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### **Forces of Love**

In a letter dated January 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, 1854, Richard Wagner writes to his friend August Röckel claiming that to find Truth, “one must experience procreation, growth, bloom- withering and decay, to apprehend them unreservedly, in joy and in sorrow, and to choose to live- and die-a life of happiness and suffering.” Such a process of experiencing a complete existence can “only [be fully attained] through love!” (Wagner). The works of Wagner could be considered a close study of this process. His works have generated many theories that study the forces that develop the expression of love, and those that inhibit it. Universal to Wagner’s oeuvre, the forces of death, capitalism, and eroticism exert strong influences in Wagner’s works and his convictions on love.

In the same letter to Röckel, Wagner asserts that human beings “must learn to die, and to die in the fullest sense of the word; fear of the end is the source of all lovelessness, and this fear is generated only when love itself is already beginning to wane” (Wagner). Michael Tanner gives special consideration to this odd claim in his book *Wagner*. He suggests that “[Wagner] seems to have been reading the poem of *The Ring* and imparting new meanings to it, for nowhere in the text is there reference to fear of death as the root of all evil” (Tanner 172). Tanner is spot on in his deduction that Wagner’s words seem out of sync with the themes of his operas. However, what could be considered an imparting of new meaning could be further clarified when considering that Wagner completed reading Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* later that very same year, which he later deemed the most important event in his life.

In his book *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, Dieter Borchmeyer conducts a close analysis on Wagner's interpretation of love and death in the context of Schopenhauer's influence, specifically in *Tristan and Isolde*. Borchmeyer claims that the magic love potion's effect on Tristan and Isolde is arbitrary, and that the only magic at work is "a love beyond all magic, a love created by the magic of death," or what he later labels as an "erotic attraction to death," –the terminus of a lust to be united with the universe (Borchmeyer 158). Schopenhauer claims that dying is the liberation of one from one's self, "or the one-sidedness of an individuality which does not constitute the innermost kernel of our true being" (Schopenhauer). One's true being can be characterized as an ultimate yearning to escape the burden of individuality and be conjoined with God. Death-Devoted, erotic, and unwavering commitment to another in the form of empathetic love serves as the medium through which this union with the infinite can be achieved. Therefore, if one is to assume that at this point in Wagner's life his thoughts are synonymous with those of Schopenhauer, then it is necessary to assume that death plays an integral role in the formulation of this pure love that leads to the perfect reality. Schopenhauer acutely verbalizes the philosophies and thought processes behind Wagner's concurrent inclusion of characters willing to die for love in his operas.

Despite presenting a clear influence of Schopenhauer, Wagner does distance himself from his pessimism. Whereas Schopenhauer believes that sexual love, like all other human actions, is a selfish form of self preservation, Wagner suggests that such love is akin to compassion and sympathy, and "is no longer tied to the utilitarian of maintaining life, but is identified with the longing for death, a state in which the individual enters into a union with the universe" (Borchmeyer 163). However, Wagner and Schopenhauer also differ in their formulation of death's ultimate function in relation to an ultimate union with a creative force.

Schopenhauer sees death as the cessation of being “I”, marking the end of individual desire. Wagner, however, prefers a more optimistic stance by asserting that through ceasing to be “I”, death allows for the consummation of eternal love through another. Therefore, it is not only death, but also love through death (and vice-versa) that allows for a true union between individuals.

Later in the same letter to Röckel, Wagner muses that “ the most perfect reality ... comes to us only in the enjoyment of love” and the abandonment of egoism. “Egoism, in truth ceases only when the “I” is subsumed by the “you”... and this is something it can become only in the shape of the individual I love” (Wagner). As previously mentioned, Wagner’s oeuvre is full of tragic figures finding redemption (or their perfect reality) through love, and love that ultimately results in death. In his book *Death-Devoted Heart*, Roger Scruton conducts a close analysis of *Tristan and Isolde* to deduce the relationship between love and death. In studying this relationship, Scruton looks to the influence of Schopenhauer’s formulations on the will’s inherent resistance to death. However, “the intellect can overcome the will’s resistance to death by showing that we have nothing to fear from death and everything to gain” (Scruton 129). Scruton clarifies Schopenhauer’s thoughts on the benefits of death in relating it to vestiges of *Tristan and Isolde* that exemplify a reciprocal relation between Love and Death. The emotional and narrative structure of *Tristan* can be divided into the realms of night and day. The realm of night “corresponds to Schopenhauer’s idea of death: a loss of individuality, a melting away into the ongoing stream that is the will behind appearances” whereas the “realm of day is a realm of individuals, sustained in being by the continuous illusion of the senses” (Scruton 130).

Borchmeyer also highlights this dichotomy between night and day. He, however, focuses on how *Tristan and Isolde* exemplifies how the intellect can expose the way the will defines the

relationship between love and death. Day “[symbolizes] all the values that had ruled [Tristan’s] life until then ... [such as] honor, fame, glamour and morality.” The values of the day represent the will’s initial resistance to death according to Schopenhauer (a sort of preoccupation with posterity.) By exclusively associating these socially constructed values with the “day”, Wagner creates a stark dissonance between the planes of day and night. Night, on the other hand “reveals [these values] as illusionary.” As Wagner proposed in his letter to Röckel, the perfect, or ultimate reality can only be exposed by love and “only in the face of the night of death ... is it possible for love to express itself.” As Schopenhauer explained, the intellect can expose the effect of the overbearing, yet subconscious, anxiety of death on love, and in doing so, dismisses socially constructed values in favor of the truth of love. It is only through the conscious or unconscious perspective of the transience of life can Wagner’s formulation of absolute reality through love be attained. “Existing values are turned on their head, and day becomes the realm of deceit, night the womb of truth” (Borchmeyer 168-169). *Tristan and Isolde*, more than any other of Wagner’s works, solidifies the concurrent thought processes of Wagner and Schopenhauer in their model of love’s relation to death and reality. Their parallel perspective on death can be seen through Tristan and Isolde’s “hunger to be united in ... the original darkness from which all things emerge and to which all things return” (Scruton 130).

Wagner, however, did not specify the fate of Isolde during the Liebestod at the end of Act III. His vague stage directions leave it to the director’s interpretation whether Isolde joins her beloved in the holy death of night. In his book *The Tragic and the Ecstatic*, Eric Chafe interprets Wagner’s preoccupation with the dichotomy between night and day as a representation of the dream world and reality, not necessarily life and death. Unlike some of Wagner’s other works like *Twilight of the Gods* and *Die Meistersinger*, “in *Tristan*, ... the dream of love and the idea

of dreams serve another purpose altogether: that is, they lead inward instead of outward, from the illusion, the allegorical dream of existence, to ‘the dream of deepest sleep’ to the end of dreaming as the celebration of unconsciousness and the will-to-live itself’ (Chafe 35). In this interpretation, love’s transience is represented through the dream world, or a celebration of the unconscious. In the love-swearing duet of Act II, a leitmotif known as “*Traume*” (or Dream-chord) “symbolizes the lover’s longing for the never-awakening state of the metaphysical night” (Chafe 35). Ironically, this dream world provides a glimpse at an absolute love that transcends the corporeal. *Tristan* represents a resignation of empiricism, and a yearning devotion to the measureless truth of the unconscious.

Therefore, Wagner’s association of night with both death and unconsciousness details reality’s inadequate ability to access true transcendent love. Love inhabits a separate plane of existence that excludes outward, physical preoccupations. Wagner considers love “to be the most beautiful of dreams.” Therefore, the end of Act III can also be interpreted as Isolde’s “ecstatic submission to the unconscious,” or complete submission to the dream world and its ability to allow her to transcend the will-to-live.

As previously mentioned, Schopenhauer would disagree with the assertion that love can transcend the will-to-live. For Schopenhauer, love is characterized as desire, which is inherently, and existentially, perpetual. Therefore, desire, “under its endless striving, allows neither peace nor real progress of attainment and satisfaction, existence in Schopenhauer’s view is both restless and essentially static, an illusion of motion that in reality is no more than a perpetual circling back to the starting point” (Chafe 36). However, unlike Schopenhauer, Wagner proposes a separate existence that can transcend the perpetual torment of the inability to achieve existential satisfaction. This separate plane of reality lies in the realm of the unconscious, or the state of

metaphysical night. Therefore, it can be said that Wagner doesn't necessarily disagree with Schopenhauer, for Tristan and Isolde's ecstatic devotion to the unconscious surely suggests a dismissal of any hope of satisfying desire within the realm of the day. Rather, it could be said that Wagner's amends Schopenhauer by asserting a never-awakening dream world that represents the consummation of the desires initiated by, but never satisfied by, the day.

In describing to Röckel the thematic structure of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, which he was writing at the time, Wagner informs him that "the pernicious power that poisons love is concentrated in the gold that is stolen from nature and put to ill use" (Wagner). Such is the basis for Wagner's critique of capitalism and materialism, and its adverse affect on love.

Both Borchmeyer and Scruton further consider Wagner's critical conception of material possessions in *The Ring* and how it diametrically opposes love. In the first scene of *Das Rheingold*, Wagner establishes an inverse relationship between valued material possessions and love when Alberich is forced to forswear love in order to obtain the ring and all the powers it can offer. But it is not only Alberich who falls under the perverse inversion of morality that the ring resembles, for the gods "[also] stumbles into this vicious circle of evil." In Scene iiiii of *Das Rheingold*, Freia's freedom is conditional upon Wotan's ability to stack gold to equal her height, therefore equating a woman's worth to that of gold. In the text, Wotan goes as far as to claim that the glittering gold is worth far more than Freia. This materialistic treatment of women is part of what Borchmeyer deems the "Bartered Bride," a theme that is ever-present in Wagner's operas. Wotan's acute awareness of this demeaning process and Fafner's singular concern with making a profit are all products of what could be called "demonized capitalism: [the principle that states that] all fellow feelings and social virtues, from sexual love to contractual loyalty, are now replaced by their egocentric and asocial opposites and by the evil of total individuation that seeks

to turn the world into a mere object” (Borchmeyer 172). In Wagner’s conception of achieving a true reality through denying individualism and entering into a union of love is surely at odds with the isolating, impotent, and selfish power of materialism. Likewise, a concurrent symbol of love in all of Wagner’s operas is the glance, which always represents a token of love such as in *Tristan and Isolde* when Tristan’s gaze coerces Isolde to drop the sword and spare him.

Borchmeyer muses on the significance that the last piece of Freia that can be seen before she is entirely enshrouded in gold is her eye. Her gaze, the symbol of love, can only be silenced by the ring itself. Thus “the ring that represents the principle diametrically opposed to love and that signifies the loving glance has been sold,” thus inferring that materialism opposes and stifles love.

Some may go as far as to say that *The Ring*, specifically *Das Rheingold*, constructs a critical parallel of the structure and interpersonal dynamics inherent in the capitalist system. In his book *The Perfect Wagnerite*, George Bernard Shaw conducts a harsh, often comedic, interpretation of *The Ring* that condemns capitalism as a force detrimental to love. Shaw likens Alberich’s conquest of the Rhinemaidens in *Das Rheingold* to a situation: “as if some poor, rough, vulgar, coarse fellow were to offer to take his part in aristocratic society, and be snubbed into the knowledge that only as a millionaire could he ever hope to bring that society to his feet and buy himself a beautiful and refined wife” (Shaw 10). Like Borchmeyer, Shaw dwells upon the reoccurring theme in Wagner’s work of the objectification of women. Alberich’s inability to experience love coerces him to invest in the gold, which can literally buy him the pleasures of a woman. Thus, capitalism has made human beings themselves a commodity. Love is no longer the base medium for interpersonal relationships. Rather, human interaction is no different than the buying and selling of stocks. However, Shaw does not exclude women from being inherently

part of this perverted system. When the opera opens, the Rhinemaidens are seen literally worshipping the Rhinegold, yet they scorn and trivialize Alberich's offer of love. Although women are ultimately the ones who are objectified by the system, both men and women are products of the loveless cycle it produces. Shaw suggests that this dynamic is no different than the everyday interactions under the capitalist system that reduce love into a commodity. Alberich "foreswears love as thousands of us foreswear it every day," for in the face of immeasurable wealth, love seems an inadequate force.

Shaw's condemnation of capitalism through close study of Alberich extends to an allegory of oppression that proves painstakingly relevant today. In Scene ii of *Das Rheingold*, Loge informs Wotan that Alberich has harnessed his power of the ring to coerce the rest of the Nibelung race to tirelessly mine for gold in the underground mines, thus making them slaves. "The very wealth they create with their labor becomes an additional force to impoverish them; for as fast as they make it it slips from their hands into the hands of their master, and makes him mightier than ever" (Shaw 10-11) Thus, Alberich becomes the Marxist symbol for the greedy, exploitative capitalist. The ring, a symbol for Alberich's willingness to foreswear love, acts as a catalyst for the enslaving of his fellow kinsmen. Whereas love is a complementary force, in which one becomes the consummation of another, Alberich's commitment to materialism is an ongoing cycle of unfulfillable desire for more. Thus, it can be deduced that Wagner suggests that the embrace of materialism is inherently an act against love, for the material-obsessed world of capitalism is one that is centered around the idea of taking from many to heap up one's own possessions. Shaw connects this to situations "in every civilized country today, where millions of people toil in want and disease to heap up more wealth for our Alberichs, laying up nothing for themselves, except sometimes horrible and agonizing disease and the certainty of premature



death” (Shaw 11). Not only is Wagner’s commentary on capitalism frightful, but it is also frightfully present.

Borchmeyer continues where Shaw left off and comments on *The Ring* highlights the various perverting powers of money on the individual. Borchmeyer quotes Marx’s revolutionary *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in saying that money “transforms loyalty into treason, love into hate ... servant into master, [and] master into servant”(Marx). This book was written four years before Wagner started conceiving *The Ring*, so it is more than possible that Wagner was writing with Marxist ideas in mind. Of all the ideas Marx presents in his manuscripts, the inverting power of money proves most telling in *The Ring*. The Marxist idea of the inverting power of money dictates that “through money, man can do what he cannot do as a man.” (Borchmeyer 172). It is in this sense that the possessor of the ring is just as possessed by it. As previously mentioned, the ring allows Alberich to buy the pleasures of a woman, but how exactly does the ring fill the incapacity to achieve love? Money inverts all people’s impotencies to the opposite. Harnessing the power of material possessions, Alberich, who is decidedly ugly, can buy the most beautiful of women. Ugliness, which is traditionally a repelling quality is turned on its head and by the power of material, yields awards from the opposite end of the spectrum. As humans, it is assumed that love can only be exchanged for the love of another, and other personal qualities such as kindness can be traded for equally honest kindness. However, capitalism turns these holiest of human faculties into quantities that can be bought and sold in the marketplace. Because of this phenomenon, Alberich falls victim to what Marx calls the “fetishization of material possessions.” This obsession replaces, and perverts the idealistic vision of true empathetic love.

The ring is also a powerful individuating force that breaks the bonds between human beings, placing large gulfs between them and dismissing socially structured order. This isolating quality is contagious, as the discovery of the ring by Wotan initiates him into this aforementioned “vicious circle of evil.” But even before Wotan discovers the ring, the creation of the ring itself produces a ripple through the rest of the opera in which humans and gods alike are stricken with a hyper-consciousness that corrupts the pure conception of love. In Scene iiiii of *Das Rheingold*, Wotan attempts to thwart the giants and break his contract with them. In doing this, “he has already begun to undermine his own moral order based on loyalty and faith, [and by doing so] enters the world of the ring, which embodies a principle diametrically opposed to the feudal principle of loyalty and faith” (Borchmeyer 172). Not only does the ring’s presence make Wotan dishonorably dismissive about his contractual obligations, but it also introduces a distasteful irreverence for the future of his sister-in-law.

Although Wagner’s oeuvre explores the more dismal aspects of capitalism and develops the philosophies of one of the most pessimistic modern thinkers, his works are never without hope of love’s ability to redeem. In a letter to Franz Liszt, a close friend and future father-in-law, he suggests they “treat the world only with contempt ... [for] it is evil, fundamentally evil, only the heart of a friend and a woman’s tears can redeem it from its curse” (Wagner). Despite the cold, unfeeling chaos of the physical, faith in empathetic love is the only hope for existential fulfillment.

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