



WILEY

---

The Psychological Motivation of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*

Author(s): Robert A. Hall, Jr.

Source: *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (May, 1963), pp. 245-257

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the American Association of Teachers of German

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/402543>

Accessed: 07-11-2017 23:10 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*American Association of Teachers of German, Wiley* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The German Quarterly*

# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATION OF WAGNER'S *GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG*

Robert A. Hall, Jr.

Modern opinion is divided with respect to the literary merits of Wagner's *Ring* tetralogy. Among the general public and especially among music critics, there is a strong tendency to regard the *Ring* as heady and boresome,<sup>1</sup> a confused conglomeration of ancient Nordic mythological figures deceiving, fighting and killing each other in a murk of endlessly repeated, bombastic narration.<sup>2</sup> During the Hitler period, the favor shown by the Nazis to Wagner's works, above all the *Ring*, aroused an understandable but quite irrational hostility in many.<sup>3</sup> *Die Götterdämmerung* has fared particularly badly at the critics' hands; even Bernard Shaw, one of the most favorable of

<sup>1</sup> E.g. P. H. Láng (*Music in Western Civilization* [New York, 1941], p. 982), who speaks of "the cosmic-German implications and leaden mythology of the *Ring*."

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the remarks of R. Capell (as quoted by B. H. Haggin in *The Listener's Companion* [New Brunswick, N.J., 1956], pp. 128-9), who spoke of "many things in Wagner which could only be considered as incoherent, tautologous, morally reprehensible, or even dull," and considered "the radical falsity of the libretto of the *Ring*" to be "that the simple barbarians of the old saga are endowed by Wagner with a new consciousness and a manner of expressing themselves which are by no means simple—and all the while they retain their antique savagery of action. Wotan's cunning and Siegfried's brutal powers were all very well before these persons took to heroising themselves, but then they became unpardonable." According to Capell, Siegfried as "a symbol, an ideal, a demi-god, a saviour" is "nothing but an ordinary looting *soudard*," and Wotan, "the substance of the Intelligence of the Present, turns out to be the substance of a fraudulent army contractor." Haggin goes on to give his own opinion of the "endless narrative declamatory, endless bombastic proclamation, endless literal illustration of words and action . . . occasional tawdriness and cheapness . . . as unendurable as the philosophical posturings and the equally pretentious and laughable verbal jargon of the texts."

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the remarks of Carl Engels, a noted German-American musicologist, as quoted by S. Robb (in his *Foreword to The Ring of the Nibelung* [translated by S. Robb, New York, 1960]): "If Hitler likes Wagner's music, it is all the more reason why every non-Nazi should shun and loathe it."

Wagner's exponents, found little to commend in it from a literary point of view, calling the final scene of *Siegfried* and the whole of *Götterdämmerung* "opera and nothing but opera."<sup>4</sup>

Positive interpretations of the *Ring* are of several types, and can be classified according to the level on which it is interpreted:

1. Literalistic, in which the dramas are taken at their face values, as representations of old Germanic gods and heroes, embodying a glorification of Germanic valor and destiny of world-conquest. The gods are interpreted as true divinities, and the ultimate catastrophe is ascribed purely to the treachery of Hagen against Siegfried (the pan-Germanists' useful excuse for all moral defects and military defeats, in the mythology of the "stab-in-the-back"). This is the obvious, superficial interpretation placed on the *Ring* by the ordinary naïve opera-goer who pays no more attention to the content of the tetralogy than he does to that of any ordinary operatic libretto, and which was at the base of the approval accorded the *Ring* by such pan-Germanists as the notorious Houston Stewart Chamberlain<sup>5</sup> and their followers, the Nazis.

2. Allegorical, taking the action and characters of the *Ring* as being in some way symbolical, of various types of relations which fall into three main classes:

a. Cultural, i.e. symbolizing situations and relations in the human world as we know it.<sup>6</sup> For the *Ring*, this type of interpretation has been given chiefly in Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite*, discussing the allegory of the tetralogy in terms of the relations between government, capital and labor. The gods are taken as types of human beings, and the earlier Siegfried and Brünnhilde as being higher than the "gods",

<sup>4</sup> *The Perfect Wagnerite* (second edition, New York, 1909 and later printings), p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. in his *Richard Wagner* (München, 1896; English translation, Munich, 1897 and London, 1900).

<sup>6</sup> For the general principles of the interpretation of cultural symbolism in literature, cf. my "Cultural Symbolism in Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*," *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli* (Sezione Germanica), I, part 2 (1959), 127-40; and for the best exemplification of this type of analysis that has yet appeared, see Eric A. Havelock, *The Crucifixion of Intellectual Man* (Boston, 1951), an interpretation of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* in terms of the fundamental human conflict between wisdom and power.

in Shaw's interpretation. Recent criticisms of Shaw tend to take his interpretation as having been purely socialistic, and hence excessively narrow.<sup>7</sup>

b. Psychological, in which the characters of the *Ring* (and of Wagner's other music-dramas) are taken to represent abstractions or projections of human types revealed by C. G. Jung's "depth-psychology."<sup>8</sup> When carried to an extreme, and combined with pan-Germanism, this type of analysis can lead, for example, to an interpretation of Brünnhilde as "die göttliche Volksseele" (in accordance with Jung's doctrines of the "collective unconscious"), and we are told that Wagner has chiselled in the *Ring* "die Züge seiner lebendigen Schau in den Schicksalsablauf des germanischen Götter-, Volks-, Sippen- und Menschentums."<sup>9</sup>

c. Other-worldly, especially as an embodiment of esoteric or occultist philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Such an interpretation has the merit of being somewhat in accord with Wagner's well-known interest in Eastern philosophy, especially Buddhism; but it remains in the realm of the ultimately undemonstrable and depends on the reader's acceptance of Rosicrucian or other occultist outlooks.

It is my intent here to discuss the *Ring*, and especially *Götter-*

<sup>7</sup> E.g. the remarks of E. Blom in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (fifth edition, London, 1954), VII, 743 (*s.v.* Shaw, George Bernard): "It is difficult nowadays to take Shaw quite seriously, when he makes this exposition of the 'Ring' an attempt to show that work, which has cost more money, and made more, than any other enterprise in operatic history, as a denunciation of the evils of capitalism."

<sup>8</sup> Exemplified in J. Bertram: *Mythos, Symbol, Idee in Richard Wagners Musikdramen* (Hamburg, 1927), particularly in the section "Der Ring des Nibelungen als Gestaltung germanischer Welt- und Schicksalschau," pp. 136-221. Significantly, Bertram's three chief guides in the interpretation of Wagner are Jung, Rudolf Steiner and . . . Chamberlain.

<sup>9</sup> Bertram, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., most recently, O. J. Hartmann, *Die Esoterik im Werk Richard Wagners* (Freiburg i. Br., 1960). Some aspects of Hartmann's book, especially his attack on the current re-staging of Wagner's music-dramas at Bayreuth (Ch. V, "Landschaft, Pflanzen und Tiere als Mitspieler in den Mysteriendramen/Probleme der Inszenierung," pp. 60-8) are clearly an answer to some of the naïvetés inherent in Bertram's and similar interpretations.

*dämmerung*, in the light of its cultural symbolism. This aspect of the *Ring* has been neglected in recent Wagner criticism, primarily because its chief exposition (in Shaw's *Perfect Wagnerite*) has been considered as too narrowly restricted to the economic level—e.g. Alberich as symbolizing nineteenth-century capitalists, the Nibelung dwarfs as wage-slaves, Nibelheim as a factory, etc. Yet this is only a special case of the more general cultural symbolism involved. The *Ring* as a whole is an allegory of the difficulties and of the impasse confronting any man who tries to establish power over others, in what Norbert Wiener has termed "the human control of human beings."<sup>11</sup> Wotan is the type of the empire-builder, in the broadest sense of the term. Anyone who tries, as Wotan does, to establish a rule allied with law and ethical conduct (Fricka), but at the same time making use of brute force (the giants) is inevitably contracting a tight situation, out of which he can maneuver himself only by unethical means (robbing Alberich of his ill-gotten gains but not giving them back to their rightful owner) with the help of trickery and deceit (Loge). The *Rheingold* is simply a presentation, in straightforward symbolical terms, of the empire-builder's initial difficulties and, at least from the short-term point of view, apparent success in surmounting them.

Yet the long-term problem remains, of how the empire-builder Wotan is to rid himself of the faults inherent in his newly-built rule, and of the threat posed by totally unscrupulous greed (Alberich), which is still in existence although temporarily checked. *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* represent two successive stages of Wotan's phantasy<sup>12</sup> of wish-fulfillment at this point; and *Die Götterdämmerung*, a still further layer of phantasy on Wotan's part—this time, however, involving not wish-fulfillment but his realization (still in symbolical terms) of what the actual outcome of his phantasy would be. The *Walküre* embodies Wotan's perception of his own inability to surmount the difficulties; his hope that he might directly initiate and control the process of saving his rule; and his realization that he could not

<sup>11</sup> In the book of that name (Boston, 1950; reprinted New York, 1954, Doubleday-Anchor Books no. A-34).

<sup>12</sup> I here follow the graphic distinction between *phantasy* (as a psychological term) and *fantasy* (as a literary term), established by Bernard De Voto, in *The World of Fiction* (Boston, 1950), p. 8, fn. 1.

do so because forbidden by the law which he has espoused, and that he would be forced to abandon the forces he had created to save himself, and also to put away from his own reach (and that of all except the most daring) the highest intelligence and aspiration (Brünnhilde) which he himself has begotten and which is the best part of himself. *Siegfried* represents his further wish that a hero might arise, independently of Wotan's own will (through the mating of Siegmund and Sieglinde) yet embodying what is strongest, most heroic and most masculine in Wotan himself, and penetrate past all artificial barriers (the ring of fire) to unite with the "inner thought and will of Godhead,"<sup>13</sup> so that he would establish a new rule which would make that of Wotan and his order of gods unnecessary.

So far, this constitutes a set of phantasies on Wotan's part; but what would actually happen in the world of reality if such a hero were to arise and to have at his disposal the intelligence and wisdom embodied in a Brünnhilde, with which to join in conquering the world? Would he have the sense to make his bride his necessary equal, or even in some ways his superior and guiding power, in order to accomplish this task? The answer given in *Götterdämmerung* is an unqualified *no*. The concluding drama of the *Ring* shows us a Siegfried who refuses to make use of the wisdom which Brünnhilde brings him; who goes away from her and leaves her on her inaccessible mountain-top, instead of taking her with him as his companion and aide; who eventually forgets her so much as to be willing to hand her over to another man, an ordinary mortal; and who thereby, since he has deprived himself of the insights she might have given him, makes her his mortal enemy (at least for a time) and thus lays himself wide open to the vengeance of Alberich carried out through Hagen. This vengeance would be completely effective, if it were not for the *dei ex machina* at the end (Siegfried's arm raised in warning, the Rhine overflowing its banks, and the Rhine-maidens recovering the Ring); Hagen and through him, Alberich would take the Ring and make themselves masters of the world. Shaw was quite wrong in saying "the ultimate catastrophe of the Saga cannot by any perversion of ingenuity be adapted to the perfectly clear allegorical design of the Rhine Gold, the Valkyries, and Siegfried."<sup>14</sup> Actually,

<sup>13</sup> *The Perfect Wagnerite*, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Wagner foresaw, far better than Shaw, the course of events during the twentieth century; modern history has justified Wagner's symbolical presentation of the catastrophe of modern civilization in *Die Götterdämmerung*. Shaw was indeed right in entitling the sub-chapter from which the above quotation was taken "Back to —— Again";<sup>15</sup> but he should have filled the blank slot with the word "reality" rather than "opera."

What justification is there for the interpretation of Siegfried's behavior given in the preceding paragraph, and especially for the statement that Siegfried rejects Brünnhilde? The key lies in two hitherto neglected elements of the drama: first, the dialogue between Brünnhilde and Siegfried in the second part of the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*; and, second, the two magic potions which Hagen gives Siegfried, the one to make him forget Brünnhilde (Act I, sc. 2) and the other to make him remember her (Act III, sc. 2). Just before Siegfried departs from Brünnhilde's fastness, she tells him that in his wanderings he is to be the agent of her will, and to be her arm; Siegfried repeats these statements, but wondering, with what is clearly the beginning of rejection:

Durch deine Tugend allein  
soll so ich Taten noch wirken?  
Meine Kämpfe kiesest du,  
meine Siege kehren zu dir:  
auf deines Rosses Rücken,  
in deines Schildes Schirm,  
nicht Siegfried acht' ich mich mehr,  
ich bin nur Brünnhildes Arm.

The theme of the knight going off on his wanderings in search of adventure and leaving his wife at home was, of course, a commonplace element of mediæval tales, e.g. Yvain Laudine in Chrestien de Troyes' and Hartmann von Aue's poems, and many others. Wagner took over this feature and, as with other aspects of the story, re-interpreted it. After all, if Siegfried is to establish a new order that is to replace the rule of Wotan and the gods, we would expect him to take Brünnhilde along with him, so that she might aid him in so doing, and indeed he might be expected to follow her guidance. His departure without her marks, on the contrary, the beginning of his rejection of her. This is psychologically credible, on several levels.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Central European men have never been inclined to admit that women could be their equals or superiors, and Siegfried's unwillingness to accept Brünnhilde as mentor and guide, purely on the grounds of sexual jealousy, is a very characteristically Central European masculine attitude. On the symbolic level, strength has traditionally been unready to follow the guidance of wisdom, preferring to consider itself qualified to "go it alone" and even, on occasion, doing all the harm that it can to intellect and intellectual activity.<sup>16</sup> In *Siegfried*, the hero (as Shaw pointed out) typifies primarily the protestant, even anarchist frame of mind; in *Die Götterdämmerung*, we have, rather, Siegfried as the unintelligent anti-intellectual. Siegfried begins to show, from the very beginning of *Die Götterdämmerung*, his fatal flaw of character, his *hybris*, in underestimating Brünnhilde and his need of her: without her, he can be only a brave but stupid, easily duped, lummo. The Rhine-maidens know this well, and berate Siegfried roundly for it (Act III, sc. 1), but he is too conceited and foolish to heed them.

After Siegfried has left Brünnhilde, we are not told how long his wanderings take; but it must be a relatively long time, several years, not the few days or weeks that it would take him to sail directly down the Rhine (as is usually assumed on the basis of the brief orchestral interlude known as "Siegfrieds Rheinfahrt"). We are justified in assuming this, on the basis of the references that Siegfried makes in the later part of *Götterdämmerung* to his encounter with Fafner and his discovery of Brünnhilde as being a story "aus meinen jungen Tagen" (Act III, sc. 2). He has also been wandering long enough to have forgotten to pay attention to the voice of nature, in the birds' song, of which he is by now contemptuous: "Seit lange acht' ich des Lallens nicht mehr" (*ibid.*).

Siegfried eventually arrives at Gunther's home, where his fame has preceded him (another evidence of a fairly long interval of time having elapsed), and is here given the magic potion which induces forgetfulness of Brünnhilde. However, as has been pointed out,<sup>17</sup> a magic potion in Wagner is simply a symbol for the release of an

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the highly acute and penetrating discussion in the first part of Havelock, *op. cit.* (pp. 1-103), embodying many parallels to the situation as set forth symbolically in *Die Götterdämmerung*.

<sup>17</sup> E. Newman, *The Wagner Operas* (New York, 1949), pp. 197-8, 214; and Hartmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-7.

already existing and irresistible desire; this is often remarked in the case of Tristan and Isolde's drinking the love-potion, and it is surprising that it has not been so widely recognized in connection with Siegfried and the drink of oblivion. Siegfried is simply desirous of escaping from Brünnhilde's domination; he has left her back there on the rock, and by now he has forgotten her so far that he is quite willing to hand her over to someone else, even a new-found acquaintance. Symbolically, this rings true: those men who pride themselves on their strength have no desire to be dominated by intelligence (which they regard as weak and womanish), and they escape from its rule as soon as possible, preferring to forget about its existence and caring nothing about its fate. This has been the typical attitude of anti-intellectualism in our time, not only in America, but in many other countries as well, as shown in the traditional hostility of "town" towards "gown" in university communities, and in the contempt of "hard-headed" men on all levels (economic, social, political) for the use of wisdom and culture in guiding our society, from the nineteenth century through the days of the New Deal and down to our time.<sup>18</sup>

Brünnhilde, left alone on her rock and without the experience of the world of men which Siegfried is gaining in his wanderings, remains so attached to the idea of Siegfried as hero that she will give up nothing of his, particularly not the Ring, of whose malignant powers she refuses to be sufficiently aware. Intellect, when abandoned to its own dreamings by overly selfish anti-intellectuals, does not acquire a sufficient knowledge of the world to reject sufficiently the latter's reliance on greed and power. Just so is it possible for intellectual people, at the beginning of any revolutionary epoch, to believe in the saving power of their revolutionary allies, without realizing that they will eventually be ruined by the force of greed and the love

<sup>18</sup> Exemplifications may be found in almost any issue of any daily paper; an especially relevant instance of intense hatred for wisdom, knowledge and culture is contained in the following quotation from a widely syndicated columnist, cited by A. J. Liebling in the *New Yorker* (Nov. 25, 1961, p. 221): "These days you hear nothing but the symphony, the opera and the ballet, a lot of Russian tomatoes bouncing around like a bunch of elephants . . . There comes a time when a free-born American citizen gets good and sore the way those culture-bums push clean-living, God-fearing, baby-having Americans around shoving culture at us."

of power for its own sake.<sup>19</sup> Hence, when Brünnhilde's sister Waltraute brings her the urgent warning, born of Wotan's tragic experience, to relinquish the Ring, she does not realize that the cause of the entire trouble is in the Ring itself, symbolizing human beings' desire of domination over each other through the love of gain, and that if either she or Siegfried retain the Ring, they are inevitably doomed thereby. If Siegfried and Brünnhilde had gone ahead to establish an ideal rule on earth, their first step would have had to be the return of the Ring, the Tarnhelm and the rest of the Rhinegold to the Rhine-maidens; not even the most heroic rulers can serve both God and Mammon,<sup>20</sup> can establish complete justice and retain selfish greed as one of their instruments of rule.

Not only Siegfried, but also Brünnhilde manifests a tragic flaw of character. Brünnhilde's *hybris* is the opposite of Siegfried's: whereas he does not realize his need of and dependence on her, she is excessively attached to him, and does not realize the nature of his attitude towards her nor even the possibility of there being a change in it. (After all, she has had considerably less experience of life as a human being than even Siegfried with his extensive acquaintance with the deep forest and his long contact with at least one person, even if that one person is only the dwarf Mime!) The tragedy of *Die Götterdämmerung* is caused by refusal to return the Ring to its proper place in time, on both Brünnhilde's and Siegfried's part; but the refusal is motivated by different reasons. Here, as in other epic conflicts, the fault is not only on one side: the tragedy is due to flaws in the characters of both protagonists, flaws of similar fundamental nature but opposite in their manifestation.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Cf., in real life, the fate of many intellectuals who espoused Fascism or Nazism (e.g. the philosopher Giovanni Gentile, whose reform of elementary education was one of the few real accomplishments of Italian Fascist rule).

<sup>20</sup> The Biblical term *Mammon* meant specifically the gain, the extra profit left over for the business man after all his expenses had been met; cf. A. Honeyman, "The Etymology of *mammon*," *Archivum Linguisticum*, IV (1952), 60-5. Jesus' words "Ye cannot serve both God and Mammon" mean, therefore, quite specifically "You cannot serve both God and the Profit Motive."

<sup>21</sup> There is a very similar situation in the *Chanson de Roland*, where the catastrophe at Roncesvalles is due to a tragic flaw in the characters of both Roland and Ganelon, both misconceiving their duty

When Brünnhilde conspires with Hagen for Siegfried's undoing, therefore, it is quite natural and psychologically true—to the historical conception of the Brynhild of the sagas as a woman wronged; to Wagner's re-interpretation of Brünnhilde as a personage in the drama; and to the symbolic significance of Brünnhilde vis-à-vis Siegfried, as the incarnation of wisdom and intelligence betrayed by unintelligent strength. We have had many instances of such hostility in our day, especially in the instances of intellectuals (particularly scientists) who have gone over to their countries' enemies because they feel that they or their ideals have been betrayed. Brünnhilde's character changes, of course, as she gains experience through the course of *Die Götterdämmerung*; but the sudden hatred she conceives for Siegfried is natural and to be expected under the circumstances, particularly symbolically.

But then Siegfried suddenly realizes what Brünnhilde should have meant to him, and remembers how he came to her and had her for his own. This is the justification for which Hagen has been seeking, to accuse Siegfried of treason to his sworn companion Gunther; in fact, Siegfried is no longer useful to Hagen (and to Alberich, who is still in the background), since he has already performed his chief service to him, that of getting Brünnhilde onto Hagen's side and thereby bringing the Ring within the grasp of Hagen and Alberich. Similarly, an honest but stupid anti-intellectual who has been hoodwinked by those who are animated by a pure lust for power, will be treated as a mere fool to be liquidated as soon as possible and robbed of his sources of power (economic or social) over his fellow-men. If he shows any sign of beginning to use his intelligence again, that will be a further ground for liquidating him all the quicker. Here again, the magic potion is simply a symbol for a change of heart which has already taken place in Siegfried. Even Siegfried's closing apostrophe to Brünnhilde, sung operatically by the hero with a spear sticking in his back, rings psychologically true: the anti-intellectual who has come to grief because he despised wisdom often realizes his mistake, even if it is only at the very time he is being liquidated by the enemies to whom he abandoned the use of the intellectual re-

to God and Emperor, with Ganelon thinking too much of his own self and Roland thinking too little. Cf. R. A. Hall, Jr., "Ganelon and Roland," *Modern Language Quarterly*, VI (1945), 263-70; and "On Individual Authorship in the *Roland*," to appear in *Symposium*.

sources on which he himself should have been drawing.

With Siegfried's assassination, however, the natural course of the conflict has come to an end, and the rest of *Die Götterdämmerung* is a conclusion of the *deus ex machina* type, which serves to underline the difference between what would actually happen and what we are shown on the stage. In the normal course of events, Hagen would simply take the Ring from the dead Siegfried's finger; he and Alberich would proceed to make themselves masters of the world; Brünnhilde would be irrevocably tied to their service; and they would also take over the rule established by Wotan, either liquidating the former gods or (more likely) maintaining them as false fronts for their own rule. Some might even consider that this has actually happened in the modern world, which is already ruled by the Alberichs and the Hagens of our time; and that the next step (which, some might say, has also already taken place) would be for the Alberichs and Hagens and their like to fall to quarrelling over world power and fighting among themselves for it.

In the *deus ex machina* conclusion which Wagner has supplied, we have again a return to Wotan's dream-phantasies, of the way he would wish to see everything end, even when he realizes that the hoped-for redemption of the world by a heroic couple would come to nought because the powerful hero would be too stupid and his bride unable to contribute her wisdom in the proper way. There would be only one way out: to stop the whole show and go back to the primordial state of affairs. For this to happen, Wotan's own wisdom, embodied in Brünnhilde, would have to take command and direct proceedings; Hagen would have to be prevented by some means or other from seizing the Ring; the entire existing order of human society (symbolized by the hall of the Gibichungs) and the rule of the gods would lose its power and be destroyed, the conflagration being so great as to reach, symbolically, even to Valhalla; and the primal order would have to take over again (the Rhine magically overflowing its banks). At the end of her amusing and very penetrating analysis of the *Ring*,<sup>22</sup> Anna Russell observes quite rightly: "And after sitting through all of this, you're exactly where you started, twenty hours ago!" But this, strange as it may seem, is the entire point of the Ring tetralogy: that the whole process of empire-building

<sup>22</sup> American Columbia record no. ML-4733, side A.

is wrong from the start, and bound to lead to catastrophe; and that the only way of avoiding such catastrophe is to go back to where we started from. Why should Wagner have taken four dramas and twenty hours of music to set this forth? Because our entire culture is so deeply sunk in the slavery of greed and selfishness (is so completely controlled by Alberich through the Ring) that such an extensive analysis and presentation is necessary to make clear to us symbolically what we have long since lost the ability to recognize in our everyday lives.

From this point of view, there was no sudden shift in philosophical or religious basis from the *Ring* to *Parsifal*. The message of the *Ring* is that it is futile to base any kind of world order on power relations, because the exercise of "human control of human beings" will inevitably involve unethical and hence self-destructive means. A wholly different basis (self-sacrifice and self-immolation) will have to be found; hence Wagner's use, as the concluding motif of the tetralogy, of the "love" theme, which he hoped "would explain in music what could not be explained in words."<sup>23</sup> This message is, at least negatively, Christian,<sup>24</sup> and it is but a short step from this to the positive Christianity of *Parsifal*. It has been suggested, and rightly, that *Parsifal* is really to be considered as "the fifth music-drama of the *Ring*;" Siegfried has been a fool, without knowledge because devoid of sympathy, and affairs can be set straight only by *Parsifal*, who is also a kind of fool, but pure, and "durch Mitleid wissend."

In its combination of deeply significant symbolism, living characters, and unsurpassable music, Wagner's *Ring* may well be considered the greatest single artistic achievement of modern times.<sup>25</sup> If it is to be treated, however, from a narrow, pan-Germanist point of view, it may continue to be of interest to Germans, especially neo-Nazis, but is likely to become again an object of contempt or scorn for others. An exclusively occultist interpretation can cast light on the moral and anagogical interpretation of the tetralogy, but will similarly be restricted to a few initiates. In order to aid all modern men to

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the discussion in E. Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner* (New York, 1933-46), III, 360-1.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Hartmann, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>25</sup> Newman does not seem, from this point of view, to be exaggerating when he says (*The Life of Richard Wagner*, II, 341-2) that the *Ring* is "one of the most stupendous dramas that humanity has ever produced."

understand its message—which is, after all, of fundamental importance for our own civilization and that of the past three thousand years—we must give the *Ring* as broad an interpretation as possible, at least in part along the lines of cultural symbolism which have been suggested here.

*Cornell University*