

# DESECRATING WAGNER

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Contemporary Wagner productions "domesticate" the dramas, betraying a fear of sublime experience and the power of myth. Taking myth seriously was Wagner's big idea.

Wagner's mature operas concern heroes who move in a mythic realm, and who are prompted by emotions which have been lifted free of ordinary human contingencies and endowed with a cosmic significance and force. In works like the "Ring, Tristan and Parsifal", the human condition is idealised, as it might be in the narratives and liturgy of a religion. To take these operas seriously is to be drawn into a peculiar modern project: that of remaking the gods out of human material. This project, it seems to me, identifies both the artistic triumph of Wagner, and the hostility with which that triumph is so often greeted.

Wagner tried to create a new musical public, one that would see the point of idealising the human condition. This attempt was already doomed when he first conceived it: kitsch culture was already eclipsing the romantic icon of the artist as priest. Since then, Wagner's enterprise has acquired its own tragic pathos, as modern producers, embarrassed by dramas that make a mockery of their way of life, decide in their turn to make a mockery of the dramas. Of course, even today, musicians and singers, responding as they must to the urgency and sincerity of the music, do their best to produce the sounds that Wagner intended. But the action is invariably caricatured, wrapped in inverted commas, and reduced to the dimensions of a television sitcom. Sarcasm and satire run riot, as in Richard Jones's 1994-6 Covent Garden production of the "Ring", because nobility has become intolerable. The producer strives to distract the audience from Wagner's message and to mock every heroic gesture. As Michael Tanner has argued, in his penetrating defence of the composer, modern productions attempt to "domesticate" Wagner, to bring his dramas down from the exalted sphere in which the music places them, to the world of human trivia, usually in order to make a "political statement" which, being both blatant and banal, succeeds only in cancelling the rich ambiguities of the drama.

In their attempts to rationalise their distaste, the critics of Wagner have approached his art with an antagonism that has few parallels outside the chronicles of religious censorship. Nietzsche led the way, in writings that are penetrating in just the way that religious inquisitions are penetrating, seeking the proof of damnation in the smallest gesture. The interrogations have continued unabated, with critics freely exploiting the facts of Wagner's life, his writings, his powers of self-advertisement, and the corruptions of his worst admirers in order to place a massive moral question mark over his works. The assault on Wagner's antisemitism owes much to Theodor Adorno. But Adorno's reservations were also aesthetic and he tried, in his tortured and tortuous way,

to discover corruption in the melodic and harmonic structure of Wagner's music, regardless of the composer's unpleasant opinions. Other critics have been less scrupulous, and have seen the agitated antisemitism of the man as a sufficient condemnation of the work, without troubling to ask where, and how, the antisemitism finds endorsement in the music. (Marc A Wiener, in "Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination", verges on the insidious accusation that if you do not see the antisemitism in Wagner, you are an antisemite.) Even a critic as thoughtful and alert to the musical argument as Barry Millington can write as though antisemitism were somewhere near the top of Wagner's musical and intellectual agenda and as if it should therefore be constantly borne in mind as we study his works. To a great extent, this obsessive distraction from the real questions surrounding Wagner's art and philosophy has been laid to rest by Bryan Magee in "Wagner and Philosophy", his account of Wagner's intellectual background. Nevertheless, something needs to be added to Magee's defence, if we are to understand the root of the hostility to Wagner.

In the second half of the 20th century, racism became the first amongst political crimes, and one so broadly defined that even the most innocent remark may be taken as proof of it - for example, the comment that I have just made in this sentence. Racism has also been associated (at least by the left) with the political and social beliefs of the right, and especially with the defence of traditional order, social hierarchy and the inheritance of western culture. Furthermore, crimes committed by the political right are not forgiven by modern intellectuals, whereas those committed by the political left are often dismissed as errors, or justified in terms of their long-term effects.

For much of his life, Wagner was a revolutionary, distinguishing himself in the liberal-socialist cause. But it cannot be denied that the philosophy that is most easily gleaned from his later works is in sharp conflict with the egalitarian project. Moreover, his celebration of the German idea, and of the folk-culture in which it is embedded, has made him far more useful to nationalists and traditionalists than he could ever be to socialists or liberals. Nor has Wagner's reputation been helped by Hans Sachs's appeal to the German nation in "Die Meistersinger", or by the extraordinary restatement of Christian mysticism in "Parsifal". Subsequent history has only confirmed the suspicions of left-wing critics and, as a result, the crimes of Hitler are read back into the operas of Wagner, as though they originated in that source.

This guilt by association is the fate of any artist who can

be seen as a fellow traveller of the political right; recent victims include Joseph Conrad, TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, WB Yeats, Ernst Junger, Hans Pfitzner and Igor Stravinsky. Such treatment rarely awaits the intellectual of the left, and even those who have justified and encouraged crime on the highest scale - Sartre, for example, Aragon, Brecht, Eisler - are often forgiven by their intellectual judges on account of their egalitarian goals.

This asymmetry of blame must be kept in mind when considering the case of Wagner. His art is dedicated to human distinction. He did not believe that human beings are equal in any of the respects which make life worthwhile. His ideal hero could not possibly be taken as a model by socialists or anybody attached to the idea of human equality. Moreover, the dramatic context makes it all too easy to suppose that the composer's antisemitism is of a piece with his hero-worship, and that both are founded in an ideology of racial supremacy. It is true that Shaw saw Siegfried as a portrait of the revolutionary anarchist Bakunin, with whom Wagner had been friendly in his revolutionary years. But the identification is wildly implausible, and proof, at best, that Bakunin would not have lasted long in his own utopia.

Nietzsche was less bothered by the antisemitism than by the hero-worship. This was not for the reasons that trouble modern critics, who cannot abide romantic heroes in any form, but because, in Nietzsche's view, the heroic in Wagner is a sham. Rather than accept Wagner's characters in the terms suggested by the drama - terms in which Wagner himself, as a disciple of the materialist philosopher Feuerbach, did not believe - we should, Nietzsche advises, translate them "into reality, into the modern... into the bourgeois!" What then? We find ourselves amongst the banal problems of "Parisian decadents."

Nietzsche does not condemn the art by finding fault with the man. He purports to discern a profound artistic failing in the works themselves, a failing that undermines their clamorous appeal for our attention. Nietzsche is asking us to see through Wagner's characters, with their vast fields of heroic action, to the repertoire of real emotions from which their deeds derive. What we then find, Nietzsche believes, is not heroic fortitude, generous love, or world-redeeming renunciation, but attention-seeking neurosis and a life-denying inability to accept the world as it is.

Nietzsche is inviting us to see Wagner's characters as one-dimensional people lifted free from the bourgeois reality of cost and benefit, to enjoy a spurious sovereignty over their fate in a fairy-tale world. But Wagner's dramas are not fairy tales. Nothing is more impressive in them than the grim realism with which wholly intelligible motives are carried through to their crisis. At the same time, these motives are placed in a prehistorical, mythical or medieval setting. Wagner's purpose was not to fill the stage with fantasies, but to create the kind of distance between audience and drama that would endow the drama with a universal significance. Hence his preoccupation with myths and legends - stories which depart from realism only in order to convey universal truths about the human condition.

When Wagner applied himself to the study of the surviving literature of the early Germanic tribes, and to the

poetry of medieval Germany, it was not to identify exemplary people and historical events, but to acquaint himself with a culture in which the real had been through and through penetrated by the ideal: a culture in which people did not merely do things, but also lived up to things. He discovered myth not as a collection of fables and beliefs, nor as a primitive religion, but as a distinct category of human thought; as open to us, Wagner believed, in a world of scientific scepticism as it was open to the inhabitants of ancient Greece or Iceland. Myth dawned on Wagner as a form of social hope. It was a way of thinking which could restore to modern man the lost sense of the ideal - an idea taken up some decades later by Jungian psychology.

Wagner's appropriation of myth is not merely a matter of one person's moral and artistic credo. It is also one of the great intellectual advances of modern times: the ancestor and inspiration of comparative anthropology, symbolist poetry, psychoanalysis and many aesthetic and theological doctrines that are now common currency. Wagner is given credit for this by Claude Lévi-Strauss (who acknowledges the composer as the main inspiration behind his "structuralist" method), by the anthropologist and medievalist Jessie L Weston, and by Weston's disciple, TS Eliot, in "The Waste Land". The idea of myth as a dramatisation of hidden truths about the human psyche entered the mainstream with Freud and Jung. However, the accumulation of myth-analysing, myth-dramatising and myth-making that has ensued in the wake of Wagner has made it necessary to revisit Wagner's own approach, and to study the vitality with which he transformed ancient myth and legend into modern art.

A myth, for Wagner, is not a fable or a religious doctrine but rather a vehicle for human knowledge. The myth acquaints us with ourselves and our condition, using symbols and characters that give objective form to our inner compulsions. Myths are set in the hazy past, in a vanished world of chthonic forces and magniloquent deeds. But this obligatory "pastness" is a device. It places the myth and its characters before recorded time and, therefore, in an era that is purged of history. It lifts the story out of the stream of human life, and endows it with a timeless meaning.

Wagner's original impulse, therefore, which was to discover in the ancient legends of the Germanic people the living record of the time of heroes, led him back to his starting point in the modern world. The time of heroes was a mythical time - and mythical time is now. Myths do not speak of what was but of what is eternally. They are magical-realist summaries of the actual world, in which the moral possibilities are personified and made flesh. Hence the "Ring", Wagner's synthesis of the Germanic and Icelandic myths as they were reflected in the dark mirror of early Germanic literature, became the most determinedly modern of his works, the one which more than any other provides a commentary on modern life and on the hopes and fears that thrive in it. Yet, planted within the bitter and often cynical drama, like a seed that survives in the desert and which suddenly flowers at the first drop of rain, is the heroic ideal - the ideal that Wagner had searched for as a past reality, but which he discovered to be a myth.

For Wagner, the heroic ideal, enshrined in the love of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, was not refuted but vindicated by its mythical setting - it was transported from the past to an eternal present. Of course, Wagner did not see the legends that he wove into dramas as we would see them. But he responded to their hidden fund of religious feeling, and this endows the Wagnerian music dramas with their distinctive spiritual glow. All the subtle emendations and elisions, were designed to reveal the sacred - indeed sacramental - character of our deepest emotions, and to isolate the moments of sacrifice in which ideals become real. The love-death theme which is made explicit in "Tristan und Isolde" propels also the inner psychic movement of the "Ring", and is only superficially hidden by the veil of religious renunciation drawn across it in "Parsifal". We are being constantly reminded that love, treated as a summons to sacrifice, is a sacred, redeeming force. All else is compromise.

In pursuing this theme, Wagner created an array of unforgettable characters and a series of brilliant plots. He also invoked an eerie world without love - the world of Nibelheim, which we revisit again and again in the Ring, not as a physical but as a psychical realm, from which the tormented souls of Mime, Alberich and Hagen can never escape, since they are incapable of the one thing - renunciation - which would give them the power to do so. Wagner contrasted this loveless realm not with a kingdom of love - for there is no such thing, as the story of Valhalla reveals - but with moments of sacrifice and renunciation, in which love suddenly irradiates the human psyche and persuades us that our mortal life is worthwhile, and worthwhile because mortal.

In Parsifal, the moment of sacrifice achieves Christian form. But the Christianity is grafted on to a more pagan conception of sacrifice - a conception that comes vividly to mind in the two immolations of Brünnhilde and in the death of Siegfried. The connection between Siegfried's death and the pagan stories of victims sacrificed and sanctified so that the world might be renewed was noticed by Thomas Mann in "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner": "The overpowering accents of the music that accompanies Siegfried's funeral cortège no longer tell of the woodland boy who set out to learn the meaning of fear; they speak to our emotions of what is really passing away behind the lowering veils of mist: it is the sun-hero himself who lies upon the bier, slain by the pallid forces of darkness - and there are hints in the text to support what we feel in the music... 'Behold the cursed boar,' says Gunther, pointing to Hagen, 'who slew this noble flesh.' The words take us back at a stroke to the very earliest picture-dreams of mankind. Tammuz and Adonis, slain by the boar, Osiris and Dionysus, torn asunder to come again as the Crucified One, whose flank must be ripped open by a Roman spear in order that the world might know Him - all things that ever were and ever shall be, the whole world of beauty sacrificed and murdered by wintry wrath, all is contained within this single glimpse of myth."

In "Opera and Drama", Wagner compared the role of the orchestra to that of the chorus in the Greek tragedy. Although this very imperfectly describes his own use of the orchestra in subsequent works, it perfectly fits the technique that the composer uses in order to set a

frame around Siegfried as he is led forward to the slaughter. The orchestra is the supremely sympathetic observer of its own sacrificial victim, following his narrative in a kind of subdued awe, leading him on with gentle gestures as the sacred bull was led to the altar, encouraging him to give the sign of acceptance that will summon the sacrificial blow. It is precisely because his musical technique brought these undercurrents of religious emotion to the surface, that Wagner was able to iconise and idealise the passions of his characters, and to make it not only plausible but also right that they should sacrifice everything for what would otherwise be the transient nothingness of love.

It is only if we understand the religious nature of Wagner's dramas that we will be able to account for their appeal to modern people, and for the hostility as well as the devotion that they inspire. For Wagner, as for the Greeks, a myth was not a decorative fairy tale, but the elaboration of a secret, a way of both hiding and revealing mysteries that can be understood only in religious terms, through the ideas of sanctity, holiness and redemption. These are ideas that all of us need, Wagner believed, and, although the common people perceive them through the veil of religious doctrine, they find articulate form in art. As Wagner wrote: "It is reserved to art to salvage the kernel of religion, inasmuch as the mythical images which religion would wish to be believed as true are apprehended in art for their symbolic value, and through ideal representation of those symbols art reveals the concealed deep truth within them."

Wagner's works are therefore more than mere dramas: they are revelations, attempts to penetrate to the mysterious core of human existence. They are not unique in this: Aeschylus and Shakespeare (to both of whom Wagner was indebted) also present dramas that are shaped as religious epiphanies. But Wagner worked in another medium, which enabled him to present the conscious and individual passions of his characters simultaneously with their universal and unconscious archetypes. The orchestra does not merely accompany Wagner's singers, nor are they merely singers. The orchestra fills in the space beneath the revealed emotions with all the ancestral longings of our species, transforming these individual passions into symbols of a common destiny that can be sensed but not told. Wagner acquaints us with our lot, and makes available to an age without religious belief the core religious experience - an experience that we need, but from which we also flee, since it demands from us even more than it gives.

To the religious mind, nature lies beyond human control, although not beyond human damage. The natural world must be approached with awe and piety, but also with a sense that we belong in it, and can abuse our position of trust. Moreover, for the religious person, nature is governed by the same forces that order the inner life and is, therefore, in Baudelaire's words, "a forest of symbols." This way of reading nature belongs with those "very earliest picture-dreams of mankind" to which Mann refers. It is not only in children's stories that birds speak and trees have faces. This is our primal experience of the world - an experience of territory that we share with other species, governed by forces that we must appease through prayer and sacrifice.

Wagner perceived that the drama of the "Ring", whose characters inhabit the landscape of the hunter-gatherer, required him to reinvent such a natural world. The forests and rivers, the fires and storms, the dragons and mermaids, the voices of the woods and birds - all these are recreated in the "Ring", with a freshness and poetry that owe everything to music, but with a directness that recalls the rich tradition of German children's literature. (All children have been brought up on this literature, even those who have never read a word of it, since it is the literature that created childhood. Christmas is only one of its many by-products.) The god-haunted, dream-enchanted landscape of the Ring is the first thing that modern producers hasten to airbrush from the story. For it creates the context for religious awe.

Looked at in that way, we can see Wagner's "Ring" cycle as a bridge between two far more humble productions: Grimm's fairy tales and the "Lord of the Rings." Grimm influenced Wagner and Wagner made Tolkien possible. Indeed, the emotions that are stirred by the cinematic realisation of Tolkien's rambling story are a faint echo of what would be felt, were the Ring to be performed as Wagner intended, with every single stage direction realistically obeyed. This would be the film to end all films, the "Götterdämmerung" of our modern era, in which Wagner's moral would be apparent even to the unmusical. Almost certainly it would be derided, perhaps even banned.

Tolkien's passion for the medieval world arose, like Wagner's, from a lifelong religious quest. Unlike Wagner, however, Tolkien did not have the ability to remake the religious experience through art. He remained a "good sad Christian at heart," but with a talent for pagan fairy tales. His novel has smatterings of the great conflict between good and evil, and an abundance of mysteries. But it does not recreate the experience of the sacred that Wagner has always in mind in the tetralogy. The "Ring" is not merely the greatest invocation of primeval nature and the hunter-gatherer world in modern art. It also abounds in moments of genuine religious awe: Brünnhilde's announcement to Siegmund of his impending death; Sieglinde's blessing of Brünnhilde; Wotan's farewell; Siegfried's first encounter with Brünnhilde - and  
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so on. Virtually all the turning points of the drama are conceived in sacramental terms; they are occasions of awe, piety and transition, in which a victim is offered and a promise of redemption received.

But a Wagnerian twist is given to each of these moments. While the sacred has been interpreted as man's avenue to God, for Wagner it is God's avenue to man. It is the gods, not man, that need redemption, and redemption comes through love. But love, for Wagner, is possible only between mortals - it is a relation between dying things, who embrace their own death as they yield to it. This Brünnhilde recognises during her great dialogue with Siegmund, resolving in her heart, but as yet not fully conscious that this is what she is doing, to relinquish her immortality for the sake of a human love.

But what, on this view, are the gods? Mere figments, as Feuerbach argued? Or something deeply implanted in the scheme of things, something that precedes and survives us? Wagner's answer is not easily explained in words, although it is transparently clear in music. And it is an answer that makes him supremely relevant to us. For, despite our attempts to live without formal religion, we are no more free than people ever have been or ever will be from the religious need. Wagner accepted Feuerbach's view of the gods as human creations. But human creations include some very real and lasting things, like St Paul's Cathedral. Gods come and go; but they last as long as we make room for them, and we make room for them through sacrifice. The gods come about because we idealise our passions, and we do this not by sentimentalising them but by sacrificing ourselves to the vision on which they depend. It is by accepting the need for sacrifice that we begin to live under divine jurisdiction, surrounded by sacred things, and finding meaning through love. Seeing things that way, we recognise that we are not condemned to mortality but consecrated to it.

Properly produced, the Wagner music-dramas compel their audience to see things in that way, which is why they are no longer properly produced. The sacred prompts the desire for desecration, and - in those who have turned away from religion - this desire is irresistible.