

Feuerbach, Schopenhauer, and the Ring of the Nibelung
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Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* is a synthesis of Germanic myth – an amalgamation of different tales from different times and regions, distilled into a story that encompasses the beginning and end of a world. A work that has since been interpreted in an almost endless number of ways, Wagner himself originally wrote the *Ring* as a Feuerbachian work, but later reinterpreted it in the context of Schopenhauerian philosophy. Thus, without any changes to the libretto, Wagner was able to read into the *Ring* the ideas of a philosophy which was completely in opposition to the original philosophy that had influenced and inspired his work's creation. An investigation of Feuerbach's and Schopenhauer's philosophies, their influences on Wagner, and interpretations of the *Ring* based on these philosophies will reveal how this was possible – perhaps even inevitable.

Between the philosophies of Hegel and Marx came that of Ludwig Feuerbach, born in 1804, and whose revolutionary *The Essence of Christianity* was written in 1841. Feuerbach was a Young Hegelian and initially a follower of the philosopher Hegel, whose “fundamental insight, out of which most of his thought evolved, was that reality is not a state of affairs but a process: it is *something going on*... Nothing stays the same, however slow the change may be.”¹ Hegel and the subsequent proliferation of different schools of Hegelianism – eventually diverging as Left and Right – dominated European thought from the 1830s through the 1840s. By the “end of the 30's the division in the [Hegelian] school grew greater and greater. The left wing, the so-called Young Hegelians, in their fight with the piously orthodox...straightforwardly rejected the dominant religion and the existing state...”²

¹ *The Tristan Chord*. 43.

² *Ibid.* 49.

“Then came Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*...[which] set materialism back on the throne without any beating about the bush.”³ This quotation comes from Engels, a contemporary of Feuerbach and a one-time Young Hegelian, who goes on to outline Feuerbach’s philosophy: “Nature exists independently of all philosophies... Beyond man and Nature nothing exists, and the higher beings that our religious fantasies have created are nothing but imagined reflections of our own individual existence.”⁴ Thus, Feuerbach perceived religion to reveal fundamental truths about human beings – our greatest strengths and our worst weaknesses as perceived by us – and to provide for basic human needs. At the core of Feuerbach’s philosophy was this concept that man had created the gods, and not vice versa.

Feuerbach’s book was an immediate success, finding a large audience in post-Hegelian Germany. According to Engels, “its literary, imposing, even bombastic style ...was a constant relief after the long years of abstract and abstruse Hegelianism.”⁵ Along with this, Feuerbach’s glorification of love, or concept of liberation of mankind through love, was greeted as a welcome change from “the insufferable sovereignty of pure reason.”⁶ The excitement caused by this view was universal. Engels asserts that these aspects of the book, though according to him actually its faults, were what the Socialist movement in Germany seized on from 1844 onwards, “elevating literary phrases above scientific knowledge, and the liberation of mankind through love above the emancipation of the proletariat...”⁷

³ Ibid. 49.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 50.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Given Feuerbach's reception in Germany, it is not surprising that the philosopher had a tremendous impact on Richard Wagner. Indeed, "when his ideas were new, [they had] a greater influence on Wagner than any other philosopher until the mid-1850s."⁸ After the failure of the 1849 Dresden insurrection and while in exile in Switzerland, Wagner began to immerse himself in Feuerbach's philosophy and writings. He even took up the pen himself in honor of Feuerbach, writing *The Work of Art of the Future* as a parallel to Feuerbach's *The Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, and even dedicating the book to Feuerbach. "All in all, it could scarcely have been an act of more openly declared intellectual partisanship."⁹ Besides this, of course, is the fact that the *Ring* itself was inspired by Feuerbachian philosophy, in that "Feuerbach's most central ideas got into the libretto..."¹⁰ An excellent example is Wagner's portrayal of the gods of Valhalla. These gods, instead of being god-like in the classical sense of the phrase – in other words, noble, admirable and ideal – rather represent the Feuerbachian concept of gods and religion. Wotan and the other gods are realistic reflections of human beings. Each has their weakness and must come to terms with problems caused by these weaknesses. They make mistakes, and are on the whole a rather unsavoury lot, to begin with. They are not agents of some transcendental world above and beyond the world portrayed in the *Ring*.¹¹ Another important concept of Feuerbach's found in the *Ring* is the exaltation of love. Wagner did not simply introduce it as "an additional and extravagant glorification... but [instead] a pseudo-rationale of it as a substitute for

⁸ Ibid. 48.

⁹ Ibid. 51.

¹⁰ Ibid. 54.

¹¹ Ibid.

politics, seen as a sufficient basis in itself for a cohesive society.”¹² Cliché though it is to point out, it makes it no less true that the *Ring* is a struggle between power – or politics – and love. The first mistakes made in the world of the *Ring* are made in the name of power, in a loveless world, and all subsequent injustices in the world follow from these acts. In contrast, Wagner showed how love could combat these injustices, and perhaps redeem them in the end, though the entire world might be destroyed in the process. Through this, Wagner demonstrated his wish not to save an old world, but found a new one.¹³ Besides these examples of Feuerbachian philosophy in the *Ring*, there is another point worth mentioning. Though Wagner eventually struck it from the final work, what is known as the ‘Feuerbachian ending’ of *Götterdämmerung* and the *Ring* does show explicitly how this Feuerbachian current drives the *Ring*:

Though the race of gods	not house, not garth,
Passed away like a breath,	nor lordly splendour;
Though I leave behind me	not troubled treaties’
A world without rulers,	treacherous bonds,
I now bequeath to that world	not smooth-tongued custom’s
My most sacred wisdom’s hoard. -	stern decree:
Not wealth, not gold,	blessed in joy and sorrow
nor godly pomp;	love alone can be.

These lines sung by Brünnhilde before she joins Siegfried in death exemplify how Wagner originally interpreted the *Ring*. As the gods pass away, love replaces power as the basis of society in the world of the future.

“The *Ring* as a whole tells of the coming of age of a world in the explicitly Feuerbachian sense,” where the world is at first governed by the powers of the gods, who

¹² Ibid. 121.

then lose the reins of power to human beings who establish a “new order ... based not on leadership or on power but on love ... alone.”¹⁴ Thus, in the general terms of a Feuerbachian interpretation of the *Ring*, the work as a whole represents a revolution, the overthrow of a corrupt and unjust world and its replacement with a new, pure one. As Wagner himself wrote to Roeckel in a letter of 23 August, 1856, “I meant in the presentation of the whole Nibelung myth to express my meaning ... by showing how from the first wrongdoing a whole world of injustice arose, and subsequently fell to pieces, in order to teach us... that we must recognize injustice and tear it up by the roots, and raise in its stead a righteous world.”¹⁵

Other writers have interpreted Wagner’s *Ring* in this way, but besides such general interpretations, it is interesting to note that to date there has been only one in-depth Feuerbachian analysis of Wagner’s *Ring*, which is consistent from beginning to end, and that is Paul Heise’s. In Heise’s interpretation, the struggle between the characters in the *Ring* represents a battle between religion and scientific knowledge: “Alberichs’ curse on his Ring punishes Wotan (religious man) for his sin of world-renunciation (pessimism). Alberich foresees that all men, in their quest for his knowledge and the power it brings ... will inevitably seek the power of truth [or science] alone, and forsake the consolations of religious belief (the gods) and artistic self-deceit.”¹⁶ Furthermore, Siegfried as a hero represents ‘art,’ the mode through which ‘religion’ can live on for a time despite the assault of ‘science,’ since the “artist-hero stakes no claim to

¹³ *Wagner handbook*. 42.

¹⁴ *The Tristan Chord*. 55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 58.

¹⁶ *Interpretation of Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung*. 1. Heise.

the power of truth (Siegfried does not use the ring.)”¹⁷ Despite the fact that a general Feuerbachian interpretation of the *Ring* calls for some change in the world to be effected, Heise seems to suggest that there is in fact a possibility for a cyclical nature in the events: “Though Hagen is dragged into the depths by the Rhinedaughters... Alberich himself remains unaccounted for, implying that the conditions remain for a repeat of the same events we have just witnessed in some future cycle.”¹⁸ Heise also implies that, since love is completely betrayed in *Götterdämmerung*, the only redemption in the end is through the artwork itself, and not a redemption of the world by love.¹⁹ These ideas are not necessarily in keeping with a general, large-scale Feuerbachian interpretation, but Heise’s analysis is extensively supported through the parallelisms between the language of the *Ring* and the writings of Feuerbach.

The focus of this investigation will presently shift to a study of Arthur Schopenhauer, his philosophy, and his effect on Wagner. Schopenhauer, born in 1788, “is distinctive among philosophers in the western tradition for holding a starkly pessimistic view of life, and for emphasizing the will at the expense of the intellect in his portrayal of the mental make-up of man.”²⁰ Feeling great contempt for contemporary German philosophers – he hated and despised the obscurity of, for example Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, regarding it as pseudo-profundity²¹ – Schopenhauer brought out the first edition of his masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*, in 1818. He was thirty at the time. Later, in 1844, and after having continued to work on the problems with which it dealt, an extended second edition, which now consisted of two volumes, was published.

¹⁷ Ibid. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid. 8.

¹⁹ Ibid. 9.

²⁰ Schopenhauer. 1.

Schopenhauer saw himself “as correcting and complementing the philosophy of Kant,” so that his – Schopenhauer’s – philosophy could correctly be termed a Kantian-Schopenhauerian philosophy.²² To examine how Schopenhauer viewed Kant, consider a few of Kant’s observations about human beings’ perception of reality. Most importantly, as an observation from which many others would stem, Kant argued that what we experience depends as much on the apparatus with which we experience as it does on that which actually transpires, or what there is to apprehend. Thus he concluded that anything that is in existence but which is beyond the ability of our apparatus to perceive, cannot be experienced by us. Further, Kant asserts that “though we can be almost sure that part of reality lies outside any possibility of our experiencing it we have no way of envisaging what it is like.”²³ Thus the known world that we inhabit (the phenomenal) is nothing more than that – the world of experience – yet it is inseparable from existing reality – though we may not experience all of it. (That which we cannot experience constituting the noumenal.) On the whole, Schopenhauer agreed with these ideas. But where Kant suggests that “outside the empirical world [things could be] in plural...Schopenhauer [argued that] outside space and time [or, in the noumenal], everything must be one and undifferentiated.”²⁴ Also, where Kant assumed “that the relationship between the noumenal and the phenomenal was a causal one...Schopenhauer insisted that...the noumenon and the phenomenon are the same reality apprehended in two different

²¹ *The Tristan Chord*. 144.

²² *Ibid.* 152.

²³ *Ibid.* 154.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 162.

ways.”²⁵ Thus, the noumenon represents the hidden but veritable essence of the outwardly perceived phenomenal world, but neither causes the other.

From these observations, Schopenhauer drew further conclusions. Concerning ethics, Schopenhauer deduced that all objects, while appearing separate in the dimensions of time and space, are nonetheless connected to each other through the noumenon. Thus, in any crime committed, the wrongdoer injures himself as much as he injures the victim. According to Schopenhauer, compassion, morals, and “ethics [are] based on the fact that outside the ephemeral world of space, time and material objects we are one...Everything that exists, whether rational or not, participates in the ultimate oneness of being.”²⁶ Along with this, Schopenhauer’s attitude of pessimism toward a constantly-suffering world led him to the conclusion that the noumenal is something terrible, and that the only way to escape it – to escape this ‘Will,’ as he called it – is through “disengagement, non-attachment, the denial of the Will, a refusal to be involved.”²⁷

According to Magee, “Schopenhauer’s work, whatever one might think of the ideas contained in it, is superbly written...The fact that [he] was such a clear thinker and compelling writer makes it [difficult] to understand why he was so neglected for so long.”²⁸ His work only became known nearly ten years after the second edition of *The World as Will and Representation* was published. It is likely, though, that philosophical thought from the 1820s through the 1840s left little room for thinkers outside Hegel and his group of followers. Strangely enough, Schopenhauer first began gaining recognition

²⁵ Ibid. 163.

²⁶ Ibid. 164.

²⁷ Ibid. 167.

²⁸ Ibid. 145.

in England, thanks to a man named John Oxenford. Shortly afterwards, the philosopher suddenly became famous not only in his native Germany, but also throughout Europe.

It was through revolutionary refugee, artist, writer and poet, Georg Herwegh, that Wagner first became acquainted with the work of Schopenhauer. The year was 1854 and Wagner was forty-one, and in the process of composing the score of *Die Walküre* when he started to read *The World as Will and Representation*. The effect it had on him was profound. Within a year, Wagner had read the entire work four times, and he would study it many times again throughout the rest of his life. The subject of Schopenhauer became a complete obsession with Wagner, and not just a passing one; constant study and application of the philosophy became an integrated part of everyday life for Wagner, as Cosima's diaries testify: "They abound with countless expressions of everlasting gratitude, allusions, and borrowings, with recurrent eulogies and defenses whenever Wagner felt the need to enlighten the ignorant or the critic... he experimented with Schopenhauer's compulsive tracing of the mechanisms of the Will,"²⁹ and regarded the philosopher as his mentor and guide in all things. "It simply is not, emphatically not, the case that after that first seismic impact of the philosopher on the composer the effect and its repercussions faded away with the passage of time, as often happens for most people with most enthusiasms."³⁰ The scale of the turn-around is vast: Wagner had spent years formulating theories, publishing his ideas in articles and books – ideas which were in complete opposition to Schopenhauer's – and then, not without an initial reluctance,

²⁹ *The Wagner Handbook*. 289.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 139.

turned around and completely surrendered himself to Schopenhauer. “The revolutionary on fire with a mission to save the world had become a rejecter of the world.”³¹

The effect on Wagner’s work was no less formidable. Schopenhauer’s philosophy came to be the basis for the rest of Wagner’s creative work – there can hardly be a more Schopenhauerian work than *Tristan and Isolde*, for example – and allowed the composer to come to an ever greater understanding of “both himself and his creative work in Schopenhauerian terms.”³² Even Wagner’s Feuerbach-inspired *Ring* cycle underwent complete reinterpretation by the composer, so much so that Wagner wrote – though did not in the end keep – what is commonly called the ‘Schopenhauer ending’ of

Götterdämmerung:

I depart from the home of desire,	the enlightened one now goes,
I flee forever from the home of delusion;	The blessed end
the open gates	of all things eternal,
of eternal becoming	do you know how I attained it?
I close behind me:	Grieving love's
to the holiest chosen land,	deepest suffering
free from desire and delusion,	opened my eyes:
the goal of world-wandering	I saw the world end .
redeemed from rebirth,	

Quintessentially Schopenhauerian ideas pervade these lines intended for Brünnhilde. By negating the Will, or departing ‘from the home of desire,’ she escapes the suffering of the world, or is ‘redeemed from rebirth.’

Another important element to note here is a connection between Wagner and Schopenhauer that at first may seem curious, at least on the part of the philosopher, but is

³¹ Ibid. 137.

a vital link between the two. Schopenhauer, in his analysis of the Will, introduces a discussion of music, for music “alone among the arts is not representational...[and is] the self-expression of something that cannot be represented at all, namely the noumenon. It is the voice of the metaphysical Will.”³³ This concept of music was a prominent thought of Schopenhauer’s; according to him, “the composer reveals the innermost nature of the world, and expresses the profoundest wisdom, in a language that his reasoning faculty does not understand.”³⁴ Wagner’s pre-Schopenhauerian theories regarding opera demanded equal roles given to both the music and the libretto, and this is indeed what he practiced in *Das Rheingold*. Following his conversion to Schopenhauer’s philosophy, however, Wagner came to assign a much greater importance to the music in his work, beginning with *Die Walküre*. In fact, after rewriting the end to the *Ring* cycle several times without satisfaction, Wagner decided to let the music tell the tale; this is “linked with a typical Schopenhauerian reference to the expressive potential, the ability of music itself to comment on the action.”³⁵ So, when the *Ring* is performed, the music alone comments on the action after Brünnhilde immolates herself on Siegfried’s funeral pyre, besides Hagen’s final cry of “Give back the ring!”

Before moving on to Schopenhauerian interpretations of the *Ring*, it is important to establish that the “*Ring* was conceived and poetically executed independent of Schopenhauer,”³⁶ though most of the music was still to be composed. It was written and printed before Wagner was ever introduced to *The World as Will and Representation*. “Only one subsequently written strophe of Brünnhilde’s final monologue (“I lead no

³² *Wagner Handbook*. 295

³³ *The Tristan Chord*. 171.

³⁴ *The Will as World and Representation*. Vol. ii. 264.

³⁵ *Wagner Handbook*. 293.

longer to Valhalla's citadel") is clearly influenced by Schopenhauer's thought, specifically negation of the Will"; yet Wagner never set any music to this line, because he felt that its meaning was already expressed clearly through the music of the final scene.³⁷ Siegfried's death was not, as has been suggested, due to Schopenhauerian influence; it "was in fact the initial concept for the *Ring*; the link with *Götterdämmerung* had long since been determined."³⁸

In a broad view, just as a Feuerbachian interpretation of the *Ring* would call for the work to represent a change, or revolution, so a general Schopenhauerian view suggests instead the cyclical nature of the work. Since the philosophy asserts the inability of the world to better itself in any way, it should follow that no fundamental change in the way of the world could occur and redeem this world of the ring from its first crimes. History is doomed to repeat itself, and those caught in it are doomed to continue suffering unless they renounce the Will that drives them. This is exemplified in the end of *Götterdämmerung* by the self-willed ends of both Brünnhilde and the god Wotan. (This point demonstrates one of the differences between Wagner and his philosophical mentor; the composer believed in suicide as an acceptable means to negate the Will, whereas Schopenhauer regarded it as simply a further manifestation of the Will; an active action of the Will.) In fact, "Wotan may be understood as representative of the Will...and [when] indelibly marked by the contradictions in his own design of the world, ready to renounce [his work]... and finally ready to will his own destruction."³⁹ Brünnhilde, of course, represents Wotan's will in the *Ring*, and their existences are parallel

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *Wagner Handbook*. 294

constructions. Thus, when they renounce the will to live, they are freed from the world, “redeemed from rebirth.” The rest of the world, however, is destroyed, with the suggestion of a possible repetition. After all, even if the destruction of the world is complete, (and some have argued that it is not), and nothing were left, did not the world of the ring come into being with the first notes of *Das Rheingold*? There is no reason why this could not happen again, and, according to Schopenhauerian philosophy, no reason why the consequences should be any better the next time around. If the world is *not* totally destroyed at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, if the *Gibichungs* on the stage are actually survivors, Schopenhauerian interpretation still dictates that the world is incapable of bettering itself, and that mistakes are doomed to be repeated. The “evils [of the world] are not confined to a single historical epoch but are perennial.”⁴⁰

A good example of a Schopenhauerian interpretation of the *Ring* is Warren Darcy’s *The Pessimism of the Ring*. According to Darcy, “what had begun in 1848 as a sociopolitical allegory, an ideal prognosis for a Utopian future, had evolved into a dramatic expression of metaphysical pessimism.”⁴¹ He points, for example, to a passage Wagner wrote to Liszt when he sent him the completed *Ring*: “Consider well my new poem; it contains the beginning and the destruction of the world!” “In July 1872 [Wagner] was still referring to the end of *Götterdämmerung* as his Weltuntergangscouplet – literally, his ‘verses for the destruction of the world.’ Never did he imply that the Welt (world) of which he spoke comprised only Valhalla and the gods...” According to Darcy, Wagner “simply would not have used the word in such a limited context.” Instead, it is to be understood that the composer meant the destruction

⁴⁰ *The Tristan Chord*. 180.

⁴¹ *The Pessimism of the Ring*. 24.

of the entire cosmos of the ring, “including both heaven and earth as well as all their inhabitants, from Wotan on down to the lowliest human vassal. Consequently, the term Weltuntergang signifies an all-inclusive holocaust, the destruction of everything and everyone.”⁴² The earthly inhabitants and the gods are, throughout the entire work, set up as reflections of each other – parallelisms - and Gibichung Hall is the “earthly equivalent” of Valhalla, so “when Wagner indicates that ‘the entire space of the stage appears filled with fire,’ he surely is attempting to represent, within the limits of practicality, the destruction of earth (although our view is necessarily confined to Gibichung Hall and environs).”⁴³ This concurrent annihilation of the entire physical world with the destruction of the self – or Brünnhilde’s and Wotan’s destruction of themselves – “corresponds closely to Schopenhauer’s notion that the phenomenal world exists only as a representation... in the mind of the knowing subject... it cannot exist independently of the perceiver, and will perish with him. In other words, when Brünnhilde perishes, the entire phenomenal world [– “the land of illusion” –] of the *Ring* ceases to exist.”⁴⁴ Darcy quotes Magee in saying “[the] *Ring* begins and ends... with the emergence and destruction of the self.”⁴⁵

Darcy holds that Wagner constructed *Götterdämmerung* as a “replay” of *Das Rheingold* to demonstrate the cyclical nature of history. (And, indeed, the large-scale structure as well as individual events are mirrored between the two operas.) Because “humanity never learns anything, it is doomed to repeat past errors until it finally destroys itself. Nothing, not even love, can overcome man’s insatiable lust for power, and

⁴² Ibid. 27.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 28.

⁴⁵ *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*. 347.

his overwhelming desire to enslave and dominate his fellow human being, and this aggressive instinct will eventually lead him to effect his own annihilation.”⁴⁶ Darcy continues by remarking that this view of the world by no means originated with Schopenhauer’s philosophy or any other philosopher, but that Schopenhauer did give Wagner “conceptual terms with which to articulate this world view: man’s power-lust is really the universal Will manifesting itself as the Will to Power. More important, Schopenhauer offered a solution:”⁴⁷ recognize and acknowledge the meaninglessness of the phenomenal world, and thus deny the Will.

Thus far, the philosophies of Feuerbach and Schopenhauer, as well as the influence of these philosophies on Wagner and interpretations of his work based upon their concepts have been examined. Clearly, the effects of both philosophies and the changes they caused were fundamental in nature and vast in scale. It is this fact that makes Wagner’s conversion such a remarkable incident. But more specifically, the fact that he was able to reinterpret the *Ring* so radically, and without rewriting it, is perhaps both the most surprising and the most enlightening aspect of the conversion. This one work traces the extremes of Wagner’s philosophical beliefs: a work steeped in Feuerbachian ideals of remaking the world – transformed without any physical change into a work that acknowledges the insignificance and triviality of the world and advocates denial of the Will.

It is necessary, first, to concede the point that the *Ring* is a work which has been interpreted in about as many ways as there have been critics to judge it. Ambiguity in the libretto and the music invite a wide range of interpretations. Volker Mertens asserts that

⁴⁶ *The Pessimism of the Ring*. 35.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

“Wagner’s work on the [source] material and his increasing inclusion of additional heterogeneous mythic elements led to the development of a narrative tale that can no longer be interpreted unambiguously.”⁴⁸ Deryck Cooke even goes so far as to say that the *Ring* simply cannot be interpreted consistently on a single level throughout. According to him, the tetralogy begins as a social-political parable, then “develops, transforms, and deepens its meaning as it proceeds, until it arrives firmly on the ultimate metaphysical level at the end of *The Twilight of the Gods*.”⁴⁹ Concerning the musical aspect of the *Ring*’s ambiguity, consider two points. One, the tonal structure of the *Ring*, suggests a Feuerbachian revolution, or change, since it begins in the key of E-flat major, and it finally ends in D-flat major. Thus change, or revolution, is effected. In contrast, consider the music at the end of *Götterdämmerung*: a Schopenhauerian interpretation of the *Ring* – in other words, a pessimistic one – would elicit music suggestive of the failure of a world to redeem itself of its original wrongdoings. Yet the final music, which Wagner wrote under Schopenhauer’s influence, is seen by many critics to offer “comfort and hope”⁵⁰ of a future. At first ambiguities such as these may appear to suggest that there is nothing special about Wagner’s reinterpretation of the *Ring* – if there is such vast room for interpretation of the work, why could there not be room for opposite views as well? But there is one important difference: When Wagner wrote the *Ring*, it was with the express intent of writing a Feuerbachian work. And when he reinterpreted it in terms of Schopenhauer, it was to the exclusion of the Feuerbachian ideals he now rejected. In each case, the philosophy was so much a part of the work that the work became, in a sense, the philosophy itself displayed on stage, not simply one way of looking at the work.

⁴⁸ *Wagner Handbook*. 254.

⁴⁹ *I Saw the World End*. 247.

In the end, the answer comes down to a matter of predisposition. The predominant mood of the later nineteenth century was one of skepticism and resignation, which “derived from the lack of political or historical progress.”⁵¹ Wagner himself became disillusioned “not just with this political hope or that but with all political hopes [–] political hopes as such. It was a veritable bonfire of illusions.”⁵² Through his personal disillusionment with politics, Wagner was already set up to follow a Schopenhauerian philosophy; all he needed was the right philosopher to delineate it for him. Deep down, he already knew everything Schopenhauer could tell him, but without Schopenhauer, Wagner could never have articulated these thoughts, or perhaps even recognized them for what they were.

Wagner’s view of the world he had created in the *Ring* world changed because his view of the world he lived in had changed. When he lost faith in politics and worldly affairs, he lost faith in the revolutionary ideals that permeated the *Ring*. If it sounds strange that Wagner’s view of his work could change so radically without alteration to the work itself, the whole affair sounds less strange when one realizes that his perception of the real world had changed without the world itself changing in any fundamental way.

Wagner’s reinterpretation of the *Ring* shows his intuition had always been present in his work, though he himself may not have known it. As he put in a letter, “At first, [annihilation of the Will and self-abnegation] didn’t sit well with me at all, and I didn’t want to abandon the ‘cheerful’ Greek view of the world... [But] I looked at my Nibelung poems and recognized to my amazement that the very things I found so unpalatable in

⁵⁰ *Wagner Handbook*. 65.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 287.

⁵² *The Tristan Chord*. 127.

theory were already long familiar to me in my own poetic conception.”⁵³ Clearly, he did realize the presence of his tuition in his work after the fact, as this passage from an 1856 letter to Roeckel further demonstrates: “I was scarcely aware that in the working out, nay, in the first elaboration of my scheme, I was being unconsciously guided by a wholly different, infinitely more profound intuition, and that instead of conceiving a phase in the development of the world, I had grasped the very essence of the world itself, in all its possible phases, and had realized its nothingness... [S]omething quite different saw the light from what I had originally intended.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid. 135.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 189.

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