

# THE PHILOSOPHIES OF RICHARD WAGNER



JULIAN YOUNG

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# Abbreviations

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## WAGNER'S WORKS

The following works are to be found in: Richard Wagner. 1966. Richard Wagner's Prose Works, 8 vols., trans. by W. A. Ellis. New York: Broude Bros. (I have frequently modified Ellis's translations.)

AF	"The Artwork of the Future." Vol. 1.
AMD	"On the Application of Music to Drama." Vol. 6.
AR	"Art and Revolution." Vol. 1.
AS	"Actors and Singers." Vol. 5.
ASK	"Autobiographical Sketch." Vol. 1.
B	"Beethoven." Vol. 5.
BR	"Bayreuth." Vol. 5.
CF	"A Communication to my Friends." Vol. 1.
DO	"On the Destiny of Opera." Vol. 5.
FP	"The Festival-Playhouse at Bayreuth." Vol. 5.
JM	"Judaism in Music." Vol. 1.
LSP	"On Franz Liszt's Symphonic Poems" Vol. 3.
MD	"On the Name 'Music Drama.'" Vol. 5.
OD	Opera and Drama. Vol. 2.
PC	"On Poetry and Composition." Vol. 6.
RA	"Religion and Art." Vol. 6.
SR	"On State and Religion." Vol. 4.
TFN	"To Friedrich Nietzsche." Vol. 5.
TR	"The Revolution." Vol. 8.
WBK	"What Boots this Knowledge?" Vol. 6.
Z	"'Zukunftsmusik.'" Vol. 3.

## OTHER WAGNER TEXTS

ML	My Life. New York: Tudor, 1936.
CD	Cosima Wagner's Diaries. 2 vols. Trans. G. Skelton. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.

S&M	Selected Letters of Richard Wagner. Ed. and trans. S. Spencer and B. Millington. New York: Norton, 1988. Numerals refer to letters, not pages.
WW	Richard Wagner: Werke, Schriften und Briefe. Ed. S. Friedrich. Berlin: Digitale Bibliothek DVD, 2004.

## SCHOPENHAUER'S WORKS

BM	On the Basis of Morality. Trans. E. F. J. Payne. Providence: Berghahn, 1995.
PP	Parerga and Paralipomena. 2 vols. Trans. E. F. J. Payne. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
TFP	Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics. Ed. and trans. C. Janaway. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
WN	On the Will in Nature. Trans. E. F. J. Payne. New York: Berg, 1992.
WR	The World as Will and Representation. 2 vols. Trans. E. F. J. Payne. New York: Dover, 1969.

## NIETZSCHE'S WORKS

With respect to Nietzsche's published works, numerals refer always to sections, not pages. With respect to his unpublished notebooks, numerals refer to notebook entries, not pages, and with respect to his letters, they refer to letters, not pages.

AO	Assorted Opinions and Maxims. In <i>Human, All Too Human</i> , ed. E. Heller, trans. R. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
BGE	Beyond Good and Evil. Ed. R.-P. Horstmann and J. Norman, trans. J. Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
BT	The Birth of Tragedy. In <i>The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings</i> , ed. R. Geuss and R. Speirs, trans. R. Spears. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
CW	The Case of Wagner: A Musician's Problem. In <i>The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings</i> , ed. A. Ridley, trans. J. Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
EH	Ecce Homo. In <i>The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings</i> , ed. A. Ridley, trans. J. Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
GM	On the Genealogy of Morals. Ed. K. Ansell-Pearson, trans. C. Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
GS	The Gay Science. Ed. B. Williams, trans. J. Naukhoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
HH	Human, All-Too-Human. In <i>Human, All Too Human</i> , ed. E. Heller, trans. R. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
HKG	Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke und Briefe: Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe. Vol. II. Ed. Hans Joachim Mette. Munich: Beck, 1933.
KGB	Nietzsche Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. 25 vols. Ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975-2004.
KSA	Kritische Studienausgabe. 15 vols. Eds. G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999.
NCW	Nietzsche contra Wagner. In <i>The Portable Nietzsche</i> , ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann. New York:

Viking, 1954.

TI

Twilight of the Idols. In *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. A. Ridley, trans J. Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

UM

Untimely Meditations. Ed. D. Breazeale, trans. R. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

WB

Wagner in Bayreuth. In *Untimely Meditations*, ed. D. Breazeale, trans. R. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

ZT

Thus Spoke Zarathustra. Ed. and trans. G. Parkes. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.



# Acknowledgments

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This book grew out of a “Wagner and Philosophy” course I co-taught with my musicologist colleague and friend, David Levy, at Wake Forest University during the fall semester of 2010 and again during the spring semester of 2013. I am greatly in David’s debt both for essential musicological knowledge and for his stimulating challenges to many of my interpretations of Wagner’s operas. This book would not have come into being without him.

# Introduction

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Wagner has many sides. Composer, conductor, inventor of musical instruments, poet, theater designer, impresario, and self-marketer, he was also—such is the argument of this book—a philosopher. Even if he had never written a note of music, I shall suggest, his philosophical writings would still be important: important in part on account of their (acknowledged but poorly understood) influence on Nietzsche and (almost entirely unacknowledged) influence on Heidegger, but important, too, in and of themselves. This, however, has almost never been recognized. Although it is well known that Wagner wrote literally thousands of pages on philosophical topics, the habit of diminishing, or simply ignoring, these writings has been almost universal. Already well underway during his lifetime—he complains bitterly about the “philistines” who “can imagine the artist only as dolt, never as thinker” (AF, 68)—this trend has continued to the present day. So, for example, Reginald Hollingdale, the Nietzsche biographer, assures us that Wagner’s “pose as a philosopher . . . has no justification” since “his reasoning powers were of the slightest,” that he “deck[ed] out his writings with half understood terminology from Feuerbach and Schopenhauer” in order to give them a “spurious air of profundity” (1999, 58). Surprisingly, Wagner’s devoted biographer, Ernest Newman, agrees with this judgment, characterizing his subject’s philosophical efforts as nothing more than “sham-intellectual maunderings” (1946, 601). And even as enthusiastic a Wagnerian as Michael Tanner describes his hero’s philosophical writings as “a bore” (1979, 146). A symptom of the general low regard for Wagner’s theoretical works is the fact that, for those who do not read German, access to them remains almost entirely confined to the translations of Wagner’s prose works that William Ashton Ellis began in 1893 and completed in 1899 (Ellis 1966). Admirable though this project was, and moderately reliable though the translations are, to have Wagner’s thought refracted through the sometimes impenetrable quaintness of Ellis’s Victorian prose can only tend to confirm the accusation of “sham-intellectualism.”

The practice of discounting Wagner’s philosophical writings has a number of different causes. One, I think, is just the romantic paradigm according to which, since philosophy is “intellectual” while art is “intuitive,” a great artist like Wagner simply cannot be a serious thinker, must be a “dolt.” Another, I suspect, lies in the attempt to sanitize Wagner’s art by treating his well-known anti-Semitism as part of his attempted philosophizing and then dismissing this as meaningless “maundering” irrelevant to the “real” Wagner. (This is an unsuccessful strategy, first, because it does not address the claim that the figures of Mime and Beckmesser are anti-Semitic parodies so that Wagner’s art is anti-Semitic in its own right, and second, because, so I shall argue, there is, in fact, nothing in Wagner’s philosophy that mandates anti-Semitism.) A third cause is the fact that most people who write on Wagner are musicologists. Since musicologists tend not to feel at home in philosophy, they tend also to discount its significance for

Wagner studies. A further cause lies in the fact that, for obvious reasons, Wagner's philosophical writings are occasional, usually polemical, works dashed off in a hurry by a writer with no formal training in philosophy. They lack the "scientific" structure, discipline, and taste for qualification, sometimes taken to be hallmarks of genuine philosophy.

There are three notable exceptions to the practice of dismissing Wagner as a philosophical "dolt," fraud, flâneur, or all of these. The first is Thomas Mann who justly observes that beneath the "random, unkempt amateurish" of the surface of the theoretical writings lies an "astonishing perspicacity and intellectual vigor," which makes struggling through the "unkempt" prose eminently worthwhile (198:105). The second is Friedrich Nietzsche who was, between 1869 and 1872, Wagner's intimate friend and disciple, and until 1876, at least in public, his supporter. Although Nietzsche's intellectual development was in some respects a progress away from Wagner (a progress which, I shall suggest in the final chapter, was in other respects a progress toward Wagner), it is surely unthinkable that the most brilliant philosophical mind of the second half of the nineteenth century could, at the end of his career, have described his intellectual-spiritual relations with a philosophical "dolt" as the most "profound" of his life (EH III 5), and Wagner as his "greatest benefactor" (EH II 6). A third exception is Michael Tanner. In spite of having once found Wagner's philosophical writings "a bore," a decade and a half later he completely reverses this judgment and, in 1995, describes them as containing "much of the finest reflection ever undertaken on the nature and importance of music drama, and on many other subjects" as well (95). In spite of this reversal, however, Tanner has never undertaken the task of showing in detail just why Wagner's reflections are so important. That is what this book tries to do. I seeks, first, to provide a clear exposition of the philosophy contained in Wagner's indeed "unkempt" and formally "amateurish" writings, and, second, to provide them with the sympathetically critical engagement—with the Heideggerian *Auseinandersetzung*—that any serious philosopher deserves.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Given his usual preoccupation with other matters, there are long periods in which Wagner wrote nothing of a theoretical character. His theoretical (as opposed to poetic) writings fall into three main periods: the very early writings (mostly in French) of 1840–1841; the "Zurich" or "revolutionary" works of 1849–1852 associated with Wagner's participation in the 1848 Revolution, which I shall refer to as the "early" writings; and the very different later writings produced subsequent to Wagner's encounter with Schopenhauer's philosophy in 1854. While the most important of these later works were written between 1864 and 1870, the founding of the Wagnerians' house magazine, the *Bayreuther Blätter*, in 1878 provided Wagner with the stimulus and forum for a final elaboration of his later views in essays written between 1878 and his death in 1883.

The works of the very early period touch on topics—the triviality of the current operatic stage and the proper relation between music and words—that become

matters of intense focus (from different perspectives) in each of the later periods. They contain, however, no discussion of culture in general, nor (even though Wagner claimed to have been already radicalized by the July revolution of 1830 [ASK 6]) of politics. Neither the advocacy of “communism” nor the ideal of the “rebirth of Greek tragedy,” major themes, we shall see, in the revolutionary writings, appear in any of Wagner’s writings prior to 1849. These absences are symptomatic of a more general absence in the very early writings; the absence of what Wilfred Sellars calls “the synoptic vision” and takes (as do I) to be definitive of the perspective of philosophy. The very early writings discuss isolated topics in the aesthetics of music but do not attempt to integrate the views expressed into a general philosophy, for which reason I shall discuss them no further.

In fact, however, Wagner had a particular gift for the synoptic vision, for integrating his views on particular topics into a synoptic totality. Nietzsche takes note of this. Even though his stance toward Wagner had, by 1874, become largely critical, he observed in his notebooks of that year that

Wagner’s strongest gift is to feel the unity in multiplicity . . . he has an innate capacity to perceive the relationship of the arts to each other and the connection between state, society and art.<sup>[1]</sup> (KSA 7 33 [7])

In other words, not only did Wagner have the capacity to conceive and create the Gesamtkunstwerk, the “total work of art,” he also had the capacity to create a “total” philosophy of art and life.

Wagner’s talent for creating a synoptic philosophy first appears in the works of the revolutionary period that provide the topic of part I of this study. For obvious reasons, the center of his concern is art in general and opera in particular. Yet, so I argue, what Wagner offers during this period is not a free-floating aesthetics. Rather, his account of art takes place, in Nietzsche’s phrase, “from the perspective of life” (BT Attempt at a Self-Criticism, 2). His views on art and on opera are anchored in—more specifically, derived from—a general account of politics, society, and culture, a general account of the conditions of human flourishing. His early views on how life is, and how it ought to be, are, I show, influenced by “Left” Hegelians such as Proudhon, Feuerbach, and (Wagner’s comrade-in-arms during the 1848 Revolution) Bakunin. Yet, so I argue, his focus on the place of opera in a Left Hegelian vision of the future enables him to produce a philosophy that is both original and important.

As with many philosophers—Heidegger and Wittgenstein are famous in this regard—Wagner’s philosophical outlook did not remain constant throughout his career. Toward the end of 1854 he discovered Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* and underwent what he himself compared to a religious “conversion” (WBK, 257), a conversion from, broadly speaking, Hegelian optimism to Schopenhauerian pessimism. The works of this second philosophically significant period provide the topic of part II of this study. Although the philosophy of this second period is, in nearly all respects, diametrically opposed to that of the revolutionary period, it is nonetheless characterized, I shall argue, like that of the

earlier period, by the integration of Wagner's philosophy of art into a synoptic vision of life (and death). Although less original than the philosophy of the earlier period—its parameters are firmly established by Schopenhauer—there is nothing slavish, I argue, about Wagner's Schopenhauerianism. Like the youthful Nietzsche with whom he had innumerable discussions of Schopenhauer (BT Preface), Wagner is aware of the radical contradictions in Schopenhauer's philosophy and, sometimes in company with Nietzsche, works at resolving them—resolving them in, as Nietzsche puts it, "Schopenhauer's spirit and to his honor" (BT 5).

The book concludes with an epilogue that discusses the relationship between Wagner and Nietzsche. Of the many different kinds of criticism Nietzsche raises against Wagner after completing his turn against both Wagner and Schopenhauer in about 1876, the most fundamental, so I argue, is to the trajectory of Wagner's spiritual development, the move from the "life-affirmation" of the early philosophy to the "life-denial" of the later. This criticism is one I endorse. Although the later philosophy contains a number of important insights (particularly about music), what is most valuable in Wagner's philosophical thinking seems to me his early philosophy, "the philosophy of the Gesamtkunstwerk," as one might call it. That he turned against this philosophy is indeed, I shall suggest, a cause for regret.

Nietzsche represents the trajectory of Wagner's career as a self-betrayal: a matter of the "lower" Wagner triumphing over the "higher" Wagner, over the Wagnerian "ideal." And he represents himself as the true flag-bearer of that ideal. This, I argue, tells us something important about Nietzsche himself: that the lodestar of all his philosophy, including the philosophy of his maturity, is Wagner's early "philosophy of the Gesamtkunstwerk." And since, according to that philosophy, the "total" or, more accurately, "collective" artwork collects together not merely the arts but also the community—a community that thereby comes into "self-conscious" (AR, 41) existence—a proper understanding of Nietzsche's relationship to Wagner helps us see that, although, as the standard interpretation tells us, Nietzsche indeed values the exceptional individual, he values the community even more.

## THE PHILOSOPHY AND THE OPERAS

It is impossible to miss the fact that Wagner's seven (or perhaps eight) mature operas—or "musical dramas" as he preferred to call them—are thoughtful in a way that makes them essentially different from the operas of, say, Donizetti or Puccini. Nietzsche described the Ring cycle as a "tremendous system of thought" (WB 9), and while he perhaps exaggerates the systematic element he is surely right about the thought. Wagner's operas are unmistakably about ideas, philosophical ideas. For this reason, professional philosophers, as well as philosophically inclined thinkers such as Bernard Shaw (1916),<sup>[2]</sup> have been drawn to the task of determining what the philosophical content of the operas is.

The most obvious approach to this task is to read the theoretical works of a given period, works in which Wagner tells us what his philosophy is, and then interpret the operas of that period in the light of those works. This is what

Nietzsche does. Wagner's operas, he has no doubt (and he has, it should be remembered, a deeper knowledge of Wagner than does anyone else), are Wagner works of philosophy "set to verse" (CW 4). Surprisingly, however, modern English-speaking philosophers who have interested themselves in the operas have almost always rejected this approach.<sup>[3]</sup> Instead, they attempt to discover Wagner's philosophical outlook from the operas alone. So, for example, Roger Scruton's *Death-Devoted Heart* (2004), a philosophical interpretation of *Tristan und Isolde*, makes only six, glancing references to Wagner's theoretical writings, while Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht's *Finding an Ending* (2004), a philosophical interpretation of the Ring cycle, makes none at all.

There is a reason for this. For, as we shall see, while the philosophical texts of the period in which *Tristan* was written and the Ring completed are resolutely Schopenhauerian in character—pessimistic, even "nihilistic"—Scruton, Kitcher, and Schacht wish to provide resolutely upbeat interpretations of their respective operas. Thus, according to Scruton, "the religious meaning" of *Tristan* is "the renewal of community in life" (2004, 194), while, for Kitcher and Schacht, the Ring ends with the "affirmation" that the future of "the earth" and of the life it contains is "charged with promise" (2004, 184, 201). That it ends with such an affirmation, they say, means that the Ring "is as far from delivering a Schopenhauerian negative judgment on life and the world as Wagner could have written" (2004, 23).

What appears to be happening is this. The philosophers in question love the operas and love them as something more than enjoyable music. Unsurprisingly, however, they hate the "nihilism" of Wagner's later theoretical works. And so they solve their problem by ignoring the philosophical writings and discovering a different and more acceptable philosophical meaning in the operas. (It is worth noting that Scruton's "renewal of the community in life" sounds rather like his own—indeed rather attractive—Burkean conservatism, while Kitcher and Schacht's "charged with promise" is what nearly all of us would like to think about the future of "the earth.")

In itself, this activity is not illegitimate. To reinterpret Wagner's works as life-affirming rather than life-denying (either as philosophical interpreter or as opera director) is a healthy thing to do. But it is not good scholarship. As an attempt to discover "the" meaning of the works in the sense of Wagner's intended meaning—which is what these philosophers, none of whom is a "death of the author" theorist purport to be doing—the approach is seriously flawed. For what it postulates is the extraordinary hypothesis that, as a thinker (and, as I will show, he really was a thinker), Wagner systematically misunderstood his own art for the last thirty years of his life.

Wagner himself, as we shall see, gives a certain amount of dubious aid and comfort to those who would take this approach by suggesting, retrospectively, that as an optimistic, revolutionary thinker, he misunderstood himself as an artist (S&M 193, SR, 8–9). (He never, however, suggests that as a Schopenhauerian thinker he misunderstands himself as an artist.) It is, of course, true that the creator of an artwork does not have infallible access to its meaning. Reflection may, on occasion, be misaligned with artistic intention. Nonetheless, Wagner's articulated

philosophical views of a period, and his frequent interpretative observations about his operas based on those views, must surely be the best guide we have to the intended meaning of the operas of that period, a more authoritative guide than anyone else's. Unless we have some strong evidence to the contrary (Bernard Shaw's blustery and biographically unsound claim that the later Wagner was not a Schopenhauerian "every day of the week" [1911, 118] does not constitute such evidence),<sup>[4]</sup> to suppose an impermeable firewall to have existed for three decades between Wagner the pessimistic thinker and Wagner the artist (but not between Wagner the optimistic thinker and Wagner the artist) is simply not credible. It follows, it seems to me, that the approach of this book, which is to take the philosophical writings of a period as the principal key to deciphering the intended meaning of the operas of that period, is the only responsible approach that there is.

## NOTES

1. He completely forgets this insight in the ill-judged attempt in *The Case of Wagner* to claim that Wagner was merely a musical "miniaturist," that he had no ability to create "organic unities" of any kind (CW 7).
2. Shaw was, of course, a great admirer of Nietzsche. His claim that with *Götterdämmerung*, Wagner reverts from serious social criticism to the grand opera he had started out by rejecting, echoes the theme of self-betrayal which, as indicated, I shall argue to be Nietzsche's principal criticism of Wagner.
3. Although known more as a journalist than as a philosopher, an honorable exception is Brian Magee (2000).
4. Approving of the revolutionary Wagner, Shaw wishes to read socialism into the whole of the Ring up to and including Siegfried. He is compelled, therefore, to deny the "authenticity" of the later theoretical works.

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# Early Wagner



# Chapter Chapter 1

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## The Way We Are Now

Together with revolutionary comrades such as Mikhail Bakunin, Wagner was one of the leaders of the Dresden manifestation of the Revolution of 1848–1849. He was involved in the manufacture of grenades and attempted to incite the troops of the Saxon king to resist the Prussian troops summoned by the king to restore order.

### REVOLUTIONARY IDEALS

The 1848 Revolution was, in broad terms, a rerun of the French Revolution whose ideals of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” had simmered away throughout Europe ever since 1789. The Revolution failed. Narrowly escaping certain imprisonment and possible execution in Saxony, Wagner spent the next thirteen years in political exile, mostly in Switzerland. It was there, between 1849 and 1852, that he wrote the revolutionary “Zürich” writings that form the primary topic of this and the following three chapters. The purpose of these writings was to explain why a revolution was still needed, to explain what was wrong with the current state of affairs and what should replace it. In particular, Wagner wished to focus attention on the role of art in the revolution and its role in the “society of the future” that was to replace the current order.

As with all the radical revolutionaries of 1848, Wagner was, in a broad sense, Hegelian. He subscribed to Hegelian “optimism” (S&M 193), to the picture set forth in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* of “world” (actually Western) history as a *Bildungsroman*, a “rational” and inexorable evolution from the primitive toward the perfect.

After Hegel’s death his followers split into two camps: the “Right” or “Old” Hegelians and the “Left” or “Young” Hegelians. For the Right Hegelians the *Bildungsroman* of history had already reached its end. History, they argued, had terminated in the model provided by the Prussian state (the source of Hegel’s university salary in Berlin), a state characterized by strong monarchical authority, a powerful bureaucracy and military, limited democracy, and the beginnings of social welfare. The Left Hegelians, by contrast, believed that history still had a very long way to go and that its eventual terminus would be something far more utopian than the flawed institution of the Prussian state.

Wagner was, of course, a Left Hegelian. In “Art and Revolution” he admits that his political ideals are “utopian,” but adds that to use the word as a term of abuse is merely an excuse for inaction. The only utopia that is genuinely unobtainable, he adds—disclosing one of his early *bêtes noires*—is the Christian one (AR, 59).

Nearly all of the Left Hegelians were critics of capitalism and most believed in the replacement of private ownership of property by communal ownership. Most of them were, that is, “communists.” (The moderate left, the social democrats, did not appear on the scene until the 1860s.) Despite recognizing the label as “police-dangerous” (AF, 75 fn.) Wagner explicitly called himself a “communist.”

This radical, “communist” left was, however, itself split into two broad camps. On the one hand were the Marxists who believed that while the state would—eventually (in Engel’s phrase) “wither away” as the absence of private property allowed human nature to perfect itself, a dictatorial state—the “dictatorship of the proletariat”—was the essential precursor of that final goal. The immediate point of the revolution was thus to seize control of the state rather than to abolish it.

Opposing the Marxists were the anarchists who demanded the state’s immediate abolition. Inspired by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), the first person to describe himself as an “anarchist” and author of the famous slogan that “property is theft,”<sup>[1]</sup> their leader (insofar as anarchists can have a leader) was Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876). (The split between the Marxists and anarchists was finalized in 1872 when Marx had Bakunin expelled from the International Workers Association.) It was to this anarchist wing of the radical left that Wagner belonged.

Bakunin and Proudhon were the political theorists who most strongly influenced Wagner (ML, 509, 467). While both agreed with Marx that a just society demands perfect economic equality—Proudhon quotes Cicero to the effect that in the great theater of nature each individual is entitled to (and needs no more than one seat (1994, 44)—they broke with Marx on the issue of “liberty” which for Bakunin was a revolutionary ideal even more fundamental than equality: “liberty,” he wrote, “stands at the head of the agenda of history” (1973, 37). From this perspective, a dictatorial state was something that could not be tolerated even as a supposedly temporary measure. Bakunin pointed out that since government could not literally be placed in the hands of millions of workers the so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat” would inevitably become dictatorship by a self-serving and self-perpetuating elite, an elite that would actually prevent rather than promote the notional “withering away” of the state. (Noam Chomsky, a self-declared anarchist and admirer of Bakunin, points out that this is one of the relatively few predictions in the social sciences which [in the history of China and the Soviet Union] has been proved true [2003, 48].)

In the main, then, Wagner’s revolutionary ideals were inspired by Proudhon and Bakunin. What, however, moved him to add to the revolutionary literature was, above all, a concern for his chosen profession, that of the artist. The place of art in the revolution had not, he felt, been properly worked out.

Art, Wagner observes, is the product of leisure. It requires, therefore, that the artist’s material needs should be satisfied by someone other than himself. This tends to generate a mutual antipathy between socialists and artists. Socialists regard artists as parasites living off the sweat of the workers, which in turn leads artists to fear revolution and to ally themselves with the reactionary classes. In “Art and Revolution” (a work which appeared in 1849, one year after “The Communist Manifesto”) Wagner argues that this mutual suspicion is unjustified since people—“the people”—desire more than material adequacy. Alongside that desire they have an “instinct” for a “noble” kind of satisfaction. People want and need something more in life than “civilized barbarism” (AR, 56).

Wagner’s account of how art can and should provide this “something more,” his account of the place of art in the revolution, constitutes the constructive, and

most original, side of his revolutionary writings. Yet prior to the question of the place of art in the revolution is the question of the revolution itself, of why it is needed. Why should we not join the Right Hegelians in holding the current order of society to be, if not perfect, at least as good as human beings are capable of achieving? Wagner's answer to this question constitutes the critical aspect of his writings, his "cultural criticism." In the retrospective "'Zukunftsmusik'" he explains that his turn to philosophy arose out of his frustrations as a practicing artist. Realizing that art in general and theater in particular is a "mirror" of the society that produces it (AR, 24, S&M 69), and that artistic reform is therefore inseparable from social reform, he decided to investigate the social conditions responsible for the dismal phenomenon that is modern art. It is possible, I think, to distinguish five interconnected strands in Wagner's critique of modernity: his critique of the state of the capitalist economy, of social relations, of what I shall call "postmodern nihilism," and—from his own perspective the most important—his critique of the current state of art.<sup>[2]</sup>

## CRITIQUE OF THE STATE

Whereas for the Right Hegelians the model provided by the Prussian state represented the "end of history," for Wagner it is the paradigm of what is wrong with the modern state as such. The focus of his critique is what twentieth-century thinkers refer to as the "totalizing" character of the modern state.<sup>[3]</sup> The modern state is, Wagner observes, repressively bureaucratic. By compelling us to submit to a host of identical procedures it enforces a "red-tape uniformity" (AF, 203-4). Permanently militarized (AF, 204) and assuming the right to control the education of the individual, the modern state seeks to completely determine the culture and values of its citizens. Aided by a pliant press and the dogmas of an at least implicitly state religion, the modern state says "so shall you think and act" (OD, 196-97) and not otherwise. The modern state thus bureaucratizes its citizens, turns them into mere functions of itself, its "instruments" or "tools" (AR, 55, 57).

What is wrong with this absorption of all aspects of life into the life of the state is that it oppresses, constricts, places an "iron harness" on a plastic body (AF, 80). There are two aspects to this oppression: the oppression of groups and the oppression of individuals.

A natural grouping of individuals, writes Wagner, is the product of shared land, climate, genealogy, language and customs. Human beings need, can only flourish in, a "communal homeland" (AF, 89). Modern states, however, created by "capricious"—usually dynastic—interests, destroy such natural groupings and force people into "unnatural unions" (AF, 203). The natural need for homeland is thus replaced by the fractiousness of enforced cohabitation with an alien humanity.

The modern state oppresses individuals (individuals in their individuality rather than in their need for a shared homeland) because while they have a deep need for the "breathing space" in which to develop "freely, elastically" into the individuals that they are, the state confronts them with a "stiff, dogmatic, fettering

and domineering might” that homogenizes them into the types of being of which approves (OD, 196–97). Variety, to be sure, is not absent from modern life. Diachronic variety is provided by changes in fashion. But this is merely a form of economic oppression: Wagner particularly objects to the Paris fashion industry telling the “German wife” how she should dress (B, 19). Synchronic diversity is provided by differences in “class,” yet that, too, is merely a kind of enforced uniformity: “these days we cannot conceive a human being otherwise than in the uniform of his ‘class’” (OD, 100).

The total state is, then, inimical to the liberty that is the precondition of individual happiness. But it is also fatal to itself. The reason for this is that only genuine individuals can create, and only creation can enable a society to meet the novel challenges of an ever-changing environment. Wagner makes this point in terms of “genius.”

Whereas talent is merely the ability to work within the existing scheme of things more quickly and accurately than others, genius, says Wagner (in remarkably modern language), is the ability to “open up new pathways.” The genius is one who “abrogates” existing forms and is thereby enabled to “fashion new forms of life and art” (CF, 289). Wagner rejects the romantic idea that genius comes as a bolt out of the blue, a gift of the gods. The ossified character of Chinese history is, he says, a plain proof that social conditions can either promote or, as in the case of China, stifle, the appearance of genius.<sup>[4]</sup> But now, laments Wagner, genius is being crushed by the modern state, particularly by modern, state-controlled education. His own genius, he observes, he owes to his being, relatively speaking, uneducated. To his boring, time-serving teachers, he told Nietzsche, he paid almost no attention (TFN, 292–93).

It is, surely, this idea of the “finder of new pathways” (“entrepreneurship” in even more up-to-date language) that is presented in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (Wagner completes a prose sketch of the work in 1845). Walter von Stolzing with his new style of singing is the epitome of untamed “genius,” while the “marker,” Beckmesser, epitomizes the stifling weight of tradition. (In his “Communication to My Friends” Wagner says that it is not, in fact, Walter but rather Hans Sachs—who brings about the reconciliation between Walter and the mastersingers—who embodies the “productive spirit of the people,” implying that genius must be tempered by rules of intelligibility to produce something of value to either art or society [CF, 329].) But the “finder of new pathways” reappears, too, in Nietzsche’s insistence on the necessity of the “untimely man” or, later, “free spirit,” to a society that has the capacity to adapt to an ever-changing world. More remotely, it belongs to the brew of ideas that were “in the air” and about to find their expression in *The Origin of Species* (1859). Like Nietzsche’s “free spirit,” Wagner’s “genius” is a cultural analogue of Darwin’s “random mutation.”<sup>[5]</sup>

A critique of the total state is not, of course, a critique of every kind of state, and, as an anarchist, it is the abolition of the state as such to which Wagner is committed. It is plausible to see the call for such an abolition as an element in the narrative of the Ring<sup>[6]</sup> (the “state” that is created by the treaties engraved on an

enforced by Wotan's spear is one in which everyone, mermaids, dwarfs and gods, miserable) and is explicitly argued for in 1852, in *Opera and Drama's* interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*. (In the tragedy, Antigone dies because she gives a proper burial to her brother, thereby defying Creon's order that, as someone who attacked his own city, Polyneices body shall be left to the vultures.) The moral Wagner draws from the tragedy, one that is "true for all times," is the need for, and inevitability of, the downfall of the state. He argues as follows. The state arises out of the "well-meaning" attempt to embody and enforce the "ethical view" of the community, its shared understanding of the proper order of communal life. But rapidly and inevitably, the state turns from being the preserver of communal ethos into its enemy. The support of vested interests and desire of the majority for a quiet life allow corrupt men to come to power. The actual state, Wagner claims, always embodies the vices, never the virtues, of individuals (OD, 186-95).

Two elements in Wagner's thought, when taken together, lead one to wonder, however, whether there might not be a hyperbolic element in his advocacy of anarchism. The first is the plausible thesis that art in general and theater in particular "mirrors" the society that produces it (p. 5 above), so that a healthy art mirrors a healthy society. The second is the fact that the great age of Greek tragedy—for Wagner, as we shall see, the pinnacle of Western art—coincided with the great age of the (somewhat) democratic Athenian state: Sophocles and Pericles were almost exact contemporaries. Given this, together with, as we shall see, Wagner's positive approval of the fact that the playwrights and actors in Greek tragedy were often "the most illustrious members of the state" (Z, 307), it might be best to conclude that, while skeptical about its lasting for any length of time, a genuine nation state, one that keeps itself constantly in tune with the ethical sense of its citizens, might be something to which Wagner would find no real objection.

## CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM

Turning from politics to economics, the second strand in Wagner's modernity critique focuses on capitalism and its effects on the use of modern industrial technology. In Rome, Mercury (the Greek Hermes) was the god of tricksters and thieves (elements of Mercury's character are surely incorporated into the Ring's Loge). But in the modern world he is the principal god, the god of the "holy five percent" (AR, 41-42). Modern life is based, in other words, on the acquisition of wealth, not by labor, but by the ownership of wealth. It is based, in short, on capitalism.

Capitalism has resulted in a new form of slavery. Though we condemn the slavery of the ancient world, modern industrial capitalism reduces its workers to nothing but "steam power for the machine" (AR, 54, TR, 233)—mere, as we now say, "human resources." Whereas work in the pre-modern craft economy was a joyful, creative activity, work in the modern factory is unpleasant, dehumanized, mechanical "drudgery" (AR, 50). It is, in Marx's terminology, "alienated."<sup>[7]</sup> The

reduction of workers to industrial slaves, Wagner continues, is endorsed and enhanced by Christianity's doctrine of the "worthlessness of human nature" (AR, 55). Life is not meant to be fun: the poverty of the many is a sign of the worthlessness of the many. Conversely, the wealth of the few is a sign of the virtue of the few, of God's blessing. As "our [modern] God is gold, our religion the pursuit of wealth" (AR, 51), so our modern moral heroes are "hero[es] of the bourse" (AR, 50).

One might think that though the workers are likely to be miserable in a capitalist economy, at least the "slave"-owners, the bourgeoisie, are happy. But this is not so. One reason for this, implicit in Wagner's Prussia-focused critique of the state, is that though not reduced to industrial "resources," the middle classes are nonetheless reduced to "resources"—bureaucratic, state resources. Another is that since capitalism engenders a materialistic conception of happiness—since production depends on consumption, capitalism has a systematic need to promote the conception of happiness as consumption—the bourgeoisie conceive of happiness as "luxury," as the consumption of more and more things. But once genuine desires are satisfied, the acquisition of unnecessary things produces less and less pleasure, becomes in fact, boring. Because they can satisfy only "artificial" (AF, 75), manufactured desires, the bourgeoisie are "bored to death by pleasure" (Z, 306).

Capitalism is thus a double curse. The working classes are miserable because they exist in a condition of slavery and destitution. The bourgeoisie are miserable because they are bored. (In 1854 Wagner will rediscover this idea in Schopenhauer. "Need and want," writes Schopenhauer, "are the 'scourge of the people,'" boredom is the affliction of "the world of fashion" [WR I, 313].)

A further curse of capitalism is social atomization. Capitalism is ruled, says Wagner, by a "religion of egoism" (AF, 155). (The point can be put by saying that, while presented as purely descriptive, classical economics is, in fact, a normative account of capitalism.) By producing a society of competitive individuals who pursue private interest to the exclusion of all else, to the exclusion, in particular, of communal interest, capitalism destroys community. Why community should be important is something we shall come to later on.

Although he thinks that the Ring cycle loses its way at the end, Bernard Shaw claims, in *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898), that at least *Das Rheingold* is a critique of capitalism. Whatever the opera might be in addition to this, Shaw's claim is surely undeniable. The Nibelungen slaves working in Alberich's underground cave are evident "steam-power" for his industrial machine; some productions emphasize this point by making Nibelheim a very steamy place.

In *Das Rheingold*, Alberich can only acquire the power to turn the Rhine-gold into the ring of world domination by swearing an oath renouncing love. This brings us to a further strand in Wagner's critique of modernity, his claim that it is "loveless."

## LOHENGRIN



Wagner claims that to the extent we are engulfed by the culture of modernity we are rendered incapable of genuine love. This is the meaning of his treatment of the Lohengrin myth, which, he says, has been widely misunderstood as a Christian allegory. In the opera, the swan-born knight makes it a condition of their union that Elsa give him the absolute trust that needs to ask neither his name nor origin. Through frailty and intrigue she eventually raises the fatal question thereby forcing him to return to the heavenly region from which he came. The opera's tragic hero, Wagner surprisingly asserts, is not Elsa but rather Lohengrin himself. He descends from the "cold" realm of his "lonely, sterile bliss" seeking the warmth of unconditional human love. He yearns to be man, not god. He seems to have found true love with Elsa but in the end is betrayed by her. This, says Wagner, is "the tragic element of modern life." The principle of unconditional love seemingly embodied by Elsa but in the end betrayed by her, he adds, "made me a revolutionary at one blow" (CF, 347).

What is non-Christian about this reading of what was, of course, originally a medieval Christian myth (Lohengrin is the son of Percival [Wagner's Parsifal], the knight of the Holy Grail) is the reversal of the Christian order of value: in Wagner's early interpretation of his opera (one he will later abandon) the natural, human world is superior to the supernatural, heavenly world.

## FEUERBACH

This reversal, together with the elevation of human love to a supreme value, reflects the considerable influence exercised over the early Wagner by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872). Wagner dedicated the 1849 "Artwork of the Future" to Feuerbach, making him the most conspicuous of Wagner's philosophical debts.<sup>[8]</sup>

Feuerbach's most famous and influential work is the 1841 *The Essence of Christianity* which so impressed George Eliot that she developed her German to a point where she was able to translate it into English. Wagner, however, found it relatively boring, calling it "prolix and unskilful" as well as "dull" (ML, 522–23). What impressed him were the *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* of 1830 (ML, 521), and the *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* of 1843; that the latter work impressed him is evident from the fact that the very title of his "The Artwork of the Future" pays homage to it.

Feuerbach (in general terms a Left, but relatively apolitical, Hegelian) is a critic of traditional, especially Lutheran, Christianity. Concerning the traditional, supernatural God he argues, first, that he is a fiction—there is no supernatural world—and, second, that we—we nineteenth-century, educated Europeans—really know him to be a fiction. Unlike our medieval ancestors who lived in a world infested by angels and demons, we, he observes, "have lost the organs for the supernatural" (1986, 23). Third, Feuerbach argues (mirroring Hegel's critique of the "unhappy consciousness" of the Middle Ages), the location of true happiness in the supernatural world is a destructive idea since it leads to the devaluation of this—the only real—life (1980, 11–14).

An atheist might respond to the last of these observations by demanding that

we erase God from our worldview. (Bakunin, for example, responding to Voltaire's "If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him," writes that "if God really existed it would be necessary to abolish him" [1973, 128].) Feuerbach, however, is no atheist. His famous slogan "theology is anthropology" is not merely a denial of traditional theology, a reduction of the supernatural gods to humanity's wish-fulfilling projections, but also a normative injunction pointing toward the construction of a "true" theology. What we must do is not abolish God but rather transfer him from the supernatural to the natural, and specifically human, world. "The task of modernity," he writes, is "the humanization of God . . . the transformation of theology into anthropology" (1986, 5).

Feuerbach's execution of this program contains in a radically new interpretation the biblical text "God is love" (John 4:8). God, he asserts, exists in loving intimacy, "in the unity of I and thou" (1986, 71). To the extent that human beings love each other—the paradigm of loving intimacy, but by no means its exclusive expression, is sexual love (1903, 22, 276)—the Divine is realized. This is the hidden meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity: in the "I-thou" relation a third being, the Holy Spirit, exists (1986, 72). The more love there is, the more we are genuinely intimate with each other, the more God is realized. Implicit in Feuerbach, I think, is the Hegelian idea of an "end of history" in which all human beings come to exist in loving community with each other, so that, finally, God is fully realized. From this point of view, God is thought of as an historical process, a process of self-actualization.

All this, I believe, lies behind Wagner's inversion of the traditional Lohengrin myth. Lohengrin's supernatural world is not a better place than the natural, human world. The human world is the better place, or at least will be if love is allowed to flourish. Love, then, is what makes the human world worth living in, makes it potentially divine. But love is excluded by modern culture. Wagner presents two arguments in support of this claim, both of which have ultimately to do, I think, with the effects of capitalism.

## LOVE AND LANGUAGE

The first of these arguments concerns language. In the grips of modern culture, Wagner argues (OD, 224 3-6), we can neither give nor receive love. This is because modern language is incapable of expressing love. It cannot express love because it cannot express emotion of any kind. Communication within the language of modernity suffers from a kind of emotional numbness, a kind of autism.

Originally, human communication was more like song than speech.<sup>[9]</sup> Our first language was intensely "lyrical," primarily used to express emotion. In a simple world, identification of objects of interest (of fear or desire) was achieved by pointing, or by inference from the direction of eyes or the source of sound. The main point of our ancestors' utterances was thus not to describe states of affairs but to express feelings, either about objects or belonging to one's inner state. Thus, almost exclusively, the sounds they produced were vowel sounds, faint



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