

# **GOLD RULES**

## **THE POLITICS OF WAGNER'S RING**

**By Neil K. Friedman**

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## INTRODUCTION

“I have been told that Wagner's music is better than it sounds,” Mark Twain is supposed to have quipped.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, the same is true for the plot of the massive four-opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung*. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that the story of Gods, Giants, Dwarfs, Valkyries and Heroes is not as bizarre as it seems.

It is a truism that authors and artists reflect their own era, even when their subject-matter ostensibly deals with another. Each generation of historians reinterprets the past from its own perspective; science fiction writers inevitably tell us more about our present than about our future. In works with a political message, the tendency is even stronger to interpret the past or future in the light of the writer's contemporary concerns. Sometimes the framework imposed is explicit, but in many cases — especially when the message is politically sensitive or even dangerous to expound — a commentary on the present is disguised as one on the past.

It is our thesis that Richard Wagner's great music drama, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, tells us more about 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe than it tells us about ancient gods and gnomes. It is, in this interpretation, a story of class conflict in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe with a message to Wagner's contemporaries, although it draws upon ancient Germanic and Nordic mythology for its characters and themes. While almost all admirers of Wagner's work recognize some references to his own era, as yet no one has published a full-scale interpretation of the *political* meaning of this operatic cycle, the creation and production of which extended over nearly three decades (from the first prose sketch in 1848 to the staging of the full cycle at Bayreuth in 1876), the better part of Wagner's 70-year lifespan (1813-1883).

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<sup>1</sup> *A Dictionary of Musical Quotations* cites this, and it is popularly attributed to Twain himself. But what Twain (Samuel Clemens) actually wrote was: “The late Bill Nye once said ‘I have been told that Wagner's music is better than it sounds.’” (*Autobiography of Mark Twain*, Volume I, p. 288). An endnote on p. 588 of this definitive edition of the *Autobiography* (ed. Harriet Elinor Smith, pub. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2010) explains that “...Edgar Wilson (Bill) Nye (1850-96) was a journalist and then a popular humorist and lecturer. Clemens himself is often mistakenly credited with this remark.”

## The imperfect Wagnerites

The writer who made the most famous attempt at political interpretation is George Bernard Shaw, a major dramatist in his own right, in *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung's Ring*.<sup>2</sup> Despite the title he chose, Shaw must be declared an imperfect Wagnerite.<sup>3</sup> His political analysis peters out frustratingly after three of the four operas — like a baseball runner left on third base — whereupon he adds, in what seems forced reasoning, sections like “Collapse of the Allegory” and “Why He Changed His Mind.” As the years go by, he has second thoughts and supplements new editions, but still cannot carry the political analysis through to its logical conclusion. This sort of allegation that Wagner “changed his mind” before completing *The Ring* is very common in the Wagner literature; but I reject it as methodologically unsatisfactory. While it is not unreasonable to point out that Wagner's intellect underwent development during the more than two decades that he worked on his magnum opus, even the proponents of the “changed his mind” thesis are aware that he conceived the work in its essentials in a fairly short period and wrote the poems that became the librettos of the four operas in reverse order, starting with “Siegfried's Death” and filling in the events that eventually became the first three operas as necessary background to this tragedy. Shaw and others being aware of this process, explicitly stated in Wagner's autobiography, fall back on the position that, although the librettos were written in reverse order, the music — which reveals Wagner's “real” intention — was composed over many years in the order the operas are shown starting with *Rhinegold*, plus there were certain adjustments in the librettos, most notably in Brünnhilde's closing oration in *Götterdämmerung* which Wagner seems to have agonized over more than any other part of the text; therefore, they say, the same interpretation cannot be applied consistently to the whole *Ring*. Deryck Cooke, whose awesome study of the mythological sources and meaning of *The Ring* is so valuable in other ways, falls

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<sup>2</sup> Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*. For full references, see Bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> An excellent critical summary of Shaw's Wagnerism is Chapter IV of *The Dream of Self-Destruction*, by L. J. Rather, who observes that at crucial points “Shaw is more concerned with the elucidation of his own ideas than those of Wagner.” For a brief, balanced overview of how Shaw was influenced by Wagner, see “Bernard Shaw, Wagnerite,” Chap. 2 in *Richard Wagner and the English* by Anne Dzamba Sessa.

into this pattern of “he changed his mind,” although, unlike Shaw, he finds the change coming right after the first of the four operas, apologizing to his readers that “in moving on from *The Rhinegold* to *The Valkyrie*, we shall be obliged to treat Wagner's symbolism from a rather different point of view”:

If we were to continue with the broad social interpretation necessary for *The Rhinegold*, we should find ourselves faced with unanswerable questions such as ‘Why, if this future is so rosy, does no-one liberate the oppressed Nibelungs?’ or at least ‘What happened to the Nibelungs when Alberich lost the ring?’ *The Rhinegold* shows the world as it is, with the Nibelungs (the workers) oppressed by capitalism; *The Valkyrie* and *Siegfried* switch to a portrayal of possible new human types, motivated by superabundant vitality, courage, and love, who alone could set such a world to rights.<sup>4</sup>

In evaluating competing interpretations of a work that is as complex as *The Ring*, yet is one coherent work, we must be mindful of the logical principle of parsimony, sometimes referred to as “Occam's razor” (after the English philosopher William of Occam), which calls for economy in explanation, admonishing us that “What can be done with fewer assumptions is done in vain with more.” In this spirit of scientific inquiry, our goal should be to explain as much as possible of *The Ring* with one consistent theory.

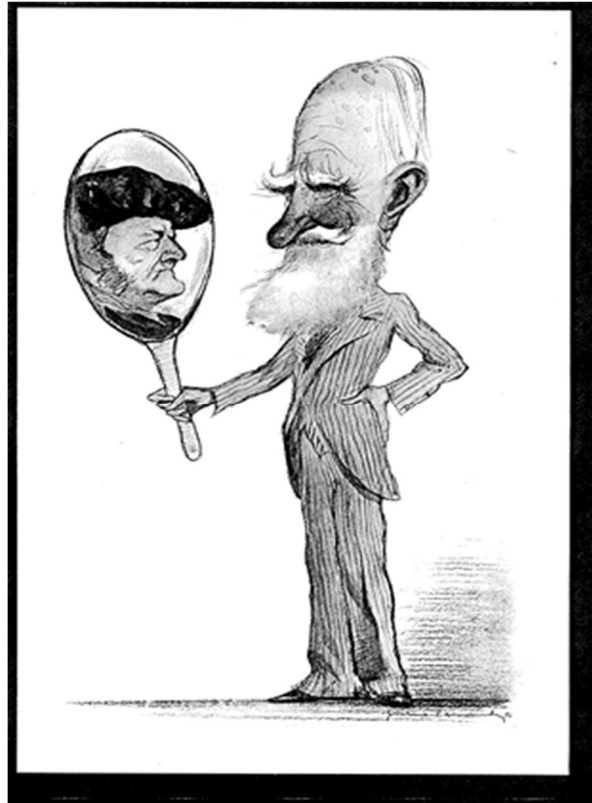
Despite its shortcomings, Shaw's explication of *The Ring* as a tale warning of the effects of avarice is inspiring and helpful as far as it goes. I shall refer to it at relevant points and contrast my analysis to Shaw's. It did have a lasting influence on Wagner scholarship. Many Wagner commentators even in our time feel obliged to pay some obeisance to Shaw, albeit without adding much to his analysis. For example, according to Martin van Amerongen, “After having been ignored for almost three quarters of a century, the justness of Shaw's interpretation has finally been confirmed by the publication of [Wagner's wife] Cosima's Diaries: ‘The other day R. said that it gave him pleasure to have offered in the *Ring* a complete picture of the curse of greed, together with the ruin which it entails.’”<sup>5</sup> But we didn't need Cosima's diaries to know that *The Ring* is about greed; the issue is whether it is about *capitalist* greed. Now, a full century after the first edition of *The Perfect Wagnerite*, Shaw's is still considered *the* political interpretation of *The Ring* such that, unfortunately, the very possibility of interpreting

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<sup>4</sup> *I Saw the World End*, pp. 274-75.

<sup>5</sup> Amerongen, *Wagner: A Case History*, p. 41.

the work as a political allegory is thought to stand or fall on the credibility of Shaw's effort. Accordingly, many readers are skeptical of the very idea of a political reading of *The Ring*, having judged Shaw's short book to be witty but implausible.



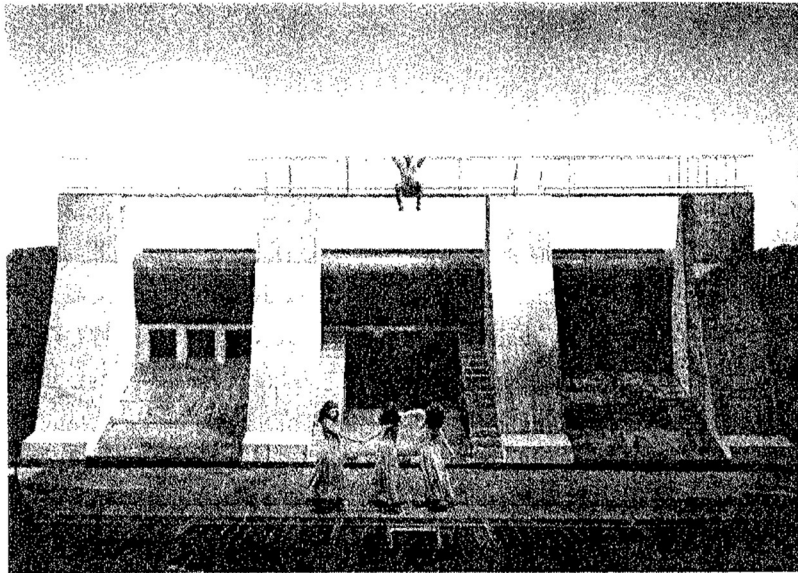
**Cut himself while Shavian:** G.B. Shaw sees himself reflected in Wagner, in Julio Fernandez's illustration for the Time-Life special edition of *The Perfect Wagnerite*.

The production of *The Ring* at the 1976 Bayreuth Festival (on the centennial of Wagner's first full *Ring* cycle, in his own theater), produced by Patrice Chéreau and conducted by Pierre Boulez, took off from Shaw's analysis and costumed the characters in modern clothing that indicated their positions in different social classes, the doom of the Gods thus signifying the downfall of the old ruling class in an industrializing society. This departure made it a highly controversial production, a heresy in the eyes of certain self-appointed guardians of Wagnerian purity, who booed and walked out despite fine dramatic performances. *Opera News* reported on the reaction:

Thirty-one-year-old Chéreau's vivid stage direction had assured that bravos held the boos in check for the first two *Ring* operas, but by *Götterdämmerung* the Wagnerian stand-and-sing approach was back in the saddle, and when the Rhinemaidens' residence, a triple-sluciced concrete dam, appeared again at the beginning of Act III the music was interrupted for minutes by boos and catcalls, led up to by a buzz of disapproval at the sight of Hagen in a gray business suit with spear and open laughter at a tuxedoed Siegfried.<sup>6</sup>

Barry Millington observed that “to direct aspects of the work against its greatest admirers as representatives of the ruling, privileged class, was to invite a reaction of cosmic proportions.” Still, Millington judged,

Chéreau's interpretation of the *Ring* was not essentially a Marxist one, any more than that of Friedrich at Covent Garden; neither had the coherence of, say, Bernard Shaw's account of the work as a Marxist allegory. A number of symbols identifiable with an industrialized society and the class struggle — bloated capitalists, a manipulated proletariat, formal dress, working clothes, pit-wheel, power-station, and so on — were used, but to make points of a general nature. Chéreau resisted the temptation to impose a specific interpretation on the work; instead, he simply reset the story within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to stress its significance for modern times. Much of its epic quality was consequently lost, but that was precisely what he intended: a demythologizing of the *Ring*.<sup>7</sup>



**Dam the industrial revolution:** In Chéreau's centenary production of the *Ring* (Bayreuth, 1976), the Rhinemaidens plead with Siegfried for his help to restore the flow of the dammed and polluted Rhine river. [Illustration in Millington & Spencer, *Wagner in Performance*, p. 68]

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<sup>6</sup> Sutcliffe, “Scandal At Bayreuth,” p. 48. The complete Chéreau *Ring* cycle is available on Philips videos.

<sup>7</sup> Millington, “Bayreuth 1976,” in *The Wagner Companion*, pp. 226-27.

Some of those outraged at Chéreau's audacious staging of the sacred cycle, which had been allowed by Wolfgang Wagner, the surviving grandson of the composer who was then in charge of Bayreuth, looked to his pro-Nazi mother Winifred who had been forced into retirement after the war but did not hesitate to express her opinions within her circle. According to Brigitte Hamann's biography of Winifred, quoting from her letters:

Disgusted Wagnerians took their sorrows to Winifred, and she had the satisfaction of seeing an 'Action Group for the Works of Richard Wagner' being formed in protest at Chéreau's *Ring*. 'The Action Group is trying to rescue Wagner from the distortions of modern directors.' Elsewhere, she wrote: 'ALL my friends left before the Ring! ... The tendency to make Wagner look ridiculous and to see the whole Ring as proof that "property is theft" is gaining strength all the time – it makes you weep!'<sup>8</sup>

A whole book, fortunately a short one, by Uwe Faerber is devoted to lambasting the Chéreau-Boulez production for being unfaithful to the composer's intentions, which are elicited from the musical themes.<sup>9</sup> The first and most obvious example is that in this production the Rhinedaughters were costumed as nineteenth century tarts, completely out of keeping with the musical motif that signifies their natural innocence. Glaring discrepancies such as this in productions that attempt to bring out the political content of *The Ring* make observers skeptical of the whole approach. Indeed, even if our political analysis is correct and the operas do refer to 19th century Europe, it may be virtually impossible to *stage* them as such without running into absurdities. The problem of the Rhinedaughters could perhaps be solved by portraying them as innocently naive fishermen's daughters or bathing beauties on a beach. But what to do with pre-industrial items crucial to the operas, like the sword Nothung? Make it into a rifle? But then how would Siegfried forge it? As described later in this paper, the "sword" actually has a broader meaning than any stage prop serves to show. The lesson is that *Ring* productions trying to set the scene in Wagner's own century, or in ours, will inevitably be flawed in particulars and should be viewed as curiosities that may be edifying in certain respects but will leave any audience with certain dissatisfactions and some audiences with outrage. The alternative of staging the operas with very little, or highly abstract, scenery (as in Wieland Wagner's postwar productions that relied on lighting effects more than scenery) and letting the

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<sup>8</sup> Brigitte Hamann, *Winifred Wagner: A Life at the Heart of Hitler's Bayreuth*. Trans. Alan Bance. London, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Faerber, *The Centenary Ring in Bayreuth*.

audience imagine the rest, is more satisfactory to many spectators. The important point for us is that the shortcomings of experimental approaches such as the Chéreau-Boulez one -- which started a trend of *Ring* productions in and out of Bayreuth updating Wagner's work for the nuclear age and beyond -- should not be allowed to discredit a valid political analysis based on the original work itself, reflecting Richard Wagner's life experience and thought.

### **The political Wagner**

Wagner's own experience as a fervid revolutionary who, had he not narrowly escaped into exile after his visible part in the violent 1848-49 upheaval in Dresden would have faced the death penalty, and who consorted with the famous anarchist leader Michael Bakunin in those events, has been described in the major biographies.<sup>10</sup> In retrospect, one might even say that the most significant long-term effect of this abortive upheaval was not political but artistic: its effect on Wagner's work. One historian, Priscilla Robertson, writes: "Of all the 1848-49 uprisings in Germany, possibly the best known is the one in Saxony for the simple reason that it involved Richard Wagner.... However, he did not make the Saxon revolution. He simply enjoyed it."<sup>11</sup> The truth is actually between these two poles; Wagner certainly did not incite the revolution, but neither did he merely "enjoy it" as a spectator. Robertson does allow that Wagner carried out concrete assignments during the uprising, writing that "Wagner's job, so far as he had any, was supervising the convoys that brought in provisions and reinforcements from the countryside, which was enthusiastic in its support of the city people." This was no simple task because "before the battle was over, help and militia were streaming in from all parts of Germany."<sup>12</sup>

According to Ernest Newman, dean of Wagner biographers, "Had Wagner been captured with the others, a sentence of death, commuted, as in the other cases, to a long term of imprisonment, would have been practically

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<sup>10</sup> Some of the more substantial biographies in English are: Martin Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner: His Life, His Work, His Century*; Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music*; Ronald Taylor, *Richard Wagner: His Life, Art and Thought*. All these are preceded, of course, by Ernest Newman's studies, especially the one-volume *Wagner as Man and Artist* and the massive four-volume *The Life of Richard Wagner*.

<sup>11</sup> Priscilla Robertson, *Revolutions of 1848: A Social History* (Princeton, 1952), pp. 181-82.

<sup>12</sup> Robertson, p. 184.



certain, unless the indulgent King had especially intervened on his Kapellmeister's behalf.”<sup>13</sup> Newman concluded after a careful review of the evidence that a defense attorney would have had a hard time defending Wagner had he been put on trial for his part in the 1849 upheaval, because “he ranked with the others as a leader of the revolt...whenever policy is debated and resolutions are taken at the very heart of events, there Richard Wagner is sure to be found.”<sup>14</sup> Actions speak louder than words — although in Wagner's case the actions *were* mostly words — and when the barricades went up, Wagner, then in his mid-30’s, was on the revolutionary side. It is revealing to look at the legal charges against the composer that led to his banishment and exile from the German lands for almost 13 years; the charges are summarized by Josserand as follows: <sup>15</sup>

- 1 Associated closely with Bakunin, Röckel and Heubner (Provisional President of the revolutionary government).
- 2 Held secret meetings with future revolutionary leaders.
- 3 Used his garden for secret discussions.
- 4 Ordered hand grenades from a Dresden foundryman.
- 5 Wrote the May 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Röckel which indicated that a revolutionary outbreak had been planned (the letter was discovered on Röckel’s person when he was captured during the revolution).
- 6 Took part in the revolution by (a) observing from the Kreuzturm, and (b) accompanying a formation of rebel soldiers.
- 7 Accompanied the retreat of revolutionary government leaders on May 9<sup>th</sup>. Also probably toured the countryside in search of rebel reinforcements.

Wagner’s deep immersion in the class conflict that animated the politics of his period is usually understated, including by Wagner himself in the autobiography he dictated later in life at the behest of King Ludwig II (although he does not deny the above charges in his autobiography; in fact, he verifies some of them).

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<sup>13</sup> Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, Vol. II, p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, Vol. II, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> *Richard Wagner: Patriot and Politician*, p. 107. His life in exile and attempts to gain a pardon and be able to return to the German lands are described and documented in Woldemar Lippert, *Wagner in Exile 1849-62*.

Newman goes to great length to recapture Wagner's state of mind in 1848-49 when the inspiration for the life-work that would become *The Ring* bloomed from a cross-fertilization of his exploration of the ancient myth of the Nibelungen Hoard, his personally intolerable financial indebtedness, and the revolutionary atmosphere that he was breathing deeply. That the plan for *The Ring*, at first called *Siegfried's Death*, took shape at this historical juncture is far from coincidence. "In some strange way or other, the Hoard became symbolical, for him, of the factors in modern society to which he attributed most of his own troubles."<sup>16</sup> It was in 1848 that Wagner had begun work on the theme of *The Ring*,<sup>17</sup> which Chancellor describes as "nothing less than the musico-dramatic realization of a political Utopia in which man has finally broken out of various forms of bondage to be himself, free and capable of love. It is, maybe, the first and only work of art consciously influenced by political theories."<sup>18</sup> What has been debated ever since is the extent to which *The Ring* gives direct expression to Wagner's political ideas. Elizabeth Magee, whose main interest is to explore the *Ring* in the context of the upsurge of cultural activity concerning the Nibelung myths among Wagner's contemporaries, nevertheless begins her book by acknowledging that the political context is inseparable from the cultural:

The *Ring* text belongs to the most turbulent period of Wagner's varied life. Between the first sketch in 1848 and the completion of the poem for publication at the end of 1852 lay revolution and upheaval, flight from Dresden, and exile in Zurich, and not surprisingly the preoccupations of these years left their mark on the work in progress. *Der Ring des Nibelungen* resounds with social, political, and economic messages and the author's shifting philosophical convictions, all bearing witness to the revolutionaries, socio-economists, and philosophers whose work Wagner read or with whom he associated. Of all the contemporary movements, however, none exercised a more fundamental influence on Wagner's drama

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<sup>16</sup> Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, Vol. II, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> See *My Life*, translated by Grey, p. 310.

<sup>18</sup> Chancellor, *Wagner*, p. 102. Of course, Chancellor goes overboard in the last-quoted sentence: Wagner's is hardly the "first and only" work consciously influenced by political theories. For instance, Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* extols the ideal of liberty. — See Bishop Fan S. Noli, *Beethoven and the French Revolution* (New York, 1947), pp. 80-82. He reports that "*Fidelio*, the only opera Beethoven composed, is primarily a Hymn to Liberty and only incidentally a paean of conjugal love." And, with a pertinent comparison to Wagner, he writes: "In the Ninth Symphony we have a Hymn to Universal Brotherhood. Beethoven was anxious to make his message perfectly clear this time and, like his great successor Wagner, he attached labels to his musical themes. That was absolutely necessary. He wanted to reach the masses and proclaim to them the new message of the French Revolution in a language they understood and admired, in the language of Schiller, the poet of Rousseau's New Covenant. Revolutionary in his political views, Beethoven was revolutionary also in his art."

than the revival of the Nibelung legend, whose origins can be traced back to the Franks and Burgundians of the Dark Ages and which aroused such interest among Wagner's contemporaries.<sup>19</sup>

Most significantly, Magee finds that the surges of interest in these ancient legends can be explained largely by German political needs in each period:

The onset of Romanticism with its idealizing vision of the Middle Ages, coupled with events in the political arena of the early nineteenth century, brought the Nibelungs to the attention of a wider reading public, and for a time at the start of the century the Nibelungs enjoyed a vogue of popularity. Germany was smarting under French domination following Napoleon's military successes. The contrast between the impotence of their own divided land and the power of their mighty neighbor was inescapable to the educated German public. The movement for German unity was born, and for a while, as the tide turned in the Napoleonic Wars and hopes for liberation grew stronger, it was condoned by the authorities of Germany's particularist states. Deprived of the last vestiges of real political cohesion with the dissolution of the Holy Roman empire in 1806, Germany looked to its cultural heritage as a rallying-point. In its quest for unity it turned to the literary works of the Middle Ages as monuments of a shared, seemingly more vigorous and glorious past, the products of an age when the empire had been a force to reckon with.

This political context is what led, continues Magee, to the *Nibelungenlied's* "elevation to the role of unofficial national epic."<sup>20</sup> For a couple decades thereafter, she says, popular interest in the epic waned, but "in the years leading up to the revolutions of 1848-9 the Nibelungs once again became a rallying-call for the beleaguered movement for German unity."<sup>21</sup> Magee later in her book settles on a compromise interpretation in which Wagner's work has political-economic ramifications but these are not its primary import:

From this material [the myths and writings about them] Wagner fashioned a case history of social conflict generated by the gold. Numerous attempts have been made to interpret Wagner's Nibelung drama strictly in terms of nineteenth-century society, of which Bernard Shaw's is the wittiest [Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite* is cited, but no other of the "numerous attempts"]. All fall short ultimately, for the reason that Wagner was too true to his sources and his own broader dramatic instincts: his gods are too much gods, his giants giants, his Nibelungs dwarfs, to double successfully as schematic kings and aristocrats, gentry and proletariat, capitalists, plutocrats, or whatever. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that certain sections of the *Mythus* [Wagner's first sketch of the Nibelung story in 1848] were intended, if not as an exact analogy of contemporary society, then at least as a symbolic demonstration of the baleful workings of capitalism.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Magee, *Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs*, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Magee, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Magee, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Magee, pp. 72-73.

A key piece of evidence that Magee produces is that, while in Wagner's early sketch "the fate of the oppressed dwarfs was a major concern" so that in the end Brünnhilde's returning of the ring to the Rhine frees them of their bondage, "in the final cataclysm of *Götterdämmerung* the Nibelungs' freedom is forgotten."<sup>23</sup>

Magee's is a responsible attempt at a balanced view but, as is common in the Wagner literature, it is an effort to *depreciate* the political significance of *The Ring* without having made a sufficient effort to *appreciate* that aspect of the work. Before dismissing the political implications of Wagner's masterpiece as secondary, it is necessary to track down as many of the political sources of *The Ring* as possible and evaluate their significance for Wagner's life and thought, just as Magee and others do with such scrupulousness for the mythical sources. In tracing the changes from Wagner's early outlines of the story to the final form of *The Ring*, Magee has pointed out an instance in which the material apparently was made less directly political — but not much less, because although the oppressed are not clearly liberated at the end, the fire into which Brünnhilde leaps will "cleanse the ring of its curse," the gold will be returned safely to its rightful place in the Rhine, and all the oppressors will seemingly be obliterated. If Wagner had tried to end *The Ring* with the Nibelungs marching out into freedom, the ending would have been too much like that of Beethoven's *Fidelio* and *The Ring* would not have been the epic tragedy that Wagner wanted. In my book, the fact that in the 1848 sketch "the fate of the oppressed dwarfs was a major concern" is evidence that political intent *was primary* in Wagner's conception of this tale. And exactly what Magee means by her remarks that "his gods are too much gods...to double successfully as schematic kings and aristocrats..." and so forth is not clear. Sometimes these gods' behavior seems not far different from the escapades of the European royals as reported in the tabloids. And does Alberich, when in possession of the ring, act much differently than a contemporary capitalist? True, he does not lay off any Nibelungs, he makes them work overtime (how could he "downsize" them when they are already dwarfs?).

Wagner's interest in politics began in his teenage student days, stimulated by the 1830 revolts in several European countries. Sympathy for Poland's independence struggle became a touchstone for the politically

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<sup>23</sup> Magee, p. 74.

progressive, comparable to the cause of the Spanish Republic for our 1930's generation. As Wagner reminisces about his student days in his autobiography, "The Polish war of independence against Russian rule now filled me with growing enthusiasm. The victories achieved by the Poles during a short period in May of 1831 aroused my ecstatic admiration: it seemed to me as if the world had been created anew by some miracle. Conversely, news of the battle of Ostrolenka made me feel the world had once again come to an end."<sup>24</sup> Further, he recalls that despite artistic interests, "My principal preoccupation remained the outcome of the Polish struggle: the siege and capture of Warsaw struck me like a personal calamity. My excitement when the remnants of the Polish army began passing through Leipzig on their way to France was indescribable...", and he goes on to depict vividly his encounters with Polish revolutionary heroes. The deliberate emphasis on his early sympathies with non-German European revolutionaries — here the Poles, later the Russian Bakunin — avowed by the mature Wagner whose alleged German nationalism would have been fully formed by the time he dictated the autobiography, leads us to consider that the revolutionary heroes in *The Ring* — Siegmund, then Siegfried — are intended to be prototypes of the *European* revolutionary, not particularistic German heroes.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, opera could have a political impact that we, with our array of mass media, find it hard to conceive. Dieter Borchmeyer, in an article for the 1990 program of the Bayreuth Festival, "Wagner and the French Revolution,"<sup>25</sup> records Wagner's awareness that Auber's opera *La Muette de Portici* [The mute girl of Portici], which is about the effect of the French Revolution although taking a dim view of it, had an inflammatory impact on the masses in some European cities where it was performed, leading even to violence. Indeed, *Kobbé's Opera Book* quotes an authority who said, "It is well known that a performance (not the first performance though as sometimes stated) at Brussels, August 25, 1830, gave the signal to the outbreak of the Belgian revolution, which led to the independence of the country."<sup>26</sup> Likewise Thomas S. Grey observes that Wagner was very

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<sup>24</sup> *My Life*, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> Dieter Borchmeyer, "Wagner and the French Revolution," *Programmhefte der Bayreuther Festspiele 1990*, Vol. VI, pp. 37-56 (English).

<sup>26</sup> *The Definitive Kobbé's Opera Book*, ed. by the Earl of Harwood (New York, 1987), p. 574.

familiar with Auber's works having conducted/rehearsed them multiple times and that in addition to musical influence on his early operatic efforts, "The theme of popular uprising against corrupt authorities in *Das Liebesverbot* and the transferal of Shakespeare's action to Sicily reflect the example of Scribe's libretto for *La Muette....*"<sup>27</sup>

Borchmeyer goes on to describe how the budding Wagner himself drafted an opera set at the time the French Revolution spread to Nice in 1793, *Die hohe Braut* [The High-born Bride]. In this the masses play an active part, and the sentiment is largely pro-revolutionary. But Wagner's draft was amended by others so that the product became a more cautious one, to fit the political climate of the time. "In contrast to Wagner's draft in which the Revolution is warmly embraced, the defeat of the royalist Savoyard army is seen as an altogether terrifying event, the French invasion even being described as a 'catastrophe'...." "The ship of revolutionary opera was stranded on the shoals of reaction," Borchmeyer concludes. Von Westernhagen quotes from one of Wagner's messages to the colleague who was revising this opera, pressing him not to soften it, saying, "The one dreadful, exalting element is the inexorable advance of a great world destiny, personified here by the French revolutionary army, marching in terrible glory over the ruins of the old order," and adding that "we see literally before our own eyes the entrance of a new world order, whose birth-pangs were the sufferings in the events of the drama up till then." Von Westernhagen, who typically downplays Wagner's radical political thinking, feels compelled to add the questionable caveat, "All he meant here, of course, was an operatic revolution — he did not believe there would be a real revolution, even in France...."<sup>28</sup> To the contrary, Wagner's epiphany was that the two were inseparable: an "operatic" revolution would require a "real" revolution. Wagner's work builds upon the precedent of politically-relevant opera that had already been set in Germany, not just by Beethoven's *Fidelio* but by Weber's *Der Freischütz* [The Freeshooter], about which the fine reference work *Opera* edited by Batta says:

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<sup>27</sup> Grey in Millington, ed., *The Wagner Compendium*, p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> Curt von Westernhagen, *Wagner: A Biography*, Vol. I, p. 128.

At the time of its première in Berlin in 1821 *The Freeshooter* was politically relevant in a number of ways. The work marked the end of the domination of the German stage by Italian opera, a goal towards which Weber had directed all his musical and literary endeavors. At the same time, *The Freeshooter* is a postwar play, in terms of both its subject matter and the period in which it was composed. The story is set shortly after the Thirty Years War, a conflict in which Caspar had served as a mercenary. The end of the war left him – like so many others – without a livelihood, as a result of which he sold his soul to the devil. He is not so much an evil character as a belated victim of war. *The Freeshooter* was composed just a few years after the Battle of the Nations at Leipzig (1813), which rather than bringing the freedom that people hoped for, led to renewed feudal sectarianism and strengthened the forces of reaction. Weber was among the many who had hoped for liberty, and had composed patriotic choral works in the battle’s wake. A chorus of similar and yet quite different nature occurs in *The Freeshooter*, sung by the prince’s huntsmen.<sup>29</sup>

Bellini, another of the composers Wagner admired, was similarly seen to have contemporary political relevance.

About Wagner’s deep admiration for Bellini, Bryan Magee writes that

Musically, Wagner consciously took Bellini as a model. Perhaps surprisingly, he retained all his life a high opinion of Bellini. It is not true to say, as some writers have, that he never criticized him; but through all his subsequent proclamations of the need for what is truly German in art, he never glossed over his love and admiration for this Italian composer.<sup>30</sup>

And later when Wagner read Schopenhauer, he was pleased to see the philosopher citing Bellini’s opera *Norma* as “a tragedy of extreme perfection.”<sup>31</sup> *Norma* was another opera with political impact on its era, according to Batta’s reference work; as it would be with Verdi and Wagner in the next generation, Bellini’s political message (with his librettist Felice Romani) was joined with cultural and philosophical aspirations:

The high priest Oroveso, who waits at the head of his oppressed people for the heavenly sign for revolt, is a precursor of the Verdi prophets, army commanders, and freedom fighters in the decade of the *Risorgimento*. Here the melodies are like marches, fired by fanatical resolution.

Similarly, the choruses in Bellini’s operas do not serve a purely decorative function, but show a nation with a topical message in Italy of the 1830s. The proclamation of the fight against the hated “eagle’s lair” and the “city of the Caesars” did not go unnoticed in Milan, the base of the Habsburgs, any more than the stirring, elementary force of the chorus, “Guerra, guerra” (“War, war”).

As with many other historicizing Romantic operas, the old subject matter served Bellini only as a pretext for treating contemporary phenomena, though he was less interested in superficial political matters than in expressing both an individual and a collective yearning for a self-determining life, free of prohibitions and regulations – with all its dangers and challenges.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Andrés Batta (ed.), *Opera*, p. 838.

<sup>30</sup> *The Tristan Chord*, p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172

<sup>32</sup> Batta (ed.), *Opera*, p. 29.

So would Wagner utilize ancient tales to comment on his own time. Then suddenly his life merged with his art: He himself became a heroic figure in the epic events going on around him. It was in the wave of revolutionary upheaval culminating in the 1848-49 crisis that Wagner was drawn into the vortex of the political maelstrom. By then he looked forward to a revolutionary transformation in Europe that he believed was not only inevitable given the socio-economic forces at work, but was also desirable — indeed necessary — for his own plans for a new type of art and theater to be realized fully.<sup>33</sup> In the tenor of the times described by historian E. J. Hobsbawm as follows, Wagner's consciousness is more understandable.

In brief, the world of the 1840s was out of balance. The forces of economic, technical and social change released in the past half-century were unprecedented, and even to the most superficial observer, irresistible. Their institutional consequences, on the other hand, were as yet modest. It was, for instance, inevitable that sooner or later legal slavery and serfdom ... would have to go, as it was inevitable that Britain could not for ever remain the *only* industrialized country. It was inevitable that landed aristocracies and absolute monarchies must retreat in all countries in which a strong bourgeoisie was developing, whatever the political compromises or formulae found for retaining status, influence and even political power. Moreover, it was inevitable that the injection of political consciousness and permanent political activity among the masses, which was the great legacy of the French Revolution, must sooner or later mean that these masses were allowed to play a formal part in politics. And given the remarkable acceleration of social change since 1830, and the revival of the world revolutionary movement, it was clearly inevitable that changes — whatever their precise institutional nature — could not be long delayed.

All this would have been enough to give the men of the 1840s the consciousness of impending change. But not enough to explain what was widely felt throughout Europe, the consciousness of impending social revolution. It was, significantly enough, not confined to revolutionaries, who expressed it with the greatest elaboration, nor to the ruling classes, whose fear of the massed poor is never far below the surface in times of social change. The poor themselves felt it. The literate strata of the people expressed it. 'All well-informed people,' wrote the American consul from Amsterdam during the hunger of 1847, reporting the sentiments of the German emigrants passing through Holland, 'express the belief that the present crisis is so deeply interwoven in the events of the present period that "it" is but the commencement of that great Revolution, which they consider sooner or later is to dissolve the present constitution of things.'<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See *My Life*, pp. 372-74, where Wagner expands on the inspiration he got from reading Proudhon and others and the reasoning that led him to wish for "a possible form of human society which would correspond wholly, and indeed solely, to my highest artistic ideals."

<sup>34</sup> Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, pp. 303-04.



## Marx and Engels, and Wagner

If we were not thus reminded of the milieu in which Wagner lived, we might erroneously assume, looking back from today, that it would be necessary to prove he was a disciple of Karl Marx to demonstrate that a revolutionary class-conflict analysis underlay his conception for *The Ring*. However, since a number of intellectual trends we now associate mainly with the Marxist school were prevalent in Wagner's time (in the German-speaking lands and to some extent beyond them), a class-conflict interpretation of *The Ring* does not depend on Wagner having direct familiarity with Marx or his writings. These intellectual trends included the premise, obvious in European society, that social class was the main determinant of one's life and consciousness; a premonition of an impending social upheaval that was not illogical given the still-fresh experience of the French Revolution; and even dialectical methods of thought applied to various fields.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, biographers have deduced that Wagner almost certainly had some acquaintance with Marx's ideas. Newman reasoned as follows, using circumstantial evidence:

Wagner saw a good deal of the anarchist [Bakunin] during these early months of 1849: Röckel, and one or two of the more advanced thinkers of the Vaterlandsverein seem to have become his chief companions now. It would be interesting to know the subjects of some of their conversations. Bakunin had been intimate with Marx, Engels, and other leading socialists and communists since the early 'forties, so that it is highly probable that he set the views of these people before Wagner and Röckel. It would be further interesting to know how much reading of Marx and his associates had been done by Wagner on his own account at this time. A German translation of Proudhon's *What is Property?* had been brought out in Germany in 1844. We shall find Wagner studying this in Paris in 1849, after his flight from Dresden; but this does not preclude the possibility of the book having been read before that by one who was absorbed in the social problems of property and exploitation as Wagner was in 1848. Marx's *Holy Family* had been published in 1844, and his *Poverty of Philosophy* (in which he deals polemically with Proudhon's *Philosophy of Poverty*) in 1847. In 1848 appeared the historic *Communist Manifesto*, which was mainly the work of Marx. Was Wagner acquainted with any or all of these works, either before or during his association with Bakunin and Röckel? The ideas and the phraseology of them certainly find more than one echo in his own writings. It is a thousand pities that his brother-in-law Brockhaus confiscated his library on his flight from Dresden: the mere titles of some of the books might have told us a good deal we should like to know about Wagner's reading and thinking in those critical days.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Justin holds that dialectical materialism informed not just Wagner's philosophical views but also his music; see his "Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Dialectical Materialism in the Ring," in Richardson (ed.), *New Studies in Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung*, pp. 89-126.

<sup>36</sup> Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, Vol. II, pp. 50-51.

Miraculously, Wagner's Dresden library did turn up after World War II, having survived American bombing raids in a bunker at the Brockhaus publishing house, and its contents were inventoried. None of Marx's works were found in it; actually, there were not that many books on economics or politics. Of course, this does not prove that Wagner never read or heard of such works.<sup>37</sup>

Gregor-Dellin, who has carried out some of the most detailed research on Wagner's life including the editing of Cosima's Diaries, concluded that later in Wagner's life his friend Georg Herwegh ("the revolutionary bard and poet of the proletariat"), who was personally close to Marx, must have discussed Marxist ideas with Wagner. "He cannot have failed to speak of Marx and expound his theories on their long mountain rambles or a supper in Swiss country inns. To suppose otherwise would be absurd," insists Gregor-Dellin.<sup>38</sup> Marx himself retained a particular sympathy for poets that tempered his relationship with Herwegh as well as with Heinrich Heine, in effect exempting them from his usual intolerance of those who did not follow him ideologically. Franz Mehring, author of the first definitive biography of Marx, explains:

As we know, in his youth Marx himself had vainly yearned for poetic laurels and all his life he retained a lively sympathy for poets, invariably showing great toleration towards their little weaknesses. He felt that poets were peculiar people who should be permitted to go their own way and must not be measured by the standard of ordinary or even extraordinary mortals. If they were to sing they must be flattered; it was no use belaboring them with severe criticism.<sup>39</sup>

Whether Marx would have extended such tolerance to Wagner, had these two of the most colossal egos of the 19th century ever met in person, is doubtful, but we will never know. When Wagner was publishing the poetic text for all four operas of *The Ring*, he recounts in *My Life*, "Herwegh was the only one who entered into the work with much warmth and comprehension, and I often discussed it with him, reading him the parts as I completed them."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Rather, *Reading Wagner*, p. 5. Rather cites Curt von Westernhagen, *Richard Wagners Dresdener Bibliothek* (Wiesbaden, 1966).

<sup>38</sup> Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner*, p. 242.

<sup>39</sup> Mehring, *Karl Marx*, p. 79.

<sup>40</sup> *My Life*, p. 490.

For his part, Marx in his later years was peripherally aware of Wagner and *The Ring* but apparently not of its contemporary political allusions. An 1882 letter Marx wrote focused on an anthropological point, probably mistaken: in primeval society marriage between brother and sister was considered moral.<sup>41</sup> That would suggest that Herwegh or others who might have acted as bridges between Marx and Wagner did not convey the ideas of the Composer to the Communist. It does show Marx's awareness of Wagner's *Nibelung* text. Before that, in August 1876 Marx happened to be traveling in the vicinity of Nuremberg at the time of Wagner's first festival in nearby Bayreuth, and was annoyed that all the rooms at local hotels and inns were taken, "partly because people from all over the world came for the Bayreuth Fool's Festival of the State Musician, Wagner."<sup>42</sup> (Although royalty and dignitaries attended the festival, and Wagner had the patronage of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, it was not fair of Marx to dismiss him as a "State Musician" [*Staatsmusikant*] given that *The Ring* depicted the downfall of the aristocratic "gods," although Marx was not aware of its meaning.) A little later the Communist complained in a letter to his daughter Jenny that wherever he went he was "pestered with the question, 'What do you think of Wagner?'" He shared with her the prevalent gossip about the Wagner clan:

Everywhere one is pestered with the question: What do you think of Wagner? Highly characteristic of the new-German-Prussian empire-musician: He and his wife (she who divorced von Bülow), with Hahnrei Bülow and their common father-in-law Liszt, all four of them living in harmony together in Bayreuth, hugging kissing, adoring, and enjoying each other. When you think, moreover, that Liszt is a Roman monk and Madame Wagner (first name, Cosima) is his "natural" daughter by Madame d'Agoult (Daniel Stern) – you can hardly imagine a better text for an opera by Offenbach than this family group with its patriarchal relationships. The adventures of this group – like the Nibelungen – would lend themselves to a tetralogy.<sup>43</sup>

Then in January 1877 in a letter to a friend predicting the future (more or less) Marx makes another reference to Wagner:

The "Oriental Question" (which will end with a revolution in Russia, regardless of the outcome of the Russo-Turkish war [1877-1878]) and the mustering of the Social Democratic forces in the Fatherland,

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<sup>41</sup> Engels cites Marx's letter in a footnote to *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), see Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1970), Vol. 3, p. 216-17 fn.

<sup>42</sup> In Saul Padover, ed., *The Letters of Karl Marx*, p. 310.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 312.

will convince the German culture-philistines that there are more important things in the world than Richard Wagner's Music-of-the-Future.<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, Marx's careless dismissal of Wagner as a "state musician" parallels Nietzsche's more thought-out reaction against Wagner at the time of the first Bayreuth festival and in the philosopher's later writings "contra Wagner" where, as Karol Berger points out in *Beyond Reason: Wagner Contra Nietzsche*, Nietzsche wrote remarks such as "What did I never forgive Wagner? That he *condescended* to the Germans – that he became *reichsdeutsch*."<sup>45</sup> (There is no evidence Marx knew about Nietzsche, although Nietzsche apparently knew of Marx's ideas from reading sources that mentioned him, not Marx's works directly.)

To conclude that Wagner probably knew of Marx, too, is not to infer that he was a "Marxist." Although *The Communist Manifesto* was issued in 1848, in Wagner's formative political years Marx did not yet have the overwhelming stature among revolutionary thinkers that he gained later; there were other important proponents of socialist revolution. Then too, Marx was junior to Wagner by five years, having been born in 1818. (They both died in 1883.) Most important, however, was that Wagner was first and foremost an artist and wanted to use politics to further his artistic goals more than the other way around. At the end of his long prose work *Opera and Drama* he makes clear that, compared to others who seek to perceive and influence human destiny, it is the artist who has the highest calling:

Where now the statesman loses hope, the politician sinks his hands, the socialist beplagues his brain with fruitless systems, yea, even the philosopher can only hint, but not foretell, — since all that looms before us can only form a series of un-willful happenings, whose physical show no mortal man may preconceive, — there it is the *artist*, whose clear eye can spy out shapes that reveal themselves to a yearning which longs for the only truth — *the human being*.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, Wagner's own ideology was not as dissimilar to Marx's as one might expect, not because he was influenced directly by Marx, but because the thoughts of both jelled from similar intellectual and political

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 314.

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Berger, *Beyond Reason*, p. 393 [italics in original].

<sup>46</sup> *Opera and Drama* (Vol. 2 of Ellis's translation of Wagner's Prose Works), p. 375. Italics in original.

ingredients. The two were influenced by several of the same thinkers (notably Hegel, Feuerbach, and Proudhon), in addition to having mutual friends. Above all, they grew up in the same political climate. As Edward Downes puts it, “It is no accident that Wagner's first written version of *The Ring* story, *The Nibelungen Myth as a Project for a Drama*, dates from 1848, the year of the Communist Manifesto,” because “Revolution was spreading like a prairie fire across Europe.”<sup>47</sup>

Wagner never met Marx’s closest collaborator Friedrich Engels either, but the young Engels even more than Marx was enamored of the myths that thrilled Wagner and were adapted for *The Ring*. Biographer Tristram Hunt reports that Engels

could not shake his youthful literary passion for the German mythical past and, in April 1839 [at age 18], he penned an unfinished epic play based on the life of the folk hero Siegfried. It is full of demands for action and an end to reflection, of battles entered and dragons slain. Most intriguing is the stress Engels lays on the psychological struggle Siegfried and his father, Sieghard: while the former wants to run free (“Give me a charger and a sword / That I may fare to some far land / As I so often have implored”), the king thinks “it’s time he learned to be his age” (“Instead of studying state affairs, / he’s after wrestling bouts with bears”). After a war of words, the father finally lets go and Siegfried is free to follow his own path in life (“I want to be like the mountain stream / Clearing my route all on my own”). It doesn’t require too much insight to realize that, in the words of Gustav Mayer, this unfinished play represents “the virtual embodiment of the battle that may have taken place in the Engels family in relation to Friedrich’s choice of vocation.”<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the teenage Engels identified with this mythical Siegfried, while his wealthy businessman father wanted him to take over the family textile business. Continuing on this theme, around the time of his twentieth birthday Engels wrote a travel essay titled “Siegfried’s Native Town” when he visited Xanten [also spelled Santen] in North Rhine-Westphalia. He begins by citing a poem:

There lived in the Low Lands a rich king’s heir by right,  
His father Siegmunt, his mother Siglint hight,  
In a castle brave that everywhere was famed  
Down by the Rhine, and *Santen* it was named.  
Der Nibelungs Note [I] 20

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<sup>47</sup> Introduction to Steward Robb’s English translation of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, p. ix.

<sup>48</sup> Tristram Hunt, *Marx’s General: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels* (New York, 2009), pp. 33-34.

In the essay Engels advises that “Young Germans should choose a seldom visited place for their pilgrimage – I am speaking of *Xanten*, the native town of the Horny Siegfried,” because “Xanten has Siegfried and Cologne only St. Anno, and what is the Song of Anno compared to the Nibelungs!” Walking about the town he discovers a gate: “Above the gate, right and left, below a pair of small turrets, were two bas-reliefs, unmistakably two Siegfrieds.... The hero stands in a closely-fitting coat of mail, spear in hand, driving the spear into the dragon’s jaws in the image on the right, and trampling down the ‘strong dwarf’ Alberich on the left.” After further exploration, “I went out of the town and up a sandy rise, the only natural elevation for miles around. This is the mountain on which, according to the legend, Siegfried’s castle stood.” Here Engels ponders a broader question that Wagner obviously considered too, and the Siegfried story immediately takes on political import for authoritarian Germany:

What is it about the legend of Siegfried that affects us so powerfully? Not the plot of the story itself, not the foul treason which brings about the death of the youthful hero; it is the deep significance which is expressed through his person. Siegfried is the representative of German youth. All of us, who still carry in our breast a heart unfettered by the restraints of life, know what that means. We all feel in ourselves the same zest for action, the same defiance of convention which drove Siegfried from his father’s castle; we loathe with all our soul continual reflection and the philistine fear of vigorous action; we want to get out into the free world; we want to overrun the barriers of prudence and fight for the crown of life, action. The philistines have supplied giants and dragons too, particularly in the sphere of church and state. But that age is no more; we are put in prisons called schools, where instead of striking out around us we are made with cruel irony to conjugate the very “to strike” in Greek in all moods and tenses, and when we are released from that discipline we fall into the hands of the goddess of the century, the police. Police for thinking, police for speaking, police for walking, riding and driving, passports, residence permits, and customs documents – the devil strike these giants and dragons dead!

After continuing in this vein about contemporary political conditions, Engels winds up his essay:

But I want to go down to the Rhine and listen to what the waves gleaming in the sunset tell Siegfried’s mother earth about his grave in Worms and about the sunken hoard. Perhaps a friendly Morgan le Fay [an enchantress in Arthurian legend] will make Siegfried’s castle rise again for me or show my mind’s eye what heroic deeds are reserved for his sons of the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

One would think that, had Engels seen Wagner’s *Ring* or even read the libretto, he would have instinctively grasped its political import, but it seems he was never exposed to it. Engels did recall later that “In a letter in the Spring of 1882 Marx spoke out in the strongest terms about the total falsification of primitive times which

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<sup>49</sup> In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 2: Frederick Engels: 1838-42 (London, 1975), pp. 132-36 “Siegfried’s Native town.”

dominates Wagner's *Nibelungen* text." This suggests that Marx either read the libretto or was told about it, but misunderstood it as an attempt to portray primitive society. Engels was aware of some of Wagner's works, being more interested in music than Marx. According to an article "Marx and Engels on Music" on the Monthly Review website, his early letters "show that young Engels not only attended concerts and the opera, but also performed in a chorus, cultivated a taste for music from the first half of the 18th century, and tried his hand, in a gentlemanly and very amateurish way, at composing." Furthermore, "the alertness to salient detail that he had developed in his musical activities at Bremen is still apparent in a letter to Eduard Bernstein of May 15, 1885, where he complained, "You and Kautsky, you seem to blow so much gloom against each other that a whole concert in minor [keys] could be made from it; it's just like the trombone in Wagner which also always lets loose whenever something dire happens." Late in life Engels was still aware of Wagner through friends and "in the late 1880s and early '90s Engels and Charles Bernard used to argue about Wagner: A socialist of the Marxist school, he [Bernard]...was also a passionate admirer of Richard Wagner, making regular pilgrimages to Bayreuth.... [He] had a fine, sonorous baritone voice, and sang with great artistic knowledge. Wagner was the occasion of many a dispute between him and Engels."<sup>50</sup>

### **A political artist**

At the end of a biographical study of Wagner's political views and activities, "a record which contains oftentimes perplexing inconsistencies and annoying divergencies," Frank Josserand concludes that there is a "unifying element by which all may be rendered coherent."<sup>51</sup>

Wagner was above all else an artist. His views on politics or practically any other subject were conditioned by the larger esthetic view of life which he developed for himself. If he resorted to twists and turns in his political thinking, he did so in order that he might realize the dominant theme of his life — the full expression of himself as an artist and as a cultural regenerator of modern civilization.

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<sup>50</sup> "Marx and Engels on Music," posted Aug 18, 2010 by Mark Lindley on Monthly Review website at <https://mronline.org/2010/08/18/marx-and-engels-on-music/>

<sup>51</sup> *Richard Wagner: Patriot and Politician*, p. 305.

In fact, several biographers have cited Wagner's contempt for "politics" in the conventional sense. Paul Bekker in a 1924 biography writes as follows:

In a letter to Liszt of January 1852, Wagner says of the character of Ortrud [in *Lohengrin*] that "she is the woman who knows not love. To say this is to say all — the most terrible thing that could be said. Her soul is *politics*." This was written at a time when the figure of Alberich was taking shape in Wagner's mind. Alberich, Ortrud's male counterpart, is the soul of politics, and politics and lovelessness are interchangeable ideas. Politics means strife for power, property, and gold.<sup>52</sup>

Wagner did not join political parties and never seems to have contemplated a run for office — unlike Verdi who in 1861 was elected as a deputy to the first national Parliament of Italy, although his role was largely symbolic.<sup>53</sup> Like many people then and now, Wagner was cynical about party politics, considering the mundane political process beneath him and "politicians" a low form of life. The American Communist and cultural critic Sidney Finkelstein may have been right in saying that "what impelled his radicalism was irritation at philistinism rather than democratic ties,"<sup>54</sup> a viewpoint that Finkelstein carried into analysis of the sources of Wagner's musical themes: "Since he erected a subjective fantasy against reality, he tended to find musical ideas not in the folk and popular music of the people about him, but in the past of composed music itself..."<sup>55</sup>

All this does not mean we can disregard the composer's political expressions in words and actions; to the contrary, his basic political views, whether we feel they are logically consistent or contradictory, find an outlet in the plot and characters of the *Ring*. To understand Wagner, one must accept that his primary calling as an artist

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<sup>52</sup> Bekker, *Richard Wagner: His Life in His Work*, p. 247.

<sup>53</sup> In Parliament, however, Verdi voted as a follower of the politician Cavour who had encouraged him to run, did not have a partisan or independent position, and served only one term. Verdi's real contribution to Italian nationalism was through his operatic compositions and symbolic role over several decades of the unification movement. Concise appreciations of Verdi's political role are found in George Martin, *Aspects of Verdi*, Chapter 1 "Verdi and the Risorgimento" (New York, 1988); in Anthony Arblaster, *Viva la Libertà*, Chapter 4 "Verdi: the Liberal Patriot" (London, 1992); in Paul Robinson, *Opera and Ideas*, Chapter 4 where Verdi's opera *Don Carlo* is a case study to analyze the relationship between political ideas and musical expression; and of course in the major biographies. Unlike Wagner, Verdi's focus was on politics alone, not on the economic system underlying it, and Robinson characterizes Verdi's mature ideology as "Realpolitik."

<sup>54</sup> Finkelstein, *Composer and Nation: The Folk Heritage in Music*, p. 136. The same author wrote *Jazz: A People's Music* (New York, 1948, 1988) that gives a political perspective on development of that genre.

<sup>55</sup> Finkelstein, p. 145.



was broad and all-encompassing: it comprehended politics (in the higher sense of political philosophy) as well as religion and other fields bearing on the fate of humanity. Even his best friends could not follow him in all these respects. For example, biographer Bekker noted that Liszt had tried to discourage Wagner from his tendency to spout what Liszt saw as “political platitudes and socialistic gibberish.” However, Bekker observed,

It was no “socialistic gibberish,” no passing mood, that had made Wagner a revolutionary. A conception of art as a means of expression, gradually taking possession of his whole nature, drove him to formulate a philosophy. He had to become a politician, a revolutionary, a socialist, an atheist — not because these questions as such interested him personally but because his art depended on the answers to them.<sup>56</sup>

Nothing less than the fate of humanity was Wagner’s concern; his invidious remarks about particular nationalities have to be kept in perspective as subordinate to this overriding concern. While Wagner is frequently identified as a proponent of German nationalism and was susceptible of being misappropriated posthumously by ultra-nationalists and National Socialists, and while he did make himself a spokesman for German aspirations toward cultural autonomy and political unity, this nationalism is balanced by the theme in his political writings of *internationalism* as the ultimate stage of human cultural development. Thus, in *Art and Revolution* he wrote:

If the Grecian Art-work embraced the spirit of a fair and noble nation, the Art-work of the Future must embrace the spirit of a free mankind, delivered from every shackle of hampering nationality; its racial imprint must be no more than an embellishment, the individual charm of manifold diversity, and not a cramping barrier.<sup>57</sup>

In *The Art-Work of the Future* he expanded upon the theme of historical transition to an internationalist era; there is no question that he saw himself as a guide for humanity in this process. It is in the light of his vision of the future that *The Ring* should be interpreted.

Two *cardinal moments* of his development lie clear before us in the history of Man: the *generic national* and the *un-national universal*. If we still look forward to the future for the completion of the second

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<sup>56</sup> Bekker, p. 223.

<sup>57</sup> *Richard Wagner's Prose Works* [hereafter cited as *RWPW*], translated by William Ashton Ellis (New York, 1966). Vol. I: *The Art-Work of the Future*, pp. 53-54. At the Bayreuth Festival of 1999 all the shopping bags given to those who purchased the program book were emblazoned with that quotation from *Art and Revolution* in German, English and French, perhaps befitting the movement toward a unified European Community. The English translation (not Ellis’s) read: “Whereas the Greek work of art expressed the spirit of a splendid nation, the work of art of the future is intended to express the spirit of free people irrespective of all national boundaries; the national element in it must be no more than an ornament, an added individual charm, and not a confining boundary.”

evolutionary step, yet in the Past we have the rounded-off conclusion of the first set clear as day before our eyes.<sup>58</sup>

Insofar as Wagner did speak for the emerging German nation, the emphasis was on the cultural entity more than the political. Downes is accurate in his assessment that, “Wagner was not a nationalist in the sense of some of his supporters and visitors to Bayreuth. Hans Sachs's speech at the end of *Die Meistersinger* shows clearly enough that Wagner's nationalism was primarily a concern for German art, not for German political power.”<sup>59</sup> The apparent contradiction between Wagner’s nationalist and internationalist sentiments can never be fully resolved, as both were integral to the composer’s nature. The French author Maurice Boucher comes closest to a resolution in the apt phrase “Wagnerian nationalism which claims, like all nationalisms, to be valid for all humanity.” Boucher, too, sees that it is primarily a cultural nationalism, citing a typical quote from Wagner that goes, “It is an extraordinary gift which the kindness of heaven bestows upon us Germans, and without which a genius as universal as that of Mozart could never have been born.”<sup>60</sup> We will do best to consider *The Ring*, assuming it expresses the author's highest aspirations for an artistic work, to be not just about parochial German concerns but about the fate of all mankind.

In view of Wagner’s priorities — a composer-poet first and a writer of prose works second — one should not exhaust oneself trying to reconcile every apparent contradiction in his prose writings as one might do more profitably with a careful theoretician like Marx. One commentator maintains that Wagner’s prose works show, among other things, “that his essay-writing was a way of arranging diverse ideas without having fully synthesized them; that, as in his music, he relies on intuition, not logic, to guide the connection of ideas...”<sup>61</sup> Wagner himself was quoted later in life as saying, tongue-in-cheek, “When I re-read my theoretical works, I can no longer

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<sup>58</sup> *RWPW*, Vol. I, p. 89.

<sup>59</sup> Downes, Introduction to Robb’s translation of *The Ring*, p. xvi.

<sup>60</sup> Boucher, *The Political Concepts of Richard Wagner*, p. 24.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Hicks, “The Priesthood of Wagner,” in Shaw et al., ed., *Wagner in Retrospect*, p. 30.

understand them.”<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, because his voluminous prose works are products of a sincere effort to grapple with the difficult subject of the relationship of art to society, economics and politics, and even more because he thought that true artists were the ones who would lead the transformation of European society, it is worth studying the prose writings to determine how his artistic works fit his ideological framework. Wagner’s extensive outpouring of books and articles can be studied profitably provided the end is a deeper understanding of his artistic works, rather than a vain search for a logically consistent philosophical system. For as biographer Bekker explains, no matter what field Wagner was covering, his motive was to find in it some essence that the creative artist could use:

Wagner’s mode of apprehending whatever came to him from without, whether politics, religion, philosophy, or other men’s art, was not rational but imaginative, and whatever idea corresponded with his own imaginative desires, whether it were an axiom, a concept, a work of art, or a philosophical system, had to be suitably transformed and adapted for existence in Wagner’s own interior world. It might retain an appearance of independence, but it actually passed wholly into a nature that knew nothing outside itself and could understand nothing that would not admit of such transplantation.<sup>63</sup>

Bekker makes that generalization to explain the composer’s relationship with Nietzsche, which he says even in its warmest period was “based on a profound mutual misunderstanding,” and we shall find it quite an accurate description of how Wagner utilized concepts and symbols from other thinkers — notably Feuerbach, Proudhon and Bakunin — in the *Ring*.

The outpouring of prose in the first years of his exile, when he produced the articles “Art and Revolution” and “The Art-Work of the Future,” the notorious “Judaism in Music,” and the book-length “Opera and Drama,” are fundamental for our analysis because they most systematically define Wagner’s ideas on the relation of art to society, economics and politics, and because they immediately preceded his creating of *The Ring*. As Josserand’s political biography puts it,

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<sup>62</sup> *A Dictionary of Musical Quotations*, p. 154; Wagner is quoted by Camille Saint-Saëns in *Portraits et Souvenirs* (1903),

<sup>63</sup> Bekker, *His Life in His Work*, p. 421.

With the completion of “Opera and Drama” Wagner abandoned his theoretical prose writings in favor of the libretto of his *Ring des Nibelungen*. He had stated his artistic creed and was now impatient to put into effect his ideas on the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the unified work of art.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, the turning from theoretical prose writings to work on *The Ring* marked a decisive step in Wagner’s artistic development, and the *Ring* cycle was intended to prove that his artistic theories could be put into practice. A letter, written to Theodor Uhlig in 1851 after two years in exile, reveals how *The Ring* was central to Wagner’s artistic and political hopes:

*A performance* is something I can conceive of only *after the Revolution*; only the Revolution can offer me the artists and listeners I need. The coming Revolution must necessarily put an end to this whole *theatrical business* of ours: they must all perish, and will certainly do so, it is inevitable. Out of the ruins I shall then summon together what I need: I shall *then* find what I require. I shall then run up a theatre on the Rhine and send out invitations to a great dramatic festival: after a year’s preparations I shall then perform my entire work within the space of *four days*: *with it* I shall then make clear to the men of the Revolution the *meaning* of that Revolution, in its noblest sense. *This audience* will understand me: present-day audiences cannot.<sup>65</sup>

If *The Ring* was going to make clear the meaning of the Revolution, then it must be *about* the Revolution.

Despite strong hints as to Wagner’s intentions, a number of diehard Wagnerians reject, even resent, explicitly political interpretations of *The Ring*. For example, Winkler in *For Freedom Destined*, a peculiar psychological interpretation of the operas, argues against a political perspective: “It is true that in *Art and Revolution* and *The Artwork of the Future*, Wagner emphasizes how desirable it is that art have a timely and social significance; and this thesis apparently has been taken to mean that his principal motive for choosing myths and legends for his librettos was their allegoric reference to the social evils of Germany in the mid-nineteenth century. But the operas themselves, and the majority of his other writings, show that he intended to go far beyond any economic or political concern of his day.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Wagner: *Patriot and Politician*, p. 118.

<sup>65</sup> In Spencer & Millington ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 234. Emphasis is in original.

<sup>66</sup> Winkler, *For Freedom Destined*, p. xiii.

Biographer Curt von Westernhagen is objective enough to appreciate that politics was a crucial source of inspiration for *The Ring*; nevertheless he takes pains to argue that once the overall project was conceived, other sources of creative juices took precedence. Focusing on the period circa 1850, he writes that Wagner's

belief in revolution was by now only a habit of thought essential to his creative work. As the hope of a revolution in 1848 had given him the desperate courage necessary to embark on the Nibelung plan, so now he had to sustain the illusion so as not to lose his courage in the face of the dissatisfactions of his present circumstances. Once he had established the dimensions of his plan, laid down the width, height and depth of it, the idea of revolution lost its creative importance and nothing more was heard of it all the time that he was at work on the music.

The strained logic is apparent in the phrasing: “belief in revolution was only [!] a habit of thought essential [!] to his creative work.” He goes on to conclude that, “It was neither philosophy nor politics that dictated the tragic turn taken by Wotan's fate in the *Ring*: his tragedy revealed itself to Wagner in exactly the degree that the mythological figure took on the attributes of individuality, of *humanity*.”<sup>67</sup> This too is representative of the logic used by those who deliberately downplay Wagner's political side: A false dichotomy is set up between “philosophy” or “politics” on the one hand and “humanity” on the other, upon which the author argues that if one is important, the other must not be. But what are philosophy and revolutionary politics ultimately concerned with if not the fate of humanity? There is no need to introduce separations where Wagner's genius was to find unity. To divine the political meaning of *The Ring* is not to depreciate its significance for humanity; it is to appreciate it more deeply.

Probably the reason so much doubt exists about the politics of *The Ring* is that no reliable guide to the political meaning of the whole four-opera cycle is available. It is not surprising that Wagner did not provide such a handbook. In addition to the axiom that poets do not deign to explicate the meaning of their own poetry, there was the practical matter of the artist's financial dependence (earlier in his career as a hope, later actual on the very aristocracy whose doom he prophesied, and his awkward debtor-creditor relations (until Ludwig's support came)

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<sup>67</sup> Curt von Westernhagen, *Wagner: A Biography*, Vol. I, p. 164. It is not surprising that this author's political reasoning would be strained, since he is said to be one of “the persons who had been devout, believing and practising National Socialists, who had been joyous Nazifiers of Bayreuth,” who then emerged as influential in postwar Bayreuth (Spotts, *Bayreuth*, p. 265).

with the bourgeoisie he held up to contempt throughout the operatic cycle. In fact, in an 1854 letter to his political co-conspirator August Röckel (then serving a sentence for his part in the 1849 uprising), Wagner justified on artistic grounds his decision not to make the political significance of *The Ring* (then in poem form) explicit:

I believe it was a true instinct that led me to guard against an excessive eagerness to make things plain, for I have learned to feel that to make one's intentions too obvious risks impairing a proper understanding of the work in question; in drama — as in art —, it is a question of making an impression not by parading one's opinions but by setting forth what is instinctive. It is precisely this that distinguishes my poetic material from the political material which is virtually all that is current today.<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to conclude that Wagner *never* put into prose any admission of the political meaning of *The Ring*. An instance in which he did unmistakably declare its political significance, albeit in quite general terms, was near the beginning of an essay “On State and Religion” that he wrote in 1864 at the express request of King Ludwig II, who had recently undertaken to support Wagner. At the time the essay was designed for the young King's eyes alone; it saw the light of publication only a decade later, in 1873, when it was included in Wagner's collected works. “Undoubtedly to its intimate character we owe those deeper glimpses into Wagner's inmost thought, such as we meet so often in his private correspondence,” says Ellis the translator in his introduction to this essay. Apparently Ludwig had asked Wagner to put in writing how his views on the State and Religion had changed since his 1849-51 writings on these institutions — a touchy subject as it referred directly to Wagner's views during his revolutionary activity and political exile. Wagner's reply (for which he has been accused of less than full candor, but which probably expresses his deepest intentions) insists that he was never really in “the arena of *politics* proper,” and that “whoever has assigned me the role of a political revolutionary, with actual enrolment in the lists of such, manifestly knew nothing at all about me....” He does admit to an interest in how political movements might change society (e.g. by redefining the nature of labor and occupations) and influence the prospects for realization of artistic aspirations. Wagner's main contention here, however, is that since he is an artist and not a politician, his prose works on subjects such as State and Religion are somewhat naïve in retrospect, since his hopes were soon to be disappointed by political developments. His real, instinctive

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<sup>68</sup> In Spencer & Millington, eds., *Selected Letters*, p. 308.

wisdom about the destiny of humanity came out not there, but rather in the poem for *The Ring* he produced at the same time. A crucial paragraph of the essay “On State and Religion” reads as follows, treating the meaning of the *Ring* poem in the context of Wagner’s disappointment with “European politics”:

Now, on thinking back, I believe I may acquit myself of having been sobered from the aforesaid mood — not unlike a spiritual intoxication — first and merely through the turn soon taken by European politics. It is an attribute of the poet, to be riper in his inner intuition (*Anschauung*) of the essence of the world than in his conscious abstract knowledge: precisely at that time I had already sketched, and finally completed, the poem of my “Ring des Nibelungen.” With this conception I had unconsciously admitted to myself the truth about things human. Here everything tragic through and through, and the Will, that fain would shape a world according to its wish, at last can reach no greater satisfaction than the breaking of itself in dignified annulment.

At this passage translator Ellis cannot resist adding a footnote that quotes Wotan (in *Siegfried* Act Two, where the god appears in the guise of Wanderer), “Zu schauen kam ich, nicht zu schaffen” (“I came to watch, and not to act”).<sup>69</sup> Should we not accept as sincere Wagner’s assertion that his views on “European politics” and more generally on “things human” are stated more unerringly in *The Ring* than elsewhere?

The biggest problem facing interpreters of Wagner is that the task of pinning down his political views is so daunting. Some writers have argued that the early Wagner’s revolutionary attitudes were repudiated by the mature Wagner; others insist that he never changed his basic philosophy, merely adapted to the prevailing political conditions and pursued the same goals with the means at hand. Of the various interpreters of Wagner’s political thought whose work is available in English (original or translation), the one who seems to have made the most valiant attempt to puzzle through all the sources logically is the French author Maurice Boucher, whose *The Political Concepts of Richard Wagner* was published in English translation in 1950 (and is, regrettably, now out of print). Boucher faces the difficulties head on, admitting that, “It is indeed hazardous to attempt to give an intelligible, or even merely ordered, image of what Wagner’s ‘social and political ideal’ really was,” due to the fact that “Wagner is above all a poet, he has tendencies, sentiments, revolts, but he has no system.”<sup>70</sup> Boucher

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<sup>69</sup> *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 8-9.

<sup>70</sup> Boucher, p. 112.

rejects the thesis that the old Wagner was completely different from the young revolutionary: “It can be said that the Wagner of 1849 and the Master of Bayreuth have been, have remained, revolutionists, even if the revolution had to assume, little by little, the form of regeneration.”<sup>71</sup> (By which he means regeneration of the human spirit with the help of Wagner’s art.)

He said he was primarily an artist; he could as well have said a dreamer, a passionate fancier: actually, his political and social aspirations escape all known classifications, find their place in none of the commodious frames in customary use.<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, Boucher bites the bullet and tries to give a “general designation” to Wagner’s political thought, classifying it at first pass as “idealistic anarchism.” “Anarchism to be sure. For Wagner condemns the State, the laws, ownership, contracts.”<sup>73</sup> The institution of the state was inseparable from the institution of property in Wagner’s mind, as it was, of course, in the minds of political thinkers of his era, especially Communists, Socialists, and Anarchists. To them (and one could argue, to Conservatives and Liberals too, in fact to the founding fathers of the U.S.A.), the primary function of government was to protect property rights and maintain the orderly conditions under which commerce could be conducted and contracts enforced. Before the fields of political science and economics got to be separate specialties, there was “political economy.” To Wagner, as to the Marxists, the state was almost by definition an oppressive institution; if as Proudhon sloganeered, “property is theft,” then the state’s role was to defend the thieves. Thus, to Wagner the state and ownership were the twin tyrants preventing the individual from being free. Boucher notes that while Wagner stated these positions most explicitly in his revolutionary period, he never repudiated this essence of his political-economic philosophy. “But we should not believe that the years made him change his mind. Much later, in 1881, towards the end of his life, his article *Know Thyself* restates the indictment against ownership, and in almost the same terms.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Boucher., p. 113.

<sup>72</sup> Boucher, p. 114.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Boucher, p. 118.



It is obvious how this unity of political and economic power is portrayed in *The Ring*, and Boucher summarizes it well:

State and ownership — today we would say capitalism — sustain each other. In that defensive struggle which they must wage against life and the freedom of men, they find their principal weapon primarily in contracts. That notion, dear to Wagner who illustrated it magnificently in the personage of Wotan — inventor, custodian and prisoner of the runes — is broader than the concept of law. It opposes the shifting and increasingly recurrent claims of life and tries to immobilize forever that which can exist for only an instant.<sup>75</sup>

Like any good anarchist Wagner concludes, according to Boucher, that “the State must be destroyed — in the name of the individual.” His first pass at a *Siegfried's Death* scenario in which the Nibelungs are all freed while Wotan continues to rule probably seemed naïve to him as he developed his ideas. Where Wagner parts company with the political anarchists, however, is that he does not see a better future coming through political action. As Boucher puts it, he turns to “religion” for the real solution, but not to any of the existing religions or churches. “The downfall of the State must come not from without, as is desired by revolutionists who imagine that realities are changed by a change of appearances: it can come to pass with or after an inner reform of man. In other words, the State will collapse only if a new kind of religion replaces its frame.”<sup>76</sup> Boucher quotes the following from Wagner’s writings: “The ruin of the State cannot reasonably signify anything other than the advent of a religious consciousness through which society will recognize its essence of pure humanity.... We shall continue having States and religions until we have one single religion and no State at all.” Based on this type of generalization that Wagner made repeatedly, Boucher decides that his characterization of Wagner’s philosophy as “anarchistic individualism” should be supplemented with another modifier, “unanimous,” so that it becomes “unanimistic anarchism.”<sup>77</sup> This awkward term means essentially that the whole population should rally to the new spiritual values that Wagner’s art will propound, and turn away from materialistic values. Even there Boucher is not

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Boucher, p. 119.

<sup>77</sup> Boucher, p. 120.

satisfied that he has fully described Wagner's philosophy, and he says another qualifier should be added: "mystic." That is, the unanimity of the people leading to a new type of religion will be achieved through a mystical kind of "love."<sup>78</sup> Never forgetting that Wagner is really an artist, not a politician or a social theoretician, Boucher has the insight to suggest that the composer's perception of social reform is analogous to his musical ideas; in other words, Wagner may "conceive the society of men as a large orchestra in which each instrumentalist would play solely the part that suits him (i.e. with a feeling of full freedom), and in which, however, the multitude and variety of the songs would be arranged around some leading motives by the inconscient-mysterious composer, both learned and inspired."<sup>79</sup> This resolution is what Boucher turns to again in the Conclusion of his book, where he tries to account for "how it happens that a great man could tolerate under his pen or in his utterances so many affirmations, alternately or at once so vague, so contradictory, and also puerile."<sup>80</sup> There are two kinds of language, Boucher says, the language of science and that of poets; in the latter, in Wagner's language, "words have primarily an expressive power, sometimes an explosive value, always a transitory role, indicative, suggestive or symbolic." The use of the poetic language is lyrical, "one might as well say also — it is only another form of the same name — musical." Thus, Wagner's prose is really another kind of music:

But instead of musical sounds, *the composer orchestrates ideas*, remarks, memories, everything that comes to his mind, his historical knowledge and his personal rancors, the observations he made in his chance moods and the desires he nurtured according to his passions. Free instrumentation, if there ever was one, innumerable possibilities: the musician who writes for voices, strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion is restricted by their compasses and by the twelve notes of the scale; but the thinker who makes music with his thoughts has, for his abstract symphonies, everything every experienced and remembered by men in their conscious existence. Then motives surge from all sides, transitions, modulations are easy, "bridges" and codas offer themselves spontaneously and seem to impose themselves the better because they have been heard before.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Boucher, p. 122.

<sup>79</sup> Boucher, p. 123.

<sup>80</sup> Boucher, p. 182.

<sup>81</sup> Boucher, p. 185. Italics in original.

Here we do not have to delve into Boucher's astute interpretation in much more detail (he identifies influences on Wagner from his radical friend Röckel, from the French anarchist Proudhon and the Russian anarchist Bakunin, and others), except to mention something especially relevant for the part of Wotan in *The Ring*, Wagner's perception of the role of the sovereign. As he reached maturity Wagner understood more and more that society needs belief in some kind of myth, and when he came to write *On State and Religion* to advise King Ludwig II, this was a basic part of his conception of the proper role of the monarch. As Boucher puts it, "what Wagner contrives in order better to understand how the society of men maintains itself, is a collective illusion, a mirage which forces itself upon all and which he calls *Wahn*." Furthermore, "in political life, that mirage is manifested under the form of patriotism."<sup>82</sup> Here the political significance of some major themes in *Die Meistersinger* is also apparent, but for our analysis of *The Ring*, the key element is the role of the sovereign which is, holds Wagner, not only to arbitrate the differences among various interests in his realm but, as Boucher says, "also to control and to discipline collective illusions." (For the many of us who think that politicians lie to the public, that's a nice way of putting it.) But that is precisely why the role of King is a tragic role, because he must express an ideal that is unrealizable, based on the "true religion."<sup>83</sup> Thus the ending of the *Ring* cycle, and the fate of its protagonist Wotan the monarch, must be tragic, nevertheless leading to apparent redemption of the world through mankind learning the lesson of higher spiritual, non-materialistic value.

The present work is an attempt to set forth the parameters of the *Ring* allegory, making explicit its political-ideological message. Such a political exegesis does not preclude other interpretations or appreciations of *The Ring*, whether aesthetic, musicological, mythological, psychological or "universal," but it does focus entirely on that aspect at the expense of other perspectives. The complexity of *The Ring*, written and composed over a quarter century, is so great that no one commentator can hope to cover all its facets. One who attempted a "comprehensive" analysis — a full exposition of the music as well as the text — is Deryck Cooke in *I Saw The*

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<sup>82</sup> Boucher, p. 136.

<sup>83</sup> Boucher, pp. 137-38.

*World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring*. His world unfortunately ended in 1976 and the “first half” of his uncompleted project had to be published posthumously as a mere 360-page book.<sup>84</sup> He performed an indispensable service by his logical conceptual analysis of *The Ring* and particularly by his thorough search for Wagner's sources in mythology. Perhaps most important, he concluded that there *was no source* in the myths for many of the twists and turns in the operatic plots, which itself is revealing of Wagner's priorities. The huge gap between the mythical sources and Wagner's work disturbs those who value the myths. Thus A.T. Hatto, translator of *The Nibelungenlied*, laments that Wagner “has unfortunately harmed the cause of medieval German poetry by intruding reckless distortions between us and an ancient masterpiece.”<sup>85</sup>

The gulf between *The Ring* and its apparent “sources” raises an essential methodological question for our approach. Is it relevant to a political analysis of *The Ring* whether a particular part is grounded in the mythology or not? Let us postulate that Wagner operated roughly as follows: Whenever he found a portion of ancient mythology that suited his purposes, he used it. Having a wealth of mythological sources, he would pick and choose among the characters and events he found in them, sometimes combining elements from sources that were not originally connected. However, when he could not find a mythological ingredient suitable for his recipe, he concocted one. To put it bluntly, he invented a new “myth” whenever he felt the real ones were inadequate to his purposes. I came across the term for this, “mythopoeia,” when reading about the English romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Like Shelley, Wagner was mythopoeic [alternatively “mythopoetic”].<sup>86</sup> Therefore, one could argue that tracing his mythological sources may be interesting, but has only limited relevance to the contemporary meaning of *The Ring*. On the other hand, we might hypothesize a sort of reverse relevance to tracing the mythological sources. That is, suppose that the places where Wagner could not find a suitable myth for his purposes and had to invent a new story line or character, are precisely the places likely to have a particular import

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<sup>84</sup> Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring*.

<sup>85</sup> Hatto, Forward to *The Nibelungenlied*, p. 7.

<sup>86</sup> Shelley was also politically radical with anarchist and atheist tendencies, a famous poem of his being “The Mask of Anarchy.” Engels and the Marx family were enthusiastic about it. It's unlikely that Wagner was exposed to Shelley's work.

for his own time: he *needed* material in a form that was not readily available in the mythology. Therefore, we should flag such scenes for intensive analysis. While Wagner believed that the spirit of the *Volk* was expressed in myths, he apparently thought that social conditions had changed enough that folks in his day needed updated “myths” that he would obligingly prepare for them. A caveat to our hypothesis is that it would be a bit presumptuous to infer that whenever Wagner invented something that did not exist in the original mythology, he did it for political reasons; the possibility must also be borne in mind that he created some elements for pure dramatic effect; we should favor the political explanation when it is the more convincing one, the most consistent with the other variables in *The Ring*.

Wagner was not the first to adapt antiquated sources to contemporary political ideology. Heinrich Heine, among others, had been doing this conspicuously.

Unlike the German nationalists, who claimed that the Germans’ deepest instincts were conservative, Heine, as we saw in *The Harz Journey*, preferred to think that the German people, deep down, were committed to freedom. His obvious course, therefore, was to adapt folk-poetry and folk-tales so as to bring out their latent revolutionary content, link it to the political program of emancipation, and thus deprive the German nationalists of one of their most potent weapons.<sup>87</sup>

Wagner, of course, was well aware of Heine’s literary contributions. He would use Heine’s tale for *The Flying Dutchman* and had been introduced to Heine personally in Paris in 1839. In his time Wagner was not singular in updating mythology, but he was most thoroughgoing.

The light that a political interpretation of *The Ring* sheds on conditions and feelings in Wagner’s Europe is matched by the appeal that it has to people of our age, when the trends Wagner worried about – the industrial rape of nature, the curse of capitalist greed, and the collapse of venerable institutions – have spread across the globe and reached levels far beyond what the composer imagined. In this sense the tetralogy speaks to citizens of any industrial society. The exploding popularity of *The Ring* in Japan in the mid 1980’s, when, at the height of Japan’s postwar economic boom, the news was filled with stories of societal disruption, environmental

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<sup>87</sup> Ritchie Robertson, *Heine* (London, 1988), p. 27.

degradation and international trade disputes, is explained by Kunio Tsuji as follows in the Program Notes to the 1988 Bayreuth Festival:

We shall not be guilty of interpreting the *Ring* in a one-sided way or of limiting its relevance to a particular time and place if we see in the Japanese enthusiasm for the work a willingness to recognize this feeling of crisis. If Wagner associates gold and power in his drama, it is because he sees through the diabolical force of capital, a force which permeates every last mechanism of society. His drama is unquestionably a profound critique of the western culture of technology. This is seen even by those who perceive this primeval mythology through the intoxicated haze of the music's beauties.<sup>88</sup>

The ecological lessons of *The Ring* – recognizing Wagner as an early environmentalist warning of industrialists' despoiling of Nature – have been brought out in a number of productions in Europe and the U.S. and we may be seeing more of these in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, general director Speight Jenkins led the Seattle Opera in a naturalistic “green *Ring*” mounted in 2001, a version he thought appropriate to the Pacific Northwest.<sup>89</sup>

Despite the necessity of a political-economic interpretation, a listener should probably experience *The Ring* as pure dramatic “mythology” — a tale of Gods and Mortals, Giants and Dwarfs — at least once before delving into its political ramifications. A novice's first exposure to the masterwork might be “spoiled” by reading this paper in advance. Similarly, a child should first greet Christmas believing in Santa Claus. But just as a growing child gains a deeper appreciation of the meaning of Christmas by knowing who “Santa Claus” really is, an opera-goer will get a lot more food for thought by understanding what the curious characters of *The Ring* really represent. “Yes, Woglinde, there is a Santa Claus — but he's not who you thought.”

## I. THE RHINEGOLD

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<sup>88</sup> Kunio Tsuji, “The restoration of an age of innocence,” Programmhefte der Bayreuter Festspiele, 1988/V, p. 97.

<sup>89</sup> “Back to Nature In Seattle On Rhine,” by Anthony Tommasini, *New York Times*, August 13, 2001.

## Scene One

*The Rhinegold*, the prelude to the other three operas that make up *The Ring* cycle, sets the historical background to the social upheavals taking place in Wagner's era. Like Marx, Wagner understood that the causes of the social transformations that threatened to overturn the whole order of society stemmed from material bases. He deliberately started *The Ring* at the substructure of the economy and then shifted to the commanding heights — the Gods who represent the ruling aristocracy — in Scene Two. In order for us to attempt a political analysis of the work informed by the thesis that the mythical characters correspond to social groups in the Europe in which Wagner lived — especially the German lands — and confronting a roster of mythical characters ranging from Gods to Dwarfs (the latter having the temerity to challenge the former for hegemony), we need first of all a clear picture of the class structure of Germany at the time Wagner conceived the plot of *The Ring*. The key source on the social classes and class conflicts of this era come from Wagner's contemporaries, Marx and Engels, the pioneers of class analysis, in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*, a series of articles that focus on the 1840's with the purpose of explaining the failure of the 1848-49 revolutions.<sup>90</sup> A stereotype of Marxism held by people who have not actually studied the works goes something like this: With the rise of capitalism the bourgeoisie gains economic power and overthrows the aristocracy (in the French revolution, etc.) to take political control of society; but as capitalism develops further, the exploited working class, the vast majority, should finally topple the bourgeoisie and take control themselves, resulting eventually in a classless "communist" society. Although this stereotype contains key elements of the Marxist view, when Marx and Engels came to applying their method to actual societies and historical events, they identified a more complex class structure and process of change. Even when Engels tried to express their historical view in a one paragraph nutshell, in an 1852 follow

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<sup>90</sup> Available in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1969), pp. 300-87. It was originally published as a series in the New York Tribune under the byline "Karl Marx," whom the newspaper had retained as a European correspondent; but as it was later determined that Engels had drafted them for his collaborator, authorship is now credited to Engels. It is doubtful that many readers of the Tribune appreciated that they were reading what would become a classic in revolutionary social science.

up to the New York Tribune series, he broke down the propertied class into different sectors in the sweep of European history:

History showed to the Communist party, how, after the landed aristocracy of the Middle Ages, the monied power of the first capitalists arose and seized the reins of Government; how the social influence and political rule of this *financial* section of capitalists was superseded by the rising strength, since the introduction of steam, of the *manufacturing* capitalists, and how at the present moment two more classes claim their turn of domination, the petty trading class, and the industrial working class. The practical revolutionary experience of 1848-49 confirmed the reasonings of theory, which led to the conclusion that the democracy of the petty traders must first have its turn, before the Communist working class could hope to permanently establish itself in power and destroy that system of wages-slavery which keeps it under the yoke of the bourgeoisie.<sup>91</sup>

Whether or not Wagner shared the Marxist view of class conflict driving history — and I will argue that to a certain extent he did — he lived in a highly class-conscious society, in which anyone who wanted to get along had to use different levels of politeness and respect when interacting with persons depending on their status. And with his interest in politics, Wagner would have been vividly aware of the fact that political parties and movements typically were formed to represent class interests.

The background for our analysis of Wagner's *Ring* finds, therefore, a class structure with at least the following components: At the top, the upper class, an aristocracy of noble birth who are hereditary rulers of society. Next, a big bourgeoisie consisting of powerful capitalists who gained their economic power from finance or industrial manufacturing. To avoid confusion, in this study I am using "big bourgeoisie," "capitalists" and "upper middle class" interchangeably (to be sure, this is "middle class" in the British sense rather than the American sense: no matter how much money one has, one is still "middle class" unless one has noble parentage or is granted a noble rank by the Crown). Under them, and distinct in function and status, is a petty bourgeoisie (lower middle class), which Engels refers to in the above as "petty traders" but which would include other people engaged in small-scale manufacturing, crafts, or service occupations. Of course, the petty bourgeoisie vastly outnumbers the big bourgeoisie, and the ambitious ones aspire to become the latter. Forming the lower class are the industrial workers, who are increasingly being concentrated in larger factories owned by big capitalists, but

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<sup>91</sup> Engels, *The Late Trial at Cologne*, in *Selected Works*, Vol. One, p. 389. Italics in original.



many of whom also are employed by smaller establishments where working conditions may be even more exploitative. (This list leaves out another numerous sector of the population, the peasants, who are mainly under the control of the land-owning aristocracy but who also become a source of supply of industrial workers by moving from rural to urban areas.) Most important for our analysis is the distinction between the big capitalists and the petty bourgeoisie — the two main components of the “middle class” which, apparently, are represented in Wagner’s conception by the Giants and the Dwarfs. Size matters in *The Ring*. Surprisingly, I cannot find any source that points out this fairly obvious parallel.

Where could a petty bourgeois look for a source of power that would let him compete with the big capitalists and perhaps ultimately even challenge the ruling nobility? In the material forces of production, of course. In Scene One, Alberich the Dwarf steals the Rhinegold and makes from it a ring that has magical powers so awesome that with it he threatens the hegemony of the Gods. Alberich is an ugly, pitiful Dwarf, and in the German dictionary “Alb” is a mythical elf.<sup>92</sup> I postulate that Wagner consciously used the Dwarf characters to symbolize the *petty* bourgeoisie: the small tradesmen or craftsmen who were not a highly respected class in the European social structure of Wagner’s time. Evidence will be accumulated to prove that Wagner’s class symbolism was somewhat deeper than Shaw and others have been able to fathom.

One Rhinedaughter, Wellgunde, lets slip the secret of the gold when Alberich questions its value.<sup>93</sup>

The world’s wealth  
would be won by him

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<sup>92</sup> Gutman, p. 182fn. As a biographical aside Gutman notes, “The name, found in the *Nibelungenlied*, is also reminiscent of Albert, the brother Wagner despised as a materialist.” His book, however, gives no evidence of Wagner’s feelings toward his brother. There is some evidence elsewhere, for instance in Newman’s *The Life of Richard Wagner*, Vol. I, p. 389 and p. 494fn, where it says Richard had “turned against” his brother because “Albert had in earlier days shown talent as a singer but had given up all his ideals, for himself and for Johanna [his daughter who was a very promising singer], merely in order to go with the crowd and make money.”

<sup>93</sup> Quotations from *The Ring* are taken from the English translation by Stewart Spencer, as published in *Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion*, with commentary by Barry Millington (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993). Occasionally other translations, such as Andrew Porter’s singable one for the English National Opera, are cited for comparison, but for analytical purposes the Spencer translation seems most suitable since it is quite clear and literal. The pattern of indentation has been simplified since our focus is on meaning more than poetic pattern. Rudolph Sabor’s recent translation (pub. 1997) attempts, often with great success, to combine accuracy of meaning with matching lines and key words, metre, alliteration and rhyme, and characterization (different characters speaking in their own styles).

who forged from the Rhinegold  
the ring  
that would grant him limitless power.

Alberich hears from the Rhinedaughters that no one can take the gold at the bottom of the river and forge it into a magic ring unless he “renounces love,” an act thought to be impossible.

Only the man who forswears  
love’s sway,  
only he who disdains  
love’s delights  
can master the magic spell  
that rounds a ring from the gold.

The Rhine River symbolizes Nature in which vast resources reside. This reference was made explicit in Wagner’s 25-26 January 1854 letter to Röckel, where he wrote of “the *gold* that is stolen from nature and put to ill use, the Nibelung’s ring: the curse that clings to it is not lifted until it is restored to nature and until the gold has been returned to the Rhine.”<sup>94</sup> Since Wagner chose the names of characters and locations for his operas very deliberately, it is not to be overlooked that in German “*rein*” means clean, clear or pure and is pronounced the same as the name of the river *Rhein* (*Rhine* in English spelling). Wagner’s instructions for performance, recorded by Porges, were to avoid any sense of artificiality:

Regarding the orchestral prelude as a whole, built on a single E flat major triad, Wagner insisted that its huge crescendo should throughout create the impression of a phenomenon of nature developing quite of its own accord — so to say, an impersonal impression. Nothing must be forced; there must be no sense of a conscious purpose imposing itself. Thus the goal will be achieved. It will be as though we were experiencing the magical effects of an ideal presence; as though, no longer conscious of the music, we had become immersed in the primal feelings of all living things and were peering directly into the inner workings of natural forces.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> In Spencer & Millington, eds., *Selected Letters*, p. 307.

<sup>95</sup> Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the ‘Ring’*, p. 7. The Porges work is replete with illustrations of the musical themes, or leading motives. While these are, of course, crucial to a full understanding of the *Ring*, they are not analyzed in the present work due to the author’s lack of musicological training. However, commentators’ remarks about how musical themes portray world events, characters or objects relevant to our analysis are occasionally quoted here. Readers wishing to familiarize themselves with the leitmotifs have many sources. For example, the English National Opera librettos Nos. 21, 28, 31 and 35 include the German original, Andrew Porter’s singable English translation, and numbered occurrences of many leitmotifs. The more literal Spencer translation also includes 67 musical examples.

Porges adds in a footnote that for this effect, “it was necessary for the orchestra to be invisible,” hence Wagner designed his theater in Bayreuth with a covered orchestra pit, a daring innovation that changed theater history.

To Wagner, though, as to many of his contemporary German artists, the Rhine signified more than nature; it equally stood for German nationhood. A study by Celia Hopkins Porter, *The Rhine as Musical Metaphor*, treats Wagner’s use of the river in the context of many other musical compositions, *lieder*, and poems, especially of the 1840’s, that used an image of the Rhine as a symbol of German national and cultural identity. A historical reason, she points out, was that France’s threat to take the Rhine had led to an upsurge of nationalistic sentiment in the German lands, prompting composers and poets to use the river as a metaphor for the German spirit. No other river, she argues, has been used metaphorically to the extent that the Rhine was in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Her thesis regarding Wagner is that he saw the Rhine as a symbol of *both* nature and nationalism. On the nationalistic side, she quotes Wagner after he left Paris in 1842 with some bitterness against the French, who had largely failed to appreciate his operatic genius: “For the first time I saw the Rhine — with hot tears in my eyes, I, poor artist, swore eternal fidelity to my German fatherland.”<sup>96</sup> As to how nature is portrayed in *The Rhinegold*, she explains:

The violence of their [the Nibelungs] passions, in fact, reflects feelings aroused by nature and transposed to nature.... And, like Wagner’s Nibelungs, his Rhine Maidens represent personalized compressions of human emotions and forces in nature that found equally pantheistic expression in German Romantic lyric poetry and landscape art. In sum, the *Ring*, with its Nibelungs and Rhine Maiden Loreleys, romanticizes a supreme emblem of nature, the evocatively beautiful Rhine, as the collective human psyche.<sup>97</sup>

Let us adopt as a working hypothesis, and expect that it gains increasing credence as evidence is collected, the notion that male and female characters in *The Ring* have different allegorical functions. Namely, I propose that the male characters usually represent the classes of people in European society, whereas the female characters express more general cultural principles (that, nevertheless, may be associated with certain social classes). Let us suppose that the Rhinedaughters (often called “Rhinemaidens” in writings about *The Ring*, but “Rhinedaughters” is the direct translation used by Spencer and Millington) innocently express the way of thinking

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<sup>96</sup> C. H. Porter, p. 7, quoted from “Autobiographic Sketch” in Wagner’s prose works, Vol. I, p. 19.

<sup>97</sup> C. H. Porter, p. 121.

that prevailed before the industrial revolution and came to be looked back upon nostalgically by the Romantics of Wagner's generation: enjoying the beauty of nature without trying to control or exploit it. It would follow that, in philosophical terms, to "renounce love" in Wagner's allegory means to give up the romantic appreciation of nature for its own beauty and to look at it in the cold light of scientific reason, as an object to be manipulated and exploited. The reigning aristocrats, in spite of — more likely *because of* — their superior access to education, were incapable of this intellectual feat. Meanwhile the under-estimated petty bourgeois tinkering in their workshops were able to implement the new science and engineering that would remake the world. They were prompted to do so by being rebuffed in their attempts to join in the pleasures of the romantic world, as Alberich's advances toward the Rhinedaughters are ridiculed. In *Opera and Drama* Wagner had devoted a few pages to the distinction between the poetic appreciation of the "Wonder" of Nature and the rational-scientific "Understanding" of it using tools like the microscope and mathematical calculation.<sup>98</sup> That distinction is shown vividly in the poetry and music of this opera, where the Rhinedaughters' grace in the water and wonder at the beauty of the gold is contrasted to Alberich's clumsiness in nature's realm and his striving to grasp and possess first a Rhinemaiden and then the gold.

A subsidiary hypothesis that informs our methodology is that where biographical connections can be adduced, they add credibility to the thesis that *The Ring* is about Wagner's own life and times. In this respect, it is not out of place to point out that Wagner's boyhood put him in direct touch with gold. One of his older brothers, Julius, was apprenticed to "father" Geyer's brother, a goldsmith. After Geyer's death, Wagner himself was temporarily sent to live with them, so he got a chance to see the gold business at first hand.<sup>99</sup>

Conductor Georg Solti describes the musical moods through the Rhinedaughters scene:

The beginning is gentle and flowing. The singing should be light — even Alberich is in a good mood. The whole opening section is 'about' the flowing of the Rhine, its eternal, unvarying motion. Over this ground-bass the Rhinemaidens play their little sexual game with Alberich. When the gold becomes

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<sup>98</sup> *Opera and Drama*, pp. 216-220 (Vol. 2 of Ellis's translation of the Wagner's prose works; reissued by University of Nebraska Press in a paperback series with the same pagination).

<sup>99</sup> Gutman, p. 14.

visible, the music changes to C Major, and the Rhinemaidens perform their ritual of adoration, their morning-service to the gold, as I always like to think of it. Meanwhile the flowing 9/8 motif of the water continues, mingling with the motif of the gold. When the break in this movement finally occurs, it is devastatingly emphatic: Alberich renounces love and seizes the gold. After that the Rhine motif returns, but in the minor now; innocence and serenity have fled.<sup>100</sup>

The eponymous ring that Alberich forges from the gold is, of course, the most consequential symbol. Wagner deliberately changed the title of his operatic masterpiece from *Siegfried's Death* to *The Ring of the Nibelung* as he fleshed out his original conception into four full operas. As the meaning ascribed to this central symbol depends on one's interpretation of the whole work, at the outset it is advisable to sketch its significance in the form of a hypothesis. An interpretation of the ring symbol that is quite promising — because of its simplicity and because Wagner's early writings show him thinking along these lines — is that the forging of the ring illustrates the coining of money. In an 1840 piece entitled *The Virtuoso and the Artist*, Wagner discussed how an ancient legend, in this case one about miners finding a fantastic jewel, had been transformed over the years: “And things have finally come to such a pass, that the original legend is completely forgotten, whilst all kinds of minor modern fables take its place, for example that quite prolific veins of gold have been discovered in the diggings, and solid coins struck from them.” He goes on to propose that, “Perhaps the whole legend, with its subsequent fable, is to be understood in an allegorical sense.”<sup>101</sup> Although the allegory he had in mind then (it compares the jewel to music and the miners to creative artists) is somewhat different from (although related to) the one I believe he used in *The Ring*, the earlier writing shows Wagner's propensity to interpret legends in allegorical terms with contemporary significance. Under this interpretation of the ring, the magic that can make Alberich ruler of the world is nothing more, nor less, than money: financial power. When a metal found in nature is coined into money, it takes on a vastly different social significance. Many writers have associated Alberich's ring with money without developing the idea into a full-scale economic treatment of the operas. To cite one: Wagner biographer Ronald

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<sup>100</sup> Georg Solti, “A Few Words from the Conductor,” in DiGaetani, ed., *Penetrating Wagner's Ring: An Anthology*, pp. 405-06.

<sup>101</sup> Translation in Charles Osborne, ed., *Richard Wagner: Stories and Essays* (New York, 1973), p. 138. Borchmeyer in *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre*, p. 6, also draws a parallel between this early essay and *The Rhinegold*.

Taylor suggests that, “The ring itself, forged by the Nibelung Alberich, father of Siegfried's murderer, Hagen, symbolizes the rule of money, the subjection of human life to the false philosophy of getting and spending, and the ultimate destruction of that life.”<sup>102</sup> Thus the ring is held to mean money in all its ramifications as financial power. In an essay *Know Thyself*, near the end of his life, in 1881, Wagner focused on the importance of the invention of money, then compared Alberich's ring to a “stock portfolio.” Rather's translation of that key passage goes like this:<sup>103</sup>

Though much that is ingenious and admirable has been thought, said and written concerning the invention of *money*, and of its value as an all-powerful cultural force, nevertheless the curse to which it has always been subject in song and story should be weighed against its praises. There *gold* appears as the demonic throttler of mankind's innocence; so, to our greatest poet [Goethe, in *Faust*] has the invention of *paper money* take place as a devil's trick. The chilling picture of the spectral ruler of the world might well be completed by the fateful ring of the Nibelung as stock portfolio.

The translation of the longer passage by Ellis in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works* is perhaps less precise, substituting “pocket-book” for “stock portfolio” (*Börsenportefeuille*), but worth quoting in view of its seminal importance as a rare reference by Wagner himself to the political-economic significance of the Alberich's ring:

Clever though be the many thoughts expressed by mouth or pen about the invention of *money* and its enormous value as a civiliser, against such praises should be set the curse to which it has always been doomed in song and legend. If *gold* here figures as the demon strangling manhood's innocence, our greatest poet shews at last the goblin's game of *paper money*. The Nibelung's fateful ring become a pocket-book, might well complete the eerie picture of the spectral world-controller. By the advocates of our progressive Civilisation this rulership is indeed regarded as a spiritual, nay, a moral power; for vanished Faith is now replaced by “Credit,” that fiction of our mutual honesty kept upright by the most elaborate safeguards against loss and trickery. What comes to pass beneath the benedictions of this Credit we now are witnessing, and seem inclined to lay all blame upon the Jews. They certainly are virtuosi in an art which we but bungle: only, the coinage of money out of nil was invented by our Civilisation itself; or if the Jews are blamable for that, it is because our entire civilisation is a barbaro-judaic medley, in nowise a Christian creation.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Taylor, *Richard Wagner*, p. 92.

<sup>103</sup> Rather, *The Dream of Self-Destruction*, p. 175, with reference to Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, X, 268. Weiner, in *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*, p. 144, also refers to this passage.

<sup>104</sup> RWPW, Vol. VI, p. 268. Italics in original.

And this was in his *Know Thyself* essay penned near the end of his life in 1881, showing that he never lost his obsession with the evils of wealth. It is perhaps also noteworthy that in the commercial jargon of Wagner's era, "Ring" in another sense referred to a financial trust or syndicate.<sup>105</sup>

Alternatively, there is a variant interpretation of the ring symbol that focuses more on the industrial side of capitalism and less on its financial side. We could say that the capital (gold) invested in technology (the ring) yields limitless economic, hence political, power. This interpretation draws special attention to Alberich's skill in forging the ring from the gold: a skill with which the petty bourgeois craftsman class was blessed; employed to the full, this skill could allow them to realize their dream to grow from a petty to a great bourgeoisie.

Is it going overboard to speculate that the opening scene of *The Ring* is so loaded with political-economic symbolism? After all, was not Wagner merely dramatizing a tale he found in ancient Germanic and Nordic mythology? Again, research such as that in Deryck Cooke's extensive study of the mythological sources of Wagner's *Ring* is decisive in answering this kind of objection. What Cooke discovered, is that "amazingly" (his word), there was nothing in the mythology that could have served as a basis for *The Ring*'s opening action. "Nowhere, in any of the sources, does a dwarf, or any other creature, go into the Rhine, or any other river, and meet three water-nixies and woo them, with or without success, or discover gold that can be stolen and made into a ring conferring absolute world-power, by renouncing love, or by any other means, and then perform that feat." In other words, this whole scene "is Wagner's own invention."<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> By the time of the first *Ring* performance in 1876, another allusion to a "Ring" could have occurred, to an Austrian audience at least. In Vienna after the old city walls were torn down and replaced by a wide boulevard called the Ringstrasse, along which people with new industrial wealth built neo-classical residences in the 1860s and 1870s, "the new-money spirit of the Ring, progressive and expansive but also often apparently crass and uncreative, seemed the essence of the epoch." (Publication for "Vienna 1900" exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1986).

<sup>106</sup> Cooke, *I Saw the World End*, p. 134. While Cooke's thesis about the degree to which Wagner shaped the overall story is upheld, other scholars have been able to document mythological sources of many particular parts. Elizabeth Magee, for example, evaluates alternative sources for the Rhinedaughters in *Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs*, pp. 63-67. Interestingly, she finds one source to be not the actual myth but an illustration in an edition Wagner possessed in which the artist had taken liberties and added water-maidens to a scene where the hoard is dumped into the Rhine. Or as Magee puts it (p. 15), "Wagner also responded to visual stimuli."

Alberich has *stolen* the Rhinegold. The key to political interpretation of this action is in the French socialist Proudhon's 1840 book, *What is Property*, which is definitely known to have impressed Wagner. Proudhon answered his own question on the first page with his famous aphorism, "Property is theft." According to Wagner biographer Gregor-Dellin,

During the year just ended, 1840, in which Wagner had experienced the total dependence of the penniless artist on the affluent, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *Qu'est-ce que la Propriété?* had been published in Paris. Wagner first became acquainted with Proudhon's basis principle — that property connotes theft — through Samuel Lehrs, who always had his finger on the literary pulse. He found it so thought-provoking that he never forgot the author's name; but he had no gift for the patient, painstaking assimilation of economic, scientific, and political theories. Most of what he retained consisted of slogans — conclusions devoid of reasoned argument.<sup>107</sup>

While Wagner lacked the patience for detailed economic analysis, he showed infinite patience in crafting a music-dramatic portrayal of Proudhon's seminal slogan. That the Proudhonian conception was central to Wagner's consciousness all his life is verified by an incident cited by Theodor Adorno:

His follower Glaserapp, in a reminiscence of his last stay in Venice [where Wagner died in 1883], reports that 'at the sight of the numerous closed unknown places' he had exclaimed: "That is property! The source of all corruption! Proudhon had a far too material and external view of it. For considerations of property determine the vast majority of marriages and this in turn is the root cause of racial degeneration."<sup>108</sup>

This quotation is revealing because, besides the syndrome Adorno identifies as the "substitution of biological concepts for social ones," it sheds light on the role of marriages in the drama of *The Ring*, where for example, the plot turns on a plan to betroth a Goddess to a Giant to settle a material debt. Because of the multiple references Wagner makes to Proudhon's work in his own writings and in verbal utterances reported by acquaintances, we are justified in assuming that he read Proudhon's book thoroughly.<sup>109</sup> For example, in *My Life* recalling his exile in Paris after fleeing Dresden after the 1849 uprising, Wagner speaks of "occupying myself with Proudhon's writings, particularly with his *De la Propriété*, in a spirit that afforded me singularly rich consolation for my

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<sup>107</sup> Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner*, pp. 104-05.

<sup>108</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, p. 17.

<sup>109</sup> *My Life*, p. 420.



position.” It is likely that Proudhon’s reference to an “age of gold” as a primitive stage of human society caught his attention:

Justice, after passing through the state of negative communism, called by the ancient poets the *age of gold*, commences as the right of the strongest.... From this to the assumption of the right of property in all things, it is but one step.<sup>110</sup>

Sandra Corse in *Wagner and the New Consciousness* likewise finds Alberich’s theft of the gold to be a dramatization of the Proudhonian definition of property, and she extends this interpretation a bit farther to include Valhalla:

Wagner was perhaps influenced by Proudhon’s slogan, “Property is robbery,” which he called the “signal of revolutions.” The ring obviously symbolizes property as theft — Alberich steals the gold from the Rhinedaughters and Wotan steals it in turn from Alberich. But the musical connection between the ring and Valhalla reminds us that Valhalla too is property — and Wotan intends, in fact, to steal it from the giants by robbing them of payment for their labor.<sup>111</sup>

The institution of property, or material ownership, became for Wagner the root of all evil in the world, and he tended to shape his perception of history, fading back into ancient myth, around it. An essay called *The Wibelungen* (*Die Wibelungen*) that he wrote in his “revolutionary” period (1848-1849), illustrates how shadowy ideas culled from myth, from history, and from more current political-economic theories fermented together in Wagner’s creative brain, brewing the basic conceptions that underlie the plot of the *Ring*. A central thesis of the *Wibelungen* essay is summarized by Boucher, after a caveat that “one hardly knows where the legend stops and where history begins in Wagner’s mind”:

With the fall of the *Wibelungen* (i.e. the Carolingians), humanity detaches itself from its natural source and the treasure of the *Nibelungen* vanishes into legend and dream. Nothing remains of it but the condensation, the deposit, the lees, in another word, ownership. With the *Nibelungen* (i.e., the royal race which had won the treasure), property had to be conquered and unceasingly re-conquered in order to be preserved. The notion had been perpetuated in the Feudality where investiture had to be asked for and granted. As soon as the fiefs became hereditary, there was no longer any question of personal virtue and the very idea of ownership became corrupted. In vain did the Emperor search for the Holy Grail; the nobility and the princes saw in their wealth only material things, entirely at their discretion and suitable only to satisfying their egotism. This ownership became crystallized, immobilized, defending itself by all sorts of juridical constructions, with all the artifice of a soulless State. Here we see taking shape the

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<sup>110</sup> Proudhon, *What is Property*, p. 268.

<sup>111</sup> Corse, p. 83.

figure of Wotan, guardian of the laws, with runes on his lance, powerless and melancholy. We also foresee what Wagner, idealistic anarchist as much as socialistic patriot, will tell us later about the accursed gold and the regeneration of hearts.<sup>112</sup>

Had Wagner aspired to a different career, that of, say, a historian, he could be criticized for sloppy methodology. But since it was perhaps only by confusing myth with history and current ideological issues that he could make best artistic use of all these elements, the liberties he took can be permitted under the rubric of “poetic license.”

## Scene Two

Scene Two of *The Rhinegold* rises to the aristocratic heights where the “Gods” dwell and Valhalla, their castle, has just been completed. In devising the prelude to *The Ring*, Wagner managed to avoid the basic mistake of bourgeois ideology that Marx had attacked in *The Holy Family* in 1844:

As it separates thinking from feeling and the soul from the body, so also does it separate history from natural science and industry, and regards the birthplace of history as being in the hazy cloud formations of heaven rather than in the raw, material production on earth.<sup>113</sup>

No, Wagner was careful to start *The Ring* cycle with the material transformation of nature by science and industry; only after setting that basis did he shift to “the hazy cloud formations of heaven” to show how the “Gods” were faced with the consequences of material developments down below. It is too bad that Marx never became familiar with Wagner’s unique approach to portraying the materialist view of history in art — he might have appreciated it. For example, Wotan awakened at the opening of Scene Two to face the question of how to pay for Valhalla looks like a portrayal of Prussian King Friedrich-William IV who, as described by Engels, was awakened to “some stern and startling realities which interrupted his poetic dreams. Alas, that romanticism is not very quick to accounts....” Engels continues with a quick balance sheet of this typical king’s financial difficulties, for which salvation the monarch had to turn to the middle classes. However, in exchange for their help, the middle classes wanted political concessions: “The poor King, whose commercial difficulties were the keenest satire upon his medieval propensities, very soon found out that he could not continue to reign without making some slight

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<sup>112</sup> Boucher, *The Political Concepts of Richard Wagner*, p. 33. (“One hardly knows....” p. 30).

<sup>113</sup> Quoted by Mehring in *Karl Marx*, p. 100.

concession to the popular outcry for that ‘Representation of the People’....”<sup>114</sup> What is interesting in this comparison of Engels’ with Wagner’s treatment of similar conditions is, for one thing, that Engels makes the link with the ideology of “romanticism” that was fundamental for Wagner, and for another thing, it suggests a possible interpretation of the Giants’ demand for Freia as being the middle class demand for a share of political power, although I have chosen to interpret the demand more literally as the big bourgeoisie’s desire to marry into the aristocracy and become landed gentry. Engels adds a commentary on how the middle classes’ expectations of the new King of Prussia were dashed, just as were the Giants’ hopes in Wotan: “Indeed the middle classes, who had partly expected that the new King would at once grant a Constitution, proclaim the Liberty of the Press, Trial by Jury, &c., &c. — in short, himself take the lead of that peaceful revolution which they wanted in order to obtain political supremacy — the middle classes had found out their error and had turned ferociously against the King.” What this passage shows is that Wagner’s own hopes for a King who would lead a revolution were not unique to Wagner but common to a large sector of society and probably not considered naïve in his time except by revolutionaries well to Wagner’s left. That Wagner held this view was public knowledge in Dresden, as shown by the following story from *Opera Anecdotes*:

#### Good Intentions

Vising Dresden not long after the rebellion of 1848, journalist Henry Chorley commented to a local Wagnerian on Wagner’s disloyalty to the king of Saxony, who, after all, had made Wagner his Kapellmeister and permitted the production of *Rienzi* at the court theatre. First Wagner exploits a state appointment, then he rises up against the state!

“But Wagner meant well,” said the Dresdner. “He was really very fond of his King. He would have made him President of the Republic!”<sup>115</sup>

Despite the exceptional role he had in mind for the king — reflected in his conception of Wotan — Wagner’s class consciousness otherwise pretty well fit the attitudes of progressives in that era. As evidence of

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<sup>114</sup> *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*, p. 312.

<sup>115</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Opera Anecdotes* (Oxford, 1985), p. 42.

how he viewed the cultural tastes of the different classes, here is his summation of the three kinds of audience to which, he regretted, “our theatrical institutions” had to cater:

The only regulator of distinctions, has been the *section* for whom this entertainment was to be provided: for the *rabble*, brought up in tutored grossness, coarse farces and crass monstrosities were served; the decorous *Philistines* of our bourgeoisie were treated to moral family-pieces; for the more delicately cultured, and art-spoilt *higher* and *highest classes*, only the most elegant art-viands were dished up, often garnished with æsthetic quips.

In the following passage which continues the above discussion, he refers to the highest classes as “the so-called ‘Gods’”; we may infer from his “so-called” that it was common among theatrical professionals in Wagner's Dresden days to refer to aristocrats in the audience this way.<sup>116</sup>

Now the special feature of our *greater* theatrical institutions consists in this, that they plan their performances to catch the taste of all three classes of the public; they are provided with an auditorium wherein those classes range themselves entirely apart, according to the figure of their entrance-money, thus placing the artist in the predicament of seeking-out his hearers now among the so-called ‘Gods,’ now in the Pit, and again in the Boxes.

On a deeper level, Wagner was conscious that the historical origin of mankind’s belief in “gods” could be traced back to human authorities who in ancient times combined secular with religious roles and in more recent history merely claimed to rule with the grace of God. In his *The Wibelungen* essay, written during the summer of that revolutionary year 1848 as Wagner conceived the project that would become *The Ring*, he sketched this connection between mythology and history. The original authority, he speculated, was a human father-figure who headed the races who were to move into Europe from “the East”:

But the original kinghood was the patriarchate: the father was the bringer-up and teacher of his children. To them his discipline and doctrine seemed the power and wisdom of a higher being, and the larger the family grew, the more prolific in collateral branches, the more peculiar and divine must the mould of its original head have seemed, to whom the family owed not only its body, but also all its spiritual life and customs. As this head laid down both discipline and doctrine, the royal and priestly powers were naturally united in him, and his authority was bound to grow in proportion as the family became a race. Moreover, as his power was transferred to his direct heirs, the tribe recognized these as their chieftains, and finally, the long-deceased father of the race, from whom undisputed honour flowed, *appeared to them to be a god, or at least the earthly avatar of an ideal god.*<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Wagner, *A Communication to My Friends*, trans. by W.A. Ellis, pp. 351-52 in *The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works*.

<sup>117</sup> In Osborne, *Richard Wagner: Stories and Essays*, p. 151. Italics added.

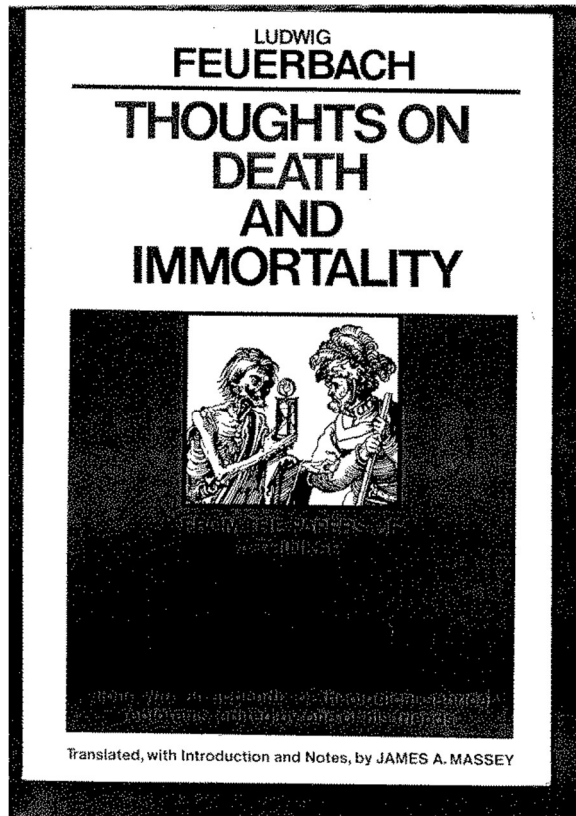
It is crucial to an understanding of *The Ring* to bear in mind Wagner's advanced (for his time) intellectual position, influenced by Feuerbach as we shall see, that "gods" were created by men and that religion was utilized to back up human authority. That is why he could portray the European nobility in its dying days as troubled "gods" who seem "human, all-too-human." (It seems highly appropriate to quote this phrase from Nietzsche, who first took Wagner as a father figure, practically a god, but later rebelled against him. According to Walter Kaufmann, a leading translator and interpreter of the philosopher, "roughly at the same time he decided to break with Wagner, he gave up his previous style and method and turned to writing books composed of aphorisms — largely concerned with human psychology or, in Nietzsche's phrase, with the "human, all-too-human."<sup>118</sup>) In his autobiography Wagner recalls how Feuerbach's *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* "pleased me greatly, as much for its tragic implications and for its social radicalism. I found it elevating and consoling to be assured that the sole authentic immortality adheres only to sublime deeds and inspired works of art."<sup>119</sup> The biographer of Feuerbach, Marx W. Wartofsky, notes that in that philosopher's theory "the musical sound is the purest image of feeling" and that "Feuerbach's influence on Wagner's early conception of 'The Art of the Future' and of the music drama has its sources in this conception."<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Walter Kaufmann, ed. and trans., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, 1976), p. 51.

<sup>119</sup> *My Life*, p. 430.

<sup>120</sup> Marx W. Wartofsky, *Feuerbach* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 286.



One of the philosophical works that particularly influenced Wagner.

Because many of the leitmotifs<sup>121</sup> in *The Ring* are related to each other in complex musicological ways, caution is in order when citing these relationships to back up a political analysis. Yet the subject cannot be ignored, given that the music often conveys meanings that clarify, or add to, the libretto. While no musicological analysis will be attempted here, it being beyond the scope of this work and beyond the competence of the author, it will nevertheless be appropriate to cite certain observations of experts on the music where they shed light on the relationships among the entities in *The Ring*. Deryck Cooke's analysis of the musical themes is very useful for

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<sup>121</sup> Wagner himself did not use the term *Leitmotiv* (leading motive), rather he referred to *Grundthemen* (basic themes) in his music and stressed the fact that they were interrelated; the term became prevalent among analysts of Wagner's music because they often "lead" in the sense of appearing in the orchestration just before the statement, action or object that they are associated with. Sometimes they also "lead" by hinting at something that will come later in the opera, or even in the next opera in the cycle; but they are also used conversely to recall things from previously in the cycle.

this purpose.<sup>122</sup> Relevant to our current discussion are two points he illustrates: The “gold” motif is one of the transformations of the “nature” motive, indicating to us that the gold (before Alberich steals it) is an innocent part of nature, i.e. a natural resource. Cooke also emphasizes that the “ring” motif is closely related to the “Valhalla” motif, the latter being the more dignified form, showing us that Wagner is drawing a parallel between the striving for power of the two protagonists Wotan and Alberich. Indeed, the whole aim of the masterful musical transition between Scenes One and Two of *Rheingold* (besides giving time to reset the stage) is to show how the “ring” motif is turned into “Valhalla.”

Wotan, the chief God — therefore, the King or Monarch — is having a great castle Valhalla built by the Giants. The opera's audience might wonder, if they stopped to think about it, why the castle is being completed only now, when the Gods have been around for ages. Perhaps the reason is that a castle such as this could not have been built before. The castle might represent one of the great cities, with monuments and distinguished public edifices, built with and designed to show off the affluence of an emerging industrial society still under royal authority. The “Burg” could be a place where Bürgers (townsmen, citizens, bourgeois) live, if this kind of word-association was going on in Wagner’s mind.<sup>123</sup> Or one can opt for the more literal interpretation, “Burg” meaning castle or fortress, a place where the Gods can live, as Wotan hopes, “safe from dread and dismay” (*sicher vor Bang und Grau’n*), in which case the episode portrays a monarch driven into debt by his vast military expenditures.

An early parody of the *Ring*, summarized by Borchmeyer in *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre* as follows, helps place the work in its socio-political context.

Shaw was not the first to see an allegory of the modern industrial world in Wagner’s *Ring*, nor was he the first to suggest a semi-serious, semi-parodistic sequel to it. Not long after the first Bayreuth Festival, the Berlin writer Paul Pniower published (pseudonymously) a parody, *Der Ring der nie gelungen*, in which

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<sup>122</sup> Cooke’s analysis, originally issued in LP form, is now available in a 2 CD set “An Introduction to *Der Ring des Nibelungen*” (Decca/London 443 581-2) and in cassette tape form from the Wagner Society of New York. It draws most of its musical examples from the Solti recording of the complete *Ring*.

<sup>123</sup> Manya, who hosted “Ring Day” on WBAI FM in New York, during the February 23, 1997 broadcast explained the reason the Gods wanted to move into Valhalla: there they would have indoor plumbing for the first time.

Wagner's tetralogy is transformed into a drama about the contemporary world of city life and big business. Fasolt and Fafner are building contractors, Alberich and Mime are the founders of the banking firm of Albrecht & Co. Both, of course, are Jews, described by the gods as 'Zwiebeljungen' (literally, 'onion boys'), whence the corruption 'Nibelungen'. During the boom years of the early Reich (a period known as the *Gründerjahre*), the gods had an official residence built for them which was far beyond their means, and they are now on the verge of bankruptcy. 'Wodann', the father of the gods, complains: 'O how I sigh for the green *Gründerjahre*, / where one could build as one wanted!' The plight of the gods reflects the 'great depression' which overtook the German Reich following the collapse of the Vienna Stock Exchange in 1873. Thus the twilight of the gods becomes a symbol of economic depression. (The final part of *Der Ring der nie gelungen* is headed '*Katzenjämmerung*', a play on Wagner's title derived from the German *Katzenjammer*, meaning 'hangover' or 'depression'.) As such, the piece appears more of a parodistic actualization of political events than a satire on Wagner's myth of the Nibelung's ring.<sup>124</sup>

Many authors -- too many to quote them all -- observe the political-economic significance of Wotan's castle and Alberich's ring, without decoding the detailed allegory of the whole work. A good recent example is Karol Berger in *Beyond Reason* [2017] who explains that "the existence of the Ring (the private capital accumulating without any public scrutiny) threatens the stability of the castle (the legitimate if not perfectly just political rule of the traditional elites), while musically "the orchestral juxtaposition of the two motives suggested the close relationship, almost equivalence of these two symbols of power." Berger further notes, "The Ring and the money it stands for is threat to the castle and the politics it represents even after the payment has been made."<sup>125</sup> One danger of an incomplete *Ring* theory is that it leads to irrelevant questions, and Berger raises one of these when he observes Alberich threatening the Gods with the power of the Ring, "when your menfolk yield to my power, your pretty women, who spurned my wooing, shall forcibly sate the lust of the dwarf." Berger asks, "Has Alberich in this last sentence for a moment forgotten that he speaks to a god?" Well, no, Alberich hasn't forgotten; for the atheist Wagner literal Gods do not exist, and the "god" characters in *The Ring* are aristocrats but still humans. Many authors, including Berger, mistakenly say that in *The Rhinegold* there are no human beings, and humans first appear in *The Valkyrie* in the persons of Siegmund and Sieglinde. Yet Berger himself reminds us

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<sup>124</sup> *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theater*, p. 324. Borchmeyer's citation: "Pniower's parody is quoted in Dieter Borchmeyer and Stephan Kohler (eds.), *Wagner Parodien* (Frankfurt, 1983), 299-300. (Pniower published his satire under the pseudonym Paul Gisbert.)

<sup>125</sup> Karol Berger, *Beyond Reason*, pp. 70-71.



that it is not just Alberich who talks to Wotan with a lack of awe, but “Fasolt gives Wotan a civics lesson:

....‘What you are you are through contracts alone’.”<sup>126</sup>

To understand the awesome yet vulnerable position of the “Gods” in Wagner’s *Ring*, one must bear in mind the situation in the German lands at the time Wagner conceived the work. The class structure, according to Engels, “was, in Germany, more complicated than in any other country.” The feudal nobility was still a major presence in the 1840s, he continues:

While in England and France feudalism was entirely destroyed, or at least reduced, as in the former country, to a few insignificant forms, by a powerful and wealthy middle class, concentrated in large towns, and particularly in the Capital, the feudal nobility in Germany had retained a great portion of their ancient privileges. The feudal system of tenure was prevalent almost everywhere. The Lords of the Land had even retained the jurisdiction over their tenants. Deprived of their political privileges, of the right to control the Princes, they had preserved almost all their medieval supremacy over the peasantry of their demesnes, as well as their exemption from taxes. Feudalism was more flourishing in some localities than in others, but nowhere except on the left bank of the Rhine was it entirely destroyed. This feudal nobility, then extremely numerous and partly very wealthy, was considered, officially, the first “Order” in the country. It furnished the higher Government officials, it almost exclusively officered the army.<sup>127</sup>

Reading this last sentence brings to mind two aristocratic characters in *The Ring*: Froh as an example of how the feudal class “furnished the higher Government officials” and Donner, for “it almost exclusively officered the army.”

If the Dwarfs represent the *petty* bourgeoisie, it follows that the Giants are the *big* bourgeoisie: the big builders, the captains of industry and commerce, already established and prospering, often from government contracts. The size symbolism is plausible to an analyst acquainted with the class concepts rampant in 19th century revolutionary circles, and was even found in broader literary usage. Heinrich Heine, in his writings from Paris around 1831-32 (some of which Wagner probably read, as he was well acquainted with Heine and his work), used the same symbolism; as summarized by a biographer,

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid. pp. 74-75.

<sup>127</sup> Frederick Engels, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*, in Marx and Engels *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 302 (Moscow, 1969). Of course, Engels wrote this in collaboration with Marx, under whose name it was first published in the New York Tribune.

*Conditions in France* includes a memorable description of the Bourse, the Paris Stock Exchange, full of images of mechanical coldness. The international financial system was at the furthest remove from the heroic ideal of politics which Heine was reluctantly discarding. If Périer was a giant among modern statesmen, then the speculators of the Bourse, in Heine's opinion, are dwarfs; he also anticipates modern Zürich by calling them gnomes.<sup>128</sup>

Bernard Shaw's class analysis, in comparison, was not sufficiently variegated to encompass Wagner's symbolism of Dwarfs and Giants for the petty and big bourgeoisie (middle classes). Instead, Shaw relied on motivational types: "Really, of course, the dwarfs, giants, and gods are dramatizations of the three main orders of men: to wit, the instinctive, predatory, lustful, greedy people; the patient, toiling, stupid, respectful, money-worshipping people; and the intellectual, moral, talented people who devise and administer States and Churches."<sup>129</sup> Shaw was over-confident in starting this sentence with "Really, of course..."; while obscuring the class structure Wagner was trying to portray, it distorts some of the characters. For example, the Giants are not entirely "stupid" and the Gods are often far from being "intellectual" and "moral." Despite its flashes of insight and witty presentation, Shaw's treatment is an unsatisfactory political analysis of *The Ring*. Shaw "uses Wagner as he had previously used Ibsen to work out his own philosophical position," says Shaw biographer Michael Holroyd, explaining that Shaw had earlier divided human being into three classes (philistines, idealists, and realists) and now was using *The Ring* as a sounding board to redefine his preconceptions.<sup>130</sup> Perhaps Shaw should have read Marx and Engels more carefully to find the social categories relevant to *The Ring*. On the other hand, the American Communist writer Finkelstein, who presumably did study the Marxist sources in depth, still followed Shaw and missed the significance of the big fellows: "The giants, Fafner and Fasolt, who build the castle of Valhalla for Wotan and the gods, are portrayed as repulsive morons; a typical bourgeois view of working people. And the music given to such people bears out Wagner's lack of common sympathies, so different is it from Verdi's tender musical portrayal of the Gypsy woman, Azucena, in *Il Trovatore*, or the peasant

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<sup>128</sup> Ritchie Robertson, *Heine*, p. 60.

<sup>129</sup> Shaw, p. 22.

<sup>130</sup> Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw*, Vol. II, p. 11.

characterizations, so rich in folk music, of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*.<sup>131</sup> This was a grave misstatement of Wagner's intentions, because the Giants were supposed to be bourgeoisie philistines, the category of people for which Wagner (following Proudhon) had the most contempt, not humble workers (for whom Wagner did not lack sympathy, as shown in his horrifying portrayal of working conditions in Nibelheim).

From a broader political view, the Giants at the *Rhinegold* stage of economic evolution are the first generation of successful builders or industrialists, grown powerful through unrelenting efforts until they have begun to cut a larger figure on the European scene than many of the aristocrats. They are, as Shaw says, patient, toiling, and respectful — at least until those they respect and work for prove unwilling to share prestige and power. When the captains of business have attained the strength to build projects (Valhalla) on a scale undreamt of before, the established ruling class — the nobility symbolized by the Gods — wants to harness their productive power yet avoid accepting them socially. This is the second case of social rejection in the opera, the first of course being the Rhine maidens' put-down of Alberich; and it too has very serious consequences.

Ronald Taylor generalizes, "The race of the toiling Nibelungs represents the proletariat, the giants the propertied exploiting class."<sup>132</sup> This interpretation shows promise but, like most, vastly oversimplifies; what is overlooked by Taylor, as well as by Shaw, is Wagner's conception of the *process* of social evolution through the *Ring* cycle. At the stage of *The Rhinegold*, the Nibelungs are a petty bourgeoisie undergoing proletarianization, while the Giants have the traits of the first generation of big industrialists, whose fate is determined by a combination of circumstances including a rebuff by the snobbish aristocracy and a challenge from upstart entrepreneurs like Alberich arising from among the Nibelung tradesmen.

Such unsatisfying attempts to link *Ring* characters to broad social classes derive from fuzzy conceptions the authors have of the class structure in Germany in Wagner's time. Again, one must turn to Engels to get a

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<sup>131</sup> Finkelstein, *Composer and Nation: The Folk Heritage in Music*, p. 140.

<sup>132</sup> Taylor, *Richard Wagner*, p. 91.

clearer picture of the situation visible to Wagner. The position of the German bourgeoisie was complex, according to Engels' analysis:

The bourgeoisie of Germany was by far not as wealthy and concentrated as that of France or England. The ancient manufactures of Germany had been destroyed by the introduction of steam, and by the rapidly extending supremacy of English manufactures; the more modern manufactures, started under the Napoleonic continental system [when Napoleon for a time prohibited trade with Great Britain], established in other parts of the country, did not compensate for the loss of the old ones, nor suffice to create a manufacturing interest strong enough to force its wants upon the notice of Governments jealous of every extension of non-noble wealth and power. If France carried her silk manufactures victorious through fifty years of revolutions and wars, Germany, during the same time, all but lost her ancient linen trade. The manufacturing districts, besides, were few and far between; situated far inland, and using, mostly, foreign, Dutch or Belgian, ports for their imports and exports, they had little or no interest in common with the large seaport towns on the North Sea and the Baltic; they were, above all, unable to create large manufacturing and trading centers, such as Paris and Lyons, London and Manchester. The causes of this backwardness of German manufacturers were manifold, but, two will suffice to account for it: the unfavorable geographical situation of the country, at a distance from the Atlantic, which had become the great highway for the world's trade, and the continuous wars in which Germany was involved, and which were fought on her soil, from the sixteenth century to the present day. It was this want of numbers, and particularly of anything like concentrated numbers, which prevented the German middle classes from attaining that political supremacy which the English bourgeois has enjoyed ever since 1688, and which the French conquered in 1789. And yet, ever since 1815, the wealth, and with the wealth, the political importance of the middle class in Germany, was continually growing. Governments were, although reluctantly, compelled to bow at least to its more immediate material interests.... Thus, with growing wealth and extending trade, the bourgeoisie soon arrived at a stage where it found the development of its most important interests checked by the political constitution of the country.... The natural consequence was the passing of the whole mass of them into the camp of the Liberal Opposition, and the gaining of the first serious struggle of the German middle class for political power. This change may be dated from 1840, from the moment when the bourgeoisie of Prussia assumed the lead of the middle-class movement of Germany.<sup>133</sup>

The above description of the German bourgeoisie helps explain the characteristics of Wagner's Giants. The "backwardness of German manufactures" and the geographical isolation that Engels describes make them appear like country-bumpkins. While they lack the political power or social acceptance of their more advanced counterparts in England or France, they have grown too large for the German ruling class to ignore. Wagner's Giants are only too happy to work for the Gods, but the price they demand is to be brought into the godly society. The best way to get in is to marry in, and such is the contract that the Giants have reached with Wotan. Wotan's wife Fricka, who reminds Wotan that he has made an unacceptable bargain by agreeing to betroth to one of the

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<sup>133</sup> *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*, pp. 303-04.

Giants Fricka's own sister, Freia (the Goddess of eternal youth), epitomizes traditional values. In a letter to Uhlig, Wagner made a brief reference to "Wodan's struggle with his own inclination and with custom (Fricka)," one of the rare times he made explicit the symbolic reference of one of his dramatic characters even in a private letter to a close friend.<sup>134</sup> "Custom" is how Wagner apparently viewed such hallowed institutions as contract, marital fidelity and the incest taboo that Fricka tries to uphold in *Rheingold* and *Valkyrie*. Biographer Gutman is probably accurate in saying that the character Fricka reflects Wagner's feelings about his first wife, Minna, whom he had used in certain of his earlier operas as the basis of more sympathetic characters. After claiming that when drafting *The Flying Dutchman* Wagner originally called the heroine Minna and later shifted her name to Senta, Gutman summarizes how Minna

lives on in four operas. The young wife of Riga and Paris is Senta of the *Dutchman*, defying the bourgeois world, putting her fate into the hands of an unknown, cursed wanderer, and by her sacrifice, gaining immortality. The more mature Minna of Dresden appears as the doubting Elsa of *Lohengrin* and then is seen as the righteous, practical Fricka of *Rheingold* and *Valkyrie*, she who would pull from her husband the cloak of speciousness in which he attempted to wrap himself. Such was Wagner's disappointed view of Minna's character development from faith to doubt to censure. The noble and the pragmatic, qualities at times in conflict, were reconciled in Minna's personality, and this combination makes Fricka fascinating. Unfortunately, she is often interpreted as a scold, and, indeed, it was to this state that Wagner had reduced Minna by the close of their Dresden adventure.<sup>135</sup>

To be fair, it was not so much Minna who had changed her position, but Wagner, floating in political currents that Minna could not fathom. Similarly, it is Fricka who strives to keep things stable while Wotan insists that unprecedented deeds are required given the altered historical circumstances — much as Wagner must have thought he was doing when he joined in the 1848-49 revolution to Minna's total dismay.

It is a shrewd bargain the Giants have struck because with Freia their race will live on and inherit the earth while the Gods will be fated to extinction, since Freia's golden apples keep them vigorous. Indeed, the social transformation still pending in Wagner's time was exactly that: The old ruling aristocracy was fading and

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<sup>134</sup> Text of the letter is in Spencer & Millington, eds., *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, p. 233. ("Wodan" was later changed to "Wotan.")

<sup>135</sup> Gutman, *Richard Wagner*, p. 110.

the bourgeoisie absorbing its power. The female role of Freia can be captured only through an appreciation of women's place in this alteration of class structure. As the feminist historian Gerda Lerner reminds us, describing the change extending through 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, "the rising middle class, wealthy professional and businessmen, married into the gentry and followed the gentry mode of class formation by buying land and holding on to it through gendered marriage and inheritance arrangements that strengthened male control over land and wealth."<sup>136</sup>

Although the German ruling classes were able to hold out longer than their English or French counterparts against this trend, Wagner could see that the ultimate outcome was inevitable. So could Engels when he summarized the conditions in "Prussia and the smaller States of Germany, at the end of 1847" in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*:

The middle class, feeling its power, and resolved not to endure much longer the fetters with which a feudal and bureaucratic despotism enchained their commercial transactions, their industrial productivity, their common action as a class; a portion of the landed nobility so far changed into producers of mere marketable commodities as to have the same interests and to make common cause with the middle class; the smaller trading class, dissatisfied, grumbling at the taxes, at the impediments thrown in the way of their business, but without any definite plan for such reforms as should secure their position in the social and political body; the peasantry, oppressed here by feudal exactions, there by money-lenders, usurers, and lawyers; the working people of the town, infected with general discontent, equally hating the Government and the large industrial capitalists, and catching the contagion of Socialist and Communist ideas; in short, a heterogeneous mass of opposition, springing from various interests, but more or less led on by the bourgeoisie, in the first ranks of which again marched the bourgeoisie of Prussia and particularly of the Rhine province.<sup>137</sup>

Perhaps it was no accident that Wagner chose the Rhine region as the locus of action in this revolutionary drama, given that the Rhine Province in Germany (although a part of the Prussian State) was widely viewed as a progressive vanguard among the German lands, due probably in large part to its proximity to France. However, it is equally possible that Wagner just wanted to capture the romantic appeal of this great river, which to him symbolized Nature and whose name signified "pure."

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<sup>136</sup> Lerner, *Why History Matters*, p. 171.

<sup>137</sup> In Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 320.

Wagner's patron later in life, the "mad" King Ludwig II of Bavaria, was a last gasp of a perishing nobility in the German states. (He is so often referred to as "mad" that the pop-psychiatric designation almost seems part of his name; but it should be rejected as an inadequate diagnosis of an intelligent and troubled monarch.) His storybook castle Neuschwanstein, built in an era when castles were militarily obsolete but not yet paying tourist attractions, was a white elephant that drained the treasury and could have been a model for Valhalla. That castle, however, was built years after Wagner had worked out the plot of *The Ring*. A partial inspiration for his work may have been an attraction built under Ludwig II's grandfather, Ludwig I, who reigned from 1825 to 1848. It was called "Valhalla" and consisted of a replica of the Parthenon near the city of Regensburg along the Danube River. Begun in 1830, it was completed in 1842 and drained the Bavarian treasury. "The name for the temple, Valhalla, was the idea of Swiss-born historian, Johannes von Mueller, then enamored with Germanic legends and epics that were becoming popular in the early Romantic period," according to a 1988 travel piece.<sup>138</sup> Another of Ludwig I's monuments, the Befreiungshalle, is a domed structure that contains 34 10-foot-tall sculptures of Valkyries and goddesses of victory. That one was begun in 1842 and not completed until 1863, long after Ludwig I was forced to abdicate. Wagner must have known of the Bavarian "Valhalla," perhaps even visited it, *before* conceiving the plot of *The Ring*. Certainly he was riding the same wave of interest in Germanic mythology, and it is plausible that he was inspired by newspaper accounts of Ludwig I's Valhalla to choose the name for the castle-city to be constructed by order of the Gods in *The Ring*, with comparably disastrous impact on their treasury. In the Edda sagas, Valhalla is just one of Odin's homes, the one for the heroes chosen from the dead in battle — the Hall of the Chosen (Val-) — but Wagner shows Wotan making it his primary residence.

Impoverished and hounded by creditors for much of his life, Wagner had few scruples about accepting aid from the nobility when it was forthcoming. Indeed, he was notorious for living in an almost aristocratic style even when he could not afford it, and indulging even deeper when others were willing to foot the bill. He justified purchases of household frills like rich draperies by insisting that the proper environment was conducive

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<sup>138</sup> John Dornberg, "Two Temples To the Greats of Germany," *New York Times*, June 19, 1988, Travel section.

to his work as an artistic genius — after all, the world would be enriched by his productions. But even while enjoying the benefits of courtly patronage under Ludwig II, he was keenly aware that the nobles' privileges were anachronistic in late 19th century Europe and that, though they made a grander display, they were no more creditworthy than he was.

Just as the European nobility had to make deals with bankers and industrialists to get cities and monuments built, so the Gods in *The Rhinegold* have to deal with the Giants. However, when it comes to yielding their very future as a ruling class to a bunch of uncouth monsters, the price seems prohibitive. Instead of payment, deception and trickery are employed to make the captains of industry feel accepted by the nobility when in fact they are viewed as an inferior, uncultured breed. The Gods call the Giants oafs or churls. Early in the opera it becomes obvious that Wotan, once the almighty God who upheld the highest principles, has begun reluctantly to stoop to base means. According to DiGaetani, “Wieland Wagner has called Walhalla ‘Wall Street’ to indicate his conception of the gods as totally corrupt.”<sup>139</sup>

Here is where Loge's part becomes crucial. Loge, Wotan's chief adviser, is not of the Gods but has made himself indispensable to them. In class position Loge could be part of the “sub-nobility” that Maynard Solomon vividly describes in a biography of Beethoven; in the following citation some relevant characters in *The Ring* are interspersed in brackets:

As for Vienna's so called “sub-nobility” — the hard-working, well-educated state bureaucracy and the professionals [Loge] who rendered personal or cultural services to the high aristocracy — its members felt excluded from the main circles of power and resented imperial privilege but nonetheless cherished their position in the social fabric and maintained as their ideal an empire organized upon Enlightened principles. (Many of Beethoven's closest friends are to be found among these lesser aristocrats.) Their egalitarianism did not extend very far; they had no discernible sympathy for the artisans [Alberich, Mime] and unskilled workers [the other Nibelungs] who from time to time after 1792 demonstrated, struck, rioted, and were flogged and jailed by “Papa” Franz's [the Emperor's, i.e. Wotan's] armed forces [Donner]. Nor did the industrial and financial classes [the Giants] seriously challenge existing privilege; rather, their goal was to emulate the high aristocracy and share in its prerogatives [Fasolt especially, who wanted to marry Freia]. The wholesale ennoblement of bankers and financiers was sufficient to defuse most resentments based on caste differences. As for the peasantry, which constituted more than 60

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<sup>139</sup> DiGaetani in his introduction to *Penetrating Wagner's Ring*, p. 18. It should be borne in mind, though, that Wieland's purpose in drawing such analogies was to elicit sympathetic performances from his actor-singers, not to advocate a contemporary political-economic interpretation of *The Ring*; see Skelton, *Wieland Wagner*, p. 103 on this.



percent of the Austrian populace, it lived securely on the fertile agricultural lands of the entailed estates [Freia].<sup>140</sup>

A slightly different take on Loge is given by Karol Berger, who calls him “Loge, the god of fire (an intellectual, more intelligent and crafty than the rest of the lot and hence not much liked by them, but protected by Wotan on account of his usefulness) ....”<sup>141</sup> Another hypothesis is that Loge represents the lawyers, as he is supposed to be clever enough to fool the Giants into taking less than what they contracted for and being satisfied with it. Later I will suggest another interpretation, in which Loge symbolizes the Clergy.

According to conductor Georg Solti, “Loge is the only really intelligent one in the council of the gods; he foresees at this early stage the eventual ending that is to come in *Götterdämmerung*. He is also the most enigmatic character in the *Ring*. One is never really sure about his motives. He urges Wotan to get the ring back to the Rhine daughters, yet he describes its great powers so cunningly that he practically ensures that Wotan will not give it up willingly, once it is in his possession. Does he want to destroy the gods and also, presumably, himself as well? Or does he actually want to save them? That is never made clear.”<sup>142</sup>

When Wotan tries to hold Loge responsible for counseling that it would be possible somehow to wiggle out of giving up Freia, Wotan’s “noble pledge,” to the Giants, Loge makes a lawyerlike evasion:

With utmost care  
to ponder on ways  
by which to redeem it —  
*that* I did indeed promise:  
but that I would find  
what never befell and  
what’s bound to fail,  
how could such a promise be made?

Then Fricka admonishes her husband,

See what a treacherous  
rogue you trusted!

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<sup>140</sup> Solomon, *Beethoven*, p. 92.

<sup>141</sup> Karol Berger, *Beyond Reason*, p. 71.

<sup>142</sup> Solti, “A Few Words from the Conductor,” in DiGaetani, ed., *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring*, p. 406.

And the God Froh shouts,

Loge's your name,  
but I call you Liar [Lüge]!

Indeed, if we scan a German dictionary seeking Wagner's most probable referent for the name Loge, a near match turns up on "löge," a form of the verb "lügen," to tell a lie, deceive, be false. Close by it in the dictionary is also "loh," from the verb "lohen," to blaze or flare up, to flame. Once again, Wagner's proclivity for word association comes into play, and it apparently sparked the inspiration for Loge's name.

Loge's social-class background explains the ambivalence of his commitment to the aristocracy. We find out in Scene Three when he leads Wotan down to Nibelheim, that Loge is a "cousin of the Dwarf Alberich," hence a person of humble origin who has attained a high-level position as adviser to the ruling elite. There Loge reminds Alberich of their past relationship:

What use would your forgework have been  
if I hadn't heated your forge?  
I am your kinsman [*Vetter*]  
and once was your friend:  
so your thanks seem far from fitting!

But Alberich responds suspiciously:

So Loge now smiles  
on the light-elves [i.e., the gods],  
cunning rogue that he is?  
If, false traitor, you're now their friend,  
as you once were a friend to me,  
haha! — I'm glad —  
from them I've nothing to fear.

As DiGaetani indicates, "In this scene we also find out that Loge is a cousin of Alberich's, a highly significant relationship because of the similarities it suggests between the two characters."<sup>143</sup> Both are parvenus striving to break out of the lower-middle class, each by his own strategy. Wagner's own humble class origin is a crucial clue to the psychology of these characters. At various times in his life Wagner must have felt an equivocation similar

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<sup>143</sup> DiGaetani, p. 22.

to Loge's, as would any talented person patronized by an elite. In Rose's interpretation of *The Ring* as a work motivated throughout by an anti-Semitism that Rose declares inseparable from the revolutionary German thought of the time, Alberich is viewed as "the abhorrent Jewish counterpart of Wotan"; as for Loge, "he seems to be a higher Jewish type than Alberich, yet still (like Wagner's stereotype of the assimilated Jew) a trickster, manipulator and moral nihilist - rather, in fact, as Heine must have appeared to Wagner."<sup>144</sup> Thus, while interpretations of Loge's background vary in particulars, they have a common emphasis on the fact that he is a person of humble origins using his wits to ingratiate himself with the elite and feeling ambivalent about it at crucial turning points.

When the two Giants thump onto the stage to claim their reward, they are dismayed to find that Wotan does not intend to honor the original contract with them. Although the Giants modestly call themselves "dull-witted," Fasolt actually lectures the chief God on the importance of contract law in maintaining his legitimate authority, which is the essence of the feudal system:

What you are  
you are through contracts alone  
your power, mark me well,  
is bound by sworn agreements.  
Though you are wiser  
than we in our wits,  
you bound us freemen [*uns Freie*]  
to keep the peace....

The self-reference to "freemen" clearly places the Giants in the European social class hierarchy, which is why we can safely call them "middle class." Fasolt is infatuated with Freia's beauty, while his brother Fafner is more cynical and wants only to remove Freia's powers of rejuvenation from the Gods so that they will droop and die, leaving the field to the Giants. This reflects the two attitudes prevalent among the industrialists of Europe: some longed to join the aristocracy, others wanted to sweep it out of the way. The God Donner ("thunder"), wielding a hammer that can spark lightning bolts, is held back by Wotan when he begins to swing it at the Giants. To the

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<sup>144</sup> Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution*, p. 69 and Note 49 on p. 206.

accompaniment of the descending “spear motif,” Wotan lays down the law by interposing his great spear on whose shaft are carved contracts between the opposing parties — as ruler of the kingdom, Wotan is bound to maintain law and order.

Nothing by force!  
My spearshaft  
safeguards contracts:  
spare your hammer’s haft.

Rulers like Wotan cannot allow hotheads (one is tempted to say “dunderheads”) like Donner to use force arbitrarily to contravene laws and contracts, because that would undermine the legitimacy of their authority. White’s book *The Turning Wheel: A Study of Contracts and Oaths in Wagner’s Ring* is centered on Wotan, and it elaborates on the thesis that “the contract as an institution is just as important to the *Ring* as are the characters linked to each other by that institution.”<sup>145</sup> Students of history will recall that European feudalism was based on a contractual relationship between lord and subject, often put in writing, in which rights and duties of both sides were specified. Both parties were bound by the contract, which was theoretically enforceable in the King’s courts; a vassal could even sue the lord in some instances.



**Many are shafted but few get the point:** Wotan’s spear has contracts engraved on its shaft and a sharp point to enforce them. [Illustration from Gutman, *Richard Wagner*, p. 335, showing original costume design for first *Ring* cycle in Bayreuth.]

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<sup>145</sup> David A. White, *The Turning Wheel: A Study of Contracts and Oaths in Wagner’s Ring*, p. 9.

It will help the legions of Japanese *Ring* enthusiasts to understand the work if they bear in mind that the legal-contractual nature of European feudalism differentiated it historically from the feudalism in Japan that was based on an implicit moral contract. The *Daimyo's* (Lord's) relationship with his armed retainers was that he protected their smaller lands and privileges in exchange for their loyalty. In Japan it was not a legal-contractual relationship and there was no higher authority for enforcement; it was a moral relationship in which a vassal owed his lord unlimited loyalty but expected that the lord would treat him with fairness due his station. In practice, of course, the ideal of absolute loyalty was not always fulfilled and there were acts of betrayal, but there were also cases of vassals committing suicide upon the death of their lord, the highest mark of loyalty. The Japanese epic tale *Chushingura*, about the 47 *ronin* who swear to avenge the unjust death of their lord and sacrifice their own lives for that purpose, may be contrasted to European tales of knighthood in the values it extols.

This analysis of *The Ring* is inspired by the traditional saying, "God is in the details"; or, more specifically for this case, "the Gods are in the details." Froh ("joy"), another God who has several lines in the opera, seems to speak as a more genial counterpart to Donner. Donner and Froh represent the two sides state power presents to the world: the threat of military force on the one hand, and smiling diplomacy on the other. The fact that Wotan is obliged to restrain Donner's use of force in order to uphold the law is significant; Froh's ineffectiveness is also to be noted. What is portrayed in this short scene is the tense relationship in German society between the nobility and the emerging big bourgeoisie; the contention between these two classes had profound economic, political, and psychological dimensions. A historian's exposition of the class conflict helps clarify the situation in Germany:

In the nineteenth century tension and rapprochement between the tradition of the aristocracy and the economic power of the plutocracy are very noticeable. Not indeed in France, where the political power of the feudal stratum was radically eliminated by the revolution of 1789 despite subsequent reactions. But in England and Germany the political power of the aristocracy was still important. Each of these two countries solved the problem of the survival of aristocratic power in a different manner, but both did it by compromise. In England a comparatively harmonious solution of the relation between the two forces was found by a mutual acknowledgment of the rights of each.... For the English aristocracy cleverly pursued a

double tactic. It opened the doors for the reception of fresh blood from the middle-class, and it remained also in contact with capitalistic development by sending its younger sons into industry and commerce.

In Germany the amalgamation was far less harmonious and double-sided. The aristocracy mostly kept aloof from the new capitalistic development.... In Germany, aristocratic prestige at first was threatened by the economic and political rise of the middle-class, but was later made secure by the political impotence and failure of the bourgeoisie. The aristocracy to some extent envied, yet felt itself superior to, the middle-class. The bourgeoisie, in turn, partly hated the aristocracy for its hegemony but sometimes imitated its behavior. A peculiar psychological situation arose.<sup>146</sup>

It is this “peculiar psychological situation” that provides much of the drama of *Rhinegold*, as it did for much of 19th century German literature according to Bramsted. As a general rule, attempts at psychological analysis of *The Ring* would benefit from considering how the characters’ attitudes are shaped by their social class positions.

The Giants have been anxiously viewing Alberich the Dwarf as a potential competitor even before Alberich became important enough to come to Wotan’s attention. Big capitalists are constantly aware of the threat posed by small businessmen with great aspirations. When Loge reports to Wotan about Alberich’s theft of the Rhinegold, Wotan does not immediately see its relevance, but for Fasolt and Fafner this is news about one who has long been a thorn in their side. Fasolt (who has been listening attentively, according to the stage directions), says to his brother:

The gold I begrudge the elf;  
the Nibelung caused us much distress,  
but the dwarf has always slyly  
slipped from our clutches.

To which Fafner responds,

The Nibelung will think up  
new ways to harm us,  
as long as the gold gives him power.

And he goes on to question Loge about the significance of this new weapon that the Giants’ old rival has acquired. Loge explains more about the gold, saying that “once it is forged to a rounded hoop, / it helps to confer unending power / and wins the world for its master,” and now Wotan recalls that he too has heard of the gold and the fact that “power and riches / beyond all measure may be gained through a ring.” Suddenly this prize seems even more

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<sup>146</sup> Bramsted, *Aristocracy and the Middle-Classes in Germany*, pp. 10-11.

attractive to the Giants than what they originally bargained for. Accordingly, Fafner suggests, and Fasolt reluctantly concurs, that the Gods may keep Freia and pay the Giants in Rhinegold. The fact that the gold is not the Gods' to give is set aside at this point, as Loge has assured Wotan that they can swipe it — “What a thief stole / you steal from the thief.” Wotan resists at first, then goes along with Loge's plot, promising to be back by evening; until then, the Giants will hold Freia hostage.

Freia's abduction by the two Giants has an immediate impact on the Gods' realm. According to Wagner's stage directions, “A pale mist, growing denser, fills the scene; it gives the gods an increasingly wan and aged appearance.” As shall be seen shortly, Wagner used mist or fog [*Nebel*] to reference industrial smoke or smog. In this scene the mist has a physiological effect on the Gods, as aristocrats might be affected by air pollution to which they are not accustomed. More generally, the scene shows how the aristocratic class is devastated by the spread of industrialism into its domain. The mist — or for that matter the loss of Freia's apples — does not bother Loge, who keenly observes its effects on the Gods as Froh becomes joyless, Donner drops his hammer, and Wotan seems “suddenly old”:

I have it! Hear what you lack!  
Of Freia's fruit [Frucht]  
You've not yet tasted today:  
the golden apples  
in her garden  
kept you hale and young  
when you ate them every day.  
She who tends the garden  
has now been placed in pawn;  
on the branches the fruit [Obst]  
dries out and withers:  
soon it will rot and fall. —  
It troubles me less:  
in her niggardly fashion  
Freia always  
begrudged me the luscious fruit [Frucht]:  
for I'm only have as godlike  
as you, you immortals!

But you staked all  
on the youth-giving fruit [Obst],  
as the giants knew full well;  
your very lives

they've threatened:  
now look to ways of saving yourselves.  
Without the apples,  
old and grey,  
grizzled and grim,  
withered and scorned by the whole of the world,  
the race of gods will perish.

While the two terms, “Frucht” and “Obst” are generally interchangeable and Wagner probably employs both for verbal variety, “Frucht” can have a broader meaning: like “the fruit of the land” in the English sense, it also translates as “crop,” “harvest,” or “produce.” Freia's golden apples symbolize the agricultural bounty that sustained the feudal landowners, that allowed them to lord it over the rest of society. In this context it is significant that Wagner chose to make Freia's apples “golden,” which they were not in his mythological sources, thereby hinting at a parallel to the Rhinegold, an alternative source of wealth: as the fruit of the land was the source of the nobility's riches, so the mineral riches of the earth, transformed into economic wealth, would be for the bourgeoisie. Deryck Cooke with his usual thoroughness clarifies the fact that Wagner added the “golden” to the apples, but then he inexplicably denies the import of that small change:

The apples are not golden in the mythology, but apples which can be eaten in the normal way; nor are they said to be golden by any of the German scholars Wagner relied on, though they are sometimes referred to as golden in modern English books about Teutonic mythology. There seems to have been some influence of the idea of the golden apples of the Hesperides in Greek mythology — and there may have been in Wagner's case. It is really an unimportant point: in *The Ring*, the ‘gold’ of the apples can obviously have no symbolic connection with the gold of the ring, or that of the Nibelung treasure.<sup>147</sup>

In discussing Wagner's *Ring*, one should never conclude *a priori* that a detail is “unimportant,” nor should one use the word “obviously” in denying symbolic significance, since the import of the symbolism depends on one's interpretation.

Sociologist Reinhard Bendix, in his comparative study of historical development in Germany and Japan, emphasizes the importance of the German aristocracy's attachment to the land by contrasting the positions of the “warrior aristocrats” classes, the Junkers of Prussia and the Samurai of Japan. “The Junkers remained on the land

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<sup>147</sup> Cooke, *I Saw the World End*, p. 155 fn. Thanks to Naomi Dicker, a member of the Wagner Society of New York, for pointing out Cooke's error.



and lorded it over a servile peasantry as landowners, administrators, judges, prosecutors, and police officers, this combining personal dominance with governmental authority. In Japan the samurai were removed from the land in the sixteenth century, while the social structure of the village community remained intact.” This put the samurai in a position where they were able to contribute to, indeed lead, Japan’s rapid modernization and industrialization in the early Meiji period (the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, roughly the era of Wagner), while the German landed aristocracy was more reluctant.<sup>148</sup>

In a changing European economy, the means the nobility had of maintaining their high living standards was by selling off the productive lands that formed the base of their wealth and privilege, and/or allowing the rising industrialists to acquire a share of that property by marrying into the landed aristocracy. The relevant period is the one when “the aristocratic houses were relatively intact despite the encroachment of debts and the necessity of liquidating portions of their landed estates.”<sup>149</sup> Wagner's scene therefore compresses decades of history into minutes on stage. Wotan is struggling to stave off the inevitable decline of a ruling class with his increasingly desperate actions. White, in an analysis of contracts and oaths in the *Ring*, says that “we may discern how Wotan has lost contact with the mode of behavior proper to a ruler who governs by means of contracts rightfully honored. This loss of contact takes two forms: (a) Wotan lacks the power, or at least the devious ingenuity, to fulfill the contracts he has made; and (b) more important, he does not have the wisdom to make wise contracts in the first place.”<sup>150</sup> In political-economic terms, however, the underlying reason for (a) is that the economic basis for the ruling class’s power and legitimacy has declined relative to that of the classes with which it makes contracts; while (b) is explainable by the unrealistic economic goals of a ruling class that refuses to accept its weakened position. In this case, Wotan has promised Freia as payment for construction of Valhalla because he

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<sup>148</sup> Reinhard Bendix, “Preconditions of Development: A Comparison of Japan and Germany,” in R.P. Dore, ed., *Aspects of Social Change in Modern Japan* (Princeton, 1967). Bendix also covers this in his book *Nation-Building and Citizenship* (New York, 1964), Chapter 6.

<sup>149</sup> Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven*, p. 65, referring to the aristocracy in the Hapsburg Empire at the beginning of the 19th century when Beethoven had arrived in Vienna.

<sup>150</sup> *The Turning Wheel*, p. 44.

lacks other means of payment. White infers that “Wotan’s position of authority has been gradually weakened as the result of other contracts on which he has defaulted.” Evidence for this is that when Wotan tells his wife that he never really intended to carry out the contract with the Giants by giving them Freia, Fricka is not particularly surprised. “The blithe and open manner in which he confesses his insincerity to Fricka deepens the impression that this was not the first time Wotan has violated that institution by means of which he became guardian of the world.”<sup>151</sup> And there is other evidence White cites that legality has been corrupted, such as Wotan’s admission to Brünnhilde in *Walküre* that men were subject to laws based on “tarnished contracts.” In desperation Wotan the noble lord resorts to ignoble measures to save the situation. What the ruling class of Europe gave with its right hand, it tried to take back with its left, in order to preserve its hegemony. So Wotan approves Loge’s plot (“What a thief stole / you steal from the thief”) to go down to Nibelheim, capture the treasure, and use it to reclaim Freia.

### Scene Three

The musical transition leading into Scene Three might have been the first deliberate rendering of the industrial revolution into musical form. It is disturbing even to us, who have grown up with a musical beat driven by technology and amplified to ear-splitting levels, but its unconventionality must have caught listeners of Wagner's day completely unprepared. (Ludwig II was a teenager when he became enamored of Wagner's avant-garde music, and his senior counsellors viewed his obsession with about as much favor as today’s elders give to youth’s taste for heavy metal music.) Wagner was not exaggerating when he wrote to Liszt after working on the *Rheingold* music, “Believe me, nothing like this has ever been composed before,” and when he continued, “I feel that my music is terrible — a maelstrom of horrors and heights.”<sup>152</sup> English poet W. H. Auden showed keen insight when he penned these lines:

The genius of the loud Steam Age

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<sup>151</sup> *The Turning Wheel*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>152</sup> Quoted in Bekker, *Richard Wagner: His Life in His Work*, p. 267.

Loud *Wagner* put it on the stage<sup>153</sup>

As Wotan and Loge descend into the bowels of the earth, the audience hears blacksmiths' hammers banging on anvils: the incessant beat of the industrial revolution. This hammering is heard from behind the stage scene, not from the orchestra pit, and it is a noise never found in a musical production before Wagner. During the descent into Nibelheim (and later in the musical transition during the ascent out), there is even a short period when the orchestra instruments are suspended entirely, leaving only the hammering. It is the only time in the whole *Ring* cycle that an extraneous sound substitutes for the orchestra.<sup>154</sup> Obviously Wagner is trying to make an impression here; his stage directions are: "An increasing clamor, as of forging, is heard on all sides." Porges, observing the first production under Wagner's own direction, reports:

The powerful orchestral piece, depicting the descent from the mountain heights to gloomy, cavernous Nibelheim, was played with a tremendous weight and energy. The Valhalla theme creates an atmosphere of grandiose calm appropriate to the spirit of law and order, but now a daemonic force erupts revelling in its power to destroy the realm of freedom and love. The performance not only should but must be carried to the extreme of loudness for here symphonic art is sovereign since this alone has the power to represent the life-and-death struggle of supra-personal forces.<sup>155</sup>

When the orchestra comes back, that "hammering Work motive," as Porges labels it, is enlarged as if into machines pounding the rhythm, while Wotan and Loge enter a noisy, smoky industrial work place. Wagner associated "Nibelheim" with the German *Nebel* meaning "fog, mist, or haze" perhaps crossed with *nieder* which means "low, inferior or vulgar." In fact, in his *Wibelungen* essay of 1848, in which we can see ideas in formation that became central to *The Ring*, Wagner discussed the origin of the name:

In the religious myths of the Scandinavians, the term *Nifelheim*, i.e. Nibel or Nebelheim (the Home of Mists) comes down to us as a designation of the subterranean region of the Night-spirits, 'Schwarzalben', as opposed to the heavenly dwelling of the 'Asen' and 'Lichtalben' (Light-elves). These Black-elves, 'Niflûngar', children of night and death, burrow in the earth, find out its inner treasures, smelt and smith

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<sup>153</sup> W. H. Auden, *New Year Letter*, January 1, 1940, cited in Karol Berger, *Beyond Reason*, p. 62. In original *New Year Letter* (London, 1941) it appears on p. 66, lines 132-33, among vivid commentary on the depressing times in which Auden was writing, World War II having broken out in Europe. (American title: *The Double Man*)

<sup>154</sup> The late Robert Bailey, Professor of Musicology, New York University, pointed this out at a January 10, 1988 seminar on *The Rhinegold* held by the Wagner Society of New York.

<sup>155</sup> Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring'*, p. 27.

its ore. Golden gear and keen-edged weapons are their work. Now we find the names of the Nibelungen, their treasures, arms and trinkets, again in the Frankish chronicles, but with the distinction that the idea originally shared by all the German races here takes on historic ethnic significance.<sup>156</sup>

The German philologist Mone, whose research Wagner drew upon, had noted the shifting significance of “Niflung” or “Nibelung,” a native of Nifheim:

The root *niv* or *nov* expresses the damp location of a place. The Teutons make Nebel out of it, perhaps at first from the observation that fogs are more frequent at such places, but later they attached mythical concepts to the name that were quite foreign to it. Nevertheless these later notions became the prevailing popular view and very much obscured the simple origin.<sup>157</sup>

Wagner adopted the name and designed the scene to suggest the smog of the industrial zones.<sup>158</sup> He went to great lengths in Bayreuth to get the stage effects he wanted, using the engines of decommissioned locomotives to produce plenty of steam that was piped onto the stage.<sup>159</sup> The contrast with the clean, pure (“*rein*”) river, with Nature, is clear, making Wagner a precursor of environmentalists. Shaw was on the mark when he described the scene in Nibelheim:

This gloomy place need not be a mine: it might just as well be a match-factory, with yellow phosphorus, phosphy jaw, a large dividend, and plenty of clergymen shareholders. Or it might be a whitelead factory, or a chemical works, or a pottery, or a railway shunting yard, or a tailoring shop, or a little gin-sodden laundry, or a bakehouse, or a big shop, or any other of the places where human life and welfare are daily sacrificed in order that some greedy foolish creature may be able to hymn exultantly to his Plutonic idol....<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> In Osborne, *Richard Wagner: Stories and Essays*, p. 166.

<sup>157</sup> Franz Joseph Mone in an 1836 study quoted in Benvenaga, *Kingdom on the Rhine*, p. 160. According to Benvenaga, p. 20fn, “Wagner acknowledged [Mone’s work] as one of the sources for the *Ring Cycle*.” Cooke too (in *I Saw the World End*, p. 131) mentions Wagner’s use of Mone’s study, and he goes into more detail on the origins of the word “Nibelheim,” which meant “land of mist” (pp. 196-97). Mone — who is out of favor today — was apparently viewed with suspicion in his own time, too, by the more scientific philologists and folklorists. But Wagner, who probably knew that, enjoyed Mone’s creative speculations and probably drew on that freedom to create his own myth.

<sup>158</sup> Various references show Wagner’s distaste for polluted industrial areas. In an 1851 letter to Liszt cited in Newman’s biography (Vol. II, p. 271), Wagner says that the four-opera festival he envisions could only be performed “far from the thick smoke and the pestilential odour of industrialism in our city-civilisation.” And according to Rather (in *Reading Wagner*, p. 197), “In 1877, after concertizing in London, Wagner had described that great grimy town, in terms drawn from the *Ring*, as ‘Alberich’s dream ... Nibelheim, world-dominion, everywhere the press of steam and fog.’ The same words could be used of the new Germany, where the whip of Alberich was wielded by the so-called Iron Chancellor, Bismarck.”

<sup>159</sup> Gundula Kreuzer analyzes his techniques of producing such stage effects for Nibelheim and other scenes in *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera*, p. 167 etc.

<sup>160</sup> *The Perfect Wagnerite*, p. 8.

Cooke quotes Shaw approvingly, adding that “Wagner himself had such things on his mind during the gestation of the text of *The Ring*. In 1849, he wrote in *Art and Revolution*:

...our modern factories offer us the miserable spectacle of the deepest degradation of man: perpetual soul- and body-destroying toil, without joy or love, often almost without aim.”<sup>161</sup>

Later Cooke concludes that “it is clear that Wagner...poured all his detestation of the evils of capitalism into the creation of Alberich, and particularly into the creation of Alberich’s actions in the Nibelheim scene in *The Rhinegold* — symbols which could speak so much more powerfully for him than his political prose.” Cooke nevertheless takes a broader view than Shaw:

And yet it is impossible to sustain a purely socialist interpretation of the character and behavior of Alberich as those of the big capitalist boss, with the implication that the remedy for the situation is a political and economic one. It would restrict the range of Wagner’s symbolism too severely — and indeed, it was on this point that Shaw’s interpretation of *The Ring* finally came to grief: when he reached *The Twilight of the Gods*, in which Wagner’s projected remedy turns out to be, not a political or economic, but a metaphysical one, he could only dismiss that final work as a betrayal of all that had gone before. The truth is that beneath Wagner’s political and economic symbolism lies a fundamental psychological one, which goes to the heart of the matter. What the Rhinemaidens offer Alberich, in indicating the nature of the Rhinegold, is not wealth and luxury, but “measureless power” (*masslose Macht*). And Alberich himself makes clear, in his outburst to Wotan in Nibelheim, that what he is after is measureless power — mastery of the world: the treasure he amasses, by slave-driving his fellow-Nibelungs, is merely a means to that end (though the slave-driving itself is, of course, already a first satisfaction of his power-lust). The aim of the capitalist, the symbolism tells us, is indistinguishable from that of the pre-capitalist seekers for power. The real goal is not wealth, but domination of society; wealth is simply the means of achieving that domination.<sup>162</sup>

Cooke’s conclusions are quoted here at length for several reasons: First, because they perspicaciously point up some of the limitations of Shaw’s analysis. Second, because some readers will no doubt apply the same objections to our analysis which, while it is more detailed than Shaw’s and does not break down at the opening of *Twilight of the Gods* as his does, is nevertheless likewise a purely political analysis. Third, because Cooke poses an apparently attractive alternative explanation for those dissatisfied with the political one. Thus it is important to point out certain logical difficulties in Cooke’s reasoning. One is the false dichotomy that Cooke sets up between

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<sup>161</sup> *I Saw the World End*, p. 16.

<sup>162</sup> *I Saw the World End*, p. 271.

the political-economic “socialist” interpretation and the “psychological” one. These are different levels of analysis, complementary and not opposed if used properly: a psychological analysis of *The Ring* will be much stronger if the characters are taken to be social types in European class society. Cooke’s assertion that Alberich is really after “measureless power” rather than “wealth and luxury” sets up another false dichotomy, since only the most crude interpretation of capitalists’ motivations would hold that it is *either one or the other*; a businessman desiring only “wealth and luxury” would not be a successful capitalist — he would be too lazy! Most distressing, however, is Cooke’s blunder — in an otherwise inspiring analysis — in characterizing Wagner’s purpose when he writes, “Wagner’s projected remedy turns out to be, not a political or economic, but a metaphysical one.” Apart from the vagueness of the phrase “a metaphysical one” (is it “metaphysical” because most of the significant characters die?), Cooke’s conclusion reveals a startling assumption: that Wagner’s object was to provide a “remedy.” The operatic cycle is a *tragedy*. A political interpretation reveals Wagner’s concern that the world he knew would end up in catastrophe if trends advancing with apparently inevitable force in his time continued to play themselves out. (He was all too right.) In one sense, Wagner offered a clear remedy: At any point in the drama, the ring could have been returned to the Rhinedaughters (e.g. by Wotan or Siegfried, who are each begged to do so). Brünnhilde finally does this, after the complete tragedy has unfolded. Wagner’s insight, however, was that it could not happen until all the tragic consequences were experienced by mankind; until then, the desire for wealth and power would prevail. Beyond the end of the twentieth century we see that the ring has still not been returned to the Rhine, despite a scale of tragedies unimaginable even to Wagner. But here, bearing in mind the application of Wagner’s lesson to our time, we must return to *Rhinegold* Scene Three.

Wotan and Loge arrive in Nibelheim, where Alberich is gloating over his new-found power derived from the ring and using it to enslave the other Dwarfs. “The third scene of the opera, with Alberich wielding the master’s whip and the helpless Nibelungs mining gold in the dark shafts of Nibelheim, is a somber, frightening picture, obviously an allegory of the slaves of capitalism, the sweated labor, and the foul working conditions that

did exist in many a factory and mine.”<sup>163</sup> One of the most terrifying powers he has is the ability to make himself invisible. As Shaw interprets this part, Alberich’s workers “never see him, any more than the victims of our ‘dangerous trades’ ever see the shareholders whose power is nevertheless everywhere, driving them to destruction.”<sup>164</sup> Particularly victimized is the skilled Dwarf named Mime, portrayed as a pitifully amusing figure.<sup>165</sup> Mime is a craftsman, therefore of the petty bourgeois class. Some analysts see Mime as a Jewish caricature, and this claim will be analyzed in the *Siegfried* section; here it is enough just to flag this character as another one who was not present in the mythological sources and whom, therefore, Wagner felt perfectly free to define for his own purposes. Cooke’s thorough research showed that Wagner “deliberately created this situation: there is no basis for it in the mythology.” “Indeed,” Cooke continues, “there is no basis even for Mime’s identity as Alberich’s brother: his presence in this scene, and the part he plays in it, are the products of one of Wagner’s most subtle and complex manipulations of his source-materials.”<sup>166</sup>

Mime, under Alberich’s command, has just succeeded in fashioning a magical helmet called the Tarnhelm, which lets its wearer change shape or appearance at will. Shaw has a clever interpretation of the Tarnhelm, likening it to the top hats worn by the bourgeois of the period: dignified dress that made ruthless capitalists appear to be respectable members of high society. Working conditions in Nibelheim are appalling. Craftsmen who used to find joy in labor have been turned into prisoners of the mines and factories under Alberich’s relentless rule. Mime vividly describes the change in their lives from tradesmen to wage-slaves:

Carefree smiths,  
we used to fashion  
trinkets for our womenfolk,  
delightful gems and  
delicate Nibelung toys:

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<sup>163</sup> Edward Downes in Introduction to Robb translation of *The Ring*, p. xi.

<sup>164</sup> Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>165</sup> Patrice Chéreau is quoted in the liner notes to the *Siegfried* video (Philips 070 503-1): “Mime has to be funny and tragic, almost like a caricature, he has to be earnest and sentimental, a clown like Charlie Chaplin and pathetic like a downtrodden people.”

<sup>166</sup> Cooke, *I Saw the World End*, p. 199.

we cheerfully laughed at our pains.  
Now the criminal makes us  
crawl into crevices,  
ever toiling  
for him alone.  
Through the gold of the ring  
his greed can divine  
where more gleaming veins  
lie buried in shafts:  
there we must seek  
and search and dig,  
smelting the spoils  
and working the cast  
without rest or repose,  
to heap up the hoard for our lord.

“To heap up the hoard” is what Marxists would call “capitalist accumulation,” in an economy where all is subjugated to the profit motive, or (as capitalists don’t like to call it), greed. That the ring may represent science and technology, or at least an advanced management method, is indicated by its function, “to show where the treasure lies hid in the rocks.”

In *Art and Revolution*, penned at the same time Wagner was conceiving the *Ring* plot, he emphasizes the difference between a skilled artisan or craftsman with pride in his work and a worker forced to toil just for the money:<sup>167</sup>

The *true artist* finds delight not only in the aim of his creation, but also in the very process of creation, in the handling and moulding of his material. The very act of production is to him a gladsome, satisfying activity: no toil. The *journeyman* reckons only the goal of his labour, the profit which his toil shall bring him; the energy which he expends, gives him no pleasure; it is but a fatigue, an inevitable task, a burden which he would gladly give over to a machine; his toil is but a fettering chain. For this reason he is never present with his work in spirit, but always looking beyond it to its goal, which he fain would reach as quickly as he may.... The latter is the lot of the Slave of Industry; and our modern factories afford us the sad picture of the deepest degradation of man, -- constant labour, killing both body and soul, without joy or love, often almost without aim.

Mime's lament about his fate was very topical in the years when Wagner wrote *The Ring*. Heine's ballad *The Silesian Weavers*, which responds to the Weavers' Revolt of 1844 and describes the social misery of the weavers, is an example of the political poetry of the period. The transformation of the economy from craft to

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<sup>167</sup> Wagner, *Art and Revolution*, in Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, Vol. 1, pp. 48-49.



factory form of production was one of the most wrenching social changes. Not being the first to industrialize, the German lands were faced with the task of catching up, not only economically but also socially and politically. As Thorstein Veblen puts it, “in the second quarter of the nineteenth century [i.e. in Wagner's formative years], Germany was far in arrears, as compared with its neighbors to the west, but more particularly as contrasted with the British.” Veblen goes on to explain:

In industrial matters Germany was still at the handicraft stage, with all that is implied in that description in the way of institutional impedimenta and meticulous standardization of trifles. Measured by the rate of progression that had brought the English community to the point where it then stood, the German industrial system was some two and a half or three centuries in arrears — somewhere in Elizabethan times; its political system was even more archaic; and use and wont governing social relations in detail was of a character such as this economic and political situation would necessarily foster.<sup>168</sup>

A process that took a couple centuries in Britain, the world's industrial pioneer, had to be compressed into decades in Germany. That Wagner's *Ring* seems to depict human history from ancient to modern, yet simultaneously the particular history of Wagner's time and place, is a paradox resolvable in this context. As described in an excellent history of Germany in that era by Theodore Hamerow, the German states were faced with the difficult and controversial issue of whether to protect the artisan class from being decimated by factory competition. The political strength of the tradesmen versus the industrialists determined the legislative outcome in each state, and there were a number of policy shifts in the 1850s and 1860s, but in the end the tradesmen were doomed to a subordinate position in the economy.<sup>169</sup> Their fate, with a bit of exaggeration, was Mime's. The importance of the German petty bourgeoisie is captured most vividly by Engels in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*, in what could be description of the Nibelungs' precarious place in the class structure of *The Ring* and the psychological characteristics that result from it:

The small trading and shopkeeping class is exceedingly numerous in Germany, in consequence of the stunted development which the large capitalists and manufacturers, as a class, have had in that country. In the larger towns it forms almost the majority of the inhabitants; in the smaller ones it entirely predominates, from the absence of wealthier competitors for influence. This class, a most important one

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<sup>168</sup> Veblen, *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution*, pp. 64-66.

<sup>169</sup> Hamerow, *Restoration, Revolution, Reaction: Economics and Politics in Germany, 1815-1871* (Princeton, 1958), pp. 241ff.

in every modern body politic, and in all modern revolutions, is still more important in Germany, where during the recent struggles [1848-49] it generally played the decisive part. Its intermediate position between the class of larger capitalists, traders and manufacturers, the bourgeoisie, properly so called, and the proletarian or industrial class, determines its character. Aspiring to the position of the first, the least adverse turn of fortune hurls the individuals of this class down into the ranks of the second. In monarchical and feudal countries the custom of the court and aristocracy becomes necessary to its existence; the loss of this custom might ruin a great part of it. In the smaller towns, a military garrison, a county government, a court of law with its followers, form very often the base of its prosperity; withdraw these and down go the shopkeepers, the tailors, the shoemakers, the joiners. Thus, eternally tossed about between the hope of entering the ranks of the wealthier class, and the fear of being reduced to the state of proletarians or even paupers; between the hope of promoting their interests by conquering a share in the direction of public affairs, and the dread of rousing, by ill-timed opposition, the ire of a Government which disposes of their very existence, because it has the power of removing their best customers; possessed of small means, the insecurity of the possession of which is in the inverse ratio of the amount; this class is extremely vacillating in its views. Humble and crouchingly submissive under a powerful feudal or monarchical government, it turns to the side of Liberalism when the middle class is in the ascendent; it becomes seized with violent Democratic fits as soon as the middle class has secured its own supremacy, but falls back into the abject despondency of fear as soon as the class below itself, the proletarians, attempt an independent movement. We shall, by and by, see this class, in Germany, pass alternately from one of these stages to the other.<sup>170</sup>

Alberich, returning to the factory, discovers that he has some very important and possibly dangerous visitors, but his newly acquired power makes him bold and careless. Loge tricks him into demonstrating the Tarnhelm by making himself first into a huge dragon, then into a tiny toad. Wotan steps on the toad-shaped Alberich to restrain him while Loge snatches away the Tarnhelm and ties him up. The two drag the prisoner, who has resumed his normal form, back up to the aristocratic heights through a reverse musical interlude from that of the descent into Nibelheim.

#### **Scene Four**

Back up on the aristocratic heights, Wotan and Loge inform Alberich that the gold is the price for his freedom. Alberich agrees, knowing that as long as he has the ring he can replenish his stockpile, and he orders the Nibelung laborers to haul up the treasure from the caves. Even when Loge insists the Tarnhelm be part of the ransom, Alberich reluctantly yields. However, when Wotan demands the ring too, Alberich is crushed. He tries to

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<sup>170</sup> In Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. I, pp. 304-05.

resist, but Wotan “seizes Alberich and tears the ring from his finger with terrible force” (stage directions). As soon as Alberich is set free, he seeks revenge by pronouncing a fatal curse on anyone who holds the ring:

Just as it came to me through a curse,  
so shall this ring be accursed in turn!  
Just as its gold once endowed me  
with might beyond measure,  
so shall its spell now deal  
death to whoever shall wear it!  
No joyful man  
shall ever have joy of it;  
on no happy man  
shall its bright gleam smile;  
may he who owns it  
be wracked by care,  
and he who does not  
be ravaged by greed!  
Each man shall covet  
its acquisition,  
but none shall enjoy  
it to lasting gain;  
its lord shall guard it without any profit,  
and yet it shall draw down his bane upon him.  
Doomed to die,  
may the coward be fettered by fear;  
as long as he lives,  
let him pine away, languishing,  
lord of the ring  
as the slave of the ring:  
till the stolen circlet  
I hold in my hand once again!

This is the curse of capitalism, where everyone becomes subordinated to the endless quest for profit — most of all the capitalists themselves.

The Giants will accept as payment for construction of Valhalla, instead of the Goddess Freia, enough gold to cover her, which turns out to be all of it, including the Tarnhelm. Even the ring, which Wotan has quickly come to treasure, is demanded as part of the ransom to plug the last little crack in the pile of loot through which Freia’s “starry eye” still shines on Fasolt. In David A. White’s legalistic analysis of the opera, “The giants are sticklers for contractual details.”<sup>171</sup> Wotan is stubbornly unyielding until unexpectedly a new figure appears out of the

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<sup>171</sup> White, *The Turning Wheel: A Study of Contracts and Oaths in Wagner’s Ring*, p. 43.

ground: Erda, the earth mother, who advises him to abandon the ring since the Gods are in any case fated to pass away.

All things that are — end.  
A day of darkness dawns for the gods:  
I counsel you: shun the ring!

She refuses Wotan's entreaties to explain more, and disappears back into the ground, leaving the Gods, Loge, the Giants, and us, with a methodological quandary to ponder. If the doom of the Gods is inevitable, i.e., the course of the *Ring* cycle from the building of Valhalla through *Götterdämmerung* is predetermined, then why does Wotan struggle to change its course? Or, in dramatic terms, where is the real drama of *The Ring* if all that happens is inevitable and the characters have no choice? Commentator Michael Tanner writes about Erda in this scene:

She also produces what has always been seen as *the* riddle of the *Ring*: to music of intense gravity, she warns that everything that is will end, and that the gods are doomed, it seems, in any case. So what is the motive for Wotan to give up the Ring if he can't, even by doing that, save the situation? Whatever the answer, that conundrum lies at the heart of the *Ring*.<sup>172</sup>

The methodological question Tanner is raising here is, interestingly, similar to the one that many critics raise against Marxism, and it arises out of the Hegelian historical view common to both Marx and Wagner.

Commentators who do not fully understand his method of doing social science like to accuse Marx of logical inconsistency: He seems to say that proletarian revolution is inevitable, yet he expends vast efforts advocating and organizing to convince the working class to carry it out. Space does not permit an in-depth discussion of Marxism here, but suffice it to say that the alleged contradiction is resolved by a fuller understanding of Marx's analytical method, which purports to identify the most powerful *tendencies* in historical development of societies and isolate them methodologically for analysis, with the understanding that wisdom in political action comes from harnessing these powerful forces. In fact, all scientific laws, whether in physical or social sciences, can only be expressed as *tendencies* that are true when other factors are held constant; unfortunately, social scientists usually

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<sup>172</sup> Tanner, *Wagner*, p. 117. Italics in original.

cannot experiment by holding other factors constant, which is why it is so difficult to identify the laws of sociology, economics or political science.

Another crucial insight Marx gained from his Hegelian studies is that the *consciousness* of mankind develops out of historical experience, to a higher level in each historical stage. Marx's great addition to Hegel in this regard was to show that material, economic experience is key to shaping this consciousness, so that, for example, the shift from an agricultural to an industrial society would change people's belief systems, norms of behavior, and values. Marx is considered an originator of a field that came to be called Sociology of Knowledge. The fact that human thought is affected by socio-economic factors is another reason for the difficulty of generalizing in the social sciences; one must become aware of one's own biases and their origins.

It is precisely this aspect of the Hegelian (and Marxist) method that is the key to resolving what Tanner and some others see as the great riddle of the *Ring*. In our socio-historical analysis, the all-knowing Erda represents the earthy wisdom of the agricultural society on which the feudal civilization of the nobility is based, a society in which wealth and status was gained primarily through land ownership. At this stage in history depicted in *Rhinegold*, she is an apparition who arises from the earth by her own volition, and Wotan respects her advice; two generations later, in *Siegfried*, Wotan will have to awaken her forcefully, only to find her confused counsel no longer useful. So Erda depicts the land-based value system in its last stages. White, in his study of contracts and oaths, emphasizes that Wotan's relationship even with Erda is contractual in a sense; as Wotan will explain to Brünnhilde in *Walküre*, the god used "love's magic" to secure information from Erda, at the same time making a "pledge" to her, that pledge apparently being an agreement that Erda would bear Brünnhilde.<sup>173</sup> (It is not clear whether the eight other Valkyries are mothered by Erda or by other earthly women Wotan dallied with.)

Knowledge [*Kunde*] I gained from her;  
from me though she gained a pledge [*Pfand*]:  
the world's wisest woman  
bore to me, Brünnhilde, you.

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<sup>173</sup> *The Turning Wheel*, pp. 55-56.

The school of economics that gave theoretical expression to this was the Physiocrats, who “regarded land, or agriculture, as the source of all wealth because they believed that only agriculture produced a clear surplus over the costs of production.... the physiocrats recognized the landowners as a legitimate class entitled to rent on their lands, because they or their ancestors were the first ones to clear it and prepare it for farming. In this sense, the physiocratic school accepted the prerevolutionary structure of society.”<sup>174</sup>

Again, the essence of feudalism is contractual relationships, and when the feudal era finally crumbles — the time depicted in *The Ring* — a major issue is which contracts are still valid. The Wotan-Erda relationship, depicted as a love-contract, shows the typical relationship between a monarch and the landed agricultural interests that are the basis of the economy in that stage of history. Brünnhilde and the other Valkyrie sisters, we shall see, are created to be means of preserving this arrangement.

This was a time when the European nobility was already fascinated by new sources of economic power (represented by the ring) but, limited by its feudal consciousness, was unable to appropriate these as its own and in a pinch would turn back to the old values. Eventually in the course of the *Ring* Wotan comes to realize that he, and the Gods, must accept the course of history. The real drama of the *Ring* cycle comes from the developing *consciousness* of its main characters; the *events* seem to take place inevitably given the limitations of the characters’ understanding at each stage. A true appreciation of the work compels the realization that it portrays the changing consciousness of the main social classes of Europe in Wagner’s own era. Tanner, later in his book quotes a key passage from Wagner’s famous 25/26 January, 1954 letter to his revolutionary comrade Röckel (then in prison) explaining the *Ring*:

Wodan [as he was still called at this stage] rises to the tragic heights of *willing* his own destruction. This is all we need to learn from the history of mankind: *to will what is necessary* and to bring it about ourselves.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, Fifteenth Edition, 1991, Volume 9.

<sup>175</sup> Tanner, p. 169. A full translation of Wagner’s long letter is in Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, pp. 300-13. Emphasis is in the original letter.

Wagner's reference to "the history of mankind" is especially pertinent here for those who doubt that the *Ring* is designed to portray actual history.

As soon as the Giants have the ring, inevitability of events takes over again as the curse claims its first victim. The two Giants quarrel over division of the loot; Fafner in a fit of rage slays his brother Fasolt and, with no apparent regrets, gathers up all the hoard. The economic lesson is that big businessmen, while they may have fraternal relations and cooperate on major projects, are locked in deadly competition and do not flinch from driving each other to bankruptcy to gain the whole reward for themselves. The more ruthless drive out the more tender; as Lewsey points out in *Who's Who and What's What in Wagner*, the difference is drawn in the music as well:

Wagner invests the character of Fasolt with some of the most sympathetic music in *Das Rheingold*. Fasolt embodies the very values that Wotan has so crucially jeopardized by his deceit. When Fasolt succumbs to his brother's staff, the fatal undermining of the ethical basis of Wotan's autonomy is clear.<sup>176</sup>

The lesson that Wotan does not yet fully learn will resound through the *Ring* cycle almost to the very end, leaving death and destruction, until (in a close parallel to Fafner-Fasolt) Hagen kills his half-brother Gunter and leaps to his own death in a last reach for the ring.

In the triumphant yet foreboding conclusion to *The Rhinegold* the Gods parade into Valhalla across a rainbow bridge, while the Rhinedaughters below wail at the loss of their treasure: Nature has been violated. Preceding the Gods' crossing of the rainbow bridge into Valhalla, Donner finally does get to strike a hammer blow, attempting to freshen the atmosphere that has been muddled by the Gods' questionable behavior. Wotan has just admitted, "With evil wage / I paid for the building," and now Donner (in his only positive role in the *Ring*) prepares to clear the air:

A sultry haze  
hangs in the air;  
its lowering weight  
lies heavy upon me:  
the leaden clouds  
I'll gather into a raging storm;

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<sup>176</sup> Lewsey, p. 62.

it will sweep the heavens clear.

Later Wagner used a similar political metaphor in advising King Ludwig II, as Josserand reports in a political biography of the composer:

The political situation in Germany was rapidly approaching the crisis which exploded into open warfare on June 14, 1866. On April 29<sup>th</sup> Wagner urged Ludwig to rouse himself sufficiently to deal with the “circle of narrowness, foolishness, frivolity, superficiality, untruthfulness, faithlessness which ends in complete misery.” Referring to the tense political situation he asked the king, “Will the clouds gather and a terrible thunderstorm clear the atmosphere?”<sup>177</sup>

Out of the thunder storm appears a rainbow bridge that the Gods march across into Valhalla. Only Loge is able to sense that they are headed for disaster, but after some equivocation he seems to go along with them, having nowhere else to turn. At this stage of the drama Loge is the character with the most conscious grasp of the course of events, made possible no doubt by his position suspended between two classes — nobles (Gods) and commoners large (Giants) and small (Dwarfs) — which also explains his hesitation about which way to go. Loge does not appear on stage again in the *Ring*; only his fire will be invoked. Other characters have to develop consciousness through their own experience, a point Wagner also emphasized in his letter to Röckel: “*Experience* is everything.”

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<sup>177</sup> *Richard Wagner: Patriot and Politician*, p. 228. Josserand cites a Wagner letter to Ludwig written from Triebtschen, April 29, 1866.



## II. THE VALKYRIE

### Act One

Careful listeners have pointed out that the storm music opening Act One of *The Valkyrie* is derived from the spear motif.<sup>178</sup> As it has been made clear in *The Rhinegold* that Wotan's spear stands for the rule of law and sanctity of contract, it follows that the storm out of which Siegmund emerges seeking shelter is a political upheaval and he a refugee. Cooke has pointed out in his musicological analysis of *The Ring* that, Siegmund being an outlaw, his motif is opposite that of Wotan's spear motif, or more specifically, Siegmund's motif grows out of the first several notes of the spear motif but checks and opposes it.<sup>179</sup> That Donner's motif too underlies the storm music is not surprising since the god of thunder would be busy in a storm, but our interpretation that Donner represents the state's threat of military force has added relevance in this new context. The character Siegmund is thus an exhausted revolutionary agitator escaping after a defeat at the hands of his class enemies — similar to the way Wagner had to flee to avoid a possible death sentence after his part in the abortive 1848-49 revolution in Dresden. Siegmund collapses at the home of master Hunding and wife Sieglinde, Hunding's domain being comparable to another state in Europe where Hunding represents the ruling class and Sieglinde the oppressed subjects. Lewsey's *Who's Who and What's What in Wagner* characterizes Hunding this way:

Lacking imagination or creative ambition he epitomizes a worldly morality, bound by convention and answerable solely to the letter of the law. If he is judged by these standards he has right on his side throughout. But his marriage to Sieglinde is a loveless one, Sieglinde having been purchased from traders. He thus epitomizes the bourgeois ethic of a commercial society: the very reverse of everything Siegmund (and by association Wagner) stands for.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Peter Allen in his narration on the tape *Die Walküre* in the series "Talking About Opera" (MET 602), 1988, says that "the storm symbolizes the violence and hostility that we will learn have always confronted Siegmund, a hostility created by Wotan to toughen the hero, a hostility that also creates in Siegmund a melancholy yearning for love."

<sup>179</sup> Deryck Cooke, "An introduction to *Der Ring des Nibelungen*", CD version, Disk 1, Track 12.

<sup>180</sup> Jonathan Lewsey, *Who's Who and What's What in Wagner*, p. 107.

And his “bourgeois ethic” comes clear when, introducing himself, Hunding brags about his socio-economic status, intoning “Hunding’s the name of your host; if you turn your steps to the west of here, in wealthy homesteads kinsmen dwell who safeguard Hunding’s honor.”

Sieglinde’s first words of surprise upon finding the weary traveler in her domain, “*Ein fremder Mann!*” could in this political context be translated as “A foreign man!”; after all, the German adjective *fremd* has this meaning too. Of course, none of the major English versions use that politically loaded translation (Spencer uses “An unknown man!,” Porter renders it “A stranger here?,” and so on). The unhappy Sieglinde feels immediate sympathy for the stranger, drawn to him by an irresistible attraction as she offers food and drink. Hunding, returning home, is suspicious of the uninvited guest and is struck by the family resemblance to his wife. He inquires as to the visitor’s background. Siegmund, not yet knowing his own real name, calls himself “Wehwalt” (ruler of woe). An analyst of the language of *The Ring*, Oswald Panagl, takes note of these “spontaneous compounds which a hero may use to find his bearing, elevating his present frame of mind to the status of an honorary epithet.” It would be more appropriate in our context to say “elevating it to a political level.” Panagl cites Siegmund’s statement here as a prime example:

Friedmund I may not call myself;  
Frohwalt fain would I be:  
but Wehwalt I must name myself.

Panagl then explains, “Each of these names comprises two elements, the first of which (*Friede, froh* and *Weh*) mean, respectively, ‘peace’, ‘glad’ and ‘woe’. Of the second element, *-mund* derives from Old High German *mund* and meant the power exercised by a householder over the members of his household, while *-walt* is from the Old High German verb *waltan* meaning ‘to wield power over’: in both cases then, the suffix means ‘someone with power over’ the emotion or state described by the first element of the name.”<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Oswald Panagl, “Archaic and Archaising Elements in the Language of Wagner’s ‘Ring,’” *Programmhefte der Bayreuter Festspiele 1988*, Vol. IV, p. 116.

Andrew Porter, after he produced an elegant singable translation of the libretto for the English National Opera, acknowledged this difficulty: “The proper names were a special problem. They mean things. In *The Ring* I would be a doorkeeper. Both for better and for worse I decided against ‘translation’ (could Mann’s ‘woeful the wolfcub’ sound right? Should the Walsung twins be called Victor and Victoria?) but on the other hand tried to ‘gloss’ the meanings wherever the text...permitted.”<sup>182</sup>

Siegmond recalls that his mother was killed by bandits and he was separated from his twin sister when a child; his father began to raise him, then disappeared. From the musical motif (the Valhalla theme) we the listeners know immediately what Siegmund does not — that he is a child of Wotan, the product of one of that great God’s earthly escapades. The not-unusual phenomenon of aristocrats producing illegitimate children through liaisons with humble women (maidservants, peasant girls, etc.), then abandoning the kids to the lower class, was something Wagner wanted to include in the opera. His piquant interest in cross-class procreation had an autobiographical element. As biographer Gutman points out, Wagner was conscious that his mother, Johanna, “was actually an illegitimate daughter of Prince Friedrich Ferdinand Constantin, brother of Grand Duke Karl August of Weimar. A rather self-indulgent young nobleman with a talent for music, Constantin fathered Johanna before his sixteenth birthday” in a liaison with a humble woman, a tanner’s daughter.<sup>183</sup> An alternate interpretation holds that Wagner misunderstood what his mother was hinting at and did not suspect “what Johanna was really trying to say, namely that she was not Constantin’s daughter but his mistress decades before Richard was born.”<sup>184</sup> However, what had an impact on Wagner’s work and life was what he *believed* about his family origins.

Indeed, in *My Life* Wagner alludes to his mother’s heritage when he says that “she had been placed in a select boarding school in Leipzig and enjoyed there the protection of one whom she called ‘a high fatherly friend,’

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<sup>182</sup> Andrew Porter, “Translating *The Valkyrie*,” in DiGaetani, ed., *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring*, p. 401.

<sup>183</sup> Gutman, *Richard Wagner*, p. 10. He adds, “The affair was an open secret.”

<sup>184</sup> Köhler, *Wagner’s Hitler*, p. 32, citing a 1989 article by Volker Sigismund.

and to whom she afterwards referred as a Weimar prince who had been very kind to the family....”<sup>185</sup> Whatever might have been Wagner’s self interest in promoting the idea that he had noble blood, especially considering that he dictated the autobiography at the request of the royal “friend” (note the similar usage of this term for a royal person) Ludwig II, apparently it was not something that Wagner was just imagining. Whether the knowledge helped him attain the supreme self-confidence he showed in dealings with people of any class, or stimulated his love of princely home furnishings (usually at others’ expense), is a matter best left to the psychologists. Of most interest to us is what Wagner’s grandson Wieland considered “the strong autobiographical element in his grandfather’s work.” Wieland would base aspects of his postwar stagings of the operas on interpretations he derived from biographical sources.<sup>186</sup> Or as Nattiez puts it, “Certainly, Wagner was keen to break down the barriers between life and art, as is clear from the names he gave to his children—Isolde, Eva, and Siegfried.”<sup>187</sup> Therefore it is extremely significant that he showed awareness of his (illegitimately) noble ancestry; Grey adds a 1991 postscript to his translation of Wagner’s autobiography, including the following:

“Strangely enough,” Richard Wagner remarks of his mother (Page 11), “she had been placed in a select boarding school of Leipzig and enjoyed there the protection of one whom she called ‘a high fatherly friend,’ and to whom she afterwards referred as a Weimar prince who had been very kind to the family in Weissenfels. Her education in that establishment seems to have been interrupted as a result of the death of this fatherly friend.”

These lines have received close and rather baffled scrutiny over the years, even leading to the contention that Wagner was in fact the grandson of Prince Constantin of Saxe-Weimar, younger brother of Goethe’s patron, the Duke Carl August. This contention was exploded, however, when it became clear beyond reasonable doubt that Johanna Rosine Pätz had been born on 19 September 1774 — when Prince Constantin, living in Weimar under close tutorial guidance, was only fifteen years old. The mystery remained unresolved until publication in 1984 of Volker Sigismund’s biographical study of Constantin, based upon the most scrupulous perusal of the ducal family records in Weimar.

These records demonstrate that Wagner’s mother had been one of the Prince’s many mistresses — no less than seven in the area of Weissenfels alone. Her removal to Leipzig — to a boarding house, not a boarding school — and her resulting estrangement from her family were demonstrably the result of this

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<sup>185</sup> *My Life*, p. 11. The editor, Mary Whittall, of the Gray translation adds a note explaining, “a Weimar prince”: “Prince Constantin of Saxe-Weimar (1758-1793). Johanna Rosine Pätz, daughter of a baker in Weissenfels, became his mistress early in 1790 and shortly moved to Leipzig at his behest, where he paid her living expenses. Upon the death of the prince, she received a final payment of 50 Reichstaler from the Ducal treasury in Weimar.”

<sup>186</sup> Skelton, *Wieland Wagner*, p. 140.

<sup>187</sup> *Wagner Androgyne*, p. 286.

liaison, which began in her sixteenth year. Upon the early death of Constantin in 1793, she was left “to fend for herself” — as Carl August himself put it in approving a final payment to her.

The implications for Wagner biography of these facts are profound....<sup>188</sup>

We might add that the implications for interpretation of *The Ring* are profound. In her tirade of accusations, Wotan’s wife Fricka says that while he has strayed in the past, at least he maintained some dignity for his noble family, but

now that you’ve fallen  
to fathomless shame,  
and fathered a couple  
of common mortals,

the betrayal is too much to bear. In an irony holding deep significance for Wagner personally, the hero who would finally bring down the Kingdom was to spring from the King’s own spermatozoa. Wagner’s identification with Siegfried has an element of the composer’s belief that he himself — who would revolutionize art — stemmed from a noble ancestor.

Returning to our place in the story, we find Siegmund introducing himself as a lonely dissenter: “...ever was I treated as an outcast, ill fortune lay upon me. Whatever I held to be right others thought was wrong; to whatever seemed to me bad others gave their approval. (animatedly) I was caught up in feuds wherever I went and met by anger wherever I fared.” Wagner is portraying someone way beyond the ideological mainstream, like the revolutionaries he threw in his lot with in 1848-49.

Hunding identifies Siegmund as the enemy his kinsmen (in this case the rulers of a neighboring principality) had been battling, and dictates that the next morning Siegmund must fight him to the death. That night Sieglinde, having given Hunding a sleeping draught, returns to where Siegmund is lying and tells him about a sword buried deep in a tree standing right there in Hunding’s home. Siegmund has been promised a powerful weapon in his hour of need by his father. In fact, the music here recalls that it was Wotan who, in disguise, plunged the sword into the tree at Sieglinde’s wedding ceremony. That Siegmund names the sword

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<sup>188</sup> November 1991 Afterward to *My Life*, pp. 758-59.

“Notung” (“Needful”) shows that it represents the force needed to prevail in a crisis – for Siegmund the way to get Sieglinde and himself to safety, for us political interpreters the historical necessity of a forceful revolution. Wagner said in his autobiography that by 1848 he “had arrived at the conclusion that in matters concerning the people there was no point in relying on reason or wisdom, but rather solely on the real power to act, such as is aroused only by enthusiasm or the dictates of necessity.”<sup>189</sup> The musicologist Robert Bailey has pointed out that what is commonly called the “sword motif” actually has a broader significance, as shown by the fact that it first appears near the end of the previous opera, *Rheingold*, when Wotan is about to lead the Gods into Valhalla: Here Wotan (“very resolutely, as though seized by a grandiose idea,” according to the stage directions) sings “Thus I salute the stronghold / safe from dread and dismay.” The so-called “sword motif” here is invoked to signify the “grandiose idea” of using force to resolve world problems. Bailey holds that it is more appropriate to regard the sword as a visual symbol for the musical motif of a “great deed” than the conventional view that names the motif after the physical object (that is, the “signifier” and the “signified” should perhaps be reversed).<sup>190</sup> This view is supported by Porges’ notes on Wagner’s rehearsal of the first *Ring* cycle: “As the new theme is sounded, signifying a new deed to be accomplished in the future [sword motif] Wotan, seized by a great thought, picks up the sword left by Fafner and, pointing to the castle, cries ‘So grüss ich die Burg, sicher vor Bang’ und Grau’n!’ [‘Thus I salute....’ quoted above].”<sup>191</sup> Although Wagner had Wotan pick up an actual sword for extra dramatic effect — a gesture often omitted from present-day productions — the idea behind the theme clearly was the “new deed” rather than the sword itself.

The grandiose idea, or great deed, is in Wagner’s conception necessitated by the historical circumstances. During March 1849 — the same month that Bakunin arrived in Dresden and Wagner was involved in intense

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<sup>189</sup> *My Life*, p. 363.

<sup>190</sup> Robert Bailey, Professor of Music, New York University, in a lecture at the Wagner Society of New York’s annual seminar, January 9, 1999.

<sup>191</sup> Porges, p. 39.

political discussions with him, Röckel, etc. — Wagner wrote a poem entitled “*Die Noth*”; Josserand offers a synopsis of the poem, in which *Die Noth* is translated as “Want” (perhaps “Need” or “Necessity” would be better):

From now I recognize *one* God only — Want! He alone can free us from fraud and greed and idle pleasures. The fire of men’s age-long sufferings will kindle thy torch, which shall destroy all sham and greed. Thy torch shall sever our bonds, it shall consume the robbery wrought by paper and parchment. Briefly the firebrand burns, cities become skeletons, and the power which enslaved us is gone! Those who lived on the toil of others are now without wealth — they must learn to find their daily bread, and Want shall be their teacher! For though all be ruin, life will spring anew; humanity is freed of chains, nature and man are restored — as one! What separated them is destroyed! The dawn of liberty has been kindled by — Want!<sup>192</sup>

Several ideas adumbrated in this radical poem are elaborated in the *Ring* cycle, starting with the concept of *Die Noth* that is fundamental to Siegmund’s actions (embodied in the name he gives his sword, *Nothung*) as well as to Wotan’s explanations. Then there is the placing of this materialistic-based concept as the only “God.” Next we find the cleansing fire that will (at the end of the *Ring* cycle) finally free humankind and restore it to “nature” (the Rhine River that overflows all after the *Götterdämmerung* fire burns down Valhalla). Not to be overlooked too in this poem is the reference to “robbery wrought by paper and parchment,” which, we may infer, is a reference to Proudhon’s “property is robbery” slogan that, I have argued above, is the underlying meaning of Alberich’s stealing the gold. Thus, the basic ideas of the *Ring* from its very beginning to its very end are alluded to in Wagner’s March 1849 poem, conceived during his most revolutionary mood.

The concept of *die Not* [or *Noth*] is expanded in the longer theoretical work *The Artwork of the Future* where, according to Boucher, it signifies the distress or need felt instinctively by the people:

Wagner wants to define that concept of “the people” which he had used so far in too vague a manner, attributing to it marvelous virtues. In his mind it is bound to the idea of need and, by that fact, joint to the idea of an unconscious force — difficult to grasp with the intelligence alone — which works by instinct, through a necessary expansion, as does nature. The people is the sum of all those whom a common distress unites. But that word distress must be understood in the dual meaning it has in German: *die Not* — both distress and necessity.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> In *Richard Wagner: Patriot and Politician*, p. 95. Josserand cites the *Burrell Collection*, pp. 223-24 as the source of the translation, and for the original Wagner’s *Gesammelte Schriften* (Kapp), XII, 39-42.

<sup>193</sup> Boucher, *The Political Concepts of Richard Wagner*, p. 46.

Boucher further remarks that in this work Wagner's concept of necessity, and its opposite, have an import such that the artistic is inseparable from the political or sociological, which in turn is part of Nature:

The idea of necessity is constantly opposed in his mind to that of arbitrary, of *Willkür*, in which he wanted to include everything he condemns: i.e., industrialized art, fashion, obsolete traditions, unjust social institutions, without asking himself if all these too are not equally products of nature.<sup>194</sup>

Thus the world-shaking significance of the drama happening in Hunding's hut, where further dialogue with escalating affection between Siegmund and Sieglinde leads her to conclude that they must be long-lost brother and sister. Interestingly, though, *before* she has confirmed his identity and told Siegmund his real name, Siegmund has independently raised the brother-sister analogy in his "Winterstürme" aria, where he sings (Spring being the subject), "To find his sister / he flew this way; / Love has lured Spring here," and then "The sister-bride / was freed by her brother; / in ruins lies what held them asunder." Spencer and Millington gloss this passage:

The brother/sister imagery works more naturally in German, where *der Lenz* (Spring) is masculine and *die Liebe* (Love) feminine. For the present, the language remains metaphorical. Not until the end of the act do Siegmund and Sieglinde recognize each other as siblings and reenact the imagery in an incestuous relationship prefigured and, hence, sanctioned by Nature herself.<sup>195</sup>

It is Sieglinde's further questioning that absolutely confirms that the man who has come is a Wälsung<sup>196</sup> (because his father was Wolfe), therefore he should be able to withdraw the sword that was put there for her savior. Once she reveals his real name to him, Siegmund pulls out the sword with a mighty motion, whereupon they instantly fall in love as the curtain falls. Viewed as a drama of a moral dilemma involving adultery and incest — the morality or immorality of it debated by the Gods in the next Act — it is interesting to note that Siegmund and Sieglinde have absolutely no hesitation, even when they realize they are brother and sister, and make love with no scruples. It was not that they fell in love *before* they were conscious of their sibling relationship and then faced a

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>195</sup> Spencer and Millington, Note 46 on p. 366.

<sup>196</sup> The name *Wälsung* is reminiscent of the German verb *wälzen* meaning "to roll, rotate, or turn"; a more political variation of it is *umwälzen* which also translated as "to overthrow" or "to revolutionize," the noun being *Umwälzung*, "revolution." Thus Wagner may have seized upon this name to use for his revolutionaries.



vexing moral dilemma when they found out, as happens in some other tales (e.g. the Finnish epic “Kullervo” set to music by Sibelius, in which a youth entices a young woman to ride with him in his sleigh, where he seduces her under the blankets but afterwards discovers to his shock that she is his long-lost sister). Here is why viewing *The Ring* as a story of *political* “adultery” and “incest” makes the Wälsungs’ behavior more understandable: The revolutionary agitator, temporarily set back in one country, seeks refuge in another land where the people are equally oppressed. That the proletariat of all nations are brothers (and sisters) was the most subversive idea in Europe. That they should get together — “Workers of the world, unite!” — across national boundaries instead of patriotically supporting their own respective ruling classes (the Hundings) against those of other countries, was an intolerable threat to the established order. One author who recognizes the broader social import of the apparent incest and adultery of Siegmund and Sieglinde is Karol Berger, who mentions it in his excellent comparison of Marx’s and Wagner’s ideologies:

No less than Marx in the *Manifesto*, also Wagner in the *Ring* was driven by the contrast between is and what should be, between the actual present condition of humanity – a condition characterized by man’s alienation from his fellows and from nature – and the desired future condition in which the alienation would disappear, leaving men and women free to relate to one another like siblings or lovers (or both) rather than like deadly competitors for economic advantage and political power. No less than Marx, also Wagner reckoned that to reach this goal one would first have to identify and then destroy the root causes of alienation. Where Feuerbach located these causes in the human propensity to worship gods, to displace our own human values onto another, transcendent realm, and where Marx thought that he found the causes of alienation in the institutions of the market economy (the division of labor, trade, money, and above all privately owned capital), Wagner’s *Ring* represents a synthesis of these two views, with both Wotan’s gods and Alberich’s capital standing in the way of the unalienated humanity of the future. Wagner’s anticapitalist beliefs at the time of the *Ring*’s conception are documented in an interesting entry (December 2, 1848) in the diary of Eduard Devrient. After a reading of the *Siegfried’s Tod* poem, the conversation took a political turn, “at which point he [Wagner] again mounted his hobby horse, the annihilation of capital.”<sup>197</sup>

Outside a political context, the idea of these two heroes committing incest and adultery with no moral compunctions is something that bothers Wagnerians no end. Was the composer condoning violation of the most universal taboos in all known civilizations? Interspersed with the musicological analysis that is his real forte,

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<sup>197</sup> Karol Berger, *Beyond Reason*, p. 181.

Earlier in his book Berger had raised the question this way, writing about the episode when Sieglinde recognizes “her lover is also her brother”:

The incestuous nature of their relationship does not bother her for a moment and neither will it bother Siegmund when he becomes aware of it. They are both votaries of natural instinct and know civilization and its discontents only for the suffering they bring. To be sure, it was bound to provoke Wagner’s audience. Why then did he insist on making Siegmund and Sieglinde siblings? Perhaps he too wanted to proclaim his allegiance to a love free of all traditional constraints. Perhaps also because the new humanity that was to replace the existing society and its order was to be as different from the old one as possible....<sup>198</sup>

In the political context, the idea of Siegmund and Sieglinde falling in love spontaneously even after knowing their sibling relationship makes dramatic sense and draws deeper sympathy. Let the ruling classes debate whether it can be condoned under any circumstances; the most highly conscious of the oppressed will go ahead and do it. Wagner’s use of Nature (Spring) to anticipate and sanctify the act is consistent with other uses of the Nature analogy to signify a kind of Natural Law that applies to human society: the Rhinegold being a beautiful feature in the river when illuminated by the Sun before being turned into capitalist property by Alberich, or the storm through which Siegmund flees to Hunding’s home being a political upheaval. Apparent sequential discrepancies such as Siegmund’s use of the brother-sister vocabulary before Sieglinde has told him they are siblings, dissolve away when the levels of analogy are made explicit. Wagner’s political experience evidently taught him that when revolutionary agitators call upon oppressed workers to unite as “brothers” it takes some consciousness-raising before the oppressed reached the level of awareness where they are ready to act on this; but when they finally do, it is on their initiative as if by force of Nature. In his analysis of contracts and oaths, White makes something of the fact that Siegmund expresses a kind of morality in his love for Sieglinde, swearing an oath just before the “Spring” enters:<sup>199</sup>

Deep in my breast  
there burns the vow [*Eid*]  
that binds me, noble woman [*Edlen*], to you.

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<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>199</sup> *The Turning Wheel*, p. 52.

It is interesting that he also refers to her as “noble,” signifying that to him she is not inferior to any other woman despite her oppressed social position. The union, illicit in the eyes of the higher social strata, is sanctified in terms of revolutionary morality.

Parenthetically, it is possible that besides the source in myth Wagner adapted the name “Siegmond” from a revolutionary he heard speak during a visit to Vienna in 1848. In *My Life* he recalls how an acquaintance “thought he should give me an idea of the matters currently agitating the Viennese by taking me one evening to a political club of extremist tendencies. I heard a certain Herr Sigismund Englaender speak there, who some time later made a name for himself by publishing in political monthlies: the audacity with which he and others expressed themselves that evening about the most feared public figures in Austria astonished me almost as much as the shallowness of the political opinions they advanced.”<sup>200</sup> It is, of course, only speculation to suggest that this particular rabble-rouser was the one who led Wagner to settle on the name “Siegmond” for the protagonist in *Valkyrie*. After all, in the *Nibelungenlied* Siegmund and Sieglinde are father and mother of Siegfried, so the carry-over to *The Ring* is straightforward in this sense despite many other details being changed. Yet why did Wagner remember this particular political speaker, of all those he must have heard during his life, decades later when he dictated his autobiography, and choose to include him by name if not because of the closeness to “Siegmond”? It is interesting (in view of all the psychoanalytic interpretations of Wagner’s work) that Freud changed his name from “Sigismund” to “Sigmund” at about age 21. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, emphasizing the influence of Romanticism on psychoanalysis, writes, “It is too little known that Freud changed his first name from Sigismund to Sigmund following the first Viennese performance of *Die Walküre* on 5 March 1877,”<sup>201</sup> but Freud biographers do not necessarily see direct cause and effect here. Ronald W. Clarke says that Freud’s shift from “Sigismund” to “Sigmund” was more gradual, and that in fact the latter is merely the German version of the former. “It has been suggested that the change which he gradually adopted in the 1870s was merely the adoption

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<sup>200</sup> *My Life*, p. 368.

<sup>201</sup> *Wagner Androgyne*, pp. 261-62.

of German rather than Slav usage; but ‘Sigismund’ was Vienna’s favorite name for abuse in anti-Semitic jokes.”<sup>202</sup> Thus Freud’s motives may have been mixed, and he spelled it “Sigmund” rather than “Siegmond.” Still, without diverging too far from our main topic, it is not out of place to speculate that in Wagner’s mind as in Freud’s, the different forms of this name were one, and that the agitator Sigismund who impressed Wagner was linked in the composer’s mind to Siegmund, the Wälzung troublemaker.

Invoking our criteria that a theory about the *Ring* cycle should be judged by how much of these complex dramas it can explain with plausibility, it will be instructive to compare our interpretation to another one proposed for Act One of *Valkyrie*, the racist-nationalist explanation given by Marc Weiner. Weiner too holds that *The Ring* is a political metaphor, but he finds it permeated by “horrendous notions of race” that are supposed to underlie Wagner’s desire for a “homogenous community” of Germans.<sup>203</sup> Specifically for the act under consideration, Weiner asserts that Siegmund and Sieglinde “constitute a metaphorical-dramatic parallel to Wagner’s pronouncements, scattered through his revolutionary tracts, concerning the German *Volk*.” He goes on to say that “the Volsungs, like Wagner’s German people, seek freedom from the pressures of foreign authority and find themselves — *recognize* themselves — in their hour of ‘highest need.’” In other words, “Wagner employed the metaphor of the family as the *Volk*,” such that “it becomes clear that family, race, and *Volk* are diverse expressions for a group of like-minded, similarly speaking, and physiologically related (and similar) beings, beings defined by their physiological difference from others.” “In the *Ring* cycle, this equation of family and *Volk* characterizes the metaphorical function of the Volsung race and of the antithesis between it and its foes, who are foreign to it, such as the Neidings in *Die Wälkure*, and the race of the Nibelungs....”<sup>204</sup>

This kind of explanation is plausible to some readers because Weiner gives a vast amount of detail that purportedly supports it, because it fits many readers’ preconceptions about Wagner, and because it is stated on its

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<sup>202</sup> Freud: *The Man and the Cause* (New York, 1980), p. 36.

<sup>203</sup> Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*, p. 72.

<sup>204</sup> Weiner, pp. 73-74.

own rather than in comparison to other theories. Gottfried Wagner, great-grandson of Richard, refers to his two favorite books on the composer's anti-Semitism in glowing terms, as "the painstaking historical study *Race and Revolution* by Paul Lawrence Rose (1992); and above all the interdisciplinary standard work *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* by Marc Weiner (1995)," adding: "The works of Paul Lawrence Rose of Pennsylvania State University and Marc Weiner of Indiana University outshine anything that has been published on the subject in Europe."<sup>205</sup> As Gottfried is a genuine Wagner descendant who has apparently taken as his life mission public atonement for his ancestors' anti-Semitism, overcoming of this horrible legacy of his native country through German-Jewish dialogue, and censure of the current regime in Bayreuth (run by his father, Wolfgang), his opinion carries weight with many people. The trouble is that Gottfried, like the authors he praises, fails to take into account alternative theories that might explain the facts better.

The weakness of Weiner's exegesis becomes more obvious when one asks what it does *not* explain. It does not explain any of the crucial events that happened in *Rheingold*: Alberich's theft of the ring, the curse he put on it, Wotan's dilemma in dealing with the Giants, etc. Weiner dismisses the importance of all this by starting his account of the *Ring* with Siegmund and Sieglinde and rationalizing: "Indeed, their recognition is the moment when the drama truly begins, the machinations of *Das Rheingold* having provided only the necessary background to *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie) (hence Wagner's characterization of the cycle as a 'trilogy with a prelude'), which opens with the reunion of the Volsung twins." Even if we were to concede Weiner's point that *Rheingold* is not really important to an analysis of the *Ring*, we would find gaps in his explanation of the act he starts with; notably, he has no explanation for Hunding, a character who does not seem to fit Weiner's theory that the "other" people who are not the German *Volk* typically have higher voices than the real Germans, and so forth. Weiner sees the "incest" between Siegmund and Sieglinde in racial rather than political terms, consistent with his interpretation of the whole work as anti-Semitic: "If the Teutonic family is a metaphor for racial and national community, breeding within domestic boundaries preserves the national essence from the filth of foreign invasion. This is the very idea

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<sup>205</sup> Gottfried Wagner, *Twilight of the Wagners*, p. 275 and p. 281.

Wagner later emphasizes in ‘Erkenne dich selbst’ [Know Thyself] when he argues that Germany must breed from itself if it is to stave off the threat of Jewish influence.”<sup>206</sup> In Weiner’s conception as in ours, the “incest” stands for something broader than the literal sin. But what about the *other* sin committed in this act, adultery, which Fricka considers as reprehensible as incest? And what about Hunding, the one wronged by that sin? Since he does not have the “Jewish” traits that Weiner finds so salient in Alberich and Mime, perhaps Hunding represents a non-German nationality such as the French (about whom Wagner also had some nasty things to say)? It would seem that the class-struggle interpretation outlined above better explains these other aspects of the drama, as well as Siegmund’s position as a social outcast.

This kind of limitation in the racial approach, while it tends to be covered up in Weiner’s long book by the plethora of detail he marshals, was acknowledged more directly by Weiner himself in an earlier article on the same theme, “Wagner and Vocal Iconography.” There Weiner ends up saying that Wagner was inconsistent (because he did not always follow Weiner’s theory!), and “if Wagner had been consistent, all his heroes would have been *bassi profondi* and his figures evincing purportedly Semitic features (Alberich, Hagen, Beckmesser, and Klingsor, as well as Mime) would have been cast as high lyric tenors. Conversely, in the most explicitly anti-Semitic work for the stage, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Wagner would not have written such an unusually high tenor part for his young poet Walther von Stolzing....”<sup>207</sup> Trying to explain the *Ring* in terms of racial and national concepts only works for selected aspects of the dramas, and is unsatisfactory as a general explication of the work.

In a profound sense, the shortfall in explanatory power that racial/national concepts have for the *Ring* is akin to the shallowness of trying to explain the phenomenon of Naziism by German racism and anti-Semitism. True, the Nazis propounded extreme racialist theories, and anti-Semitism was deeply engrained in Germany society (although perhaps less so than in Poland, Russia, etc.), but these facts are insufficient to explain why the

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<sup>206</sup> Weiner, p. 148.

<sup>207</sup> Marc Weiner, “Wagner and Vocal Iconography,” in Grimm and Hermand (ed.), *Re-Reading Wagner*, p. 98.

Nazis came to power in the 1930's. For a real explanation one must look the collapse of the capitalist economic system, the pressing possibility of a socialist revolution, and the way Germans of various social classes responded to these realities. Likewise, one cannot understand the events in Wagner's *Ring* without analyzing the political-economic crisis portrayed therein and the ways that characters representing different social classes respond to it. Siegmund and Sieglinde are not just members of the *Volk* (if they are, so are Wotan, Fricka, and others), but Siegmund is a revolutionary proletarian and Sieglinde is an oppressed "sister" he wants to liberate; the class struggle, not racial identity, is primary in the *Ring*.

### **Act Two**

On a high, craggy place where the Gods dwell. Wotan is armed with his spear, and Brünnhilde — his favorite Valkyrie daughter — is in battle dress. Brünnhilde sings "Hoyotoho," the Valkyrie call, joyous at the prospect of carrying out Wotan's will, which is to take Siegmund's side in his hour of need in the fight against Hunding.

What do the Valkyrie signify in Wagner's political allegory? The name (*Walküre*) in the mythology meant "chooser of the slain-in-battle." They are agents from on high who choose mortal heroes slain on the battlefield to be brought up to the Gods' domain, Valhalla. A political explanation is that they represent the ability of the ruling class to intervene in society, especially to control social mobility. The power of the rulers to coopt very selectively the most capable members of the lower classes into the aristocracy was essential to maintain hegemony. Feudal societies had rituals and honors such as knighthood for commoners of exceptional achievement, most often achievement in battle. In England and a few other monarchies, ceremonies still exist by which a commoner is made a "Lord." Coopting heroes from below not only invigorated the ruling class; equally important, it deprived the lower classes of leadership.

However, for Heaven to intervene on the side of a revolutionary who had committed political adultery and incest — uniting with his fellow (sister) in complete disregard of the expected loyalty to one's local authorities — would be going beyond the bounds of accepted practice. In no European country did anyone have knighthood bestowed on him for valor in a revolutionary insurrection! Fricka, Wotan's angry wife, who represents the

traditional morality, storms onto the scene and reproaches Wotan for failing to uphold the standards of Godly decency. Fricka's objection is, firstly, to the breaking of the marriage vow. A wife is bound to her lawful husband forever: the lower classes must remain loyal servants of their rulers. Secondly, incest cannot be condoned: the oppressed cannot be allowed to solidarize across boundaries or the sovereign political order will be upset. (Marx's "workers of the world unite" is a no-no.) Fricka insists that unless Siegmund and Sieglinde are punished, the Gods' whole claim to moral superiority will be worthless; in fact, their very regime will be undermined. Fricka is probably not engaging in hyperbole when she ("breaking out in the most violent indignation" according to the stage directions) cries out in disbelief at what Wotan is doing:

So this is the end  
of the blessed immortals,  
since you begot  
those dissolute Wälsungs? -  
I've said it now -  
have I caught your meaning?  
The gods' hallowed kin  
means nothing to you;  
you cast away everything  
that you once cared for,  
severing ties  
that you yourself forged,  
laughingly loosening  
heaven's hold  
that this impious twin-born pair,  
your falsehood's wanton fruit,  
might obey the dictates of pleasure and whim!

White's contractual analysis of the opera is perceptive on Fricka's motivation here. Although he does not go in political interpretation, he focuses on Fricka basic worry that Wotan's behavior threatens the very regime of the privileged gods:

Fricka is not motivated simply by her injured pride and tarnished image, nor by slavish adherence to the morality of the day. She sees what Wotan apparently does not, that the illicit union of Siegmund and Sieglinde is unnatural, not only because it is adulterous and incestuous, but, more fundamentally, because it goes against the very nature of the contractual dimension essential to Wotan's position of authority and to all the gods insofar as they depend on Wotan for their own right to existence.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> *The Turning Wheel*, p. 51.



Wotan, although he is the Monarch, is pressured to promise his Empress that he will reverse his decision, take away the magic power of Siegmund's sword, and let Hunding win the battle.

In the heated domestic quarrel between Fricka and Wotan, *The Ring's* social class references are made explicit. Arguing that to take sides against Hunding would be beneath Wotan's dignity, Fricka reminds her husband that, "No nobleman battles with bondsmen."<sup>209</sup> This is one of the rare places where the political analogy is made explicit in the libretto: "Gods" are likened to human beings of the noble class. In fact, Porges records an instance where Wagner used the same analogy in directing the performers in a passage sung shortly before the above: "Wotan's 'Was Fricka kümmert, künde sie frei' [Let Fricka freely confide her cares] should be 'spoken graciously, like a king', Wagner directed."<sup>210</sup> In view of this passage's importance to our political interpretation, let us quote Porges' notes on Wagner's careful instructions for the 1876 staging of this part of the scene:

Fricka steps close to Wotan at the words, 'für ihn stiest du das Schwert in den Stamm' [for him you thrust the sword in the tree trunk]; after the passage, 'Mit Unfreien streitet kein Edler' [No nobleman battles with bondsmen], she distances herself again and in the ensuing 'den Frevler *strafft* nur der Freie' [the freeman alone chastises the felon] waves her hand imperiously (the wave coinciding with the sharply accented '*strafft*').<sup>211</sup>

Brünnhilde comes back to confirm her marching orders and is dismayed by the sudden reversal in Wotan's command, as well as his mood. Wotan pours out his heart to her, agonizing to himself out loud, citing the history we saw in *The Rhinegold* back to Alberich's theft of the gold and forging of the ring, and developments since. Audiences who are bored by Wotan's long monologues and tend to doze off until the action picks up again are missing an important history lesson. What happened in the previous opera is not retold merely to remind us of what we may have forgotten: it is told from Wotan's viewpoint. Crucial to a full understanding of the *Ring* cycle

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<sup>209</sup> In this instance we cannot accept Porter's translation, "With bondsmen the *gods* do not battle," since the German text is "Mit Unfreien streitet kein Edler," and "Edler" is nobleman. Porter thought it all right in the context to substitute "the gods" for brevity, inadvertently dropping Wagner's strong hint as to the political analogy. Sabor's recent translation, unfortunately, takes the same liberty, rendering it "With subjects the gods do not skirmish," which scans nicely but misses Wagner's point; perhaps "With subjects nobles don't skirmish" would have been better.

<sup>210</sup> Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring'*, p. 52.

<sup>211</sup> Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring'*, p. 54.

is an awareness that major characters have their own perspectives on events, their consciousness determined by their position in the hierarchy of beings. Wotan outlines the function of the Valkyries in preventing the downfall of the Gods by building armies of heroes from the lower orders who, he admits, are manipulated and subjugated. For those who believe war is the result of ruling class conspiracy, here is the smoking gun – an admission by the ruler himself that he tricks people into fighting each other for his own purposes, to preserve his own kingdom.

I bade you bring me heroes:  
those men whom, high-handed,  
we tamed by our laws,  
those men whose mettle  
we held in check  
by binding them to us  
in blind allegiance  
through troubled treaties'  
treacherous bonds —  
you'd spur them on  
to onslaught and strife,  
honing their strength  
for hot-blooded battle,  
so that hosts of valiant warriors  
I'd gather in Valhalla's hall.

However, Wotan explains, if Alberich and his kind should regain possession of the ring, they could sway this mighty army to their side and turn it against the Nobles. Here Wotan says, in German, with Spencer's translation:

Nur wenn je den Ring  
zurück er gawänne —  
dann wäre Walhall verloren:  
der der Liebe fluchte,  
er allein  
nützte neidisch  
des Ringes Runen  
zu aller Edlen\*  
endloser Schmach;  
der helden Muth  
entwendet' er mir;  
die kühnen selber  
zwäng er zum Kampf;  
mit ihrer Kraft  
bekriegte er mich.

Only were he [Alberich]  
to win back the ring  
would Valhalla then be lost:  
he who laid a curse on love  
he alone  
in his envy would use  
the runes of the ring  
to the noble gods'\*  
unending shame;  
my heroes' hearts  
he'd turn against me,  
forcing the brave  
to battle with me  
and, with their strength  
Wage war against me.

Where an asterisk is inserted above, one can see that Spencer took a little liberty to change “to all the nobles” to “to the noble gods.” Porter likewise translates “zu aller Edlen / endloser Schmach” as “to bring eternal shame on

the gods.” Rudolph Sabor takes similar liberty in his freer translation, rendering this passage “while we, the gods, were slighted and shamed.” In fact, it is hard to find a translator who does not try to “help” his poor English-speaking readers by changing “nobles” to “gods,” but one who does keep the original meaning is William Mann in a translation made originally for the Friends of Covent Garden.<sup>212</sup> He renders the same passage accurately as “for all noble people’s unending disgrace.”

The crucial point is that only Alberich, who has renounced love and made the ring, can be a threat to the nobility. Only the emerging bourgeoisie can mobilize the power of capital to attract forces away from the ruling class. That is the outcome Wotan fears most of all for his world, because it is what Wagner, following Proudhon and other radical thinkers, feared was happening in the European world.

For the moment, though, the established builders, the Giants who have a more limited consciousness and are closer to the traditional order, have possession of the ring. Fafner is less of an immediate threat to the Gods because he is just sitting on the gold and does not realize the power of the ring. Still, Wotan cannot take back the ring from Fafner because it was given by formal contract: To violate a lawful agreement would call into question the Gods’ ostensible basis of authority and reveal the law to be nothing more than their whim. Wotan laments his plight:

Fafner broods on the hoard  
for which he killed his brother.  
From him I must wrest the ring,  
which I paid him once as tribute:  
having treated with him,  
I cannot meet him;  
fatally weakened, my courage  
would fail me.  
These are the bonds  
that hold me in thrall:  
I, lord of treaties,  
am now a slave to those treaties.

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<sup>212</sup> Mann’s translation is included with the recording of the Böhm *Ring* (Bayreuth 1967) on Philips Classics.

There is, however, one slim hope. An entirely free agent, operating outside the legal order, could act independently to liberate the ring from Fafner. Potentially the revolutionary hero Siegmund, an illegitimate offspring of Wotan, could accomplish this task; but the paradox is that Wotan must now let Siegmund be destroyed in order to preserve the traditional order. In Wotan's unsolvable dilemma Wagner has portrayed the agony of Europe's once-noble aristocrats watching helplessly as their world crumbles. They themselves are incapable of establishing a new order based on modern rationality — they cannot “renounce love” in favor of scientific and economic rationality, nor can they repudiate the treaties that legitimize the feudal order — yet they covet the benefits of an advanced economy and look for ways to make deals with the already-established business tycoons (Giants) and prevent the newly-emerging entrepreneurs (Dwarfs) from getting out of control. Wotan, once the mightiest God, is reduced to a pathetic, troubled figure, increasingly so as *The Ring* cycle progresses.

In concluding, Wotan makes reference to the fact that Alberich has fostered a son who portends the doom of the Gods. Although not named at this stage, the son is going to be Hagen, who will act for Alberich and his class in the last opera of the cycle, *Twilight of the Gods*. The whole tragedy of Alberich's vulgar materialistic class inheriting the world has been forecast. This is another reason why it makes little sense to accept Shaw's interpretation that *Twilight of the Gods* abandons the political themes of the earlier parts to become “grand opera.”

Brünnhilde finds it incomprehensible that Wotan has reversed course and is now ordering her to back Hunding against Siegmund. Brünnhilde seems to represent the radical, youthful idealism among those associated with the upper classes. We might even tentatively hypothesize that, in a more deeply symbolic sense Brünnhilde epitomizes Revolution itself, in view of the fact that Wagner used the following image in a political tract written in his most radical period, 1849:

Ay, we behold it; the old world is crumbling, a new will rise therefrom; for the lofty goddess Revolution comes rustling on the wings of storm, her stately head ringed round with lightnings, a sword in her right hand, a torch in her left, her eye so stern, so punitive, so cold; and yet what warmth of purest love, what wealth of happiness streams forth toward him who dares to look with steadfast gaze into that eye!<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Wagner's writing of April 1849, reprinted in Goldman & Sprinchorn, eds., *Wagner on Music and Drama*, p. 69.

Change the torch to a shield, and we have the very image of the *Ring's* most demanding role. However, given the profound transformations that this central character undergoes through the *Ring* cycle — from favorite Valkyrie to banished daughter, from mortal woman loved by Siegfried to wife betrayed by him, and finally to agent of the Gods' destruction — it holds promise to hypothesize that Brünnhilde symbolizes “the Revolution” only if we are prepared to refine this analysis as we go along with the understanding that her complex fate reveals Wagner's mixture of hopes and fears about the fate of European civilization in a revolutionary era. We shall find that, because of her evolving wisdom as the *Ring* cycle advances, Brünnhilde cannot be assigned a simple political meaning. Following our hypothesis that female roles in *The Ring* refer to cultural principles (as Fricka is, according to Wagner himself, the traditional morality), in contrast to the male roles that represent social classes or groups (which are the real *actors* of history according to Marxists and other 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers), and bearing in mind also Wagner's inseparable linking of art and revolution, a good working hypothesis about Brünnhilde is that she represents the true art, the high culture the proletariat (e.g. Siegfried) should inherit from the old order. That is to say, Brünnhilde symbolizes Wagner's own revolutionary art, especially *The Ring* which is designed for the masses and, Wagner thought for a long time, could only be mounted on stage after the revolution. The sociological insight here goes further: It is the artists of a decaying civilization who are among the first to express hope for a new order; they carry out the inner “will” that official rulers cannot acknowledge publicly. Avant-garde artists breaking with the ideology of the ruling class is an indicator of revolutionary times.

Wotan senses her potential for rebellion and warns Brünnhilde strictly against any thought of disloyalty. In every pre-revolutionary situation, some of the more idealistic sons and daughters of the privileged break with their class and go over to the progressive forces. (By the 1960s this phenomenon came to be called the “generation gap”)<sup>214</sup> In a crucial turning point in *The Ring* cycle, Brünnhilde will turn against Wotan's command — against the values of Fricka — and thereby forfeit her godhood, i.e., her powers and privileges as a member of

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<sup>214</sup> As expressed by Bob Dylan in *The Times They Are A-Changin'*: “Come mothers and fathers / Throughout the land / And don't criticize / What you can't understand / Your sons and your daughters / Are beyond your command....”

the ruling elite. Yet she will feel that she has done the right thing — what Wotan deep in his heart would have liked to do — and her father will comprehend her action although he cannot condone it.

At first Brünnhilde, following orders, appears to Siegmund, advises him of his inevitable defeat in battle, and offers to take him away to Valhalla where he will be welcomed as a hero. It is a futile effort by an agent of the authorities to coopt a leader of the revolutionaries. The policy of cooptation is highly selective, however, and only a few chosen ones can be offered the special deal. Siegmund is tempted by the offer and asks a few questions about Valhalla. It sounds wonderful, but there is one condition on which Siegmund insists: he will go only if he can take Sieglinde with him. This, Brünnhilde tells him, is out of the question. Other wonderful women will be found up there, but Sieglinde is not to be admitted. Then Siegmund makes the fatal choice to stay behind and meet death as a mortal rather than to betray solidarity with his oppressed sister, Sieglinde. “Wagner explained that for a Valkyrie it was undreamed of that a man should reject the honor of being taken as a hero to Valhalla.”<sup>215</sup> Indeed, what an uncommon sort of commoner one would have to be to turn down an offer of knighthood!<sup>216</sup>

Overcome with sympathy, Brünnhilde makes an equally fatal choice, to disobey Wotan’s orders and protect Siegmund. But just as she is about to aid him in the heat of battle, Wotan himself intervenes and breaks Siegmund’s sword on the Godly spear that signifies all the legal authority of the ruling class. What happened in European history was that all the force of the state was brought down to prevent the workers from arming themselves and conquering their class enemies. Hunding then easily finishes off the disarmed Siegmund. Wotan in a rage of disgust slays Hunding with one motion (in a repressive crackdown there are casualties right and left) and turns to look for disobedient Brünnhilde, who has fled the scene with the surviving Sieglinde, a refugee, in hand.

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<sup>215</sup> Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the ‘Ring’*, p. 62.

<sup>216</sup> Someone like John Lennon in our era, who in 1969 returned his MBE to the Queen with a letter objecting to Britain’s role in the Vietnam war and other conflicts.

### Act Three

The third act takes us up to a rocky height, where the Valkyries are gathering the fallen heroes from earth before taking them on to Valhalla. In political terms, these “heroes” are failed revolutionary leaders who are to be coopted into the ruling circles after their radical fervor is burned out, and Wagner has a bit of fun with them. When one Valkyrie asks another which slain hero she has hanging from her saddle, the second answers “Sintolt the Hegeling.” Though dead at his entrance, Sintolt the Hegeling can be ignored only at the analyst’s peril. While the “Sintolt” is obscure (there is a minor character “Sintolt” in *The Nibelungenlied*), the “Hegeling” is likely a playful allusion to the intellectual tendency that formed one of the main streams of 19<sup>th</sup> century German radical politics, the “Young Hegelians.” In addition to Feuerbach and Marx, whose debts to G. W. F. Hegel’s philosophy are fundamental, Wagner’s revolutionary co-conspirator Bakunin fell into the Hegelian camp.<sup>217</sup> In *My Life* Wagner is so explicit in describing him as a combatant in the Hegelian philosophical battles that we are led to speculate that Bakunin was a model for “Sintolt the Hegeling”:

He was so loquacious that he undertook on that first evening [early in 1849 when Wagner met Bakunin at Röckel’s place] to inform me about the various stages of his personal development. A Russian officer of good birth, he had found the pressures of the most blinkered kind of military discipline so insufferable that, inspired by his reading of Rousseau’s works, he had fled to Germany under the pretext of going away on vacation; in Berlin he had flung himself upon philosophy with all the zest of a barbarian newly awakened to culture; he found Hegel’s philosophy ruling the field there at the time, and he became such an adept at it that he was able to unhorse the most renowned disciples of the master in an essay written strictly in accordance with the most rigorous Hegelian dialectic.<sup>218</sup>

From Wagner’s picture of Bakunin as a Hegelian warrior who could “unhorse” his opponents, it is but a small step to incorporating him into one of the few humorous moments of the *Ring* cycle. At the same time, Wagner may have had in mind other Hegelians, or have been trying to symbolize the whole “Young Hegelian” tendency — a

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<sup>217</sup> On Bakunin’s roots in the Hegelian movement see Woodcock, *Anarchism*, pp. 134-39, and Carr, *Michael Bakunin*, Chaps. 6-9. For an attempt to explicate Wagner’s debt to Hegel and Feuerbach, see Corse, *Wagner and the New Consciousness*.

<sup>218</sup> *My Life*, p. 385.

major current in German intellectual and political history<sup>219</sup> — in the character of “Sintolt.” The fact that Bakunin was a diehard who would *not* be coopted into the ruling circles (as Wagner noted, he had an aristocratic background that he rejected), makes him more a model for Siegmund than for Sintolt. Later in our chapter on *Siegfried* another way that Bakunin was possibly symbolized in the *Ring* will be suggested. What we can conclude here, however, is that “the Hegeling” is almost certainly meant to symbolize the Hegelian tendency, whether or not Wagner had one individual of this school in mind for “Sintolt.”

Wagner did not make up the name “Hegeling”; it was already a derisive label for the tendency that came to be called Young Hegelians. In his biography of Marx, historian Gareth Stedman Jones traces the origin of the label in theological-philosophical debates in the late 1830s to a Protestant ex-Hegelian named Heinrich Leo, debating radical Hegelians led by Arnold Ruge:

Ruge’s attack in turn provoked an angry response from Leo, who dubbed Ruge, Feuerbach, Strauss and their allies ‘the little Hegelians’ (*die Hegelingen*). This was the origin of the term ‘Young Hegelians’. Leo portrayed them as a group of atheists who relegated Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension to the realm of mythology and were pressing for an entirely secular state.<sup>220</sup>

Thus “*der Hegeling*” literally means “little Hegelian,” “*die Hegelingen*” being the German plural. For the above passage Stedman Jones references James D. White, who wrote as follows:

This [Heinrich Leo’s pamphlet *Die Hegelingen*] was a tract in which Leo set out to dissociate himself and Hegelian philosophy in general from the direction being taken by Ruge, Feuerbach, Richter, Strauss and their followers [Marx too was in this camp for a time]. These constituted a group, Leo asserted, which openly propagated atheism, claimed that the resurrection and ascension of Christ were myths, and were entirely secular in outlook.<sup>221</sup>

Does one really joke about Hegelians? That Wagner could be jocular about Hegelian philosophy, in which few readers today find a source of humor, is shown in a passage from a memoir of a visitor to Wagner's home: “One

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<sup>219</sup> A good sample of their writings is found in *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence S. Stepelevich (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1983).

<sup>220</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge, Mass. 2016), p. 73. Stedman Jones in turn references James D. White, *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of dialectical Materialism* (Basingstoke, England, 1996) Chap. 3.

<sup>221</sup> James D. White, *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism* (New York, 1996), Chap. 3 “The Young Hegelians,” p. 117.



day when I called on him, I found him passionately absorbed in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which he assured me with characteristic extravagance, was the best book ever published. To prove it, he read me a passage that had particularly impressed him. I did not completely follow it, so I asked him to read it again. This time neither of us could understand it. He read it a third time, then a fourth, until in the end we looked at one another and burst out laughing. That was the end of phenomenology."<sup>222</sup> Sandra Corse's *Wagner and the New Consciousness* — the most detailed study of possible Hegelian influences on Wagner — takes the matter too seriously, perhaps, by ignoring Sintolt the Hegeling.

The other Valkyrie in this vignette carries "Wittig the Irming," the reference of which is possibly identifiable too. There was a "Wittig" who would certainly have been known to Wagner: the editor of a radical paper *Dresdener Zeitung*, with whom Bakunin lodged briefly during his stay in Dresden and in whose paper he published some manifestos; this at the same time that Bakunin was "a frequent visitor at Wagner's house."<sup>223</sup> "Irming" could be a fanciful completion of the name based on the verb "irr" meaning to err or mistake the course; presumably it portrays another faction among the disputatious revolutionaries, because one Valkyrie says "Only as foes saw I Sintolt and Wittig." Ironically, the rivals from opposing factions are both being coopted into the establishment, bringing their quarrels along; the Valkyries' horses carrying them jostle each other as "The warrior's hate still embroils the horses." Wagner had to do some wide-ranging cutting and pasting from his mythological sources to come up with these two dead troublemakers' names. A note to the Spencer translation explains that Sintolt the Hegeling "gets his name from a court official in the *Nibelungenlied* and his patronymic from a leading tribe in *Kudrun*," while Wittig the Irming "is a concoction from the late medieval German epics where a Witege is the minion of a King Ermenrich."<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Quoted in Taylor, *Richard Wagner*, p. 70.

<sup>223</sup> Carr, *Michael Bakunin*, p. 187.

<sup>224</sup> Spencer, footnote 68 on p. 367; he cites George Gillespie as the source for these details.

Perhaps some composer should write an opera about the epic battle leading to the mutual deaths of Sinto and Wittig, in similar spirit to Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. But now we must return to the plot of the *Ring*.

Brünnhilde arrives last, and to her sisters' surprise is bearing on her saddle not a slain hero but a woman still alive. Without Siegmund, Sieglinde only wants to die, but Brünnhilde convinces her she must escape into the forest, bear the child in her womb, name him "Siegfried," and give him the shattered sword that belonged to his father Siegmund. This represents hope for preserving the revolutionary heritage in a time of repression.

With Wotan approaching in stormy wrath, Sieglinde is sent to the eastern forest where the Nibelung treasure was brought by Fafner the Giant, who has changed into a Dragon and guards the hoard in a cave. Wotan is said to be unlikely to pursue her there because he fears the power of the ring that Fafner holds. In 19th century Europe, political refugees escaped to other countries seeking asylum, as Wagner himself fled from Saxony (then one of the separate German states) to Switzerland and France after the 1848-49 uprising. At this stage Fafner the dragon could be a reference to the big capitalists who established intimidating police power to guard their wealth.<sup>225</sup> Wagner in his autobiography, telling about his arrival as a refugee in Paris under a reactionary regime, says he was "appalled by the sight" of bankers "with their large money sacks slung over their shoulders and fat portfolios in their hands. They were never so ubiquitous as now, when the old rule of capital was zealously reasserting itself victoriously against the previously dreaded Socialist propaganda with almost insulting pomp in the attempt to regain public confidence."<sup>226</sup> Thus the image of Fafner sitting on the pile of loot could be a dig at the French bourgeoisie (or the Swiss, where Wagner took refuge for the longer term). After all, Wagner had written his *Wibelungen* essay about the import of the mythical hoard in European historical development. "If we

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<sup>225</sup> Newman notes that in Wagner's early (1848) prose sketch, "the Hoard and the Ring, after they have come into the possession of the Giants, are watched by a dragon appointed by themselves (not, as in the present *Ring*, by one of themselves)." Again, in an early conception of *Rhinegold*, the Giants "appoint as their custodian a monstrous dragon" to guard the hoard and the ring. *The Life of Richard Wagner*, Vol. II, p. 28, 343. Wagner later consolidated the dragon and Fafner into one character.

<sup>226</sup> *My Life*, p. 418.

look more closely at this Hoard, the Nibelungen's special work, we recognize firstly the mineral wealth wealth of the earth, and secondly man's use of this: arms, the ruler's regalia and stores of gold."<sup>227</sup> Biographer Gregor-Dellin makes comments to the effect that Wagner's linking of the Nibelung legend to European history was not very scientific and that Wagner's conclusions in the *Wibelungen* essay were quite a stretch of the imagination.

Just as myth passed down into history, so had the Nibelung's "ideal Hoard" become transmuted into that source of all social ills, "heritable property." The royal line was extinct, the Hoard degraded into filthy lucre, the people deprived of everything but song. Wagner had at last succeeded in reconciling socialism with the German sagas!<sup>228</sup>

While Hitler and the Nazis did not propound an official political interpretation of *The Ring*, they made scattered references to its metaphorical meaning. Alex Ross cites an example, "A Nazi-era guide to the *Ring* put the allegory most bluntly: 'The German people (Siegfried) smashes the power of capitalism (Fafner) and slays Jewishness (Mime).'"<sup>229</sup> That interpretation is not far off and is surprising because the basic purpose of Naziism was hardly to destroy capitalism but rather to collude with capitalists large and small and protect them from the socialist threat.<sup>230</sup> It should also be corrected by saying that Mime represents "Jewishness" only in the sense that that label was applied to grasping capitalists including supposedly many Jews. Ross also digs up an amazing New York Times editorial from February 26, 1940 pointing out that while the Nazis exploited Wagner for their political purposes, Wagner's values as expressed in *The Ring* are antithetical to those of the Nazis:

The "Ring"! The "Ring," fundamentally a moral, revolutionary document; teaching the fatal effects of wealth and overlordship; that only one thing is more destructive than greed of gold – namely, greed of power; that a state founded upon violence, terror and falsehood is doomed to annihilation; that the greatest leaders, the very high gods themselves, are not immune to the dread penalties of those who transgress moral law; and that only the invincible weapons of truth and love can cleanse mankind of its evil and make possible a better world! Thus Wagner, who pounds home his allegory with everlasting insistence in every one of the four interlocking operas of the "Ring." Nor does the "Ring" constitute an isolated expression of Wagner on this subject. More than any other writer or artist of his time in

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<sup>227</sup> In Osborne, *Richard Wagner: Stories and Essays*, p. 167.

<sup>228</sup> Gregor-Dellin, p. 155.

<sup>229</sup> Alex Ross, *Wagnerism*, p. 532.

<sup>230</sup> A clear, concise analysis of the reasons for the rise of Fascism is Leon Trotsky, "What is National Socialism?" June 1933, Marxist Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1933/330610.htm>

Germany, and in a period when it was dangerous to do so, did he inveigh publicly against the evils which he foresaw in the rising tide of industrialism in the modern state.<sup>231</sup>

A writer trying to do a legalistic analysis of *The Ring* finds: “One of the minor puzzles of the story is why Fafner, who certainly showed great acumen in the early stages, never subsequently exploited his possession of the Ring. He seemed to be content to live on his capital in retirement. Perhaps Fasolt was really the brains of that team.”<sup>232</sup> The solution to this puzzle is not likely to be found in a difference between Fafner’s and Fasolt’s brain power, but rather in their common status as representative of the big bourgeoisie. Either one of them would be “content to live on his capital,” an apt way of putting it. Wagner was trying to distinguish this complacent, established type of capitalist from the constantly-striving Alberich type.

Fafner’s metamorphosis from a Giant into a Dragon is a bigger puzzle. Even in the context of the opera’s fantastic characters, no one else in the *Ring* goes through such a total transmutation, although others assume thin disguises from time to time (Wotan as the Wanderer, Siegfried as Gunther), and, to be sure, Brünnhilde is transformed from Valkyrie to mortal woman. Technically, it is not a problem in Wagner’s story: because early on he had Alberich demonstrate the use of the Tarnhelm to completely change one’s form, audiences are not going to object to Fafner using the same handy tool. But on the political side, further explanation is required to indicate why Wagner felt it appropriate to depict such an extreme character transformation. The key may be found in a political lesson Wagner likely learned from Bakunin in 1849 during the abortive Dresden revolution. Only snatches of their discussions have been preserved in sources such as Wagner’s autobiography, so we must try to reconstruct essential points from information available about Bakunin’s main concerns at that time, assuming that the Russian anarchist was not reticent to share his recently acquired wisdom when he was “a frequent visitor at Wagner’s home” and, in Wagner’s recollection, “stretched on his host’s hard sofa, he could argue discursively with a crowd of all sorts of men on the problems of revolution. On these occasions he invariably got the best of the

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<sup>231</sup> New York Times, February 26, 1940, p. 14

<sup>232</sup> Charles Fletcher-Cooke, “Counsel’s Opinion: The Ring and the Law,” in DiGaetani, ed., *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring*, p. 136.

argument.” According to biographer E. H. Carr, one of Bakunin's central political beliefs at that juncture, based on the failures of several revolutionary attempts he saw as participant-observer around Europe in 1848, was “that the *bourgeoisie* had revealed itself as a specifically counter-revolutionary force, and that the future hopes of the revolution lay with the working-class.” Specifically, the lesson went, “The institution of private property was the bulwark of *bourgeois* supremacy; and when this bulwark was threatened, the *bourgeoisie* rallied to its defence as brutally and vindictively as the aristocracy had formerly rallied to the defense of its privileges.”<sup>233</sup> Thus, in revolution's mid-course, the bourgeoisie would change from a progressive to a reactionary force. That is why, in Wagner's symbolism, Fafner could be transformed from a constructive Giant trying to work his way into the ruling class to a loathsome Dragon who sits defending a pile of gold and must be slain by Siegfried before the plot can progress. Wagner's reason for choosing a Dragon specifically is discussed in the *Siegfried* section, where the influence of that other famous anarchist, Proudhon, will be invoked once more. Parenthetically, note here that Bakunin too used the not-uncommon Dragon image in his *Appeal to the Slavs* penned in 1848 (the time of his association with Wagner) to say that in recent revolutionary upheavals in Europe “the dragon that had been standing guard over the melancholy torpor of so many living dead peoples lay mortally wounded, writhing in its death throes.”<sup>234</sup>

Another student of the Bakunin literature, Aileen Kelly, confirms that in 1848 when Bakunin turned his attention from revolution among the Slavs to the situation in Germany, “he asserted that the main threat to the revolution in Germany came not from monarch, but from the bourgeoisie, which was opposed to the creation of a republic for fear that this might open the way to social revolution. The only ‘living’ forces in Germany were the proletariat and the peasantry: these were beginning to stir, and when they rose there would be ‘a terrible revolution, a real flood of barbarians, which will wash the ruins of the old world from the face of the earth’.”<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Carr, *Michael Bakunin*, p. 170.

<sup>234</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/1848/pan-slavism.htm>

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Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin: A Study in the Psychology and Politics of Utopianism*, p. 132-33 (she cites a letter Bakunin wrote in April 1848).

Here Bakunin uses the “flood,” instead of his favorite “fire” imagery; Wagner, whether he got them from Bakunin or not, would combine them in his ending of the *Ring* cycle when the fire that consumes the world is doused by an overflowing Rhine. A related theme that Bakunin was stressing at this time was the spontaneous, instinctual character of the revolution from below; Wagner’s agreement with this is found in the characters of Siegmund, and even more so, of Siegfried. The following quotation from a letter Bakunin wrote to Georg Herwegh in August 1848 reads like a contrast of the characters of Mime and Siegfried the way Wagner portrayed them:

Reaction (by this I mean reaction in the broadest sense of the word) — reaction is thought, which has grown stupid through senility. But revolution is instinct rather than thought; it acts and spreads as instinct, and as instinct it wages its first battles.

Kelly, after quoting from this letter, sums up Bakunin’s outlook at this period, for us the most crucial period because it was when he interacted with Wagner (although for Bakunin’s life it was also a turning point, as he was to spend the next decade in prison and then go into exile):

‘Reaction is thought, ... revolution is instinct’: this simple antithesis, of the kind of which Bakunin was so fond, is the sum of the wisdom that he had accumulated by the end of the 1840s: it was to be the foundation of his later anarchism.<sup>236</sup>

Wotan decrees Brünnhilde’s punishment to the terrified Valkyries: she shall be cast out of Godly society, be made a mere mortal, and be put to sleep on the mountaintop; the first man who finds her lying there may take her as wife. Brünnhilde will be turned into a common housewife:

the maid’s maidenly  
flower will fade;  
a husband will win  
her woman’s favors;  
henceforth she’ll obey  
the high-handed man;  
she’ll sit by the hearth and spin,  
the butt and plaything of all who despise her.

A cruel fate indeed! The other Valkyries plead with Wotan to reconsider the harsh sentence, but he chases them off. Then in a touching scene his anger gradually melts under his daughter’s entreaties. Brünnhilde tries to

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<sup>236</sup> Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin*, p. 134.

explain that she could not but take pity on Siegmund and in so doing was really carrying out Wotan's inner will, which he could not admit to himself. In their extended dialogue the terrible, lonely role of the monarch is laid bare. Constrained by laws and duties, Wotan does not have the freedom to do that which Brünnhilde chose to do: "...you drank from love's cup / with lips parted in laughter — / while *my* drink was mixed / with the griping gall of godly distress? —" Such a conception of the king's exalted yet constrained position, likewise phrased in a drinking-from-the-bitter-cup imagery, reappears in *On State and Religion*, which Wagner wrote at King Ludwig's request:

The very fact that the individual called to the throne has no personal choice, may allow no sanction to his purely human leanings, and needs must fill a great position for which nothing but great natural parts can qualify, foreordains him to a superhuman lot that needs must crush the weakling into personal nullity. The highly fit, however, is summoned to drink the full, deep cup of life's true tragedy in his exalted station.<sup>237</sup>

While Wotan cannot retract Brünnhilde's banishment from Godly society, he does grant her one urgent request: that her sleeping place be surrounded with fierce fire so that the man who comes to possess her can be only the bravest hero from among the mortals. Wotan assents to this request and calls upon Loge to encircle her with a blaze of magic fire. Shaw's interpretation of the magic fire is one of his cleverest insights in *The Perfect Wagnerite*. He sees it as "the fires of hell," the religious intimidation used by the governing classes to keep ordinary people in line. The fires are threatening only to those who fear them. Shaw explains, "When Wagner himself was a little child, the fact that hell was a fiction devised for the intimidation and subjection of the masses, was a well-kept secret of the thinking and governing classes. At that time the fires of Loki [Loge] were a very real terror to all except persons of exceptional force of character and intrepidity of thought. Even thirty years after Wagner had printed the verses of *The Ring* for private circulation, we find him excusing himself from perfectly explicit denial of current superstitions, by reminding his readers that it would expose him to prosecution."<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Ellis translation, *RWPW*, Vol. IV, p. 22.

<sup>238</sup> Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, p. 33.

In my commentary on *Siegfried* I shall present an analysis of the magic fire that goes beyond Shaw's in discovering its origin in philosophical works that Wagner relied upon. Here, however, in the spirit of never overlooking any scrap of evidence as to how Wagner's dramatic imagination could have been stimulated by political manifestations, it is worth mentioning that in the composer's lifetime fires were set atop mountains to arouse political consciousness. "The first and most famous of these celebrations was at the Wartburg in 1817, when a great mass of young men climbed the mountain, lit a huge bonfire on top, and swore to each other to believe in kings but not in officials, not to fight other Germans, not to become censors nor members of the secret police. The most recent such affair had been held in Hambach in 1842."<sup>239</sup> While Wagner would have been only four years old in 1817, he could have learned later of the event or seen subsequent ones. Wagner, of course, used the Wartburg as a central symbol in *Tannhäuser*. "It is difficult to recapture today a full sense of the importance of the Wartburg as a historical monument for nineteenth-century Germans," says a commentator on that opera, who goes on to explain and to refer to the same 1817 event:

The castle's association with Luther's struggle for religious freedom was instrumental in turning it into a symbol of the struggle for political freedom by German patriotic liberals of the early nineteenth century. In 1817, the tercentenary of the Reformation, it was the scene of the first major demonstration which brought students together in protest from different German states. Although no political action was envisaged, the event had an enormous resonance and was important enough to alarm the reactionary governments, and from that moment on the Wartburg was a potent ideological symbol of German nationalism. When Wagner wrote *Tannhäuser*, in the decade before the 1848 revolution and about twenty-five years after the Wartburg student demonstration, these political and historical associations were paramount in the public mind.<sup>240</sup>

We might assume that Brünnhilde represents the best legacy of noble society's the high art and culture that would be inherited by the victorious working class if all went well in the changing German and European lands. That culture heretofore was surrounded by the religious intimidation of the church; it was only for the initiated. And if the magic fire represents religion, then Loge, who lights it at Wotan's command, could be seen as

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<sup>239</sup> Robertson, *Revolutions of 1848*, p. 145.

<sup>240</sup> Timothy McFarland, "Wagner's Most Medieval Opera," in English National Opera series, *Tannhäuser*, p. 26, 28.



the priest of a church that has been brought under state control.<sup>241</sup> In fact, when calling up Loge, Wotan recalls that he had to tame him in the past, as the Christian church, at first independent, was brought under the control of the political authorities of Rome and later, in Wagner's time, was subservient to the powers that be, although these powers had to reassert their authority over it from time to time:

Loge, listen!  
Lend an ear!  
As I found you at first,  
a fiery glow,  
as you then disappeared,  
as a will-o'-the-wisp,  
just as I bound you  
I tame you today!  
Arise, you flickering flame,  
enfold the fell with fire!

(Stage directions: "During the following, he strikes the stone three times with his spear")

Loge! Loge! Come hither!

And Wotan's final words in *The Valkyrie* also link his spear to the fire:

He who fears  
my spear-point  
shall never pass through the fire!

Which is to say, no citizen who fears the legal force of the state will dare to challenge the state-sanctioned religion. Church and state are united to control the population; only a heroic political rebel willing to break the law of the state would be immune to religious intimidation of the fire.

In the next opera *Siegfried*, who embodies the hopes of the masses for a better future (and the hopes of Wagner for a new art not bound up with the church but for all the people), has moments of triumph. In the end, however, as the "twilight of the Gods" approaches, the course of events departs from the hopes of the young Wagner and other progressives of his generation. It is not so much that Wagner "changed his mind," the youthful radicalism giving way to middle-aged moderation, as Shaw and others allege, rather that Wagner observed and portrayed realistically what was happening in European society: a tragedy. High culture was perishing, pushed

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<sup>241</sup> As I revise this draft in 2022, the Russian Orthodox Church is completely subservient to Putin's regime.

out by the vulgar; the masses were being drawn to mediocrity; idealistic revolutionaries were being either coopted or killed.

### III. SIEGFRIED

#### Act One

Siegfried is truly a man without a country, a free spirit who recognizes no borders or social constraints. His mother Sieglinde gave birth to him in a great forest and died in the process. Mime, the crafty Nibelung Dwarf found her there, was unable to save Sieglinde but assisted at the birth and then undertook to raise Siegfried. The child grew to be an unruly youth of formidable strength who wandered in the forest and played with wild animals.

Following our hypothesis that the psychological insights expressed in the libretto and music can be best appreciated as portrayals of the psychology of members of specific social classes, let us view Mime's moods in the opening scene of *Siegfried* as an attempt to characterize the timid, vacillating, petty bourgeoisie in the face of revolutionary change. Porges describes the opening as Wagner wanted it:

The sombre, uncanny atmosphere — the very first drum roll creates a sense of standing on uncertain, shifting ground — is evoked by themes from the Nibelheim scene of *Das Rheingold*. But, whereas there those themes conveyed the force of a willpower, surging from hidden depths, here they convey acutely conscious psychological processes of a very peculiar kind: the malignant dwarf, Mime, is in the grip of uncontrollable forces with which he cannot deal and so his mind is in a painful state of doubt and turmoil. Only by attending to every detail — particularly the numerous crescendos dissolving into piano — can the players bring out the dual character of this mysterious piece of tone-painting, the depiction of a being whose will is impelled by forces of irresistible power and yet confounded by weakness and irresolution.<sup>242</sup>

If Dwarfs represent the petty bourgeoisie, and if the character Mime is, as some allege, an attempt at a Jewish caricature, then Wagner's symbolism is at least consistent, the Jews in Europe typically positioned in the lower-middle class, with occupations such as tradesmen and craftsmen. According to Rather, “the shrill, pinched, nagging tones of Mime in the first act of *Siegfried*” call to mind the description of the “Semitic speech pattern” of German-speaking Jews that Wagner in *Judaism in Music* called offensive to the ear.<sup>243</sup> There is some historical basis for making such an interpretation: Siegfried's upbringing by Mime is likened to that of the unschooled,

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<sup>242</sup> Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring'*, p. 79.

<sup>243</sup> Rather, *Reading Wagner*, p. 165.

unruly workers being instructed by the radical intellectuals who often did come from the Jewish urban petty bourgeoisie. Perhaps pertinent in this connection is a biographical detail about Wagner. As Rudolph Sabor points out, after the budding composer had moved to Paris in 1839 and was forming his ideological views, a time when “Wagner was no more anti-Semitic than most central Europeans,” it was “Samuel Lehrs, a philologist of Jewish descent, who introduced Wagner to the teachings of Feuerbach and Proudhon,”<sup>244</sup> the two philosophers who most influenced the *Ring*. In a passage already quoted, the biographer Gregor-Dellin observed that “Wagner first became acquainted with Proudhon’s basic principle — that property connotes theft — through Samuel Lehrs....” The reality of intellectual life was that it would have been difficult to follow the currents of political-economic thought without learning something from thinkers of Jewish heritage. The young Siegfried being raised by Mime could reflect this reality of Wagner’s era.

Still, such a controversy-laden question as that of possible Jewish caricatures in Wagner’s operas, a subject on which new books and articles seem to appear every year, calls for very careful judgement, especially since Hitler’s ideological utilization of Wagner has loaded the discussion with bitter emotions that affect all subsequent commentary.

### **Wagner’s anti-Semitism**

As to whether and how anti-Semitism is expressed in *The Ring*, there are three main currents among Wagner interpreters: One group holds that all the Nibelungs are Jews; another says that only Mime is supposed to be a Jew; a third denies that any Semitic stereotyping appears in the operas.

A proponent of the first school, Paul Lawrence Rose — in a recent book *Wagner: Race and Revolution* which interprets much of what Wagner did in his life as a reflection of his anti-Semitism — contends that the Nibelung Alberich is “the abhorrent Jewish counterpart of Wotan.” He further suggests that Loge “seems to be a higher Jewish type than Alberich, yet still (like Wagner’s stereotype of the assimilated Jew) a trickster,

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<sup>244</sup> Sabor, in the “companion volume” to the *Ring* translation, p. 28.

manipulator and moral nihilist.”<sup>245</sup> Citing several other commentators, Rose, goes on to determine that “Alberich's brother Mime represents a different sort of Jew. (Adorno calls him a ‘ghetto-Jew’ in contrast to Alberich the ‘stock-exchange Jew’.)” “No less an admirer of Wagner than the (Jewish) composer Gustav Mahler freely admitted the Jewish nature of Mime....”, he notes. And naturally, in the last opera of the *Ring* cycle, “Hagen, the son of Alberich, is the villain here, who has corrupted the German Gibichung court by introducing the Jewish traits of greed and domination.”<sup>246</sup> What makes the “Nibelungs = Jews” thesis plausible is that, as most Wagnerians readily admit, to Wagner monetary interests and “Jews” were almost the same thing; in what was no doubt common usage of his time, he tended to use the terms interchangeably, as in expressions like “let the Jews have it” (“it” being one of his early operas that was commercially exploited). As biographer Josserand explains, “Wagner usually equated finance with Jews, for, according to him, the Jews controlled the banks and the press; financial negotiations therefore automatically meant dealing with Jews.”<sup>247</sup>

What makes the proposition that all Nibelungs are Jews unlikely is that in Wagner’s early version of the *Ring* project, when it was called *Siegfried’s Death*, the projected end had the Nibelungs being freed from the curse. In that version, Brünnhilde heralds their liberation in her final peroration:<sup>248</sup>

You Nibelungs, heed my words!  
 Your thralldom now I end:  
 he who forged the ring and enthralled you restless spirits, —  
 he shall not regain it. —  
 But let him be free, like you!

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<sup>245</sup> Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution*, p. 69 and footnote 49 on p. 206. Rose’s treatment is criticized by Hans Rudolf Veget in “Wagner, Anti-Semitism, and Mr. Rose: *Merkwürdig’ger Fall!*”, *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Spring 1993). A more reserved account, which deliberately refrains from trying to read Wagner’s anti-semitism into his operas but explores its varying significance at different stages of his life, is Katz, *The Darker Side of Genius: Richard Wagner’s Anti-Semitism*. On the other side, Marc Weiner’s *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* goes to such lengths in finding Jewish characterizations in the operas that a reader often wonders whether the “imagination” referenced in the title is Weiner’s or Wagner’s.

<sup>246</sup> Rose, p. 71.

<sup>247</sup> *Richard Wagner: Patriot and Politician*, p. 131.

<sup>248</sup> Translation from *Appendix: Rejected Versions*, in Spencer and Millington.

Obviously it more plausible to think that Wagner had in mind the liberation of the oppressed masses than that he was projecting freedom for the Jews exclusively, and that from the outset the Nibelungs to him represented a socio-economic class, not a racial or religious group.

Wagner should be given credit for a fully articulated *Ring* symbolism in which *altitude* is an indicator of social class (the God-aristocrats in the clouds, Giants on the earth's surface, Nibelungs below ground), *size* is an indication of relative economic power (the Giants being big industrialists, the Dwarfs petty craftsmen turned into wage slaves by Alberich), and more individual characteristics may show increasingly subtle socio-ethnic traits. Thus Mime could well represent the Jewish part of the petty bourgeoisie by his isolation from society (dwelling in a cave in the woods), his fear of more powerful forces (the awesome Wotan visiting as the Wanderer, the fearsome Fafner guarding the gold, the uncontrollable strength of Siegfried), and his single-minded pursuit of the treasure.

To accept the third theory cited above, that anti-Semitism is completely irrelevant to the *Ring* operas, seems tantamount to dismissing the political interpretation as a whole, given the interchangeability in Wagner's mind between commercial greed and Jewishness. However, there are some plausible arguments for this third view that deserve scrutiny. A leading proponent is Professor Dieter Borchmeyer of the University of Heidelberg, who asserted confidently in the program materials distributed at the 1996 Bayreuth festival, "Wagner's notorious malevolence toward the Jews should neither be denied nor glossed over. And yet no trace of it is to be found in his music dramas."<sup>249</sup> He elaborates on his adamant stance in a longer entry in Müller and Wapnewski's *Wagner Handbook*, with special reference to Mime:

Ever since 1952 and the publication of Theodor W. Adorno's *In Search of Wagner*, it has been repeatedly claimed that Wagner's music dramas contain unequivocal traces of anti-Semitism. Against this it must be said that, in all of Wagner's innumerable commentaries on his own works, there is not a single statement which would entitle us to interpret any of the characters in the music dramas or any of the details of their plots in anti-Semitic terms, or even to interpret them as allusions to the Jews. The attempt to interpret the Nibelungs, and especially the figure of Mime, as mythic projections of the Jews — an interpretation based on Wagner's description of the physical appearance and speech patterns of Jews in his 1850 essay — is no more than unverifiable hypothesis. And it is an implausible hypothesis, if for no other reason than that Wagner admitted to Cosima on 2 March 1878 that "he had once felt every sympathy for Alberich." In

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<sup>249</sup> *BayreutherFestspiele 1996*, p. 108 [English translation], p. 98 [German original].

fact, in its original conception the prose scenario (*The Nibelung Legend [Myth] of 1848*) had ended with the liberation of all the Nibelungs, including Alberich, by Brünnhilde.<sup>250</sup>

An alternative translation (by Stewart Spencer) of the same passage is found in “Afterward: Wagner’s Anti-Semitism” in Borchmeyer’s book *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre*:

Ever since 1952 and the publication of Theodor W. Adorno’s *Versuch über Wagner [In Search of Wagner]* it has been claimed again and again that the Nibelungs — and especially Mime, the delineation of whose character is said to recall Wagner’s description of the physical appearance and language of the Jews in his 1850 pamphlet — are ill-concealed Jewish caricatures. This, at best, is idle speculation, rendered implausible not least by the fact that in 2 March 1878 Wagner himself admitted to Cosima that he had ‘once felt every sympathy for Alberich’. Certainly, Brünnhilde’s freeing of the Nibelungs, including Alberich, was part of the original conception of the Nibelung legend as early as 1848.<sup>251</sup>

In both of the above sources Borchmeyer goes on to discount similar allegations that the character of Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger* or that of Kundry in *Parsifal* are intended to be Jewish figures. Referring to Wagner’s own writings Borchmeyer asserts, “There is not a single remark which would allow us to interpret as Jewish any of the characters or situations in his music dramas.”<sup>252</sup> His explanation of Wagner’s motivation is as follows:

We are bound to ask ourselves why, in spite of his violently anti-Semitic polemical writings, there is not a single trace in Wagner’s music dramas of any similar tendencies (a claim which is philologically unassailable, notwithstanding speculative suggestions to the contrary). The basic reason is clearly that Wagner would have given the lie to the promise of redemption held out by the artwork of the future if he has used his music dramas — which promised to free the Jews from the “curse” of their race — as an instrument of anti-Jewish propaganda. Within the utopian framework of the mythopoeic music drama, the Jewish problem is solved by means of Wagner’s mystical doctrine of redemption.<sup>253</sup>

Again there an alternative translation by Spencer is found in Borchmeyer’s book, and it uses similarly categorical statements:

There are no Jewish characters in his music dramas, still less any anti-Semitic tendencies. His hatred of the Jews was excluded from the inner sanctum of his artistic personality. The fundamental reason for this undoubtedly lies in the fact that Wagner would have given the lie to his promise of aesthetic salvation if the ‘art-work of the future’, which promised ‘redemption’ to Jews as well as Gentiles, had been turned into an instrument of anti-Jewish satire and polemical prejudice. Within the Utopian framework of the

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<sup>250</sup> Dieter Borchmeyer, “The Question of Anti-Semitism,” in *Wagner Handbook*, p. 183.

<sup>251</sup> Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre*, p. 407.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>253</sup> In *Wagner Handbook*, p. 184.

mythic musical drama, the Jewish question had been solved for Wagner by his mystic doctrine of redemption.”<sup>254</sup>

Thus his position is that, in a complex way, *The Ring* and some of the other music-dramas are relevant to the Jewish question without resorting to outright Jewish caricature. However, Borchmeyer’s argument in this regard is suspect on two logical grounds. One is the extreme categorical nature of his statements, such as his reference to “the indisputable fact that he [Wagner] kept his musico-dramatic oeuvre free of anti-Semitic tendencies.”<sup>255</sup> How can he use a term like “indisputable” when he himself makes clear that this “fact” has been greatly disputed? The other is his tendency to compartmentalize Wagner’s mind, asserting that the composer’s adamant treatment of the Jewish question in his prose writings had no influence on the creative work on the music dramas, and that “Wagner never made any attempt to relate his theoretical hostility towards the Jews to the practice of his personal dealings with them.” This line of argument is intellectually unsatisfying because we end up with several Wagners instead of one integrated personality. It would be more scientific to try to resolve the apparent discrepancies of Wagner’s attitude toward Jews in three areas of his behavior — the prose works, the art works, and the personal relations — with one consistent hypothesis. Such a hypothesis can be stated as follows: For Wagner, “the Jew” is a blend of ethno-religious and socio-economic traits; in other words, the economic function of Jews in European capitalist society is crucial to their identity as they conceive themselves and are perceived by Gentiles. Indeed, their economic role as money-lenders and peddlars is part of the very definition of “Jewish” for Europeans of Wagner’s time. Jewish people themselves might use the label this way, succumbing to the common usage. A biographer of Heinrich Heine notes that

Heine sometimes identifies the Jews outright with commerce. Thus a letter to his gentile friend Christian Sethe, written when Heine was eighteen, calls Hamburg a ‘huckster town’ and adds ‘I call everyone in Hamburg a Jew.’<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre*, p. 408.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>256</sup> Ritchie Robertson, *Heine*, p. 79.



Later in life Heine gained more perspective and “believed the anti-Semitism of his day to be no longer religious but economic, based on a false identification of Jews with capitalists.”<sup>257</sup>

By grasping the fact that Wagner’s definition of “the Jew” was as much an economic category as a racial or religious one (in this sense, Wagner did not transcend the common attitudes of his time), we can reconcile his apparently contradictory behavior. In the prose works Jews are condemned along with the institution of property. In his personal relations with individual Jews, Wagner was quite capable of engaging in close working cooperation, even warm, friendly social association, for the simple reason that these people were not playing the economic role of “Jews” but rather the role of artistic collaborators. And in his music dramas, primarily *The Ring*, Wagner was dealing with the socio-economic category of “Jews” (especially for Mime, the old craftsman striving for wealth and power). What makes it difficult to understand the true nature of Wagner’s “anti-Semitism” is that present-day interpreters cannot help viewing it through the distorted filter of Naziism, which turned “Jews” from a vague religious-ethno-economic category into a purely racial one. The distinct change in the German definition of the Jew that took place a half century after Wagner’s death is expressed sharply by the feminist historian Gerda Lerner (who also experienced it personally as a refugee from Austria), who places it in the context of a discussion of the nonsense of all racist concepts:

The arbitrariness and irrationality of the designation race are clearly shown in the case of Jews. For nearly two millennia Jews were distinguishable from others solely by their self-imposed religious observances, which differed from those of the people among whom they lived. They were, at times, forced to mark themselves as Jews by items of clothing, such as the pointed hat and the yellow star imposed on European Jews in the Middle Ages. Up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jews were despised, persecuted and designated as outsiders for religious reasons and each individual Jew could escape his/her plight by converting to Christianity. When the Nazis in Germany looked for a rationale to explain and justify their desire to exterminate all Jews, they designated them a “race.” The Nüremberg laws made this designation the law of the land. The definition of who is a Jew — a purely arbitrary definition — no longer had anything to do with religion. Atheists and converted Jews were marched into the gas chambers, as long as their biological ancestry made them fall under the racial designation invented by the Nazis.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>258</sup> Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters*, pp. 185-86.

Thus, Wagner could not have been a racist or anti-Semite in the Nazi sense, for the simple reason that such a sense did not yet exist during his formative years. In fact, Wagner's occasional suggestions to his Jewish colleagues in music (suggestions perhaps well-intentioned but usually unwelcome to the recipients) that they convert to Christianity, show that his anti-Semitism was of the traditional, not the Nazi type: one could choose not to be a Jew. (Not a few talented Jews did get baptized in order to qualify for official positions and integrate into German society.) Considering this, Wagner's multiplicity of attitudes toward Jewish colleagues in the different roles through which they intersected his life was not necessarily inconsistent. And it would be wildly speculative to suppose that, had Wagner lived in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, he would have been a Nazi follower.

Borchmeyer identifies a similarity of Wagner's thought to Marx's line of argument, citing "one point which the two writers have in common, namely, the belief that the Jewish question cannot be solved by integrating the Jews into existing society. It can be addressed only by abolishing Judaism as part of a more general process involving the struggle to overcome man's alienation from self, which is itself the result of the domination of capital."<sup>259</sup> To simply summarize the theory apparently held by both Marx and Wagner in more neutral social-science terms: As capitalism developed in the West, the society assigned certain economic roles to the Jews, functions such as money-lending and trading for profit that, because they were frowned upon by the dominant Christian morality and yet were essential to the economic system, were conveniently handed off to an available and willing minority. Specialization in these functions both reinforced the social isolation of Jewish communities from the Christian and gave rise to a feeling of abhorrence of Jews by Christians who felt themselves their economic victims. By the time of Marx and Wagner, however, the religious sanctions against usury and profiteering had weakened to the extent that respectable Christian bankers and traders could do, with no social approbrium, what Jews had been doing since the Middle Ages; therefore the unique economic role of "the Jew" had become superfluous and the Jewish population was increasingly marginalized in society, faced with a choice of either trying to assimilate with the majority and pursue broader opportunities in the mainstream, or

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<sup>259</sup> In *Wagner Handbook*, p. 176.

stubbornly cling to a ghettoized existence with opportunities only within their own community. This residual historical status of the Jews as both economic exploiters and targets of social discrimination would only be overcome when the profit motive ceased to be the motivating force behind the political-economic system, i.e. after the socialist revolution (Marx) and the artistic-spiritual redemption from greed (Wagner).

Among the three schools of Wagner interpretation on the Jewish question, I favor the second: the idea that it is primarily in the portrayal of Mime that Wagner's anti-Jewish prejudices come to the fore. I agree with a sensible judgement made by Thomas Grey in a critical review of Weiner's *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* — a book that backs the first of the three theories in extreme form, trying to prove that Wagner's operas are permeated with anti-Semitism and the Nibelungs are all Jews. Grey writes that “the tendency to equate the Nibelungs as a ‘race’ with the Jews obscures the fact that these dwarves figure as the oppressed masses (in *Das Rheingold*), as well as oppressors or would-be oppressors, while in Wagner's *Weltenanschauung* [sic] the Jews were never victims, but only victimizers.”<sup>260</sup> The quotation from Mahler that several writers cite as evidence of anti-Semitism in *The Ring* endorses the interpretation that Wagner had such intention regarding Mime in particular. Cooke, who holds to the third theory and writes that “we should be eternally grateful that Wagner, with the supreme artist's infallible intuition, never intruded his racialist theories into his works of art,” nevertheless cites the Mahler quotation as follows:

The only possible exception — the allegedly ‘Jewish’ nature of the squeaky-voice utterances given to Mime — is not proven; though Mahler, who was extremely critical of Jews and of himself as one, accepted Mime as an anti-Semitic caricature, and a legitimate one. ‘No doubt with Mime,’ he wrote, ‘Wagner intended to ridicule the Jews (with all their characteristic traits — petty intelligence and greed — the jargon is textually and musically so cleverly suggested) ... I know of only one Mime, and that is myself...you wouldn't believe what there is in that part, nor what I could make of it.’<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Thomas Grey in a review of Marc A. Weiner's *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln, Neb.: 1995) in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (July 1996), pp. 190-91.

<sup>261</sup> Cooke, *I Saw the World End*, fn 8 on p. 264, where he cites the source of the Mahler quotation as Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Mahler*, Vol. 1, 1974, p. 482.

A variation of the Mahler quotation is cited by Carl Niekerk in his chapter “Mahler contra Wagner” in a book called *Sound Matters*, where he says “Natalie Bauer-Lechner’s memoirs include an interesting reference to a Vienna performance of Wagner’s *Siegfried* that Mahler conducted:

...Although I am convinced that this figure [Mime] is the embodied persiflage of a Jew, as intended by Wagner (with all the traits which he gave him: his petty cleverness, greed and all the complete musically and textually excellent jargon), in God’s name that should not be exaggerated and dished up so thickly here, as Spielmann did this – especially in Vienna, at the ‘k.k. Court Opera,’ it is clearly laughable and a welcome scandal for the Viennese! I know only *one* Mime (we all looked at him anxiously) and that is *me!* You will be surprised to see what lies in the part and what I could make of it.

Himself born a Jew, Mahler had no illusions about the anti-Semitic stereotypes personified by Mime in Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelungen*; in fact, he had no problem admitting that Mime could represent *him*. But the ease with which Mahler, armed with that knowledge, turns Wagner’s anti-Semitism against one of the singers, Spielmann, is astonishing.”<sup>262</sup> Now, without falling into the “it takes one to know one” fallacy (in two senses: Mahler as a Jew with a sympathetic understanding of Mime, and Mahler as a great German composer and conductor with a deep understanding of Wagner), we can credit Mahler with a perception as authentic as anyone’s.

However it may have surfaced in his operas (according to some) or remained submerged (according to others), Wagner’s anti-Semitism — the most egregious flaw in the composer’s otherwise generally progressive socio-political outlook — apparently had deep psychological roots in his uncertainty about his own parentage and the fact that he might have been suspected of being Jewish or part-Jewish because of the family name “Geyer” he had while growing up, near a Jewish neighborhood to boot. The man supposed to be his father, Friedrich Wagner, had died in a plague when Richard was a few months old. Ludwig Geyer, a close friend of the Wagner family, had died in a plague when Richard was a few months old. Ludwig Geyer, a close friend of the Wagner family, married Richard’s mother several months after, and he was the only “father” Richard knew growing up. Given the obvious possibility that an affair began between Geyer and Richard’s mother during Friedrich Wagner’s fatal illness and was formalized in marriage after Friedrich died, Richard had reason to suspect that Geyer might also be his biological father. Later evidence showed that Geyer was not Jewish, although his name was one sometimes

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<sup>262</sup> *Sound Matters*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Lutz Koepnick (New York: 2004), pp.50-51.

associated with Jewish families. Nevertheless, a lingering doubt about parentage, perhaps also ethnicity, affected Wagner. Based on all the evidence he could gather on the paternity issue, biographer Ernest Newman wrote: “The upshot of it all is not that it is now certain that Wagner was the son of Geyer...but that *Wagner himself believed in the possibility* of Geyer having been his father.”<sup>263</sup> Apparently Wagner confided this possibility to Nietzsche.<sup>264</sup> Another conscientious biographer, Martin Gregor-Dellin, perceptively proposes that the name of “Mime” could refer to “father” Geyer's profession as a “mime” or actor.<sup>265</sup> In that interpretation, Siegfried in the opera revealingly expresses Wagner’s own anxiety about his probable parentage. Quite likely Wagner, growing up as “Richard Geyer” and having a prominent proboscis, had the irritating experience on occasion of being mistaken for a Jew. For our purposes, however, the psychological roots of Wagner’s anti-Semitism are secondary to the ideological.

It is impossible to understand Wagner’s anti-Semitism without grasping its key element, that he viewed the Jews as the epitome of the materialistic, petty-bourgeois class that was undermining the romantic, naturalistic cultural ideals that he cherished and that eventually triumph (after most of the leading characters are dead) in *The Ring*. When he writes in *Judaism in Music* that “it is we [Germans] who require to fight for emancipation from the Jews,” he makes reasonably clear in the following passage that by “Judaism” he means domination — especially of art — by materialistic values:

As the world is constituted today, the Jew is more than emancipated, he is the ruler. And he will continue to rule as long as money remains the power to which all our activities are subjugated. That that historical misery of the Jews and the criminal brutality of Christian German leaders have resulted in this power being in the hands of the sons of Israel requires no proof from me. But that the impossibility of our arts evolving further without complete re-organization has given the artistic taste of our time into the custody

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<sup>263</sup> Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, Volume I, p. 9. Italics in original.

<sup>264</sup> Nietzsche’s sister wrote that “my brother told me that Wagner always regarded his alleged stepfather, Ludwig Geyer, as his real father.” *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, ed. by Elizabeth Foerster-Nietzsche p. 34. Nietzsche himself, after the break, made the famous insinuation that Wagner might have a Jewish parent in a footnote to *The Case of Wagner*: “His father was an actor by the name of Geyer. A Geyer [vulture] is practically an Adler [eagle].” (Adler being a more commonly Jewish name.) This was obviously prompted by his recollection of an earlier incident, reported by Elizabeth in the above source, when Wagner, apparently in jest, planned to have a coat of arms designed with a vulture in it and begged Nietzsche’s help in finding a good picture of a vulture that did *not* look like an eagle.

<sup>265</sup> Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner*, p. 21.

of busy Jewish hands is the subject we must examine here more closely.... What the great artists have toiled to bring into being for two thousand unhappy years, the Jew today turns into an art business.<sup>266</sup>

Wagner's anti-Semitism was abstract rather than specific, political-ideological rather than personal. The paradox as reported by his major biographers is that his ranting in speech and writing against the pernicious influence of the Jewish people as a group in music, art and society did not prevent him from working with and at times even warmly fraternizing with a number of Jewish colleagues. He welcomed them as individuals in his musical productions when he thought them qualified. As a good example, Gregor-Dellin points out that "*Parsifal* was conducted by a man with the name of Levi, and Wagner's determination on that point was not shaken by receipt of anonymous antisemitic missives insisting that he preserve the 'purity' of his work and not allow it to be conducted by a Jew."<sup>267</sup> Another such example is his closeness with the young Karl Tausig, also reported by Gregor-Dellin:

Thought not yet seventeen [in 1858], Karl Tausig was an amazingly precocious pianist who combined prodigious musical talent with an engaging blend of youthful impudence and sophisticated conversation. Wagner put him up at the nearby Hotel Sternen, where he stayed for two months. Tausig reluctantly accompanied Wagner on walks whose length he soon tired of, carries messages to the villa when the Wesendoncks returned, and proved such an entertaining companion that Wagner became genuinely fond of him. He treated Tausig like a son, scolding him gently for his boyish misdemeanors but delighting in his technical proficiency and keen intelligence. Wagner's affection for Tausig was remarkable, if only because the angelic young virtuoso happened to be Jewish. Suddenly remembering that *Judaism in Music* required all Jews to be repellant, he hastened to inform Minna that Tausig's father was "an honest Bohemian and a thoroughgoing Christian."<sup>268</sup>

Milton E. Bremer recently published a 300-page book, *Richard Wagner and the Jews*, covering the lifelong paradox of Wagner persistently voicing anti-Semitic ideas while maintaining tight personal and professional relationships with individual Jewish people.

All the same, Wagner kept making such virulent denunciations of "the Jews" that friends such as the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (who likewise in the next century was to be unjustly accused of having helped

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<sup>266</sup> Wagner, *Judaism in Music*, in Osborne, ed., *Richard Wagner: Stories and Essays*, p. 25.

<sup>267</sup> In "Afterward" to *Richard Wagner, My Life*, p. 745.

<sup>268</sup> Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner*, p. 282.

prepare the ideological ground for Nazism) broke off relations with him. Nietzsche was one who later implied with bitter irony that Wagner was really Jewish. Gregor-Dellin, one of the most scrupulous biographers, seems genuinely puzzled by the fact that “Wagner willfully forgot that some of his closest and most intimate friends were Jews: Samuel Lehrs, Josep Rubinstein, Tausig, whom he loved tenderly, and Angelo Neumann.”<sup>269</sup> We might add Heinrich Porges, to whom Wagner entrusted the note-taking during the Bayreuth *Ring* rehearsals; as Robert L. Jacobs, the translator of the book resulting from these notes, describes it, the ties between Wagner and Porges were more than professional:

In 1864 the relationship between the two developed rapidly. Porges was one of the friends who arranged the sale of Wagner’s effects after he fled from his creditors in Vienna; later that year, when his fortunes were changed overnight by King Ludwig of Bavaria, Wagner invited Porges not only to come to Munich as his private secretary, but to *live* there with him: “how important for me and how beautiful always to have your understanding, friendly companionship!”<sup>270</sup>

The paradox of Wagner’s apparently inconsistent attitude toward the Jewish people can be resolved on one level — to the extent that it can be — by noting the distinction between personal relationships and socio-economic views. On a deeper level, however, it can be resolved only by an awareness that Wagner’s mind was not analytic but synthetic — in other words, creative. Wagner did not *have to* be perfectly logical, he had to be artistic. *The New Grove Wagner* has a short summary:

In terms of the history of ideas, however, the decisive characteristic of Wagner’s (as of Karl Marx’s) anti-semitism was the habit, for which ‘Vormærz’ [obscurantist] Hegelianism was to blame, of thinking of real people as symbolic figures representing some objective historical phenomenon: the Jew (the very use of the singular is a fatal depersonalization) became a kind of allegory or a convenient simplification of the causes of the social damage wrought by the early industrial age....<sup>271</sup>

This is a fair characterization of Wagner’s, but not Karl Marx’s so-called anti-Semitism, which is even more the subject of misinterpretation but with less justification since Marx was more explicit in his treatment of Jewish history in the context of Europe’s socio-economic evolution, and scientific in tracing the underlying economic

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<sup>269</sup> In “Afterward” to Wagner’s *My Life*, p. 745.

<sup>270</sup> Translator’s preface to Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the ‘Ring’*, p. x. Italics in original.

<sup>271</sup> Deathridge and Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner*, p. 81.

causes of cultural phenomena. Also, one might point out to the authors of *The New Grove Wagner* that the use of the categorical singular (“the Jew,” “the Christian,”) is more common in German and does not necessarily have an invidious connotation.

An instructive way to comprehend Wagner’s anti-Semitism is to compare it with his anti-French attitude. He stated negative generalizations about the French, which if collected into a book would probably exceed in length and severity his *Judaism in Music*. An excellent source of analysis for these attitudes is *The Political Concepts of Richard Wagner* by the French author Maurice Boucher who, being a Frenchman deeply interested in Wagner and writing only a few years after World War II, would be expected to be particularly sensitive to this problem. To his credit, he carries off an objective and perceptive analysis. His chapter entitled “Civilization” (he notes Wagner’s propensity to use this term in a negative sense of the ills of modern civilization in contrast to “culture” which is more positive), starts by conceding that “the civilization Wagner describes in order to condemn it is Paris and France.” “The matter, however, is more complex,” he goes on, admitting that at times Wagner was also severe with his countrymen, the Germans. Both are abstractions, symbols, to Wagner: “The Germany he admires is no less imaginary than his France.”<sup>272</sup> Nor did Wagner’s harsh remarks about the French prevent him from having friendly relations with French individuals. French civilization, centered in Paris, was for Wagner a metaphor for everything detestable about modern European life (that is, when he was not using the Jewish metaphor for the same). After citing examples of Wagner’s prejudices about the French (they are incapable of a deep understanding of Mozart’s or Beethoven’s music even though they could perform it better than the Germans, etc.), Boucher concludes that “he identifies French pseudo-civilization with the decadence of mankind.”<sup>273</sup> Perhaps today the U.S. stands in a position that France occupied in Wagner’s time, as the producer of mass culture and fashion, so that a comparable attitude today would be denouncing American “civilization” as the primary contributor to the cultural decadence of mankind, due to the spread of Hollywood movies, Disneylands, and

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<sup>272</sup> Boucher, *The Political Concepts of Richard Wagner*, p. 75.

<sup>273</sup> Boucher, p. 87.



McDonald's. What is important in Boucher's analysis, however, is the point that, "France, as represented by Wagner, was the negative myth. Germany was to be the positive myth."<sup>274</sup> To put it another way, Wagner wrote and spoke about artistic ideals more than about concrete conditions in the countries concerned. The terms "French" or "German" were prescriptive of ideal types as much as descriptive. Boucher is perceptive also in identifying the fact that Wagner's anti-Semitism was on a similar level of abstraction, with mythic properties, and that he was not a "racist" as that term is understood today.<sup>275</sup>

### **Siegfried and Mime**

In any case, the opera *Siegfried* portrays Mime as a slightly sympathetic, partly humorous, but essentially calculating and grasping character. Mime raises Siegfried with dedication, but always for the ultimate purpose of getting hold of the treasure and ring for himself using Siegfried's strength to kill the dragon Fafner. As Wagner viewed the European political scene, middle-class revolutionaries, including Jews (like Marx), who helped raise the working class to political consciousness had ulterior motives. They wanted to take control of the economic system themselves and were using the workers as the means to power.

Characterizing the main political tendencies of the 1848-49 revolution in *My Life*, Wagner explains that "two main political societies had been formed in Dresden: the first styled itself the German Union; its program called for 'a constitutional monarchy with a broad base of democratic support'. The inherent harmlessness of its aims was soon evidenced by the names of its principal founders, among whom, despite its broad base of democratic support, my friend Eduard Devrient and Professor Rietschel were included as loud and doughty advocates. This society, which enlisted everybody who was afraid of a real revolution, conjured up in opposition a second association, which called itself the Patriotic Union. In this one the 'democratic base' seemed to be the main thing, and the 'constitutional monarchy' only the requisite camouflage." Years later, Wagner relates in the autobiography, he was visited by the same Eduard Devrient. "In the best of moods I played host to Devrient as

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Boucher, p. 53.

well as I could; on one morning I played and sang the whole *Rhinegold* for him, which seemed to please him very much. Half joking and half in earnest, I told him I had thought of him when writing the part of Mime; for if it were not too late, he should have his chance to play this role some day.”<sup>276</sup> For his part, Devrient admired Wagner as a poet but was disturbed by his political views, which he could see were reflected in *The Ring* from the earliest stages of its conception, as Stewart Spencer reports:

Eduard Devrient, whom Wagner regularly regaled with readings from his latest works, was sufficiently impressed to note in his diary: ‘The fellow’s a poet through and through. A beautiful piece of work. Alliteration, as used by him, is a real find for opera poems; it ought to be raised to the level of a general principle.’ (Conversely, Devrient was frankly alarmed at the ‘socialist pretensions’ of the 1848 scenario, *The Nibelung Legend*).<sup>277</sup>

The opera opens in Mime's cave, equipped as a smithy's workshop, to the musical theme of the Nibelungs which, as we have seen, is the motif of industrial technology. Mime is hammering away, trying in vain to forge a sword strong enough for Siegfried to use without it shattering under his power. This sword symbolizes the revolutionary force that Siegfried, vanguard of the working class, can wield to slay the big capitalists represented as Fafner, the Giant who has turned himself into a fierce Dragon. What Wagner may have had in mind is that the big bourgeoisie invokes a military state to guard its wealth. However, the petty bourgeois Mime is completely incapable of forging the sword of revolution, the sword called *Nothung* from the German *Not* which means ‘need,’ ‘necessity’ or ‘distress’ and is an important word in *The Ring*, used by Wotan. The revolution has to happen when it is historically necessary, because objective conditions have built up to a crisis.

Siegfried makes his first appearance when he comes home leading a large bear, “which he now sets on Mime in boisterous high spirits” (stage directions). When Mime in terror responds “Away with the beast! / What use is the bear to me?”, Siegfried explains: “I came as a pair / the better to plague you: / ask him, Bruin, about the sword!” Only when Mime points to his latest forged product does Siegfried send the bear back to the forest, after which Mime, still trembling, complains: “I’m happy for you / to hunt down bears: / but why bring / brown bears

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<sup>276</sup> *My Life*, p. 363 and p. 551.

<sup>277</sup> Spencer, “A Note on the text and translation,” in Spencer and Millington, eds., *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung*, p. 11.

home alive?" Siegfried first says he was seeking a better companion than Mime, and the bear is the one who turned up; second, he repeats that he brought the bear home "to ask you, you scoundrel, about the sword." Thus, the libretto tells us no less than three times that Siegfried's purpose in bringing home the bear is to "ask" Mime why the needed weapon is not yet ready. Bears don't talk, even in *The Ring*, but this repetition leads us to think that Wagner had a certain person in mind for the bear figure. The bear could well be a caricature of Wagner's Anarchist accomplice in the violent revolution of 1849, Bakunin, whose picture in Gutman's biography of Wagner is captioned this way: "A great bearish itinerant revolutionary, Bakunin cast a powerful spell over Wagner with his inflammatory harangues on the glories of popular revolution."<sup>278</sup> The interpretation of Siegfried's bear as the Russian "bear" Bakunin is more precise than Shaw's attempt to depict Siegfried himself as "a totally unmoral person, a born anarchist, the ideal of Bakunin, an anticipation of the 'overman' of Nietzsche."<sup>279</sup> Curt von Westernhagen's objection to Shaw's appraisal, although overstated, should be sustained:

In view of the profound differences between their outlooks, it is ludicrous to call Wagner a Bakunist and to see a portrait of Bakunin in his Siegfried, as Bernard Shaw did. But it only needs one intelligent mind to propose an amusing paradox for ten less intelligent ones to spring up and adopt it in all seriousness. Bakunin for his part had nothing but contempt mingled with pity for Wagner's politics. According to the minutes of the hearing at Königstein on 19 September 1849 he said: 'Wagner I at once recognized as a dreamer, and although I discussed politics with him I never undertook any joint action with him.'<sup>280</sup>

Bakunin the professional revolutionary would, indeed, have perceived Wagner as a political naïf; however, perhaps his testimony at the hearing was also contrived to avoid implicating his conductor friend in capital crimes. To deny that Wagner was a "Bakunist" (whatever that might mean) doesn't prove that Wagner's lasting impression of Bakunin is not reflected in *The Ring*. It is more logical to reason that Siegfried, the eponymous hero who is destined to undergo profound development at each stage of this opera and further transformations in the next, exhibits the complex fate of the proletarian vanguard, while the bear Bakunin is simply the most

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<sup>278</sup> Gutman, *Richard Wagner*, p. 133.

<sup>279</sup> Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, p. 35.

<sup>280</sup> Westernhagen, *Wagner: A Biography*, Vol. I, p. 133.

threatening (to petty-bourgeois, would-be revolutionary leader Mime) of his consorts. Like Siegfried, Wagner brought home the fearsome “bear” Bakunin, who devoured quantities of sausage and meat to Minna's dismay.<sup>281</sup> The parallel goes even further, because the bear came out of the woods to befriend Siegfried when the hero played music:

I was seeking a better companion  
than he one sitting here at home;  
deep in the forest I wound my horn  
till it echoed far and wide:  
would some good-hearted friend  
be glad to join me,  
I asked by means of that sound.  
From the bushes came a bear,  
which growling, gave me ear;  
I liked him better than you,  
but might find better ones yet:  
I bridled him then  
with a length of tough bast  
to ask you, you scoundrel, about the sword.

Wagner is careful to recount in his autobiography how a musical performance brought the Russian bear out of hiding:

Once again, on Palm Sunday of the new year 1849, I had a glorious satisfaction. In order to ensure maximum box office receipts, the orchestra again had recourse to a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony; everybody made every effort to make this one of the best performances of all; the public received it with open enthusiasm. The general rehearsal had been attended, in secret and without knowledge of the police, by Michael Bakunin; after it was over he came up to me unabashedly in the orchestra to call out to me that, if all music were to be lost in the coming world conflagration, we should risk our own lives to preserve this symphony. Several weeks after the performance this “world conflagration” seemed about to be ignited in the streets of Dresden, and Bakunin, with whom I had become more closely associated in a strange and unusual way, seemed to want to assume the function of chief pyrotechnist in this act.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> *My Life*, p. 387.

<sup>282</sup> *My Life*, p. 384.



*A great bearish itinerant revolutionary, Bakunin cast a powerful spell over Wagner with his inflammatory harangues on the glories of popular revolution.*

**Too much to bear:** Bakunin is described as “bearish” in this captioned picture in Gutman’s *Richard Wagner*, p. 133. Wagner probably got the same impression. Is the bear that Siegfried brings home to Mime’s cave an allusion to Bakunin, whom Wagner brought home?

So, besides the obvious link between Bakunin’s fantasy of “world conflagration” and the final scene of *Götterdämmerung* which Wagner interpreters have not neglected to point out, it is highly significant that, as observed by Wagner, Bakunin’s role in the events leading up to the Dresden insurrection was precisely

to ask where was the sword *Nothung* — the needed revolutionary force. Here is Gregor-Dellin’s account of Wagner’s observation of Bakunin’s attitude toward the Dresden radicals of 1849, very similar to Siegfried’s contempt for Mime’s sword-forging:

Wagner now became acquainted with the grotesque side of such ill-organized revolts, with their alternation of mob hysteria and peaceful normality. That afternoon he saw Mikhail Bakunin strolling through the barricades, frock-coated and puffing at a cigar.... Bakunin poured scorn on the whole insurrection. After a day spent studying maps in the city hall, he displayed the half amused, half sorrowful resignation of one who has turned up at the wrong party.<sup>283</sup>

Another autobiographical aspect of Wagner’s portrayal of the young Siegfried is the quest for knowledge about parents lost in early childhood. While these scenes no doubt owe their emotional poignancy to the author’s wondering about his true father, they have important political significance too. Siegfried’s persistent questioning of Mime eventually brings out the fact that Mime is not his real “father and mother,” a claim Siegfried had always doubted. Mime reluctantly tells the true story about mother Sieglinde, and to prove it he takes out the fragments of the sword that is Siegfried’s inheritance. In political terms, it is the revolutionary legacy of the masses, gained

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<sup>283</sup> Gregor-Dellin, pp. 171-72.

through costly defeats. That it has to be transmitted by the “Jewish” agitator Mime is regrettable but necessary, as direct contact of the workers with the past generation’s political experience has been cut off. Even if Siegfried had gone to school, he would not have learned any revolutionary lessons there.

Siegfried is excited by the prospect of obtaining the true sword and demands that Mime reforge it immediately. As Mime faces this task, of which he is by nature incapable (petty bourgeois intellectuals cannot forge the weapon of class struggle for the workers; the workers must do this for themselves), Siegfried goes off into the forest and a stranger drops in on Mime.

The stranger is the all-knowing Wotan in disguise as a Wanderer. He claims to offer wisdom in exchange for hospitality, but Mime is leery. The Wanderer proposes a question-and-answer contest and says he will answer any three questions Mime puts to him. To an audience unaware of the political significance of *The Ring*, this whole episode may seem a trivial game of riddles. In fact, it is a serious political discussion of the type Wagner must have heard take place in the coffee houses of Leipzig or Dresden. The discussion focuses on the proper analysis of social classes and sources of political change. The life-and-death significance of this analysis is underlined by the Wanderer’s challenge: that he is staking his head against Mime’s.

Mime’s three questions refer to the major classes of society, but they are unimaginative questions calling for stock answers. First he asks, “What dusky race dwells in the earth’s deep caverns?” In other words, who make up the lower class? Spencer’s translation of Mime’s first question, “what is the race that trades in the depths of the earth?” [from the German: *welches Geschlecht tagt in der Erde tiefe?*], is most apt for our political-economic analysis and is justified by the translator’s note.<sup>284</sup> The Wanderer answers that it is the Nibelungs, and he recapitulates the history of Alberich temporarily using the ring to rule over “that hard working race.” Next

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<sup>284</sup> Spencer and Millington, p. 210. The note (p. 367-68) reads in full: “Although Wagner’s use of the verb *tagen* is probably conditioned by purely alliterative constraints, it may be significant, none the less, that its meanings include ‘to meet in order to transact business’, a reading entirely consonant with Wagner’s interpretation of the Nibelungs as a thriving business community. In this context it is worth recalling Wagner’s reaction to London’s docklands in 1877: ‘This is Alberich’s dream come true - Nibelheim, world dominion, activity, work, everywhere the oppressive feeling of steam and fog.’” The source of the quote is Cosima’s Diary entry for 25 May 1977.

Mime asks, “What mighty race dwells on the earth’s broad surface?” and the Wanderer replies that the earth is where the Giants dwell, telling briefly how Fafner ended up guarding the gold and the ring. This explains the successful middle class, the capitalists. Finally, Mime asks, “What lordly race dwells on cloud-hidden heights?” That is, who composes the upper class, half-hidden from the eyes of the masses. The answer, of course, is that the Gods dwell there, and Wotan is their ruler. On Wotan’s spear shaft he engraved “hallowed treaties’ binding runes,” in other words the contract-based feudal legal apparatus the aristocracy has established over society. Whoever holds that spear (representing state power: “with the point of that weapon Wotan governs the world”). Thus, the basic social class structure has been sketched, as was elementary A-B-C in a 19<sup>th</sup> century radical political discussion.

Mime has to admit that all the answers are correct, so now it is the Wanderer’s turn to query him three times. The Wanderer admonishes Mime that he should have asked what he really needed to know instead of what he knew already. Mime’s questions are routine academic ones — typical of a petty bourgeois intellectual. The Wanderer’s first question is “What is the name of the race that Wotan treated harshly and yet holds most dear in his heart?” Mime carefully answers that it must be the Wälsungs, namely the tribe of Siegmund, Sieglinde, and their child Siegfried. These are the folks that Wotan had fostered illegitimately and then had to repudiate (a revolutionary vanguard). The name “Wälsung,” incidentally, Wagner may have derived from “Wahl” which means “choice” in German, as the characters in question are the only agents in the opera capable of exercising free choice: most of the other characters, even Wotan, are confined by their class ideology. Wotan’s loss of one eye gives him limited perspective although he has seen more than most.

The second question put to Mime calls for the name of the sword Siegfried must use to kill Fafner and gain the ring. Mime is able to respond correctly that it is Nothung, and shows that he knows its history and significance. Politically speaking, Mime the radical agitator knows that this “necessity” is the revolutionary force that can overcome the big capitalists. The third question from the Wanderer, however, is the one that stumps Mime: “Who will forge the sword?” Mime, the most skillful smithy, who made the Tarnhelm for Alberich and who has been heating and hammering the fragments of the sword over and over in vain, cannot imagine who else

could possibly do it. European petty bourgeois intellectual leaders could not admit that anyone but themselves could equip and direct the working class toward a successful revolution. But the reality was that the proletariat had to reach the boiling point where it got ahead of the “leaders” and took the initiative spontaneously, forging the sword of revolutionary force.

With Mime unable to answer the most important question, the Wanderer claims his head as the prize. (Mime’s sentence will be carried out later in the opera.) But before departing, the Wanderer tells Mime the correct answer: “One who has never learnt to fear — he makes Nothung new.” Siegfried thereupon returns and is exasperated to find that Mime still has not forged the sword for him. Wagner relates in his autobiography how, while he was composing *Siegfried*, an annoyance in his life had a fortuitous influence on his music:

A tinker had recently moved in at the house opposite ours, and he stultified my ears throughout the day with his resounding hammer strokes. In my misery about my inability ever to find lodgings free of noise and disturbance, I was about to give in and abandon all composing until such time as this indispensable condition could be fulfilled. But it was precisely my anger at this tinker that, in a moment of fury, gave me the theme for Siegfried’s outburst of rage at the bungling of Mime.<sup>285</sup>

Mime realizes that he has forgotten to teach Siegfried the meaning of fear, and tries hopelessly to explain it to him. But he still fails to make the connection that it is Siegfried who must forge the sword; he admits only that “no Dwarf can forge it.” The shopkeeper class is too easily intimidated to lead a revolutionary movement. Siegfried, having lost all trust in Mime’s ability, finally grabs the fragments and decisively begins to forge the sword himself. His methods are much more radical than Mime’s: He files down the old pieces into powder, then starts from scratch to shape it into a blade. Mime looks on skeptically but has to admit to himself that Siegfried will inevitably succeed. Thus, each generation of workers has to relearn its revolutionary heritage through practice, not just theory. When finished, Siegfried has a sword so strong that he cleaves Mime’s anvil in two with it. Meanwhile, Mime has mixed a poisonous soup to use to dispose of Siegfried so that he can gather the gains of the hero’s exploits. The reforging of the sword from its fragments is a political allusion to the unity of the revolutionary forces, which is the source of their strength. This weapon cannot be reforged by trying to patch

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<sup>285</sup> *My Life*, p. 537.



together the old factions of revolutionary movements, as Mime kept trying to do. Rather, a leader with fresh initiative must begin again with the molecules (individuals) and build a new organization without the fault lines of the old ones. That is why Siegfried has to melt down the old sword shards and temper a new weapon in the flames of social unrest.

## **Act Two**

As Act Two opens, Alberich is keeping a jealous watch outside Fafner's cave. In fact, the name of the cave is Neidhohle, "cavern of envy" or "cave of covetousness." Wotan, still in disguise as the Wanderer, approaches, but Alberich recognizes him as the God who, with Loge, tricked him out of the ring. "I came to watch and not to act," Wotan assures Alberich. Insofar as we may adduce biographical elements in the *Ring* text, Wotan's assurance (as noted in our introductory chapter) seems to parallel Wagner's assurance to King Ludwig in the opening of *State and Religion*, thus may portray the attitude of the artist toward politics ever since his experience in the 1949 revolutionary debacle.

In any event, Alberich is aware that Wotan does not dare to take back the treasure and ring from Fafner by force, for that would mean breaking the solemn bond or contract that Wotan made with the Giants, hence breaking down the legal order.

With my treasures  
you paid your debts;  
my ring rewarded  
the toil of those giants  
who built your stronghold for you;  
what you once agreed  
with those insolent creatures  
is still preserved today in runes  
on your spear's all-powerful shaft.  
What you paid the giants  
by way of tribute  
you cannot wrest from them again:  
you yourself would shatter  
the shaft of your spear;  
in your hand  
the all-powerful staff,  
so sturdy, would scatter like chaff.

Were the ruling class ever to repudiate the sanctity of the contract, the basis for their law and order would collapse totally.

Wotan tells Alberich that Mime — “your brother” — is coming with a naive boy who knows nothing of the significance of the ring. It is Mime who is Alberich’s rival for the ring, Wotan asserts. The European petty bourgeois were susceptible to this divide-and-conquer tactic. Wotan’s next sly suggestion is that, perhaps if Alberich warns the drowsy Dragon that a threatening hero is on the way, Fafner would be so grateful that he might even give the ring as reward. Wotan then calls out to awaken the beast, and Alberich eagerly tries the stratagem, but it does not work: Fafner’s reply is “What I lie on I own: (yawning) leave me to sleep!” [*Ich lieg’ und besitz’: laßt mich schlafen!*] The big capitalist is not going to share his wealth or power with the aspiring little one no matter how the latter tries to ingratiate himself. Spencer has a note to the line “*Ich lieg’ und besitz’*” referring to “the Proudhonesque implications of the dragon’s inert enjoyment of the hoard.”<sup>286</sup>

By the time Mime brings Siegfried to the entrance of Fafner’s lair, Siegfried is ready to declare independence from his foster parent.

Far indeed have you led me;  
a whole night in the forest  
the two of us have wandered:  
now, Mime, you must leave me!  
If I don’t learn here  
what I’m meant to learn,  
I’ll go on my way alone  
and be rid of you then at last!

The proletariat has been educated, propagandized and instigated to the point of revolt by its teachers, mostly intellectuals like Mime stemming from the lower-middle class. But in actually carrying out the revolution, the workers must act on their own. In “the final conflict” (to quote a phrase from the *Internationale*), their petty bourgeois allies will be of little practical help.

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<sup>286</sup> Spencer’s Note 106 on p. 368 refers to Manfred Kreckel, *Richard Wagner und die französischen Frühsozialisten*.

Mime cautions Siegfried about the terrible powers of the Dragon: the savage jaws that could swallow a man whole (perhaps an allusion to the threat of imprisonment faced by all revolutionaries?), the poisonous venom (vicious propaganda?), and the scaly tail that can lash out and crush a man (military force to shoot down rebels in the streets, or in our day tanks to crush uprisings?). Of all potentially deadly threats, not the least is the allusion to propagandistic venom:

Poisonous spittle  
spews from his lips:  
if you're splattered  
by gobbets of spit,  
your flesh and bones will waste away.

Siegfried is not intimidated by any of the dangers and responds calmly,

That the spittle's bane won't harm me,  
I'll step to one side of the beast.

Siegfried simply confirms with Mime that the Dragon has a heart, albeit "a fierce and inhuman heart," and can therefore be slain with a thrust of the sword Nothung. Then he sits down outside the cave and waits for the Dragon to emerge. Mime, getting out of the way, mutters to himself,

Fafner and Siegfried —  
Siegfried and Fafner —  
if only each might kill the other!

The wish of the petty bourgeoisie is that the rival classes above and below it — the big capitalists and the militant workers — would annihilate each other.

Although Siegfried's confrontation with the Dragon Fafner is the climax of the action, the battle does not seesaw back and forth to build up suspense as modern movie directors might think is mandatory. Not a bit intimidated by the Dragon's threats, Siegfried slays him with a bold blow. It is another instance where Wagner appears to have sacrificed dramatic sensationalism for political verisimilitude, as he did with the treatment of Siegmund and Sieglinde's love affair in *The Valkyrie*. The audience is not left in a lot of suspense wondering whether the Dragon or the Hero will win. A characteristic of the whole *Ring* cycle is that events follow a predestined path, guided by forces of historical determinism toward an ultimately tragic denouement. The

political point Wagner was making in this episode is one that revolutionary leaders liked to stress: that the working class has such overwhelming power — if only it exercises it with confidence — that no adversary can block its way. The workers can march right into the factories and take them over, regardless of the apparently daunting police power the owners employ to protect their assets. Siegfried has just shown he can do it, like the workers in European cities in 1848-49 and other revolutionary upsurges during Wagner's lifetime, and later in 1917 in Petrograd when the Soviet forces took over the capital with almost no casualties. Where the revolutionary forces were well organized and confident, the capitalist dragon proved to be a paper tiger.

In my analysis of *Valkyrie* I cited Bakunin's influence on Wagner, specifically the point that in the course of the revolution the bourgeoisie would change from a progressive to a reactionary force, to explain Fafner's transmutation from Giant to Dragon. But why a Dragon rather than some other animal or mythological being? Making connections to another main source of Wagner's political inspiration, L. J. Rather finds that the political parable of Siegfried slaying the Dragon is something Wagner got straight out of Proudhon, just as Alberich's stealing the gold from the Rhine dramatizes Proudhon's principle "Property is theft":

As we know from his autobiography, Wagner became acquainted with Pierre Joseph Proudhon's book *What is Property?* during his first stay in Paris (1839-1842). Wagner's own, much later writings on credit-money and property reflect a general agreement with Proudhon's ideas on these subjects. And we learn from Cosima Wagner's recently published diaries that a few days before his death in Venice in 1883 Wagner again expressed his approval of Proudhon's views on property. In rereading Proudhon's book I was surprised by an anticipation of Siegfried's slaying of the gold-hoarding dragon Fafner (in Wagner's *Ring*) in the form of Proudhon's "proletarian," who, armed with the magic answer to the question posed in *What is Property?*, slays the "monster," the "old serpent," the "sphinx" of capitalism.<sup>287</sup>

It is worth quoting the cited passage from Proudhon, with all its hyperbole, as Rather does:

*Property is the right to increase:* this axiom will be for us like the name of the beast of the apocalypse, a name that includes the whole mystery of the beast. Well, then! It will be by means of a profound interpretation of our axiom that we shall kill the sphinx of property ... we are going to follow the coils of the old serpent, we shall number the homicidal twistings of this hideous taenia whose head, with its thousand suckers, always lies hidden from the sword of even its most high-spirited enemies ... For something other than courage is required to overthrow the monster: it was written that the monster would not die until a proletarian, armed with a magic rod, had taken its measure.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Rather, *Reading Wagner*, p. x.

<sup>288</sup> Rather, *Reading Wagner*, p. 249.

While Rather claims to have improved upon the translation of this part, he may have elided a few phrases.

Tucker's full translation helps us appreciate how consequential this passage was to Wagner's creation of the scene:

*Property is the right of increase.* To us this axiom shall be like the name of the beast in the Apocalypse, — a name in which is hidden the complete explanation of the whole mystery of this beast. It was known that he who should solve the mystery of this name would obtain a knowledge of the whole prophecy, and would succeed in mastering the beast. Well! by the most careful interpretation of our axiom we shall kill the sphinx of property. Starting from this eminently characteristic fact — the *right of increase* — we shall pursue the old serpent through his coils; we shall count the murderous entwinings of this frightful tænia, whose head, with its thousand suckers, is always hidden from the sword of its most violent enemies, though abandoning to them immense fragments of its body. It requires something more than courage to subdue this monster. It was written that it should not die until a proletaire, armed with a magic wand, had fought with it.<sup>289</sup>

One can imagine the elements of this passage fermenting in Wagner's dramatic mind. There is the emphasis on cracking the mystery of the *name* of the monster, which comes out when the fatally wounded Dragon turns reveals to Siegfried that his name is Fafner (and in some current stagings physically changes back to the Giant's form). Another key element is Proudhon's notion that the proletarian through his confrontation with the beast would "obtain a knowledge of the whole prophecy." Siegfried's tasting of Fafner's blood leads to enlightenment.

The dying Fafner cannot believe that the newcomer Siegfried could have acted alone. The capitalists always underestimate the strength and resourcefulness of the humble workers and think that some other class must have instigated and directed them.

Who are you, valiant lad,  
who has wounded me to the heart?  
Who goaded the mettlesome child  
to commit this murderous deed?  
Your brain did not brood upon  
what you have done.

Siegfried replies honestly that he is still ignorant and confused about his own identity.

There is much that I still don't know:

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<sup>289</sup> The complete passage as translated by Tucker is found in the Dover edition of *What is Property?* (New York, 1970), pp. 155-56.

I still don't know who I am:  
to join in murderous fight with you  
you goaded me on yourself.

In other words, the workers, even after being egged on by middle-class agitators such as Mime, still would not undertake the decisive revolutionary act except that the capitalists crack down on them with life-threatening repression. This is another of the accurate historical portrayals that *The Ring* yields upon careful analysis.

The slaying of Fafner begins a process of rapid enlightenment for Siegfried. First, the dying Dragon fills in the background to what has happened, including how the Giants got the cursed gold from the Gods, brother slew brother, and Fafner “the last of the giants” (monopoly capitalism, the final stage of capitalism), turned into a Dragon guarding the treasure. Despite the answer to his former question as to who put Siegfried up to it, Fafner in his dying wisdom knows, and he gives Siegfried a final bit of advice:

See clearly now,  
you radiant youth;  
he who goaded you on in your blindness  
is plotting the death of the radiant youth.  
Mark how it ends: ———  
pay heed to me!

But the greatest enlightenment is yet to come, for as Siegfried tastes the Dragon's blood, the singing of a Woodbird suddenly becomes intelligible to him. This is equivalent to the rapid learning process that the working class undergoes when it marches into the corridors of economic and political power and for the first time sees what goes on from the inside. The Woodbird expressed the laws of nature (society), which were always there but never well understood until revolutionary action made them comprehensible to ordinary people. Wagner has dramatized here the revolutionary axiom that the working class attains wisdom only through actual experience in class struggle; no amount of teaching will suffice without this battle experience.

The Bolshevik cultural leader and Commissar of Enlightenment (in charge of education and the arts) 1917-29, Anatoly V. Lunacharsky was astute enough to penetrate Wagner's symbolism when he wrote that Siegfried “had discovered the key to the ‘bird's songs’, the prophetic songs of the laws of social order and the

means of reviving life.”<sup>290</sup> The Proudhonian phrase “knowledge of the whole prophecy” has become for Lunacharsky “the prophetic songs of the laws of social order,” a startlingly accurate interpretation. Lunacharsky was profoundly impressed by both Nietzsche and Wagner, understood the relationship between them in their period of collaboration, was keenly aware of the revolutionary import of Wagner’s works, and wanted to hold Soviet artists to the same high standards:

Lunacharsky was an unwavering Wagnerophile, and saw Wagner’s early work in unreservedly Nietzschean terms. Speaking at the opening of an Institute of Musical Drama in 1920, he referred to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* as “a work of genius,” and elaborated the ideal of a musical drama where the stage depicts an “Apollonian dream” of the spirit of the music. “Music is tragic in its essence. And even as Dionysus is raging there should unfold on the stage, as if in a visionary dream, an approximate concrete representation of what the orchestra is, much more broadly, depicting.” He found Mussorgsky the only creator of truly musical drama, rivaling even Bizet. In 1925, defending the continued existence of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, he claims that Nietzsche demanded of Wagner “not, of course, proletarian opera, but at all events a profoundly meaningful opera.” The imperialist bourgeoisie had evidently lacked the cultural energy to create this Nietzschean opera. In 1933, writing on the fiftieth anniversary of Wagner’s death, Lunacharsky held him up as an example of a philosopher-musician, a philosopher-poet, and playwright who had achieved the highest synthesis of music and literature to date. He castigated Soviet musicians and playwrights for their inadequacy in this area, and their inability to create a major opera of the revolutionary emotions and the worldwide revolutionary struggle.<sup>291</sup>

Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, in her chapter “Wagner and Wagnerian Ideas in Russia” in Large and Weber (eds.) *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics*, demonstrates how Lunacharsky brilliantly nailed the essence of Siegfried and Wagner’s political philosophy in historical context:

From 1900 until his death in 1933, Lunacharsky insisted that even though Wagner did not fulfill his ideals, even betrayed them later on, his theater-temple remained “an almost classic expression of the theory of the theater as we want to see it,” a means for the spiritual emancipation of the proletariat. He recognized the power of Wagnerian theatrics, especially light and music, to manipulate the emotions of the audience, and hoped to use them to make the theater into an agency of social transformation. Discerning an inner tie between musical creativity and revolution, he described revolution as a “grandiose symphony.” Bach’s music, he said, emerged from the “gigantic storms of the Reformation”, Beethoven’s, with its “theme of struggle and victory,” derived from the French Revolution. Explaining Wagner’s turn to reaction, Lunacharsky stressed the harmful influence of Schopenhauer’s pessimism, maintaining that Schopenhauer’s concept of will expressed the bourgeois spirit in its decline – always questing, never satisfied, turning to art as a narcotic. Pointing out that Wagner’s first Siegfried was a world conqueror, Lunacharsky believed that Wagner killed him in a fit of despair at the failure of the

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<sup>290</sup> A. Lunacharsky, *On Literature and Art*, p. 348.

<sup>291</sup> A. L. Tait, “Lunacharsky: A ‘Nietzschean Marxist?’” in B. G. Rosenthal, ed., *Nietzsche in Russia* (Princeton, 1986), pp. 288-89, footnotes omitted.

revolutions of 1848-1849. Lunacharsky expected the Russian Revolution to bring forth a new music, permeated with the optimistic vision that inspired and sustained the revolutionaries.<sup>292</sup>

While Lunacharsky's sketch of musical history may be oversimplified, not to mention over-optimistic from a Bolshevik viewpoint, it has one of the best encapsulations of the essence of the character Siegfried. Other Bolsheviks, even Lenin himself, shared an appreciation of Wagner, albeit not to the same extremes as Lunacharsky. Alex Ross in *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*, recounts that:

Interest in Wagner to the top of the new Soviet hierarchy. Vladimir Lenin was a casual Wagnerite, having been raised in a home that held the composer in high regard. The Bolshevik leader apparently saw no political value in the operas, instead thrilling to their theatrical effects, which sometimes overwhelmed him. "He liked Wagner greatly," Lenin's widow Nadezhda Krupskaya, recalled. "But he usually left, almost ill, after the first act." He heard the Good Friday music from *Parsifal* in London in 1903; attended Wagner performances while in exile in Zurich; and had three Wagner books in his library at the Kremlin. When, in 1920, he laid a wreath at the Monument to the Victims of the Revolution on the Field of Mars, Siegfried's Funeral Music served as an accompaniment. "It is as if this music was created for this moment," a witness reported.

The same hero's lament rang out at a concert marking Lenin's death, in 1924. Curating that musical memorial was Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Education [literally "Enlightenment"] and the chief cultural authority in the first years of the regime.... In 1918 Lunacharsky wrote an introduction for a new edition of [Wagner's] "Art and Revolution," in which he made a bold claim of equivalence: "The revolutionary movement of 1848 that gave birth to the great *Communist Manifesto* of our brilliant teachers Marx and Engels was also reflected in the small, lively, deep and revolutionary brochure of the no less brilliant Richard Wagner."<sup>293</sup>

In the libretto the woodbird elaborates Proudhon's revolutionary prophecy in these words:

Hey! Siegfried now owns  
the Nibelung hoard:  
o might he now find  
the hoard in the cave!  
If he wanted to win the tarnhelm,  
it would serve him for wonderous deeds:  
but could he acquire the ring,  
it would make him the lord of the world!

The bird's message is that the already-accumulated gold is not the most valuable thing -- remember Proudhon's "*property is the right of increase.*" Rather than be satisfied with the wealth they expropriate from the capitalists, the victorious workers should grasp the "Tarnhelm" (from the German "tarnen," to mask or disguise; in Shaw's

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<sup>292</sup> Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal in Large and Weber (eds.), p. 234. [Her endnotes omitted.]

<sup>293</sup> Ross, *Wagnerism*, pp. 452-53.



interpretation noted above, the ability of the capitalists to pass in any society). But above all they should take possession of the ring, that is, master the methods to attain wealth and power, so as to become the new ruling class, “the lord of the world.” While Siegfried does follow the bird’s counsel, his nonchalant attitude shows that he doesn’t know the potential value of what he has won; he seems to heed the woodbird because it is part of Nature which he loves rather than because the advice is practical. The hero is an avatar of Wagner’s conception of the ideal man of the future, the free man who obeys the laws of Nature and strives for artistic rather than material goals. The Marxists likewise projected that human nature would change under Communism when mankind would be freed from material concerns and to pursue higher intellectual and cultural paths, but Wagner’s ideal is more Romantic and puts more emphasis on the artist. Still, Wagner shared with Marx the assumption that human nature could be improved, that the covetous capitalist was not the final product of human evolution. This was a key assumption underlying the theories of both thinkers, an assumption both discussed explicitly. For Wagner in particular, Boucher points out, “the ideal man who he conceived is not a vague form; he has characterized traits,” as seen in Siegfried:

First of all, he will be unselfish. Precisely because he is a man before being an instrument. Indeed, interest, contrary to appearances, subordinates man to matter: it places ownership before man. Siegfried conquers the treasure for his pleasure, to prove to himself that he is alive and strong. But he will not put it to use. This could lend itself to dangerous or strangely indicative interpretations. However, in Wagner’s mind that condemnation is radical and bears on everything which is external and material profit: be it a matter of ambition, conquest or power, any material wealth is less an advantage than a servitude, it weighs on the mind and perverts the destiny of nations.<sup>294</sup>

The contrast between Siegfried’s indifference to the hoard and the two Nibelungs’ greedy desperation to acquire it could not be sharper, either dramatically or musically. Nearby the mouth of the cave, Alberich and Mime have been disputing who will take over the valuable assets Siegfried has won but is presumably too naïve to keep. Alberich makes a convincing case that he was the one who “robbed the gold for the ring from the Rhine” and “cast the tenacious spell on the ring,” while Mime insists that he too has rights, having crafted the Tarnhelm and taken pains to raise Siegfried. Mime shrewdly suggests a deal in which Alberich gets the ring and the gold

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<sup>294</sup> Boucher, *The Political Concepts of Richard Wagner*, p. 146.

while Mime takes the Tarnhelm, but Alberich astutely rejects the offer, afraid that Mime would use Tarnhelm trickery against him. Neither dwarf wins the argument. When Siegfried emerges from the cave with the Tarnhelm and ring, Alberich fades back and Mime schemes to take the prizes. However, the woodbird warns Siegfried to “not trust the treacherous Mime” and tells him that the dwarf’s “hypocritical words” will no longer fool him because Siegfried will “be able to understand what Mime means in his heart.” After that, Mime’s efforts to drug, deceive and dispatch Siegfried are transparent, and Siegfried in disgust finally strikes Mime dead with Nothung. In European history, before and after Wagner, instigators of revolution are often destroyed by the very forces they helped create.

The extensively-documented case made for Mime being an anti-Semitic caricature, by Marc Weiner in *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*, says that, “Long before Wagner, German folklore harbored the belief that Jews were murderers with a predilection for poison and that they could understand the language of the animals,” and uses this background to explain Siegfried’s statement that he had learned from Mime that one could come to understand the language of the birds.<sup>295</sup> In a political context however, this would mean that the working class had learned from petty-bourgeois, Jewish agitators that it was *possible* to understand the laws historical development, even if those teachers could not master such understanding themselves, an understanding that can be gained only through actual revolutionary experience.

After Mime’s death, Siegfried is completely alone: the working class having overcome its oppressors and rejected its mis-leaders has no reliable class ally. But now it has another guide. Siegfried asks the woodbird where he can find a friend, and the bird sings a song that gives him great hope.

Hey! Siegfried’s now slain  
the evil dwarf!  
Now I know  
the most glorious wife for him.  
High on a fell she sleeps,  
fire burns round her hall:  
if he passed through the blaze  
and awakened the bride,

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<sup>295</sup> Weiner, p. 168.

Brünnhilde then would be his!

Siegfried jumps up in exultation and, confirming with the bird that he, who knows no fear, will be able to pass through the fire, follows the bird toward Brünnhilde's rock.

Brünnhilde asleep on the mountain rock represents the high culture of the aristocracy, dormant as that ruling class loses its vigor but still the heritage of civilization that must pass on to the class that will lead the next stage of history. The fire protecting her, again in Shaw's interpretation, symbolizes the "fires of Hell" or the religious mystification that made this culture inaccessible to common people. Most of the art, music and education that the European nobility fostered over centuries was associated with the Church and religious rituals that awed the masses. But now the untutored Siegfried will break through the superstition and find the true wisdom, no longer godly but in the form of a humanized Brünnhilde.

In the debunking of religion Wagner was deeply influenced by the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (who also had a determining impact on the young Karl Marx). This influence came precisely during Wagner's revolutionary period 1848-49 while the plot of *The Ring* was being conceived. Biographer Gregor-Dellin reports that Wagner "was deeply impressed, not only by Feuerbach's social radicalism, but by his resolute atheism."<sup>296</sup> Although Wagner had an ambiguous artistic relationship to Christianity and used pseudo-religious symbols in some of his operas (outside *The Ring* cycle), in this period of his life he was adamantly secular. "In 1851, under the spell of Feuerbach's philosophy, he went so far as to 'abolish' Christmas and give out presents on New Year's Eve instead!"<sup>297</sup>

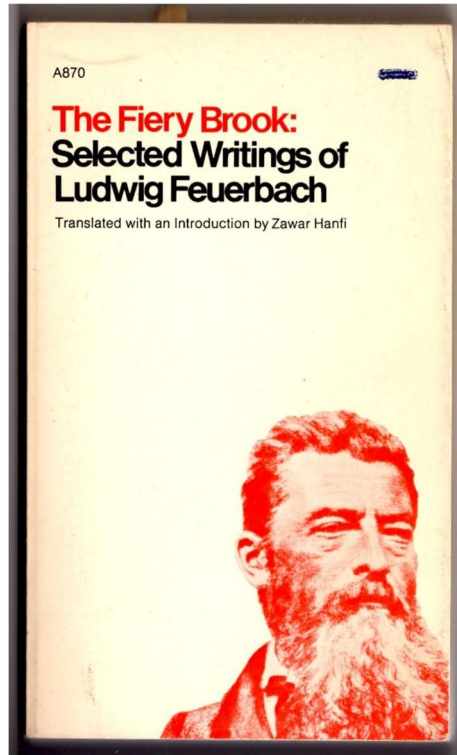
Of all the protective devices Wagner could have invented, or found in the myth sources he read, he certainly chose the "magic fire" to reflect the name Feuerbach (literally "fire-brook" or "stream of fire"). Marx had made the name-association in an 1842 essay after Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* was published ("the most important philosophical event in Germany since the death of Hegel" according to Robert Tucker):

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<sup>296</sup> Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner*, pp. 187-88.

<sup>297</sup> Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner*, p. 537 (note to p. 188).

And I advise you, speculative theologians and philosophers: free yourselves from the concepts and prepossessions of existing speculative philosophy if you want to get at things differently, as they are, that is to say, if you want to arrive at the *truth*. And there is no other road for you to *truth* and *freedom* except that leading *through* the stream of fire [the *Feuer-bach*]. Feuerbach is the *purgatory* of the present times.<sup>298</sup>



Appropriate title for a selection of Feuerbach's writings edited by Zawar Hanfi (NY: Anchor Books, 1972)

This word-association apparently became current in leftist Young Hegelian circles in the 1840s and most likely was picked up by Wagner's ears, alert to dramatic images. If from no one else, Wagner certainly could have heard

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<sup>298</sup> Karl Marx's essay, "Luther as Arbiter Between Strauss and Feuerbach," written in January 1842, reprinted in D. Easton and K. Guddat, eds., *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (Garden City, NY, 1967), p. 95. Marx's statement is quoted in (and suggested the title for) *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings of Ludwig Feuerbach*, translated and introduced by Zawar Hanfi (Garden City, NY, 1972), pp. 41-42. Tucker pp. 80-81 gives a slightly different translation.

it repeated by Bakunin, whose period of personal instruction by Marx fits between Marx's above-quoted passage and the 1949 Dresden revolt where Bakunin found Wagner to be a fellow Feuerbach enthusiast. Over a century later the image still resonates for Marxist philosophers, and we find Sidney Hook (a lapsed Marxist in his later years) reminiscing about secular radicals who later turned to religion by saying, "They had never gone through what Marx called the *Feuer-Bach* — the stream of fire of Ludwig Feuerbach's great work from which Marx drew the conclusion that the critique of religion is the basis of all other critiques."<sup>299</sup> While it cannot be absolutely proven that Feuerbach inspired the "magic fire," Feuerbach's leverage on Wagner's intellectual development is not in doubt. Wagner Biographer Gregor-Dellin calls him "the author who, after Proudhon, most decisively influenced the basic idea of the *Ring*."<sup>300</sup> M.W. Wartofsky in his book *Feuerbach* claims that the philosopher's effect on the composer was seminal: "Feuerbach's influence on Wagner's early conception of 'The Art of the Future' and of the music drama has its sources in" Feuerbach's suggestion that "the complementing of the visual or figural representation with the musical gives the total image of feeling in its fullest scope."<sup>301</sup> Furthermore, the name-association (although Shaw himself overlooked it) certainly does add credence to Shaw's "fires of Hell" interpretation of the magic fire. In view of the bearing Feuerbach's philosophy has on our *Ring* interpretation, it is worthwhile quoting directly from Wagner's autobiography about his encounter with this thinker. Covering the period in the late 1840's when he was conceiving the *Ring* project, he speaks of "the inner excitement nourished in me by my acquaintance with the principal work of Ludwig Feuerbach." After frustrating efforts to penetrate to the core of philosophy through direct readings of Hegel and others, Wagner says,<sup>302</sup>

it was a former student of theology, at the time a German-Catholic preacher and political agitator with a Calabrian hat, named Metzdorf, who first called my attention to "the sole adequate philosopher of the

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<sup>299</sup> Sidney Hook, *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century* (New York, 1987), p. 42. He does not cite the original source of the Marx quotation.

<sup>300</sup> Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner*, p. 110.

<sup>301</sup> Marx W. Wartofsky, *Feuerbach* (New York, 1977), p. 286. He refers to "Rawidowicz's thorough discussion" of Wagner's relation to Feuerbach, citing S. Rawidowicz, *Ludwig Feuerbachs Philosophie, Ursprung und Schicksal* (Berlin, 1931; 1964), pp. 388-410.

<sup>302</sup> *My Life*, pp. 429-31.

modern age”, Ludwig Feuerbach. Now my new Zürich friend, the piano teacher Wilhelm Baumgartner, brought his *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* to my house. The widely praised, very stimulating, lyrical style of the writer greatly fascinated me as a total layman. The absorbing questions treated here with an appealing circumstantiality, as if it were the first time they had ever been raised, had occupied me ever since my initial association with Lehrs in Paris, just as they occupy the mind of every serious and imaginative person, yet my interest in them, while continual, had not been incessant, and I had on the whole contented myself with the poetic animadversions on the subject which are to be found here and there in the works of our great writers. The frankness which Feuerbach finally finds the courage to adopt in the mellower parts of his book, in treating these deeply interesting questions, pleased me greatly, as much for its tragic implications as for its social radicalism. I found it elevating and consoling to be assured that the sole authentic immortality adheres only to sublime deeds and inspired works of art. But it was a bit more difficult for me to maintain my interest in *The Essence of Christianity* by the same author, as the reading of it, willy-nilly, would not allow me to ignore the sprawl and rather unhelpful prolixity in the development of the simple basic idea, the interpretation of religion from a purely psychological standpoint. Nonetheless, Feuerbach became for me the proponent of the ruthlessly radical liberation of the individual from the bondage of conceptions associated with the belief in traditional authority, and the initiated will therefore understand why I prefaced my book *The Art-Work of the Future* with a dedication and an introduction addressed to him. My friend Sulzer, a well-schooled Hegelian, was vexed to see me so involved with Feuerbach, whom he did not count as a philosopher at all. The only good thing about it, he opined, was that Feuerbach had awakened ideas in me whereas he himself had none. But what had really induced me to attach so much importance to Feuerbach was his conclusion, which had led him to abandon his original master, Hegel: namely, that the best philosophy is to have no philosophy at all, a theory whereby the study of it, which had hitherto deterred me, became immeasurably easier for me; and in addition, there was his conclusion that the only reality was that which the senses perceived. The fact that he proclaimed what we call “spirit” to lie in our aesthetic perceptions of the tangible world, together with his verdict as to the futility of philosophy, was what affording me such useful support in my conception of a work of art which would be all-embracing while remaining comprehensible to the simplest, purely human power of discernment, that is, of the drama made perfect at the moment of its realization of every artistic intention in “the art-work of the future”; and this must have been what was on Sulzer’s mind when he spoke deprecatingly of Feuerbach’s influence on me. Admittedly, after only a short time it became impossible for me to return to his works, and I recall that one of his books appearing shortly thereafter entitled *On the Essence of Religion* scared me off by the monotony of its title alone to such an extent that, when Herwegh opened its pages in front of me, I closed the book with a bang before his very eyes.

Thus, although Wagner lacked the patience to plow through the longer works, Feuerbach is one of a few thinkers he acknowledges having a formative influence on his intellect. As it was *The Ring* that Wagner had in mind as the epitome of “the art-work of the future,” we are justified in assuming that Feuerbach’s impact is reflected in this work more than any other. Sandra Corse, a scholar who documents Feuerbach’s influence on Wagner in great detail in *Wagner and the New Consciousness*, writes that Wagner when he conceived Wotan’s punishment of Brünnhilde was “following Feuerbach, who argued that natural human relationships become allegorized into religion and in the process are transformed from ties based on love to relationships based on a fossilized

ideology,” but strangely, she does not make the connection that the Magic Fire refers to Feuerbach and religion, perhaps because she does not accept Shaw’s interpretation.<sup>303</sup>

We cannot help but sympathize with the translator of Wagner’s prose works, William Ashton Ellis, who momentarily lets his frustration toward Feuerbach surface in the preface to his translation of *Opera and Drama*: “Personally, I should like to strangle his ghost, if that were a possible feat; but I suppose he had his uses in the development of Wagner’s thought, for I cannot believe that it is mere Chance that brings one mind to influence another.” However, Ellis vastly underestimates the philosopher’s influence when he insists that “it was mere *terminology*, and only portions of *that*, which Wagner borrowed from Feuerbach.”<sup>304</sup> Fortunately Ellis was not able to go back and strangle Feuerbach’s ghost, or he would have choked off the source of the magic fire, the most beautiful scene in many productions of *The Ring*. And the magic fire might not be the only important dramatic symbol attributable to Feuerbach. According to Spencer and Millington’s notes to the recent *Ring* translation, Wotan’s spear might fall into this category: “The idea that it is carved with the runes of legally binding contracts may have been suggested to Wagner by Ludwig Feuerbach who, in *The Essence of Christianity*, equates Odin with ‘the primeval or most ancient law’ (1903: 26).”<sup>305</sup> To put this in a little more context, let us quote the passage they are probably referring to from G. Eliot’s translation of *The Essence of Christianity*; this passage near the beginning would have caught Wagner’s attention despite his confessed difficulty in getting through the long book, because it comes in a context of comparing the ancient Germans’ conception of gods to that of the ancient Greeks:

The Homeric gods eat and drink;—that implies eating and drinking is a divine pleasure. Physical strength is an attribute of the Homeric gods: Zeus is the strongest of the gods. Why? Because physical strength, in and by itself, was regarded as something glorious, divine. To the ancient Germans the highest virtues were those of the warrior; therefore their supreme god was the god of war, Odin,—war, “the original or oldest law.”<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Corse, pp. 128-29.

<sup>304</sup> Ellis, p. xvii in Translator’s Preface to Volume 2 (*Opera and Drama*) of *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*.

<sup>305</sup> Spencer and Millington, *Wagner’s Ring*, Note 18 on p. 365.

<sup>306</sup> Harper Torchbooks edition, 1957, p. 21.

One can imagine Wagner’s vividly dramatic mind picturing war, “the original or oldest law” as inscriptions on Wotan’s spear shaft; but for this “law” to become contract required a historical leap from the ancient to the feudal era. Whatever Wagner’s sources for the spear — the leitmotif of which is also fundamental to the musical structure of *The Ring* — it is a wonderful symbol, the very essence of political power: law (engraved on the shaft) combined with threat of force (the spear point).

### **Act Three**

This great symbol of authority is about to be broken, thus signaling a major turning point in the plot. First, at the opening of Act Three, Wotan (still wielding his legal weapon) calls upon Erda to awaken from deep slumber. As noted in the *Rhinegold* section, Erda represents the traditional wisdom of an agricultural society. We have seen that in *The Ring* women are used to symbolize cultural principles: Fricka embodies the strict moral propriety the nobility upheld in principle, if not always in practice. Brünnhilde as a Valkyrie (the daughter of Wotan and Erda, thus an offspring of a king’s liaison with a woman of rural distinction) acts at first as a bridge between aristocratic society and those members of the lower classes deemed worthy of being raised up into the nobility. Now banished from the godly realm, Brünnhilde still represents the liberal part of that cultural heritage. Erda, the last gasp of the feudal agricultural society, is portrayed as a fading apparition who can hardly stay awake, although Wotan still hopes to find in her a fount of knowledge.

Pressed by Wotan for her counsel, Erda at first moans that he should consult the Norns, who “weave the rope and bravely spin whatever I know.” The Norns, we shall propose in the next chapter, represent the scholars who spin theories to explain everything. Wotan has little regard for academics who are incapable of changing what seems the inevitable course of history:

In thrall to the world  
those wise women weave:

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naught can they make or mend;  
but I'd thank  
the store of your wisdom  
to be told how to hold back a rolling wheel.

In the prelude to *Twilight of the Gods*, in fact, the threads of the Norns will finally snap, showing that their theories have been invalidated. Erda next tries to tell Wotan that he can find out anything else he needs to know from their daughter Brünnhilde. When Wotan discloses that he put Brünnhilde to sleep because of her disobedience, Erda cannot comprehend what is going on:

I've grown confused  
since I was wakened:  
wild and awry  
the world revolves!

There were so many contradictory trends in Europe in Wagner's era that the world did seem wild and strange to those raised with traditional agrarian-based values. Erda continues to express incomprehension of Wotan's plight:

Does he who taught defiance [Trotz]  
scourge defiance?  
Does he who urged the deed  
grow wroth when it is done?  
Does he who safeguards rights  
and helps uphold sworn oaths  
gainsay that right  
and rule through perjured oath? —  
Let me descend once more:  
let sleep enfold my knowledge!

What makes *The Ring* profound in socio-political terms is that each character in the drama perceives events from the perspective of his or her social position, with all the limitations that that entails. Fricka, the representative of traditional upper-class norms, is unable to comprehend Wotan's plans which entail violating some of these values; Erda, who symbolizes the landed values of feudal society, is considered the source of wisdom (at least by Wotan who heeded her counsel in *Rhinegold* and goes to consult her again here), but her wisdom turns out to be irrelevant in this new situation. It could be said that Loge has the most objective view of anyone in the drama, an objectivity his position between two social classes allows him. However, Loge's role diminishes as the operas unfold, and in the end he is reduced to an unseen one who starts fires at Wotan's

command. Apart from Brünnhilde's enlightenment at the end of the cycle, Wotan is the only character who comes closest to grasping the course of history. He is the only one in position to perceive nearly everything, although the loss of one eye shows that he too has limited perspective. Wotan becomes a tragic figure by trying to intervene and control events which have their own inexorable logic. A noble monarch who resorts to base means in a vain attempt to avert disaster to his world, he has the consciousness of a ruling class that reluctantly realizes its time is up but cannot relinquish its rule without being forced. Wotan can find psychological comfort only by accepting the inevitable as his own will, a decision he reveals to Erda:

Fear of the end of the gods  
no longer consumes me  
now that my wish so wills it!  
What I once resolved in despair,  
in the searing smart of inner turmoil,  
I now perform freely  
in gladness and joy:  
though once, in furious loathing,  
I bequeathed the world to the Nibelung's spite,  
to the lordliest Wälsung  
I leave my heritage now.

Thus Wotan hopes to bequeath his realm not to grasping materialists like Alberich, but to an uncorrupted hero, Siegfried, "free from greed." Wotan lets Erda go back to endless sleep.

Wotan is the character most difficult to understand in *The Ring*, because his will expresses basic political-philosophical principles that Wagner himself was grappling with. If Wotan is a complex and seemingly contradictory character, it could be because he embodies the conflicting hopes (bound to be frustrated) in the monarch that the political naïf Wagner held during 1848-49. Theodor Adorno points out that "even in Wagner's official revolutionary writings the King plays a positive role."<sup>307</sup> Or, as Jacques Barzun evaluates the Wagner of 1849:

His friends, the revolutionists Röckel and Bakunin, could not quite make out the reasons for Wagner's fever heat. His knowledge of politics was slight, and though he wrote incendiary appeals in Röckel's

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<sup>307</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, p. 17.

sheet and rang alarm bells at the risk of his life, his demands for a better future seemed somewhat contradictory: an *absolute* king ruling over a *free* people, without parliament or nobility.<sup>308</sup>

Wotan's dilemma is exactly that: He wants to remain absolute monarch, yet have the Wälsungs he has fostered be "free" to accomplish what he wills but cannot do. In *My Life* Wagner described the impact of Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*: "Only now did I understand my own Wotan myself and, greatly shaken, I went on to a closer study of Schopenhauer's book."<sup>309</sup> While Schopenhauer's philosophy might help Wagner — and us — *understand* Wotan, it does not *explain* Wotan, since Wagner had already planned the course of *The Ring* before being exposed to this philosophy. To find a source with more explanatory power, one that Wagner was exposed to before and during his creation of *The Ring*, we must turn again to Proudhon's *What is Property?* This source illuminates what may seem a very peculiar pattern of class alliance that Wagner favored, namely an alliance between the king and the proletariat to prevent the bourgeoisie from prevailing. Proudhon's summary of class alliances in different periods goes like this:

What was feudalism? A confederation of the grand seigniors against the villeins, and against the king.  
What is constitutional government? A confederation of the *bourgeoisie* against the laborers, and against the king.  
How did feudalism end? In the union of the communes and the royal authority. How will the *bourgeoise* aristocracy end? In the union of the proletariat and the sovereign power.<sup>310</sup>

Definitions of the terms referring to classes under feudalism will be helpful to us who are distant from that era. "Seigniors" were the feudal lords; "grand seigniors" would be the most powerful ones. "Villeins" were a class of partially free persons, who were surfs with respect to their lord but freemen with respect to others. However, for our analysis of Wagner's *Ring* the key Proudhonian concept is the idea that the proletariat will unite with the "sovereign power," i.e. the king, to end the chances of the bourgeoisie becoming the ruling class. What may seem to us in retrospect to be naïve, wishful thinking, was actually a considered proposal put on the agenda in the 1840s

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<sup>308</sup> Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage*, p. 232.

<sup>309</sup> *My Life*, p. 510.

<sup>310</sup> Proudhon, *What is Property?*, pp. 360-61. Italics in original.

by influential conservatives. Thus in Prussia, Joseph Maria von Radowitz, described by a historian as “the intellectual power of the right” and “considered the evil genius of Prussian politics,” made such a proposal to King Frederick William IV, with sound reasoning. “His advice to the King of Prussia was to make an ally of labor, as a bulwark against the middle class; having labor laws, social security, and progressive income taxes would be as far as the workers cared to go, he thought, whereas the bourgeois liberals were after the essence of kingly power.”<sup>311</sup> To be sure, Radowitz’s conception was not as radical as Wagner’s, as it did not envision a *republic* that would end the King’s sovereign power, but at most a constitutional monarchy. Still, it had the same object as Wagner’s and Proudhon’s plan — preventing the bourgeoisie from taking over.

Naturally, for any such plan to be carried out, the King would have to be an enlightened monarch, having the will to forge an alliance with the often unruly working class to head off a worse fate for society, that of bourgeois dominance. Here in a nutshell we have the plot of *The Ring*: Wotan, the aware monarch (enlightened by Erda but then developing his plan beyond what was conceivable to her ) striving to find in the proletariat (first Siegmund, and when that fails, the next generation, Siegfried) a force capable of overcoming the threat from the rising bourgeoisie (Alberich and his next generation, Hagan and the Gibichungs). This Proudhonian plan was central to Wagner’s political view and underlies the main events in *The Ring*. It might be possible to carry this analysis further by suggesting that Proudhon’s “grand seigniors” refers to the Giants in *Valkyrie*, that is, a class of people of lesser rank than the Monarch but having the power to deal with him on contractual terms. Then, the significance of the Fafner turning into a dragon sitting on the gold would be that feudal lords were unable to utilize wealth in the creative ways that the bourgeoisie could, but merely hoarded and defended it. That is a plausible interpretation of the Giants’ role in *The Ring*, an alternative to our earlier idea that the Giants signify big industrialists. In any case, it is apparent that Wagner’s portrayal of class structure is sophisticated enough to deal with complex European society across more than one historical epoch. It is necessary to keep in mind that Wagner as a German was facing a different situation than Proudhon the Frenchman. In France, the monarchy had

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<sup>311</sup> Robertson, *Revolutions of 1848*, p. 152.

been eliminated in 1789, so that, despite Napoleon's and Napoleon III's attempts to restore it by making themselves Emperor, what Proudhon would have meant by "the sovereign power" was not exactly a king any more. Wagner was looking at a Germany where kings still existed, and his political proposal was that a king ally with lower-class revolutionaries to ward off the rising bourgeoisie. To Wagner as to Proudhon, the bourgeoisie was the greatest threat. Josserrand's biographical treatment of Wagner's developing political views traces this attitude back at least to his first sojourn in Paris when he faced economic hardship and lack of acceptance by the established art world: "one effect was Wagner's growing dislike for art as a 'business,' a bourgeois activity to be entered into solely for entertainment and profit. This hatred for bourgeois values probably had much to do with his participation in the Dresden revolution of May, 1849...."<sup>312</sup> While Proudhon advocated revolution to liberate humanity, Wagner's primary interest was in its potential for a social-economic system that would value and support true art (*his art*).

Wagner must have also foreseen an alternative historical outcome, what Proudhon saw as the greatest danger: that the bourgeoisie itself would ally with the nobility; this will be Hagen's stratagem in *Götterdämmerung*, to set up a marriage between the rich Gunther and Brünnhilde with her noble heritage. In a footnote to the above-quoted passage, Proudhon had warned: "The *bourgeoisie* will accept any thing rather than the emancipation of the proletariat. As soon as it thinks its privileges threatened, it will unite with royalty." Near the end of *What is Property?* Proudhon fantasizes about how he would address the king if the nation should choose him to speak for it at that revolutionary moment when the masses come to petition the monarch. "The following," he says, "would be the substance of my speech."<sup>313</sup>

"SIRE,—This is what the nation wishes to say to your Majesty:—  
"O King! you see what it costs to gain the applause of the citizens. would you like us henceforth to take for our motto: 'Let us help the King, the King will help us'? Do you wish the people to cry: 'THE KING AND THE FRENCH NATION'? Then abandon these grasping bankers, these quarrelsome lawyers, these miserable *bourgeois*, these infamous writers, these dishonored men. All these, Sire, hate you, and continue to support you only because they fear us. Finish the work of our kings; wipe out aristocracy and

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<sup>312</sup> *Richard Wagner: Patriot and Politician*, p. 52.

<sup>313</sup> Proudhon, *What is Property?*, p. 447.

privilege; consult with these faithful proletaires, with the nation, which alone can honor a sovereign and sincerely shout, ‘Long live the king!’”

In Dresden in 1848-49, Wagner’s appeal to the Saxon monarch was so consistent with this statement of Proudhon’s that we would be justified in assuming that the Frenchman was the main influence on Wagner in this respect. Compare Proudhon’s hypothetical speech quoted above to an article Wagner wrote and read at a political meeting in Dresden in June, 1848, titled “What relation do republican endeavors bear to the Kingship?” In Newman’s account,<sup>314</sup>

In this he [Wagner] gloated over what he imagined to be the approaching extinction of the aristocracy, or at all events the abolition of their privileges at Court, where they were to be replaced by a “free Folk.” Saxony was to have a single chamber, universal adult suffrage, a Folk-army without class distinction, freedom, in some Utopian way the details of which are no clearer to us than they were to Wagner, from servitude to gold — that “sallow metal” — free and flourishing trade (without any more “usury, bill-swindling, interest, and bankers’ speculation”), and sundry other benefits.... All this, however, it seems, is not merely quite consistent with the Saxon Kingship but inseparably bound up with it; the King is to be the “first and truest republican of all.”

A monarch accepting Wagner’s radical proposal would have to face the fact that it would mean the end of his sovereign power. In *Siegfried* Act Three, Scene Two, Wotan’s political-psychological dilemma at this crucial point is portrayed vividly. Still in the disguise of a Wanderer, Wotan steps into Siegfried’s path and confronts him with questions that expose the limits of his immature understanding. Siegfried brashly tries to push on past. Wotan makes a last effort to halt Siegfried, knowing that when the spell of the fire protecting Brünnhilde is broken, it will “make me powerless for eye!.” When Wotan tries to bar the path with his spear, Siegfried decisively breaks the spear with his sword. Recall that this is the spear against which Nothung had shattered in *The Valkyrie*. Now the world has changed and the same sword reforged — the revolutionary force wielded by Siegfried — strikes the spear in two. The spear on which all treaties and bonds are engraved — the legality and legitimacy of the reigning aristocracy and its monarch — is broken forever. In Shaw’s politically-loaded description of the confrontation,

Then Wotan throws off the mask of the Wanderer; uplifts the world-governing spear; and puts forth all his divine awe and grandeur as the guardian of the mountain, round the crest of which the fires of Loki now

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<sup>314</sup> Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, Vol. II, p. 9.

break into a red background for the majesty of the god. But all this is lost on Siegfried Bakoonin. “Aha!” he cries, as the spear is levelled against his breast: “I have found my father’s foe”; and the spear falls in two pieces under the stroke of Nothung. “Up then,” says Wotan: “I cannot withhold you,” and disappears forever from the eye of man.<sup>315</sup>

In April 1849 Wagner published an article called “The Revolution” in a left-wing newspaper in which he wrote, “I will shatter the power of the mighty, of the law and property.”<sup>316</sup> The dramatic act of the free individual smashing the authority of the state — the laws engraved on Wotan’s spear shaft — is inspired by the anarchist ideal of Proudhon, by whom Wagner had been profoundly influenced when he penned this threat to official authority. What Wagner could not do in real life, he had Siegfried do in the opera, freely yet in accordance with Wotan’s inner will.<sup>317</sup>

In the final scene the triumphant Siegfried marches through the fire to awaken Brünnhilde and claim her as his bride. The bold hero who could not be taught the meaning of fear by Mime, by the dragon Fafner, or even by Wotan, now stands in awe of Brünnhilde and trembles. According to DiGaetani, “The boy has been lonely and seeking a companion for most of the opera and here at last he has found her; but she also represents knowledge for him. As a child of Wotan and Erda, she has the wisdom that he himself knows he lacks. She tells him about his past and his dead parents, which he has been curious about since the beginning of the opera. Potentially, then, presented here is the ideal matching of active energy and wisdom.”<sup>318</sup> (In the libretto itself she doesn’t inform him about his parents, but we can assume she explains much to him in their subsequent time together, because in *Götterdämmerung* he toasts her in her absence: “(quietly, but with extreme determination) Were all forgotten that you gave me, one lesson alone I’ll never neglect – this first drink to true remembrance, Brünnhild’, I drink to you!”)

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<sup>315</sup> *The Perfect Wagnerite*, p. 46.

<sup>316</sup> Quoted in Taylor, *Richard Wagner*, p. 90. Newman gives the text in more detail in *The Life of Richard Wagner*, Vol. II, pp. 54-56.

<sup>317</sup> On Proudhon’s alleged influence on this scene, see Kreckel, *Richard Wagner und die französischen Frühsozialisten*, p. 103.

<sup>318</sup> DiGaetani, *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring*, p. 29.

It is more than knowledge or even than wisdom that Siegfried needs to get from his bride-to-be: it is culture itself. Siegfried the untutored proletarian embodies the role Trotsky identifies for the class:

The proletariat is forced to take power before it has appropriated the fundamental elements of bourgeois culture; it is forced to overthrow bourgeois society by revolutionary violence for the very reason that society does not allow it access to culture.<sup>319</sup>

The love duet between Siegfried and Brünnhilde, beautiful in its musical rendition, gains even more from its allusions to the daunting educational project the two of them face. The working class introduced to the highest heritage of civilization is at first confused, and so is the bearer of this culture encountering her new master from the lower class. Brünnhilde at one point says, “My senses grow clouded / my knowledge falls silent: / is my wisdom to forsake me now?” And she nearly rejects Siegfried, trapped by dreams of her past:

Grieving darkness  
clouds my gaze;  
my eye grows dim,  
its light dies out:  
night enfolds me;  
from mist and dread  
a confusion of fear  
now writhes in its rage!  
Terror stalks  
and rears its head!

Siegfried forces her to open her eyes again, but she still struggles not to yield to him and tries to make him go away while also wishing to embrace him. Through their extended duet, Brünnhilde continues to express fears and doubts as to the consequences for both of them of their impending union. It is enlightening to review Wagner’s directions on how to properly perform key parts of this dialogue as reported by Porges in *Wagner Rehearsing the ‘Ring’* because they clarify the composer’s intent that this scene be far more than a love duet — an announcement of a new world order. Porges writes [Spencer translation added in brackets where Porges quotes the libretto in German]:

Very significant to my mind is Wagner’s remark that, at the words: ‘O Siegfried, lauchtender Spross! Liebe dich und lasse von mir, vernichte dein Eigen nicht!’ [O Siegfried! Light-bringing youth! Love but yourself and let me be: do not destroy what is yours!], Brünnhilde must ignore the real Siegfried standing

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<sup>319</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 195.



before her: ‘she has an ideal in her mind and sings as though she were addressing the whole world (*singt wie in die Welt hinaus*)’. Emotion must reach a pitch of terrifying violence at Siegfried’s vibrant outcry, ‘Dich lieb’ ich, O liebtest mich du!’[It is you that I love: if only you loved me!] And then the flood of his passion carries Brünnhilde away. During his speech, ‘Fasst dich mein Arm, umschling ich dich fest...’ [As my arm enfolds you, I hold you fast....], he should not actually embrace her, but give the impression of wanting to and yet being restrained by inner timidity. ‘Here everything is symbolic’, Wagner said.<sup>320</sup>

Porges leaves it to us to figure out what “everything is symbolic” of. The best clue could be the following paragraph in Wagner’s 1849 essay *Art and Revolution*. All we have to do is realize that Brünnhilde is Art and Siegfried is Revolution and the final scene of *Siegfried* becomes clear:

It is for Art, therefore, and Art above all else, to teach this social impulse [Revolution] its noblest meaning, and guide it toward its true direction. Only on the shoulders of this great social movement can true Art lift itself from its present state of civilised barbarianism, and take its post of honour. Each has a common goal, and the twain can only reach it when they recognize it jointly. This goal is *the strong fair Man*, to whom *Revolution* shall give his *Strength*, and *Art* his *Beauty!*<sup>321</sup>

In the end, of course, Brünnhilde succumbs, breaking away from her noble past forever and celebrating the end of a historical era. For the climactic ending Porges reports Wagner’s performance instructions, quoting him in part: “At the beginning of their final, heroic hymn of praise the lovers should not be looking at each other: ‘they are addressing the whole world’.”<sup>322</sup> Many performances do follow this convention, having the hero and heroine release each other, put some distance between them, face the audience and sing out to the “whole world.”<sup>323</sup> Brünnhilde’s part goes:

Laughing I must love you;  
laughing I must grow blind;  
laughing let us perish —  
laughing go to our doom!

Be gone, Valhalla's  
light-bringing world!  
May your proud-standing stronghold

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<sup>320</sup> Porges, p. 114. (A misprint in the book where “her speech” should be “his speech” has been corrected since it clearly refers to Siegfried’s lines.)

<sup>321</sup> *RWPW*, Vol. 1, p. 56. Italics in original.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>323</sup> In four performances of *Siegfried* available on video they do this: The Met *Ring*, the Munich one conducted by Sawallish, the Chéreau-Boulez, and the Kupfer-Barenboim.

moulder to dust!  
Fare well, resplendent  
pomp of the gods!  
End in rapture,  
you endless race!  
Rend, you Norns,  
the rope of runes!  
Dusk of the Gods,  
let your darkness arise!  
Night of destruction,  
let your mists roll in! —  
Siegfried's star  
now shines upon me;  
He's mine forever,  
always mine,  
my heritage and own,  
my one and all:  
light-bringing love  
and laughing death!

These famous last lines, sung by Brünnhilde and Siegfried in the ending duet, are difficult to translate from the German “leuchtende Liebe, lachender Tod!” (Other translations found in librettos include “Love that illumines, laughing at death,” and the too-literal “Shining love, laughing death.”) References to death — seen as a release — are not unusual in Romantic poetry and love songs. However, the “love-death” association that is central to Wagner’s other tragic operas, expressed most beautifully in the “Liebestod” of *Tristan and Isolde*, seems to embody certain philosophical principles expounded by Feuerbach in *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, a book, it will be recalled, that Wagner says in his autobiography “pleased me greatly, as much for its tragic implications as for its social radicalism.”<sup>324</sup> In that book Feuerbach makes love a central concept: “All human actions can be derived from love.” He defines it in terms of sacrifice, saying that “the more you sacrifice yourself, the greater and more genuine in your love”; “All love, all modes of love, have in common the fact that they are self-surrender, self-sacrifice.” Linking this to the title-subject of his book, Feuerbach insists: “Love would not be complete if death did not exist.” “Natural death is thus the ultimate sacrifice of reconciliation, the ultimate verification of love.” In more Hegelian language he concludes: “Thus death, precisely because it is the

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<sup>324</sup> *My Life*, p. 430.

manifestation of your being-for-self, is at once the manifestation of love.”<sup>325</sup> In our allegorical political interpretation, the lines take on additional significance: The high art and culture bequeathed by the aristocracy (Brünnhilde) will have to be destroyed and re-created in a different form by the new ruling class, the proletariat (Siegfried) and in this process, both parts of society will be transformed almost beyond recognition, a process terrifying as well as fascinating to both. This is the import of what Brünnhilde and Siegfried are announcing when, according to Wagner, “they are addressing the whole world.”

Wagner meant the ending of this opera to be a philosophical-political manifesto, more than just a love scene. Yet Karol Berger in an otherwise masterful account of the music and meanings, suddenly becomes highly critical at this point, writing as follows:

The words are more interesting than the music. “Laughing let us perish,” says Brünnhilde near the beginning of the cabaletta, and this conjunction of laughter and death remains the main idea of the opera’s closing section, the lovers’ last words apostrophizing repeatedly “light-bringing love and laughing death!” Meanwhile Brünnhilde bids farewell to the ancient régime of the gods and welcomes the rising star of Siegfried, while the hero himself hails again the day, sun, light, world. They look forward to the world of the future, the world of the free, fearless, loving human beings who no longer seek Wotan’s or Alberich’s tutelage. To be sure, in this new world of immanence Brünnhilde will be as mortal, as transient, as any human. But the heroic race of overmen faces this transience with laughter, not terror: they take delight in existence, in every aspect of existence, and turn away from the dream of transcendent essences. These are intriguing thoughts, presaging Nietzsche again. But while the ideas are interesting, the music is merely loud and ponderous. Instead of genuinely persuasive erotic union of two passionate human beings, something he was by now, after *Die Walküre* and *Tristan*, perfectly capable of providing, Wagner chose to end *Siegfried* with the coupling of the man and woman of the future, a noisy but lifeless ideological construct.

Yet here Wagner was not composing another *Tristan* or even another *Walküre*. When he directed that “they are addressing the whole world,” he meant it and composed the music accordingly. Most of us Wagnerians do not find it “noisy but lifeless” – a better description might be “awesome and inspiring.”

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<sup>325</sup> Feuerbach, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, pp. 122-26.

#### IV. TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

##### **Prologue**

The 20th century historian Arnold Toynbee devotes a considerable part of *A Study of History* to common patterns in the disintegration of great civilizations. He identifies “vertical schisms” between geographically segregated communities, and “horizontal schisms” between socially segregated classes. While of course both schisms existed in 19th century Europe, it was the horizontal type that Wagner took up as the theme for *The Ring*. In Toynbee's terms, “the schism between classes is a product of the disintegration of a coherent social ethos.” The historian goes on to summarize the main features of social breakdown: the dominant minority's loss of creative vigor and its growing reliance on force instead of merit to hold the allegiance of the lower-class majority. These themes are depicted dramatically in *The Ring*. Pausing to take stock, Toynbee writes:

These are the threads of inquiry into the horizontal schism in a broken-down society that are already in our hands; and perhaps the most promising way of attempting to pursue our inquiry further will be to draw these threads together and then spin out the strands.<sup>326</sup>

One wonders if Toynbee had seen a performance of *Twilight of the Gods* before penning these lines.

In the foreboding Prologue to this opera, three Norns — who, I believe, represent the professors, especially professional historians and social scientists — are trying to spin out theoretical strands to explain events unprecedented in world history. (In the stage directions they are described as “tall female figures in long, dark veil-like garments.” An idea for an avant-garde production would be to dress them in academic caps and gowns and set this scene on a university campus.) The scholar-Norns are experiencing more and more difficulty. Looking for places to attach their rope, they bemoan the fact that the World Ash Tree has been destroyed, tracing the problem way back to the time Wotan broke off a branch from that tree to make a spear; upon its shaft he carved laws and treaties, and he held it to rule the world. Ages later, after that spear was shattered by the hero

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<sup>326</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Revised and abridged by the author and Jane Caplan (New York, 1988), pp. 223-25.

Siegfried, Wotan ordered that the World Ash Tree itself be chopped into pieces to be stacked like firewood around Valhalla.

The way the Norns talk about Loge's fate lends credence to the hypothesis that the fire god symbolizes the clergy. The First Norm raises the question:

I cannot see clearly  
the hallowed past,  
when Loge once  
flared up in white-hot flame: --  
do you know what became of him?

To which the Second Norm continues:

By the spell of his spear  
Wotan tamed him;  
he whispered wisdom to the god:  
to work himself free  
he gnawed and destroyed he runes on the shaft.  
Then with the spear's  
All-powerful point  
Wotan cast a spell on him,  
Bidding him blaze round Brünnhilde's rock:  
do you know what will come of him?

Finally, the Third Norm forecasts:

The shattered spear's  
sharp-pointed splinters  
Wotan will one day bury  
deep in the fire-gods' breast:  
a ravaging fire  
will then flame forth,  
which the god will hurl  
on the world-ash's  
heaped-up logs. –

What Wagner seems to have had in mind by letting the Norns go into detail about Loge's fate, was that the collapsing aristocracy would drag down the Church with it. That was an outcome of the French Revolution that all were familiar with, and it was a feared or hoped-for (depending on one's ideology) possibility for other European countries.

In Porges' account of Wagner rehearsing the Norn scene, there are hints of its meaning. Although it is not always clear whether he is quoting Wagner or stating an interpretation based on Wagner's hints, Porges calls this scene "the counterpart to that of the Rhinemaidens in that here it is the 'dark side of nature' that is being revealed." What would "dark side of nature" have meant to Wagner, anyhow? Possibly human nature? Porges goes on to state the prevalent view of the "three Norms, who represent the three aspects of time — the past, the present and the future." They are often called "the Fates," and Porges observes that "the Fate motive, which is the tragic motto of *Götterdämmerung*, is often sounded."<sup>327</sup>

To understand the history the Norns are recounting in more contemporary concepts, we should recall that to Wagner (as to his Marxist and Anarchist contemporaries), the State — as distinct from the Nation or People (*Volk*) — was an inherently oppressive institution. Its compulsion turned people into subjects, curtailing the freedoms they would have had in Nature. A Wagnerian Hero, as individual and artist, was one who could resist State power and live beyond the bonds of social convention, something Wagner portrayed not only in *The Ring* but also in *Parsifal* by having the hero grow up in the woods. Now, when Wotan broke a branch from the World Ash Tree and made it into a spear, he was violating Nature, bringing it under his (the Monarch's or state's) control. More broadly than the physical disfigurement of Nature (although this too was important to Wagner, who may be viewed as an early environmentalist), the authority of Wotan's spear representing the feudal, contractual State was based on subjugation of Nature and by implication human nature.<sup>328</sup> And the institutions of the State and the Church were mutually supporting.

The Norns used to hang their threads of theory on the World Ash Tree's verdant branches. Now that the world ash is laid waste, the Norns have nothing but jagged rocks and a remaining fir tree on which to attach their lines. While doing so, they review certain events of the past three operas while adding historical perspective.

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<sup>327</sup> Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring'*, p. 117.

<sup>328</sup> Gunter Kossodo often stressed the centrality of Wagner's concept of the Hero versus the State in interpreting *The Ring* in his lectures to the Wagner Society of New York.

Like some academics, they are mostly interested in restating their own theories of the past, present and future (one Norn for each, respectively, described in the stage directions as “the oldest,” “younger” and “youngest”). As they try to incorporate into their discourse what has happened in the world – Alberich’s theft of the gold and its consequences -- their ropes begin to slip, to fray, and finally to snap. The three Norns cry out at the fragments of rope and resign themselves:

An end to eternal wisdom!  
Wise women no longer  
tell the world their tidings.

Perhaps the Norns’ resignation here portrays the strong premonition that Wagner had expressed in a preface to *Art and Revolution*, that the people whose job has been to explain what is going on no longer have a clue: “There was a time when art ceased to speak and political sciences and philosophy were born. Now that politicians and philosophers have reached the end of their knowledge, it is the task of the artist to begin again.”<sup>329</sup> More than two decades later, when Wagner drafts a new introduction to this part of his collected works, he recaptures his mood at the time, admitting that “in the feverish excitement of the year 1849” when he penned *Art and Revolution*, “I believed in the Revolution, and in its unrestrainable necessity.” He goes on to say:

I was bold enough to prefix the following motto to the little pamphlet: “When Art erst held her peace, State-wisdom and Philosophy began: when now both Statesman and Philosopher have breathed their last, let the Artist’s voice again be heard.” [Note that this is Ellis’s translation of the same statement quoted above in a more modern translation.]

And, Wagner laments, “It is needless to recall the scorn which my presumption brought upon me.”<sup>330</sup> Still, that was the mood he was in when he conceived the plot of *The Ring*, and he leaves it to the Norn scene to get across the point that in a revolutionary period the people who are supposed to know, suddenly don’t.

Bernard Shaw's theoretical threads likewise snapped at this juncture, the transition from *Siegfried* to *Twilight of the Gods*. In a section called “Back to Opera” he states that “the ultimate catastrophe of the Saga

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<sup>329</sup> Quoted in Boucher, *The Political Concepts of Richard Wagner*, p. 38.

<sup>330</sup> *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, trans. Ellis, Vol. I, p. 24.

cannot by any perversion of ingenuity be adapted to the perfectly clear allegorical design of *The Rhine Gold*, *The Valkyrie*, and *Siegfried*.” He finds “no philosophic coherence, no real identity between Brynhild of the Gibichung episode and the daughter of Wotan and the First Mother.” He concludes that “at the point where *The Ring* changes from music drama into opera, it also ceases to be philosophic and becomes didactic.... In the didactic part the philosophy degenerates into the prescription of a romantic nostrum for all human ills.”<sup>331</sup> Yet Shaw was never comfortable with his inability to integrate the last opera of the cycle into his political explication of the preceding three. In a Preface to the Third Edition of *The Perfect Wagnerite* in 1913 (the first edition had been published in 1898), Shaw admitted, “I was struck by the inadequacy of the merely negative explanation given by me of the irrelevance of [*Twilight of the Gods*] to the general philosophic scheme of *The Ring*.”<sup>332</sup> In an effort to compensate, Shaw added a chapter called “Why He Changed His Mind.” That chapter tried to use the historical changes that had taken place between Wagner's conception of the idea for *The Ring* during the 1848-49 revolution and its completion around 1876 to justify Wagner's supposed philosophical change. By that time, wrote Shaw, “the Siegfrieds of 1848 were hopeless political failures, whereas the Wotans and Alberics and Lokis were conspicuous political successes.... To put it in terms of Wagner's allegory, Alberic had got the ring back again, and was marrying into the best Valhalla families with it.” Furthermore, “Fafnir in the real world becomes a capitalist, but Fafnir in the allegory is a mere hoarder.”<sup>333</sup> Shaw's addition adds little to the analysis of the opera; in some ways it compounds his earlier errors by trying to rationalize them.

In fact, while Wagner was no exception to the tendency of youthful radicals to mellow with age, there is no basis for the assumption that he “changed his mind” fundamentally about the allegorical scheme of *The Ring*. It makes much more sense to pursue the political allegory through to the very end. Wagner himself relates in *My Life* how in 1848, “I had actually begun the poem of *Siegfrieds Tod* precisely with those scenes which now form

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<sup>331</sup> Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, pp. 48, 55, and 56.

<sup>332</sup> Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, p. xvii.

<sup>333</sup> Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, pp. 79-81.



the first act of *Götterdämmerung*, and had explained everything bearing upon the previous relationship of Siegfried to Brünnhilde solely through a lyric-episodic dialogue between the heroine, left alone on her rock after his departure, and a band of Valkyries passing by.”<sup>334</sup> Friends convinced Wagner that it was necessary to incorporate a lot more background material to make the significance of “Siegfried's Death” comprehensible to an audience; from there the first three opera librettos began to take shape in reverse order. In several places in his autobiography Wagner confirms this order of creation, so, as Taylor states (and other biographers agree), “The text of *The Ring* as a whole, finally completed in 1852, was thus written from end to beginning.”<sup>335</sup>

After ominously opening *Twilight of the Gods*, the Norns vanish. The sun rises and the heroic figures of Brünnhilde and Siegfried come onto the stage. The audience is reassured as the two recount their deeds of glory with familiar musical motifs backing them up. But the Norns' forewarning cannot be ignored: the situation is not the same in the world, and the future will not justify Siegfried's self-confidence. Brünnhilde and Siegfried reaffirm their love and unity of purpose, but there are different nuances in their words, unlike the joyful optimism at the close of *Siegfried*. Brünnhilde realizes that Siegfried must go on to perform further heroic deeds on his own, and regrets that she has little more to offer him. Professor Robert Bailey makes a good case that one generation passes between each of the operas that make up *The Ring*, so that at this point Siegfried (as well as Hagen, son of Alberich, who was reported to have been born about the same time as Siegfried) are approaching middle age, a time-scheme which allows for Brünnhilde to have been tutoring him for years:

What gods have taught me  
I gave to you:  
a bountiful store  
of hallowed runes;  
but the maidenly source  
of all my strength  
was taken away by the hero  
to whom I now bow my head.  
Berift of wisdom  
but filled with desire;

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<sup>334</sup> *My Life*, p. 381.

<sup>335</sup> Taylor, *Richard Wagner*, p. 91.

rich in love  
yet void of strength,  
I beg you not to despise  
the poor woman  
who grudges you naught  
but can give you no more!

It might seem strange for a bride with aristocratic roots to feel unworthy of a husband raised in the woods and a smithy's cave; but the passage makes sense in sociological interpretation. Brünnhilde has tried to teach the venerable cultural wisdom of the nobility to the new master of society — the proletarian Siegfried — to the point of exhaustion (“I'm wise no more”). The enthusiastic pupil has learned much in a short time since slaying the capitalist dragon, but his capacity to absorb traditional wisdom is limited by his deficient education and by the need to create new norms for new situations. Aristocratic culture is elegant and refined, in the end too elusive for a plebian to grasp. That is why Brünnhilde is about to lose Siegfried, despite his protestations of loyalty and love.

It is important to a political understanding of *The Ring* to follow the libretto's emphasis on Brünnhilde's attention to her role in imparting to Siegfried wisdom, and her grave doubts that she has enough to impart or that she has passed it on sufficiently. Of course, we know that Siegfried has not gotten enough wisdom to ward off the final tragedy that is his fate, and we know that Brünnhilde will attain the ultimate wisdom only at his funeral. But here in Act One it is helpful to note the emphasis on education. In White's analysis of the operas in terms of contracts and oaths, the focus is on Siegfried's “pledge of love” [*Liebesspfand*] for which he receives in return Brünnhilde's “holy runes” [*heiliger Runen*] of wisdom that she has retained from her godly former life. White recapitulates her concern with wisdom throughout the *Ring* cycle and at this point in particular:

Brünnhilde's own testimony on her relation to wisdom reflects its presently uncertain status. When she faces the enraged Wotan in the third act of *Die Walküre*, she says to him that “I am not wise” (*Nicht weise bin ich*). In context, she may mean only that her wisdom is negligible in comparison with the paternal fountainhead of wisdom, not that her own measure of wisdom was nonexistent. However, at the conclusion of *Siegfried*, Brünnhilde confesses that whatever wisdom she once possessed has now vanished: “My wisdom is silent” (*Mein Wissen schweigt*), she cries when Siegfried presses her to return his passion. Again again, shortly thereafter, “heavenly wisdom rushes from me” (*himmlisches Wissen / stürmt mir dahin*), although this claim also suggests that she still retained some trace of wisdom, even though that wisdom may have sprung from a different source. In light of this possibility, consider her avowal shortly after Siegfried kisses her and they both experience love for the first time: “yet I am wise only because I love you” (*doch wissend bin ich / nur weil ich dich liebe*). Here Brünnhilde intimates jthat

whatever wisdom she may possess results from love rather than, or perhaps in addition to, any vestiges of her divine lineage.<sup>336</sup>

It may seem pedantic to try to measure Brünnhilde's level of erudition so precisely; but we should keep in mind that degree of wisdom, and sacrifices made to attain it, are fundamental traits distinguishing the main characters in the *Ring*. Wotan himself long ago he sacrificed an eye to attain his wisdom. Alberich gained the knowledge to forge the ring from the gold — something even Wotan was incapable of — because he forswore love to attain it. And as will be seen now at the Hall of the Gibichungs, what distinguishes Hagen from his half-brother is precisely his astuteness, offset by lack of any traits that would make him lovable.

### **Act One**

“We now enter a new world, pass from the boundless realms of nature into a settled, ordered society governed by strict laws of custom. This has a bearing upon both the performance of the music and the acting.” Thus Porges, reporting on the crucial transition to Act One in Wagner's 1876 *Ring* rehearsal.<sup>337</sup> The society Siegfried now enters and the characters he meets are new to *The Ring* but not entirely unfamiliar types. The Hall of the Gibichungs is populated by the social descendants of the Alberich and his type, now grown too big to be characterized as Dwarfs. They are the next generation of the (formerly petty) bourgeoisie, economically successful and making pretensions of being pillars of society. (If Wagner chose their name for its allusion to a German word, as he often did, the relevant expression could have been the dialectical “gibberig” — “hankering” after something, to underline this class's striving for material wealth and social position.)

Gunther is the master of the Hall, the one who has greatest authority; but his half-brother Hagen is the cleverer one, as Gunther readily admits. Hagen is none other than the son of Alberich, the Nibelung who stole the Rhinegold and forged the ring. Nevertheless, neither Gunther nor Hagen is satisfied with his current status. Gunther wants to marry into high society to solidify his position as a nouveau riche, and Hagen shrewdly suggests

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<sup>336</sup> *The Turning Wheel*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>337</sup> Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring'*, pp. 119-20.

the availability of Brünnhilde, who throughout *The Ring* cycle has offered the path to upward social mobility, first as Valkyrie and then as mortal woman. Now, Hagen tells Gunther,

I know of a woman,  
the noblest in the world: —  
high on a fell her home;  
a fire burns round her hall:  
only he who breaks through the fire  
my sue for Brünnhilde's love.

From the perspective of a Gibichung, Brünnhilde — although cast out of the Godly realm — is the noblest or most magnificent (*herrlichste*) wife one could aspire for. However, Hagen cautions, Gunther is incapable of winning her love, not being a heroic figure like Siegfried who could march through the fire to her lofty abode (high social level). At the same time, Gunther's sister — the dazzling Gutrune — needs a suitable husband, and mention of the hero Siegfried arouses her interest. His feat in capturing the Nibelung treasure and his prospects for ruling the world with it make him eminently eligible. Hagen hatches an intricate plot by which Siegfried will be tricked into falling for Gutrune and delivering Brünnhilde to Gunther. The method involves giving Siegfried a magical potion to disorient him.

Drugs (especially liquor, the bane of the working class) will help, but the fact that Siegfried is susceptible to such manipulation is the important lesson in this part of the opera, where Wagner is expressing his observations of — and disappointment with — the European working class. After the workers had tested their political strength in upheavals like the revolutions of 1848-49, they were all too easily distracted from their lofty goals by the tempting rewards of bourgeois society. If Brünnhilde symbolizes the best heritage of aristocratic culture offered to the masses, then Gutrune exemplifies the vulgar culture of the new rich who were taking over European cities in Wagner's time. In our day, Gutrune would be the neon lights, television commercials, and Hollywood movies — all the manifestations of materialistic values that divert ordinary citizens from “higher” cultural pursuits.

Siegfried arrives on cue at the Gibichungs' Hall, gulps down the potion, and falls right into the trap, bedazzled by Gutrune's charms. He decides to use the Tarnhelm to disguise himself as Gunther while bringing

Brünnhilde down from her protected rock, turn her over to the real Gunther, and claim Guttrune as his reward. Under Hagen's approving gaze he seals a blood oath with Gunther. The powerful working class has been won over to an alliance with the new capitalists, and the consequences will be far-reaching. Indeed, it is the portrayal of these results that was Wagner's main purpose in writing the whole *Ring* operatic cycle. Wagner saw the fatal conclusion as inevitable, but still he had to protest. If only there were a way to stop the inexorable course of history driven by the motive of lust for power! — is the central message of *The Ring*.

In the Scene Three, the Valkyrie Waltraute appears at Brünnhilde's rock and tries to warn her former sister-in-arms of the impending doom, not just of Brünnhilde's marriage but of the whole civilization of the Gods. Waltraute reports that the Gods are completely demoralized, that Wotan came home with his spear shattered and ordered that the World Ash Tree be chopped down and its branches piled up around Valhalla. The Valkyries are no longer sent out to recruit fallen heroes from earth, and gloom pervades the godly domain.

Brünnhilde finds the significance of all this difficult to grasp, for she has left the company of the Gods. Waltraute implores her to take the only action that can reverse the drift of events: to cast the ring back into the Rhine River. At this suggestion, Brünnhilde is dumbfounded. The ring is what Siegfried has given her as a token of love (which is ironic, since the ring could be forged only by one who renounced love). Brünnhilde rebuffs the request out of hand and sends Waltraute on her way. Now Brünnhilde hears the horn signaling Siegfried's return and rises in anticipation, but she receives a terrible shock when the figure who passes through the wall of flame is in the form of Gunther, with the Tarnhelm covering part of his face. Siegfried in disguise follows the script agreed to with the Gibichungs and claims Brünnhilde as bride in the name of Gunther. Her forceful resistance is futile and the pair eventually lie down to sleep, although to keep his bargain with the real Gunther, Siegfried places the sword Nothung in between them so that his and Gunther's honor will not be compromised that night. Nothung, the symbol of revolutionary violence born out of necessity, historically did separate the proletariat from the liberal section of the old ruling class.

Brünnhilde's shock at the image of Gunther in this scene expresses the outrage Wagner felt as he saw the vulgar bourgeoisie usurping the cultural treasures that had once been the province of the aristocracy. It would

have been all right if a pure, uncorrupted working class — Siegfried before swallowing the Gibichung potion — could have been educated to assume the role of cultural leader of society. Such a historical outcome Wagner could have accepted; in fact, it was what Wagner counted on in his revolutionary days to make possible the new theater in which he could properly stage his operas. But the innocent masses were quickly corrupted by bourgeois materialistic values and tricked into yielding leadership to the newly-rising business class.

## **Act Two**

At the beginning of Act Two, Hagen is dozing when a vision of his father, Alberich, appears. Alberich, the original thief of the Rhinegold and originator of the curse on the ring, urges his son to be cunning and "cherish the hatred" ["hate the happy" in Spencer's translation] of all rivals — including Gods and heroes — who stand in the way of Alberich's kind taking full possession of the world's wealth and power. Alberich's apparition does not vanish until Hagen is made to swear in his sleep that he will regain the ring. The continuity of class hatred by the bourgeoisie against both the doomed ruling class above and the threatening working class below, is instilled in the next generation. In practice, Alberich's urgings are hardly necessary, for Hagen already has planned to do everything required.

When Siegfried returns to the Gibichungs' hall, he has already handed Brünnhilde over to Gunther, and now he claims the gaudy Gutrune as wife. Hagen prepares the final stages of the conspiracy: an ostentatious double wedding, the ultimate betrayal of Siegfried and capture of the ring. As part of the wedding ritual Hagen calls for animals to be slain on the altars of the Gods Wotan, Froh, Donner and Fricka, so that the Gods will bless the whole arrangement. In Europe as the commercial class gained hegemony and married upward, while subordinating the working class, it utilized traditional religious rites borrowed from feudal times to legitimize the transformation.

Brought to the double wedding ceremony, Brünnhilde is all the more disoriented when she sees Siegfried paired up with Gutrune and herself with Gunther. Everyone, including Siegfried, acts as if this were perfectly normal, to the point where Brünnhilde begins to doubt her own sanity. Brünnhilde's shock here is a vivid expression of the dismay that Wagner expressed in his writings when he saw the masses lured by commercial

spectacles and his own creations made subject to the bourgeois-controlled art market (at least until Ludwig II's patronage offered an alternative means to produce his works). Suddenly, however, Brünnhilde spots the ring upon Siegfried's finger — the very ring that she remembers “Gunther” stealing from her hand the night before. Siegfried does not admit to knowing how it got there, acknowledging only that he originally won the ring by slaying Fafner the Dragon at the cave. It is clear to Brünnhilde now that terrible treachery has been perpetrated. Hagen slyly suggests that he can help Brünnhilde take revenge on Siegfried for the deceit. He pumps her for any hint of a weakness in Siegfried, and Brünnhilde lets out the secret that Siegfried is vulnerable only from the back. Because he would never run from an enemy, there was no need for a protective spell to be put on his back. The historical truth in this is very clear: the working class cannot be defeated in a straight-on battle, least of all by the weak and cowardly bourgeois forces; it can be destroyed only by being stabbed in the back by its supposed friends.

Gunther, who represents the more respectable section of the business class, has qualms about having Siegfried murdered but goes along with it. Hagen, a gangster with fewer scruples, will do the dirty work. Near the end of Act Two, Brünnhilde bewails the fact that her gifts to Siegfried proved less attractive than the superficial glamour of Guttrune:

What did my wisdom tell me?  
What did my runes have to teach me?  
In my helpless distress  
it dawns on me now:  
Gutrune's the name of the spell  
that spirited away my husband!

Here again is an expression of Wagner's profound regret that the emergent working class, on whom he had placed hopes in his revolutionary youth, had shown itself so easily susceptible to crude, materialistic culture when it had within its grasp the highest legacy of civilization. Indeed, Wagner's idealistic followers such as Nietzsche, when they observed of the events surrounding the first *Ring* at Bayreuth in 1876, were dismayed at how the pure art had been turned into a spectacle, a social occasion for the rich and high-born.

### Act Three

During the fatal hunting trip organized by Hagen, Siegfried is temporarily separated from the others in the party and encounters the Rhinedaughters at riverside. They give him a final warning about the curse on the ring and offer him a last chance to throw it back in the water, but he does not take them seriously. The hunting party stops to rest, and Siegfried offers to tell his life story, from childhood with Mime to the victory over the dragon-giant Fafner and the march through the flames to Brünnhilde. This time Siegfried reverts to the truth, Hagen having poured him a second potion that counteracts the first. At that very moment of revelation, Hagen seizes the opportunity to plunge a spear into Siegfried's back. Dying, Siegfried has visions of the true Brünnhilde once more. Historically, the European working class realized it had made a political mistake only when it was too late.

If we were to push the political analogy of the opera into the twentieth century (although this exercise must be conducted with extreme caution as such attempts have often been made without sufficient basis, sometimes merely to impugn Wagner's reputation), we would have to conclude that Hagen is Hitler. Wagner turned out to be correct sociologically in portraying the wellspring of the vicious force that would later be called fascism as arising out of the lower-middle class, fanned by the resentment the petty bourgeois have against the more "respectable" rulers above them on the one hand, and the fear that they will be pushed down into the despised proletariat on the other. Hitler's fondness for Wagner (albeit with little depth of understanding) and the Nazis' use of Wagner's works, plus the collaboration of several Wagner descendants and heirs with Hitler, has led many writers to impute part of the responsibility for 20th century German fascism back to Wagner.<sup>338</sup> It is therefore important to keep in mind the relationship of class forces that is portrayed in *The Ring*, for although Wagner's anti-Semitism cannot be denied, the best defense of the composer's overall historical legacy can be mounted on top of a complete understanding of his political analysis as revealed in *The Ring*. Wagner's anti-Nazi granddaughter Friedelind was intuitively right when she wrote, near the end of World War II: "If Hitler had read the Ring of the Nibelung with

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<sup>338</sup> A brief assessment of Wagner's possible influence on Hitler and Nazi ideology with references to several sources is William E. Grim's "Did Wagner Create Hitler? Reflections on the Influence of the *Ring* on Modern German History," in Richardson (ed.), *New Studies in Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung*, pp. 155-75.



understanding he could have foreseen his own doom.” She likens Hitler to Alberich, who “gathered unto himself power and enslaved others and set in motion the whole selfish pattern which we see repeated today,” and she admonishes that, “If Hitler and those who repeat his misstatements about Wagner could or would look at the parallel they would understand Wagner.”<sup>339</sup> Friedelind’s likening of Hitler to Alberich is understandable but overly generous; unlike Alberich who was first to forge the ring, Hitler made no original contribution to technological progress. Our analysis shows more precisely that Hitler played the role of Alberich’s son Hagen, the murderer of Siegfried, whom *The Ring* portrays as an evil genius manipulating characters who are objectively stronger than him, and more respectable than him, by pretending to be their ally. This was exactly how Hitler operated: with his left hand he held up a banner (the “Socialist” part in the Nazi label) to attract the powerful working class — who had Siegfried’s strength — and stabbed them in the back by destroying the whole independent union movement, while with his right he shook hands with Germany’s bourgeoisie — the respectable and trusting Gunthers — assuring them he would look out for their best interests and finally causing their doom.

Whether Wagner’s works, either the music dramas or the prose writings, were in any substantial way a determining influence on Hitler’s mental development is an elusive problem. He was impressed by the power of operatic spectacles to sway mass audiences, and he borrowed some of the staging techniques for Nazi rallies. Yet, despite Wagner’s expressed concern with the fate of the German nation and his anti-Semitic pronouncements, it is surprisingly difficult to find evidence that Wagner was a formative influence on Hitler’s thought. In the dictator’s statements one finds Wagnerian references. In *Mein Kampf* Wagner’s name is merely mentioned in a list of “great men,” yet never (to my knowledge) a considered treatment of Wagner’s ideas. Wagnerian themes are, however, used to dramatize political ideas, as in “A fire was kindled, from whose glow must come one day the sword that will win back freedom for the Germanic Siegfried and life for the German nation.”<sup>340</sup> Perhaps that reflects the shallowness of Hitler’s intellect. Consider the following excerpt from a speech he delivered in

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<sup>339</sup> *Heritage of Fire*, p. xii.

<sup>340</sup> Quoted in Alex Ross, *Wagnerism*, p. 529.

Munich on April 13, 1923, which we choose to quote here because it is one of the few Hitler sources that appears to utilize symbols from Wagner's *Ring* to make a political point:

Why have the Jews been against Germany? That is made quite clear today — proved by countless facts. They use the age-old tactics of the hyena — when fighters are tired out, then go for them! Then make your harvest! In war and revolution the Jew attained the unattainable. Hundreds of thousands of escaped Orientals became modern 'Europeans'. Times of unrest product miracles. Before 1914 how long would it have taken, for instance, in Bavaria before a Galician Jew became — Prime Minister? — Or in Russia before an anarchist from the New York Ghetto, Bronstein (Trotsky) became — Dictator? Only a few wars and revolutions — that was enough to put the Jewish people into possession of the red gold and thereby to make them masters of the world.<sup>341</sup>

In the two volume collection of Hitler's speeches from which the above is excerpted, almost 2000 pages in total, there is no "Wagner" reference in the index, although many other names appear, including even two references to Trotsky. However, it would be hard not to construe the last sentence as a reference to *The Ring*. The fact that "possession of red gold" would "make them masters of the world" apparently makes the Jews into Alberich. We must conclude that Hitler was affected more by Wagner's symbols and dramatic methods than by his philosophical thought. (Hitler's habit of distorting facts is also evident in the above passage: e.g. Trotsky was not an "anarchist" and was not "from the New York Ghetto" although he was in exile in New York a few months until the Russian Revolution broke out. Lenin the non-Jew who was still alive in 1923 is ignored and Trotsky the Jew called "Dictator.")

Because an understanding of the socio-economic forces that led to fascism is often missing, even in writings by people who have devoted much effort to studying its effects in the holocaust and World War II, it is necessary to review what these forces were before attempting any interpretation of the Nazi experience in the light of *The Ring* and speculating on how Wagner might have felt had he been around in the 1930's. Crucial to any understanding of fascism and its German variant, Nazism, is a recognition that it found its main support base among the lower-middle classes, what Marxists refer to as the petty bourgeoisie. In what is perhaps the best concise analysis of Nazism from the class perspective, a pamphlet called "What is National Socialism?" that Leon

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<sup>341</sup> *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April 1922 - August 1939*, ed. by Norman H. Baynes (London, 1942), Vol. I, p. 51.

Trotsky wrote in June 1933 (shortly after Hitler had come to power), it is emphasized that the explanation for the rise of the Nazis cannot be found in Hitler's personality but only in the broader socio-economic phenomenon of the "pauperization of the petty bourgeoisie." "Not every exasperated petty bourgeois could have become Hitler," Trotsky writes, "but a particle of Hitler is lodged in every exasperated petty bourgeois."<sup>342</sup> What is Alberich throughout most of *The Ring* but an "exasperated petty bourgeois" (except for the brief period between his theft of the gold and Wotan and Loge's taking away of his ring, when he has pretensions of grandeur)? It is his son Hagen, however, who actually carries out the deed that made it possible for the Nazis to assume political power: to stab the revolutionary working class in the back while pretending to be its friend. Hagen does this ostensibly to help his half-brother Gunther realize his aspiration to move from the middle class to the upper class by acquiring Brünnhilde, instigating him to be a partner in the crime. Trotsky vividly describes how the Nazi movement utilized these class resentments to achieve power:

The bonfires which burn the impious literature of Marxism light up brilliantly the class nature of National Socialism. While the Nazis acted as a party and not as a state power, they did not quite find an approach to the working class. On the other side, the big bourgeoisie, even those who supported Hitler with money, did not consider his party theirs. The national "renaissance" leaned wholly upon the middle classes, the most backward part of the nation, the heavy ballast of history. Political art consisted in fusing the petty bourgeoisie into oneness through its common hostility to the proletariat. What must be done in order to improve things? First of all, throttle those who are underneath. Impotent before big capital, the petty bourgeoisie hopes in the future to regain its social dignity through the ruin of the workers.<sup>343</sup>

Or, as Ernest Mandel (the Belgian Marxist who was also a fighter in the resistance to the Nazi regime) summarizes the situation in his introduction to Trotsky's writings on fascism,

Such a mass movement [as fascism] can only arise on the basis of the petty bourgeoisie, capitalism's third social class, situated between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. If this petty bourgeoisie is hit so hard by inflation, bankruptcy of small firms, and mass unemployment of university graduates, technicians, and the higher salaried employees, that it falls into despair, then a typical petty-bourgeois movement, compounded of ideological reminiscences and psychological resentment, will arise. It will combine extreme nationalism and at least verbal anti-capitalist demagoguery with the most intense hatred for the organized workers' movement ("Against Marxism," "Against Communism"). At the moment this

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<sup>342</sup> Trotsky's writings on this subject are collected in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (New York, 1971), where the article "What is National Socialism" is found on pp. 399-407.

<sup>343</sup> In *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, p. 402.

movement begins physical attacks on the workers, their organizations, and their actions, a fascist movement is born.<sup>344</sup>

No one can possibly say with authority where Wagner would have stood had he lived in Germany a century later. Thomas Mann raised and disposed of the question in 1933 this way: “How would Richard Wagner stand toward our problems, our needs and the tasks before us? That ‘would’ has a hollow sound, the position is unthinkable. Views are of secondary importance, even in their own present; how much more so when that has become past!”<sup>345</sup> Might Wagner have succumbed to the blandishments of the Nazis had they offered to make him the nation's cultural leader? Would he have bestowed his blessing on Hitler if the dictator imagined himself the incarnation of the “hero” Siegfried and interpreted Siegfried's slaying of Mime as approval of the policy of exterminating Jews? It is far more likely that Wagner would have been one of the early victims of the Nazis, who had no tolerance for avant-garde artists or for persons who associated with the likes of Bakunin. Wagner, who was quite radical in his social views and detested militarism, would probably have seen through to the essence of fascism — an expression of the most vulgar side of bourgeois class hatred.

Even with his anti-Semitism (which, as we have seen, was directed abstractly at Jews as symbols of a capitalistic way of life that Wagner resented), Wagner probably would not have been able to stomach fascism. After all, the Nazi's came to power by destroying the organized power of the working class, persecuting the radical agitators, Socialists, Communists and Anarchists who were the descendants of those on whose side the young Wagner had fought in Dresden. In this sense Hitler played the role of Hagen; and Hagen is a character with whom Wagner clearly is not sympathetic. If Wagner is to be dragged into our century, it is only fair to allow his greatest operatic work to speak for itself. Even Hitler, intellectually incapable of appreciating that he was a Hagen rather than a Siegfried in the socio-political scheme of *The Ring*, apparently realized in midst of the war that *Götterdämmerung* might be all too prophetic of his own fate.

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<sup>344</sup> Introduction to *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, p. 19.

<sup>345</sup> From Thomas Mann, *Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner*, quoted in Taylor, pp. 259-60.

There is evidence that the Nazi authorities became, somewhat belatedly, aware of the peculiar applicability of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* to their own case. Word went out in Germany in 1942 that complete performances of the *Ring*, even in Bayreuth, were no longer welcome. *Parsifal*, too, fell under this partial ban. Commenting from Tel Aviv in 1977 on the reasons why these two works were singled out by the Nazis, Yehuda Cohen writes: "The Nazis rejected the *Ring* obviously because they saw in it a prophecy of their downfall [*Untergang*], *Parsifal* because it is too Christian."<sup>346</sup>

While the question of what Wagner would have done had he lived in the twentieth century is unanswerable, we are entitled to ask another, less hypothetical question: "What should a good Wagnerian, one faithful to the master's ideals, think and do in this century? In addition to studying Wagner's political-philosophical writings, it is through a full understanding of the politics of *The Ring*, a politics animated by social class forces symbolized in mythological characters, that we can approach this problem. When Trotsky wrote that "Hitler's nation is the mythological shadow of the petty bourgeoisie itself," he was describing a much more frightening use of myth than Wagner envisioned; it is myth without the uplifting moral lesson that Wagner wanted. The Nazis invented myths, the myth of "Aryan" racial superiority above all, to console the lower-middle for their losses in the real, material society and their lack of power under the Nazi regime itself. "As the ruined nobility sought solace in the gentility of its blood, so the pauperized petty bourgeoisie befuddles itself with fairy tales concerning the special superiorities of its race," as Trotsky put it.<sup>347</sup> A true Wagnerian living in the mid-twentieth century would not support fascist myths and movements unless he or she perhaps thought that Alberich and Hagen were the "good guys" in *The Ring*.

Returning finally to the plot of the opera, the curse on the ring claims yet another victim. Hagen, having slain Siegfried, reaches out for the ring on the dead hero's finger, but Gunther defends the ring for Gutrune. Hagen in anger strikes down his half-brother, just as Fafner slew Fasolt in an earlier fratricidal conflict between capitalists. However, when Hagen tries to grab the prize, Siegfried's hand with the ring on it rises menacingly, causing Hagen to draw back in terror. Such is the awesome power of the working class that at any sign of

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<sup>346</sup> Rather, *The Dream of Self-Destruction*, p. 170. The citation of Cohen is to an article in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 13, 1977.

<sup>347</sup> In *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, p. 404.

movement (a demonstration or strike, for example) its murderers worry that it is not completely dormant. By the way, this political explanation of how the “dead” Siegfried is able to raise his hand — because a *class* of people can never be a hundred percent dead — solves a dilemma that some producers apparently feel; for example, in the Kupfer production at Bayreuth at the start of the 1990’s Brünnhilde is made to raise Siegfried’s hand for him — hardly necessary!

As the *Twilight of the Gods* reaches an inevitable tragic conclusion — Siegfried's funeral pyre growing into the conflagration that engulfs Valhalla; the final enlightenment of Brünnhilde and her decision to leap into the flames, thus returning the ring to the Rhine; and Hagen's desperate plunge after the ring, when he apparently drowns in his own greed — Wagner's own philosophy finds full expression. Wagner was first and last a Romantic, not a revolutionary. True, the concept of a “conflagration” goes back to Wagner's 1848-49 experiences, particularly to encounters with Bakunin recounted in *My Life*, in which the famous Anarchist advocated a fiery apocalypse and Wagner referred to him as “chief pyrotechnist in this act.”<sup>348</sup> As per Bakunin, *The Ring* ends with a cleansing fire to clear the way for a better world, although it might be said that Wagner was more astute than Bakunin in forecasting the many troubles, death and destruction that would come before this final, fateful end.

Wagner saw what technological and economic forces were doing to European society, and he wished the course of history could be altered. His *Ring* operatic cycle is a final warning about what will happen if the forces let loose — the industrial rape of nature and what Americans like to call the “profit motive” but Wagner called “greed” — are allowed to prevail. Not only will the noble aristocracy with its glorious cultural accompaniments be doomed, but the innocent heroes at the bottom of society, the sincere Siegfrieds who deserve to inherit what is left, are fated to be pushed aside by ruthless striving capitalists like the Gibichungs.

Wagner helped define the cultural movement called Romanticism. A brief entry on that movement in an encyclopedia reads: “The basic aims of romanticism were various: a return to nature and to belief in the goodness

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<sup>348</sup> *My Life*, p. 384, and similarly on p. 386.

of man, most notably expressed by Jean Jacques Rousseau — with the subsequent cult of ‘the noble savage,’ attention to the ‘simple peasant,’ and admiration of the violently self-centered ‘hero’ ....” That sounds like a description of Siegfried. The entry goes on to say that the romantic movement affected literature, art, music and opera, with Wagner being a decisive influence. “Romanticism in music was characterized by an emphasis on emotion and great freedom of form. It attained its fullest development in the works of German composers ... it reached its zenith in the works of Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, and Wagner.” “Romantic opera began with Weber, included the works of the Italians Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi, and culminated in the work of Wagner, who aimed at a complete synthesis of the arts in his idea of Gesamtkunstwerk [total work of art].”<sup>349</sup> It was even more than a “complete synthesis of the arts” that Wagner aimed for; it was a synthesis of the arts with what we might call *political/economic Romanticism*. His conceptual framework of political society used many of the same social-class categories that the Marxists and the Anarchists defined, but it had other components that were perhaps even more important to Wagner and which came out of Romanticist thought. One central idea was, of course, the need to return to Nature and not allow industrial priorities to prevail over traditional values. Another crucial Romantic concept was the role of the independent individual against the state and society.

Indeed, *The Ring* can be interpreted as a tragic battle of the individual — first Siegmund, then Siegfried — striving in vain against the forces of the larger society. Wotan himself agonizes over his inability to step outside the legal-social restrictions that he is bound to uphold, and tries to create these “Wälsungs” (from *Wahl* meaning “choice” and its verb form *wählen*, “to choose, elect”) to be able to do what he wills but cannot carry out. Nevertheless, an interpretation of *The Ring* only in terms of the individual versus society, leaving out the class structure that is so elaborately depicted throughout the operatic cycle, would ignore what is perhaps Wagner's most profound insight into social science, an insight shared by Marx: that people's ideas and ideologies are molded by their class status. Very few of the characters in *The Ring* are remotely capable of acting

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<sup>349</sup> *The New Columbia Encyclopedia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

autonomously; they are all prisoners of their social class imperatives. The only exceptions are those characters whose class status is ambiguous, who live along the social-class divides. One is Loge, said to be a cousin of Alberich (hence of petty-bourgeois origin) but having made his way into the employ of the Gods where his advice and special talents are valued. That Loge has an option of acting independently is clear, for instance, at the end of *The Rhinegold* when the Gods triumphantly enter Valhalla and he turns aside and says the following to himself:

They're hurrying on towards their end,  
though they think they will last for ever.  
I'm almost ashamed  
to share in their dealings;  
to turn myself  
into guttering flame  
I feel a seductive desire.  
To burn them up  
who formerly tamed me,  
instead of feebly  
fading away with the blind —  
and were they the godliest gods —  
that seems to be not so foolish!  
I'll think it over:  
who knows what I'll do!

Again, there are not many characters in *The Ring* for whom the question “Who knows what I'll do?” is even conceivable. If Loge represents religion, his hesitation manifests what many in the church felt as they saw how the ruling lords who had “tamed” organized religion abused their powers and eventually headed toward their own doom. Another character capable of choice is certainly Brünnhilde, who likewise is a figure standing on the divide between social classes. An offspring of Wotan's liaison with the earthy Erda, her task as Valkyrie is to bring heroes from the humble classes into Godly company. It is precisely the exercise of free will (even though it reflects Wotan's secret inner desire) in choosing to flout official orders and defend Siegmund against Hunding that results in her banishment from Godly society and relegation to the lower side of the class divide, to mortal woman.

Of course, the characters who best express the fulfillment of free will of the individual acting outside legal-social constraints are Siegmund and Siegfried. They, too, are products of cross-pollination of social classes, being the offspring of an aristocrat's dalliance with a commoner. Even more significant, they are brought up



outside the normal society — “in the forest” as the opera depicts it. In the present interpretation we have called them representatives of the revolutionary working class; one could dispute this characterization and say that they are less working-class than “lumpen proletariat,” or perhaps agitators *for* the exploited but beyond organized society themselves. In that view, the industrial working class would be the Dwarfs who are enslaved in Alberich's mining and manufacturing operation, who have no hope of escape and lack the opportunity to revolt. Due precisely to their origins as outsiders, Siegmund and even more so, Siegfried, are the characters in *The Ring* supposed to be able to act freely<sup>350</sup> — indeed, that was Wotan's original idea in creating Siegmund. What makes *The Ring* such a tragedy is that even they fail. Siegmund has to be destroyed by Wotan's invocation of Godly law and morality, at Fricka's insistence, but because she has found the contradiction in her husband's plan: How can someone Wotan created and armed for a purpose be truly free? Siegfried, further removed from Wotan's control and not knowing his grandfather, is able to accomplish the great deed of slaying the Dragon and awakening Brünnhilde. But in the end, even after having broken Wotan's spear — hence the power of the old regime — is finally taken in by the bourgeois Gibichungs through trickery and seduction.

In his political forecast Wagner was all too prescient, even when we look at Europe into the following century. That the aristocracy was doomed to fade out was apparent enough in Wagner's time. The castle and palace building spree of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, Wagner's patron, was the final fling of an obsolete ruling class. But Wagner's allusions to how the proletariat would be lured into accepting bourgeois values and then fatally betrayed, while the emerging capitalists would struggle fratricidally to control the fruits of industrial technology and to inherit the trappings of the aristocracy, are profoundly perceptive socio-historical commentary. No one who analyzes *The Ring* can ignore the fact that, while it carries a universal message that Wagner considered valid since mythical pre-history, it is framed in terms designed to enlighten the European citizen of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The composer's grandson Wieland saw this combination of timelessness and timeliness as the key to

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<sup>350</sup> Brünnhilde acted freely in choosing to side with Siegmund against Hunding, although it was still for the purpose of carrying out Wotan's inner will as she knew it.

full understanding. “For me it is, firstly a revival of Greek tragedy; secondly, a return to mythical sources; and thirdly, moralistic drama in the manner both of Schiller and of Brecht. The *Ring* is the mirror which Richard Wagner holds up to humanity. ‘This is how you are,’ he says, ‘and this is what will happen to our world if humanity does not radically change.’” After quoting Wieland in this way, his biographer Skelton adds that “Wagner’s moralistic challenge was addressed to the people of his own time, the society of rationalism and the industrial revolution, which had forgotten its mythical roots. But its message was more than ever applicable to the society of today.”<sup>351</sup>

Dresden, the city of Wagner's youthful revolutionary adventures, would a hundred years later go up in flames like Valhalla — literally, under Allied incendiary bombs — after the German middle class had torn apart the fabric of traditional society and created a military-industrial monstrosity. The American novelist Kurt Vonnegut, striving to find some meaning in the firebombing of Dresden, the results of which he witnessed, could come up only with an expression of resigned incomprehension: “So it goes.”<sup>352</sup> Vonnegut's book ends with a bird saying “Poo-tee-weet”; unlike the woodbird that spoke to Siegfried, its chirping is not intelligible. Perhaps *The Ring* can help Vonnegut and others understand the culmination of a long historical process that Wagner analyzed in its earlier stages.

Brünnhilde's final action of returning the ring to the Rhine expresses Wagner's fading hope that the historical process could be stopped and mankind returned to harmony with nature. It was too late to prevent the destruction of Valhalla, and Brünnhilde had already chosen to leap into the flames with Siegfried's corpse; but the yielding of the ring to the Rhinedaughters, who represent the romantic, pre-industrial world view, is a final dramatic gesture. Brünnhilde goes out in a blaze of philosophical wisdom and disposes of the ring once and for all.

My inheritance now  
I take as my own. —

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<sup>351</sup> Geoffrey Skelton, *Wieland Wagner: The Positive Sceptic*, p. 178.

<sup>352</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York, 1969).

Accursed band!  
Fear-ridden ring!  
I grasp your gold  
and give it away.  
Wise sisters  
of the watery deep,  
you daughters who swim in the Rhine,  
I thank you for your sound advice!  
I give you  
what you covet:  
from my ashes  
take it as your own!  
Let the fire that consumes me  
cleans the ring of its curse:  
in the floodwaters  
let it dissolve,  
and safely guard  
the shining gold  
that was stolen to your undoing.

Hagen, the proto-fascist, has the last line of the opera. He leaps into the Rhine screaming “Get back from the ring!” — the final victim of the curse, drowning in his own greed.

As history continues on the course that Wagner anticipated and deplored, his masterpiece of music-drama becomes, if anything, more relevant. If we might even, as suggested earlier, think of the "ring" as the atom (a ring of electrons around a nucleus), the tragic outcome of this operatic cycle should be a clear warning to opera-goers in our global society. One century after Wagner conceived the idea of a golden ring to represent the force of nature's wealth concentrated by technology and high finance, scientists managed to release the energy in the atom, giving mankind the power to bring about an immolation scene such as ends this operatic cycle. Is such an outcome as inevitable as the conclusion of *The Ring*, or do the leading characters of our time have the ability to step beyond social-political constraints and exercise free will? Even if the *Götterdämmerung* outcome is avoided, will the world's masses be drawn to the best cultural products or to the most vulgar? Will the love of Brünnhilde or the greed of Alberich rule the world? At the dawn of the twenty-first century, when “the free market system” is the ideal upheld by the world's “only superpower” and attempts at more idealistic alternatives

have crumbled, it seemed that Alberich's ring is fully triumphant.<sup>353</sup> Humanity still has not learned the lesson that Wagner tried to teach in his *Ring*.

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<sup>353</sup> Many accounts of the consequences of global markets are available; one good example is David C. Korten's *When Corporations Rule the World* (Second ed., Bloomfield, CT, 2001).

POLITICAL MEANING OF CHARACTERS IN *THE RING*

<b>Character:</b>	<b>Shaw's interpretation:</b>	<b>Our interpretation:</b>
<b>Alberich</b>	Greedy capitalist; sworn plutocrat; an unenlightened captain of industry	Small businessman with big plans and great initiative (see also Dwarfs) [ref. <i>Alb</i> , elf]
<b>Bear</b>	(no reference)	Bakunin (Anarchist with whom Wagner associated during 1848-49 revolution), the Russian bear
<b>Brünnhilde</b>	The inner thought and will of Godhead; the aspiration from the high life to the higher that is its divine element; the truth-divining instinct in religion	Revolution, both its fearsome power to destroy the existing society and its promise of a new society based on Love; also the noble cultural inheritance that the working class receives when it carries out the Revolution (see also Valkyries)
<b>Dragon</b>	Once an honest giant, can only make himself terrible enough to keep his gold by remaining a venomous reptile	Big capitalists who have established an intimidating police power to guard their wealth
<b>Dwarfs</b>	Instinctive, predatory, lustful, greedy people	Petty bourgeoisie — tradesmen, artisans, shopkeepers, small businessmen, entrepreneurs
<b>Erda</b>	First mother	Earthy wisdom of the agricultural society on which the feudal order was based
<b>Freia</b>	Goddess...with her golden love apples	Agricultural productivity — source of wealth in feudal society
<b>Fricka</b>	The Law; State Law	Conventional morality of the nobility
<b>Giants</b>	Patient, toiling, stupid, respectful, money-worshipping people; poor stupid Laborers	Big bourgeoisie — big capitalists, industrialists, great builders, real estate developers
<b>Gibichungs</b>	(no special reference)	Former petty bourgeoisie having become successful economically but striving for social acceptance; nouveau riche [ref. <i>gibberig sein</i> , to hanker after something]
<b>Gods</b>	Intellectual, moral, talented people who devise and administer states and churches	Aristocracy, nobility — traditional, feudal ruling class
<b>Gunther</b>	A fool	(see Gibichungs)

<b>Gutrune</b>		Glitzy yet attractive bourgeois culture
<b>Hagen</b>	The villain of the piece	Proto-fascist
<b>Hunding</b>	Clansmen to slain brothers (who forced their sister to wed)	The rulers in another country in Europe, to which the refugee Siegfried flees
<b>Loge</b>	The Lie, Logic, intellect, argument, imagination, illusion, reason, dialectician-in-chief	The lawyers or the clergy, especially when used by the ruling class
<b>Magic Fire</b>	Fires of Hell; religion and fear of damnation	(agree with Shaw — note also the reference to “Feuerbach” that he missed)
<b>Mime</b>	A blinking, shambling, ancient creature, too weak and timid to dream of taking arms himself to despoil Fafnir...	Petty bourgeoisie craftsmen; agitators (perhaps Jewish) who helped raise proletariat to political consciousness, but for their own purposes.
<b>Norns</b>	Helpless Fates who can only spin the net of circumstances and environment round the feet of men	Academics, especially historians; the scholarly establishment who only theorize but cannot act
<b>Rhine River</b>		Nature, in which vast resources reside
<b>Rhine-daughters</b>	Beauty. Lightness of heart, imagination, music	The Romantic values that prevailed before the industrial revolution
<b>Siegfried</b>	A totally unmoral person, a born anarchist, the ideal of Bakunin; Protestant; neo-Protestant	Revolutionary proletariat; the next generation of revolutionaries trying to regain the heritage of the defeated past ones (see Siegmund)
<b>Sieglinde</b>	Unhappy wife	The oppressed working class of the country where Siegmund seeks refuge
<b>Siegmund</b>	An adept from the school of unhappiness...an unlucky person	An exhausted revolutionary proletarian escaping from defeat at the hands of his class enemy
<b>Tarnhelm</b>	Top hat — making disreputable capitalists look respectable	(believe Shaw’s interpretation is clever)
<b>Valkyrie</b>	Heroic bodyguard; hero-chooser; War maidens whose duty it is to sweep through battlefields and bear	Ability of the ruling class to co-opt selectively the most capable members of the lower classes, to intervene in society and control social mobility (e.g. to bestow knighthood on a commoner)

	away to Valhalla the souls of the bravest who fall there	
<b>Woodbird</b>	The messenger of Nature	Expression of the laws of society — to be understood only through revolutionary action
<b>Wälsungs</b>	The heroic race of the Volsungs	Revolutionaries [ref. the German <i>wälzen</i> , to turn or revolve, and <i>umwälzen</i> , to overturn, overthrow, revolutionize; <i>Umwälzung</i> , revolution]
<b>Wotan</b>	Godhead and Kingship; Pontiff and Lawgiver	King, Monarch; chief ruler at a time when the aristocratic ruling class is weakening in its will and ability to rule

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