

MYTHS ANCIENT AND MODERN -

THE *RING* IN THE AGE OF VIRTUAL REALITY

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When Wagner was an impressionable schoolboy living in the Dresden countryside, he encountered newspaper and magazine reports of the Greek War of Independence against the Turks. He maintained in later life that these reports had greatly excited his imagination, and it was to them that he attributed his love of Greece, its history and, most significantly, its mythology.ⁱ One can say therefore, that the origin of his life-long interest in mythology, expressed so powerfully in the *Ring*, can be traced to an early awareness of contemporary social and political events. Since the *Ring* is frequently interpreted as a social and political allegory, this seems a happy coincidence. But I suggest that only *Das Rheingold* truly justifies an interpretation along these lines.

More than a century ago, George Bernard Shaw tried to identify a message running consistently throughout all four dramas, and was disappointed not to find one. He concluded that it was Wagner who had lost the plot. He suggested that after the backwards expansion of *Siegfried's Tod* to create the *Ring* as we know it, *Götterdämmerung* should have been abandoned altogether. It had become, he said, superfluous. Wagner should have faced the fact that the *Ring* was 'no longer a Nibelung epic, and really demanded modern costumes, tall hats for Tarnhelms, factories for Nibelheims, villas for Valhallas, and so on – in short, a complete confession of the extent to which the old Nibelung epic had become the merest pretext and name directory in the course of Wagner's travail'.ⁱⁱ He went further in his efforts to persuade us that the fault was with Wagner's invention and not with his own interpretation. Under the heading 'Collapse of the Allegory', Shaw wrote that in *Götterdämmerung* 'there is not a bar in the work which moves us as the same themes moved us in *The Valkyrie*, nor is anything but extended splendour added to the life and humour of *Siegfried*'.ⁱⁱⁱ From this we are left to conclude that *Götterdämmerung*, a work of unparalleled dramatic force and musical richness, might as well be jettisoned because it fails to comply with his rather simplistic view of what the *Ring* is all about. This is a salutary tale for anyone hoping to reduce the four dramas to a homily on a single issue.

Just as the focus of Wagner's intellectual enquiries shifted from the relationship between art and society to the inner needs of human beings, so the *Ring* displays a similar shift from the public nature of its 'preliminary evening' to the psychological and metaphysical dramas of its 'three days'. This process reaches a cathartic but somewhat open-ended climax in *Götterdämmerung*. The Rhine Maidens take back their gold, and equilibrium is restored. The ring that was cursed by Alberich is redeemed by Brünnhilde. There seems to be a new beginning, but on whose terms? The mythology of the *eddas* and *sagas* evolves into Wagner's own mythology, one that finds definitive expression only after the curtain has fallen on *Götterdämmerung* and risen again on *Parsifal*. When the smoke clears from the ruins of Valhalla, it is Monsalvat that comes into view.

Of course, Wagner's interest in metaphysics and what we now call psychology, predated the *Ring*, but it had an important role in shaping and colouring its narrative. Wagner

reworked the myths for his own dramatic purposes, much as the ancient bards and poets had done with their sources. However, he went further. He infused the original stories with sentiments and impulses that were quite alien to them, for he was a dramatist and composer, not just an animator of mythical worlds. Out of the ancient myths he created modern ones through a synthesis of old tales and new sensibilities. For example, taken overall, *Das Rheingold* supports our assumption that the rule of law is preferable to the exercise of autocratic authority, and it reflects modern notions of guilt and moral responsibility. When Donner threatens to bring down his hammer on the heads of the giants in order to secure Freia's release, Wotan intervenes to uphold his pact with them. In the *Prose Edda* by contrast, Thor's hammer falls on the workman's skull and smashes it to pieces. After Fafner's fratricide, Wotan's confidence is shaken. His earlier delight in the building of *Walhall* is now tempered by a sense of foreboding and guilt. 'Fear and dread seize my soul' he says, ... 'an evil wage has paid for the work.' He feels the need to salvage the situation and set matters right. Would Odin have entertained such thoughts? I think not.

Many of the details in Act One of *Die Walküre* can be traced to the *Völsungasaga*. However, again, Wagner introduces notions that spring from a different cultural milieu. Not the least of these is the mutual compassion that ignites the relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde and blossoms into fully blown love. The overwhelming force of this love reflects the influence of Feuerbach, whose ideas led Wagner in 1852 to draft an ending to the *Ring* in which Brünnhilde specifically rejects possessions, wealth and divine splendour in favour of the redeeming power of love. Although Wagner's philosophical allegiances changed in the mid 1850s, it is compassionate love which dominates the *Todesverkündigung* in Act Two, and leads to Brünnhilde's defiance of Wotan, Sieglinde's escape, Siegfried's birth, Brünnhilde's mortality and, ultimately, the downfall of the gods. Love is a prime catalyst for change in the *Ring*, and flickers into life on that stormy night in front of Hunding's hearth. It marks not only the onset of Spring and the relationship between brother and sister, but also the essential transformation of old myths into new.

Wagner was ahead of his time, and in advance of Freud, in describing the psychological importance of raising the unconscious to consciousness. We find this in the *Ring*, and especially in his treatment of the character of Wotan. In the crucial scene with Brünnhilde in Act Two of *Die Walküre*, Wotan puts himself on the psychoanalyst's couch in a way that hardly seemed possible in *Das Rheingold*, even in those moments of doubt. At first he hesitates, not wanting to lower his guard, too frightened to confront his inner self. Only when Brünnhilde convinces him that she really is his 'will', his *alter ego*, does he let go, and everything comes pouring out. 'With loathing, I can find only myself in all that I have created' he says. 'I must forsake and murder the son whom I love and who trusts me. ... Let what I have built fall apart. ... I desire only one thing: the end, the end!' No wonder Brünnhilde feels that she knows her father better than he knows himself. The spirit of this amazing scene flows not from mythological sources but from the composer's intuitive understanding. I emphasise 'composer' in this instance, because it is through the music that Wotan's inner struggle is most tellingly conveyed.

Wagner was a great synthesiser of ideas, and throughout his life seemed to have an insatiable appetite for new ones. He conferred on his mythical narrative a philosophical superstructure that was alien to it but which, when fused with it, produced a most persuasive work of art. We know that his encounter with the writings of Schopenhauer while working on *Die Walküre*, had a profound effect on him and reinforced ideas to

which he was being instinctively drawn. Wagner was in sympathy with Schopenhauer's ideas about the nothingness of the world of phenomena and, within it, the inevitability of frustration, suffering and death; the ultimate reality of the metaphysical will; compassion as the source of morality, and so on. However, he also brought to the *Ring* ideas from other, unexpected quarters, including the traditions of Christianity and Buddhism.

Wagner's views on Christianity were far from orthodox, as can be seen in the embryonic *Jesus von Nazareth* of 1849, with its revolutionary overtones. However, he was capable of using orthodox Biblical references when this suited him. His *Liebesmahl der Apostel* of 1843 is a case in point, in which he used the subject of Pentecost for a 'Biblical Scene' for adult male chorus and large orchestra. He had been raised in a conventional Protestant household and he certainly knew his way around the scriptures, as indicated by the large number of marginal notes in the Bible from his Dresden library, abandoned when he went into exile. Not surprisingly, these influences also went into the melting pot of ideas when he came to work on the *Ring*.

In Brünnhilde's announcement to Sieglinde that she will bear a son and will call him Siegfried, we find echoes of the Annunciation in Luke's Gospel, in which an angel tells the Virgin Mary that she will bear a son and will call him Jesus. The Gospel announcement is followed by the Magnificat, in which Mary praises God for exalting her. In *Die Walküre*, Sieglinde exults: *O hehrstes Wunder!* (O sublime miracle!) and proceeds with her own Magnificat, praising Brünnhilde for being the bearer of such news. If Brünnhilde's appearance to the doomed Siegmund was an annunciation of death, her message to Sieglinde must surely be an annunciation of life. In this instance, Siegfried, like Christ, symbolises hope and life amidst hopelessness and decay, and just as Mary fled into Egypt to protect the infant Jesus from the wrath of Herod, so Sieglinde flees into the forest to protect the unborn Siegfried from the wrath of Wotan. The Christ/Siegfried parallel was, of course, referred to by Wagner in his essay *Die Wibelungen* of 1848, as was the conceptual link between the Nibelung hoard and the Holy Grail.

Buddhist influences are also to be found in the *Ring*, notwithstanding its primary sources in the myths and legends of the north. In the mid 1850s, Wagner became very interested in Buddhism, particularly after his encounter with the writings of Schopenhauer. It was an interest that remained with him to the end of his life, and it also played a part in the creation of both *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*. In May 1856, after finishing *Die Walküre* but before taking up *Siegfried*, Wagner sketched out his proposed Buddhist music drama, *Die Sieger*, (The Victors). The title was inspired by the Jinas, Indian holy men whose name in Sanskrit means 'victors'. Their victory was over human passions. *Die Sieger* dealt with an event in the legendary life of the Buddha, one of whose titles was Jina – the Victor. For many years, Wagner intended to work on *Die Sieger* after he had finished *Parsifal*, and it was only in 1882 that a combination of exhaustion and realism led him to abandon the idea for good. He also felt that he would be duplicating much of what had been said in *Parsifal*. He had been attracted to the story for a number of reasons, not the least of which was its theme of reincarnation, which he saw as a vehicle for his compositional technique of Emotional Reminiscence. 'Only music' he said, 'can convey the mysteries of reincarnation'.^{iv}

How does this relate to the *Ring*? In July 1878, Cosima wrote the following in her diary: 'When I was looking through some papers with him yesterday, I came upon the original theme for *Sangst du nicht, dein Wissen*; I tell Richard that the present theme (meant at first for the Buddha) pleases me far more.'^v What is this theme that was composed

originally for the Buddha in *Die Sieger*? It first appears in Wotan's final scene with Erda in Act Three of *Siegfried*, and is used to express his new-found wisdom in accepting that he must 'will' the coming of a new order and the demise of the gods. Although the theme is usually referred to as 'the world's inheritance' or 'the world's heritage', as Hans von Wolzogen labelled it, it should, I suggest, be thought of as 'the getting of wisdom' or 'enlightenment'; hence the connection in Wagner's mind with that defining characteristic of the Buddha – 'the Enlightened One'.

In the scene in Act Three, after a long silence which is specifically indicated in the text, Wotan tells Erda that she is not wise, for he is no longer concerned about the inevitable end of the gods and, in fact, consciously wills it. What he once resolved in despair, he will now do gladly. At that point, we hear in the orchestra the majestic theme once intended for the Buddha. All the burdens of self-interest and denial are lifted from Wotan's shoulders, and we share with him a tremendous sense of release and relief. It is truly a moment of revelation. During the first rehearsals, Wagner said that this passage 'must sound like the proclamation of a new religion'.^{vi} Indeed it does.

The theme occurs again shortly afterwards when Wotan tells Erda: 'Brünnhild wakes to the hero. Then your child of wisdom will accomplish a deed that will set the world free.' We now have the juxtaposition of Brünnhilde's wisdom, and the freeing of the world. The next significant entry of the theme comes after Brünnhilde's awakening, when she tells Siegfried: 'What you would know, know it from me, for I am wise because I love you'. So, Brünnhilde's wisdom flows directly from her love for Siegfried. Finally, when Brünnhilde's fears overwhelm her and she says that her mind is in confusion, her reason is silent and her wisdom seems to be failing her, Siegfried offers reassurance: 'Didn't you tell me' he says, 'that all of your wisdom came by the light of your love for me?' This is the phrase to which Cosima had been referring. Brünnhilde therefore is 'made wise through love'; and isn't that suspiciously close to being 'made wise through compassion', the distinguishing attribute of Parsifal? Remember Wagner's words: 'It must sound like the proclamation of a new religion'.

Another, and better known, Buddhist connection with the *Ring* came with Wagner's 1856 version of the closing scene of *Götterdämmerung*, which was written contemporaneously with the sketch for *Die Sieger* and within months of the first sketch for *Parsifal*. In the text for this scene, Brünnhilde, the 'enlightened one', proclaimed her redemption from the endless cycle of suffering and rebirth, and her impending achievement of *Nirvana*, which is the 'blowing out' of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion; the extinction of 'self'. Two years after drafting this version, Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck: 'Only thoughtful acceptance of the idea of transmigration of souls has been able to show me the consoling point at which all in the end converge at an equal height of redemption after their differing paths through life, which in Time have run divided alongside one another, but which outside Time come together in full understanding.'^{vii} This is quite a remarkable passage, I am sure you will agree.

Cosima commented that some of the composite words used in the 1856 text, notably '*Wunschheim*' and '*Wahnheim*', sounded rather artificial,^{viii} and so Wagner changed his mind about setting them. In the margin of the orchestral sketch we read: 'Enough! Anything to please Cosel!'^{ix} More to the point, he sensed that a prolonged vocal *scena* would be less effective than a symphonic orchestral passage in bringing the whole cycle to a close. In his 1872 definitive edition of the poem, he offered the following explanation for not setting all of the words, which were, nevertheless, still printed as a

footnote: 'The musician had in the end' he said, 'in the act of composition, to sacrifice this passage, as its meaning is already conveyed with the greatest precision in the musical expression of the drama'.^x It needs to be emphasised therefore that, far from denying the Buddhist imagery, he affirmed it; for, as he told Cosima, 'only music can convey the mysteries of reincarnation'.

In both the *Prose Edda* and the *Völsungasaga*, Brynhild ends up on Sigurd's funeral pyre, which is how Wagner depicted events in his original 1848 sketch for the drama. However, in the 1848 version, Brünnhilde, once more the Valkyrie, is seen rising above the flames and leading Siegfried heavenwards to his place in Valhalla – a suitably Nordic ending. There is no cataclysm, and the old order survives. Subsequently, in 1851, the idea of *Ragnarök* ('twilight of the gods') was introduced, in which the gods are to be destroyed, although, strictly speaking, this should occur after a great battle with the powers of evil rather than after a hero's funeral. The mythological account of battles with the frost giants, the fearsome wolf and the sea monster is rather different to Wagner's version, though there is relevance in the flame giant, Surt, setting the heavenly rainbow bridge alight as the blazing world sinks beneath the ocean. However, in the accounts of the death and cremation of the Buddha, which attracted Wagner's attention in the mid 1850's, we learn that when the Sage entered *Nirvana* (which, remember, was also Brünnhilde's destination) the earth trembled and firebrands fell from the sky; the heavens were lit up by a preternatural fire and the rivers boiled over.^{xi} It is not difficult to recognise in a conflation of these images the amazing stage directions at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. Nor is it difficult to understand why Wagner, in a rare example of motif-labelling, referred to the exquisite closing theme (first used as Sieglinde's paean to Brünnhilde) as 'the glorification of Brünnhilde' or 'the theme in praise of Brünnhilde'. By embracing mortality and achieving wisdom through love, Brünnhilde had revealed the path to a better existence; one that was to be expressed definitively in the Christian/Buddhist syncretism of *Parsifal*. That is why it is Brünnhilde, not Siegfried, who is the real hero of the *Ring*, and why she is given the task of bringing the whole great adventure to a close.

So, where does that leave the director who would like to approach the *Ring* in his or her own way, and take Wagner's advice to 'do something new'? While the Scandinavian and Germanic myths provided the primary sources and motivation for the *Ring*, by the time it was finished they shared the limelight with Greek mythology, nineteenth century social and political ideas, the philosophies of Feuerbach and Schopenhauer, pre-Freudian psychology, and aspects of Christianity and Buddhism. I suppose the director could take a cue from any of these strands and create a production that would have dramatic validity.

Back in 1974, I wrote a short critique for the magazine of the London Wagner Society on Götz Friedrich's first productions of *Rheingold* and *Walküre* at Covent Garden.^{xii} I loved his *Rheingold* but disliked his *Walküre*. I have to say that, at that time, I preferred a less politically pointed production and quoted, in support, comments that Wagner had written to Röckel. 'I do not agree with your criticisms' said Wagner, 'with regard to a certain want of lucidity and distinctness of statement: on the contrary, I believe that a true instinct has kept me from too great definiteness; for it has been borne in on me that an absolute disclosing of intention disturbs true insight. What you want in drama – indeed in all works of art – is to achieve your end, not by statement of the artist's intentions, but by the presentment of life as the resultant, not of arbitrary forces, but of eternal laws.'^{xiii}

I have now come to the conclusion that a production can be as sharply focussed as you like and still carry a message about 'eternal laws', to use Wagner's phrase, if it relates honestly to the *Ring* in its various aspects, although, *à propos* my earlier comments about Shaw, I question the wisdom of approaching the *Ring* as a whole from any single perspective.

Why not use four entirely different perspectives, four designers, four directors, even four casts? After all, we are dealing with events that take place over a considerable period of time and in widely divergent settings. How much time elapses between *Rhinegold* and *Walküre*? Who can say? Decades, centuries, millennia? Time means nothing in *Walhall*! Eighteen years or so elapse between the end of *Walküre* and the beginning of *Siegfried*; this is determined by Siegfried's age. However, we don't know how much time passes between the end of *Siegfried* and the beginning of *Götterdämmerung*; presumably long enough for Siegfried's mind to wander to new adventures without Brünnhilde. And how long did he journey before he came across the Gibichungs? It must have been a fair time – years perhaps – because his reputation had well and truly preceded him. Basically though, all of this is unimportant in the timeless land of mythology, especially if you are fortunate enough to own a *Tarnhelm*. If time doesn't mean anything, then perhaps space doesn't mean anything either. The *Ring* can be set anywhere, for its themes (even its mythological ones) belong nowhere and everywhere. It is the richness and diversity of its sources that help to keep it one of the most adaptable and resilient of operatic works.

We live in an age of technology-driven communication, for which the medium is often the message, and in which there is little room for Wagner's kind of in-depth philosophising. And yet, ironically, there is now something of a renaissance in the performance and appreciation of Wagner's works. They have never been more popular or more widely performed than they are at the present time, at least since the first decades of the twentieth century. His dramatic vision and highly expressive music had, it seems, been waiting for the modern technologies of sound recording and stage production.

Wagner's imagination was not of the ordinary variety. As a boy, he had nightmares about inanimate objects – such as pieces of furniture – coming to life, and he had no difficulty in animating the ancient and mythological worlds of his reading. He learnt some Greek, not for scholarly purposes but in order to hear the heroic figures of antiquity speaking to him in their own voices. He was thirty before he began seriously to study Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* and the Scandinavian myths and *sagas* but, again, he felt that the inhabitants of those legendary landscapes were speaking to him with familiar voices. This sense of 'virtual reality' stayed with him throughout his creative working life, and he was able to re-activate it with the aid of stimuli that became somewhat notorious. I have always felt that it is precisely because he thought in this way, imagined his creations so vividly and evoked them so directly, that they are now able to assume for us a kind of virtual reality.

The *Internet* is an essential tool in our present communications revolution – a sort of latter-day *Tarnhelm*. Not only does it transport ideas with unprecedented speed and freedom, but it also creates new human forms – 'cyber communities'. These communities do not exist in any physical sense, but only in cyber-space. A parallel world now exists, in which people who have never seen each other and are dispersed around the globe, pursue daily relationships of surprising intimacy, conduct business and create works of art. Like a community of the blind, they have no need to see each other;

like a community of the paralysed they have no need to touch each other. They are simply a community of minds. Perhaps we shall all inhabit this virtual world one day. Is it too fanciful to see in the music of the *Ring* a precursor of this cyber-world? Was Wagner with his world of sound, anticipating its nature a century and a half ago?

If any single work of art is going to play a role in the evolution of this new community of the mind, I hope it will be *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, for its story is a good one, and mankind could do a lot worse than take some of its lessons to heart.

ⁱ *My Life*, trans. Andrew Gray, New York. Da Capo Press, 1992. P.6.

ⁱⁱ G.B. Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, Republished New York, Dover, 1967. p.80.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p.83.

^{iv} *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, ed. M. Gregor-Dellin and D. Mack; trans. G.Skelton, New York 1978-80, vol. i, p.215, May 1 1870.

^v *Ibid.* vol. ii p.117, July 20 1878.

^{vi} Quoted by Curt von Westernhagen, *The Forging of The Ring*, trans. Arnold and Mary Whittall, Cambridge University Press 1976, p.169.

^{vii} *Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendonk*, ed. W. Golther (Berlin 1904, p. 242). Trans. Lucy Beckett.

^{viii} *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, op. cit. vol ii, p.448, January 10 1872.

^{ix} Westernhagen, op.cit. p.235.

^x See Deryck Cooke *I Saw the World End*, London, Oxford University Press, 1979, p.22.

^{xi} *Buddhist Scriptures*, selected and translated by Edward Conze, Penguin 1959, p.63.

^{xii} *Wagner*, Number 34, October 1974, p.5.

^{xiii} Wagner to August Röckel, January 1854.