1 Greek Tragedy and Myth

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The three aesthetic treatises that form the bulk of Wagner's Zurich essays, *Kunst und Revolution* (*Art and Revolution*), *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*The Artwork of the Future*, both 1849), and *Oper und Drama* (*Opera and Drama,* 1851), were written at a pivotal time in the composer's life. Living in Swiss exile owing to his involvement in the Dresden uprising of 1849, Wagner had ample time to reflect on the failure of the 1848–9 revolutions and to ponder what he perceived as the deplorable state of modern art. The essays he wrote during this period bear witness to a host of frustrations rooted variously in personal, professional, and political experiences. Yet they also express a profound sense of hope – a fervent belief that the revolutionary aims for which Wagner had risked his freedom and livelihood were still on the horizon and that, once realized, they would usher in a golden age of artistic and cultural revitalization, with Wagner and his music placed squarely at the center. This "Great Revolution of Mankind," as Wagner referred to it, would bring about the destruction of existing social and political structures, which in turn would give rise to an ideal artwork to be created in the spirit of ancient Greek tragedy. The artwork that Wagner envisioned was none other than his own radical conception of traditional opera, or what has come to be known as "music drama." Foremost in his thinking was an opera on which he was working based on the Nibelung legend, called *Siegfrieds Tod* (The Death of Siegfried) at the time but eventually known as *Götterdämmerung*, the final installment of the composer's monumental *Ring* cycle. Viewed from this perspective, Wagner's mid-century aesthetic writings represent an attempt to create a theoretical framework for an operatic project that would eventually become the *Ring* and that owes much of its essence to the composer's belief that he was undertaking nothing less than the modern-day revitalization of Greek tragedy.

The Rebirth of Greek Tragedy

Wagner's fascination with the Greeks has long been of interest to scholars, who point to his mid-century reform essays, his idea for a festival theater in

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Bayreuth, and, not least, aspects of the operas themselves as evidence of his lifelong affinity with ancient Greece.[1] His interest in the subject dates back to childhood, when he studied ancient Greek history, language, and literature with his "favorite teacher" at the Dresden Kreuzschule, Julius Sillig, and received extracurricular guidance from his uncle, Adolf Wagner, a respected classicist in his own right.[2] This period (c. 1822–7) represents the first of three phases into which scholars have typically divided Wagner's study of the Greeks.[3] The second coincides with the composer's stay in Paris between 1839 and 1842, at which time he set out to master ancient Greek – a feat he never accomplished – with the help of his friend, the philologist and student of German mythology Samuel Lehrs.

The third and most decisive phase began in Dresden in the summer of 1847, marking what the classicist Wolfgang Schadewaldt described as the composer's "breakthrough" period.[4] It was at this time that Wagner began voraciously to read works of ancient Greek literature, including translations of Homer, Plato, Aristophanes, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. According to Wagner, the effect of reading Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy was "indescribable." He claims thereafter to have been unable to reconcile himself to modern literature and explains that his ideas concerning drama and the theater were fundamentally altered.[5]

Such a claim is borne out in the theoretical works that Wagner completed not long into his Swiss exile. In *Art and Revolution*, the composer draws a sharp contrast between ancient and modern art. Whereas the latter reflects the discord and alienation that define contemporary existence, ancient Greek art was an expression of the harmony between the individual and society. Greek tragedy in particular, as a harmonious union of all the arts, was the perfect artistic expression of a free and unified society as represented above all by Athens in its prime. These notions are characteristic of German idealist thought as expressed by such literary figures as Goethe and Schiller but are ultimately rooted in a German brand of

[1] For a discussion of the Bayreuth project, see Roger Allen's chapter in this volume. Among the earliest works on the topic of Wagner and ancient Greece is George Wrassiwanopulos-Braschowanoff, *Richard Wagner und die Antike: ein Beitrag zur kunstphilosophischen Weltanschauung Richard Wagners* (Lorenz Ellwanger: Bayreuth, 1905). More recent scholarship includes Wolfgang Schadewaldt, "Richard Wagner und die Griechen," in *Hellas und Hesperien: Gesammelte Schriften zur Antike und zur neueren Literatur in zwei Bänden*, 2:341–405 (Artemis: Zurich, 1970); and Ulrich Müller, "Wagner and Antiquity," in *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski. English edition trans. Stewart Spencer and ed. John Deathridge (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1992), 227–35.

[2] Richard Wagner, *SSD*, 9:295.

[3] See especially Schadewaldt, "Wagner und die Griechen." Also see Müller, "Wagner and Antiquity"; and Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Blood for the Ghosts: Classical Influences in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Duckworth: London, 1982), 126–42.

[4] Schadewaldt, "Wagner und die Griechen," 347.

[5] Richard Wagner, *My Life*, trans. Andrew Gray and ed. Mary Whittall (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1983), 342.

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Hellenism that dates back to the mid eighteenth century and to the pioneering art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who was largely responsible for establishing the Greeks as an ideal of moral and artistic achievement.

According to Wagner, it was the downfall of Athens that led to the appalling condition of modern art. For with that downfall came the demise of Greek tragedy, marked by a splintering of the whole such that its various component parts – music, dance, poetry, and the visual arts – began to develop independently from one another. As a result, art ceased to be public in nature and instead became a form of entertainment for the rich and powerful. In *The Artwork of the Future*, Wagner looks ahead to the advent of a theatrical work that will reunite the individual arts of music, dance, and poetry into a unified whole – what he calls a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total work of art."

This ideal artwork is to be rooted in the spirit of ancient Greek tragedy, not as a re-creation or revival of this genre but as the modern-day embodiment of its artistic essence. When Wagner says, for example, that this perfect artwork "cannot be *reborn* but must be *born anew*," he is drawing an important distinction between the future utopian work that he envisions and the highly influential revivals of Greek tragedy with music that had occurred at the Prussian royal court, most notably the 1841 production of Sophocles' *Antigone* with staging by the poet Ludwig Tieck and music by Felix Mendelssohn.[6] Also worth noting is Wagner's insistence that this artwork – along with the revolution that must necessarily precede it – will be brought about by the "people" (*das Volk*), which he defines as those individuals who are bound together by a collective sense of need and who recognize the value of acting in accordance with that need as opposed to being driven by a self-indulgent and egotistical desire.[7] Insofar as Wagner's understanding of the *Volk* is tied to his embrace of a burgeoning German national and cultural identity, his proposed *Gesamtkunstwerk* takes on a nationalist character even as it reaches back and appropriates elements of Greek tragedy.

The Influence of Aeschylus

Wagner began work on the text of a Nibelung drama in the fall of 1848, slightly more than a year after he first read Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. It is

[6] Wagner, *Artwork of the Future* (*PW*, 1:53). The emphasis is Wagner's. On the German revival of Greek tragedy with music, see Jason Geary, *The Politics of Appropriation: German Romantic Music and the Ancient Greek Legacy* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2014).

[7] Wagner, *Artwork of the Future* (*PW*, 1:75).

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undoubtedly because of this formative experience that the completed libretto of 1852 betrays the obvious influence of Aeschylus. Some scholars have attributed to this trilogy the sense of cosmic import that pervades the *Ring*, and a few have even suggested that the composer's use of leitmotif throughout the cycle is reminiscent of Aeschylus' use of recurrent imagery.[8]

The idea of a tetralogy itself owes a debt to Aeschylus and also recalls the historical performance of Greek tragedy at the annual Festival of Dionysus in classical Athens. There, three playwrights competed over the course of three successive days, with each dramatist presenting three tragedies followed by a lighter satyr-play in a single day. Thus Wagner's conception of *Das Rheingold* as a "great prelude" to be performed the evening prior to a trilogy of operas presented across three days effectively reverses this dramatic trajectory.[9] Wagner, of course, initially conceived of the *Ring* project as a single opera but, as his thinking developed, he worried that he would need to rely too heavily on narration to convey the details of the Nibelung myth and that the result would be a work too epic in nature.

Michael Ewans argues forcefully that the *Ring* borrows aspects of plot, character, and pacing from the *Oresteia*, citing, for example, the similarities between Orestes avenging his father, Agamemnon, by murdering his mother, Clytemnestra, and Siegfried's defeat of Wotan, who was ultimately responsible for the death of his father, Siegmund.[10] Most scholars, however, find that the cycle is more beholden to the partially extant Prometheus trilogy that in Wagner's day was attributed to Aeschylus. Wagner knew this work through the groundbreaking translation of Aeschylus' tragedies first issued in 1832 by the German classicist and ancient historian Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–84). Droysen's translation is significant not only because it provided Wagner with the presumed content of the Prometheus trilogy but also because the accompanying commentary seems strongly to have colored his views about Greek tragedy more generally.

As Daniel Foster has recently observed, Wagner's essays, letters, diary entries, and operatic works make clear that the composer was often influenced as much by contemporary scholarship on Greek drama as he was the art form itself.[11] Wagner himself suggests as much when he

[8] See Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "Wagner and the Greeks," in *The Wagner Compendium*, ed. Barry Millington (Thames & Hudson: London, 1992), 158–61. Citing Lloyd-Jones, Barry Millington echoes this claim in a more recent essay, see "Der Ring des Nibelungen: Conception and Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2008), 74–84, here 75.

[9] Wagner uses this term for the cycle's first opera in a letter to Franz Liszt of November 20, 1851. See *SL*, 238.

[10] Michael Ewans, *Wagner and Aeschylus: The Ring and the Oresteia* (Faber and Faber: London, 1982).

[11] Daniel H. Foster, *Wagner's* Ring *Cycle and the Greeks* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2010), 24–9.

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describes his 1847 experience of reading the *Oresteia* in Droysen's translation: "For the first time I now mastered Aeschylus with mature feeling and understanding. Droysen's eloquent commentaries in particular helped to bring the intoxicating vision of Attic tragedy so clearly before me that I could see the *Oresteia* with my mind's eye as if actually being performed."[12] Wagner also read Droysen on other aspects of Greek history and culture, including his work on Alexander the Great and his influential *History of Hellenism*. The composer's views on the Greeks appear to have been shaped by Droysen's fervent German nationalism and by his Hegelian belief that the notion of freedom that was born in Athens and that disappeared with its downfall would reemerge in a more genuine and lasting form with the advent of a unified, Prussian-led Germany. Such a historical outlook provided the seeds of Wagner's own appropriation of ancient Greece within a broadly nationalist framework and helps to explain why the composer viewed his effort to bring about the ideal dramatic artwork as tantamount to the rebirth of classical tragedy in a modern Germanic guise.

The first play in Droysen's reconstruction of the Prometheus trilogy depicts Prometheus' theft of fire. Prometheus then bestows this gift upon mankind, an act that earns him the ire of Zeus because it foils the latter's plan to bring about an end to the human race. The second play is *Prometheus Bound*, wherein as punishment Zeus orders Prometheus be tied to a rock, and the final drama is *Prometheus Unbound*, in which Heracles frees Prometheus from captivity. Most scholars now agree that *Prometheus Bound* – the only one of the three tragedies to survive intact – was written not by Aeschylus but by a somewhat later playwright.[13] It is likewise generally agreed that this play occupied the first rather than the second position in the trilogy, as Droysen would have us believe. For the purposes of exploring potential connections to the *Ring*, however, such controversies are beside the point. What matters instead is that Wagner's approach to the *Ring* was clearly shaped by Droysen's reconstruction of the trilogy.

Several parallels between the overall dramatic trajectories of the two works are immediately discernible, as scholars going back as far as the early twentieth century have acknowledged.[14] To begin with, Prometheus' theft

[12] Wagner, *My Life*, 342.

[13] The work of scholarship that most decisively made the case against Aeschylean authorship is Mark Griffith, *The Authenticity of Prometheus Bound* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 1976).

[14] One of the first scholarly works to make this connection is Robert Petsch, "*Der Ring des Nibelungen* in seinen Beziehungen zur griechischen Tragödie," in *Richard Wagner-Jahrbuch* 2 (1909), 284–330. Many of Petsch's claims were echoed in the influential lectures delivered at Bayreuth between 1962 and 1965 by the German classicist Wolfgang Schadewaldt, later published as Schadewaldt, "Wagner und die Griechen," cited above.

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of fire sets events in motion not unlike Alberich's theft of the gold, a connection that is further underscored by Wagner's original title for *Das Rheingold*: *Der Raub* ("The Theft"). Similarly, just as in *Prometheus Bound* the title character is tied to a rock for disobeying Zeus, so Brünnhilde – the character referenced in the title of *Die Walküre* – is likewise punished for disobedience to Wotan. And like the freeing of Prometheus, that of Brünnhilde comes in the third installment of the cycle, in her case by the hero Siegfried.

Still other plot details suggest an even stronger association between the two works. The parallels between Prometheus and Brünnhilde – despite the former's outward resemblance to the fire-god Loge and the latter's to the Greek goddess Athena – point to a fundamental similarity between these two central characters. Both have mothers who are mysterious earth goddesses bestowed with the gift of prophecy: Gaia and Erda, who has no counterpart in German or Norse mythology and who Wagner evidently derived from Aeschylus. As Hugh Lloyd-Jones has pointed out, when Erda appears in *Das Rheingold* to warn Wotan against accepting the Ring, only the top portion of her body is visible above ground, thus evoking painted depictions of earth goddesses on ancient Greek vases.[15] In another connection between Prometheus and Brünnhilde, both figures come to the aid of a female character (Io and Sieglinde, respectively) who is being pursued by the ruler of the gods and whose descendant will one day set them free. Likewise, when Brünnhilde reveals to Sieglinde in act three, scene one of *Die Walküre* that she is carrying a child destined to become the noblest of all heroes, this passage recalls the moment in *Prometheus Bound* when Prometheus comforted Io by heralding the birth of one of her descendants, Heracles.

The Enduring Oedipus Myth

Though scholars in recent decades have begun to explore connections between Wagner's tetralogy and the Oedipus myth, such discussions have historically been overshadowed by those highlighting the many parallels between the *Ring* and the Prometheus trilogy. This imbalance is surprising given the composer's extensive discussion of the Oedipus myth in *Opera and Drama*. By far the lengthiest of his operatic reform essays, this work offers a blueprint for Wagner's envisioned artwork of the future, discussing in detailed fashion such particulars as poetic meter, text-setting, and the role of the orchestra.

[15] Lloyd-Jones, *Blood for the Ghosts*, 133.

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In Part II of this essay, Wagner provides a thorough analysis of the Oedipus myth as part of an overall attempt to establish the importance of myth as such to his aesthetic goal of creating a unified artwork.[16] According to Wagner, only the Greeks have produced such an artwork, and they did so by utilizing myth as the basis of its content. Thus it is only through a genuine understanding of myth that we can fully appreciate the nature of Greek tragedy which, after all, is simply the artistic embodiment of Greek myth.[17] Moreover, it is only through myth that the *Volk* can fulfill its role of creative artist in the manner that Wagner envisions.[18]

Ultimately, the composer's lengthy discussion is intended to reveal the enduring power and relevance of myth by demonstrating how the Oedipus saga enacts "the entire history of mankind from the beginnings of society to the necessary downfall of the state."[19] Yet in light of the many parallels that emerge between the Oedipus myth and the *Ring*, Wagner's discussion can also be understood as a central element in his attempt at creating both a larger aesthetic and a more narrowly sociopolitical framework for the radical project he was then undertaking.

The myth itself begins with a prophecy revealed to King Laius of Thebes that his son will one day grow up to kill him and then marry his wife, Jocasta, the child's mother. Desperate to avoid this fate, Laius leaves his infant son – later called Oedipus – to face certain death by exposure. He remains unaware that the child is instead rescued by a shepherd, taken to Corinth, and raised by its king and queen. Upon learning of the prophecy himself, Oedipus flees Corinth to escape his destiny, only to wind up killing a stranger (Laius) in a dispute on the road to Thebes, where he solves the riddle of the Sphinx and delivers the city from a terrible plague. In turn he is rewarded with the royal throne and the hand of the queen, Jocasta, in fact his mother. Years later, Oedipus learns the truth, whereupon he gouges out his eyes and Jocasta commits suicide, but not before the couple has produced four children, one of whom is the daughter Antigone. The two sons agree to share the throne when Oedipus is banished from Thebes, but when Eteocles refuses to allow Polynices his turn, the latter raises an army and advances on his native city. Both brothers die in battle, and the throne is passed to their uncle Creon, whose first act is to brand Polynices a traitor and decree that anyone caught trying to bury him will face death. Antigone defies this decree, seeing it as her religious duty, and is left to die despite the pleas of Creon's son, Haemon, who is also her fiancé. Creon is eventually persuaded by the city elders to reverse course, but by then Antigone has

[16] Wagner's discussion occurs in *Opera and Drama* (*PW*, 2:179–90). [17] Ibid., 153, 155.
[18] Ibid., 155. [19] Ibid., 191.

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already killed herself, in response to which first Haemon and then his mother commit suicide, leaving Creon a broken man.

Wagner recounts this myth as conveyed in works by Sophocles (*Oedipus the King* and *Antigone*) and Aeschylus (*Seven Against Thebes)*, and his interpretation of it is based on a fundamental belief in the inherent conflict between the state and the individual. According to Wagner, society, as embodied by the state, values order and established custom, whereas the individual acts in accordance with natural, unconscious instincts. As a result, the actions of the individual pose a challenge to societal conventions – actions that the Greeks would have understood through the concept of fate.[20] Thus when Oedipus unwittingly killed his father and married his mother, he was merely following natural human impulses. Only when it became clear that such actions were in violation of societal norms were they deemed objectionable. In other words, Oedipus may have sinned against society but certainly not against nature.

As a handful of scholars have argued, such thinking appears to have informed Wagner's view of the incestuous relationship between the Volsung twins of the *Ring* cycle.[21] Like that between Oedipus and Jocasta, the love between Siegmund and Sieglinde is natural and instinctive (and is so affirmed by the fact that both unions produce healthy offspring). Again, the will of the individual is encroached upon by societal convention, the latter embodied in the *Ring* by the guardian of wedlock, Fricka, who Wagner himself associated with the idea of custom.[22] In act two, scene one of *Die Walküre*, Fricka expresses great shock and dishonor at this adulterous and incestuous relationship, even as brother and sister knowingly revel in their love and as Wotan reveals his inclination to bless this union. She insists against Wotan's repeated protestations that this assault on the sacred vow of marriage must be avenged. Thus do Fricka and Wotan become opposing symbols of society and the individual, respectively, evoking the fundamental conflict illustrated by the Oedipus myth. Wotan is cast as the visionary who understands the role of the instinctive human being, while Fricka is portrayed as unimaginative and completely beholden to established custom.[23] As Wotan explains with an air of resignation: "It is always convention that is the only thing you can understand, but what concerns my mind is that which has never happened before."

[20] Ibid., 179–80.

[21] See especially Dieter Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre*, trans. Stewart Spencer (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1991), 290–1; also see L. J. Rather, *The Dream of Self-Destruction: Wagner's* Ring *and the Modern World* (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1979), 55–6.

[22] Letter of Wagner to Theodor Uhlig, November 12, 1851, *SL*, 233.

[23] See also Mark Berry's chapter "Characters in the 'World' of the *Ring*."

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Arguably the most compelling parallel between the *Ring* and the Oedipus myth concerns the strong affinity between the two female figures central to each: Brünnhilde and Antigone. Though such parallels have not completely escaped notice, they have generally been downplayed in favor of those to the Prometheus trilogy explored above.[24] Wagner's own discussion of the Oedipus myth culminates in a celebration of Antigone as an agent of redemption whose role is to bring about the symbolic destruction of the state. She accomplishes this feat by demonstrating what the composer calls "purely human" love, which he defines as a form of absolute love that transcends both sexual and familial love. For Wagner, Antigone's decision to risk her own life by burying Polynices stems not from her love of him as a sibling but from her understanding of the profound misfortune that he suffered and from an awareness that only love could lead to his redemption (bearing in mind the ancient belief that a proper burial was necessary to enter into the afterlife).[25]

Wagner views Antigone as the embodiment of the instinctive individual, in which role she stands in direct opposition to Creon, the personification of the state. In this way, his outlook is aligned with that of Hegel, whose highly influential reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* resonated with ongoing political debates surrounding the increasingly prominent role of the state in modern life.[26] But whereas Hegel justified the actions of both Creon and Antigone as rooted in two equally but inherently opposed ethical spheres, Wagner came down clearly on the side of Antigone. For Antigone was that free, self-determining individual who was needed to reintroduce a genuine, instinctive morality into a society that so longed for calm, order, and stability that it was willing to overlook those ethical offenses that had led to the debacle of the Oedipal house in the first place, including Eteocles' violation of the oath he had taken to share the Theban throne with Polynices. Creon's decree made it clear that he, too, favored the interests of the state over the intrinsic laws of humanity. It was only Antigone, fueled by human compassion, who recognized the need to act in the face of rigid societal demands, and moreover, she chose to act in full awareness of the self-destructive consequences of her decision. Thus is Wagner able to point to Antigone as a free and perfect human being who, through love, serves as a source of redemption for all mankind by symbolically destroying the state. She points the way towards a more utopian

[24] This connection is made in Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner's* Ring (Ashgate: Burlington, VT, 2006), 265 ff. It is explored at greater length in Geary, *Politics of Appropriation*, 214–25, from which aspects of the following discussion are drawn.

[25] Wagner, *Opera and Drama* (*PW*, 2:189).

[26] See especially G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. E. B. Speirs and J. Burdon, 3 vols (Humanities Press: New York, 1962), 2:264.

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future by revealing the power of love to abolish the existing world order. As the composer states in highly rhetorical fashion, adding emphasis to underscore his point: "*O holy Antigone! On you I now call! Let your banner wave so that beneath it we might destroy and yet redeem!*"[27]

Wagner's conception of Brünnhilde as a redemptive figure in the *Ring* seems to have been influenced in no small part by his understanding of Antigone. In some respects, this kinship with Antigone can be extended to Siegfried as well, who Wagner himself referred to as the "human being of the future . . . who must create himself through our destruction."[28] But as L. J. Rather points out and as Wagner also suggested, the perfect human being that emerges in the *Ring* is not so much Siegfried as it is an amalgam of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, each of whom is alone unable to bring about redemption from Alberich's curse on the Ring.[29] Ultimately, however, the strongest affinity is between Brünnhilde and Antigone, especially in light of what would appear to be Wagner's attempt through the *Ring* to reclaim the mythic legacy of Greek tragedy from the successful 1841 Mendelssohn–Tieck production of *Antigone*.

Like Antigone, Brünnhilde displays a "purely human" love when, in act two of *Die Walküre*, she defies Wotan by protecting Siegmund in his duel with Hunding. Despite Wotan's begrudging but clear instructions to grant Hunding the victory, Brünnhilde takes pity on Siegmund, who expresses his unwillingness to experience Valhalla without his twin sister and bride, Sieglinde. She is further moved when Siegmund determines – even after learning that Sieglinde is pregnant with his child – that he must kill his twin sister if she cannot accompany him to Valhalla. Brünnhilde then makes the fateful decision to protect both Siegmund and Sieglinde but is thwarted in her plans by an angry Wotan. Explaining this decision to Wotan in the final scene of the opera, she claims to have been motivated by love and by a desire to fulfill the god's inner will: "My own instinct told me to do only one thing – to love that which you loved."

Wotan himself later acknowledges Brünnhilde's significance as an agent of love and redemption. In the guise of the Wanderer, he informs the earth goddess Erda in act three, scene one of *Siegfried* that Brünnhilde, the child they share together, will be awoken by Siegfried and will redeem the world through her actions. That act of redemption comes in the final scene of *Götterdämmerung*, in which Brünnhilde leaps into the all-consuming flames in order to free the Ring from its curse – something that Wotan had acknowledged earlier in the opera could only be accomplished by her (act one, scene 3). Siegfried, of course, has the opportunity to return the Ring

[27] Wagner, *Opera and Drama* (*PW*, 2:190).
[28] Letter of Wagner to August Röckel of January 24/25, 1854, *SL*, 308. [29] Rather, *The Dream*, 59.

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himself and even agrees to do so at one point, but he ultimately lacks both the love and the understanding to go through with this action. Brünnhilde, too, is initially reluctant to give up the Ring that she sees as a symbol of Siegfried's love, but in her case she is made wise through Siegfried's death. That is, she finally understands the redemptive role that she is meant to play, and, like Antigone, she willingly sacrifices her own life in order to return the Ring to its rightful place. Her actions not only cleanse the Ring of Alberich's curse but also bring about the destruction of Valhalla and the end of the gods, ushering in a new world order in what represents a parallel to the symbolic destruction of the state that Wagner ascribed to Antigone.

Myth, History, and Revolution

The power of love to undermine existing sociopolitical structures that Wagner acknowledges in the Oedipus myth and that he incorporates into the *Ring* clearly resonates with the revolutionary ideas that he expressed in his Zurich essays. There he made it clear that the eagerly anticipated "Great Revolution of Mankind" would herald the advent of a new world order based on a foundation of freedom and love – an ideal that reflects the influence of the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and of the Young Hegelians on the composer's thinking during this period. As scholars have often pointed out, the *Ring* can be understood as a dramatization of such revolutionary aims, with the fall of Valhalla symbolizing the collapse of contemporary social and political institutions.

The events of the *Ring* also evoke Wagner's notion of world history as myth, an idea he explores in the 1848 essay *Die Wibelungen*. In it, he makes the claim that history is ultimately nothing more than a series of repeated mythic prototypes – fundamental human behaviors or natural occurrences that are reenacted throughout time. Thus history is not linear but rather cyclical, defined as it is by a repetition of certain archetypal events. Seen in this light, the actions of Antigone and Brünnhilde are essentially echoes one of the other, and, what is more, they suggest that such "mythic" events are destined to be repeated again in the future. And though Wagner maintained that this established pattern had been halted by the corruption, greed, and general alienation of modern life, he nonetheless believed that reconciliation between history and myth was possible and that it would be brought about by his own music drama. Thus does the *Ring* emerge as a work that not only seeks to recapture the lost artistic unity of Greek tragedy but that also marks a return to myth as both the basis for understanding contemporary human experience and as the foundation of Wagner's ideal "artwork of the future."

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