

## Music Drama as Modernist Text *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* in Wagner's Ring Cycle

Richard Wagner's relationship to modernity is hardly less problematic than the phenomenon of modernity itself. Although the concept first acquired philosophical substance in the nineteenth century through the writings of Hegel, who characterised it as that which must create its own normativity, Jürgen Habermas reminds us that the modern is likewise bound up with its own critique. Modernity, in his view, calls into question the totalizing aspects of the cult of subjectivity that stamps it as a historical epoch in the first place.<sup>1</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that the aesthetic of modernity was first articulated by artists who were at the same time critics. For Baudelaire, the modern plays on the dialectic between the invariable and the transitory; the «painter of modern life», he writes, portrays the «passing moment» and all its «suggestions of eternity».<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Wagner's polemical account of the late nineteenth-century notion of modernity (*Modern* 1878) indicates that, for him, the notion entails less a renunciation of orthodoxy than a rapprochement between innovation and tradition.<sup>3</sup>

As Carl Dahlhaus and others have shown, Wagner's modernity manifests itself explicitly through his contributions to the progress of musical language.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, there is another sense in which the modern impulse is encoded into the very fabric of his music. In order to approach this implicit modernity in Wagner's works, we will turn to Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the cleft in contemporary modes of apperception, a cleft that he locates in the distinction between the terms *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. As we will see, the contrast between *Erfahrung* (a product of the penetration of events into the depths of memory) on the one hand, and *Erlebnis* (the striking, but isolated occurrence) on the other, emerges with striking clarity in the *Ring* tetralogy, particularly in Siegfried's narrative just before his death in the final act of *Götterdämmerung*. Our analysis of the musico-dramatic thematisation of the distinction that, for Benjamin, defines the chief predicament of modernity, will likewise facilitate our placement of Wagner's creative achievements within the broader framework of late nineteenth-century literary culture.

In a series of essays and fragments dating from the 1930s — *Erfahrung und Armut* (1933), *Der Erzähler* (1936), *Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire* (1938), *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire* (1939), and *Zentralpark* (1939-40) — Benjamin locates the essence of the modern in the relationship between alternate modes of configuring temporality. According to his schema, *Erfahrung* concords with the wisdom passed on from one generation to its successor in the form of adages, maxims, and tales. A result of the convergence in memory (*Gedächtnis*) of unconsciously accumulated data, *Erfahrung* is thus linked with the temporality of a continuing tradition.<sup>5</sup> Yet modern man, Benjamin argues, is constantly cheated out of true experience (*Erfahrung*) of this sort. The problem is particularly acute for the big-city dweller, who is unceasingly exposed to «shocks» in his confrontations with crowds and is likewise forced to repeat the same activities with mechanical and numbing regularity. With the advent of technology comes the new barbarism that Benjamin calls *Erfahrungsarmut*.<sup>6</sup> In the modern world, an enduring *Erfahrung* is displaced by the fleeting *Erlebnis*. Hence for Benjamin, the latter possesses none of the magical qualities ascribed to it in the *Lebensphilosophie* of Wilhelm Dilthey.<sup>7</sup> As the norm for the alienated individual whose perceptive capabilities have been reduced to the absorption of discontinuous events, *Erlebnis* is little more than a kind of «atrophied» *Erfahrung*.<sup>8</sup>

In Benjamin's view, it is the task of the artist to emancipate us from the disorienting *Erlebnisse* of modern life, to imbue the ephemeral *Erlebnis* with the weight of *Erfahrung*. Thus in the visual arts and architecture, Benjamin recognises the fusion of artistry and technology in the work of Paul Klee and Adolf Loos as a positive quality. Brecht's epic theatre in turn elevates the shock experience (*Schockerlebnis*) to a structural principle. The same technique informs photography, radio, and the film.<sup>9</sup> But the roots of this transfigurative process lie even earlier. Indeed, Benjamin suspects that from the second half of the nineteenth century, *Erfahrung* could only be produced synthetically, through the *correspondances* of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* and the *mémoire involon-*

1 Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne. Zwölf Vorlesungen*, Frankfurt/M. 1985, pp. 26-30.

2 Charles Baudelaire, *Le peintre de la vie moderne* [1863], in: *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris 1966, Vol. 3, p. 457.

3 Richard Wagner, «Modern (1878)», in: *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 4. Auflage, Leipzig 1907, Bd. 10, pp. 54-60.

4 Carl Dahlhaus, «Die Musik», in: *Richard-Wagner-Handbuch*, hrsg. von Ulrich Müller und Peter Wapnewski, Stuttgart 1986, pp. 220-221.

5 See Walter Benjamin, «Erfahrung und Armut», in: *Gesammelte Schriften* [BGS], hrsg. von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schwepenhäuser, Frankfurt/M. 1974-1985, Bd. II/1, p. 214; and «Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire», in: *BGS* I/2, p. 608.

6 See Benjamin, «Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire», *BGS* I/2, pp. 630, 636; and «Erfahrung und Armut», *BGS* II/1, p. 215.

7 More recently, Hans-Georg Gadamer has found in the *Erlebnis* (as an unforgettable and irreplaceable event) a complement to aesthetic perception. See *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen<sup>2</sup> 1965, pp. 60-66.

8 Walter Benjamin, «Zentralpark», Fragment 32a, in: *BGS* I/2, p. 681.

9 See Benjamin, «Erfahrung und Armut», in: *BGS* II/1, pp. 215-216; and «Der Autor als Produzent» [1934], *BGS* II/2, p. 697.



taire that served as a catalyst for Proust's massive celebration of the recollective faculty in *À la Recherche du temps perdu*.

Wagner arguably effected a similar transfiguration. But while Baudelaire takes the colorful but questionable figures of big-city life — the flâneur, the ragpicker and the gambler — as a point of departure for his poeticisation of the shock experience, Wagner turns to fairy tale, to the figure of the boy who sets out to learn fear. Indeed, Siegfried's initial inability to learn fear is interpretable as a metaphor for his inability to experience (*erfahren*) in the deepest sense. Wagner places this eminently modern dilemma in striking relief in the great narrative from the third act of *Götterdämmerung*. In the following discussion, we will coordinate this passage with the mutually dependent aspects of Benjamin's theory of modernity: 1) the devaluation of narrative (*Erzählung*) and memory (*Erinnerung*), 2) the allegorical structure and dialectical imagery of modern art, and 3) the heroism of the modern artist.

The art of storytelling, Benjamin writes in his essay on Leskov's tales (*Der Erzähler*), is coming to an end. He traces its demise to various sources: our incapacity to share experiences (*Erfahrungen*), our passion for rapidly expendable information, and the loss of a community of receptive listeners.<sup>10</sup> In the *Ring*, Wagner thematises the art of storytelling itself as a means of redeeming a practice threatened with extinction. Considered from a structural point of view, the tetralogy, after all, unfolds as a series of mutually related motivic complexes. And insofar as their manifold reflectivity is situated at the constructive center of the whole, the tetralogy warrants description as a musical novel, a «scenic epic» («szenisches Epos») in Thomas Mann's famous phrase.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, its primary reflective sites lie in the extended scenes of epic narration, among which Siegfried's retelling of his adventures (*Götterdämmerung* III/ii) counts as the most systematically organized.

Siegfried's narrative neatly divides into three sections, each corresponding to an act of the previous music drama. Yet this constructive regularity masks an underlying irony: a story, Benjamin implies, normally serves as a means of *overcoming* death; here, however, it becomes the motivating source of the hero's murder. Ironic too is the fact that Siegfried lacks the reflective powers required of novelistic figures. Hence Wagner himself tells much of the tale. The orchestral support for the opening of the monologue, for instance, derives from Mime's «Sorglose Schmiede» (*Rheingold*, Scene 3), music that Siegfried cannot know (mm. 564ff.). Likewise in the subsequent measures (659-651), it is the composer, and not his fairy-tale hero, whose recollective powers weave three thematic strands — a segment of Fafner's motive, the dotted motive associated with the Nibelungs, and the motive of Mime's brooding — into a compact utterance.

Memory (*Erinnerung*), no less than the figure of the storyteller, comes under scrutiny in Benjamin's diagnosis of modernity. On his view, the epic faculty that alone creates the dense web of which all stories form a part is becoming more of a rarity in the modern world. What remains in its stead is a debased form of memory: the short-lived remembrance or «souvenir» (*Andenken*) that, for Benjamin, serves as a complement to the fleeting *Erlebnis*.<sup>12</sup> Wagner thematises this dilemma as well. His hero is, for all intents and purposes, without a sense for the past. «Nicht kann ich das Ferne sinnig erfassen», he sings in the final act of *Siegfried* at precisely the point where the motivic continuity of the music dissolves. Siegfried eventually learns fear, but as Egon Voss has pointed out, he promptly forgets it in the rapturous final moments of his duet with Brünnhilde (*Siegfried* III/iii): «das Fürchten — mich dünkt, ich Dummer vergaß es nun ganz!»<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that Siegfried is without memory (even under the influence of the draught of forgetfulness), but rather that the *quality* of his memory is seriously impaired. Hagen's fateful brew merely brings to the surface a defining trait of Siegfried's character: his inability to retain much beyond the present moment.

Hence in his narrative from *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried makes no mention of his encounter with the Wanderer, an event of singular importance for the future course of the drama. It apparently made little impression on a hero for whom the striking *Erlebnis* is the norm. The debasement of Siegfried's recollective faculty leaves its imprint on the syntax of the music accompanying his narrative account. Motivic complexes, previously developed at some length, are shrunken to the smallest dimensions, especially in the opening summation of the content of *Siegfried* Act I. The first sixteen measures of Mime's *Starenlied*, for example, recur here as a drastically shortened unit (mm. 668-671). Siegfried's Forging Song («Nothung! Nothung! Neidliches Schwert») is compressed into a pair of two-measure segments (mm. 681-684). The combination of the rhythm of Mime's hammering motive and the melodic shape of the Sword motive creates a foreshortened figure of a single bar (m. 680).

The opening section of Siegfried's narrative, in other words, discloses the fragmented, mosaic-like quality of allegory, the signifying mode that, according to Benjamin, tears objects from their original contexts in order both to «shatter» and «preserve» them. But Benjamin's claim that Baudelaire was isolated as an allegorist in the nineteenth century requires modification: Wagner was no less a «straggler» in this regard than was the

10 Benjamin, «Der Erzähler», in: *BGS* II/2, pp. 439, 444, 446-447.

11 Thomas Mann, «Richard Wagner und der Ring des Nibelungen», in: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 9, Frankfurt/M. 1960, p. 522.

12 See Benjamin, «Der Erzähler», in: *BGS* II/2, pp. 453-454; and «Zentralpark», Fragment 44, in: *BGS* I/2, p. 689.

13 Egon Voss, «Siegfrieds Musik», in: *Das musikalische Kunstwerk. Festschrift Carl Dahlhaus*, hrsg. von Hermann Danuser et al., Laaber 1988, p. 351.



French poet.<sup>14</sup> He arranges the materials in the initiatory passage of Siegfried's narrative as if they were snapshots in a photo album, bound together only by the regularity of a propulsive  $\frac{6}{8}$  meter. Sequential statements of Fafrer's motive (mm. 688-691), for instance, are forcibly displaced from their usual F-minor context into a D-minor region. Form and melody partake of a similar process of decontextualisation. Although the first section of the narrative divides into two *Lied*-strophes (mm. 654-667, 667-693), the disjointed gestures of Siegfried's vocal line eschew the characteristic lyricism of the *Lied* forms. Tonalities themselves are reified, treated with the mechanical objectivity of motives. While the narrative essentially replicates the tonal plan of the third of the *Ring* dramas, its abrupt transitions destroy the functional underpinnings of this plan. Hence the relationship between the tonal endpoints of its first section (G minor and D minor) is undermined by the vagaries of the intervening music (in A', C', C, D minor, and E minor). It is therefore Brünnhilde's task, in her imposing *Schlussgesang*, to knit the allegorical fragments of the tetralogy into the unitary form of the symbol.

But Siegfried's music also embodies a powerful gesture of redemption, a moment in which he manages to create a meaningful whole out of the striking but disconnected *Erlebnisse* of his past. In Benjamin's theory of modernity, we are granted access to such moments through the «dialectical image» («dialektisches Bild») a configuration that brings together «Then» and «Now», fore- and after-history as if in a lightning flash.<sup>15</sup> The Parisian arcades of the nineteenth century, which fused artwork and commodity, «house» and «thoroughfare», served Benjamin as a prime repository for such images.<sup>16</sup> In a telling note for his unfinished *Passagen-Werk*, he located them, metaphorically, at the boundary between dreams and consciousness. «The Now of recognisability», he wrote, «is the moment of awakening».<sup>17</sup> Wagner dramatises this metaphor in the closing strains of Siegfried's narrative, just after his hero succumbs to Hagen's murderous assault. Here Siegfried steps back into the time already traversed in his narrative account for an extended recollection of the luminous music that had accompanied Brünnhilde's awakening in the final act of *Siegfried*. Fragmentary recall gives way to visionary reflection. If Parsifal «wird wissend», then Siegfried, if only momentarily, «wird erfahrungsreich».

The alchemical transformation of *Erlebnisse* into *Erfahrungen*, as Benjamin maintained, was a Herculean task that modern man was singularly unfit to perform. Heroic modernism, he wrote, «turns out to be a tragedy in which the hero's part is available».<sup>18</sup> The role is therefore reserved for the poet, whose ability to give shape to modernity puts him on a par with the heroes of antiquity. This insight has a long and venerable history in German letters. Hölderlin thematises the same notion in his hymn to Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory and mother of the Muses. Wagner himself employs the term *Erfahrung* as an emblem for the poetic process in *Oper und Drama*. Here he enjoins the poet to condense the «infinitely scattered moments of time and space» — the *Erlebnisse* of modernity — «into one chief motive». Yet only «already-experienced age» is granted such revelatory moments of «the highest poetic capacity».<sup>19</sup>

In a long letter to August Röckel of 25/26 January 1854, Wagner shared his thoughts on the meaning of his *Ring* poem. «In [the character of] Siegfried» he maintained, «I have attempted to portray what I take to be the most perfect human being.»<sup>20</sup> Yet the music he would compose almost twenty years later, in which Siegfried's entrapment in a typically modern predicament is vividly realized in sonic terms, presents a less exalted image of the fairy-tale protagonist. The hero of the *Ring* turns out to be its creator.

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14 See Benjamin, «Zentralpark», Fragments 13, 19, 45; in: *BGS* 1/2, pp. 666, 669-670, 690.

15 Benjamin, «N» [Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts; from *Passagen-Werk*], Fragment 3.1, in: *BGS* V/1, pp. 577-578.

16 See Walter Benjamin, *Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts*, in: *BGS* V/1, p. 55.

17 Benjamin, «N», Fragment 18.4, in: *BGS* V/1, p. 608.

18 Benjamin, «Das Paris das Second Empire bei Baudelaire», in: *BGS* 1/2, p. 600.

19 Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, Bd. 4, pp. 76, 84-85.

20 Richard Wagner, *Briefe*, hrsg. von Hanjo Kesting, München 1983, p. 284.