
WRITING THE RING

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Yes, I should like to perish in Valhalla's flames! – Mark well my new poem – it contains the beginning of the world and its destruction!' Wagner's words, in an 1853 letter to Liszt enclosing a copy of the *Ring* poem, express an abiding theatricality that is often overlooked, despite Nietzsche's vicious attack on Wagner as 'actor'. They point also to his framing of the *Ring* dramas on which he had been at work since 1848 and whose completion would lie more than two decades hence, in 1874.

It is well known that Wagner wrote his poems in reverse order, beginning with *Siegfrieds Tod*, soon to become *Götterdämmerung*. He needed to write three prequels, before composing the music in the order we know today: the trilogy 'with preliminary evening'. Likewise that he broke off composition of *Siegfried* to write *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*; and likewise that he found it necessary to write a number of verbal endings to *Götterdämmerung* between 1848 and 1856 before resolving upon the 'wordless' solution, or rather enigma, with which he continues to tantalize us. But the consequences for his dramas are often misunderstood. Wagner's thought always tended towards an amalgam of the agglomerative and the synthetic. That characteristic renders him especially attractive to the historian of the 19th century. Ideas and influences overlap, not necessarily supplanting or resolving, but heightening conflict, the very stuff of drama: thereby rendering him especially attractive to audiences and to performers. Not every idea and influence need be reflected in every performance; were that attempted, we should most likely end up with an unholy mess. However, not only will any production, indeed any audience, have to make choices; they will need also to consider what is being left out, or at least played down.

Feuerbach, Bakunin, Marx

Keith Warner's production emphasizes Wagner's intellectual influences during the 1840s, as he worked not only towards the *Ring* but also towards active participation in the violent, abortive Saxon revolution of 1849. Precisely what role he took on the barricades remains unclear, but it is unquestionable that he was close to the visiting anarchist revolutionary Mikhail Bakunin, and that he was consequently 'wanted' by the authorities – Wagner being exiled from German soil until 1860, and an amnesty from Saxony taking longer still.

In Warner's words, 'Whatever you personally believe, Wagner is dealing in the *Ring* with the nature of God and the universe.' Indeed he is, which takes us to 'the beginning of the world', or at least to the beginning of *a* world. It is actually more complex even than that, for Wagner presents us, like the Book of Genesis, with alternative beginnings. Take the following words, which describe the Prelude to *Das Rheingold*: 'the gradual development of the material world... a wholly natural movement from the simple to the complex, from the lower to the higher', not 'the vile matter of the idealists... incapable of producing anything', but 'matter... spontaneously and eternally mobile, active, productive.' Those words describe the opening perfectly, from the first sounding of the double basses' low E-flat pedal, held throughout the Prelude, reflecting unchanging Nature: as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be – or such would be the claim of the Church, and of many others. Except that those words were not written with *Das Rheingold* in mind at all. They come from Bakunin's *God and the State*, a testament to both men's converging preoccupation with the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach. Marx and Engels owed



Left, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72): woodcut (c1876) based on a photograph (c1850), reproduced in *Westermann's Monthly*, Issue 3 Volume 1, Braunschweig (November 1876) *akg-images*; right, Mikhail Bakunin (1814-76): photograph (1870s) by Félix Nadar [Gaspard-Félix Tournachon] (1820-1910) *akg-images/Mondadori Portfolio/Electa*

a similar debt. Indeed, the young Engels's enthusiasm for Feuerbach and Teutonic mythology mirrored Wagner's own. Engels wrote in 1840, eulogizing Siegfried as the representative of German youth: '... We feel the same thirst for deeds [*Taten*, the same word with which Brünnhilde will send Siegfried out into the world from her rock] ... We want to go out into the free world.' Romantic words, one might think, for a founding father of 'scientific socialism'. That is the point: Engels's socialism did not lack on account of his mythological enthusiasm; nor did Wagner's.

Feuerbach was a central figure in the movement that has come to be known as Left or Young Hegelianism. During the political, social and religious repression of the period between the uneasy restoration of 1815 and the outbreak once again of revolution in 1848-9, a group of German writers wished to extend the revolutionary dynamism of Hegel's ontology (philosophy of being) to human realms in which they believed their father-figure to have neglected, through self-censorship or otherwise, to follow its implications. Above all, radicals such as Feuerbach, David Strauss and Bruno Bauer wished to extend Hegelian criticism to the world of religion. History, it was claimed in true Hegelian style, had a purpose; now was the time to cast out Christianity at least and perhaps religion itself from philosophy. In his *Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach argued that theology transferred authentic religious impulses, such as love, justice and charity, to an object outside man: namely a God of man's own invention. Now, however, was the moment to turn from God to man. Wagner would pay tribute to Feuerbach's *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* by dedicating to him the 1849 essay 'The Artwork of the Future'.

Wotan and Alberich, Valhalla and Nibelheim

And so, in the *Ring*, Wagner unmasks – a favourite Young Hegelian conceit – the realm of the gods, built not upon that first ‘natural’ opening to the cycle, but arising from the second, counterpoised genesis, as told by the Norns in the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*. Not that the first is so straightforward as it might seem – for Nature, in the guise of the Rhinemaidens, acts cruelly to Alberich, denies the misfit dwarf love and is violated by him in turn; there is no golden age in the *Ring* cosmos. That said, the natural world stands preferable to the deeds of Wotan, chief of the gods and thus in some sense a representation of the godhead itself. Inscribing runes upon his spear, Wotan commits the primal sin of politics, defining principles which, even had they once been good in themselves, become outdated as soon as they find themselves represented in dead wood. Fricka, according to Wagner the voice of ‘custom’, simply cannot understand this, in Act II of *Die Walküre* lamenting, with all the outworn moralism of a believer who has forgotten quite why she believes, that Siegmund and Sieglinde should love one another. We never see her again, though she will be invoked, offstage – out of Heaven? – by Hunding, not that she can help him, and as the recipient of vain burnt offerings in *Götterdämmerung*.

The spear is also an instrument of domination; it is with military force as well as ideology that Wotan rules the world. Yet ideology in a sense comes first, which is why Valhalla is built, as much a religious as a political fortress: a classic instance of European ‘representational’ culture, which ‘re-presents’ its power to subjects who must be overawed. For, as Wagner and Bakunin were convinced, the ‘critique of religion is the essential precondition for all criticism’ (Marx on Hegel): that of Alberich’s capitalist tyranny of Nibelheim with its golden hoard, the modern factory incarnate, as well as Wotan’s more sumptuous, more ideologically complex castle in the air. It is intended, in the words of the celebrated Lutheran chorale, as ‘ein feste Burg’ (a stronghold sure), yet note that it appears first of all to Wotan in a dream. In Feuerbach’s proclamation: ‘Religion is the dream of the human mind’, in which ‘we only see real things in the entrancing splendour of imagination and caprice, instead of in the simple daylight of reality and necessity’. (A view lent Wagnerian credence by Pierre Boulez’s observation, voiced while working on the Bayreuth ‘Centenary’ *Ring*, that our first musical encounter with Valhalla ‘is not clearly delineated but belongs to a world of dream, phantasmagoria and mirage’.) Moreover, the forced, disturbingly empty grandeur, or rather grandiosity, of *Das Rheingold*’s closing bars tells already of desperation, unnatural prolongation, deceit and, as Erda has already foretold, ‘a dark day [that] dawns for the gods’. Freia and her golden apples may have been regained, but we have seen behind the throne, as has Alberich. Both Alberich and ‘Licht-Alberich’ – the Wanderer, in his riddle-confrontation with Mime styles himself ‘Light-Alberich’, his ‘black’ antagonist’s power-seeking alter ego – commit crimes against Nature, one despoiling the Rhine, one sapping the life from the World-Ash Tree. Both wish to extend that power through possession of the ring forged in denial of that love which was for Feuerbach the foundation of a true, human religion; both can be unmasked and thereby overthrown by extension of religious criticism beyond the ‘merely’ theological; and both have their deeds dialectically connected in the musical metamorphosis between the first two scenes of *Das Rheingold* of Alberich’s ring into Wotan’s Valhalla.

Loge: critic and god of fire

Built upon false contracts entered into with Fasolt and Fafner which are guaranteed by Wotan’s very own spear of domination, and perpetuated by continued denial of the gold to the Rhine and its daughters, Valhalla and the gods’ rule are fatally compromised from the outset. The gods’ entrance, punctured by the Rhinemaidens’ complaints and Loge’s (Young Hegelian) criticism – ‘They hasten to their end, they who imagine



Simon O'Neill (Sigmund) and Eva-Maria Westbroek (Sieglinde), *Die Walküre*, The Royal Opera, Act I (2007)
Clive Barba

themselves so strong and enduring' – is already a dance of death, rendered all the more slippery by the destabilizing, negating, almost Faustian chromaticism of Loge's motif. Not for nothing has he been identified as the *Ring's* sole intellectual, and, when one bears in mind Bakunin and indeed the Wagner who prescribed a 'fire-cure' for Paris, one realizes that there lies no contradiction whatsoever between Loge's twin roles as critic and as god of fire. Moreover, Loge's 'imagine' (*wähnen*) is crucial not only in the Feuerbachian sense, but also in that it provides, in its anticipation of the *Wahn* ('illusion') of Schopenhauer – whom Wagner had not yet read – a textbook example of a concept that would acquire additional layerings of meaning as Wagner's work on the cycle and elsewhere proceeded: recall Hans Sachs's 'Wahn, Wahn, überall Wahn!' (Illusion, illusion, everywhere illusion!)

The 'purely human' Volsungs

The contrasting world of the 'purely human', a term Wagner often employed in his theoretical writings, is experienced with vernal, magical immediacy in *Die Walküre*: 'You are the Spring', Sieglinde exults, before submitting to her brother, the curtain falling only just in time, as the music's passion requires us all to take a metaphorical cold shower during the interval. Feuerbach abides here, for not only does this celebrate love between Sigmund and Sieglinde; it

commemorates Sigmund's rejection of Valhalla, echoing Feuerbach's *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, whose opening pages include a 'Humble petition to the exalted, wise and honourable learned public to receive Death into the Academy of Sciences':

He is the best doctor on earth;
none of his cures has yet failed;
and no matter how sick you become,
he completely heals Nature.

To be sure, he never has concerned himself
with Christian theology,
yet he will have no peer
in understanding philosophy.



Siegfried, Act III, The Royal Opera (2007) Clive Barba

So then I implore you to receive
 Death into the academy,
 and, as soon as possible, to make
 him doctor of philosophy.

What Siegmund accepts, celebrating death and his love for Sieglinde in heroic defiance of the illusory promise of immortality in Valhalla, Wotan struggles towards, at one point willing 'the end' and yet, even at the last in *Siegfried*, making a stand, unwilling quite to 'die in the fullest sense of the word,' according to Wagner's words in an 1854 letter. It takes, moreover, a free act (albeit unconsciously free) by Siegfried, revolutionary hope of Engels and Wagner alike, finally to shatter Wotan's spear of law and to return the god for good to Valhalla to await, in Schopenhauerian resignation, the end. Siegfried's undoing will be his lack of consciousness, though that spontaneity will also point to his greatness, a dilemma which, as revolutionary hopes faded yet never entirely died, became all the more pressing for Wagner. Indeed, it is only *in memoriam*, in the shattering Funeral March, that Siegfried proves worthy of the hopes invested in him, of Wagner's stated desire in the *Ring* 'to make clear to the men of the Revolution the meaning of that Revolution, in its noblest sense'. No longer quite the hero of the drama that he had been in the more

straightforwardly revolutionary *Siegfrieds Tod*, Siegfried has neither quite triumphed nor quite been supplanted: again, Wagner's intellectual method poses rather than answers questions.

Concluding, thinking, making sense of uncertainty

To have written that the dramas were completed in 1874 was in a sense misleading, for they remain magnificently open-ended, whether in concert performance or in staging. The composer was notably dissatisfied with the scenic realization at Bayreuth. Wagner's great effort to conclude, whatever his own ambitions towards Hegelian totality, stubbornly necessitates further questioning. This may be of the nature 'What happens to Alberich?' – not at all a silly question. Does such uncertainty of plot, hardly accidental, suggest that, whatever the 'watchers' – the mysterious 'men and women moved to the very depths of their being', at the end of *Götterdämmerung* – may have experienced, even learned, that we are doomed to repeat the cycle ad infinitum? Such, after all, is the implication of a cycle; though what of Wagner's and Stefanos Lazaridis's double helix, perhaps suggestive of Hegel's favoured spiral? Indeed, while the ring itself tempts us to think in circular form, we should always bear in mind that, more often than not, its powers are 'unmasked' as illusory. All forms of power, love included, fall prey to Wagner's deconstruction and savage indictment – his encounter with the philosophy of Schopenhauer here fuses with prior disillusionment with the more naive aspects of Feuerbach's 'love-communism' – and yet we continue to ask ourselves whether a world without power is even conceivable, or merely 'utopian', to borrow from Marx and Engels. Siegfried is never better off than when he values the ring at naught; Brünnhilde is never worse off than when she considers it to betoken marriage, another form of property-based power. (The socialism of French writers such as Charles Fourier, with its celebration of something akin to what another generation would call 'free love', was always a potent ingredient in Wagner's intellectual mix; likewise that of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, whose most famous slogan remains 'Property is theft', instantiated in Alberich's conversion of value-free Rhinegold into capital.)

Thus particular questioning readily transforms itself into the more general, conceptual variety, and vice versa. That whole 'world' of which Wagner wrote to Liszt develops before our very eyes and ears, both in performance and in subsequent contemplation. The *Ring's* web of motifs encourages us to think in such a way, to dart back and forth, reminding us of its world's past, hinting at its future and tantalizing us with alternative paths of development, which intriguingly become all the more 'real' the more strongly we know that they will be denied. What if...? This is not a work one can know too well, or even well enough. And yet, we know, with Hegel, that the owl of Minerva only spreads its wings at dusk; or, with Marx, that it is folly to write recipes for the cookery books of the future. It is no coincidence that Hegel and Marx were so taken with early theories of evolution, with their strong facility of backward explanation and their weak predictive powers. Wagner might speak theoretically of the 'artwork of the future', but he is wise enough in that artwork to stick to the past and present; he does not present us with science fiction. The world is rightly given over to the 'watchers'.

What about us? We might do well to heed Warner's words:

When you are torn apart at the end of *Die Walküre* – as I think you should be – it's because you've had five hours of profound information about these people, not because you've been manipulated into weeping by mere theatrical or musical devices.

Wagner, in his own words, aims at 'emotionalization of the intellect', not at its abdication. The *Ring* acts as a standing rebuke to those people – Nietzsche might have called them 'Wagnerians' – who wish merely

to wallow. An audience, just as much as a performer or a director, which fails to think is unworthy of the *Ring*, yet that incitement affords an extraordinary opportunity. There is clearly identification, albeit uncertain, to be had between us and the ‘watchers’ – we are all survivors – and a crucial clue here is that they are human. The end of Wotan’s rule is not hymned with words of revolutionary jubilation as it had been in one of Wagner’s projected endings, the so-called ‘Feuerbach ending’; yet there nevertheless remains a strong sense that, human though we may be in our failings as well as our strengths, our world is that which Nietzsche would herald in *The Gay Science*:

We philosophers and ‘free spirits’ feel, when we hear the news that ‘the old god is dead’, as if a new dawn shone upon us; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectation. At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, our sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an ‘open sea’.

Uncertainty with respect both to the watchers’ position and to ours precludes glib chatter of a happy ending. Yet, informed as much by Schopenhauer’s ideas of compassion as Feuerbach’s unmasking of religion, they stand a little advanced upon the savagery we have witnessed: they present a beacon of hope to our world, which has signally failed to destroy Valhalla or Nibelheim. In the words of Herbert Marcuse, ‘Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world.’ There can be no final words when it comes to the *Ring*, but let us temporarily conclude with a return to Boulez:

There have been endless discussions as to whether this conclusion is pessimistic or optimistic [in our shorthand, ‘Feuerbach or Schopenhauer?’]; but is that really the question? Or at any rate can the question be put in such simple terms? [Patrice] Chéreau has called it ‘oracular’, and it is a good description. In the ancient world, oracles were always ambiguously phrased so that their deeper meaning could be understood only after the event, which, as it were, provided a semantic analysis of the oracle’s statement. Wagner refuses any conclusion as such, simply leaving us with the premisses for a conclusion that remains shifting and indeterminate in meaning.

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