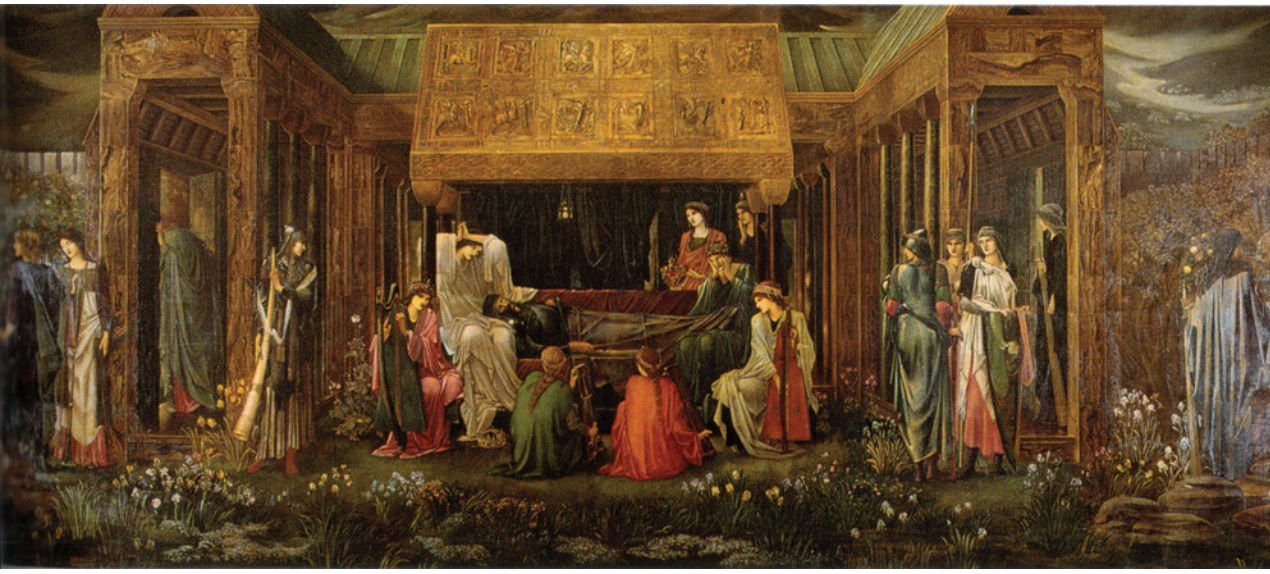
[21] Martin Harrison and Bill Walters, *Burne-Jones* (London, 1973), 166.

[22] *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* by G B-J [Georgina Burne-Jones], ii (1868–1898) (London, 1912), 43.

[23] op cit., 80. The visit provided an unexpected bonus for Burne-Jones in that he spotted in the audience a girl – the 21-year-old Margaret Benson – who struck him as the perfect model for his *Perseus* series.

[24] Review reproduced in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, ed., *The Wagner Companion* (London, 1977), 194–6.

[25] *Memorials* (note 22), 43.



Burne-Jones, *The Sleep of King Arthur in Avalon* (1881–98)

The portrait of Cosima Wagner

Wagner, for his part, was too busy with the practical arrangements for his Albert Hall concerts to visit Burne-Jones's studio with Cosima. Thus, although they exchanged notes, they never met. As for the portrait of Cosima, we can only conjecture as to reasons it was never executed. It may indeed be, as Burne-Jones himself maintained to Cosima, that he had been unable to capture her likeness – unless and until the sketches materialise, it is impossible to be sure. What we do know is that Burne-Jones was a slow worker, but that his industry was prodigious. His studio record for 1871, for instance, lists more than 27 works-in-progress.[26] With the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery at precisely the time Cosima arrived to sit for him, he may simply have been too busy to contemplate a full-scale society portrait of the kind both he and the subject would have felt fitting. Such portraits were, in any case, a comparative rarity in Burne-Jones's oeuvre.

At this time also Burne-Jones's friendship with George Eliot deepened. Previously it had been largely based on the bond between Georgina Burne-Jones and George Eliot. The latter's earnest intellectuality and intense manner of conversation were in marked contrast to the more easy-going charmers Burne-Jones usually favoured, but he was soon won over by her sympathetic nature.

George Eliot, Feuerbach and Wagner

Unlike Burne-Jones, Eliot did actually meet Wagner on his 1877 visit – of which more later. Her encounters with his music, however, go back more than twenty years, as do other resonant parallels between their personal histories and aesthetics. The first such

[26] See Debra N. Mancoff, *Burne-Jones* (San Francisco, CA, 1998), 59.

parallel concerns David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835–6) and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841), both translated by Eliot (published in 1846 and 1854 respectively) and both studied earnestly by Wagner. These major translation projects of Eliot's require some comment. As a young woman she was, faithful to her upbringing, an evangelical Calvinist. She read religious literature voraciously, but about 1839–40 she began to respond to other influences. She became acquainted with leading social reformers of the day, including Richard Cobden and John Bright and began to evince sympathy with protests over the Corn Laws, marriage rights, divorce rights and birth control.

The translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* was undertaken by her at precisely the time she was most responsive to its subversive ideas on the historical figure of Jesus – Strauss held that the gospels were narrative, not revelation, denying the validity of their supernatural events. Wagner was to be no less enthralled by Strauss, when he read him as a younger man, in the original of course, though in later years, especially while writing *Parsifal*, he found much in *Das Leben Jesu* to disagree with.

Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (The Essence of Christianity) was a crucial work in Wagner's intellectual development and in Eliot's too. Her German, far from fluent when she embarked on the Strauss, was improving, while her keen intelligence enabled her to grapple with the complex Hegelian concepts elaborated by both Strauss and Feuerbach. For Feuerbach, God was merely a projection of human fantasies, desires and needs. Humans have, he claimed, created God in their own image, setting up a divine entity that is everything they are *not* but would like to be: perfect, eternal, almighty. Feuerbach's challenge to the precepts underpinning religious faith and bourgeois morality shocked 19th-century society, at the same time providing intellectual fodder for like-minded subversives. In both Eliot and Wagner these ideas awakened deep-lying instincts, which once embraced were to make, in both cases, a fundamental impact on their future masterpieces.

As Eliot's biographer Frederick R. Karl neatly puts it with regard to his subject:

> Feuerbach came into [Eliot's] life in this intense way just when she was convinced she wanted to retain the morality and ethics of Christianity but not its expressions of faith, its humanistic reach without its theological grounding, its optimism about man and his possible salvation or redemption without counting on God's revelation, its possibilities for the structuring of family and society without its celebratory aspects.[27]

In almost all respects – though not the last – the same could be said of Wagner. His discovery of Feuerbach in the late 1840s was not only to spark one of his chief theoretical essays, *The Artwork of the Future* (dedicated to the philosopher), but also to provide a moral framework for his greatest composition, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The essence of morality, Wagner was to posit, following Feuerbach, lay not in religious dogma nor legal precepts, but in love – specifically the love of one person for another. Wagner's perception of love may have undergone re-evaluation to a limited extent following his

[27] Frederick R. Karl, *George Eliot: Voice of a Century* (New York and London, 1995), 167. That Eliot never repudiated her faith is evident from her gift to John Cross on their wedding day (6 May 1880) of Thomas à Kempis's *De Imitatione Christi* – the favourite instrument of the youthful Cosima Wagner's indoctrination by her governess Madame Patersi. (After the death of her companion Lewes in 1878, Eliot married Cross on 6 May 1880.)

George Eliot, portrait by François D'Albert Durade (1849), showing the writer at the age of 30

George Henry Lewes sketched as a younger man (1840), with pipe and works of Leigh Hunt, by Anne Gliddon

reading of Schopenhauer, with his philosophy of resignation, but Wagner was never fully to subscribe to the Sage of Frankfurt's pessimistic view of the negative power of love, and it is the Feuerbachian joy of love that pulsates through the couplings of Siegmund and Sieglinde, Siegfried and Brünnhilde.

George Eliot, George Lewes and Weimar

On a personal level, it is clear that Feuerbach's ideas – with more than a twist of Rousseau and Proudhon added to the brew – reinforced Wagner's own on the subject of bourgeois morality, with particular reference to the institution of marriage. In much the same way, Feuerbach appeared on Eliot's intellectual horizon just as she was beginning to address these questions in life and art. In the early 1850s, when she was working on the Feuerbach translation, Eliot was on the point of courting social disgrace and opprobrium by eloping with a married man, George Henry Lewes. Lewes' wife, Agnes, was intimately engaged with a friend and colleague of Lewes', Thornton Leigh Hunt. The latter, son of Leigh Hunt, part of the Shelley circle, shared the ideas of free love promulgated by the Romantic poet. So too did Agnes, for all that she was the daughter of a Member of Parliament, and their relationship could best be described as an 'open marriage'. Agnes was to bear Hunt four children – in addition to the ten he fathered by his own wife – but declined to enter into a divorce settlement with Lewes. Eliot thus became, as mentioned earlier, Lewes' life companion, from 1854 until the day he died in 1878, but despite answering to the title 'Mr and Mrs Lewes', they never married. Eliot in particular, in spite of her growing literary fame, was to suffer continual and sustained attacks for placing her 'depraved' need for emotional and sexual satisfaction above the demands of bourgeois morality.

Their first port of call, when they took off together in 1854, was Weimar, renowned for its literary associations – Lewes was engaged on a biography of Goethe. Given that Eliot's decision to cohabit with Lewes, first on the continent and then in England, was one that flew in the face of social propriety, it is scarcely surprising that Franz Liszt, whom they met in Weimar at this time, should have made such an impression on her. Liszt, who held the post of Kapellmeister at the Weimar court, was living openly with the Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein just as Eliot had determined to live with Lewes. The Princess appealed less, physically at least, to Eliot than did Liszt. Her unflattering description was as follows: 'short and unbecomingly endowed with embonpoint; at the first glance the face is not pleasing, and the profile especially is harsh and barbarian, but the dark, bright hair and eyes give the idea of vivacity and strength.'[28] As for Liszt, it was not only his marital position that inspired Eliot: she was entranced also by both his demeanour and his playing:

> My great delight was to watch Liszt and observe the sweetness of his expression. Genius, benevolence and tenderness beam from his whole countenance, and his manners are in perfect harmony with it. […] Then came the thing I had longed for – Liszt's playing. I sat near him so that I could see both his hands and his face. For the first time in my life I beheld real inspiration – for the first time I heard the true tones of the piano. [...] When the music expressed quiet rapture or devotion a sweet smile flitted over his features; when it was triumphant the nostrils dilated. There was nothing petty or egoistic to mar the picture.[29]

Liszt introduced Eliot and Lewes to the Russian composer and pianist Anton Rubinstein and made it possible for her to attend three Wagner operas: *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. Regarding the encounter with *Tannhäuser*, her journal for the period has the following entry:

> At ½ past 6 we went to hear Tannhäuser. The overture and the first and second acts thrilled me, but the third I felt rather wearisome. The tragedy in this act is very fine, but either I was too much fatigued to relish the music, or it is intrinsically monotonous and spun out beyond any but German patience.[30]

Eliot's Wagner reception

In her *Recollections of Weimar*, Eliot has more to say about both *Tannhäuser* and the other two operas:

> We were so fortunate as to have all three of Wagner's most celebrated operas while we were at Weimar. G. [Lewes] however had not the patience to sit out more than two acts of Lohengrin, and indeed I too was weary. The declamation appeared to me monotonous, and situations in themselves trivial or disagreeable were dwelt on fatiguingly. Without feeling competent to pass a judgment on this opera as music, one may venture to say that it fails in one grand requisite of art, based on an unchangeable element of human nature – the need for contrast. With the Fliegender Holländer I was delighted – the poem and the music were alike charming. The Tannhäuser too created in me a great desire to hear it again. Many of the situations and much of the music struck me as remarkably fine.[31]

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[28] *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge, 1998), 21.
[29] *ibid.*, 21–2.
[30] *ibid.*, 3 October 1854.
[31] *ibid.*, 233–4. The 'Recollections of Weimar' and of other cities were incorporated within Eliot's Journals.

George Eliot, sketched by Princess Louise on 16 March 1877 on a concert programme

George Henry Lewes, anonymous portrait, 1876

The following year, 1855, Eliot sent an article on Liszt, Wagner and Weimar to *Fraser's Magazine*, which published it in July of that year.[32] Wagner had himself been in London from March to June 1855, conducting a series of concerts for the Philharmonic Society. The unremittingly hostile reception by the London press may well have been the stimulus for Eliot's essay, in accordance with her desire to proselytise for German culture in England. In general terms, Eliot's musical sympathies informed much of her literary work. Proficient as both singer and player, 'her musicality', notes Frederick Karl

> surfaces into every aspect of her life […] into her regulated, paced speaking voice, into her stately prose, and into the very rhythmic structures of her longer works, built as they are on point and counterpoint, or on the balance of elements which recall longer works of music.[33]

Moreover, her appreciation and understanding of both choral works and opera appears to have informed her literary technique, since, as Karl continues, 'she worked hard to create structure based on parallels, repeats, and dualism'.[34]

Yet the musical taste of the Leweses seems to have been more for Gounod, Handel and Schubert than for Wagner, even if intellectually Eliot wanted to identify with the latter. Lewes was notably less sympathetic to Wagner's music than was Eliot, but he claimed to be speaking for both when he told his son Charles in 1870: 'The Mutter and

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[32] *Fraser's Magazine*, lii (July 1855), 48–62.
[33] Karl, *George Eliot* (note 27), 124.
[34] *ibid*., 124.

I have come to the conclusion that the Music of the future is not for us – Schubert, Beethoven, Mozart, Gluck or even Verdi – but not Wagner – is what we are made to respond to'.[35] To his journal Lewes confided: 'Two performances of each of his operas have failed to give us a moment of rapture, and succeeded in giving hours of noise and weariness.'[36] And again in 1872 he opined that Wagner's music 'remains to us a language we do not understand'.[37] It was in 1872 that Eliot and Lewes revisited some of the German locations they had been to in 1854, taking the opportunity to reacquaint themselves with *Lohengrin* and also experiencing a piano run-through of *Tristan und Isolde*. The latter, however, was a rare chance to hear any of the music of Wagner in his most advanced style, i.e. subsequent to his embarking on the *Ring* in 1848. The *Ring* itself was not heard complete anywhere until 1876, of course, while *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger* were not performed complete in Britain until 1882. What Eliot and Lewes are therefore reacting to is largely the even less radical style of Wagner's German Romantic operas: *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*.

Eliot and Lewes meet Wagner

Any private reservations they may have had about Wagner's music, however, were swept aside when the opportunity presented itself to meet the composer and his wife in person. Two days after their arrival in London in May 1877, Cosima forwarded to Eliot a letter of introduction from her father, Liszt. Lewes called on the Wagners the next day, reporting as follows: 'found her very agreeable; reminds me both of her father and mother. Wagner I only saw for a few minutes.'[38] Cosima visited Eliot at the Priory, their London house, and sat in the box belonging to the couple at the Albert Hall concerts. Cosima records the encounter thus: 'Wrote letters, visited the Zoological Gardens, made the acquaintance of George Eliot, the famous woman writer, who makes a noble and pleasant impression.'[39] At the rehearsal on 11 May[40] Eliot and Lewes heard music from *Die Walküre* and *Tannhäuser*. Lewes sat next to Cosima and was introduced to the soprano Amalie Materna and Carl Haag, the German-born British painter. At the concert the next day Lewes records their reaction as follows: 'Effect not so great on us as at rehearsal. The monotony of the recitative seemed greater.'[41]

Music from *Siegfried* and *Lohengrin* was heard at the rehearsal on 14 May, after which Cosima lunched with Eliot and Lewes, before being taken, as reported above, to see Burne-Jones in his studio: 'Mad. Wagner came back with us to lunch and then accompanied us to Burne Jones's [*sic*] studio. Delightful day.'[42] Lewes' diary then reports

[35] *The George Eliot Letters* (note 2), v. 85.
[36] Lewes, Journal for 25 March 1870, quoted in *The George Eliot Letters* (note 2), v. 85 (note).
[37] Karl, *George Eliot* (note 27), 502.
[38] *The George Eliot Letters* (note 2), vi. 368 (note).
[39] CT, 6 May 1877.
[40] Not the '1st rehearsal", as stated by Haight (*The George Eliot Letters*, (note 2), vi, 370): there had been several rehearsals, public and private, before that date, and indeed concerts on the 7th and 9th.
[41] *The George Eliot Letters* (note 2), vi, 370–71.
[42] *ibid.*, 370–71.

on the following day's rehearsal (Tuesday 15 May): 'Wagner Rehearsal. Talked with Mad. Wagner, Frau Materna, and Norman Grosvenor, who walked through the Garden with us.'[43]

Wagner himself had been too preoccupied with the performers – numerous problems both artistic and financial reared their heads – to socialise very much, but on 17 May Lewes was invited to dine (apparently alone) with the Wagners at the Orme Square home of the Dannreuthers, where they were staying. Following this, 'a small party assembled to hear Wagner read his "Parzival" [*sic*] which he did with great spirit and like a fine actor'.[44] Eliot must have been among the 'small party' at the reading, for the following day Lewes reported in a letter to Eugène Bodichon:

> Yesterday Wagner read aloud to us his poem of 'Parzival' and this morning we were at the Rehearsal for tomorrow.
>
> We are both in love with Mad. Wagner! We have seen a great deal of her. You remember Nanny said she liked her very much. No such woman has appeared on our horizon for a long time.[45]

Daniel Deronda

How one would love to have eavesdropped on any conversation between Wagner and Eliot, especially given the remarkable convergences and divergences of their world views at this time. For it was precisely at this time that Eliot was concerned about the representation of Jewish people: her novel *Daniel Deronda* had been published the previous year (1876). Her sympathetic portrayal of Jews was much discussed in the months that followed and at the time of the Wagners' visit, it was still very much in the air. Wagner's notorious 1850 essay *Das Judentum in der Musik* had of course been reprinted as recently as 1869, attracting considerable criticism for its blatant anti-Semitism. Although Wagner put his name for the first time to the reprinted publication, his identity as the author of the pseudonymous 1850 essay (signed by 'K. Freigedank') was an open secret and it was the assumption (wholly conjectural) of Wagner and Cosima that the 'conspiracy' they perceived to be plotting to undermine him had been instigated by the original publication. No sooner had the Wagners set foot in London than Cosima was commenting: 'the whole of Israel is once more working against us'.[46] In other diary entries she rails against Joachim and his 'consorts',[47] convinced (not without cause) that the 'Jewish' Joachim–Hanslick axis was hostile to the Wagnerian project.[48]

Thus a meeting between Wagner and Eliot has interesting dramatic potential, bringing together, as it does, the sharply contrasting perspectives of eloquent commentators from each side of the ideological divide who are yet sympathetic to each other in many

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43 *ibid*., 372.
44 *ibid*., 373.
45 *ibid*., 374.
46 CT, 3 May 1877.
47 CT, 15 May 1877; see also 21 May 1877. The violinist Joseph Joachim, friend of Brahms, was, like Hanslick, implacably hostile to the New German School.
48 Hanslick's mother, Karoline, was Jewish, his father a gentile. Karoline was baptised three weeks before her marriage to Joseph Adolf Hanslik [sic].

Gwendolen Harleth at the roulette table. Scene from *Daniel Deronda*, frontispiece to the Jenson Society edition of 1910

ways. And as we shall see shortly, there are notable parallels between *Daniel Deronda* and *Parsifal*, on which Wagner was working at this very time (he had completed the poem on 19 April 1877 and began the composition of the music the same August).

Daniel Deronda had been written by Eliot as a protest against the anti-Semitic undertow that characterised English society in the 19th century. England may have been less anti-Semitic than France, Germany or the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but the prism of class through which all were judged meant that Jews were commented on unfavourably, even when accumulated wealth enabled them to move up the social ladder. Benjamin Disraeli, who served as prime minister (for the second time) from 1874 to 1880, had converted to Christianity but was never allowed to forget his Hebrew background. Eliot's biographer Frederick R. Karl summarises the English treatment of Jews at the time thus: 'verbally contemptuous and socially condescending but otherwise tolerant'.[49]

Eliot herself commented on her aims in writing *Daniel Deronda* as follows:

> There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs. But towards the Hebrews we western people who have been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt and whether we acknowledge it or not a peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religious and moral sentiment. Can anything be more disgusting than to hear people called 'educated' making small jokes about eating ham, and showing themselves empty of any real knowledge as to the relation of their own social and religious life to the history of the people they think themselves witty in insulting. They hardly know that Christ was a Jew. And I find men educated at Rugby supposing that Christ spoke Greek.[50]

[49] Karl, *George Eliot* (note 27), 565.

[50] Letter of 29 October 1876 to Harriet Beecher Stowe, in *The George Eliot Letters* (note 2), vi. 301.

There are a number of Wagnerian references in *Daniel Deronda*. A society figure named 'young Clintock' comments to the heroine Gwendolen that the music of the intimidating connoisseur Herr Klesmer[51] 'is not addressed to the ears of the future, I suppose. I'm glad of that: it suits mine.'[52] Casual references are made to Tannhäuser[53] and the Flying Dutchman.[54] It's worth pointing out also that even the philo-Semitic Eliot subscribes to the trope of the stereotypical Jew: the unassimilated, culturally alien Jew from Eastern Europe whom even affluent Jews themselves came to look down upon. When Deronda explores the Jewish quarter of Frankfurt, he is cheated by a grasping Jewish tradesman, and encounters another 'apparently combining advantages of business with religion' which are 'shoutingly proposed to him in Jew-dialect by a dingy man in a tall coat hanging from neck to heel, a bag in hand, and a broad low hat surmounting his chosen nose'.[55] The prejudice that lies behind this description is clearly Eliot's not Deronda's, and the notion of a 'chosen nose' is surely one that would have delighted Wagner.

Nevertheless the fundamental philo-Semitism that infuses and motivates *Daniel Deronda* is remarkable for its time and denotes a fair amount of courage on the part of the author. In a letter of 31 May 1877 to a Professor David Kaufmann (who wrote a short book on the novel), for example, she speaks of the 'prejudice and ignorant obtuseness which has met my effort to contribute something towards the ennobling of Judaism in the conceptions of the Christian community, and in the consciousness of the Jewish community'.[56] And in her Journal for 1 December 1876 is an entry discussing the reception of *Daniel Deronda*. Although some reviews had been hostile, she had received 'delightful letters' from various people, known and unknown, complimenting her on her stance. 'Words of gratitude have come from Jews and Jewesses, and there are certain signs that I may have contributed my mite to a good result.'[57]

Deronda and *Parsifal*

Above all, *Daniel Deronda* is notable for its resonances with *Parsifal*. Each represented the last great masterpiece of its creator. Each tells the story of a young man who embarks on a journey of self-discovery, ultimately bringing redemption to another character. In each, too, compassion and remorse are seen as essential to that process. In *Parsifal* the hero learns compassion by identifying with the suffering of another (Amfortas). In *Daniel Deronda* the hero counsels Gwendolen, when she shows remorse for the suffering she has caused, urging her to order her life 'so as to make any possible amends, and keep away from doing any sort of injury again' (506). With his heart 'full of pity for her' (506), he comforts her with the pious words: 'One who has committed irremediable errors may be scourged by that consciousness into a higher course than is common.' (506)

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[51] Sometimes said to be modelled on the composer Anton Rubinstein, to whom Liszt had introduced Eliot in Weimar.

[52] *Daniel Deronda*, Penguin English Library edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1967, repr. 1970), 137.

[53] *ibid*., 281.

[54] *ibid*., 746.

[55] *ibid*., 415.

[56] *ibid*., 397.

[57] *The Journals of George Eliot* (note 28), 146.

Like Parsifal, Deronda never knew his father and has long been estranged from his mother. Above all, perhaps, *Daniel Deronda* articulates a meliorist world-view, elevating compassion and spiritual enlightenment over materialist values. *Parsifal* similarly envisions a better world, even if Wagner's conception of the triumph of enlightenment over materialism is underpinned by a racial ideology wholly anathema to Eliot.

One can go further and postulate another parallel between *Daniel Deronda* and *Parsifal*. As Barbara Hardy has argued, in her introduction to the Penguin English Library edition, the former is something of an 'experimental novel' that 'pushes beyond the achievement of its predecessors […]. It is one of those works of art whose greatness is inextricably bound up with imperfection.[…] a novel which reveals (or betrays) the large effort of imagination which has gone to make it.'[58] *Daniel Deronda* is moreover a novel dominated by an ideological agenda – to such an extent that, like Hardy, we may question whether the traditional categories of plot and character are best served. *Parsifal* too is dominated by an ideological agenda, albeit one obscured by symbolism to the point of inscrutability. But for all that the 'meaning' of *Parsifal* has been contested from the time it was written, it is undeniable that, like Eliot's, it is a work that betrays the struggles and ideological tensions within it. Where its predecessors *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger* present in each case a unified whole, a consistency of purpose, *Parsifal* is (as last works often are) open-ended and deeply ambivalent.

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The Burne-Jones/George Eliot/Wagner nexus, a momentary collision of like-minded souls for one month in 1877, in conclusion represents one of the most resonant, if unexpected, convergences in Wagner's career. A leading painter long immersed in mythological themes of a Wagnerian nature and a distinguished English writer whose recent novel addressed moral and philosophical issues also under examination in Wagner's own latest opera: how could he not be intrigued and flattered when these celebrities paid court to him in London? The fact that Eliot's novel wrestles with the problematic issue of Jewish assimilation from a far more sympathetic viewpoint than does Wagner only adds to the piquancy of their meeting in Orme Square. And here too lies the unfulfilled potential of these encounters. How disappointing that Eliot and Wagner didn't seize the opportunity for an animated discussion of the Jewish question, duly documented by a reliable eye-witness. How frustrating that Burne-Jones never executed the portrait of Cosima and that the opportunity didn't arise for him to tackle Wagner himself. And might Burne-Jones, his imagination steeped in Arthurian legend, not have been the ideal designer for a production of *Parsifal*?

[58] Introduction to Penguin edition (note 52), 8–9.