RICHARD WAGNER AND THE ETERNAL FEMININE

The text of Peter Bassett's talk in a Symposium during Opera Australia's production of the *Ring* in Brisbane in December 2023

"…the eternal-feminine
draws us on high."

Those are the final words (in translation) of Goethe's *Faust*, a play regarded by many as one of the greatest works of German literature. Wagner quoted them at a banquet following the first performance of the *Ring* in 1876, associating Brünnhilde with 'the eternal feminine' and leaving no doubt that she was the ultimate heroine of the *Ring*.

As a sixteen-year-old, he had composed a set of songs - 'Seven Compositions on Goethe's *Faust*' - coinciding with the appearance of his sister, Rosalie, as Gretchen, in the first Leipzig production. Goethe was still alive at the time. The songs were light and rather experimental. But ten years later, things started to get serious, and he composed what we know today as his Faust Overture. Its opening section sounds a bit like the dragon Fafner emerging from his cave, or perhaps the tormented Dutchman, or the outcast Tannhäuser, or Wotan in his deepest despair. Clearly, the ground was being laid for things to come.

Faust became a model for many of Wagner's tragic characters who, as he put it, stared into the abyss of their very existence, and could change nothing. He contrasted this with "the blessed redemptress, the glorious figure of Gretchen who is exalted by suffering". She became an inspiration for positive Wagnerian characters like Senta, Elisabeth, and, above all, Brünnhilde.

Wagner never tired of comparing Faust and Gretchen in Goethe's play with the masculine and feminine elements of *The Flying Dutchman*. "The sombre glow that I feel burning here" says the Dutchman. "Should I, wretched one, call it love? Ah no! It is the longing for salvation; might it come to me through such an angel!" And Senta replies: "That for which you yearn, salvation. Would that you could achieve it, poor man, through me." The Dutchman's hope for salvation and Senta's determination to be its instrument are conveyed in the wondrously beautiful duet in Act II.

There is a notorious letter written by Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck in Zürich in April 1858, which his wife Minna intercepted and, assuming it was a love letter, caused a scene. This letter, entitled 'Morning confession' is an apology by Wagner for his tactless remarks the night before, when a visitor to the Wesendonck household spoke admiringly of the character of Faust. Wagner wrote: "Having to listen to people saying time after time that Faust was the most significant human type ever created by a poet, made me very angry. Faust's despair rests initially either upon his knowledge of the world, in which case he is to be pitied, or else he is simply a student with fanciful ideas who has yet to experience the real world, in which case he is cripplingly immature. It would have been better if he had learned all that there was to learn, and learned it, moreover, at the first wonderful opportunity, through Gretchen's love. I can regard Faust only as a missed opportunity; and the opportunity that has been missed is nothing less than the unique chance of salvation and redemption."

The Faust-like negativity that distinguishes many Wagnerian characters is just one side of the story. On the other side is the redeeming quality of a woman's love with its roots in the idea of the *ewige weibliche* ('The eternal feminine'). In an essay of 1903, Thomas Mann concluded that: "The ending of Faust and what the violins sing in the final moments of

Götterdämmerung is the same thing, and it is the truth. The eternal feminine draws us on high".

The eternal feminine plays a vital role in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and her name is 'Eva' after the first woman in the Bible. Both Hans Sachs and Walther von Stolzing are drawn to Eva, but Sachs stands aside for the younger man who, in his prize song on the meadow on St John's Day, leaves no doubt that she is the one who is drawing him on high –

"Behold in blessed dream of love,
The most beautiful woman:
Eva in paradise!"

And, in Goethe's *Faust*, what does the *chorus mysticus* declare at the end of that play?

"All things corruptible
Are but a parable;
Earth's insufficiency
Here finds fulfilment;
Here the ineffable
Wins life through love;
Eternal womanhood
Leads us above."

In the *Ring*, Wotan's dreams change as the drama unfolds. In *Das Rheingold* we witness his dependence on Loge, demi-god of fire, a cunning trickster and the Wagnerian equivalent of Mephistopheles. But his first appeal to the eternal feminine comes with his pursuit of Erda. Towards the end of *Das Rheingold*, she rises from the ground and tells Wotan to yield the ring and escape the curse that would bring about his destruction. When he asks her who she is, she replies that she knows how all things were, are and will be. She is the everlasting world's primeval woman. She had borne three daughters, the Norns, but now the greatest danger brings her personally to him. He should heed this: all that exists will end. A dark day dawns for the gods. Wotan must shun the ring. But before he can learn more, she vanishes. The antithesis of creation is destruction, and so the nature motif in the orchestra is turned upside down as Erda warns of the end of the gods.

Wagner took the name 'Erda' (the old High German word for 'earth') from Jacob Grimm, who based his speculations on roman sources. But, in a way, Erda is Wagner's own creation. Still, as a character in *Das Rheingold* and, later, in *Siegfried*, Erda plays an important role, and her sudden, unexpected appearance in the *Ring's* preliminary evening, is great theatre. We learn from Wotan in *Die Walküre*, that he pursued Erda deep in the earth and overpowered her, and she bore Brünnhilde. With Brünnhilde and her eight Valkyrie sisters, he hoped to gather fallen heroes to defend the gods. But if the ring passed again into the hands of Alberich, the Nibelung would turn the heroes against Wotan, and Valhalla would fall.

Wotan dreams of one who could do what he could not; one for whom he longed but could never find, one who, by defying him, would be most dear to him. That saviour of the gods, he eventually decides, is the unborn Siegfried and, in Act III of *Siegfried*, the Wanderer (Wotan) tells Erda: "In rage and loathing I gave to the spiteful Nibelung the world. Now to a glorious Volsung I bequeath my inheritance". It never occurs to him, or to anyone else for that matter, that the person on whom the future really depends, is not Siegfried but Brünnhilde.

Of all the Faust-like characters who are victims of their circumstances, Wotan is the most complicated. But for him, salvation at the hands of Brünnhilde comes too late. Wagner described Wotan as: "The sum of the intelligence of the present". He exploits his half-mortal

son, Siegmund and then, faced with a crisis of his own making, sacrifices him. When his favourite daughter Brünnhilde displays the compassion that he has suppressed in himself, he sacrifices her too. Time and again, power and love are shown to be incompatible - the ways of the world versus the ways of the heart.

The feeling of compassion that overwhelms Brünnhilde when confronted with Siegmund's love for Sieglinde marks her first step towards humanity and mortality. Stripped of her godhead, she'll be awakened to new life by Siegfried in the third drama of the *Ring*. The old world of the gods will be of no consequence to either Siegfried or Brünnhilde, and they too foretell its end.

Lovelessness is at the heart of all that goes wrong in the *Ring*. Whether deliberately chosen, as in the case of Alberich, or the product of circumstance as in the case of Wotan and Fricka, lovelessness carries the seeds of destruction. The corollary is that an act of love – especially love to the point of self-sacrifice – carries the seeds of life. Brünnhilde will carry the grace of compassionate love furthest in the *Ring*, but she encounters it first in Siegmund who rejects a blissful afterlife from which Sieglinde would be excluded. For Siegmund, his 'eternal feminine' is, unquestionably, Sieglinde.

The philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach postulated that the 'glorious necessity of love' should take precedence over the law. This became Wagner's motto in his early sketches for the ring, and he never entirely abandoned it. He once told Franz Liszt: "The state of lovelessness is the state of suffering for the human race … we recognize the glorious necessity of love … and so, in this way we acquire a strength of which natural man had no inkling, and this strength will one day lay the foundations for a state on earth where no one need yearn for the other world, for they will be happy – to live and to love. For where is the man who yearns to escape from life when he is in love?"

Wotan had originally decided to give victory to Siegmund in his confrontation with Hunding but changed his mind at the insistence of his wife Fricka. Fricka's view was that the law was more important than love, and that by defending the law she could save the gods. In reality though, she was hastening their end, and Wotan was left in the depths of despair. Fricka was definitely not his 'eternal feminine'.

Wotan had instructed Brünnhilde to give victory to Siegmund, but after his grilling by Fricka (and to Brünnhilde's disbelief) he told his daughter to end Siegmund's life and give victory to Hunding. From this point onwards, Wotan's whole demeanour expresses an ever-increasing uneasy, profound dejection. But, for Brünnhilde, it is Siegmund's devotion to his eternal feminine, Sieglinde, that convinces her to disobey her father. Faced with the punishment that her father metes out, Brünnhilde urges him to protect her sleeping figure with a wall of fire so that only a fearless hero will awaken her. Eventually, Wotan's true nature shines through - albeit too late - and he agrees to do as she asks. Faust too, when he tries to rescue Gretchen from prison for killing her child, realises the extent to which he was responsible for destroying her life, and he wishes he had never been born. Wotan, I suspect, feels the same way.

As Faust had treated Gretchen callously, so Wotan had ignored his daughter's feelings and abandoned his own beliefs. She was probably the last person he would have turned to for advice, and yet, in reality, she was the one who could have helped him the most. When, in the closing scene of *Die Walküre*, Wotan takes one last, sorrowful look at the sleeping Brünnhilde before disappearing through the flames, he is no more than a departed spirit and can only let things happen as they will - which is why he becomes the Wanderer. In the next drama, after passing through the circle of fire, Siegfried awakens Brünnhilde with a kiss. He and the now mortal Brünnhilde care nothing for the fate of the world or the gods but declare

their love for each other in terms of the utmost rapture. As the curtain falls, we are left wondering - will love really triumph after all?

With the failure and departure of Wotan, Brünnhilde's focus is transferred to Siegfried who is still a curious mixture of child and man. His first reaction on wakening her is to call out to the mother he's never known. His feelings for his mother had dominated his thoughts for much of his life, and now these feelings are triggered again by the beautiful young woman before him. What does this mean? Sigmund Freud described the 'Oedipus Complex' in his interpretation of dreams, published in 1899, well after the *Ring* had been written, and after Wagner's death. The Oedipus Complex was concerned with feelings for a parent of the opposite sex and antagonism towards a parent of the same sex. Siegfried confuses Brünnhilde with his mother, and he kills Mime who had been in *loco parentis* for his father. But perhaps this is all becoming a bit silly for a mythological tale. Myths and religions are full of unusual relationships, including in the book of Genesis and in the religions of the ancient Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Norsemen and just about everyone else, often to explain natural phenomena.

Siegfried is now besotted with the person before him who will become, in every respect, his eternal feminine. Indeed, she is the only feminine human being that he's ever set eyes on. For the rest of his life, Brünnhilde will mean everything to Siegfried, and we need to put aside the calamitous impact of drugs and potions administered by the Gibichungs and, in particular, by Hagen in *Götterdämmerung*. In this story, potions symbolise the damage that third parties can do to otherwise loving relationships. And they'll cause enormous damage when Siegfried is made to forget his loved one, and the demoralised Brünnhilde, distressed beyond measure, joins in the plot to kill him. But it is hard to imagine all this when we listen to Siegfried's ecstatic feelings towards his eternal feminine – indeed, their feelings towards each other - high on Brünnhilde's rock during the prologue of *Götterdämmerung*.

In the Third Act of *Götterdämmerung*, during a hunting scene, an antidote is administered by Hagen, and Siegfried starts to remember how he first encountered Brünnhilde and joined her in a loving relationship. Gunther interprets this as the betrayal of a blood-brother, and Hagen now has the justification he needs to plunge his spear into Siegfried's back. With his dying breath, Siegfried declares: "Brünnhilde, my holy bride, awake! Open your eyes! Who put you back to sleep? Who forced you to this fearful slumber? Ah, to die is sweet. Brünnhilde offers me her welcome." And he dies. Eventually of course, Brünnhilde comes to understand how she and Siegfried had been manipulated by Hagen and the Gibichungs, and how Siegfried had remained true to her in all the ways that mattered. It was too late to save him, but, in the closing scene, she rises above the horrors that have engulfed them both, and declares: "Siegfried, Siegfried, look! Your wife joyfully greets you!"

There's no doubt that, by the end of the whole colossal drama, begun in 1848 and finished in 1874, it is Brünnhilde who is the 'eternal feminine'. Siegfried regarded her as such from the moment they met on that lofty peak in the clear pure air, at the start of their two new lives.

If the notion of the 'eternal feminine' played a key part in many of Wagner's dramas, it also played an important part in his own extraordinary life. And I'd like to look at five women who, he hoped, would indeed lead him on high. Three didn't, and two did. It all began when Richard was a brashly confident eighteen-year-old in Leipzig, infatuated with a Jewish girl named Leah David, daughter of a wealthy polish family and a friend of his sister Luise. "Never before had I encountered a young girl so richly attired and so beautiful", he wrote. "Never before had I been spoken to with such oriental profusion of caressing politeness. Surprised and dazzled, I experienced for the first time the indescribable emotions of first love". The boy became a regular guest at musical evenings arranged by Leah's widowed father, and he composed a Polonaise in D for piano - a measure of his fascination with his beloved's Polish origins and his sympathy for Polish refugees after an unsuccessful uprising

against the Russians in 1831. This ‘un-Wagnerian’ Polonaise is a delight. But the relationship soured when a tactless remark about the pianism of another suitor (Leah’s cousin) led to his undoing. Upset and embarrassed by what escalated into a display of bad manners, the beautiful Leah transferred her affections to her cousin, and the young Wagner was left mortified. Tact was never his strongest suit.

When he was just twenty-one, Wagner fell in love with a pretty actress, Minna Planer. In many respects, they were poles apart but they got married in 1836 in Königsberg. Things got off to a bad start when the pastor who was about to conduct the wedding opened the door to find the couple in the middle of a heated argument and on the point of departing in different directions. With a little persuading, they went ahead with the nuptials. But, soon afterwards, Minna absconded with one of her admirers, a wealthy merchant and theatre patron called Dietrich. Wagner set off to bring her back but was then faced with a second elopement by Minna! The marriage limped from one crisis to another. Minna rarely had faith in her husband’s more ambitious ventures, and she could never understand why he wasn’t content with being a conductor and composer of a more conventional kind. Their married life often involved flights from creditors in perilous circumstances. Richard remained convinced of his own destiny; Minna was just exasperated.

By 1848, revolution was in the air, and Wagner sympathised with the revolutionary movement in Dresden. He was actively involved in the violent uprisings of 1849, and a warrant was issued for his arrest. With the help of Franz Liszt, he escaped to Zürich. Exile and a warrant for treason; that was the ultimate humiliation for Minna. She nagged and scolded him until her health deteriorated. He was utterly miserable. He longed for a woman who shared his ideals and would encourage him to higher achievements. He yearned for someone who was genuinely a soulmate and believed in him – a Senta to his Flying Dutchman.

In 1848 he had met, and was attracted to, a wealthy Anglo-Scots girl Jessie Taylor who, soon afterwards, entered into an unfortunate marriage with a Bordeaux wine-merchant Eugène Laussot. It was unfortunate because her new husband, Laussot, had been involved with her mother before transferring his affections to the daughter! The family’s wealth might have had something to do with this! In 1850, while Richard was living with Minna in Zürich, he travelled to Bordeaux to see Jessie, and the upshot was that he and Jessie decided to elope together to the Ottoman Empire - to Greece or Turkey. Naively, Richard wrote to Minna to reveal his plans, saying, amongst other things: “If you had truly loved me, you would have recognized in sufferings a necessity to which one submits oneself for the sake of something higher.” Well, that went down like a lead balloon, and Minna set off at once to Bordeaux to confront him. But when she arrived, she couldn’t find him anywhere – because he was hiding from her! And so, frustrated and angry, she complained to Jessie’s mother who, in turn, told Laussot who threatened to shoot Wagner if he came anywhere near his wife. So that was the end of an affair that might have led who knows where? If Jessie had indeed turned out to be the ‘eternal feminine’ for whom he hankered, Wagner might have spent the rest of his life in the Ottoman Empire, which is an interesting thought.

But he did find such a person in Mathilde Wesendonck. Mathilde and her wealthy silk-merchant husband Otto were patrons of the arts, and they were delighted to have such a well-known composer as their protégé. They built a palatial villa on the outskirts of Zürich and installed Richard and Minna in a cottage in the grounds, which Wagner called his ‘refuge’. Each day, he’d walk across to the beautiful Mathilde to play his composition sketches for her. Other artists also came to the Villa Wesendonck but Wagner was the star. Minna soon felt hopelessly out of her depth. Mathilde, on the other hand, believed totally in Wagner’s genius and provided the sympathetic spirit he craved. He fell in love with her and dedicated to her parts of *Die Walküre* on which he was working at the time. The score contains various jottings in Wagner’s hand referring secretly to Mathilde. These jottings are

sometimes associated with particular musical phrases and take the form of cryptic sets of initials: i.l.d.g. meaning in German ‘I love you infinitely’, and I.d.m.m? ‘Do you love me Mathilde?’. Others, once deciphered, spelt out: ‘Were it not for you, beloved’; ‘You are my all!’, and ‘Beloved, why have you left me?’. The delirium of love had made him rather childish, and he admitted as much to Mathilde, but it also provided the catalyst for some of his greatest love music. Throughout his life, Wagner seems to have needed the strong stimuli of relationships and sensory experiences to conjure up his imaginary world of the emotions.

While he was under this spell, he abandoned the score of *Siegfried* after Act II and threw himself into a subject that had been increasingly dominating his thoughts: *Tristan und Isolde*. It's highly unlikely that the ‘affair’, if one can call it that, existed other than in Wagner’s mind although he dedicated the first complete draft of *Tristan und Isolde* to Mathilde. To the end of her life, she insisted that nothing improper had transpired, and that Otto was aware of the connection and tolerated it as serving an artistic purpose. But, like Senta, she was her Dutchman’s soulmate and inspired him as Minna could never do. There was no way that Mathilde would leave her husband and children for Wagner, and he, in turn, felt bound to his sick wife. The situation for all concerned had reached a crisis. Minna left for a health cure and Wagner went to Venice where he worked on the Second Act of *Tristan*. He and the Wesendoncks remained friends until his death in 1883, and they attended the first performance of the *Ring* in Bayreuth in 1876.

Mathilde wrote the text of the so-called *Wesendonck Lieder*, five songs for the female voice which Wagner set to a piano accompaniment. He orchestrated one of them, *Träume* (‘Dreams’) and had it played beneath her bedroom window on her birthday in 1857. It is a study for the wondrous Act II duet in *Tristan und Isolde* and encapsulates - as words alone could never do - his feelings for the eternally feminine Mathilde.

In the end though, there was one woman in Wagner’s life who became both his ‘eternal feminine’ and his wife, and that was Cosima, daughter of Franz Liszt. Cosima had been born out of wedlock at Bellagio on Lake Como (hence her name) on 24th December 1837 to Franz Liszt and the French countess Marie d’Agoult. In 1868, she wrote to her husband Hans von Bülow, confirming that their marriage was over and that, henceforth, she would be devoting her life to Richard Wagner. By then she had given birth to two daughters by Wagner (Isolde in 1865 and Eva in 1867). A third child, Siegfried, would be born to Cosima and Richard in 1869. Having made the monumental decision to devote the rest of her days to Wagner, Cosima began to write her diaries, which would extend to about a million words and occupy her for the next fourteen years.

In July 1870, Cosima and Bülow were divorced, and in August, she married Wagner in the Protestant church of St Matthew in Lucerne. A few months later, Richard planned a surprise for Cosima’s birthday, to be celebrated as always on Christmas Day. In secret, he composed the exquisitely beautiful chamber work described in its dedication as: Tribschen Idyll with Fidi's birdsong and orange sunrise; a symphonic birthday greeting. Presented to his Cosima by her Richard. The reference to the ‘orange sunrise’ was to Cosima’s description of the sunlight falling on the orange wallpaper at the time of Siegfried’s birth. Hans Richter had been given the task of secretly rehearsing a small ensemble from the Tonhalle Orchester Zürich, and Richter himself played the trumpet part.

On Christmas morning in 1873, Cosima again celebrated her birthday, this time in Bayreuth after the move there from Tribschen the year before. On the morning of her birthday, she was enchanted by her children singing what became known as *Der Kinder-Katechismus* (‘The Children’s Catechism’) composed by Richard. In this, the rose (‘Rose’) that blooms in May is rhymed with Kose (the caress) of Christmastide. Kose, of course, is a pun on Cosima.

If the rose of May has faded, it blossoms anew in the bosom of Christmas. Rose in May, cosy in May, dearest, loveliest, Cosima!

The orchestral epilogue, which Wagner added after completion of the score of *Götterdämmerung*, quotes the final "Glorification of Brünnhilde" motive. So, clearly, he was equating Cosima with Brünnhilde. Indeed, he once sang the final section to Cosima and said to her: "That's you".

Birthday celebrations were opportunities for Wagner to declare his love for Cosima, and the last opportunity occurred in December 1882 at the *Teatro la Fenice* in Venice, barely two months before his death. His plan was audacious – to conduct a performance of his symphony in C Major which he'd composed at the age of nineteen in 1832. By 24th December, when Liszt had joined the rest of the family, they all travelled to the *Teatro la Fenice* in gondolas. Cosima wrote in her diary: "I am touched to think that 50 years ago he performed this work for his mother; now for me". Perhaps Wagner, like Siegfried, was associating his 'beloved' with his mother. Far from evoking the tormented Dutchman or the outcast Tannhäuser or Wotan in his deepest despair, this happy music was the expression of a contented man embracing one 'eternal feminine' beyond all others – his wife Cosima.

Peter Bassett