

5. Seeking for Signs of Parzival

Extract from a lecture given in Leipzig on 1 January 1914

Rather unusually, Steiner here gives a very personal account of the process of his own spiritual research into the realities underlying the Parzival legend, allowing us to accompany him on this intriguing journey of exploration. In other words, we can here witness some of the stages in his own Grail quest, and at the same time remind ourselves of some significant episodes in the saga.

Where, in this account, the hermit upbraids Parzival by reminding him of the 'mother of God', we can recall how Steiner interprets this latter figure, in the first lecture in this volume, as embodying the cleansed and purified human soul that is ready to receive the influx of spirit. Somehow there is an implication here of a connection between Parzival's lack of awareness of his mother's suffering and his failure to ask the essential, conscious and compassionate question at the Grail castle; and hence of the direction his journey must take before he fulfils his destiny.

As Steiner comes upon the name of Parzival in what he calls the 'stellar script', he presents us with a picture of the invisible spirit descending into and borne by the visible physical body, in the same way that, in the Grail saga, the host descends into the chalice on Good Friday.

[. . .] My dear friends, allow me at this point to confess to you that when in my occult researches I tried to follow this stream, I often lost trace of it; I had to search for places where it reappeared. I could suppose that the stream of the Christ impulse had reappeared slowly, and that even today it has not fully reappeared but can only give certain signs of itself. But

where and how did it come to the surface? That is the question. Where did it lay hold of souls sufficiently to make an impression on their consciousness?

If you follow up the various expositions in my books and lecture courses, and if you feel about it as I do, you will find, especially in the older ones, that what I have said in connection with the name of the Holy Grail is one of the least satisfying parts. That is how I feel, and I hope that others have felt it too. It is not that I have said anything that does not hold good, but simply that when I spoke of this, I felt dissatisfied. I was confident about what I presented, but often, when I tried to trace the further course of this stream—when I tried to unravel the further occult development of Christianity in the West—then before my soul rose the admonition: 'You must first read the name of Parzival in its right place.'

I found that occult research is guided in a remarkable way. To avoid being lured into speculation, or realms where we can very easily be borne away from hidden truth on the wings of fantasy, we have to be guided slowly and by stages. Our research should ultimately bring to light a kind of self-affirming truth. So I often had to be content with waiting for an answer to the prompting: 'Search out where the name of Parzival stands!' You know from the Parzival saga that after Parzival returns, in a certain sense cured of his errors, and again finds the way to the Holy Grail, he is told that his name will appear shining upon the holy vessel. But where is this holy vessel—where is it to be found? That was the question.

In occult research of this kind one is often held back, delayed, so that one may not get very far in a day, or a year. Landmarks slowly appear. For me they appeared in the course of really a good many years, during which I sought an

answer to the question—where will you find the name of Parzival written on the Holy Grail?

I knew that many meanings can be attached to the holy vessel in which the host, the holy bread or wafer, is placed. And on the holy vessel itself the name 'Parzival' was to shine. I was aware also of the deep significance of a passage such as that in St Mark's Gospel (Chapter 4, verses 11–12, and 33–34) where we are told that the Lord often spoke in parables and only gradually clarified their meaning. In occult investigation, too, one is led gradually, and very often only in connection with karmic guidance; and on encountering something that seems to have to do with a certain matter, one very often does not know what it will become in one's own soul under the influence of forces coming from the world of spirit. Often one does not know in the least whether something drawn from the depths of the esoteric world will have a bearing on some problem that one has been pursuing for years. Thus, not knowing how to proceed, I once asked the Norwegian folk spirit, the northern folk spirit, about Parzival, and he replied: 'Learn to understand the saying that through my powers *ganganda greida* flowed into the northern Parzival saga.' This means something like 'food for wayfarers' or 'journeying viaticum'.⁵ I had no idea what to make of this. It was the same when I was coming out of St Peter's in Rome under the strong impression made on me by Michelangelo's *Pietà*—that you find on the right-hand side as you enter: the Mother with Jesus, the Mother who looks so young, with Jesus dead already on her knees. And after looking at this work of art (this was the kind of guidance I mean), there came to me, not as a vision but as a true imagination from the spiritual world, a picture inscribed in the Akashic record, showing how Parzival, after he first leaves the castle of the

Grail where he failed to ask about its mysteries, meets in the forest a young woman who is holding her bridegroom in her lap and weeping over him. But I knew that whether it is the mother, or the bride whose bridegroom is dead (Christ is often called the Bridegroom), the picture had a meaning, and that the connection thus established—without my having done anything about it—had a meaning also.

I could tell you of many promptings of this kind that came to me during my search for an answer to the question: where can I find the name of Parzival inscribed on the Holy Grail? For it had to be there, as the saga itself tells us. And now we need to recall the most important features of the saga.

We know that Parzival's mother, Herzeleide, bore him in great suffering and with dream-like visions of a quite peculiar character; we know that she wished to shield him from the knight's life and the code of knightly virtue; that she arranged for the management of her property and withdrew into solitude. She wanted to bring up her child as a stranger to impulses that were certainly present in him, to avoid exposing him to the dangers that had surrounded his father. But we also know that the child soon began to notice everything glorious in nature; from his mother's teaching he really learnt nothing except that there was a God in authority, and he conceived a wish to serve this God. But he knew nothing of what this God was, and when one day he met some knights he took them for God and knelt before them. When he confessed to his mother that he had seen the knights and wanted to be a knight himself, she dressed him in fool's garments and sent him on his way. He met with many adventures, and later on—people may call this sentimental but it is of the deepest significance—the mother died of a broken heart because of her son's disappearance: without

turning back to give her a farewell greeting, he had set out to experience knightly adventures.

We know that after many wanderings, during which he learnt much about knightly ways and knightly honour, and distinguished himself, he came to the castle of the Grail. On other occasions I have mentioned that the best literary account of Parzival's arrival at the castle is to be found in Chrétien de Troyes. There we hear how, after frequently losing his way, Parzival comes to a lonely place and finds two men: one is steering a little boat and the other is fishing from it. They direct him to the Fisher King, and presently he encounters the latter in the Grail castle. The Fisher King is old and feeble and has to rest on a couch.

While conversing with Parzival, the Fisher King hands him a sword, a gift from his niece. Then a page carrying a spear first appears in the room: the spear is bleeding and the blood runs down over the page's hand; and then comes a maiden with the Holy Grail, which is a kind of dish. But such glory streams from it that it outshines all the lights in the hall, just as the stars are overpowered by the light of sun and moon. And then we learn how the Holy Grail contains something which nourishes the Fisher King's aged father in a separate room. He has no need of the sumptuous meal of which the Fisher King and Parzival partake. These two nourish themselves with earthly food. But each time a new course—as we should say nowadays—is served, the Holy Grail withdraws into the room of the Fisher King's aged father, whose only nourishment comes from what the Holy Grail provides.

On his way from Gurnemanz, it has been suggested to Parzival that he ought not to ask too many questions; and so he does not inquire why the lance bleeds or what the vessel of the Grail signifies—naturally he did not know their names.

He then goes to bed for the night, in the same room (according to Chrétien de Troyes) where all this has happened. He intended to ask questions in the morning, but when morning comes he finds the whole castle empty—nobody is there. He calls out but no one replies. Getting dressed and going downstairs he finds his horse ready. He thinks the whole company has ridden out to hunt and wants to ride after them to ask about the miracle of the Grail. But when crossing the drawbridge it rises up so quickly that his horse has to leap quickly over it to avoid being plunged in the castle moat. And he finds no trace of the company he encountered in the castle the previous day.

Then Chrétien de Troyes tells us how Parzival rides on and in a lonely part of the wood comes upon a woman with her husband on her knees, mourning and weeping for him. It is she, according to Chrétien de Troyes, who first suggests to him that he should have asked questions, and thus experience what effect his questions might have on the great mysteries shown him. We then hear that he goes on his way, often wandering from the right road until, precisely on a Good Friday, he comes to a hermit named Trevrizent. The hermit tells him how he is labouring under a curse for wasting the opportunity to redeem the Fisher King—which he could have done by asking questions about the miracles in the castle. And then he is given many and various teachings.

Now when I tried to accompany Parzival to the hermit, a saying was disclosed to me—a saying which, in the words my spiritual-scientific research reveals, is nowhere recorded. This was spoken—and it made a deep impression on me—by the old hermit to Parzival, after he had acquainted him as far as he could with the Mystery of Golgotha, of which Parzival knew little, although he had arrived there on a Good Friday.

The old hermit then uttered this saying (I shall use ordinary words that are perfectly faithful to the sense of the utterance): "Think of what happened at the Mystery of Golgotha! Raise your eyes to the Christ hanging on the cross, at the moment when He said, 'From this hour on, there is your mother'; and John did not leave her. But you"—said the old hermit to Parzival—"you have left your mother, Herzeleide. It was on your account that she passed from this world."

Parzival did not fully grasp the connection, but the words were spoken with the spiritual intention that they should work in his soul as a picture, so that from this picture of John, who did not forsake his mother, he might discern the karmic debt he had incurred by deserting his own mother. This was to produce an after-effect in his soul.

We hear that Parzival stayed a short while longer with the hermit and then set out again to find the Holy Grail. And he finds the Grail shortly or directly before the death of old Amfortas, the Fisher King. Then the knights of the Holy Grail, of that holy order, approach him with the words: 'Your name shines in the Grail! You are the future ruler, the king of the Grail, for your name shines out from the holy vessel!'

Parzival becomes the Grail King. And so the name, Parzival, is inscribed on the holy, gold-gleaming vessel, which bears the host. It is inscribed there. [...]

And now, in my concern to find the vessel, I was at first misled by a certain circumstance. In occult research—I say this in all humility, with no wish to make an arrogant claim—it has always seemed to me necessary, when a serious problem is involved, to take account not only of what is drawn directly from esoteric sources, but also of what external research brings to light. And in following up a problem it

seems to me specially good to make a really conscientious study of what external scholarship has to say, so that one keeps one's feet on the ground and does not get lost in cloud cuckoo land. But in the present instance exoteric scholarship led me astray (this was some time ago): I gathered from it that when Wolfram von Eschenbach began to write his Parzival poem, he had—according to his own statement—made use of Chrétien de Troyes and of a certain Kyot. External research has never been able to trace this Kyot and regards him as having been invented by Wolfram von Eschenbach, as though Wolfram von Eschenbach wanted to attribute his own extensive additions to Chrétien de Troyes to a further source. Exoteric learning is prepared to admit, at most, that Kyot was a copyist of the works of Chrétien de Troyes, and that Wolfram von Eschenbach put the whole thing together in a rather fanciful way.

So you see the direction external research takes. It is bound to draw one away, more or less, from the path that leads to Kyot. At the same time, after being somewhat led astray by external research, something else came to my attention (another instance of karmic guidance). [...] Today we must search among the stars in a way different from the old ways, but the stellar script must once more become something that speaks to us. These thoughts about a revival of the stellar script linked themselves in a remarkable way to the secret of Parzival, so that I could no longer avoid the conclusion that the two were connected. And then a picture rose before my soul: shown to me while I was trying to accompany Parzival in spirit on his way back to the Grail castle after his meeting with the hermit Trevrizent. Chrétien de Troyes recounts this meeting with the hermit in a particularly beautiful and touching way. I should like to read you a

little from this passage, telling how Parzival comes to the hermit:

He roused his steed to start
And sighed from his deepest heart,
For guilt did rack his breast,
Remorse gave him no rest.
Weeping he comes through the wood
Yet halts where hermitage long has stood.
Makes ready to dismount,
Lays weapons on the ground—
And finds within a chapel cell
The pious man: before him fell
Upon his knees in woeful plight.
The tear that blinked before his sight
Rolls down at last from cheek to chin
As he with simple, childlike mien
Folds his hands in prayer together
In hope that he find solace here.
—‘O hear my sad confession:
Five years I laboured in delusion
While, poor in faith, the life I led
Led me to many a woeful deed.’
—‘Tell me why you have so done
And pray to God that He ere long
Will lift you to him once again.’
—‘By Fisher King I once did stand.
I saw the spear upon whose steel
Hung drops of blood. I saw the Grail
Yet failed to say the word,
To ask the meaning of this blood;
To ask what the Grail signified—

‘I were better I had died!
Until this day indeed
My soul’s in direst need.
Our Lord I thought of never more
And from His Grace I strayed afar.’
—‘Now tell me what your name may be.’
—‘As Parzival men speak of me.’
The old man sighs, this name he knows
Well, very well; at last he says:
—‘What you unwittingly have left undone
Has brought this sorrow upon your crown.’⁶

Then come the conversations between Parzival and the hermit of which I have spoken already. And when I sought to accompany Parzival in spirit during his return to the Grail, an image rose in the soul of how he travelled by day and night—devoting himself to nature by day and to the stars by night—as if the stellar script spoke to his unconscious self; and as if this was a prophecy of what the holy company of knights who came from the Grail to meet him would say: ‘Your name shines forth in radiance from the Grail.’ But Parzival, quite clearly, did not know what to make of the message of the stars, for this remained in his unconscious being, and therefore one cannot interpret it easily, however much one may try to immerse oneself in it through spiritual research.

Then I tried once more to get back to Kyoto, and a particular thing which Wolfram von Eschenbach said of him made a deep impression on me, and I felt I had to relate it to the *ganganda greida*. The connection seemed inevitable. I had to relate it also to the image of the woman holding her dead bridegroom on her lap. And then, when I was not

in the least looking for it, I came upon a saying attributed to Kyot: '*Er jach, ez hiez ein dinc der gral*'—'He said, a thing was called the Grail.' Now exoteric research itself tells us how Kyot came to these words '*Er jach, ez hiez ein dinc der gral*'. He acquired a book by Flegetanis in Spain—an astrological book. No doubt about it: Kyot is stimulated by Flegetanis, in whom lives a certain knowledge of the stellar script. Kyot, inspired by this revival of astrology, sees the thing called the Grail. Then I knew that I should stray close to Kyot; I knew that he discloses an important clue in a search based on spiritual science; he at least has seen the Grail.

Where, then, is the Grail, which today bears the name of Parzival? Where can it be found? In the course of my research it had become apparent that the name—that is the first thing—must be sought in the stellar script. And then, on a day which I must regard as specially significant for me, I was shown where the gold-gleaming vessel is to be found in reality, so that through it—through its symbolical expression in the stellar script—we are led to the secret of the Grail. And then I saw in the stellar script something that anyone can see—only he will not immediately discern the secret. For one day, while I was observing the gold-gleaming sickle of the moon in inner vision, as this appears in the heavens, with the dark moon like a great disc dimly visible within it, it dawned on me: with physical sight one could see the gold-gleaming moon—*ganganda greida*, the journeying viaticum—and within it the large host, the dark, wafer-like disc.⁷ This is not to be seen if one merely glances superficially at the moon, but it is evident if one looks closely—and there, in wonderful letters of the occult script, was the name Parzival!

That, to begin with, was the stellar script. For in fact, if this reading of the stellar script is seen in the right light, it yields for our hearts and minds something—though perhaps not all—of the Parzival secret, the secret of the Holy Grail.