

Wotan's *Tod*:
The Ring as Spiritual Dialogue

Introduction

Richard Wagner was not a religious man – he received little comfort from the Lutheranism of his childhood, and appears to have turned away from formal religious activities while still in his teens. Indeed, until the end of his life, he appears to have remained quite critical of organized religions (Christianity as much as Judaism) because he believed that they, “through ceremonies, dogmas, and rituals... arbitrarily interpose themselves between God and his human creation” (Aberbach). Wagner was, however, a spiritual man, and throughout his life religious and spiritual subjects served for him as an endless source of discussion and exploration.

Though his discussions and explorations of religion and spirituality are recorded by those who knew him – particularly Cosima – and in Wagner's letters to his friends, as well as in his ‘serious’ writings, these discussions and explorations are best recorded in and expressed through the operas for which he is remembered. Few people would debate that religious and spiritual themes – love, death, God, redemption – are key to Wagner's first three major operas, *Der Fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*. Likewise, one would be hard-pressed to find a scholar who doubts the existence of spiritual and religious aspects in Wagner's last work, *Parsifal*. That Wagner's operas make use of various religious and spiritual concepts is not controversial. But ask the average Wagnerian if *The Ring* is a primarily spiritual opera and, much more often than not, the answer will be no. This could not be further from the truth; *The Ring* actually serves Wagner as a spiritual dialectic, an artistic exploration of the fundamental conflict between the concepts of free will and of fate (or specifically, predestination), and remains the most thorough representation of Wagner's complete spirituality.

The first section of this paper establishes (the possibly controversial point) that Wagner was a spiritual, if not religious, man; a man whose life was spent attempting to define his exact beliefs, and whose work served as part of this attempt. The second section then summarizes the evolution of Wagner's spiritual notions, focusing particularly on the state of his conceptions at the time he began *The Ring*, and the

different beliefs he held by the time he completed it. Finally, the third section provides an interpretation of *Das Rheingold* based on Wagner's spiritual beliefs, which might help to explain oddities in the plot and score of the opera in terms of this spiritual interpretation.

Spirituality in Wagner's Life and Works

That spirituality and religion were important in Richard Wagner's works is hardly a matter worth arguing – the existence of *Parsifal*, alone, serves to prove this point. That spirituality and religion were important in Wagner's *life*, however, is a far more controversial, and complicated, claim. In fact, the claim that religion did not play much role in Wagner's life is to a certain degree correct. It appears very likely, though, that spirituality did play an important – almost defining – role in Wagner's life, and in the composition of his operas.

Alan Aberbach, in *Richard Wagner's Religious Ideas: A Spiritual Journey*, suggests that spirituality began to play a major role in Wagner's life after he moved to Paris around 1839. It was there that Wagner had the first of several “mystical experiences” which would serve to shape his life significantly. This first mystical experience occurred when Wagner heard Beethoven's Ninth symphony preformed by the Paris Conservatory Orchestra. At the performance, Wagner seemed to “intuit some element of knowledge transcending direct sense perception” (Aberbach 3-4); in his writings about this experience and a later (in 1846) experience he had conducting the Ninth, Wagner claims that these experiences allowed him to see before himself a “mystic vision” (5). Inspired both artistically and spiritually, Wagner expresses how he felt “an intense desire to create something which would give [him] equivalent inner satisfaction,” (4). Perhaps it was this drive that eventually led him to begin *Der Fliegende Holländer* even before he had completed the far-less spiritual *Rienzi* (though in his *Rienzi* Wagner appears to have emphasized the religious aspects more than Bulwer did) (5).

Wagner's spiritual awakening is documented in his prose works from this time; he begins to discuss and ponder upon questions of God and religion. For instance, this awakening marks – if not the beginning – the evolution of Wagner's anti-religious sentiments; sentiments visible in such comments as “Man will never be that which he can

and should be, until his Life is a true mirror of Nature.... Then first will Man become a living man; whereas till now he carries on a mere existence, dictated by the maxims of this and that Religion” (10). Wagner – who was beginning to believe that a true spirituality has to be, by its nature, universal – felt *both* Judaism and Christianity (particularly, but not limited to, Catholicism) had artificially separated people, and so, “become one of the major contributors to humanity’s problems” (11). Furthermore, Wagner was coming to an understanding of Jesus as the ideal, universal man, and he was disgusted by what he saw as organized religion’s perversion of Jesus’ message for their own ends – going so far as to exclaim that, “For me Christianity has not yet arrived, and I am like the early Christians awaiting Christ’s return” (12). Even as this spirituality was developing, however, Wagner encountered a serious obstacle, and one that may have served to shape his life – particularly his career – more than any other such challenge would.

Because Wagner’s spirituality was rooted in intuitive insight – that is, because he ‘felt/knew’ certain truths to be true – it was particularly difficult to transmit. In his first three successful operas, *Der Fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*, Wagner introduced audiences to elements of his growing spiritual model, only to realize that his audiences did not understand these elements. In an attempt to allow them do so, Wagner wrote “A Communication to my Friends.”

In “A Communication,” Wagner tries to explain the intuitive nature of his beliefs, describing them as an “understanding” that “cannot be compassed by the sheer unaided Intellect, but only by the Feeling” (123). Wagner would eventually abandon attempting to explain his intuitive truths in abstract terms, and focus on sharing his insights in the only way he felt might be successful – the elicitation of his feelings in others by means of his operas. *The Ring*, *Tristan und Isolde*, and *Parsifal* can all be understood as operas that attempt to achieve this – but they, especially *The Ring*, failed to do so, and Wagner eventually even gave up at trying to communicate with a general audience through the feelings evoked by means of his operas. The conclusion he came to was that those who understand will understand, and that it was no use trying to clarify it for those who will not, though he was still “frustrated at how limited this audience might be and sometimes expressed amusement that those most able to understand him were Jews!” (124).

Wagner never did abandon his spiritual quest, though, and even late in life he was keenly observing the growing textual criticism of the bible, embracing “‘scientific findings’ to reinforce his views and opinions” (247). It seems fantastic that there are those who would question and discount the spirituality of a man willing to crudely twist *On the Origin of Species* and remark that, “Godhead is Nature, the will which seeks salvation and, to quote Darwin, selects the strongest to bring this salvation about” (23-24). No – it is clear that Wagner was certainly a spiritual man. What may be less clear is what that spirituality was.

Wagner’s Spirituality

Wagner’s spiritual model continuously evolved over his lifetime, but for the purpose of this essay, it can be separated into three general periods. The first period, which might be referred to as the “Early Period,” lasted from the point of Wagner’s spiritual awakening (ostensibly about 1839) until around 1848. The next period, the “Hafizian Period,” arguably began in the fall of 1848, though Wagner did not actually read Hafiz until the spring of 1852, and lasted until 1854. In September 1854, Wagner, upon reading the great German philosopher, entered into his final period of spirituality, the “Schopenhauerian Period.”

Wagner’s early spiritual conceptions were, though romantic, “clumsy, emotional[,] and at times illogical” (11). He believed that there existed a brotherhood of man, and sensed that, because of this, a true spirituality would be true for everybody (universal). Wagner felt that Jesus’ message was representative of this universal spirituality, but had become perverted by organized religion. He found Judaism wanting because it stressed that Jews were the elect people of God and obscured this idea of universal spirituality. Judaism was flawed enough that Jesus had been required in order to correct it and to “cast off the exclusivity of Judaism to embrace God in a simple direct fashion without intermediaries, rituals or complex institutional strictures” (15).

Organized Christian religions, however – especially Catholicism – seemed even more unnatural to Wagner, because they twisted Christ’s original, universal doctrines for their own narrow aims. Indeed, Wagner was extremely critical of organized Christianity; he writes that he was disgusted with communion and other church rituals, abhorrent of

the manner in which, as he put it, Catholicism condemns “intelligence and a feeling of beauty,” and, for some reason, absolutely furious at the Jesuits (who by the end of his life he hated more than Jews) (16-18). That the individual has become obstructed spiritually, either by religion or by unnatural law and society, seems to be the most important element in all of Wagner’s early spirituality. It is encapsulated by a line in *Rienzi* – “Oh Lord, dissolve the dark night which envelops men’s souls!” – and similarly echoed throughout *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, and later, in *Tristan und Isolde* (6-12).

In spring of 1848 Wagner finished *Lohengrin*, and that summer, taken with the idea of creating an opera around the Nibelungen legend, sketched out a prose (and non-religious) version entitled, “The Nibelungen-Myth,” which he then proceeded to abandon (130). Instead, with a seemingly inexhaustible drive to explore spirituality, Wagner began work on “Jesus of Nazareth,” a three-part “investigation into the thoughts, ideas and personality of Jesus” (91). One of these sections of “Jesus of Nazareth” – accompanied by sections that provide “a running commentary on Wagner’s major themes” and document “portions of the work by citing references from the New Testament” – is the synopsis of a five act drama, though it is unknown if Wagner ever intended the work for opera (91-92). Wagner never completed “Jesus of Nazareth,” but it remains important, both because it greatly helped him further define his spirituality, and because it helped to prepare Wagner for Hafiz’ influence.

Even before attempting the work, and because of his interest in Christ’s original message, Wagner had researched into what this message might have been. By the time he moved into his “Hafizian phase” and began work on “Jesus of Nazareth,” Wagner was already acquainted with the Talmud (not a document that many non-Jews were likely to come across), and “familiar with and even conversant in Jewish kabbalistic interpretations of the Bible” (25). Writing “Jesus of Nazareth,” however, refined for him several of the concepts that would be crucial to his spiritual model – primarily, that there is a human conflict between mind and soul, that every individual is godly, and that love is key to redemption (alternately, reunification with God). It also seems fairly clear that Wagner ended his work on “Jesus of Nazareth” with the impression that humanity possesses free will (118-119). In the early 1850s, Wagner abandoned his work upon “Jesus of Nazareth,” and penned “A Communication to my Friends” (123).

Then, late in March 1852, Wagner returned to his Nibelungen project and began his prose sketch of *Das Rheingold*. Between then and when he completed the conversion of his prose sketch into the final poem – mid-September of the same year – “Wagner came under the influence of a fourteenth century mystic poet the Persian Sufi writer commonly known as Hafiz” (131). To understand Hafiz’ influence upon Wagner, and why Wagner ended up becoming so influenced by Hafiz, one must better understand Sufi mysticism.

Sufi mysticism concentrates primarily “on the relationship between the soul and God,” and Hafiz, like many Sufis, believed that “the union of the soul with God is not only possible, but that we have been given the gift of a physical body to attain this union during our lifetime.” This God-soul union is thought to be completed through love, and Sufi literature describes this love through various metaphors, so that, sometimes it resembles “the Hindu idea of a wave returning to the ocean from which it has temporarily separated,” while other times it appears in the manner Wagner often described it, through sexual imagery (133-134). In order to achieve this union, one must attach “oneself exclusively to the will of God,” something that “can be accomplished only by a willingness to give up all desires of the senses ... replacing materialism with transcendental spiritual values” (135). “Love is concord,” claims Abu Bakr, an earlier Sufi mystic poet well known by Hafiz, “is obedience in what God commands, refraining from what He forbids, and satisfaction with what He has decreed and ordained” (137).

To Wagner, who had written – via Jesus, in “Jesus of Nazareth” – that “God is love Every creature loves, and Love is the law of life for all creation,” such concepts were largely familiar (136). Such parallels between what Wagner saw as the message of Christ and that of Hafiz, who came from an entirely different tradition than that of Western Europe, did, however, vindicate and further illuminate for Wagner both his interpretation of Christ’s message and his belief in a universal spirituality. Likewise, Hafiz’ claim that “Love has a wisdom, wisdom cannot prove— / Reason knows nothing of the things divine,” resonated with and bolstered Wagner, who had been frustrated by his inability to discuss his intuited spiritual beliefs in abstract terms (137).

Wagner and Hafiz did not agree about everything; whereas Wagner had generally favored the idea of humanity’s free will, Hafiz believed in limited will. *The Ring* itself

was initially intended to favor free will (161). Wotan asks Erda – Wagner’s representation of the “intuitive capacity through which one might acquire metaphysical knowledge” (141) – if “the swift-turning wheel can be stopped?” (Wagner 222). It is from Erda’s dreams that the Norns weave fate, and her answer should be quite obvious, but Wotan is unable to grasp this fact because – in accordance with both Wagner’s and Hafiz’ belief – Erda, representing intuition, is simply unable to explain her answer to Wotan, representing intellect.

This angers Wotan, and he warns Erda that her “wisdom grows weak before [his] wishes.” His will is, “That the gods may die soon,” so Siegfried, Wagner’s “ideal of the perfect human being the finest gift to the will” (161), and Brünnhilde can take their place as rulers of the world. Wotan’s will and machinations do indeed appear to break the power Erda wields over fate through the Norns. Wotan crafts his spear from a branch torn from the World Ash-tree, and this wound “slowly weakened the tree” until, “dry, leafless, and barren— death seized” it. Then, having determined upon the end of the gods, and having his spear shattered by Siegfried, Wotan “ordered Walhall’s heroes to hack down the World Ash’s trunk, / and to cut its branches to pieces.” The Norns were forced to string their weaving – fate – between the branch of a pine and a rock, which caused fate to snap (248-249). Yet Wagner appears still unsure about his belief, and the cycle finally answers this question of free will with a paradox: while Wotan has ostensibly broken the thread of fate, doing so required that he fulfill fate and doom the gods. Is Wotan’s will his own, or have his actions stemmed from fate? Reading Hafiz did not equip Wagner to answer this question, but reading Schopenhauer would do so.

It is no surprise Wagner wrote about reading Schopenhauer that, “it did not strike me as anything new,” (Aberbach 159), since much of Schopenhauer’s influence upon Wagner was in his articulation, “in lucid German prose,” of what Hafiz had expressed through poetry, and in his “explanations and ... rationale for thoughts already instinctively felt by Wagner” (162). “Hafiz’ Sufi belief that the, “losing of the soul in God is only a return to the conditions which existed before birth into the world” (Aberbach 133) closely parallels Schopenhauer’s belief that “we are ruled by the will, more specifically the will-to-live,” – from which “comes not only its action, but also its world” (163-164). Just as, for Hafiz, the birth separates the individual from God, so for

Schopenhauer the birth of the will shrouds the noumenal in illusion. For Hafiz, the means of return to God is the denial of and detachment from the material aspect of the world, and for Schopenhauer, it is the rejection of the will-to-live, but for both, that which is hidden by the senses and the mind can be accessed through the transcendental quality of the intuition (133-169).

Once he had read Schopenhauer, Wagner was able to conceptualize aspects of *The Ring* that he had previously only intuited, which allowed him then to consciously understand several aspects of the opera he had not been previously able to. For instance, Wagner realized that, while “his original intent was to turn Siegfried into an archetype of the free individual,” he actually had “become the least free character in the entire *Ring* cycle manipulated by Mime ... by Wotan ... and by the woodbird,” then, later by Gunther, Gutrune, Hagen, and even by Brünnhilde herself (161-162). Though Wagner did eventually change a minor portion of the libretto as a direct result of reading Schopenhauer, the main effect that the philosopher had on Wagner and *The Ring* was in Schopenhauer’s creation of an intellectual system expressing much of what Wagner had already felt to be true but that he had never been able to wholly conceptualize by himself (173).

***Das Rheingold* Interpreted**

Considering and attempting to interpret *The Ring* in a spiritual light should not be an unprecedented act. Nobody can deny the inclusion of spiritual matters in Wagner’s other works, and very few would deny that there was a profound impact made upon Wagner by Schopenhauer. Any further protest that *The Ring* should not be interpreted spiritually can only be silenced by a letter written by Wagner in April 1852, to his friend Theodor Uhlig, extolling him to: “Study Hafis properly,” for “he is the greatest and most sublime philosopher. No one else has yet gone to the root of the matter so surely and incontestably as he. There is only one thing — what he lauds; and all the rest is not worth a farthing, however high and lofty it may dub itself. —Something similar will also become clear in my *Nibelungen*” (132). When *Das Rheingold* is so examined – with an awareness of the circumstances surrounding its creation, and with an understanding of Wagner’s spiritual model – a reasonable, and quite vivid, interpretation emerges.

The opening of *Das Rheingold* has been interpreted as the sound of undefiled nature invaded by man, or the separation of consciousness from God (or the noumenal), or the birth of the world, or one of several other interpretations. The common thread through most of these interpretations, though, is that there occurs a shift from the unwilled, natural state of things to a willed, human state of things. For the purpose of this interpretation, this shift represents the birth of an individual, and the birth of the world defined by this individual's will. The individual is Wotan, and his will is like that of any other mortal will; it emerges from unity with God so insatiable that it will never be satisfied, and doomed by its nature to always suffer, striving endlessly until it returns again into unity with God (165). Later the audience will learn that, after this birth but before the action of *Das Rheingold* begins, Wotan sacrifices – in a clear metaphor for the manner in which reliance upon the mind obscures the soul's ability to return to God – his vision, or one eye of it, in return for knowledge. Wotan also takes a branch from the World Ash-tree from which he crafts a spear.

Scene One of *Das Rheingold* is set in a Rhein inhabited by the Rheinmaidens, who – through their baby-gibberish (“Weia! Waga!”), and playfulness (“*They tease and playfully try to catch one another*”), and child-like-capriciousness and cruelty (“Pfui! He's horrible!”) – represent Child-Humanity, a primal innocence as uncorrupted by human culture as is possible (Wagner 4-5). Because the Rheinmaidens have not been corrupted, they are able to bask in the golden, raw, natural glory granted to them by the Lord, “Our father” (14). The Rheingold represents universal spirituality, the intuitive, mystical truth that Wagner so long sensed and sought. The Rheinmaidens have been tasked with protecting the Rheingold since it – like universal spirituality – is easily twisted and reformed by anybody who is willing to forsake (divine) love. Protecting it is actually an almost impossible task, however, since there is no real way to prevent the stealing of a concept once somebody learns.

Indeed, the Rheinmaidens are helpless to stop Alberich when, driven over the edge by the Rheinmaidens who spurned and mocked his offers of love, and tempted by the ultimate possibility of its power, takes the Rheingold. Alberich then plays the role of a church father, forging and distorting universal spirituality into the one force strong enough to subjugate the entire world, Religion. With the might of religion behind him,

Alberich does exactly what the Catholic Church did – subjugate the peasants and become fabulously wealthy. The Ring, which is to say Religion, even inspires Alberich to commission Mime with the creation of an artifact, the Tarnhelm, straightforwardly paralleling the tradition of Catholic art. Alberich and the ring perfectly represent the power of religion in the world, but religion and wealth only constitute two of the main three forms of mortal power, and the opera next explores the other.

In Scene Two, Wotan is introduced awakening at the foot of his newly constructed fortress. Wotan’s power is a power based upon political authority, and represented by his spear – indicative of not only brute force, but of the more insidious foundation of law and order which justifies and secures Wotan’s position – and by Walhalla, or stability and security. But in order to achieve this security and gain Walhalla, Wotan almost mimics Alberich’s fall and trades Freia, the representative of the love through which the Æsir achieve eternal life, for it. It is important to understand, though, that Freia’s love is actually antithetical to divine love: divine love assists one to abandon their identity and will-to-live, and to rejoin God, but Freia’s golden apples – reminiscent of the Rheingold, but actually closer to the ring, since both are shaped while the Rheingold is raw and unformed – extends life, obstructing the abandonment of the will-to-live and preventing death. In the end, it is Loge – who roamed tirelessly around the earth till he came to the conclusion that there is “nothing at all... of greater worth to... man than... love” (Wagner 29) – that prevents Wotan’s trade of Freia.

Loge, clearly representative of the intuitive poet (Wagner), is actually attempting to warn Wotan away from making the more serious error of abandoning divine love, and not against the trifling loss of Freia, by telling the story of the one man who forsook love – but both Wotan and the giants misinterpreted the importance of his story. The giants focus on the gold – and Wotan upon the power – which Alberich gained, and not the love that he lost. Wotan becomes determined to pay the giants with the treasure and gain for himself the ring, and so, as many times before, political power comes into conflict with religious power. In this case, though, because an individual who abandons their soul – and such as is the case with Wotan, who forsook his soul for the sake of knowledge, or Alberich, who forsook his for the sake of the ring – becomes blind in some sense, it was not difficult for the clear-seeing Loge to trick Alberich. Wotan and Loge gain the

treasure; Loge retains the Tarnhelm while Wotan avidly confiscates the ring. Alberich, denied not only of the ring but of martyrdom (his plea “My life, but not the ring!” ignored, ordered by Wotan to “The ring surrender: / with your life do what you will!”), curses the ring – not by laying any magical malediction upon it, but by describing accurately that which Wagner had observed organized religion to cause (56). The ring will bring not joy to its possessor, “but death” (58) and likewise, the material wealth produced by the ring bears its own inherent evils: it “shall yield pleasure to none,” and create worry in its owner and envy in others (58).

Wotan, drawn by the power and held near spellbound by the potential of the ring, does not care. The giants arrive, bringing with them Freia, and demand the treasure – which Wotan willingly gives them. Then the giants demand the Tarnhelm and Wotan orders it to be given to them. Finally, they ask for the ring. This moment is the most important of the opera, and perhaps the most important of the entire cycle, and though it might initially appear to be crucial because it seems that Wotan is being forced to decide between Power and the ring or Love and Freia, this is not the case at all. Since this choice is between the false-love of the ring’s religion, and the false love of Freia and her eternal life, neither choice was important to Wagner. This moment of decision is actually important because, during it and despite his blindness, Wotan has a mystical experience, a moment of intuition signaled by the appearance of the intuitive being, Erda.

During this moment of intuition, Wotan comes to understanding that fate has doomed him. Wotan, blind as usual within the world he has made for himself, sees his choice as one between power and love – he does not understand Loge’s pleas that he return the ring to the Rheinmaidens – and he chooses love, Freia, and the eternal which she represents. Wagner, in his guise of Loge, makes it clear that this was the wrong decision, remarking that, “[the gods] are hastening on to their end, though they think they are great in their grandeur” (70-71). Loge, at Wotan’s request, ironically shouts down to the Rheinmaidens who are pleading for the return of the Rheingold that they should instead bask in the “new golden splendour” of the gods (72). The Rheinmaidens’ reply, echoing with every ounce of the innocent perception of fact that it is, ends *Das Rheingold* by summarizing the spiritual state of the Ring-world: “Goodness and truth dwell but in the waters: / false and base all those who dwell up above!” (72).

With Wotan now aware of his doomed destiny, the rest of the opera follows logically. He attempts to reverse this destiny through love – but since love could only bring him closer to God, and so the destruction of his will, he abandons this attempt. He seeks out Erda and asks her if he can possibly fight and oppose his destiny, how “a god might master his care?” Erda’s response that “You are not” (224) provides Wotan with his second moment of intuitive knowledge, his second epiphany. Wotan realizes that, even if he is a god, he is not God. Wotan can finally accept fate, which he does during the long pause before he tells Erda that “I have willed the end!” which is to say, that he has denied the will-to-live and begun the process by which he will reunify with God.

Armed with his intuitive realization, Wotan has the spear, the foundation of Æsir power, destroyed, and then has the same done to the world tree. The world is coming apart; the Norns’ weaving comes undone as, deprived of his will, Wotan’s world cannot last.

Finally, and as it must be, Brünnhilde, Wotan’s soul, lights the pyre and ends the world.

Wotan redeemed.

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