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RICHARD WAGNER AND THE POLITICS OF MUSIC-DRAMA*

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ABSTRACT. *This article outlines Richard Wagner's conception of music-drama during the period in which he formulated his intentions for composition of the epic Ring of the Nibelung. Attempting to renew rather than to restore the communal, political nature of Attic tragedy, he wished to transform that model from celebration of the Athenian political order into a savage critique of the contemporary political order, indeed into an incitement to and celebration of revolution. Wagner was determined to restore the dignity of art, a dignity he believed to have been lost in the pursuit of base, commercial considerations; but this determination should not be confused with the idea of art for art's sake. Instead, he wished to renew art in a socialist, even communist, sense as the paradigm of free, productive activity. The direct revolutionary experience of participation in the Dresden uprising of 1849 bolstered his conviction of the necessity of such a transformation. With his magnum opus, Wagner wrote, he intended to 'make clear to the men of the Revolution the meaning of that Revolution, in its noblest sense'.*

I

The genesis of Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* was arduous. From his first plans, conceived in the white heat of the revolutionary excitement of 1848, through to the completion of the full score of *Götterdämmerung* in 1874, work spanned more than a quarter of a century. Disillusionment in Swiss exile would colour Wagner's conception of the work, as would his reading of Arthur Schopenhauer's *The world as will and representation*, yet the greater part of Wagner's original intentions endured. This article seeks not, however, to address the politics dramatized in the *Ring* itself, but rather to examine Wagner's early conception of music-drama and its intellectual background, in order to highlight the ambition of his attempts to renew Attic tragedy, and the explicitly political sense in which they must be understood.

But first, it is worth saying a few words about what is new about such an approach. Whilst it is certainly not my intention to claim that Wagner's theoretical writings are ultimately as important as his dramas, I do consider them to be worth attention both in their own right and for the light they shed

* I should like to thank the following for their comments and advice: Tim Blanning, Alice Wood, and Gavin Kelly.

upon the dramas – in this case, above all, the *Ring*. It is far from unprecedented to look at the prose works, but it is more unusual than one might suspect for them to be taken seriously, let alone as seriously as they deserve. Not the least of reasons for this is the use or abuse made of Wagner by National Socialism, and, before that, by the strange group of ‘Bayreuth Idealists’, who took the Master’s pronouncements – in fact, only carefully selected examples of his pronouncements – as holy writ. The tradition of Bayreuth Idealism, which fed into National Socialism, was to present as the essence of the Master’s teachings a timeless, pessimistic Schopenhauerian philosophy, upon which one often finds grafted a peculiar brand of neo-Romantic German nationalism. The political activism, born of the Young Hegelian movement, of the period with which we are concerned was at best considered to have been superseded, and was often simply ignored.

Such attitudes were, if anything, strengthened during the years following the Second World War, as various commentators, some of whom had been perfectly willing to acquiesce in National Socialist ‘interpretations’ of the dramas, sought now to divest them of any dangerous ‘messages’. Curt von Westernhagen declared as late as the 1970s that ‘directors who deem themselves progressive when they transform the *Ring* back into a drama with a “message” have no idea how regressive this approach is in relation to the genesis of the work itself.’ Such remarks beg the question as to why anyone, least of all their author, should wish to write an essay entitled *Wagner as a writer*, were the composer’s writings ultimately of so little import.¹ Westernhagen is ever at pains to argue, in defiance of internal and external evidence, that Wagner had no profound acquaintance with radical political ideas, and that even if he had done, this would matter little for the music-dramas themselves.²

Wagner’s voluminous prose writings represent far more than a ‘pathology’ of which he needed to rid his system prior to composition – although there is contained a grain of truth in his claim.³ It is not difficult to understand why the fugitive Wagner, petitioning the king of Saxony for an amnesty that would allow him to return to Germany, would thus wish to play down his more revolutionary writings, of which more below. Yet the ‘pathological’ claim is quoted uncritically and out of context by many commentators, that they might be left free to ignore Wagner’s prose writings and to superimpose their own readings upon his dramas. Robert Donington, for instance, is perfectly entitled to present a Jungian interpretation of the *Ring*, but such an interpretation is not necessarily congruent with Wagner’s; nor, even, does it necessarily benefit from curt dismissal of his

¹ C. von Westernhagen, ‘Wagner as a writer’, trans. C. Williams, in *The Wagner companion*, ed. P. Burbidge and R. Sutton (New York, 1979), p. 349.

² See, e.g., C. von Westernhagen, *Wagner*, trans. M. Whittall (Cambridge, 1978), and *Richard Wagners Dresdener Bibliothek* (Wiesbaden, 1966).

³ Petition to the king of Saxony, 16 May 1856; reprinted (‘Die Begnadigung Richard Wagners’) in M. Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner: Sein Leben, sein Werk, sein Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1980), p. 872.

theoretical writings.⁴ It is, in fact, no exaggeration to see in Wagner's prose works one of the most important contributions of the mid-nineteenth century to Hegelian aesthetics, not to mention their role in presaging so much of what Nietzsche has to say on the subject. Many of Wagner's writings are explicitly political in their concerns, for Wagner was emphatically not a revolutionary solely for the sake of art. It is absurd to claim that the philosophy of Wagner, creator of the torrential revolutionary catechism, *Revolution*, 'had no meaning save in so far as it served the theatre ... to discover new means of [theatrical] expression'.⁵ The relationship is far more dialectical; and such a dichotomy is in any case unsustainable for a man with so expressly political a conception of the theatre, unsustainable for a man in whose work theory and practice are so inextricably intertwined.

There have always, of course, been other voices to be heard, even if they have often been crying in something of a wilderness. George Bernard Shaw is an early example of a writer who took Wagner seriously in political terms. His socialist interpretation of the *Ring* is one-sided, to say the least, but it still has much of value to impart to a present-day audience. However, Shaw confined himself to the dramas rather than considering the enormous theoretical efforts that lay behind them. Such a course of action might conceivably have led him toward a greater appreciation of the complexities of what he presented as a rather narrow, almost Fabian allegory, 'collapsing' in *Götterdämmerung* under the weight of Schopenhauer's quietist influence.⁶ And it could hardly have failed, had Shaw been receptive, to instil a greater appreciation of what music-drama actually meant to Wagner, of how his very conception of the form was intrinsically and explicitly political.

Theodor Adorno wrote his *Versuch über Wagner* ('Essay on Wagner', rather oddly translated as *In search of Wagner*) in 1937 and 1938, although it was not published until 1952. Adorno had much to say that was extremely perceptive, but he was also often blinded by a personal antipathy towards the composer, admitting as much in a letter to Walter Benjamin.⁷ This antipathy, fuelled by the appropriations and deeds of National Socialism, led Adorno to see Wagner as a far more reactionary figure, rather in the mould of the 'official' German conception, than closer examination allows. Adorno was not particularly interested to investigate the role of Ludwig Feuerbach or other members of the Young Hegelian movement, or indeed of origins in general. In the *Versuch über Wagner*, Adorno mentions Feuerbach just twice: first in the strange description *en passant* of Wagner's early opera *Das Liebesverbot* as 'Feuerbachian' ('Young German' would be far more apt), and second in a quotation from Wagner, without further comment.⁸

⁴ R. Donington, *Wagner's 'Ring' and its symbols: the music and the myth* (3rd edn, London and Boston, 1974), p. 32.

⁵ P. Bekker, *Richard Wagner: his life in his work*, trans. M. M. Bozman (New York, 1931), p. 226.

⁶ G. B. Shaw, *The perfect Wagnerite: a commentary on The Nibelung's ring* (4th edn, London, 1923), pp. 83–5.

⁷ Letter of 2 Aug. 1938, in H. Lonitz, ed., *Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin: the complete correspondence, 1928–1940*, trans. N. Walker (Cambridge, 1999), p. 265.

⁸ T. W. Adorno, *In search of Wagner*, trans. R. Livingstone (London and New York, 1991), pp. 11, 139.

Latterly, the field has been greatly muddled by the seemingly endless and certainly fruitless debate over Wagner and anti-Semitism, especially the claims that anti-Semitism is rife in the dramas themselves. Sensationalist accounts are legion; more balanced treatments are rare.⁹ Whatever one's views upon this particular question, it is extremely distorting for it to have become the only or even the most important question. Some writers, for example Udo Bermbach and Jean-Jacques Nattiez, have recognized this, but there remains much to be said. Nattiez, for example, is concerned primarily with addressing the important question of androgyny in Wagner. No one, however, would contend that this is any more the only question about Wagner than anti-Semitism might be.¹⁰ Bermbach, a political scientist rather than an historian, is often more interested in relating Wagner to the great themes of political theory than in paying close attention to the particular historical context within which Wagner was writing. A greater shortcoming lies in Bermbach's refusal to accept the influence of Schopenhauer on the *Ring*, but that lies beyond the scope of the present study.¹¹ My treatment of Wagner's conception of music-drama aims to contribute to a more explicitly *historical* re-evaluation of Wagner's thought. The philosophy expressed in the dramas themselves is of great importance, but the ideas examined here are not an inappropriate place to start.

II

It would be fruitless to argue about whether Wagner's conception of theatre was backward- or forward-looking, for it was both. He aimed not at a *restoration* of tragedy, but at its *renewal*.

Goethe once wrote that Shakespeare combined old and new to an 'extravagant' degree: whilst each character 'must' (Greek fate, or tragic necessity), he also 'willed' (modern subjectivity).¹² Much the same could be said of Wagner. On a broader canvas, it might justifiably be claimed that the abiding problem of modern political philosophy has been how to reconcile the apparently idyllic

⁹ On the 'balanced' side of the equation, see D. Borchmeyer, 'The question of anti-Semitism', trans. S. Spencer, in U. Müller and P. Wapnewski, eds., *Wagner handbook*, Eng. trans. ed. J. Deathridge (Harvard, 1992), in particular pp. 173–6. J. Katz, *The darker side of genius: Richard Wagner's anti-Semitism* (Hanover, NH, and London, 1986), also falls into that category. A recent and particularly extreme example of the distortions involved in much writing on this subject is J. Köhler, *Wagner's Hitler: the prophet and his disciple*, trans. R. Taylor (Cambridge, 2000). Other examples include P. L. Rose, *Wagner: revolution and race* (London, 1992), and H. Zelinsky, 'Die "feuerkur" des Richard Wagner oder die "neue religion" der "Erlösung" durch "Vernichtung"', in H.-K. Metzger and R. Riehn, eds., *Richard Wagner: wie anti-semitisch darf ein Künstler sein?* (Munich, 1978).

¹⁰ J.-J. Nattiez, *Wagner androgyné*, trans. S. Spencer (Princeton, 1993).

¹¹ U. Bermbach, *Der Wahn des Gesamtkunstwerk: Richard Wagners 'Der Ring des Nibelungen'* (Berlin, 1989). See also 'Die Destruktion der Institutionen: Zum politischen Gehalt des "Ring"', in U. Bermbach, ed., *In den Trümmern der eignen Welt: Richard Wagners 'Der Ring des Nibelungen'* (Berlin and Hamburg, 1989), pp. 111–44.

¹² J. W. von Goethe, 'Shakespeare und kein Ende!', in D. Borchmeyer et al., eds., *Sämtliche Werke, Tagebücher und Gespräche* (39 vols. in 43, Frankfurt, 1985–99), xix, pp. 641–5.

communal integration of Hellenic life and the post-Classical or Christian conception of subjectivity. For the Lutheran Hegel, liberal at least in the sense of upholding the priesthood of all believers, modern political rule rested on the consent of rational selves, whereas in the immediate unity of the *polis*, laws had been obeyed simply because they were the laws of the *polis*. For Hegelians and Romantics alike, politics or anti-politics could never be sufficient in a world that had to provide for a non-public life. The problem was that, as Rousseau had pointed out in the first chapter of *Emile*, man in civil society was 'ever in contradiction with himself, ever floating between his duties and his desires; he will never be man or citizen, being good for neither one nor the other'.¹³ Yet 'the Greeks', Wagner wrote, 'knew no superlative of "free"'. Only through the superlative of freedom's negation, 'through dehumanization, can we come today to full knowledge, owing to the highest necessity, of freedom'.¹⁴

Firmly in the tradition of German idealist aesthetics, Wagner saw the Athenian *polis* as an embodiment of harmony between the individual and society, private and public. Its art was not merely part of this, but the most important part, its supreme manifestation. The Greek state itself, according to Schiller, had been a political work of art, in contrast to the abstraction of the modern bureaucratic state. Arnold Ruge, a socialist contemporary of Wagner and a co-founder with Marx of the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher* ('German-French annals'), extolled the Greeks as 'those utterly political humans ... neither prosaic nor unphilosophical'.¹⁵ Later in life, Wagner recalled a reading of Æschylus's *Agamemnon* the previous evening: 'I declare that to be the most perfect thing in every way, religious, philosophic, poetic, artistic. One can put Shakespeare's histories beside it, but he had no Athenian state, no Areopagus as a final resort'.¹⁶ Art, then, was 'public' in the truest sense of the word. Wagner contended that, for 'the Greeks, it [art] was present in the public consciousness, whereas today it is present only in the consciousness of individuals, meaning nothing to the unconscious public'. Greek art was conservative, whereas its renewal must needs be 'revolutionary, since it exists only in opposition to the existing public'.¹⁷ Whilst the Attic drama of princes and their sufferings had tended to legitimize the contemporary order, Wagner grasped his predecessors' mantle for the sake of politico-aesthetic revolution.

Whilst Greek tragedy had been 'generically national', the artwork of the future would represent the second of the 'two principal moments in mankind's

¹³ J.-J. Rousseau, 'Emile ou l'éducation', in B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond, eds., *Œuvres complètes* (5 vols., Paris, 1959–95), IV, pp. 249–50.

¹⁴ R. Wagner, 'Das Künstlertum der Zukunft', in R. Sternfeld and H. von Wolzogen, eds., *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen* (16 vols. in 10, Leipzig, 1912–14) (henceforth *SS*), XII, p. 255.

¹⁵ A. Ruge, 'Hegel's "Philosophy of Right" and the politics of our times', trans. J. A. Massey, in L. S. Stepelevich, ed., *The Young Hegelians: an anthology* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 212.

¹⁶ C. Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's diaries*, ed. M. Gregor-Dellin and D. Mack, trans. G. Skelton (2 vols., London, 1978–80), II, 24 June 1880, p. 495.

¹⁷ Wagner, 'Die Kunst und die Revolution', in *SS*, III, p. 28.

development ... the un-national, universal'.¹⁸ The Athenian spectator had been reconciled with 'the most noble and profound principles of his people's consciousness'; Wagner's post-revolutionary audience would celebrate its membership of 'free humanity', a 'nobler universalism'.¹⁹ Such 'universalism' should not be confused with Parisian 'cosmopolitanism'. Wagner's hopes may be seen instead as a radical extension of ideas voiced in Schumann's review of Chopin's piano concertos, written for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, which Wagner is therefore likely to have known. Evidence of 'extreme nationalism' marked 'all of Chopin's earlier works'.

But art demands more. The parochial concerns of the homeland had to give way to the interests of the outside world. The physiognomy is no longer too specifically Slavic in his later works, and tends little by little toward that universal ideal pictured for us most congenially by the heavenly Greeks ... We said 'little by little', for he should never entirely deny his origin. But the more he distances himself from it, the more significant will he be for the art as a whole.²⁰

Such remarks should be understood in the context of a widespread belief amongst many contemporary German, particularly Hegelian, thinkers of the 'universal' nature of Germany's historical mission (a belief which may be traced back at least as far as Herder).²¹ For instance, Moses Hess, the 'first German communist' and certainly no 'nationalist' in any Romantic or *völkisch* sense, declared: 'We Germans are the most universal, the most *European* people in Europe'.²² Germany – and we see this even in early essays by Wagner – had the peculiar ability, indeed imperative, to synthesize developments from other nations, and to bring them to their conclusion.²³

On a more 'social' level of 'universality', Adorno would subsequently note that bourgeois opera carried out many of the same functions that film would later undertake, including 'the presentation of the body of common knowledge to the masses'.²⁴ And, as Carl Dahlhaus pointed out, music, in the wake of the French Revolution, had more generally been 'confronted with the obligation to ... become democratic and popular ... opera, from Méhul and Cherubini onwards, and the symphony, in Haydn's last works and in Beethoven, addressed themselves to "the people"', or to mankind.²⁵ Wagner, however, sought to create something

¹⁸ Wagner, 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', in *SS*, III, p. 61.

¹⁹ Wagner, 'Die Kunst und die Revolution', pp. 30, 23, 29.

²⁰ R. Schumann, 'Chopin's piano concertos', in H. Pleasants, trans. and ed., *Schumann on music: a selection from the writings* (revised edn, New York, 1988), p. 114.

²¹ See, e.g., F. Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the national state*, trans. R. B. Kimber (Princeton, 1970).

²² M. Hess, 'Die europäische Triarchie', in A. Cornu and W. Mönke, eds., *Philosophische und sozialistische Schriften 1837–1850* (Berlin, 1961), p. 28.

²³ See, e.g., Wagner, 'Die deutsche Oper', in *SS*, XII, pp. 1–4; 'Über deutsches Musikwesen', in *SS*, I, pp. 149–66.

²⁴ T. W. Adorno, 'Bourgeois opera', in D. Levin, ed., *Opera through other eyes* (Stanford, 1994), pp. 31–2.

²⁵ C. Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and modernism*, trans. M. Whittall (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1980), p. 98.

more than what he saw to be the empty 'historical' – 'cinematic'? – settings of grand opera, as associated above all with the wildly popular Parisian works of Giacomo Meyerbeer. There are important parallels with Liszt's plans for the church music of the future. Paul Merrick's summary of the contents of an article by Liszt could, with relatively little modification, pertain equally well to the Wagnerian artwork of the future: 'contempt for the Church as it then stood; a republican outlook combined with the concept of the people as a religious entity; the belief that religious music should reach the masses, if necessary outside the Church; an ardent belief in the dawn of a new age for humanity'.²⁶ Although by church music, Liszt writes, only 'the music executed during the sacred ceremonial ... is generally understood, I use it here in its most comprehensive signification ... Come, o hour of deliverance, when poets and musicians, forgetting the "public", will only know one motto, "The People and God!"'²⁷ Early socialism attempted at least as much positively to found a new religion as to react to the challenges of the Industrial and French Revolutions.

Wagner's artwork of the future should be seen very much in this tradition and also in that of the equally millenarian *Oldest systematic programme of German idealism* of 1796 (attributed variously to the young Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, or Friedrich Hölderlin) and its Romantic 'religion of the senses'. The writer sought to enthrone poetry as 'the *teacher of humanity*':

Until we have made ideas aesthetic, i.e. mythological, they will have no interest for the people. Conversely, before mythology is rational, the philosopher must be ashamed of it ... Hence ... mythology must become philosophical ... and philosophy must become mythological ... eternal unity will reign among us ... Only then can we expect equal development of *all* powers, of each individual as well as all individuals ... A higher spirit sent from heaven must establish this new religion among us. It will be the last and greatest work of humanity.²⁸

Wagner would readily have assented, if perhaps in more materialist tones, to the German Romantic notion, particularly associated with Friedrich Schlegel, of the artist as a 'Christ' of his culture, mediating between the divine and human.²⁹

Moreover, Ludwig Feuerbach, perhaps the most important of the Young Hegelian writers in general and certainly the most influential so far as Wagner was concerned, had declared that the task of philosophy, and knowledge in general, lay 'not in leading away from sensuous, that is real, objects, but rather in leading towards them'. It was necessary to combat the mystification which radicals of the 1830s and 1840s considered to have been perpetrated by the Romantics

²⁶ P. Merrick, *Revolution and religion in the music of Liszt* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 19.

²⁷ F. Liszt, 'On future church music', in L. Ramann, *Franz Liszt: artist and man, 1811–1840*, trans. E. Cowdery (2 vols., London, 1882), I, pp. 384–5.

²⁸ 'The oldest systematic programme of German idealism', in F. C. Beiser, ed. and trans., *The early political writings of the German Romantics* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 4–5 (translation slightly modified).

²⁹ F. von Schlegel, *Dialogue on poetry and literary aphorisms*, trans. and ed. E. Behler and R. Struc (University Park, PA, 1968), pp. 53–5.

and by Hegel; what had been transferred to a transcendent heaven must be brought down to earth. Thus, Feuerbach went on, philosophy's task was not to transform objects into idea, but rather to render 'visible ... objects that are invisible to ordinary eyes'. This, however, required 'communication and conversation between man and man ... Two human beings are needed for the generation of man – of the spiritual as well as of the physical man; the community of man with man is the first principle of truth and generality'.³⁰

Such words struck a ready chord with Wagner, already influenced in the wish to 'detranscendentalize' by 'Young German' writers such as Heine, Ludwig Börne, and Heinrich Laube. Laube, indeed, had published some of Wagner's first articles in his Leipzig *Zeitung für die elegante Welt*, and it was through Laube that Wagner had first met Heine in Paris.³¹ The 'victory of free sensualism over puritanical hypocrisy', as Wagner described it in his *Autobiographical sketch* for Laube's *Zeitung*, had left its mark upon the earlier dramas of *Das Liebesverbot* ('The ban on love') and *Tannhäuser*.³² Feuerbach's kindred yet more constructive vision of human 'communication and conversation' would now lay squarely behind Wagner's wish not only to rebel against restrictive Biedermeier mores but to create a 'new religion ... containing the necessary conditions for the artwork of the future'.³³

III

To this end, Wagner sought renewal not only of the public nature of *art* but also of the unity of the *arts* (to some extent presaged, if at a lowly qualitative level, in the agglomerative extravaganzas of Meyerbeer). Already in 1794, Goethe had remarked, upon re-reading Homer, how differently mankind would have developed had it never come to know Oriental melancholy, 'if Homer had remained our Bible'.³⁴ And for Wagner, as the *polis* had disintegrated, so had 'the great *Gesamtkunstwerk* of tragedy'. The decadence of later tragedy (Euripides) and, subsequently, the 'mad laughter' of Aristophanes's comedies upon its ruins were followed by 'two thousand years of philosophy', joyless purveyor of 'serious moods'.³⁵ Should these words sound similar to the *Birth of Tragedy*, this bears testimony to the largely unacknowledged debt Nietzsche owed to Wagner and, indeed, to Hegel. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes astutely that Wagner's dramas constituted for the young Nietzsche 'the offering of a work which explicitly thematizes the question of its own possibility as a work – this makes it modern – and which thereby carries in itself, as its most intimate subject, the question of the

³⁰ L. Feuerbach, *Principles of the philosophy of the future*, trans. M. H. Vogel (Indianapolis, 1986), §§ 43, 41, pp. 58–60.

³¹ R. Wagner, *My life*, trans. A. Gray, ed. M. Whittall (Cambridge, 1983), p. 180.

³² Wagner, 'Autobiographische Skizze', in *SS*, I, p. 10.

³³ Wagner, 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', p. 123.

³⁴ In conversation with Carl August Böttiger, in Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*, III, pp. 721–2.

³⁵ Wagner, 'Die Kunst und die Revolution', pp. 12–13.

essence of art'.³⁶ 'Naïve' art, according to Schiller's influential typology, was no longer possible, only 'sentimental' art. In Hegelian terms, art gave way to reflection upon art: that is, to aesthetics.

Moreover, authentic religion gave way to dogma and exploitation. What came to pass for art was broken down into its constituent parts, with no relationship to true, 'purely human' life, thus mirroring the societal particularism and egoism of the bourgeois era. This was, in reality, not art at all, but mere fashion: artificial, arbitrary stimulus. Individualistic luxury and the concomitant, alienating torments of this 'needless need' had replaced true, communal need, the prerequisite of all true art.³⁷ Wagner drew an analogy with the desire of the purely instrumental musician to divorce himself from the community and to make music alone. 'Truly, the entirety of our modern art resembles the keyboard: in it, each individual component carries out the work of a mutuality, but, unfortunately, *in abstracto* and with utter lack of tone. Hammers – but no men!' It was no accident, Wagner commented in a footnote, that Liszt, the miracle worker of the piano, was now turning his attentions to the orchestra, and, thereby, to the human voice.³⁸

By contrast, the primary artworks of lyric poetry and the 'later, conscious, highest perfection' of tragedy had, of religious necessity, fused the three 'purely human' varieties of art: dance, music, and poetry.³⁹ (Dance, or gesture, would play a lesser role as Wagner's theory developed.) Having developed separately as far as they could, the arts would now come together once again, 'in the representation of life, the ever new subject'.⁴⁰ The artwork of the future would thus satisfy spirit's need for unity, albeit at a higher level of dialectical mediation than during antiquity, incorporating and turning to good use some, at least, of the 'mechanical miracles' of modern civilization.⁴¹ For example, the modern orchestra, which 'indisputably possesses a *faculty* of speech', would assume the role of the Greek chorus, voicing the innermost aspects of the drama and commenting upon the stage action. It could communicate *via* feeling and, through the instrumental motifs, *via* conceptual thought (*Gedanke*).⁴² As the sister arts would once again come together in the service of the universal drama, so, by these means, could the portrayal of individuals in tragedy be sublated into 'infinite universal feeling, out of which the individual feelings of each performer can grow into their greatest fullness'.⁴³

IV

Yet, it should be emphasized that Wagner's religious artwork, dramatizing the downfall of the gods, was to be 'religious' only in the sense that Feuerbach's

³⁶ P. Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The caesura of religion', in Levin, ed., *Opera through other eyes*, p. 55.

³⁷ Wagner, 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', pp. 56–8.

³⁸ R. Wagner, *Oper und Drama*, ed. K. Kropfinger (Stuttgart, 1994) (henceforth *OD*), pp. 131–2.

³⁹ Wagner, 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', pp. 49–50, 67.

⁴⁰ Wagner, 'Das Künstlertum der Zukunft', in *SS*, XII, p. 271.

⁴¹ *OD*, p. 80. Wagner speaks here with particular reference to Berlioz's innovative orchestration.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 329, 349.

⁴³ Wagner, 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', p. 157.

philosophy was 'religious', that is, alert to and rejoicing in a non-transcendental religious sentiment. And it was likewise to be 'philosophical' only in the sense that Feuerbach's 'philosophy' was 'philosophical'. Wagner wrote that 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'. Feuerbach's insight that

what we call 'spirit' ... [lies] in our aesthetic perceptions of the tangible world, together with his verdict of the futility of philosophy [that is, metaphysics], was what afforded 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 realisation of every artistic intention in 'the artwork of the future'.⁴⁴

It is noteworthy that Wagner, like Marx, who also owed Feuerbach a great deal, takes his cue more from Feuerbach's *Principles of the philosophy of the future* than its wider-known predecessor, *The essence of Christianity*. The former expands criticism of Christianity to all metaphysics; the latter falls victim, Wagner considered, to 'sprawl and [to] rather unhelpful prolixity in the development of the simple basic idea, the interpretation of religion from a purely psychological standpoint'.⁴⁵

In the *Principles*, the activities of theology and philosophy – and it is crucial for understanding Feuerbach that they be seen as human *activities* – are criticized not on empiricist, still less positivist, grounds. He is not concerned to *disprove* the truths enunciated in the Gospels or even the metaphysical claims of Pauline theology. Instead, Feuerbach criticizes theological and philosophical activity in Hegelian-anthropological terms, in the context of their origins in *social* needs and dependency, in *social* forms of existence and organization, and in the context of their consequences in these terms. 'God' or 'Spirit' is detranscendentalized, translated into consciousness of man's 'species being'. Feuerbach thus claims:

What Hegel disapprovingly observes regarding Fichte's philosophy – namely, that everyone believes the ego to be himself, that everyone is reminded of himself and yet does not find the ego in himself – is valid for speculative philosophy in general. It comprehends almost all things in a sense by which they are no longer recognised.⁴⁶

This expresses itself first in religious consciousness, such as Wagner saw in Athens, thereafter abstracted and mystified in theology:

When polytheism had virtually negated itself ... and the philosophers had destroyed it scientifically, there emerged out of itself the new creation of Christianity. Christianity was the offspring of the people; so long as it remained a purely popular expression, everything in it was powerful, honest, and true – a necessary error: spontaneously, this popular phenomenon (*Erscheinung*) compelled the conversion of the whole intellect and culture of the Graeco-Roman world, and only then, when it had become an object of intelligence, of science, did its error become dishonest and hypocritical, as theology – when theology could go no further, philosophy entered; this latter is overcome (*aufgehoben*) ... and then,

⁴⁴ Wagner, *My life*, p. 431.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 430.

⁴⁶ Feuerbach, *Principles*, § 23, p. 37.

behold, ... the popular expression of this outcome appears in communism, which once again springs solely from the people.⁴⁷

Such 'communism' was very much similar to that being propagated by fellow radicals such as Marx, Ruge, Otto Wigand (Leipzig publisher of Ruge's journals and, in 1849, of two of Wagner's works: *Art and revolution* and *The Wibelungs*), and Wagner's poet friend, Georg Herwegh (another contributor to the *Deutsch-französischer Jahrbücher*). Moving away from the increasingly self-absorbed, even self-obsessed, religious criticism of the Berlin *Freien* centred around Bruno Bauer, their political concerns were yet distinguished from the 'vulgar kind' of communism by its use as an artistic term, centred upon the process of creation. The creative act was far more important than plans to redistribute wealth. Ultimately, this stance owed a great deal to Schiller's *Letters on the aesthetic education of man*, in which man is portrayed as essentially creative: when encouraged, or even when simply left to his own devices, man will create.

Wagner also sought to blur, and eventually to eradicate, the distinction between actor (or performer) and audience: another typically Romantic concern. If everyone must be an artist, then a play such as Ludwig Tieck's *Puss-in-boots* had followed suit by boasting roles for authors, actors, audience, and stagehands. Criticism of the play comes from characters as well as the audience. Members of the audience then respond, by asking characters to maintain the illusion of art, and so on – this all to the bewilderment of the so-called 'real' audience.⁴⁸ Moreover, the 'artist derives enjoyment', Wagner wrote, in Schillerian fashion, 'not only from the object of his creative labour, but from the very act of creation'. This contrasted with the *artisan*, whose work gave him 'no pleasure; it is only a nuisance'.⁴⁹ The crucial matter was that activity should be free, conducted for its own sake; it must certainly not be the means to a mercenary end. However, whereas Schiller had seen the aesthetic education of man as the only way of moving towards a reorganization of social relations, Wagner believed that change in the nature of man and society must be simultaneous, or perhaps even the other way round.

If the stagecraft of the *Ring* is less experimental than that of Tieck's proto-surrealist intimations, the political significance of Wagner's work goes beyond his Romantic forebears. In a letter to Theodor Uhlig, he declared:

A *performance* [of the *Ring*] 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.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Wagner, 'Das Künstlertum der Zukunft', p. 261.

⁴⁸ L. Tieck, *Der gestiefelte Kater*, ed. and trans. G. Gillespie (Edinburgh, 1974).

⁴⁹ Wagner, 'Das Künstlertum der Zukunft', pp. 24–5.

⁵⁰ Letter of 12 Nov. 1851, in S. Spencer, trans., and S. Spencer and B. Millington, eds., *Selected letters of Richard Wagner* (London, 1987), p. 234; G. Strobel, W. Wolf, H.-J. Bauer, and J. Forner, eds., *Sämtliche Briefe* (Leipzig, 1967–), IV, p. 176.

This was Wagner's radical socialist echo of the desire enunciated by the German Romantic poet, Novalis, for everyone to become an artist and everything to become art.⁵¹

But Wagner also finds himself impaled upon the horns of the classical dilemma of committed art, which Carl Dahlhaus summarizes nicely:

It is a dilemma for the proponents of ... socially committed art, that the kind of society they are aiming at does not as yet exist. It is difficult to decide whether works of art should be judged with regard to the future, the social utopia come true, or with regard to their direct utility value at the revolutionary intermediate stage.⁵²

On a sombre connected note, Dieter Borchmeyer has argued that, for over forty years Wagner sought to create a 'public', which would draw the artist out of isolation, yet every attempt brought in its wake further scepticism and resignation.⁵³ Such would be the perennial tragedy of the musical modernism to which Wagner acted as godfather. For 'our theatrical public', Wagner complained in *Opera and drama*, 'has no need for the artwork; it desires *diversion* from the stage, ... well-crafted (*künstlich*) details, rather than the necessity of artistic (*künstlerisch*) unity and coherence'.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, if Wagner's dilemma never resolved itself, it was not for the want of trying.

V

Wagner's plans involved the use of myth, described as a 'primaeval, anonymous folk poem, which we find treated in new ways by the great poets from every age of artistic perfection'. In myth, 'the conventional form of human relations, only explicable by abstract reasoning, disappears almost completely. Instead, only that which is eternally comprehensible and purely human appears in an inimitable concrete form.'⁵⁵ Artistic essence prevails over diverting incidentals, just as in the matter of national accoutrements, whose boundaries he believed to have been crossed by Goethe and Schiller. Their 'purely human' form of art incorporated the ripest fruits of, yet far surpassed, Romance drama.⁵⁶ Likewise, whereas Sophoclean Thebes had been no mere allegory of Athens, addressing more universal issues, there had remained points of contact. Modern Classical scholarship has tended to swing in the opposite direction, attacking nineteenth-century ideas of the 'Hellenic spirit' and its source of inspiration, and likewise questioning that 'universal' significance of tragedy suggested in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which in any case pertained more to Sophocles than to tragedy as a whole. In this respect,

⁵¹ Novalis, 'Faith and love', § 39, in Beiser, ed., *Early political writings of the German Romantics*, p. 48.

⁵² C. Dahlhaus, 'Progress and the avant garde', in D. Puffett and A. Clayton, trans., *Schoenberg and the new music* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 17.

⁵³ D. Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner: theory and theatre*, trans. S. Spencer (Oxford, 1991), p. 2.

⁵⁴ *OD*, p. 388.

⁵⁵ Wagner, "'Zukunftsmusik': an einen französischen Freund (Fr. Villot) als Vorwort zu einer Prosa-Übersetzung meiner Operndichtungen", in *SS*, VII, pp. 104-5. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Wagner stands in an interesting position, acknowledging both the ‘universalism’ of tragedy and, at the same time, its ‘national’ spirit, which he wished to overcome. Wagner also stressed, in typical Young Hegelian style, the crucial ethical distinction between modernity and antiquity, and therefore between the artwork of the future and Greek drama. The latter was founded upon slavery, rendering its destruction inevitable.⁵⁷

It is noteworthy that, when called upon to interpret his own works, Wagner’s tendency was to place them in a wider, more ‘universal’ context. It is the political significance, whether for antiquity or modernity, which comes to the fore in his analysis of the oedipus myth in *Opera and drama*.⁵⁸ An important precedent from a previous intellectual generation, with related yet different concerns, was the celebrated 1841 Potsdam production, under the aegis of Frederick William IV, of Sophocles’s *Antigone* in Ludwig Tieck’s translation. Mendelssohn had composed an overture and choral settings, an example which Wagner cites unfavourably.⁵⁹ The liberal, even radical, dawn promised by the king’s accession in 1840 and the attendant brief relaxation of censorship had not yet proved utterly false, so parallels were drawn between Creon’s *polis* and the Prussian state, or at least an idealized version thereof. Wagner, however, sees in that very Potsdam production a prophecy of the state’s destruction.⁶⁰

Myth, Wagner believes, provides greater scope for expressing the essence of history than history itself. Connections between characters, objects, and ideas become less problematical. Wotan, the spear, and the history of contract, or Loge, fire, and self-consciousness, can readily refer to one another, whereas this would run the risk of appearing contrived in straightforwardly historical narrative. Looking back in 1851 at *Tannhäuser*, and explaining his preference for that work over a projected drama concerning Frederick Barbarossa, Wagner writes:

Here it was the folk-poem that ever captured the essence of the phenomenon and thereby revealed it in simple, pictorial outline. There, however, in an historical context, ... the phenomenon is revealed in a multicoloured, superficial diffuseness, and achieves its graphic form only when the popular eye perceives its essential nature, endowing it with the form of an artistic myth.⁶¹

Although there might be a measure of self-delusion or even disingenuousness with respect to the ‘simplicity’ of Wagner’s myth, the important point is that of essence. If the poet-composer has truly penetrated to the essence of the myth, he may proceed to restructure, to expand, and to connect both with other myths and, somewhat less openly, with history itself – and even with the future. The role of history is more apparent, for example, in *The Wibelungen: world-history from the sagas* (1849–50), many of its themes finding their way into the *Ring* in more ‘purified’ mythological form.⁶² Wagner not only went back beyond the

⁵⁷ Wagner, ‘Die Kunst und die Revolution’, p. 30.

⁵⁸ *OD*, pp. 188–99.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁶¹ Wagner, ‘Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde’, in *SS*, IV, p. 272.

⁶² Wagner, ‘Die Wibelungen: Weltgeschichte aus der Sage’, in *SS*, II, pp. 115–55.

Nibelungenlied to link the tragedy of Siegfried's death with the ancient myths of the Germanic gods, but also looked forward, to incorporate what he saw to be the essence of the subsequent course of history and its necessary outcome. Writing in the wake of Young Hegelian writers such as Feuerbach, David Strauss, and Friedrich Theodor Vischer, Wagner felt none of Hegel's sober disdain for myth as failing to contain history.⁶³ Instead, he felt prepared – as did Marx, perhaps more covertly, in *Capital* – to combine more recent insights into the essence of myth with a transformed version of Hegelian concerns with the philosophy of history and politics. Teutonic mythology, for a while, had become closely, though by no means exclusively, linked with liberal and radical politics. Peter Feddersen Stuhr, for example, lectured at the University of Berlin from 1826 to 1851 upon German history, Nordic mythology, and its philosophy, whilst contributing articles to Ruge's journals and criticizing Hegel's philosophy of religion in Young Hegelian style.⁶⁴ And, still closer to Wagner's subject matter, the young Engels wrote in 1840 for Karl Gutzkow's *Telegraph für Deutschland*, under the pseudonym 'Friedrich Oswald', eulogizing 'Siegfried's homeland' and asking: 'What is the *Hannolied* [the song of Anno, archbishop of Cologne] against the *Nibelungen*?' 'I have sworn loyalty to the flag of [David] Strauss', he proudly enthused in correspondence, claiming to have become 'a first-class mythologist'.⁶⁵

Wagnerian myth, the composer was determined, would not be enclosed within what he saw to be the ossified Aristotelian unities epitomized by the imitative Racine. It would, rather, constitute a 'broad circle of relationships', which would not mirror but intensify and account for reality – and hold it to account.⁶⁶ Adorno totally missed the point when he averred that Wagner 'refused to jeopardize the spell of opera by immersing it in the sober factuality of concrete social conditions'. Wagner's post-Feuerbachian vision of the 'purely human' most certainly does not equate to 'the idea of an unvarying human nature'.⁶⁷ He simply takes a different route from the equally post-Feuerbachian Marx. Wagner's claim in *Opera and drama* that that which is 'incomparable about myth is that it is true at all times and its content, by virtue of poetic compression, is inexhaustible for all times' is often cited. It is rarely noted, however, that Wagner then declares the 'poet's task' to be interpretation of that myth; nor is much attention paid to the hermeneutical necessity implied in its 'inexhaustibility'.⁶⁸ Wagner anticipates Claude Lévi-Strauss in ascribing to myth a past, a

⁶³ G. F. W. Hegel, 'Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte', in E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel, eds., *Werke* (20 vols., Frankfurt, 1969–72), XII, pp. 12, 142.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., P. F. Stuhr, *Das Verhältnis der christlichen Theologie zur Philosophie und Mythologie nach dem heutigen Standpunkte der Wissenschaft* (Berlin, 1842).

⁶⁵ F. Engels, 'Siegfrieds Heimat', in D. Rjazamov and V. Adoratski, eds., *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin, 1927–32), I, 2, p. 9; letter of 29 Oct. 1839 to Friedrich Graeber, in *ibid.*, I, 2, p. 546.

⁶⁶ *OD*, pp. 141, 161–4.

⁶⁷ T. W. Adorno, *In search of Wagner*, trans. R. Livingstone (London and New York, 1981), p. 115.

⁶⁸ *OD*, p. 199.

present, and a future; he also harks back to Novalis and the venerable 'Allegory of Time'.⁶⁹ Indeed, Novalis had looked forward (and backward) to the Wagnerian day

When the world will be returned
to a life free unto itself,
...
and man will recognize in myth and poem
the true eternal world history.⁷⁰

Not all myths, however, were equal. Whilst lauding the 'ability of Christian myth to enthrall our minds' via its depiction of '*transfiguration through death*', Wagner also condemned it for having distorted and denied the anthropomorphism of Germanic myth, constructing instead a new theology. Rendered incapable of necessary regeneration, myth – like politics and artistic unity – had 'fragmented into its individual, self-contained, component parts ... its dramatic nucleus broken down into a plethora of unrelated deeds'.⁷¹ Following the final, but not quite decisive, onslaught of the Enlightenment upon mythical 'barbarism', reconstruction had begun with eighteenth-century opponents of that movement, such as Vico and Herder, and gathered pace with Novalis, Schelling, and other Romantics. Myth became an object both of intellectual interest and of reverence. If the oeuvres of writers on the cusp of Romanticism, such as Goethe and Rousseau, had represented great *personal* confessions, myth could now be seen as the confession of an entire community. The following words from Friedrich Schlegel's *Dialogue on poetry* might have been intended almost as a prospectus for Wagner's mythological history:

It seems to me that he who could understand the age ... would be able to succeed in grasping the poles of mankind, to know and to recognize the activity of the first men as well as the nature of the Golden Age to come. Then the empty chatter would stop, and man would become conscious of what he is: he would understand the earth and the sun.⁷²

Artistic representation, for the Romantic Schelling, annulled in its 'absolute' totality any separation of image and symbol, and could thereby claim precedence over conceptual knowledge – an idea scorned by Hegel.⁷³ 'Only in the romantic', wrote Thomas Mann, 'can popular appeal unite with the extreme of subtlety.' And only Romanticism, 'in league, of course, with music, toward which it continually aspires', has 'the power to materialize – and popularize – the highly

⁶⁹ See K. Kropfinger, *Wagner and Beethoven: Richard Wagner's reception of Beethoven*, trans. P. Palmer (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 150–2.

⁷⁰ Novalis, 'Wenn nicht mehr Zahlen und Figuren sind Schlüssel aller Kreaturen', from 'Materialen zum "Heinrich von Ofterdingen"', in R. Samuel, ed., *Werke* (3 vols., Munich and Vienna, 1978–87), 1, p. 395.

⁷¹ *OD*, pp. 167–74.

⁷² Schlegel, *Dialogue on poetry*, p. 88.

⁷³ F. W. J. Schelling, 'Erster Entwurf einer Systems der Naturphilosophie', in K. F. A. Schelling, ed., *Sämtliche Werke* (14 vols. in 2 sections, Stuttgart, 1856–61), 1, 2, p. 626.

intellectual under the guise of an orgy of the senses'.⁷⁴ There exists no superior summary of Wagner's 'emotionalization of the intellect'.

Romantic influences were not *replaced* in Wagner's world-view, but *supplemented* by a more sober Straussian approach. David Strauss's principal interest in myth, in his *Life of Jesus*, had been not so much to show, in an eighteenth-century deist sense, that Christianity had been 'false', but that its doctrine was no longer true for the present age. It was to be absorbed into a subsequent, higher stage of spiritual and cultural development. Beyond naïve supernaturalism and reductive rationalist naturalism lay the 'new viewpoint', the 'mythical'.⁷⁵ As John Edward Toews has written, 'It is ironical that Strauss gained his reputation as a nihilistic destroyer of the traditional faith through the publication of a book that originated in his own profound need to demonstrate the identity of content in Christian faith and philosophical knowledge.'⁷⁶ Christology must be salvaged from the Gospels, extended to the whole of mankind. The god-man was not unique, but typical of mankind's potential. 'Is not the idea of the unity of divine and human natures real in a more profound sense', asked Strauss, 'if I regard the entire human race rather than a single man as its realization?'⁷⁷ In this sense, the Christian myth was still of great value – an imaginative symbolization of man's hopes, an 'unconscious' work of the collective experience of a 'whole society'.⁷⁸ Such was the vein in which Wagner heeded the clarion call from Strauss's aesthetician colleague, Friedrich Theodor Vischer, to write a great, heroic opera arising from the *Nibelungenlied*. Vischer's article became quite celebrated and was often paraphrased. For instance, in 1846, Franz Brendel, successor to Schumann as editor of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and, notably, not a composer but an influential Hegelian aesthetician, declared that the composer of such an opera as envisaged by Vischer would become 'the man of the age'.⁷⁹ This was the Hegelian world-historical role Wagner sought to assume – or, rather, the world-historical role he believed to have been thrust upon him.

VI

During what Wagner described as the two thousand dark years of 'philosophy' consequent to the dissolution of tragedy, there had shone few beacons of hope. 'Here and there, art's dazzling beams lit up the night of unhappy thought, of mankind's brooding madness.' Nonetheless, the madness of Christian practice, which bore such little relation to the teachings of Christ himself, had prevailed.

⁷⁴ T. Mann, 'Sufferings and greatness of Richard Wagner', in H. T. Lowe-Porter, trans. *Essays of three decades* (New York, 1976), p. 336.

⁷⁵ D. F. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (2 vols., Tübingen, 1835–6), I, p. iv.

⁷⁶ J. E. Toews, *Hegelianism: the path towards dialectical humanism, 1805–1841* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 260.

⁷⁷ Strauss, *Leben Jesu*, II, p. 734.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 74.

⁷⁹ F. T. Vischer, 'Vorschlag zu einer Oper', in *Kritische Gänge* (2 vols., Tübingen, 1844), II, p. 410; R. Brinkmann, 'Mythos-Geschichte-Natur. Zeitkonstellationen im "Ring"', in S. Kunze, ed., *Richard Wagner: Von der Oper zum Musikdrama* (Bern, 1978), pp. 65–6.

‘Christianity was neither art itself, nor could it ever bring forth from within itself [such] true, living strength.’ The cloister replaced the amphitheatre.⁸⁰ It is worth looking at what Wagner has to say with respect to this brooding madness and the occasional beams of light, in order to understand his declaration: ‘I shall write no more operas and, since I do not wish to invent an arbitrary name for my works, so shall I call them *dramas*, since at least this denotes most clearly the attitude from which I present them and in which they must be received’.⁸¹

Art had taken a battering even before the rise of the church. Wagner followed Hegel’s *Philosophy of history*, which has survived from Wagner’s Dresden library, in viewing the triumph of Rome as poor compensation for the loss of Athens.⁸² He symbolized the transformation of politics and culture by the parallel transformation of Hermes into Mercury. Hermes had been ‘the incarnation of Zeus’s thoughts; he swept down, in winged flight, from the heavens to the depths, to proclaim the almighty power of the sovereign god’. Mercury’s winged mission, however, would be far more ‘practical’. It ‘signified the nimble activity of haggling, profiteering merchants’, which, subsequently ‘crowned with the halo of Christian hypocrisy’, had persisted and intensified unto the present day. Mercury had become

the god of the modern world, the holy, high-noble god of five per cent, the commander and master of ceremonies to our modern ‘art’. You see him incarnate in a bigoted English banker, ... who engages principals from the Italian opera to sing privately for him in his drawing room instead of in the theatre (though never upon the holy Sunday), since he will glory in paying more for the privilege. Behold Mercury and his quick-to-learn hand-
maiden, modern art!⁸³

If we pause for a moment to contrast this situation with Attic tragedy, its gravity becomes clear. ‘Our God is money’, Wagner continues, ‘our religion its acquisition’.⁸⁴ Gone is the Greek religion of art, or art of religion. Public life has vanished, in favour of an unholy alliance of private counting-houses and ‘Christian’ privacy. The conjunction was far from accidental, for having located man’s goal entirely outside his earthly existence, life could ‘remain the object of man’s care only with respect of his most unavoidable needs’. Industry thus came to rule over the earth, neglected by an absolute, utterly *transcendental* God, and so, ‘art sold itself, body and soul’, to its new mistress.⁸⁵ Art as free, productive activity – the mainstay of the Schillerian communism discussed above – has been perverted, alienated, privatized. The true nature of Mercury’s art ‘is industry, its moral purpose the acquisition of money, its aesthetic purpose the entertainment of the bored’. It was difficult to decide whose hypocrisy was the more base: that of Louis XIV at Versailles, hearing with satisfaction the eloquent verse of Corneille

⁸⁰ Wagner, ‘Die Kunst und die Revolution’, pp. 13, 15–16.

⁸¹ Wagner, ‘Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde’, p. 343.

⁸² Hegel, ‘Philosophie der Geschichte’, pp. 339–43.

⁸³ Wagner, ‘Die Kunst und die Revolution’, pp. 18–19. ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28. ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

and Racine, declaiming the Greek hatred of tyranny, or that of the playwrights themselves for thus serving the ruling class.⁸⁶

Gone, moreover, was the unity of the arts. Theatre had become 'a mere institution for entertainment, something to pass the time, as a surrogate for card-games and the like'.⁸⁷ Opera in particular had become a 'chaos' of 'sensuous elements', randomly mixed and served up, each spectator choosing whatever took his fancy – 'here the dainty leap of a ballerina, there the singer's daring passage-work, here the set-painter's brilliant effect, there the amazing eruption of an orchestral volcano'.⁸⁸ In this way, Rossini and company had become the toast of the 'entire civilized world', and acquired the protection of Metternich and his European System.⁸⁹ With Meyerbeer, the 'secret' of whose music Wagner unmasked – a typical Young Hegelian conceit – as 'effect', opera had reached its nadir. It had degenerated to the level of an 'outrageously coloured, historico-romantic, devilish-religious, sanctimonious-lascivious, risqué-sacred, saucy-mysterious, sentimental-swindling, dramatic farrago'.⁹⁰ The chaos of the modern division of labour was reflected, reified even, in its tawdry entertainments; the egotism of the Parisian *juste milieu* was the progenitor of grand opera, in which arbitrary conjunction of unmotivated spectacles replaced true artistic unity. To the German idealist mind, the realms of art, politics, and philosophy were inextricably related; art was a 'social product'.⁹¹ One could thus be forgiven for mistaking Wagner's critique of contemporary culture for the following *Self-critique of liberalism*, in which Ruge castigates the 'wise men of philosophy':

The wit and the stale humour of great cities, which are always on the lookout for momentary stars and leaders, the idolisation ... of fame, the hollow enthusiasm for dancing girls, gladiators, musicians, athletes – what does all this demonstrate? Nothing but the blasé culture that lacks real work for great goals ... Play with your super-cleverness and bore yourself to death ... but do not think that you are a total human ... The purpose of worldly culture, only to want to be clever, and of philosophism, only to want to be knowledgeable, is an *indeterminate* purpose and is related to real, effective, determinate purposes exactly as Christianity in general is related to a real confession of Christianity.⁹²

VII

Into this potent vision of tragic renewal, strongly coloured by Young Hegelian conceptions of myth and artistic unity, was introduced the crucial aspect of direct revolutionary experience. The Saxon uprising was of a different order from many other German revolutions of 1848–9, with a particularly high level of violence,

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸⁷ Wagner, 'Entwurf zur Organisation eines deutschen National-Theaters für das Königreich Sachsen', in *SS*, II, p. 248.

⁸⁸ Wagner, 'Die Kunst und die Revolution', p. 20. ⁸⁹ *OD*, pp. 45, 47. ⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 100–1.

⁹¹ Wagner, 'Die Kunst und die Revolution', p. 9.

⁹² A. Ruge, 'A self-critique of liberalism', trans. J. A. Massey, in Stepelevich, ed., *Young Hegelians*, pp. 254–5.

not least at the grass-roots level of insurgency. It also came rather late in the day, attracting on the run no less a revolutionary than Mikhail Bakunin, whom Wagner came to know rather well – and whose influence upon the *Ring* drama itself would run deep. (Bakunin had also been another member of the *Deutsch-französischer Jahrbücher* circle.) The Prussian monarch, Frederick William IV had already refused the imperial crown, on 3 April 1849, throwing the Frankfurt parliament into utter disarray. Sir Lewis Namier's 'revolution of the intellectuals' was foundering upon the contradictions of liberalism.⁹³ Yet the Left had not capitulated. Frederick William's refusal was followed immediately by Wagner's angry catechism, *Revolution*, published in the *Volksblätter*, a newspaper edited by August Röckel:

Root and branch shall I ['Revolution'] destroy the order of things ... I shall destroy every illusion (*Wahn*) that exercises power over mankind. I shall destroy all dominion, that of the dead over the living, and that of matter over spirit; I shall destroy the power of ... law and of property. May man's own will be his master ... his strength his only property, for only the free individual is sacred ... Life is its only law.⁹⁴

Röckel, himself a composer, was assistant conductor (*Musikdirektor*) to Wagner at Dresden for five years from 1843 to 1848, and the two became close friends. Like Engels – though without his first-hand experience – Röckel had studied movements of social reform in England and France. It was only after meeting him that Wagner had begun to acquire political works for his Dresden library.

The author of *Revolution* also engaged himself in plans for the musical drama, *Siegfried's Tod* (later to become *Götterdämmerung*) and two prose dramas: *Jesus of Nazareth* and *Frederick I* (Barbarossa, whom Heine had named the provisional god of the coming revolution, to return, 'holding in his hand the divine sceptre of liberty, and carrying upon his head the imperial crown without a Cross').⁹⁵ In addition, our tireless writer and composer somehow found time to involve himself in plans for armed insurrection in Dresden. It has often been claimed that Wagner and Röckel ordered a large number of hand grenades, although this remains uncertain, but Wagner was certainly involved in the purchase of rifles for the *Vaterlandsverein* upon the outbreak of insurrection.

Wagner 'worked indefatigably for the provisional government as an envoy, intermediary, and scout'.⁹⁶ His previous loyalty towards the king of Saxony had been strained, perhaps even obliterated, by Frederick Augustus II's flagrant and intentionally provocative breach of the constitution on 30 April. In imitation of the king of Prussia, Frederick Augustus had dissolved the parliament and

⁹³ L. B. Namier, *1848: the revolution of the intellectuals* (London, 1944).

⁹⁴ Wagner, 'Die Revolution', in *SS*, XII, pp. 248–9.

⁹⁵ Heine, 'Elementargeister', in E. Elster, ed., *Sämtliche Werke* (7 vols., Leipzig and Vienna, 1887–90), IV, p. 618. This passage comes from the original, French (uncensored) version. Wagner may also have planned a drama upon the subject of Achilles.

⁹⁶ R. Krohn, *The revolutionary of 1848–1849*, trans. P. Knight, in Müller and Wapnewski, eds., *Wagner handbook*, p. 164.

dismissed most of his ministers. *Götterdämmerung*, it seemed, had arrived. Even in the tempered version of events adumbrated in *My life*, Wagner admits that soon he 'quite consciously abandoned all personal considerations and decided to surrender myself to the stream of events, to bear me on that direction in which my feelings about life had urged me with an acquiescence born of despair'. Röckel gleefully informed him of the 'shivers of decorous horror' he had elicited from the timid provisional government. 'He had suggested, he said, defending the most vulnerable barricades by encircling them with pitch and, if the worst came to the worst, setting them alight ... I let him go his way ... and didn't see him again for thirteen years.'⁹⁷

For the uprising was brutally crushed on 8 May. Wagner, by way of an extraordinary string of circumstances, managed to escape into exile in Zurich, many of his comrades being less fortunate. Nothing could be learned of Röckel and Bakunin, Wagner recalled, 'apart from the fact that they had been charged with high treason and could expect the death sentence'.⁹⁸ This expectation was confirmed, although the sentences were commuted. Wagner, his name adorning several 'Wanted' posters, could have expected similar treatment had his flight been unsuccessful. In an article upon 'German refugees in Switzerland', a newspaper correspondent reported:

Of all the towns in Switzerland, this [Zurich] is the one that has always been the most open to foreigners, and it is here that the greatest number of refugees are to be found, albeit very few of their leaders. We see them everywhere. Their main meeting place, however, is the Café littéraire [sic] on the Weinplatz, whose landlord, Herr Groß, once freed Robert Steiger from prison in Lucerne. Here, where Zurich's liberals have long foregathered, let me first show you the Saxons. They form a little group around the member of the former provisional government, Karl Todt; the man has grown very old and attempts in vain to silence unwelcome inner voices. Beside him is the pitiful figure of another former member of the Diet, Herr Jäckel ... who cowers beside Todt like a misshapen question-mark. Kapellmeister Wagner, by contrast, the inspired composer of *Tannhäuser*, still keeps his head above water and refuses to be cowed by fate. With him, his enthusiasm was genuine, with no reservations of any kind – of how many others ... is it still possible to say this?⁹⁹

Kapellmeister Wagner settled in Zurich to write his most important theoretical works and thence to resume his *Ring* project. With this *magnum opus*, he wrote to Theodor Uhlig, he intended to 'make clear to the men of the Revolution the meaning of that Revolution, in its noblest sense'.¹⁰⁰

Wagner's cycle of tragedies would thus be understood in the Aristotelian tradition of the constructed mimesis of an event. Schiller, looking to the future as well as to the present, had famously affixed the motto *In tyrannos!* to the title-page

⁹⁷ Wagner, *My life*, pp. 398, 402.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

⁹⁹ Article in *Die Grenzboten*, 8/41, 5 Oct. 1849, p. 73; translated in S. Spencer, ed., *Wagner remembered* (London and New York, 2000), p. 77.

¹⁰⁰ Letter to Theodor Uhlig, 12 Nov. 1851, in Spencer, trans., and Spencer and Millington, eds., *Selected letters*, p. 234; Strobel, Wolf, Bauer, and Forner, trans., *Sämtliche Briefe*, iv, p. 176.

of the second edition of *The robbers*, sounding a clarion call against the arbitrary excesses of the duke of Württemberg and tyrants everywhere. In *Fidelio*, and not only in *Fidelio*, Beethoven had followed suit. Wagner, an avowed follower of both Schiller and Beethoven, looks not only to the present and to the future, but to history as well. To return to Novalis, Wagner wishes, in *his* mythical allegory of time, to write a true, eternal world history, albeit a history that aims at least to anticipate the revolution to come.