

PETER BASSETT

The Gods Grown Old

Götterdämmerung as a Drama of Reminiscence

And so he sits on his majestic throne, speaking not a word, silent and grave, with the remnants of his spear grasped in his hand. He will not touch Holda's apples. Astonishment and fear overwhelm the motionless gods. He has sent off his two ravens. If ever they return with good news then, for one last time in eternity, the god will smile.... I clung to his breast, weeping, and then his eyes softened – he thought of you, Brünnhilde. He sighed deeply and closed his eyes and, as if he were dreaming, he whispered....

Waltraute, *Götterdämmerung*, Act 1 Scene 3

In his essay *Opera and Drama* of 1850-51, Wagner set out his idea of using a network of motivic flashbacks in dramatic compositions:

'...a melody once used by the actor during an emotional outpouring, and then presented expressively by the orchestra at a moment when the character remembers that emotion, gives substance to his thoughts. Even when the character is no longer conscious of that emotion, the sound now associated with it re-awakens the emotion within us...'

Thus the orchestral melody, having been conditioned by earlier verbal or visual references, functions as 'a messenger of the very thought itself'. *Der Ring des Nibelungen* - and in particular *Götterdämmerung* - contains Wagner's most brilliant realizations of this idea.

Much has been written about the complex network of motifs from which the music of the Ring is constructed. However, within the narrative, as distinct from the music, another set of 'motifs' (if we may so describe them) can be observed at work - motifs of imagery, actions and relationships. Examples are to be found in all four parts of the Ring, but their greatest concentration is in *Götterdämmerung* which contains references to, or parallels with, almost everything that has gone before. Even the basic structure of *Götterdämmerung* - a prologue and three acts - mirrors the 'preliminary evening and three days' structure of the whole Ring. This final 'day' then, is not only a continuation of the story but also an elaborate mosaic of reminiscences, conveyed by music and narrative alike.

The parallels begin as soon as the curtain rises on the prologue. We see three Norns, where once we saw three Rhinedaughters. This time the sisters' attention is caught not by sunlight awakening the Rhinegold (although they keep anticipating the dawn) but by the glow from the fire surrounding the Valkyrie's rock. They refer to the World Ash, from which Wotan had fashioned his spear, an image evoking memories of that

other ash tree, in *Die Walküre*, into which the god had plunged a sword. The Norns' description of the broken spear, the cutting down of the World Ash and the destruction of Valhalla echoes Sieglinde's nightmare of the broken sword, the toppling ash tree and the death of Siegmund. In the first Act of *Siegfried* we find another ominous reference to an ash tree. Now reduced to charcoal, it fuels the fire in which the shattered sword of Wotan's ambition is being reforged.

The spreading light of dawn heralds rhapsodical expressions of love between Siegfried and Brünnhilde, but it is a false dawn and this is the last time they will meet as lovers. The imagery of dawn, light and day in the Ring is frequently a harbinger of doom. Brünnhilde's apostrophe to the sun, the light and the day in the closing scene of *Siegfried* ends with her invocation of the twilight of the gods, and with the lovers laughing at death. The bright moonlight that bathes the Volsung twins in *Die Walküre* inspires a love that is as doomed as it is ecstatic. A fateful dawn precedes Hagen's supreme act of treachery, and Siegfried goes to his death under the golden beams of *Frau Sonne*. For the characters of the Ring, no less than Tristan and Isolde, the world of day and light offers nothing but separation and pain.

Siegfried declares himself to be 'Brünnhilde's arm', and Brünnhilde says she is Siegfried's soul. This merging of identities gives the impression that the lovers are inseparable, but its real meaning is that Siegfried has supplanted Wotan in Brünnhilde's life. In *Die Walküre*, she had assured her father that, when he was speaking to her, he was speaking to himself - that she was his other self. Now, like Wotan, Siegfried abandons Brünnhilde to her fate and disappears through the flames.

Wotan had journeyed to Nibelheim to master Alberich, but his ascendancy had been short lived. Siegfried journeys to the hall of the Gibichungs and soon falls prey to Alberich's son. As Warren Darcy has observed, Siegfried in *Götterdämmerung* seems to recreate all the mistakes Wotan had made in *Das Rheingold* - embracing power, entangling himself in false treaties and renouncing true love.

The Gibichung siblings Gunther and Gutrune are, like their Volsung counterparts, victims of forces beyond their understanding. Of course, Gutrune's lover (Siegfried) is not her brother, but he is her brother's 'blood brother', which makes him her brother once removed. From Gutrune, Siegfried receives a drink in the house of his enemy, and with that drink, their love is kindled. From Sieglinde, Siegmund had received a drink in the house of *his* enemy, and with that drink, their love had been kindled. Gutrune uses a drug (the potion of forgetfulness) to 'remove' Brünnhilde from Siegfried's life, as Sieglinde had used a drug (the sleeping draught) to remove Hunding from hers. Hagen stands in the same overbearing relationship to Gutrune as did Hunding to Sieglinde, and each kills his respective rival with a spear - Siegmund receiving it in the chest and his son in the back. Brünnhilde is involved in both situations, but in contrary ways. In *Die Walküre* she had tried, compassionately, to save Siegmund and in so doing had earned the wrath of Wotan and the gratitude of Sieglinde. In *Götterdämmerung*, she misguidedly incites the murder of Siegfried and in so doing earns the gratitude of Wotan's dark counterpart, Alberich, and the curses of Gutrune.

The Valkyrie Waltraute alights on the rock in Act One of *Götterdämmerung*, reminding us of the wild gathering of all the Valkyries in the earlier drama.

Originally, in *Siegfrieds Tod*, Wagner had intended all eight Valkyries to visit the now-mortal Brünnhilde, out of sympathy for her fall from grace. After the writing of *Die Walküre*, he was able to focus on the more dramatic subject of Waltraute's plea for the return of the ring.

Siegfried undergoes a metamorphosis in Act One of *Götterdämmerung*, being transformed by the Tarnhelm not only into Gunther but also into a brute. For the moment, he is no better than his *bête noire*, Fafner, who had been similarly transformed by the Tarnhelm. In *Die Walküre*, Wotan had sentenced Brünnhilde to be taken by the first stranger who chanced upon her. She had recoiled from this terrifying prospect, pleading with her father to protect her with fire against all but the worthiest hero. When Siegfried-as-Gunther emerges suddenly from the flames, he reawakens memories of the fate once threatened by the 'angry and cruel god'. Brünnhilde, who had been brimming with joy in anticipation of her returning lover, is emotionally crushed. Siegfried compounds the tragedy by tearing the ring from her finger, mimicking Wotan's violent act of wrenching it from the Nibelung's finger. The result is equally terrible, for Brünnhilde in her own way also renounces love and becomes an accessory to Siegfried's murder.

Siegfried displays no redeeming features in this scene, except loyalty to his blood brother, which he demonstrates by placing the sword between him and Brünnhilde in their marital bed. Thus the sword, once shattered and then reforged by Siegfried, comes again between husband and wife, as it had, in a sense, between Wotan and Fricka.

The imagery of abduction is one of the most powerful and often-repeated 'motifs' of the Ring. The primary instance is Alberich's rape of the Rhinegold itself. This is followed by the abduction of Freia by the giants, Sieglinde by Hunding, the hapless woman by the Neidings in Siegmund's account, Sieglinde (albeit willingly) by Siegmund and, finally, Brünnhilde by Siegfried in the guise of Gunther.

When Brünnhilde is over-powered by Siegfried-as-Gunther, their eyes accidentally meet. Later she tells Hagen that one look from Siegfried's flashing eyes – as fell on her from his deceiving shape on the rock – would turn Hagen's courage to fear. The imagery of glinting or gleaming eyes is first used in *Das Rheingold* by Wellgunde, when she refers to 'the golden eyes that wake and sleep in turn'. In Scene Four, when the Nibelung gold is piled up in front of Freia to obscure her from the giants, Fasolt catches a glimpse of her eye and refuses to let her go. In *Die Walküre*, Hunding notices the 'mark of the dragon' glinting in the eyes of Siegmund and Sieglinde. Sieglinde describes the glinting eye of the stranger at her wedding, which stuck fear into the other guests but to her alone revealed a sweet, longing sadness. Brünnhilde's bright, gleaming eyes, once caressed with smiles by Wotan, are finally kissed asleep in the most poignant of farewells.

In Act Two of *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried returns from the Valkyrie's rock to face a Fricka-like interrogation from Guttrune, his wife-to-be. He responds with Wotan-like evasiveness. Hagen summons the vassals, as his father had once summoned his enslaved race. From Alberich's embittered lips we had heard the 'blessing with which the Nibelung, in dire distress, invests his ring'. Now, in similar distress, Brünnhilde blesses the point of Hagen's spear and dedicates it to striking Siegfried down.

In the final act, the Rhinedaughters tease Siegfried as they had teased the love-struck Nibelung. However, the roles are now reversed, for it is they who do the pleading and Siegfried who does the rebuffing. While Alberich had renounced love in favour of the ring, Siegfried, in the end, is willing to give up the ring in return for love. The fickle Rhinedaughters tell him to keep it after all, so that he can discover for himself what ill fortune it brings. Truly, Siegfried might say with Hamlet: 'The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!'

In his dying moments, Siegfried imagines that Brünnhilde has been put back to sleep and must be awakened again. This inspired scene is but one of many 'awakenings' in the Ring, notably those of the gold in the depths of the Rhine; Wotan and Fricka to gaze upon the finished Valhalla; Fafner by his fearless adversary at the Cave of Envy; Erda from her primeval slumber by the Wanderer, and Brünnhilde by Siegfried himself on that day of days on the Valkyrie's rock.

Eventually, Brünnhilde does acquire a new, more profound view of existence through her contrition, suffering and love for Siegfried. And what is this new wisdom - this state of enlightenment with which the story of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ends - if not another awakening and a new beginning?