**Revolution** was a constant specter for nineteenth-century Europeans, both a recurring, self-transforming event and a *Grundbegriff*: a “fundamental concept,” (Reinhart Koselleck), an inescapable piece of socio-political vocabulary crystallized in a single term. Others relevant to Wagner include “state,” “morality,” and “politics.” They require narration and interpretation, not analytical definition.

The French Revolution (1789) cast a shadow over the nineteenth century and posed a series of questions. Could feudal or aristocratic forms of government and society be maintained, reinvigorated even, with newfound popular conservative support? Were attempts to start anew doomed to bloody failure? Who should rule and how should government be structured? What of national sovereignty? The restorative model of revolution as a “wheel’s turning” was replaced by modern revolution as violent rupture, transforming society, its omnipresence both new and persistent throughout Wagner’s lifetime.

Indications were contradictory. The old order, apparently restored at the Congress of Vienna (1814-15), often had its much-vaunted “principle of legitimacy” breached: e.g., the Holy Roman Empire not revived, two fifths of Wagner’s native Saxon territory ceded to Prussia. However, newer ideals of Liberalism and constitutionalism also encountered inveterate hostility, epitomized by Austrian Chancellor Metternich and his European “System.” France’s 1830 July Revolution commenced another wave, replacing ultra-legitimist Charles X with “citizen-king,” Louis-Philippe. Constitutions were granted in Saxony, Baden, and elsewhere.

The seventeen-year old Wagner, hitherto repelled by tales of French Revolutionary excess, drew inspiration from news of Paris and Dresden: the “world of history came alive for me … naturally, I became a fervent partisan of the revolution” (ML/E 39). Increased and increasing public interest in social and political affairs characterized the period, “revolution” and reaction very much alive (Young Germany). Few were surprised – Metternich wearily confessed to propping up rotten buildings – when revolution engulfed Europe in 1848-9, Wagner’s experience culminating in the Dresden uprising.

Wagner’s writings now breathed “Revolution,” afforded a capital letter even when he abandoned the practice for other nouns. *Die Revolution* (1849), written for August Röckel’s *Volksblätter*, hymns the “sublime goddess *Revolution*,” the “ever-rejuvenating mother of mankind,” who prophesies a new world of love (Feuerbach’s influence), in which “*all* as brothers” would be “*free* in their desires, *free* in their deeds, *free* in their pleasures” (*SSD* 12: 245, 251). *Die Kunst und die Revolution* and other Zurich writings look to a post-revolutionary “artwork of the future”: essentially *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

However, the promise of revolution suggested by the *Ring* never materializes. Though Siegfried the anarchist love-revolutionary shatters Wotan’s spear of state, he falls victim to Hagen’s spear. Yet, long after many ’48ers lost faith, Wagner maintained his. Even after turning to Schopenhauer, he continued to glorify revolution, above all in Siegfried’s Funeral March that dramatizes the conflict between revolution and resignation: challenging, not denying, revolutionary hopes. Wagner’s chronicle never returns to the older meaning of revolution. The ring is circular; the *Ring* is not. Indeed, the need to transform a moribund society is pursued in Wagner’s final stage work, *Parsifal*.

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Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire* (see bibliography).

Dieter Borchmeyer, *Die Götter tanzen Cancan: Richard Wagners Liebesrevolten* (Heidelberg: Manutius, 1992).