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Books received

Avins, Styra (ed.). *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*. Selected and annotated by Styra Avins. Translations by Josef Eisinger and Styra Avins. Oxford University Press (Oxford 1997). 858 pp. £35.00.

Johnson, Stephen. *Bruckner Remembered*. Faber and Faber (London 1998). 186 pp. £12.99.

Levin, David J. *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen: The Dramaturgy of Disavowal*. Princeton University Press (Princeton, NJ, 1998). 207pp. £19.95.

Nattiez, Jean-Jacques. *Wagner Androgyne*. Translated by Stewart Spencer. Princeton University Press (Princeton, NJ, 1998). 359 pp. £13.95 (paperback reprint of 1993 edition).

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Walker, Alan. *Franz Liszt. Volume Three: The Final Years 1861–1886*. Faber and Faber (London 1997). 594 pp. £45.00.

Wagner's idea of power in the "Ring"

Richard Wagner's status as a composer would now seem to be more or less secure. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, which may perhaps be traced back to the strenuous depoliticisation experienced by his works as Wieland Wagner's Bayreuth emerged from the dark shadow cast by the Third Reich. None the less, Wagner's *musical* greatness is now generally accepted, however grudgingly, even by those who remain temperamentally antagonistic to its expression. Where, however, does that leave Wagner the critic, the thinker, the *Vormärz* revolutionary? The answer is, of course, that *that* Wagner — arguably *those* Wagners — has, or have, not been left behind. One would be hard put to find any remnants of the once thriving circle of "Bayreuth Idealists" who took the Word of the Master to be their new Gospel. But many productions of his music dramas, particularly of the *Ring*, have focused upon Wagner's anti-capitalist ideas, the 1976 Boulez–Chéreau "Centenary *Ring*" at Bayreuth proving a landmark in this respect.

Whatever faults or distortions it may involve, the anti-capitalist approach can lay claim to a reasonable empirical foundation. Long after the heated passion of the red-blooded Dresden revolutionary had largely given way to the more pessimistic resignation of Schopenhauer's disciple, Wagner remarked to Cosima that Alberich's dream had come true in London's Docklands: "Nibelheim, world dominion, activity, work, everywhere the oppressive feeling of steam and fog" (CT, 25 May 1877). Yet this approach remains rather limited. Opposition to capitalism — which does not necessarily equate with Marxism, though many producers seem unaware of this — is no more the foundation of Wagner's outlook than his anti-Semitism. If the depoliticisation of his works has not survived in the theatre, or in critical and polemical writing, it seems to have had more effect upon historians of political thought, often reluctant in any case to venture into realms involving consideration of non-verbal elements, as Wagner's thought must. Perhaps because relatively little has emanated from this quarter, a deeper understanding of Wagner's work in the context of political philosophy has proved elusive.[1] This essay is an attempt to address the question of one key component of his philosophy, his conception of power. After looking at a number of its specific manifestations — for example, the power of money, of property, of the state, of law and custom, of the charismatic leader — we shall try to draw some conclusions relating to Wagner's more general conceptualisation.

"Mark well my new poem — it contains the world's beginning and its end!" Thus wrote Wagner to Liszt on 11 February 1853.[2] One can readily understand what is meant, but it would perhaps have been more accurate to refer to *a* world's beginning and end. There is no act of Creation; indeed, we find references in

1. One notable exception is Udo Bermbach, *Der Wahn des Gesamtkunstwerks: Richard Wagners politisch-ästhetische Utopie* (Frankfurt am Main 1994).
2. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, trans. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London 1987), 281.

Götterdämmerung to actions having taken place prior to the first scene of *Das Rheingold*. And following Brünnhilde's self-immolation and the death of the gods, there remain "men and women moved to the very depths of their being". What does take place at the beginning of the work is the first illustration of antagonism between man and nature, and the despoliation of the former by the latter — in essence, a redramatisation of the Fall.

"All things come from you, and of your own do we give you," reads the new liturgy of the Alternative Service Book *Rite A*, during the Preparation of the Gifts. Wagner would doubtless have concurred with this somewhat oddly pantheistic declaration, given a materialist interpretation that substituted nature for the Christian God. Primal reality, as for Feuerbach, lay for Wagner not in the Hegelian *Weltgeist*, but in the material world. In the Prelude to *Das Rheingold*, "the thematic foundation for the whole had to be laid" (ML 518; English trans., 505). And it was so — musically and dramatically (a false opposition to Wagner, but one mentioned in order to dispense with it early on). The work begins with an extraordinary evocation of timeless nature: "In an ideal performance," it has been written, "the audience is unable to discern exactly when the contrabass tones begin; the listener only gradually becomes aware of a sound that, in effect, has *always* been there."[3] As the orchestral sound gradually evolves through the ascending natural harmonic series, we feel that life itself is constantly being created and recreated. Whilst the musically minded may think of Haydn's "Representation of Chaos", one may also be put in mind of Karl Marx's remarks in his "Paris Manuscripts" (which could not have been known to Wagner) on spontaneous generation as the "practical refutation of the theory of creation".[4] Gold is present in the Rhine from the outset, and already its potential danger is hinted at: Floßhilde's first mention of it brings a modulation from E flat — the key of the Prelude — to its relative minor. This remains, however, a hint, for the Rhinemaidens cannot conceive that anyone would pay the requisite price, renunciation of love, for its possession. And no one will, until the arrival of the fumbling, horribly unattractive Alberich. Teased and frustrated, the dwarf, an outsider in a world whose guiding principles appear to be merely beauty and hedonism, proves willing to pay the price, thereby obtaining if not the "limitless power" of which Wellgunde sings, then at least the potential for immense temporal power. Proudhon, to whose ideas Wagner had almost certainly been introduced during his years of Parisian indigence, would have termed the action "homicide", depriving others of the limited heritage afforded by Nature.[5] We shall come later to the transformation, with all its deleterious consequences, of pure, value-free gold into capital, the medium of exchange, but first need more fully to look at the ecological world.

Exploitation of nature has begun even before Alberich's ravishment of Paradise. We learn in the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* that Wotan broke off a branch from the world ash-tree and hewed his spear (the symbol, as we shall see, of his legal power) from its trunk. The god's action, just like Alberich's, sprang from his desire for power and resulted in the devastation of the area's ecological balance. And as Alberich's deed provokes the Rhinemaidens' lament at the end of *Das Rheingold*, that of his dialectical antithesis, Wotan (or "Licht-Alberich"), provokes a similar cry from the spinning Norns who once wove at the world-ash. "Trusty and true, it [the Rhinegold] is here in the depths alone: false and fated is all that rejoices above" – the Rhinemaidens' final words in *Das Rheingold* could equally well be sung by the Norns, suffering from *their* similar predicament. It seems that the rape of nature is not only devastatingly important in itself; it is also a metaphor for the more general consequences that follow from man's overriding will to power. One need only compare the tortuous self-examination conducted by Wotan during his monologue in Act Two of *Die Walküre* with the "primordial state [...] which [...] hardly yet thinks in concepts and in which it is itself still poetry, image and feeling" of the more "natural", indeed "primordial" sections of he drama.[6] Wagner, as may be seen in *Opera and Drama*, was, like so many German thinkers following Herder, profoundly interested in the theory of language. Consciousness, emanating from the spring at which Wotan drank and which then ran dry (a clear parallel with the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden), imposes its own misery upon mankind and may rank as a form of oppressive power in its own right. And it is from the Woodbird, the Voice of Nature, whose music is related to that of the elemental Rhine, not from the fully conscious, machinating dwarf who has brought him up, that Siegfried learns of Brünnhilde.

Wagner posits three principal forms assumed by man's power over nature, which clearly seems to be for him *the* foundation of power itself. These may be grouped under the following headings: political (including law and custom), religious and economic — although the three are obviously interlinked. In the *Ring*, political power is most closely associated with Wotan, chief of the gods. He is the first to drink from the Well of Wisdom and thereby to emancipate himself from nature; he is also the first not only to cut his spear from the world-ash but in addition to carve runes upon that dynamic instrument of power, that is, both to enshrine and to limit his dominion by law. The Wotan recalled by the Norns thus stands as one of those dim and distant, at best semi-mythological, figures for whom political philosophy has frequently need of recourse, as a Lycurgus or a Romulus, or as a Rousseauvian Legislator. At least this initial process seems rather more civilised than Nietzsche's "blond beasts". But the creation of law and its accompanying hierarchy is by no means benign; Wagner's myth stands quite close to the "exploiters", who systematically organised "the mass of the people called the State" and created "the law of the State",[7] of Bakunin (a close friend of Wagner's during the 1849 Dresden Uprising).

3. Warren Darcy, *Wagner's "Das Rheingold"* (Oxford 1993), 78.
4. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts", *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford 1977), 95.
5. Barry Millington, *Wagner*, 2nd edn (London 1992), 26; see also Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?*, ed. and trans. Donald R Kelley and Bonnie G Smith (Cambridge 1994), 136.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich and Berlin 1988), I,486; translated into English by R J Hollingdale as *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge 1983), 237. Although Nietzsche's remark was intended to refer to the whole of Wagner's dramatic poetry, it does seem apposite in this context, especially since *his* context concerns the contrast between "theoretical man" and the realm of poetic, more immediate understanding.
7. Gregory Petrovich Maximoff (ed.), *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism* (London 1965), 354.

That which Wagner places at the heart of his critique of political power, then, is the contract — hallowed basis of authority for so many liberal writers. He is not concerned, as is Hume, to demonstrate its irrelevance; nor does he stand with Hegel in declaring it an undesirable way to *view* government. Wagner's concern, rather, is to oppose himself to that tradition of political thought, particularly strong during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which puts forward the concept of a state of nature in which man lives as an unprotected, isolated individual and which claims that only by the introduction of law — positive and sanctioned — does he attain the necessary protection to progress. This is not because Wagner wishes man to revert to a state of nature, whether Hobbesian or something rather more palatable: it is difficult to feel particularly sympathetic towards the Rhinemaidens of Paradise in their provocation of Alberich. Wagner's accusation is that the reality of the contract stands diametrically opposed to its proponents' claims. It is not merely a dead, formalistic instrument, but an instrument of lies, of corruption and oppression. Wagner contends that, *pace* Lockean liberals, a contract always takes place between two *unequal* parties. That between clever Wotan and the two stupid giant brothers, Fasolt and Fafner, is no more just than that between the factory owner and his would-be employees who, in an age dominated by the "social question", may die if they do not accept his terms. Seen in this light, Fasolt's description of the basis of Wotan's power is a terrible indictment: "What you are, you are through contracts alone."

Wotan's actions in *Das Rheingold* provide a perfect example of the disastrous consequences Wagner believed to follow from the institution of political power. To build Valhalla, symbol of world dominion, Wotan has engaged the giants' services. They, like Alberich, stand inferior to Wotan in the social hierarchy he has constructed. Yet when they demand their payment — the goddess Freia — he has to agree, despite his attempts to dissuade them. Thus Wotan prevents Donner from employing the barbaric solution of brute force; what he is, he is through contracts alone. In other words, Wotan is not a despot, nor a charismatic leader; he, too, is bound by the contract, a deliberate alteration to the source material on Wagner's part. In the Prose Edda, Donner lifts his hammer, Wotan's spear is nowhere to be seen and the hammer falls upon the giant concerned. None the less, Wotan is immediately drawn into the world of power politics, assisted by Loge, embodiment of the "elementary power of thought" (or consciousness, for the gods require Freia's golden apples to retain their immortality).[8] Loge's cunningly devised solution involves theft of the ring Alberich has wrought from the Rhinegold. Here, once again, Wagner comes very close to Proudhon. To Wotan's enquiry as to how he might obtain the ring, Loge snaps "By theft!" His sinuous line continues, "What a thief stole, you steal from the thief." The self-binding that legal power involves is now leading Wotan to the point when he will ignore completely the claims of property right. He does not intend to win back the ring in order to restore the gold to its rightful owners, of whose pleas he has been made aware by Loge; the guiding principle of Wagner's naturalism has no place in this increasingly dark and corrupt world. Nor is Wotan motivated by love in his desire to ransom Freia. Having obtained the ring through a mixture of guile and

8. Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's "Ring"* (Oxford 1979), 178 and 169.

force, he wishes to retain it in order to wield a form of loveless power barely distinguishable from that which the tyrant Alberich has exercised over the enslaved Nibelungs. Only the mysterious intervention of Erda persuades him to relinquish the ring. The struggle for its ownership then immediately claims the life of Fasolt, and Fafner, in true Proudhonian style, hoards the treasure, rendering it neither value-less — its natural state — nor productive: "What I lie on, I own."

That, however, is to digress. It must already be apparent how disastrous are the consequences of Wotan's power merely in the first drama of the cycle. Wotan's desperate need ("furchtbare Not", one might say) to prevent Alberich, his rival for power, from regaining the ring will continue to bring misery both to himself and others. He will have to sacrifice his son, Siegmund, and consequently bid farewell to his favourite valkyrie, Brünnhilde. Only his Schopenhauerian realisation, in *Siegfried*, of the futility of power will enable him to renounce it and thereby to escape the quagmire of power politics. *Götterdämmerung* — for once, its original title, *Siegfried's Tod*, seems more appropriate here — will once again depict the tragedy of political power, as the "natural" man, Siegfried, falls prey to the decay and corruption of the Gibichung court. Those unable to have followed Wotan in his moment of realisation will be fated to repeat his mistakes. Already in *Das Rheingold*, however, we are vouchsafed a glance at the chimerical quality of political power. Having paid off the final instalment, the gods may now enter Valhalla, the hollowness — the "unreality" — of their triumph apparent for all to hear. Against the splendour of the Valhalla and Rainbow bridge motifs are pitted both Loge's sarcasm and the Rhinemaidens' lamentations, exposées of what Marx termed the "false consciousness" of the state, and Wagner its "abstraction", the "negation [a properly Hegelian term] of free self-determination of the individual" (GS IV,65; PW II,192). Having told us that the gods are hastening towards their own destruction — his independence from their delusions boldly underlined by the music — Loge chides the Rhinemaidens: they should cease their wailing and bask in the new-found radiance of the gods, that of the gold no longer being available. The Rhinemaidens, however, are awarded the haunting final words: "Trusty and true it is here in the depths alone: false and fated is all that rejoices above." And the piercing C flat minor of the words "falsch" (false) and "feig" (fated) proves beyond doubt the unreality of Valhalla's diatonicism. Wotan's political machinations have rendered him unable to return the gold to its natural home. It has now become "property" and doomed all those who have touched it, indeed, all those who will touch it.

Closely linked to political power is that of custom, which in the *Ring* is often indistinguishable from law. Wagner writes in *Opera and Drama* that whereas "the life-impulse of the individual expresses itself *ever newly* and *immediately* [...], the essence of society is *custom*, and its view a *mediated* one". In failing to grasp the essence of the individual, the societal view "is a limited and hindering one" (GS IV,54; PW II,179). Such anarchic individualism is a long way from Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*. The dead, corrupting hand of custom is represented by Fricka, Wotan's wife and to some extent the embodiment of his own — or political man's — conservatism. In a letter to Theodor Uhlig, Wagner refers to "Wodan's [his original orthography] struggle with his own inclination and with custom (Fricka)".[9] It is she,

9. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (note 2), 219 (letter of 12 November 1851).

goddess of marriage, a contractual institution to which Wagner was at best ambivalent, who provides the voice of moral outrage concerning the incestuous union of Siegmund and Sieglinde. Nature no more disapproved of it than it did of Oedipus and Jocasta; both unions produced children.[10] But Wotan's political deeds return to haunt him. "Unholy" he might "deem the vow that binds unloving hearts", but he has set up the rigid societal framework of law and custom which he must now defend. "In my own fetters I find myself caught: — I, least free of all things living," he cries; but execute the will of his own barren consort he must, even if this should mean sacrificing his son and bereaving his daughter. The contrast with the compassion of Brünnhilde — Wotan's own inclination — who strives to save Siegmund is clear. She, like Antigone, "knew nothing of politics: *she loved*" (GS IV,62; PW II,189). And just as the triumph of Creon — the state personified — resulted in his son's heart being cut by love's sword, wounding the state to its uttermost depths, Fricka's victory will not stem the tide. Brünnhilde, too, will offer a "love curse" to destroy the state, whilst Fricka will reappear only as the dedicatee of burnt offerings to celebrate the travesty of a marriage between Brünnhilde and Gunther.[11]

If law and custom, let alone force, have been rejected as bases of authority, what remains? We must now turn our attention to Wagner's account of religious power. For Marx, of course, the critique of religion was the precondition of any further critique. It was, after all, the issue which proved most immediately explosive amongst Hegel's successors, among whom we must count the Wagner who dedicated his *Art-Work of the Future* to Feuerbach. To a great extent, the title of the cycle's final drama, *Götterdämmerung* or *Twilight of the Gods*, expresses Wagner's message. And the final stage directions relate not to Siegfried, not to Brünnhilde, not to Alberich, nor to the Rhinemaidens, but to the gods: "As it [the fire] finally reaches its greatest intensity, the hall of Valhalla comes into view, with the gods and heroes assembled. [...] Bright flames seem to flare up in the hall of the gods, finally hiding them from sight completely. The curtain falls." Wagner's apocalyptic vision annihilates the gods just as readily as it prescribed a "fire-cure" for Paris.[12] Yet why should this be so, if the gold has been returned to the Rhine? A fully comprehensive answer to this question will probably never be forthcoming. Wagner remarked that the necessity of the denouement must be felt "emotionally",[13] which it undoubtedly is, but this is hardly helpful to analytical commentary. One way to approach the problem, however, is to look at it as the conclusion of man's necessary self-emancipation from religion, at least from religion as conventionally understood. We append this rider because Wagner is indubitably closer to Feuerbach, who "had no god but was a religious man", than to Marx, "who owed much to Feuerbach's theory, had no god but was not a religious man".[14]

10. Geoffrey Skelton, *Wagner in Thought and Practice* (London 1991), 13.
11. Skelton, *Wagner in Thought and Practice* (note 10), 19-21.
12. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (note 2), 219 (letter to Theodor Uhlig of 22 October 1850).
13. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (note 2), 309 (letter to August Röckel of 25/6 January 1854).
14. William Owen Chadwick, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge 1975), 69.

Wagner, like so many German intellectuals of the period, generally looked to ancient Greece for historical inspiration. In his Dresden library, he owned a copy of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, and he tells us that he had at the very least begun to read it before 1848. Possession of this work, which leaves one in no doubt of Hegel's preference for the Greek over the Roman world, together with ownership of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (in translation), grant us a good indication of Wagner's response towards antiquity.[15] Early Christianity — the teachings of Christ, successor to Apollo, and the early, spirited response to the barbarism of the Roman arena — was not Wagner's object of attack; before commencing work on the *Ring* proper, he had planned a drama, *Jesus of Nazareth*, which treated Christ historically — in a Young Hegelian fashion — as a social revolutionary. Wagner's opponent, rather, was Christian practice. This was the world of "hypocritical absolutism", a shameful contrast to "honest [Athenian] democracy" (GS III,16; PW I,39). Once again he comes very close to Bakunin, who writes of "the identity of the State and the Church [...]; religion came in the nick of time to bestow its blessing upon accomplished facts" and to transform them "into 'rights'".[16] Yet another consequence of Wotan's original misdeeds, one might add. In true Hegelian style, however — and it seems that his indebtedness to Hegel, or at least to Hegelianism, lies more in his dialectical approach than in any particularly philosophical doctrine —, Wagner did not want to return to the original unity in love of God and humanity, brought by Christ; rather, he desired to see a new, mediated unity.[17] Wotan, in his first scene, greets his sacerdotal fortress in words almost identical to those employed by the angels praising God in Haydn's Creation: "Achievèd [is] the everlasting / great work!" For the student of Feuerbach, however, to overcome political power and its underpinning of religious ideology, it was necessary to engineer the death of the gods, all the more magnificent given that it is willed by Wotan himself in Act Three of *Siegfried* — in Aristotelian terms, both his *cognitio* and *peripeteia* for the *Ring* as a whole.[18] If the gods embody the deepest needs and values of the "civilisation" — the word is as positive a description as it is for Rousseau — we encounter in the *Ring*, its destruction must entail their downfall, whatever happens to the Rhinegold. Only this can create the opportunity to overcome the illusory "antithesis of the divine and the human", words which probably persuaded Wagner to transform his original ending (to *Siegfried's Tod*), in which the gods will continue — at least for a time — to exercise their newly more benign power over a world purged of evil and turn it into the holocaust which brings human fate, for the first time, under the control of Fricka's "vulgar mortals".[19]

15. Curt von Westernhagen, *Richard Wagners Dresdener Bibliothek 1842 bis 1849* (Wiesbaden 1966), 93 and 90; see also George C Windell, "Hegel, Feuerbach, and Wagner's *Ring*", *Central European History*, ix (1976), 27-57, esp. 39.
16. Maximoff, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* (note 7), 207-8.
17. For an approach which makes much more of Wagner's Hegelianism, see Sandra Corse, *Wagner and the New Consciousness* (Cranbury, NJ, 1990).
18. The Aristotelian point is made by Patrick McCreless, *Wagner's "Siegfried": Its Drama, History, and Music* (Ann Arbor 1982).
19. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, ed. Wilhelm Bolin and Friedrich Jodl (Stuttgart 1903), 17.

The more theological side of Christianity provides a link with Wagner's blistering attack upon economic power. Christianity — and here, at least to begin with, Wagner foreshadows Nietzsche —

> located man's goal entirely outside his earthly existence [...] in an absolute, non-human God, so that life could remain the object of man's care only in respect of his most unavoidable needs; [...] and so it is with horror that we see the spirit of modern Christianity embodied in present-day cotton mills: for the benefit of the rich, God has become our industry (GS III,25-6; PW I,49).

The ancient parallel that Wagner's historicism so often demands is the replacement of the Greek Hermes, "Zeus's thoughts incarnate", by the Roman Mercury, signifying "the restless activity of those profiteering, haggling merchants" (GS III,41). So far as the *Ring* is concerned, the world of industry and commerce is represented by Alberich and Nibelheim.

Alberich's "theft" of the Rhinegold, of beauty from primal reality, marks the culmination of the first scene of *Das Rheingold*. The next time we encounter him, he has established a tyrannical domination over his fellow Nibelungs, once "carefree [pre-capitalist] smiths" (Mime), now abject slaves to the power of the ring. As Wotan and Loge descend to Nibelheim, we hear — and are repelled by — their ceaseless toil on the anvils. "The worker", as the young Marx put it, is "degraded to the most miserable sort of commodity".[20] No longer can the carefree smith fashion his "trinkets" and "toys"; he suffers objectification of his labour. "In itself," the gold is "only a glittering trinket in the watery depths." How, then, has Alberich accrued his power, the power that threatens Wotan's system of law and hierarchy? Renunciation of love, whose motif casts as dark a shadow over the whole of the *Ring* as does that terrible discord in the first movement of Mahler's Tenth Symphony, aided and abetted by consciousness (we learn from Alberich that Loge was once a friend to him), has driven him on to convert gold into capital. This is how the spurned dwarf has sublimated his "erotic desire" — or will to power.[21] Whatever the shortcomings of his interpretation of the *Ring*, Bernard Shaw hit the nail right on the head when he depicted Alberich as the plutocrat, the exploitative capitalist, enslaving the Nibelungs with his "whip of starvation".[22] And the harder they work, the worse becomes their servitude, for their master becomes more and more powerful. The intense resentment — Nietzsche would have employed the French *ressentiment* — he retains from his own lowly position in Wotan's society drives Alberich to increase his power further and further and thereby to subjugate the Nibelungs further and further, in order to overthrow the rule of those living "in blissful abandon on radiant heights" — words reminiscent of Wagner's own abiding hatred of the aristocracy. To put it in terms we used to hear in studies of the French Revolution, bourgeois capitalism would overthrow the decaying structures of the feudal *ancien régime*. Wagner, it should be remembered, had lived in the Paris of the July Monarchy, the Paris of Guizot's "Enrichissez-vous". And he had been forced to subsist at the lower end of the hierarchy of wealth. Small wonder, then, that he would never become a liberal.

There is, however, an alternative form of power, towards which Wagner could be seen to be more sympathetic. It is noteworthy that, throughout the desolate, loveless world of *Das Rheingold*, there is not even a hint at the idea of a charismatic leader until Wotan's "great idea" at the end. Power has been political, legal, customary, religious or economic. Here, it appears, is at least a chance to harness fruitfully the will to power. And Siegfried is about as close to a "free", natural man as seems possible before reaching the state of pure folly. "One thing counts above all else: freedom! But what is 'freedom'? is it — as our [liberal] politicians believe — 'licence?' — of course not! Freedom is: *integrity*. He who [...] acts in accord with his own being, and in perfect harmony with his own nature, is *free*."[23] Siegfried is free from property, commitments, self-reflection, historical memory and the machinations of power politics. He has no idea — unlike Wotan, Alberich or indeed virtually any other character — what to do with the ring. And yet this man from nowhere — like Lohengrin and Parsifal — commands a natural respect from others; we see this with the Gibichungs and their vassals. Siegfried, as is witnessed both by his Funeral March and by the reappearance of his motif just before the very end, remains the hero of the drama, whether we like it or not — and many do not, finding the character unsympathetic from the outset, from the ingratitude he displays to Mime for having brought him up onwards.

Yet if Siegfried remains the hero of the *Ring*, he seems to be a conspicuously unsuccessful one. Distracted and corrupted by the Gibichung court, he forsakes Brünnhilde, to whom he has given the contractual symbol of a ring, and fails to return the ring to its rightful owners. Moreover, he perjures himself and thereby falls victim to Hagen, Alberich's son. One reason for this is clear: the relative strength of the more obviously negative forms of power *vis-à-vis* charisma. The consequences of Wotan's and Alberich's plundering of nature are still very much in evidence. Hagen, driven on by his father, still lusts after the power of the ring and carefully lays the trap for Siegfried to attain his goal. And Wagner's enduring contempt for politics and politicians is well illustrated by Gunther's pathetic need for recognition, easily manipulated by Hagen. Richard Jones's recent Covent Garden production of *Götterdämmerung* made this point well when, as Gunther and Gutrune awaited the arrival of the charismatic hero, they desperately fumbled around, trying to ensure that their crowns lay straight upon their heads.

But there is another, more profound reason for Siegfried's failure. His charisma may form a preferable basis of power to the other forms we have examined, but it remains a form of power. In 1862, Wagner wrote that

> the myth of a Messiah is the most profoundly characteristic of all myths for all our earthly striving. The Jews expected someone who would liberate them, [...] bring [...] greatness, power and safety from oppression. Well, everything went as predicted, [...] [up to] his triumphant welcome to Jerusalem, [...] there he stood, everyone listened, and he proclaimed

20. Karl Marx, "Towards a Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right': Introduction", *Selected Writings* (note 4), 71.
21. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (note 2), 233 (letter to Theodor Uhlig of [12 November 1851]).
22. Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Ring of the Niblungs* (London 1898), 18-19.
23. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (note 2), 301 (letter to August Röckel of 25/6 January 1854).

to them: "My kingdom is not of this world! Renounce your desires, that is the only way to be redeemed and freed!" Believe me, all our political freedom fighters strike me as being uncannily like the Jews.[24]

In other words, Wagner's thought has by now completely transcended conventional politics. Siegfried's greatness lies in his lacking any fear of death, in his "freedom", not in any representation of some alternative form of political authority. In many ways, Wotan has become the more important figure. Whilst he never appears on stage in *Götterdämmerung*, his shadow falls over much of the drama. Siegfried may have shattered Wotan's spear, but that has only happened because Wotan, like Wagner, has undergone his Schopenhauerian conversion, has denied the will. In *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried is fated to repeat many of Wotan's mistakes — hardly surprising, insofar as he may be seen to represent the revolutionaries of 1848/9, given Wagner's remarks in the letter cited above. Wagner came to believe that the world itself was the basis of the devastating will to power, power being the only prize for which anyone will renounce love, that dominated every human being. It was necessary to turn elsewhere: "Let us treat the world only with contempt; [...] let no hopes be placed in it [...]. It is evil, *evil, fundamentally evil.* [...] It belongs to *Alberich*: no on else!! Away with it!"[25] It is only in death, accompanied by the Schopenhauerian conversion of Brünnhilde (the representation of Wotan's will in *Die Walküre*), that Siegfried acquires true nobility. "Only through his death," wrote Wagner, can "man demonstrate his complete absorption into the universality of men." To celebrate a "necessary" death "is the most worthy act that humanity can perform" (GS III,164; PW I,199). And Wagner finally decided to conclude his drama neither with restoration of the gods' rule nor with his second, Feuerbachian choice — establishment of the rule of love — but with recognition of the nullity of the phenomenal world: Hans Sachs's "Wahn! Wahn! Überall Wahn!" — redemption *of*, rather than *through* love.

Epilogue: Après le déluge?

One of the abiding mysteries concerning the *Ring* relates to what, if anything, we are to make of the remnant of the political, or at least the social, world during the Immolation Scene. No one would query the overwhelming focus upon Brünnhilde (and, to a lesser extent, Siegfried), yet there also remain with us those enigmatic bystanders, "men and women [who] watch, moved to the very depths of their being," who appear to provide an admittedly weak counterpoise, but a counterpoise none the less, to the triumph of self-abnegation. What kind of life may they expect, once the gold has been returned to the Rhine and the power of the gods has come to an end?

Any attempt to answer this question must, naturally, remain highly speculative, but not unwarrantedly so; Wagner, after all, did incorporate these figures into the drama. The darkest interpretation one could lay upon the continued human presence is that everything we have seen will take place again. Have not the mistakes of *Das Rheingold* been repeated in *Götterdämmerung*? Why should this flood be followed by a new, Feuerbachian covenant, when man's lust for power remains omnipresent? New Wotans and Alberichs will come along and destroy any aspirant Siegfrieds. After all, it might be asked, what actually happened to Alberich? This would fit with the general conclusion one must draw from Wagner's political philosophy that, like Rousseau and Marx, he is a better critic than a prophet. Few men could emerge from study of the *Ring*, still less from a performance thereof, without being impressed by his critique of power. Perhaps the message is that history will once again prove to be cyclical, that we can hope for nothing better. But why, in that case, are the "men and women [...] moved to the very depths of their being"? Whatever train of thought one follows, it is difficult, if one follows it to its conclusion, to avoid an anti-political, metaphysical interpretation, that is, a Schopenhauerian one, akin to the end of *Tristan und Isolde*. The answer, it appears, is to follow Wotan in renouncing the Will. It certainly does not seem to be to engage oneself in any anarchistic political or revolutionary activity. Still more distant does Wagner's brand of the dissolution of society stand from the emancipation of the proletariat, towards whom his true feelings had been exhibited at least as early as *Rienzi*. The bystanders, then, are moved by, and are perhaps engaged in, breaking of the Will.

We, of course, live in a century both similar to, and different from, Wagner's own. Nietzsche, over a hundred years ago, proclaimed God to be dead; some twentieth-century thinkers have even proclaimed man to be dead. In many ways, we might liken our world to that of *Götterdämmerung*. It certainly possesses its fair share of nihilistic disillusion. But Wagner's "solution" is not, as one might expect from *Das Rheingold*, a return to a preconscious Golden Age, however more highly that may rank in his estimation than modern, political society. The *Ring* does not end in E flat, the key in which it began. Rather disturbingly, it ends in D flat, the key of Valhalla. "Shall we return", asked Wagner, "to a state of nature, shall we reacquire the human animal's ability to live to be 200 years old? God forbid! Man is a social, all-powerful being only through *culture*."[26] If Schopenhauer were not to prove an uninteresting dead end, Wagner's next task — and perhaps the next task of both the onlookers and ourselves — would be to return to the gods he had killed off — perhaps prematurely — in *Götterdämmerung*. Examination of the relationship between religion and art would occupy him for the rest of his life.

Mark Berry

24. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (note 2), 546 (letter to Malwida von Meysenbug of 15 June 1862).
25. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (note 2), 319 (letter to Franz Liszt of [7 October 1854]).
26. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (note 2), 219 (letter to Theodor Uhlig of 22 October 1850).

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The September *Wagner* will include an article by Hans Rudolf Vaget to mark the centenary of the death of the conductor Anton Seidl.

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