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The Rise of Intellect in Wagner's *Ring*

S. K. Land

I

When Brünnhilde argues with her master in *Die Walküre* II.ii, Wotan makes an angry attempt to silence her:

Was bist du, als meines Willens
blind wählende Kür?—¹

From the orchestra the horns, bassoons, and lower strings make fortissimo pronouncement of the emphatic motif associated with Wotan's spear, the symbol of his authority. The god is attempting to assert control over the daughter, best loved of the nine, who calls herself his "will" (*Wille*).

As Wagner argued at length in *Oper und Drama*, the virtue of *Stabreim* is its ability to establish through phonology associations or antitheses between particular words and concepts. (*Stabreim* entails a use of language akin to music in so far as it allows the word to derive meaning from its place in a phonetic pattern rather as the musical note derives meaning from its place in a tonic pattern.) It is a verse form which, in Wagner's hands, demands that particular attention be paid not only to each word but also to each root-syllable. By means of the *Stabreim*, Wotan's words to his rebellious daughter here bring to a focal point certain crucial issues of the drama.

The phrasing and rhetoric of Wotan's question echo Brünnhilde's earlier plea:

wer—bin ich,
wär'ich dein Wille nicht? (p. 93)

But there is every difference between Brünnhilde's conception of her task as the exercise of free choice in natural harmony with Wotan's desires, and Wotan's description of the Walküre as the "blind" instrument of his will. Wotan is the maiden's master, but he goes beyond the rights of his mastery in trying to reduce her to a mindless automaton. For by nature the Walküre is a re-

sponsible agent. The very name *Walküre*, or *Valkyrie*, is an Old Norse word combining *valr* = *slain* with *kyrja* = *chooser*.² The element *kyrja*, a cognate of the archaic German *Kür* which Wotan uses here as an epithet for Brünnhilde, becomes superfluous if the “choice” is to be dictated. When Wotan uses his conscious authority to constrain a hitherto unconscious function he establishes a paradox. The *Walküre* must choose freely, for in her freedom of action lies the true freedom of Wotan’s will. Her choice is naturally his own, as Brünnhilde well knows, and when Wotan binds her in sleep it is really his own freedom of action which is anaesthetized. He has chosen to limit his own power of choice.³

The appearance of the concept of will here and elsewhere in *Die Walküre* and in *Siegfried* should not, at this stage, lead us to a consideration of Schopenhauer’s terminology. All four of the *Ring* poems were complete by 1853 when they were privately printed, but it was not until the late summer of 1854 that Wagner first encountered Schopenhauer’s work and read *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*.⁴ At the time of writing the poems, although as eclectic as ever in his philosophy, Wagner was much influenced by the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, and in particular by his *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit*.⁵ In those years Feuerbach’s name was closely associated with ideologies of social reform and revolution. It is to him, and to the ideas for a mythology which Wagner derived from him, that we must turn for a further explanation of Wotan’s use of the word “Wille.”

The concept of Mythos set out in the second part of *Oper und Drama* (published 1851) is indebted to Feuerbach’s ideas of social necessity and the primacy of sensation. The Mythos, Wagner writes, exists as “a mere image formed by Phantasy” in the mind of “the Folk.” It is necessary that the image be realized in terms of sensible reality, and this realization is the task of art. Of art Wagner offers a boldly narcissistic definition: “Art (Kunst), by the very meaning of the term, is nothing but the fulfilment of a longing to know (*kennen*) oneself in the likeness of an object of one’s love or adoration, to find oneself again in the things of the outer world, thus conquered by their representment.”⁶ Wagner carries the principles of *Stabreim* into his prose to make the etymologically valid association of *Kunst* with *kennen*, art with knowledge, and thus directs his argument toward the eventual conclusion that man’s drive to self-knowledge propels all art towards the explication of the social

organism. The underlying meaning of the Mythos is therefore to be sought in its function as a mirror of man in society.

For Wagner, as for most Romantic thinkers, the concept "man in society" yields a picture of man on one hand and society on the other, of an antithetical rather than a symbiotic relationship. Consequently what he calls the "ur-myth" reveals, in *Oper und Drama*, a recurrent conflict of individual and social wills. In order to explain this conflict Wagner uses two terms found elsewhere in his writings of this period, the words "Willkür" and "Unwillkür." "Unwillkür" means "not consciously willed" or "instinctive"; and "Willkür," its antithesis, signifies conscious choice with pejorative overtones of despotism, caprice, and irrationality. The Mythos embodies the conflict of the instinctive-unconscious and the arbitrary-conscious in terms of the incompatibility of the individual will as immediate response to sensible reality with the social will as codified abstract. The story of ancient Thebes is cited to illustrate the political basis of the Mythos. Oedipus is drawn into the conflict of individual and social wills, and is ruined thereby; Creon holds rule on behalf of the arbitrary social will, but is opposed by the individual will of Antigone; Antigone's willingness to die for her belief, her sacrificial act of pure love, reconciles all parties in grief and wisdom, and ends the strife. Here is a skeletal myth-structure recognizably akin to that of the *Ring*.⁷

The *Ring* poems were written between 1848 and 1852 (the scoring was not completed until 1874), and *Oper und Drama* was written mostly in the later months of 1850. The association of the poem with the Feuerbachian ur-myth is almost explicit in Wotan's use of the words "Willens . . . Kür" to describe Brünnhilde, for in his attempt to reduce the Walküre to a mindless functionary of Fricka's code of public morality Wotan is acting in accord with the principle of *Willkür*. In effect he is like the Oedipus of *Oper und Drama* at this point, torn between the conflicting demands of individual freedom and social stability, and is in the end reduced to playing Creon opposite Brünnhilde's Antigone. There is something arbitrary in the nature of Wotan's will, which is to say, in Feuerbach's terms, that there is something in his will not derived from, and therefore antagonistic to the realities of sense ("Sinn") and feeling ("Gefühl"). Seen in this way the *Ring* becomes the story of a confrontation between the capricious will of the gods on the one hand and Brünnhilde's love-sacrifice on the other.

The word *Volsung* is probably a cognate of the Gothic *walis* = *chosen*,⁸ and therefore of the German *wählen* = *to choose*. The concept of free choice looms large behind the *Ring*, both in the problems of the Walküre's duty and, more prominently, in the question of the Wälsungs' independence of their creator. Moreover, although Wagner has avoided the obvious pun on *Wälsung* (the spelling of the name he adopts) and *erwählt* = *chosen*, it is clear that Siegmund is created, or chosen, by Wotan at a time when the god's will is still relatively free (before it is fettered by Fricka and put to sleep with Brünnhilde) in order to effect his instinctive, individual desires. In other words, the Wälsungs are the product of the Unwillkür principle, and it is by that principle that they live.

There emerges a conceptual association between the instinctive chooser, Brünnhilde, and the instinctively chosen, the Wälsungs—which is why Brünnhilde cannot do otherwise than fight for Siegmund and rescue his child in *Walküre* II.v. The word *wählende* (which Wotan applies to her in the lines with which we began) has, in Wagner's terms, a common root-syllable with the name *Wälsung*. The Wälsungs and the Walküre are essentially united against the arbitrary will.

II

Three years before the publication of the Feuerbachian ur-myth in *Oper und Drama*, Wagner had produced a very different kind of myth. It appeared in the essay *Die Wibelungen: Weltgeschichte aus der Saga*, which had its origins in certain studies Wagner had undertaken in relation to a projected (but unwritten) drama on the subject of Friedrich Barbarossa. The terms of this essay are much closer to those of twentieth-century works on mythology than are the terms used in *Oper und Drama*—perhaps because the ur-myth it produces is not deduced from any predetermined ideology, but is the inductive result of Wagner's own researches into history and early literature. In summary, Wagner here finds in the mythology of the sagas a view of German history as an unending struggle between Welfs and Wibelungen over the imperial crown. The crown he sees as an idealised representation of world-dominion which has its mythical equivalent in the treasure of the Nibelungs. The legend of the treasure, he believes, derives in turn from ancient sun-myths; and the alternate possession of power by the aristocratic Wibelungen and the relatively demotic Welfs therefore corresponds

to the alternation of day and night, the presence and absence of the sun.

The fundamental difference between this ur-myth and that presented in *Oper und Drama* lies in their respective metaphysics. At the centre of the later myth stands the dualistic conflict of *Willkür* and *Unwillkür* with Wagner's values closely committed to the latter principle; whereas the heart of the *Die Wibelungen* myth is occupied by a single power, that of the hoard, which is symbolically the imperial crown and ultimately the life-giving sun. The field of conflict in the Feuerbachian myth is the mind of man, both individual and collective; whereas the conflict in *Die Wibelungen* has its centre in the cosmological battle of light and darkness. Two points, more specific, follow from these general differences. First, in the myth of *Die Wibelungen* with its focus upon the eternal, super-human power represented by the hoard, there is the suggestion of an unending cycle which turns in a dimension beyond the control of man. The continuous and inevitable movement of the treasure from one party to another gives rise to a decidedly deterministic world-view. "When Light vanquished Darkness, when Siegfried slew the Nibelung dragon, he won as victor's spoil the Nibelungen Hoard it guarded. But the possession of this Hoard—whose properties increase his might beyond all measure, since he thereby rules the Nibelungen—is also the reason for his death: for the dragon's heir now plots to win it back. This heir dispatches him by stealth, as night the day, and drags him down into the gloomy realm of Death: Siegfried becomes himself a Nibelung" (VII, 276). Secondly, because the cycle is unending, and because the possessor inevitably "becomes himself a Nibelung" and meets a necessary fate, there is no absolute morality in the world of the hoard. The myth of *Oper und Drama* calls for individual commitment to one side of an eternal controversy, but within the myth of *Die Wibelungen* the individual action can make no impression.

It will already be clear that this earlier outline of myth also finds certain answering structures in the *Ring*. The Wibelungs, the original possessors of the treasure who struggle endlessly to regain it, become the Nibelungs; and the hoard has the qualities of the ring itself. We may further see that if the ur-myth of *Oper und Drama* is close to the ideology of Feuerbach, that of *Die Wibelungen* anticipates something of the spirit Wagner was later to encounter in Schopenhauer.

Between 1848 and 1951 Wagner produced two mutually

exclusive structures of mythology, each of which is reflected in certain aspects of the *Ring* poem. The drama may usefully be considered in terms of the dialectic generated in its symbolism by the fusion of these two myth patterns within a single structure.

III

The Feuerbachian myth is concerned with the will. The symbol of Wotan's will, of his power and authority, is the spear upon the shaft of which are engraven the contracts of his government. The central image of the *Die Wibelungen* myth is the hoard which figures in the drama as the ring itself. The spear stands for the individual power of alignment and action, the right to decide and the ability to effect; but the ring is the negation of all individual assertion. Associated with the spear is an emphatic motif, harmonically natural and melodically linear; but an indecisive motif, circular in movement and chromatic in tone, is the sign of the ring.

The distinction between free will and determinism implicit in the dramatic opposition of spear and ring is crystallized in the functional differentiation between Erda and the Norns. The Norns are the Germanic Fates, the spinners of the rope of destiny, who represent an unqualified determinism. Whatever they foresee, whatever they spin, must come to pass. But Erda is a *Wala*, an embodiment of primal knowledge, more concerned with wisdom than with prophecy.⁹ She is older than the Norns (who are her daughters), she has personal involvement with Wotan and Brünnhilde which the abstracted Norns have not, and she is capable of admonitory intervention when her wisdom is needed. Wotan himself is fully aware that he would simply be bound by whatever he might learn from the Norns, but that from Erda he may learn how to act upon the course of events. In *Siegfried* III.i he explains to the goddess his motives for questioning her:

Im Zwange der Welt
weben die Nornen:
sie können nichts wenden noch wandeln;
doch deiner Weisheit
dankt'ich den Rat wohl,
wie zu hemmen ein rollendes Rad? (p. 189)

Erda has wisdom distinct from prescience, but the Norns have knowledge of infallible prophecy. The essential difference is ontological: Erda knows a world molded by the decisions and

actions of individuals; but the Norns know the world which they determine as they spin their rope, a world in which men are the elements but not the agents. For Erda time is a linear progression along the course of which appear the deeds of men, just as she herself appears from time to time above the surface of the earth; but for the Norns time is the unending circular motion which they enact with their rope in the Prelude to *Götterdämmerung*. Erda's world looks to the power of the spear, the Norns' to that of the ring.

Spear and ring, the central symbols of the two conflicting mythologies, are the talismans respectively of heaven and earth. As each strives to assert universal power a close parallelism develops between the actions of Wotan and Alberich, their respective natural masters.¹⁰ The initial theft of the gold by the Nibelung is the equivalent in the world of darkness to what occurs in the world of light when Wotan builds Valhalla. In each case the aim is world-domination, and although we may yet feel Wotan to be a more desirable autocrat than Alberich we cannot but see the similarities in their motives and subsequent actions. (At one point in *Siegfried* II.i, a variant of the Valhallamotif accompanies Alberich's words "der Welt walte den ich.") In each case a price must be paid for the initial assertion of power: Alberich forfeits love; and Wotan agrees to give up Freia, the keeper of the golden apples of eternal youth. Later, when through the duplicity and unwariness of both parties the hoard has fallen to the neutral Fafner, Wotan and Alberich each beget a son who is to recover for them that which, for different reasons, neither can regain for himself. The careful symmetry is reflected in the names of the two antagonists: Alberich, or "Schwarzalberich" rules the Nibelungs, or "Schwarzalben," and Wotan, or "Lichtalberich" governs the gods, or "Lichtalben." Earth is the inverted image of heaven.

In spite of the correspondence between their respective motives and activities, the political philosophies of heaven and earth, of spear and ring, are antithetically opposed. Nibelheim attempts world-rule based upon the power of possession, upon the amassing and controlling of incalculable wealth. As Wagner makes clear in *Die Wibelungen*, the ring itself is a symbol of this kind of power. "In the Nibelungen-myth we found expressed by all the generations who devised, developed, and enacted it, an uncommonly clear idea of the *nature of property, of ownership*" (VII, 294). The attitude of mind through which the ring

operates is perfectly conveyed in Fafner's words "Ich lieg' und besitze," expressive of the power of sheer bulk. Valhalla, on the other hand, attempts to build its empire on the principle of contract ("Vertrag"). The runic writings on the shaft of Wotan's spear set forth the contracts which its holder is bound to observe.

Just as ring and spear strive to rule the world with different machinery, so they give rise to different concepts of rule. The rule of the ring tends towards anarchy—for that symbol of possession is essentially such that it is ever driven from hand to hand and serves him who holds it only for so long as his hold is firm. In practice this is a regime of continual change in which one world-controller succeeds another according to the flexible logic of might and cunning. Again the spear is completely different. It aims at a stability of rule amounting to rigidity, at the perpetual autocracy of Valhalla from whose law, as Fricka insists, there must be no deviation.

The policy of the spear is that of government by contract, and the power of the gods depends upon their observance of contractual agreements. Thus Fasolt—the giant who generally talks sense and tries to negotiate whilst his brother sulks and bides his time—rightly admonishes Wotan:

Verträgen halte Treu'!
Was du bist,
bist du nur durch Verträge:
bedungen ist,
wohl bedacht deiner Macht. (p. 25)

Yet the ring is by nature a breaker of contracts. It must be forever changing hands, and can never do so, as Wagner says in *Die Wibelungen*, "by simple contract, but only through a deed akin to that of its first winner" (VII, 294). Wotan's problem is the result of his impossible desire to reconcile these two incompatible opposites.

Although the ring may appear the mightier, there exists an effectual balance of power between the two talismanic symbols such that neither can encroach upon the territory of the other. In the last analysis it is clear that whenever a ring-bearer is defeated, whenever the power of the ring is momentarily ineffectual, it is because the holder is in some way bound by a previous contract. In *Das Rheingold* Alberich must yield the ring to Wotan because he is bound to do so (the English pun on the double meaning of the word "bond" has its equivalent in the German "Band"), and Wotan must subsequently hand it to the

giants in repayment of his contracted debt. Fafner bears off the hoard and assumes the role of its guardian dragon; but in the challenge he thus presents to the world is implied the agreement that possession is the right of the mightiest, and that the power of the ring shall not be used to forestall a trial of strength. Siegfried proves himself stronger than Fafner and becomes the ring's lord; but he is himself slain at the last because, albeit unknowingly, he breaks faith with Brünnhilde who therefore betrays him to Hagen. At no point in the action will the ring enable its holder to break a contract, but neither will the ring itself be constrained by the terms of any contractual agreement.

The disadvantages of the system of the ring, of a universe of eternal fluctuation, are obvious. Yet the system of the spear is no less imperfect. The failing in contractual rule as Wagner saw it is implicit in the Feuerbachian argument against *Willkür*, against the exercise of the conscious will. Late in 1848 he wrote a lengthy sketch for a projected drama to be entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*, which contains a "sermon" against the taking of oaths. In this sermon we can see clearly Wagner's objections to contractual government.

"Ye shall not swear"; in Oaths lay the binding law of a world that knew not Love as yet. Let every man be free to act at every moment according to Love and his ability: bound by an oath I am unfree: if in its fulfilment I do good, that good is robbed of merit (as every bounden virtue) and loses the worth of conviction; but if the Oath leads me to evil, then I sin against conviction. The Oath engenders every vice: if it binds me against my profit, I shall seek to circumvent it (as every law is circumvented), and what I should quite rightly do in pursuance of my welfare, through the Oath becomes a crime; but if I find my profit in it (without doing harm to another), then I rob myself of the moral satisfaction of doing right at every instant through my own free judgement. (VIII, 299)

The contract, bond, or oath involves commitment to a predetermined line of conduct which, because predetermined, cannot be based upon the immediate realities of sense and feeling. Contract binds the individual will to an abstract of law.

In the second Act of *Die Walküre* Wotan stands between Brünnhilde and Fricka. Brünnhilde represents the freedom of his will; but Fricka is the confirmed upholder of the principles of contract, with special emphasis upon the contract of marriage and related sexual ethics. Against her husband's laxity in such

matters Fricka continually strives to establish a rigid code of marriage and morals, and it is to this end that she lends her personal support to the policy of the spear. She sees Valhalla, the fortress from which Wotan wishes to enforce his rule, as a means of imposing marital and domestic constancy upon the errant god:

Um des Gatten Treue besorgt
muss traurig ich wohl sinnen,
wie an mich er zu fesseln,
zieht's in die Ferne ihn fort:
herrliche Wohnung,
wonniger Hausrat,
sollten mit sanftem Band
dich binden zu säumender Rast. (p. 22)

Her argument in *Die Walküre* II.i is based upon the concept of codified law which Wotan flouts by permitting Siegmund and Sieglinde to defy Hunding. Fricka represents what the prose sketch *Die Nibelungen-Mythus* calls the "moral consciousness" of the gods, the desire to govern the individual will by means of binding laws.

In order to establish Valhalla, the stronghold from which this government may be effected, Wotan is constrained to sacrifice Freia, also called Holda, who is representative of all that is free ("frei") and lovely ("hold") amongst the gods. Freedom and loveliness are imperilled by the rule of abstract law which strangles the spontaneity, the instinctive and sensuous response to reality upon which they depend for their immortality.

IV

It should be clear that each of the primary symbols, the spear and the ring, seeks to operate in the way laid down for it in the myth of which it is the focal image. The spear works in terms of the will, whilst the ring, symbol of determinism, is subject to no volition. It remains that we should see how the dialectic of ring and spear is developed in the course of the drama, and how Wotan insecurely picks his way between their incompatible worlds.

In neither of the myths did Wagner at first give much place to Wotan. Siegfried is in each case the central figure who carries the weight of the myth's philosophy. In *Die Wibelungen* he is the sacrificial sun-god who brings light to the world and therefore pays the penalty of death, and in *Oper und Drama* he is the

revolutionary individual who acts in accord with the real principles of sense and feeling against the false abstracts of convention. It was consequently *Götterdämmerung* (originally called *Siegfrieds Tod*), the drama in which Siegfried is the undisputed hero, which first took shape when Wagner began work on his text.

Wagner at first planned to absorb all the material preliminary to Siegfried's arrival at the Hall of the Gibichungs in retrospective narratives within *Siegfrieds Tod*. He had already written the prose sketch *Das Nibelungen-Mythus* in which the full course of events from Alberich's theft to Brünnhilde's death is outlined in sequence. The most striking thing about this sketch is that it has no place for any of what are, in the final version, Wotan's great scenes, amongst which are the most integrally important scenes of the *Ring*. There is no mention of the Wotan-Fricka or Wotan-Brünnhilde scenes of *Die Walküre*, nor of the Wotan-Mime, Wotan-Alberich, or Wotan-Erda-Siegfried scenes of *Siegfried*. And there is no place for the Brünnhilde-Waltraute scene of *Götterdämmerung* where the image of the absent Wotan dominates the dialogue.

As the composition progressed, however, Wotan came increasingly to the fore. Not only did Wagner make place for the many scenes in which Wotan appears but he also altered certain details of the narrative in such a way as to accentuate his part in the structure of events. In the drama, for example, Wotan is the progenitor of the Wälungs, which he is not in the sketch; in the drama the sword (Nothung) is a sign of Wotan's pledge of faith to Siegmund, which the sword (Balmung) in the sketch is not; and the figure of Erda, who does not appear in the sketch, is created in the drama to assist the progress of Wotan's philosophical development. In the finished drama it is Wotan who stands most prominently between the conflicting principles of the spear and the ring.

There are three distinct stages in the course of Wotan's uncertain efforts to reconcile the conflicting principles which face him. In each he adopts a particular line of action and a corresponding view of reality.

The first stage is that covered in *Das Rheingold*. Here Wotan is under the influence of Loge, a creature of great wit and versatility, but with no apparent values or commitments. Loge is not by nature one of the gods, neither is he socially acceptable amongst them. He does not receive a full share of Freia's golden apples, nor does he make his home in Valhalla. He is a wanderer

whose easy ways, with their deceptive appearance of freedom, attract Wotan, who sees in Loge's craft a possible solution to his dilemma. But Loge's freelance duplicity makes him the implacable enemy of stability, such that there is eventually open antagonism between his unruly fire and the authority of the spear:

an des Schaftes Runen,
frei sich zu raten
nagte zehrend sein Zahn. (p. 213)

In *Das Rheingold* Loge is still Wotan's trusted friend, and it is he who is responsible for the god's ill-considered contract with Fasolt and Fafner:

Der zum Vertrage mir riet,
versprach Freia zu lösen:
auf ihn verlass' ich mich nun. (p. 23)

It is because of Wotan's reliance on Loge's impossible promise that he becomes embroiled in the contradictory affairs of the ring and the spear. To enshrine the spear's authority he builds Valhalla; but to pay for the fortress he must win and relinquish the ring, thus undermining the very power he would establish.

Loge really represents that early stage in Wotan's progress prior to the awareness of responsibilities and deeper meanings which forces itself upon the god's attention in the fourth scene of *Das Rheingold*, a state of child-like wilfulness which sees the world as unconditionally subject to its own desires. In the end Wotan is forced to banish Loge. Experience and Fricka's rhetoric combine to impress upon him the necessity for a more responsible course of conduct, with the result that when Brünnhilde is put to sleep Loge is made to share her exile and imprisonment. Loge returns with a vengeance in the last Act of *Götterdämmerung*, but in the meantime Fricka's counsel has prevailed.

The second stage in Wotan's development is that covered in *Die Walküre*. He has abandoned the deceit and casuistry of *Das Rheingold* and taken a progressive turn towards an existentialist line of argument. When Fricka arrives to insist that the illicit union of Siegmund and Sieglinde is impermissible because of a kind hitherto unknown ("Wann—ward es erlebet,/ dass leiblich Geschwister sich liebten?"), Wotan replies that in becoming actual the event has thereby become knowable:

Heut—hast du's erlebt:

erfahre so,
 was von selbst sich fügt,
 sei zuvor auch nie es geschehn. (p. 87)

In the ensuing discussion Wotan directs his argument towards an acceptance of the existential situation whilst Fricka asserts the values of law and morality. He argues that her understanding is limited to what has become conventional (“Stets Gewohntes / nur magst du verstehn”), and that she is therefore incompetent to judge of the present. He confesses, rather rhetorically, the possibility of happenings which cannot be accounted for by inductive laws, and therefore professes himself concerned, not with laws and precedents, but with unique, individual events:

doch was noch nie sich traf,
 danach trachtet mein Sinn! (p. 89)

The procedural distinction which Wotan draws at this point between Fricka and himself is echoed on earth in the nature of the dispute between the two races which they respectively support: the Neidings and the Wälsungs. Siegmund, like Wotan, is condemned for his disregard of established values. In Hunding’s words:

Ich weiss ein wildes Geschlecht,
 nicht heilig ist ihm,
 was andren hehr:
 verhasst ist es allen und mir. (p. 72)

Siegmund has already antagonised the Neidings by interfering to prevent one of the forced marriages which are normal amongst their people (that of Hunding to Sieglinde is another). The Neidings, like Fricka, accept a code of behavior supported by the constraining emotions of possessive jealousy rather than by love. The Neidings are “the jealous ones” (*Neid* = *envy*) who impose restraint upon spontaneous desires. The emblem of their law is the hunting dog such as those kept by Hunding to pursue and rend an offender; and to this emblem is opposed the lawless and free-roaming wolf of the Wälsungs who also call themselves “Wölfings.”

The ensuing brother-sister union has the force of Wotan’s current philosophy behind it. That philosophy again relates very closely to what Wagner appreciated as revolutionary in the writings of Feuerbach. His own account of what Feuerbach meant to him uses terms reminiscent of those used by Wotan against Fricka. “The frankness,” Wagner wrote, “with which

Feuerbach explains his views . . . pleased me as much by their tragic as by their social-radical tendencies. It seemed right that the only true immortality should be that of sublime deeds and great works of art. . . . Nevertheless, from that day onward I always regarded Feuerbach as the ideal exponent of the radical release of the individual from the thralldom of accepted notions, founded on the belief in authority."¹¹ There is the same scorn of traditional values and the same emphasis upon the importance of the unique, individual action.

Just as Feuerbach's epistemology appears to release the individual from the restraint of authority, so Wotan's existentialist attitude to marriage and morals is an attempt to circumvent Fricka's moral consciousness. The attempt fails, not because of any weakness in the argument itself, but because Wotan is unable to establish that Siegmund is in reality a free agent. Wotan presents himself as necessarily accepting an inevitable course of events, a picture that cannot convince unless he is able to show that those events are independent of his will. He strikes successfully at the premise of Fricka's moral argument, but she effectively denies him the profit of his victory by revealing the anomaly of his position. Wotan is forced to acknowledge responsibility for the Wälsungs.

Wagner's reading of Feuerbach led him to adopt an epistemology which allowed as real only the world revealed by sense and feeling, and which denied reality to abstract concepts. The same philosophy is shared by Wotan in *Die Walküre* until its inefficacies are made apparent by Fricka. The philosophy which Wagner was later to encounter in Schopenhauer's work moved in the opposite direction, not towards the sensible but away from it, towards a renunciation of the world not only as idea ("Vorstellung") but also as will ("Wille"). When Wagner first read *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* in the summer of 1854 he was an immediate convert and at once recognised the relevance of Schopenhauer's position to that adopted by Wotan in the later stages of the *Ring*. "On looking afresh into my *Nibelungen* poem I recognised with surprise that the very things that now so embarrassed me theoretically had long been familiar to me in my own poetical conception. Now at last I could understand my Wotan, and I returned with chastened mind to the renewed study of Schopenhauer's book."¹²

In the interval between the last Act of *Die Walküre* and the opening of *Siegfried* Wotan's philosophy changes rather in the

way that Wagner's own was to change in 1854. "Viel erforscht' ich, / erkannte viel," says the Wanderer who, in the course of his wanderings, has turned from the optimistic philosophy of revolutionary free-will to the pessimistic resignation of passive determinism. It is a movement from the metaphysical realm of Erda to that of the Norns so that now, when Wotan meets Erda for the second time, he can no longer profit from her wisdom. In the end he dismisses her "zu ewigen Schlaf" because her ontology is no longer relevant to his philosophy.

Wotan's mood in *Siegfried* is very different from that of the anguished and often blustering god of *Die Walküre*. In the character of the Wanderer he has become a meditative observer of life rather than a would-be controller, and has learnt to accept the greater necessity which over-rules all his plans. To Alberich he says:

Dies eine, rat' ich,
merke noch recht:
Alles ist nach seiner Art;
an ihr wirst du nichts ändern. (p. 169)

The end of the conflict between the ring and the spear, the inevitable Götterdämmerung, no longer disturbs him. He earnestly desires it as his only chance of rest. To Erda, who can no longer advise him, he says,

Um der Götter Ende
grämt mich die Angst nicht,
seit mein Wunsch es—will! (p. 191)

and turns to observe what the Norns will reveal. The shattering of the spear which follows soon after is the logical consequence of Wotan's resignation of the desire to control.

V

Wotan's resignation is not itself sufficient to restore peace. The ring must be won and voluntarily resigned just as the spear has been broken. A new force is necessary for this task—the strength of the Wälsungs. In order for the Wälsungs to achieve their destined task they must first establish their independence of Wotan their progenitor. Siegmund attempts to do so, but fails. His sword, which he received indirectly from Wotan himself, shatters against the spear of his master. But whilst Siegmund is Wotan's dependent, Siegfried is an outcast from birth. He is

able to re-forged Nothung for himself and successfully to defy Wotan's authority.

Yet Siegmund does not die without laying the foundation upon which Siegfried's independent victory is to be won. His unprecedented bravery in facing Wotan's spear in order to save Sieglinde, his preference for hell with his beloved to Valhalla without her, prompts Brünnhilde to act according to the dictates of love and to ignore Wotan's decree. In this way Siegfried is saved and Brünnhilde herself becomes his destined bride. Siegmund's defiance, far from being ineffective, is a turning point in the drama, an assertion of human dignity which Wagner marks by quoting in the score as Siegmund advances into battle the title theme from Liszt's "Faust" Symphony. In Sieglinde's dream Siegmund's action presages the *Götterdämmerung* itself.

The quality of Siegfried's character has proved difficult to accept. Perhaps Siegfried is a problem because although his heroism has departed from the Byronism which marks the *Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and even *Tristan* it has not yet acquired the deeper spirituality of *Parsifal*. The naivety of his innocence is unredeemed by any humility learned of experience, so that he appears to pass roughshod through all the deep and delicate problems of the drama. Yet the opera *Siegfried* is the story of his progressive education, and its structure reveals a definite pattern of spiritual development—a pattern which, like that of Wotan's ideological progress, has three distinct stages.

Siegfried is a tale of the hero's quest for identity, in which he seeks for knowledge of his parentage and for companionship—a twofold search which leads him to a single goal. In Act I Siegfried tells how he has sounded his horn in the forest in the hope of attracting some companion ("Gesell") other than the objectionable Mime:

Nach bessrem Gesellen sucht' ich,
als daheim mir einer sitzt;
im tiefen Walde mein Horn
liess ich da hallend tönen:
ob sich mir gesellte
ein guter Freund?
das frug ich mit dem Getön. (p. 137)

The questioning melody of Siegfried's horn-call becomes the token of his search. It occurs three times in the opera, and each time Siegfried is answered by a different companion.

While the hero hunts for friends and family, Mime's mind

is wholly occupied with thought of the advantage he might gain from the youth, with what repayment ("Lohn") he might win for his trouble in rearing the orphan child. A mere count of the number of times Siegfried speaks the word *Gesell* and Mime the word *Lohn* would be sufficient to indicate the gulf between them. Their different attitudes reflect a conflict we find elsewhere in the *Ring* between the view of society as ordered by obligation, contract, and profit, and the attempt to create a new society from spontaneous, unselfish relationships.

Siegfried's first horn-call is answered by the bear, a better companion than Mime, who serves to impress upon the audience and upon the recalcitrant dwarf the strength and prowess of the hero. This strength terrifies Mime into revealing Siegfried's mother's name and the fact of his father's death in battle. The second call is answered by Fafner, whom Siegfried greets with the words:

Da hätte mein Lied
mir was Liebes erblasen!
Du wärst mir ein saubrer Gesell! (p. 175)

Fafner dies without revealing much, but his blood is the means to Siegfried's next encounter. Led by the woodbird he approaches the rock of Brünnhilde and, sounding the call a third time, cries:

Lustig! lustig!
Jetzt lock' ich ein liebes Gesell! (p. 197)

With Brünnhilde his search ends, for in her he finds not only true companionship but also an imagistic substitute for his parents. When he first sees her armour-clad figure lying on the mountain-top, he at once assumes, naturally, that he has come upon a male warrior:

Ha! in Waffen ein Mann!—
wie mahnt mich wonnig sein Bild! (p. 198)

We are at once reminded of his attempt to visualize his father in *Siegfried* II.ii. Clearly the momentary hope now enters his mind that this sleeping warrior might be Siegmund. But as soon as he removes the breastplate he perceives that it is a woman he has found, and his next thought is that he has discovered his mother:

So starb nicht meine Mutter?
Schliefe die minnige nur? (p. 201)

Brünnhilde, awakened by this time, disabuses him; but the

search is satisfactorily ended nonetheless. In Brünnhilde he finds his full identity.

The three stages whereby Siegfried rises to identity are three stages in his learning, each governed by a specific type of teaching and a particular mentor. Siegfried's first companion, the bear, stands for the many forest creatures from whom the youth gains his only knowledge during his life with Mime. From them he learns of the biological facts of life, and infers an ethical code from their behaviour:

So ruhten im Busch
auch Rehe gepaart,
selbst wilde Füchse und Wölfe:
Nahrung brachte
zum Nest das Männchen,
das Weibchen säugte die Welpen.
Da lernt' ich wohl,
was Liebe sei:
der Mutter entwandt' ich
die Welpen nie. (p. 141)

He learns of love from the careful observation of natural, biological facts; but like the young Parsifal he yet remains without moral or spiritual understanding. He has no abstract concept of good and evil, and little idea of human sentiments. (For these reasons he is fearless; and his fearlessness, again like that of Parsifal, is grounded on both the virtue of innocence and the sin of ignorance. It is with the knowledge won on Brünnhilde's rock that he learns the fear which comes with awareness of humanity and responsibility.)

From his second companion, Fafner, Siegfried learns not fear (as Mime had hoped) but language. The dragon's blood makes verbally intelligible to him the world of the forest which had previously offered no more than a mute example. Siegfried now advances from mere observation of perceptible realities to consideration of conceptual problems. From the wood bird he learns to distinguish truth from falsehood in the person of Mime, to comprehend and confront the nature of evil which had previously given rise only to instinctive aversion. At this point he becomes possessed of the ring.

From Brünnhilde, his third companion, he learns of love, the redeeming love which will, in Wotan's words, "bring about the salvation of the world" ("Wirkt . . . erlösende Weltentat"). Without this love neither natural sensibility nor conceptual rationality will avail. Like Wotan the Wanderer, Siegfried has

come now to a position where he stands outside the embroilments of the spear and the ring. Wotan resigns authoritarian intervention in favour of philosophical determinism, and the spear is shattered: Siegfried learns the value of love, in the pursuit of which he ignores the power of the ring. Wotan's resolution, as Wagner retrospectively claimed, echoes the ideology of Schopenhauer; whilst Siegfried, whose impregnable strength lies in his refusal to recognise any power other than the sensible and emotional aspects of his being, retains something of the revolutionary innocence which Wagner associated with Feuerbach.

Siegfried is unassailable for so long as he does not use the power of the ring. For him the treasure is a plaything which he leaves as he finds it in Fafner's cave. The ring he gives to Brünnhilde as a love-token. But he is tricked by Hagen into employment of the Tarnhelm, the ring's companion; and this is the cause of his downfall. It is the Tarnhelm which successively betrays every holder of the ring. It tempts the holder to abandon his natural self in favour of a shape in which, under the circumstances, he is more vulnerable.¹³ Thus Alberich becomes a toad which Wotan can capture and bind; Fafner becomes a dragon which the hero, by the laws of myth and tradition, may slay; and Siegfried himself takes on the form of the weak and vain Gunther, thus divorcing himself from Brünnhilde and ultimately exposing himself to Hagen's spear. The Tarnhelm is the means whereby the ring escapes one owner and passes to the next, for it represents that insidious corruption of personal integrity which is the price the ring-bearer pays for his power.

VI

In the course of the drama Wotan and Siegfried each progress to a point where they are prepared to lay aside spear and ring respectively. So ends the cycle which began with the general awakening in *Das Rheingold*.

In the first scene the sun, the awakener ("die Weckerin"), rouses the gold which sleeps beneath the Rhine. The Rheinmaidens chant:

Lugt, Schwestern!
 Die Weckerin lacht in den Grund.
 Durch den grünen Schwall
 den wonnigen Schläfer sie grüsst.
 Jetzt küsst sie sein Auge,
 dass er es öffne. . . . (p. 17)

As the second scene begins the gods awake from their sleep on the river bank and are at once attracted by the sight of Valhalla which thereafter becomes the symbol of their wakeful consciousness. Ring and spear are thus successively aroused. Wotan remains wakeful to the end when Valhalla is destroyed and Brünnhilde calls him back to rest ("Ruhe, ruhe, du Gott!"), but in the meantime both the ring and Brünnhilde herself are forced back into a sleep from which only Siegfried can waken them.

In *Die Wibelungen* Siegfried is the hero of a sun myth. In the *Ring* he is the earthly counterpart of the sun, sharing the title of awakener ("Wecker"), who arouses Fafner and Brünnhilde in succession from sleep. Fafner is essentially a sleeping dragon, a personification of somnolence. The name *Fafner*, spelt *Fafnir* or *Svafnir* in the sagas, is related to the Old Norse *svefja* = *to cast asleep* and is therefore a cognate of the Old English *swefn*=*dream*.¹⁴ Whilst Fafner guards the hoard at Neidhole the ring is effectively asleep. When Siegfried slays Fafner he murders sleep, and thereby restores the ring to wakefulness. The awakening of Fafner is an essential prelude to the climactic revival of Brünnhilde. Only the slayer of sleep is able to arouse the one put to sleep by Wotan.

Eyes as the sign of wakefulness are of great importance to the symbolism of the *Ring*. Brünnhilde's eyes are kissed asleep by Wotan, and their awakened gaze is the last vision of the dying Siegfried. Siegmund associates the gleam of Nothung's blade with the glance ("Blick") of Sieglinde; and the gods, to whom consciousness is all important (whereas Fafner is quite content to sleep), retain Freia's "glance" in exchange for the Ring. Yet the most curious eye-symbolism is that developed around Wotan who has but one eye from the beginning and who, in the course of the drama, allows us to infer three mutually exclusive explanations of how he came to lose the other.

In the first place he claims that he sacrificed his eye in the process of winning Fricka for his wife. Later, in his exchange with Siegfried, he clearly implies that his loss is a consequence of the creation of the Wälsungs and that they are, metaphorically, his missing eye:

Mit dem Auge,
das als andres mir fehlt,
erblickst du selber das eine,
das mir zum Sehen verblieb. (p. 195)

But in the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* the Norns offer yet a

third explanation, claiming that Wotan forfeited his eye when he took a draught from their spring of knowledge.

On the face of things all is confusion and contradiction, but there is meaning in the three explanations and in the sequence in which they appear. Each relates to a particular stage in the course of Wotan's philosophical development. In his first stage the power-seeker weds Fricka, the upholder of contractual rule, for reasons which can be thought of only as political. Next he tries to circumvent the ossified code to which he finds his love of power has committed him by creating the Wälsungs, a race of revolutionaries dedicated to the principles of sense and feeling and to the overthrow of outworn conventions. In the final stage, when he finds that he can no longer control what he has created, he becomes a determinist and seeks instruction from the Norns. At each stage the sacrifice of the eye, symbol of wakeful consciousness, is offered in return for the establishment of a particular way of thinking.

The *Ring* is a story of the inconclusive progress of thought through a dualistic universe. From the irreconcilable dissension between the spear of stability and the ring of mutability Wotan and Siegfried each pursue their threefold course of mind to a position of transcendence and abnegation. In each case there is a progression from irresponsible ignorance through knowledge and involvement to renunciation—a pattern reflected in the greater cycle of movement through awakening to consciousness and final return to sleep. The universe of the *Ring* is static insofar as it is conceived in terms of a continual and inevitable duel between the firm assertion of the spear and the elusive coil of the ring, but from within the cycle ascends the clear line of rising understanding which Wagner was later to isolate and confirm in the apotheosis of his *Parsifal*.

Wagner's last hero has, initially, much in common with Siegfried—the same self-confidence and the same childhood isolation from all education—but whereas Siegfried has to find his teachers as and where he can, Parsifal has Minerva herself to attend him. The meeting of Parsifal the nameless and Kundry of the many names is the meeting of man with both a field of knowledge and with knowledge itself. For Kundry, the bearer of tidings who never lies, is not only a bringer of news but also, as the pun on *Kundry* and *Kunde* several times tells us, a very embodiment of knowledge. At the same time she is the spirit of what, in *Parsifal*,

stands for the objective world of nature. Her restless theme merges with that of the lake waters; she is like an animal, and argues the sanctity of animal life ("Sind die Tiere hier nicht heilig?"); she sleeps in the bushes, and her redemption by Parsifal's Karfreitagszauber is coinstantaneous with the redemption of the meadows and creatures of nature. Kundry is to Parsifal not only the means whereby learning is acquired but also the field of its operation.

Yet knowledge in itself is neutral. Like Kundry it will serve both good and evil masters. When Parsifal is confronted by Kundry he is to be either enlightened or seduced, and the world of nature will accordingly be either redeemed (as it is around the Gralsburg in Act III) or perverted (as around the Zauber-schloss in Act II). That Parsifal is enlightened and not seduced by Kundry's ambiguous advances is, in the last analysis, the result of divine ordination.

The ramifications of the symbols of knowledge and, in particular, of the various uses of knowledge to good and evil ends, form a separate subject for study. It is here sufficient to indicate that *Parsifal* is a logical successor to *Siegfried* as a portrayal of the education of a "natural" man. That Parsifal succeeds where Siegfried's fate is at best ambiguous is perhaps a reflection of the better education of the later hero. For *Parsifal* even more than *Siegfried* is a concentrated study of the rise of intellect.

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NOTES

¹ Richard Wagner, *Werke in zwei Bänden*, ed. Peter A. Faessler (Zurich, 1966), II, 99-100. Hereafter page references are given to the second volume of this edition.

² See the etymology of "valkyrie" in the *OED*.

³ Cf. Robert Donington, *Wagner's "Ring" and its Symbols* (London, 1963), pp. 166-69. Here, as elsewhere, my interpretation comes close to remarks made by Mr. Donington, whose analysis of the *Ring* is based upon the interesting but still questionable hypotheses of C. G. Jung's psychology. It is my aim to show that whatever value Wagner's symbols may have as archetypes or reflections of the unconscious, they are nonetheless indicative of conscious intellectual processes. I have further tried to demonstrate that Wagner's interest in the education and philosophical development of his chief characters can be discovered from his own writings on mythology, and it is from these writings that the coordinates for my discussion are taken.

⁴ The poems were then in their final form except for the inclusion of Brünnhilde's "love is better than gold" speech which Wagner eventually removed at Cosima's instigation when he came to score that part of the work in 1872. For details of the complex chronology of the composition of the *Ring* see *Richard Wagners Skizzen und Entwürfe zur Ring-Dichtung*, ed. Otto Ströbel (Munich, 1930).

⁵ Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1804-1872), *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit* (1830).

⁶ Richard Wagner, *Prose Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York, 1966), II, 155. Unless otherwise stated, Wagner's prose is quoted from this edition to which references will be given hereafter.

⁷ See *Prose Works*, II, 180-91.

⁸ This etymology is suggested by A. Heusler in *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. J. Hoops (1911-19), IV, 444; and by H. Kuhn in *Anzeiger für deutschen Altertum*, LVI (1937), 156. See *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. and trans. R. G. Finch (London, 1965), p. xxxv.

⁹ Cf. Donington, p. 109.

¹⁰ Cf. Donington, pp. 46ff, where this parallelism is alluded to in terms of the Jungian concept of the "shadow."

¹¹ Richard Wagner, *My Life* (London, 1963), p. 522.

¹² *My Life*, p. 616.

¹³ Cf. Donington, p. 227.

¹⁴ See Ferdinand Holthausen, *Vergleichendes und etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altwestnordischen* (Göttingen, 1948), "Svafnir," "svefja," and "svefn."