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# WAGNER, SIEGFRIED, AND HITLER:

## A Study in Ambivalence<sup>1</sup>

*Eric Russell Bentley*

Der von mir erkoren,  
doch nie mich gekannt,  
ein kühnster Knabe,  
meines Rathes bar,  
errang des Niblungen Ring:  
ledig des Neides,  
liebesfroh,  
erlahmt an dem Edlen  
Alberichs Fluch;

denn fremd bleibt ihm die Furcht.  
Die du mir gebar'st,  
Brünnhilde,  
sie weckt hold sich der Held:  
wachend wirkt  
dein wissendes Kind  
erlösende Weltenthat. . . .  
dem ewig Jungen  
weicht in Wonne der Gott.<sup>2</sup>

—Wotan forecasts the career of Siegfried.

Aechter als er  
schwur keiner Eide;  
treuer als er  
hielt keiner Verträge:  
laut'rer als er  
liebte kein and'rer  
und doch alle Eide,  
alle Verträge,  
die treueste Liebe—  
trog keiner wie er!<sup>3</sup>

—Brünnhilde reviews the career of Siegfried.

**T**HE NAME OF WAGNER is one to conjure with. He has been excessively praised and excessively condemned. His interests were varied, his gifts uneven, his temper erratic: so that Wagner criticism is sheer confusion. Some dislike the man because of his work, others dislike the work because of the man. Some dislike the philosophy be-

<sup>1</sup> This essay is a chapter (condensed) from the forthcoming book, *A Century of Hero-Worship*, from which the chapter on D. H. Lawrence appeared in *THE NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY REVIEW*, XII (May, 1942), 133-146; that on Stefan George in *Partisan Review*, July-August, 1942. Translations of all extended passages in German are by Mr. Bentley.

<sup>2</sup> Chosen by me, though he never knew me, a valiant lad, without counsel from me, seized the Nibelungs' ring; free of envy, rejoicing in love. The curse of Alberich grows lame before this noble one; for fear is alien to him. Her whom you [Erda] bore me—Brünnhilde—the hero lovingly wakes: awaking your child in her wisdom achieves the world's redemption. . . . the god gives place to the eternally young.

<sup>3</sup> Truer than he none ever swore oaths; more loyal than he none ever kept compacts: more proudly than he none ever loved, and yet all oaths, all compacts, the loyalest love, none betrayed as he did!

cause it is embedded in music and drama, others dislike the music because it is associated with philosophy. Wagner's first critics accepted or rejected his work *in toto*. Later it was the fashion to ignore everything save the music. Recently several critics have merely included the music in a condemnation of Wagner's ideas.

The history of Wagner production is as odd as the history of Wagner criticism. Scarcely had Wagner become generally known in America when the First World War ended the production of German opera. After the war Wagner slowly rose to a height of popularity scarcely reached by any other serious composer. But upon what terms? Anyone who has attended the Metropolitan Opera House knows that recent Wagnerism has been an enthusiasm of the groundlings, an enthusiasm for vocal virtuosity and sensationalism. Two of the greatest Wagnerian singers, Kirsten Flagstad and Lauritz Melchior, have become popular favorites, and such regular attenders as I have known have enjoyed Wagner on the level of Puccini. If the earnest Wagnerian turned up at the Metropolitan Opera House he would be shocked at the manginess of the décor, the shoddy slickness of the direction and singing, the ridiculous air of operatics about the whole proceeding. It is all too like *Aida*.

This being so it is not surprising that the serious critic prefers to overlook Wagner altogether. And for twenty years now, many of the best critics have had harsh things to say. In so far as these harsh things are calculated to crush fanatically zealous Wagnerism or callow romanticism I do not dissent. But when unfair charges are brought against Wagner it is time to call a halt.

Jacques Barzun and Peter Viereck are characteristic anti-Wagnerians. They make one point to which all others are subordinated: Wagner is a "proto-Nazi." The point is elaborated according to the prepossessions of the particular historian. If he thinks like Mr. Viereck that Nazism is essentially romantic, then Wagner is convincingly equated with romanticism. If like Mr. Barzun he thinks that Nazism is essentially materialistic, then Wagner is equated with materialism. Mr. Barzun speaks of "Wagnerians and Positivists—or what is much the same, Marxists."<sup>4</sup> The historians are agreed in assuming that since Hitler is an acknowledged disciple of Wagner, Wagner's ideas cannot be dismissed as trivial. Fair enough. The question is whether a man can justly be called a proto-Nazi because Hitler likes him, whether what Hitler likes

<sup>4</sup> *Darwin, Marx, Wagner* (New York, 1941), p. 402.

about him is the whole truth, and whether searching the nineteenth-century for proto-Nazis is a very significant or useful pursuit. There are surely too many books full of horrifying proto-Nazi remarks by older writers—did Aurel Kolnai begin this, or should we refer back to Santayana's performance in the last war?—and too frequently the critics of Nazism show a Nazi proficiency in the art of garbling. Of course if German thought is one's academic field such writing is an easy way of getting publicity.

Obviously, influential perversions of Wagner are more important than uninfluential scholarly justice. But I choose the lesser topic. What was the mind and art of Richard Wagner and how does it fall in line with Carlyle and Nietzsche?

In his *Metapolitics*, Peter Viereck has provided a summary of Wagner's ideas as found in his prose. These ideas, we are told, are those of *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhundert* and *Mein Kampf*. The concepts of *life* and *dynamism* are basic. For Wagner they are manifest not merely in the hero but also in the race, particularly in the German community. Wagner's Teutonism, says Mr. Viereck, is a familiar pattern. Wagner postulates a race-soul; he grows to hate French and "Mediterranean" ideas; he champions culture against civilization. Above all, though probably himself Jewish, he is fanatically anti-Semitic.

Mr. Viereck's chapter on Wagner and Hitler is highly sensational. Lenin's dependence on Marx, it would seem, was not greater than Hitler's on Wagner; the *maestro* is imitated even to his eccentricities such as vegetarianism and teetotalism. The story is as follows. Wagner's son-in-law and chief disciple was Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Chamberlain came of a British military family, renounced a military career because of ill health, travelled on the continent, began to feel about Germany as a Rhodes Scholar feels about England. During the First World War, he was given German citizenship; after it he endorsed National Socialism and, via Rosenberg and Hess, gave his ideas to Hitler. Among Chamberlain's few British friends were the Redesdales. Lord Redesdale wrote the preface to the English edition of Chamberlain's most important book. One granddaughter of this Lord Redesdale married Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists; another, Unity Mitford, became one of Hitler's few female friends.

If, then, Hitler says that nobody can understand Nazism without understanding Wagner, if there are busts of Wagner at Berchtesgaden

and allusions to Wagner in the Führer's speeches, it will not be surprising. But is Hitler always right about Wagner? *Mein Kampf* relates how Hitler heard *Lohengrin* at the age of twelve, and one thinks of Dorothy Thompson's allegation that Wagner's music has deluged Europe in blood. Unfortunately, however, the music and libretto of *Lohengrin* are much more innocent than, say, Swinburne's poetic dramas; if Hitler's sadism was thereby increased, his response was quite arbitrary. Mr. Stanley Baldwin's favorite author is Mary Webb, but if he considers his policies to be intelligible only to readers of *Precious Bane* he is wrong. Hitler and Mr. Viereck are wrong if they think ideology or musical taste is the foundation of fascism. Nor can our opinion of Wagner's prose or Hitler affect our opinion of Wagner's music. It is conceivable that some strange youth, hungry for fancies, might read *A Vision* by W. B. Yeats, accept Yeats' views, and make them the basis of a political ideology. Would Yeats' poetry be less good? Obviously not.

Another modern myth-maker, D. H. Lawrence, says: "This pseudo-philosophy of mine . . . is deduced from the novels and poems, not the reverse." If the same is true—and I think it is—of Wagner's pseudo-philosophy, does that mean that Nazism is embedded in his music-dramas? Not necessarily. Ernest Newman, who has studied the life of Wagner more thoroughly than anyone else, confirms my impression that Wagner's prose was chiefly a purgation of the intellect. It worked something like this. Being German, Wagner liked to have a philosophy; he prepared himself for creative work by erecting a pseudo-philosophic scaffolding which could be knocked away later; it is unfortunate that some are more interested in the scaffolding than in the edifice. "My literary works," said Wagner in a letter to Roeckel, "were testimonies of my want of freedom as an artist; it was dire compulsion that wrung them from me." This being so, it is not surprising that the prose works are uncouth. Wagner was not a competent philosopher. If he embodied Schopenhauer's philosophy in *The Ring*, it should be recalled that the work was planned before he read a word of Schopenhauer.

In all this I am allowing the reader to assume the worst of Wagner's prose. But this is giving too much away to the critics. Wagner, like Nietzsche, George, or Lawrence, is a many-sided—or more precisely, a two-sided—writer. He contradicts himself. If the fascist can find solace in his prose so too can the democrat. In *Was ist deutsch?* for example,

Wagner speaks of the tendency of a people to identify itself with its great men. This tendency, he says, is sheer vanity, and, moreover, "diese Neigung ist grund deutsch." In the same essay Wagner speaks scornfully of those who wish to make Germany a new Roman Empire controlling other peoples. There is much also in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, with its prefatory dedication to the great free-thinker Feuerbach, that would today be judged decidedly anti-fascist. And in his notes for this work, now available in the *Gesammelte Schriften*, Wagner declares that real history will begin under a communist new order when men will be governed by a genuine historical understanding and not by myths such as divine right and the sanctity of property. Richard Wagner, in such articles as "Programmatische Forderungen für ein demokratisches Deutschland" (*Dresdener Anzeiger*, July 14, 1848), was a pioneer of German social democracy; that he was also a pioneer of German fascism is a paradox that only a more intimate study of his art can help us to understand. In his music-dramas Wagner confronts himself.

In his early operas, Wagner examines the efforts of heroes to push back the boundaries of necessity, but he finds the hero doomed at the start (*Der Fliegende Holländer*) or misunderstood in the end (*Lohengrin*). The major spiritual problem, as most would admit, was only faced in the Ring Cycle, which, whether or not it is the most perfect, is certainly the richest and the most problematical of Wagner's work. It is Wagner's *Hamlet*. In it lies the key to Wagner's mind and art; most of this essay will be devoted to it.

In the *Ring* Wagner sought, or so at first it seems, to embody the new heroic religion which, like Carlyle, Nietzsche, George, and Lawrence, he found to be a necessary successor to the Christian epoch. Wotan, the old God whose tenure has always been insecure, is dethroned by Siegfried, the hero who can neither be helped nor hindered by the gods. The theme is worked out with the utmost variety of character and incident.

The old world, as Wotan explains to Mime (*Siegfried*, Act I) consists of the dwarfs and of Alberich; of the giants, Fasolt and Fafnir; of the gods and Wotan. The earth contains riches which are innocent enough when in the protection of the auroral Rhine-maidens but which, in the hands of the loveless dwarfs and giants, became the cause of endless and purposeless strife. Wotan, who heads the hierarchy of the gods, is not all-wise or omnipotent. He forfeits one eye as the price

of marriage with Fricka, whose dowry is the power of Law. He forfeits the Rhinegold and the magic ring in order to have his castle built without losing Freia, Fricka's sister, whom he has pledged to the builders of the castle, the giants. Freia is a symbol of love—she possesses golden apples—and godhead has only been able to retain the attribute of love (Freia) and law (Fricka) by humiliating barter. So much for the limitation of Wotan's power. His wisdom is limited by his unruly temper, which drives him to quarrel with the giants, who thus learn Wotan's imperfection. The giants represent stupid insurgent humanity as the draws represent shy, treacherous humanity. One is reminded of Nietzsche's opinion of the mob.

When, assisted by his cynical intelligence, personified by Loge, the god gives away the Rhinegold, Fafnir kills Fasolt rather than share the booty, transforms himself by use of the Tarnhelm, a magic helmet, into a dragon and sits guarding the gold. That is: the richness and the meaning of the earth were, in the course of history, claimed by man himself, but, far from rising to wisdom and nobility, man became a slavish and sleepy monster while God was an increasingly harassed elder statesman. Man has bought the ring and the gold by sacrificing love. The symbols are primordial. The ring is a time-honored symbol for man's goal, his union with what he most needs. It is often a female sexual symbol—as in the final lines of *The Merchant of Venice*—but, here in Wagner, the ring is what Fafnir prefers to woman: namely, the key to worldly power. The helmet represents the dexterity and adaptability of man, a dexterity and adaptability which can easily be misused. The gold-hoard reminds us of Nietzsche's belief that the heart of the earth is of gold. It is important to note how Wagner demonstrated the necessity of Godhead's preserving love and handing over earthly power to mankind. Erda, mother earth herself, the personified life-force, rises from her bed, warning Wotan to yield the Ring to Fafnir. The demands of the life-force are final. *Das Rheingold*, which I have been sketching, closes with rejoicing over Freia. Intelligence (Loge) has the last word of the gods:

Ihrem Ende eilen sie zu,  
Die so stark in Bestehen sich wännen.  
Fast schäm' ich mich  
Mit ihnen zu schaffen.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> They hasten to their end, who falsely think themselves so strong and durable. I am almost ashamed to work with them.

The Christian story passes from the failure of Adam to the triumph of the second Adam. In *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*, Wagner describes a not wholly dissimilar process, the failure of Wotan and the triumph of Siegfried.

Feeling the insecurity of his position, Wotan buttresses his divine power with a bodyguard of fallen heroes whom his Valkyries have borne to Valhalla from the battlefield. These buttresses of Deity symbolize the churches or any organized support of the old order. Fearing that Alberich will wrest the Ring from Fafnir, Wotan meditates plans for the future. His conclusion is that only a higher nature than has previously existed can recover the Ring. This higher creation is the Hero, the germ of whom he feels in his own godhead. The Wagnerian hero, like the Carlylean and the Nietzschean, is the legitimate successor of the old God. As Zarathustra strives towards superhumanity by his love of the earth, Wotan impregnates Erda herself. The fruit of this union is not the hero but true will, directive *Wille zur Macht* (as against the merely rational Loge). True will, which is also the eternal image of woman drawing men on to high endeavor, is called Brünnhilde.

The breeding of the hero is indirect and slow. Wotan cannot father him. He fathers, by a mortal woman, the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde. Contravening human laws against adultery, for Sieglinde is by this time married to Hunding, and contravening also holy ordinance against incest, the pair engender the hero, Siegfried: the old order is broken by immoralists. The sexual potency and creative power of Siegmund are suggested by the myth, familiar to readers of Malory, of the sword which can only be drawn by the hero. But Siegmund has to atone for his temerity by death; and (a highly imaginative stroke) Brünnhilde flees carrying on her war-horse the fragments of Siegmund's broken sword and Sieglinde pregnant with the hero. Siegmund's death, required by the ancient law (Fricka), was redeemed by the resentful will of Brünnhilde.

Brünnhilde's rebellion, threatening the status of Wotan and the old order, is punished not with death, for Wotan cannot kill the emanation of his own union with the life-force, but by her being thrown into a deep sleep. Like Snow-White and other heroines of the folk-imagination, Brünnhilde can be awakened only by the advent of the hero. The creative will of humanity is imprisoned, though the circle



of flame that encloses her is a mirage. Since only the hero has courage, a mirage is enough to deceive mankind.

The delivery comes in *Siegfried*. Wagner portrays his hero as the iconoclast. By a Christian criterion, he is too loud, too violent, too arrogant; an unregenerate pagan devoid of compassion. Siegfried agrees with Carlyle that one need not act charitably to the contemptible and treats Mime as roughly as his anvil. But the *hubris* which the ancients considered a fault is a virtue for Wagner, as for Nietzsche, and it is by his boundless confidence that Siegfried re-creates Nothung, the sword of Siegmund. Siegfried is a crude emanation of the vital energy which for Carlyle, Nietzsche, Lawrence, and Wagner superseded the evolution of the divine idea. He is irreverent and is, like Zarathustra, more at home with the beasts, and especially the birds, of the forest than with men. For Nietzsche, men were a cross between monster and phantom; for Wagner, at this time, they were either dolts or knaves. Siegfried slays the dragon, seizes the ring and helmet, leaving the earth's riches undespoiled. A friendly bird whispers to him in sleep that on a mountain peak Brünnhilde awaits him within a ring of fire.

The climax of the death of Fafnir is prefatory to a higher climax. At the foot of Brünnhilde's mountain, Siegfried meets Wotan. They converse and Siegfried explains that he has a healthy contempt for the old and effete. Wotan summons all his divine grandeur to impress the youth. But Siegfried reverses the fate of his father (who had broken Nothung across the spear of Wotan) by breaking the spear of Wotan with Nothung. After this, Wotan disappears from human history. God, as Nietzsche put it, is dead; we await the superman. The myth of Heroic Vitalism ends in the prologue of *Götterdämmerung*, where Siegfried and Brünnhilde exchange symbols, a male for a female, Brünnhilde's horse for Siegfried's ring. The quest is achieved. On the horse of Brünnhilde, Siegfried is master of the world. Meanwhile Wotan has tried to mend his spear with a bough from the World Ash. The ash withers, for now that the hero has freed mankind from divine shackles its day is done. Wotan's heroes cut it down and prepare to burn Valhalla with the faggots. Night will fall on the gods.

What happens to the allegory in *Götterdämmerung*? Fifty years ago Bernard Shaw maintained in *The Perfect Wagnerite* that it simply disintegrates and that this final part of the trilogy declines into mere Italianate operatics, complete with coloratura singing and a stage-villain. Shaw points out that Wagner had sketched a Death of Sieg-

fried at the age of thirty-five and suggested that, when he turned to the old libretto at the age of sixty, he had lost interest in the myth of revolution.

Now everyone would agree that with the entry of Siegfried into the court of Gunther there is a change of tone. But Shaw too readily despises Wagner's apostasy from Heroic Vitalism. *Götterdämmerung* is Wagner's palinode. It is a picture of life after the triumph of Heroism. The hero finds himself the dupe of villainy and corruption, because he carries with him the ring and its curse. The ring is a symbol of power as the gold is a symbol of wealth. Alberich is economic man, the victim and incarnation of Mammonism; Siegfried is power man, the hero of the new post-capitalist epoch. According to the Wagner of *Götterdämmerung* power man is doomed no less than economic man. Siegfried is given a chance to restore the ring to the Rhine-maidens, but he is too proud or too ignorant to yield to their entreaties. Moreover, night has not yet fallen on the gods. They linger on until the final consummation. And the final consummation is reached through the sacrificial love of Brünnhilde. In the closing bars of *Götterdämmerung* is heard the motif of redemption by love. The ring returns to the Rhine, and reconciliation is reached through love and sacrifice. The Siegfried-ideal, evidently, is not enough.

Bernard Shaw was angry with Wagner for the same reason as Nietzsche. He thought he had found in Wagnerism an expression of the power-instinct only to discover in *Götterdämmerung* that love and not power is primary. All Shaw's arguments against *Götterdämmerung* are, I believe, answerable, and here it is relevant to mention one of them. Shaw argues that there is no point in Siegfried's getting back the ring from Brünnhilde and that the incident is a bit of muddled melodrama. Now the whole tetralogy is an attempted answer to the question: what must a man do to be saved? The old deity, Wotan, is dying a not ignoble death. The new hero is trying his hand. In Siegfried's endeavor, a first stage is reached when he rides in triumph down the Rhine on the horse of Brünnhilde, the dynamic of human will. Is this the answer to Wagner's chief question? For a time it seems that it may be, and one of the Valkyries, having missed the irony of Wotan's comment that gods and men will be released ("erlöst") when the Ring is given back to the Rhine, is of opinion that men and gods might continue to live happily if Brünnhilde restores the ring to the Rhine-maidens. But Brünnhilde, believing that a final solution has been

found in her living union with Siegfried, refuses to comply with her sister's request. No sooner has she done so than it turns out that, drugged and deceived by the Gibichungs, Siegfried gives her away to King Gunther and reclaims the ring for himself. The dupe of knaves, the hero loses his pure Will and arrogates to himself the symbol of Power. This, the beginning of the end, is the second stage of Siegfried's attempt to work out the salvation of the world.

"In the original draft of Siegfried's death," says Shaw in *The Perfect Wagnerite*, "the incongruity is carried still further by the conclusion, at which the dead Brynhild, restored to her godhead by Wotan, and again a Valkyrie, carried the slain Siegfried to Valhalla to live there happily ever after with its pious heroes." The significant fact is that Wagner eliminated incongruity by cancelling this conclusion. Night does fall on the gods and a solution is found not as yet in complete Christian innocence but in the annihilation of Will, human and divine, by the flames of Love. The hero is helpless, when severed from pure Will. Having regained her horse, Brünnhilde leaps to her death.

"Death and vulgarity," says Lord Henry Wotton in *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, "are the only two facts in the nineteenth century that one cannot explain away." In *The Ring*, Wagner had accommodated vulgarity with some success (Alberich, Mime, Fafnir, Fasolt, Hagen) but there remained death, the death of the hero. Shaw, obsessed with politics, lacks the tragedian's concern with death. To him death is simply an inconvenience. Not so to Wagner. The death of Siegfried was literally his first and last interest. From his plan of *Siegfrieds Tod* in 1848 he was led back through the story of what is now Siegfried to *Die Walküre* and *Rheingold*. In 1853 the libretto of the tetralogy was complete. Shaw's argument about a change in conception can only hold for the score, incomplete for over twenty years. *Siegfrieds Tod* was transformed into *Götterdämmerung* in the early 'fifties.

What is the real significance of the transformation? There may be some truth in the theory that the optimism of *Siegfried* reflects the revolutionary Wagner of 1848, the pessimism of *Götterdämmerung* reflecting the counter-revolution of Napoleon III—the Hagen who stabbed European revolutionism in the back in 1851. Even if this theory were true, it would not be any more illuminating than the theory that Shakespeare wrote problem plays when Jacobean England was passing through a phase of disillusionment. Actually there is other evidence. Wagner did not, as many since Nietzsche have imagined,

*evolve* from world-embracing Heroic Vitalism to Buddhistic nihilism. The two opposite philosophies or attitudes, Heroic Vitalism and Buddhist-Christian religion, co-existed in his breast as they did in Carlyle's, Lawrence's, and Nietzsche's own. Wagner's mind was ambivalent. I fancy that Nietzsche was angry with himself for not seeing this before he received the libretto of *Parsifal*. He should have recalled that as early as 1848 Wagner had not only written *Siegfrieds Tod*, he had planned a Christian drama on the subject of Jesus himself.

The two Wagnerian philosophies corresponding to the two sides of Wagner's mind, are brought together in *The Ring* by a device as daring as the maestro's musical technique. Since the Siegfried story is nowadays known to us chiefly through Wagner we tend to forget his most audacious act: the conflation of the myth of Siegfried with the myth of the fall of the Gods. This astonishing juxtaposition is so successful that it is now taken for granted. It proves one thing: that the twilight of the Gods was not part of a story imposed on Wagner by his sources. It is an alien element which only an urgent sense of purpose, a tremendous genius, and the compulsion of an ambivalent mind, could fuse. The idea that heroism is ultimately worthless, that what Nietzsche called "die Unschuld des Werdens" can only be restored through love and sacrifice, is what Wagner substitutes for the happy ending which Shaw rightly ridicules. But why does Shaw ignore the meaning of the substitution? Perhaps because he could not see how a man can affirm and deny the life-force in the same work. Yet recently we discovered that the arch-priest of the life force, Henri Bergson, died a life-denier in the arms of the Roman Catholic Church.

I end with a note on heroism in Wagner. The starting point for Wagner's later heroes is to be found in his earlier heroes and heroines. The evidence is to be found not only in the operas and music-dramas themselves but in *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde*.

Through the fog of Wagner's turgid prose, one can perhaps discern what his endeavor was. The flying Dutchman, Tannhäuser, and Lohengrin are all seeking salvation through the eternal feminine. Wagner's magniloquence—Senta is "the Woman of the Future," Tannhäuser "the spirit of the whole Ghibelline race," Lohengrin "the type of the only really tragic material, of the tragic element of our modern life"—convinces us at least of his serious intentions. The Siegfried idea came from the heroine of *Lohengrin*, Elsa. She made Wagner, he says, a

full-fledged revolutionary; he was yearning for redemption through the spirit of the Volk, and Elsa was the incarnation of that spirit.

Elsa was the incarnation of Wagner's personal and social ideals, of all his heroic ideals. At last he had arrived at a conclusion. But Elsa was a woman, and Elsa's life was a failure. It was necessary, Wagner felt, to present the idea again. The Ring Cycle springs from this need. The character of Siegfried was a necessity of Wagner's development—Siegfried, the hero in his fullness, the doer of deeds, the complete man. "It was Elsa," Wagner says, "who taught me to discover this man."

"Siegfried [ist] der von uns gewünschte, gewollte Mensch der Zukunft . . . der aber nicht durch uns gemacht werden kann und der sich selbst schaffen muss durch unsere Vernichtung"<sup>6</sup>—this conception has been well digested by those who write about Wagner and Hitler. One thing is forgotten: that Wagner himself rejected the conception. *Siegfried* itself has one of the grimmest, most ironical endings in all drama, no less ironical for the fact that the audience goes home thinking it has witnessed a happy ending. Bernard Shaw, revolted by passion, turns away his gaze. One widely used English translation reads "laughing at death" for "lachender Tod" (at the end of *Tristan* "Unbewusst, höchste Lust" is translated "In a Kiss, highest Bliss"). Indeed, the words of Siegfried and Brünnhilde are richly ambiguous. Consider the final line:

Leuchtende Liebe, lachender Tod!<sup>7</sup>

This means that salvation is to be found in love and death, love being associated with light, and death not with decay but with laughter. The statement as it stands is not very different from the conclusion of the whole tetralogy. But the context is different. Siegfried is not yet the dead hero who has paid the price. He is overcome with *hubris*; he is on the brink of his downfall at Gunther's court. The irony here consists in his utter unawareness. Brünnhilde on the other hand is, until the last moment, overcome with foreboding. Each ecstatic thought of Siegfried's she has capped with a despairing thought. He speaks of life, light, day, creation; she of death, darkness, night, annihilation. Logically there is no contradiction, because he is speaking of their own future, she of the end of the gods. But the gods cannot die while Siegfried keeps the ring. Brünnhilde knows this and cries out in deliberate forgetfulness, Siegfried in involuntary joy:

<sup>6</sup> Siegfried is the man of the future whom we have wanted and desired but who cannot be made by us and who must create himself through our annihilation.

<sup>7</sup> Shining love, laughing death!

## Leuchtende Liebe, lachender Tod!

*Götterdämmerung* is foreshadowed.

Ambivalence is the cardinal characteristic of Wagner's mind, and the natural expression for such ambivalence is irony. Irony and *double-entendre* are sometimes carried over into the music itself, as for instance, when the orchestra plays such themes as World's Heritage at the very time when Brünnhilde, full of foreboding, feels that she will not inherit the world. The Ring concludes with the theme of redemption through love. Whether Wagner refutes his Siegfried philosophy or merely shifts from it would be hard to determine.

Does the tetralogy have unity? It might be claimed that Wagner's conception changed after the failures of 1848 as Milton's did after the failure of 1660. That point is not argued here. I have tried only to represent Wagner as a great artist, a serious interpreter of life who, like Nietzsche, saw both sides because he was both sides. Two worlds were at war within him; and since the struggle taking place microcosmically in Wagner, Nietzsche, Lawrence, and George, is now being fought out macrocosmically in the Caucasus and the Solomons, we cannot but be interested. But we should not look to these men for solutions. They are the struggle incarnate and their work is the image of the struggle. They are men of the transition. Others must write the blueprints for the future.