# The Lawgiver and The Divine Magician:

# Interpreting Wagner's Wotan in the Context of

# Germanic Mythology

By

Brandon Bledsoe
GRC 362E

Richard Wagner's portrayal of Wotan as a morally ambiguous schemer in his operatic masterpiece *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is not far removed from the original mythological conception of the god Óðinn.[1] It is well known that Wagner drew upon the *eddic* account of Norse mythology for inspiration; indeed, the *Elder Edda* contains not only Odin's words of wisdom, but also tells of the devious measures used to obtain that wisdom. However, the underlying motivating characteristics differ greatly between Wagner's Wotan and his mythological counterpart. The god in Wagner's epic is portrayed as a flawed yet compelling immortal obsessed with the rule of law and torn by his conflicting desire for both power and love. On the other hand, the Germanic god Odin, while being equally conniving, concentrates most of his energy on the acquisition of knowledge. In order to make a fundamental distinction between the mythological and Wagnerian incarnations of Odin/Wotan, in light of the fact that Wagner drew upon mythological sources for inspiration, it is necessary to both reconstruct the archaic conception of the god Odin within the context of polytheistic Germanic society, and to identify the uniquely Wagnerian attributes of *The Ring's* Wotan.

The ancient Germanic tribes viewed their world with a mixture of suspicion and wonder. Consequently, this view was reflected by their religion and in the surviving literature that records their religion.

I know that I hung on a high windy tree
for nine long nights;
pierced by a spear
given myself to myself.
No one can tell about that tree,
From what deep root it rises.
(Hávamál 138)

[1] For the remainder of this essay the name "Odin" will be used to identify the mythological Óðinn, also known as Wodenaz, Woutan, Woden, and Voden.

The above quotation is taken from the second poem in the *Codex Regius* of the *Elder Edda.* Known as *The Hávamál*, or Words of the High One, the poem is delivered through the voice of a *þulr* [2]. Odin is explicitly shown to be the source of the poet's divine inspiration throughout this collection of maxims and mystical knowledge. According to the belief system of the ancient Germanic peoples this wisdom could only be allocated by the Alfödr himself. In the *Eddic* account of the Norse pantheon, Odin is depicted as the god of wisdom and poetry, in addition to his role as lord of the Æsir. At the same time, it is made clear that this mythical patron of art and learning was a god who was feared and mistrusted as much, if not more, than he was worshipped. The paradoxical nature of this conception may seem irreverent at first glance, but Odin's other main functions, as a god of war and death, reveals more of the rationale behind this belief. In order to more fully understand Odin's role in ancient Germanic religion it is also important to note that Odin does not appear to have played a significant part in the everyday worship of polytheistic northern Europe; he was far more likely to receive sacrifices during times of war than in times of famine.

One of the most comprehensive and controversial explanations of Odin's role was developed during the first half of the twentieth century by renowned French scholar Georges Dumézil. Dumézil attempted to explain Odin's mythological significance within the framework of his theory describing the three social "functions" of early Indo-European societies. C. Scott Littleton provides an ample summary of this tripartite model in his introduction to the third edition of Dumézil's book *Les dieux des Germains*: "The

[2] Buchholtz defines *þulr* as "the pagan Scandinavian priest in his capacity as pronouncer of liturgical and magical formulas," 427.

common Indo-European ideology, derived ultimately from one characteristic of the proto-Indo-European community, was composed of three fundamental principles: (1) maintenance of cosmic and juridical order, (2) the exercise of physical prowess, and (3) the promotion of physical well-being." [3] Dumézil was convinced that Odin, in conjunction with the war god Týr, fulfilled the first function for the ancient Germanic people. Although he eventually disregarded his early belief that each function represented an actual social class, Dumézil spent most of his career applying this structure to his mythological interpretations. Much of his theory was based on comparative studies; Dumézil went to great lengths to establish a connection between Odin and the Vedic god Varuna.[4] However, convincing evidence for a Norse trinity comes from an actual historical account of their religious practices. Dumézil relates Adam of Bremen's description of three pagan idols encountered at a temple in Uppsala:

> In this temple, entirely covered with gold, there are the statues of three gods, which the people worship, so arranged that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber, while Wodan and Fricco have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, rules in the air, governing the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather and crops. The other, Wodan – that is, "Frenzy" – wages war and grants man courage against his enemies. The third is Fricco, who bestows peace and pleasure to mortals.[3]

Based on Adam's account, and other evidence, Dumézil claimed that Thor and Frey respectively fulfilled the latter two functions.

While this account would seem to contradict Dumézil's assessment of Odin's place within the functional hierarchy during the late Viking era, it does reinforce the notion that he was a fearsome deity. Gwyn Jones further illustrates this point in his *History of the Vikings*: "Aristocratic, perilous, incalculable, Odinn was no god for the

---

[3] Georges Dumézil, *Les dieux des Germaines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), XI.
[4] *Ibid.* , 36-9.
[5] Dumézil relied on *Gesta Hammaburgenis Ecclesiae Pontificum,* IV*, 26-27* for his translation of Adam of Bremen's account.

ordinary man to meddle with. Such would be in every way better off with Thor."[6] So perhaps Thor's place of prominence in the Uppsala temple was more indicative of his popularity than his importance in maintaining the cosmic and social order. After all, it was Odin who begat Thor. It is Odin who is given credit, along with his brothers Vili and Vé, for creating the cosmos from the body of the primordial giant Ymir. If Odin was acknowledged as a creator and maintainer of the cosmic order, then it was to be expected that a certain amount of resentment and suspicion would be directed towards him in response to the universe's cold and inexplicable nature.

There has always been a great deal of mystery surrounding Odin's origin as head of the Norse pantheon. In one of the most perplexing episodes of the *Elder Edda*, Odin is portrayed as an actual historical figure. The *Ynglinga Saga* presents Odin as a mortal king who leads his people from Tyrkland [Turkey] to conquer Scandinavia and much of northern Europe. One can only speculate on Snorri's reasons for historicizing the incident, but nonetheless the events of the *Ynglinga Saga* must be dismissed as fantasy; there is no evidence, historical, archeological, mythological, folkloric, or otherwise, that would even begin to suggest that Odin was ever an actual person. The figure of Odin, as portrayed by Snorri and other Icelandic sources, is a composite character that developed over a period of centuries in response to a variety of influences from inside and outside ancient Germanic society and the Indo-European community at large. Since the mythology that Snorri was familiar with constituted a remnant of the late Viking period, Odin's portrayal in the *Elder Edda* represents a later stage in his evolution as a deity. In

6. Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 321.

order to understand this evolution, it is necessary to establish the nature of Odin's earliest role in polytheistic Germanic religion.

Some scholars have suggested that Odin was not the original chief god of the Germanic Pantheon, and that this distinction more likely belongs to Týr, whom *The Eddas* portray as a relatively minor war god. This supposition is based mainly on comparative studies of Indo-European linguistics and mythology. Branston claims that the Indo-Europeans originally "based their religious conceptions on the family, it was a family of which the head was a father: and this father was identified with the sky."[7] He translates the name of the original Sky Father as either Djevs or Deivos, which meant "resplendent" or "shining" in Proto-Indo-European. Branston goes on to explain how this title was attached to the local name for father, hence the Vedic Dyaus-Pitar, Greek Zeus-Pater, and Latin Jupiter (Jovis-Piter). Týr was known in primitive Germanic as Tiwaz, which meant deity. The fact that this god was simply referred to as "the deity" implies that Týr once held a place of great religious significance, although whether or not he is the original chief of the Germanic pantheon is still open to speculation. However, it is certain that Týr was no longer a dominanting figure to the Norse of the late Viking period; this is attested to by his subordinate role in the *Eddas*, the total lack of Týr -based place names in Iceland, and his association with Tuesday, which corresponds with the Roman day dedicated to Mars, their god of war. Since there is no record of a "Tiwaz Fader" it is more likely that the Germanic Sky Father was later absorbed into the All-Father, a title normally used in reference to Odin. Considering that both Týr and Odin were gods of war, it is conceivable that the two deities once represented different aspects

7. Brain Branston, *The Lost Gods of England* (London: Hudson & Thames, 1957), 72.

of the same godhead; perhaps they were part of a trinity of "All-Fathers." Therefore, if Dumézil's theory is correct, a more likely explanation is that Odin and Týr once shared equal status as representatives of the first function; Týr as administrator of worldly justice and Odin as the divine sovereign of cosmic order.

Even if Odin did descend from the Proto-Indo-European Sky Father, it is clear that by the early centuries of the Common Era he had acquired enough unique characteristics to be unrecognizable as such to non-Germanic Indo-European groups. To the Romans this austere and mystifying deity was certainly not kin to the lustful and legalistic Jupiter. In the second century A.D. Tacitus, the oldest available source of information on early Germanic religion, equated the chief god of the Suevians with the Roman Mercurius, whom Dumézil claimed was the equivalent of Odin.[8] This belief is reinforced by the fact that the fourth day of the week, which the Romans reserved for Mercury, was associated with Odin by the Germanic tribes when they adopted a seven-day week. Like Mercury, Odin was said to have worn a winged helmet, an indication that he was also something of a *psycho pomp*, or soul guide. Tales that were prevalent in Northern Europe, in one form or another, well into Christian times, often portrayed Odin as the Wild Huntsman riding his eight-legged steed Sleipnir upon the wind and collecting the souls of the dead. Odin's additional role as master of Valhalla and chooser of slain warriors clearly marks him as a god of death as well as war.

Odin's magical attributes are particularly revealing of his function in polytheistic Germanic culture; the fear and awe that he inspired in his adherents mirrored their view of mortal magicians. Many scholars have noted the numerous shamanic affinities apparent in the figure of Odin, especially the stories involving his ongoing quest for

knowledge. Buchholtz believes that several of these elements may have been derived from contact with neighboring Celtic and Finno-Ugric cultures.[9] One German scholar, Wolf von Unwerth, went so far as to equate Odin with the Sami god Ruotta.[10] Odin's ability to change shape at will is an unmistakably shamanic quality. Snorri tells us that "his body lay as though he were asleep or dead, and he then became a bird or beast, a fish or dragon, and went in an instant to far-off lands."[11] Anyone familiar with arctic mysticism will note that "this ecstatic journey of Odin in animal forms may properly be compared to the transformations of shamans into animals."[12] The widely accepted etymological explanation of the god's name, which Adam of Bremen rightly translates as "furor" or "frenzy," also supports this interpretation. It is possible that this "frenzy" refers to the ecstatic state of a shaman or a berserker warrior.

When viewed in this context, Odin's position in ancient Germanic society and religion takes on a new dimension. According to Eliade some form of shamanism was practiced among the ancient Germanic peoples.[13] And in most cultures where shamanism is present there is invariably a certain degree of fear and awe surrounding the practitioner; indeed an aura of mystery is a necessary trait for a respectable shaman. Thus it is only natural that such an enigmatic character, practicing unknown arts on the periphery of society, would be beyond the day-to-day religious concerns of the laity. Odin was a powerful and mysterious individual who could only be approached with caution, mostly

---

[8] Dumézil,13.
[9] Peter Bucholtz, "Odin: Celtic and Siberian Affinities of a Germanic Deity" (Mankind Quarterly, Fall 1983, Vol. 24), 427-38
[10] Lotte Motz, "Odin and the Giants" (Mankind Quarterly, Fall/Winter 1984, Vol.25), 387-98.
11. *Ynglinga Saga, VII.*
[12] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Paris: Libraire Payot, 1951), 381.
13 *Ibid.* ,379-89.

in cases of extreme necessity, and like any true mystic he was not to be bothered with the trivial or mundane.

Odin was thought to be all-knowing, yet his quest for knowledge never ceased. Throughout most of the *Eddic* text Odin is preoccupied with acquiring wisdom and magic. There are at least six significant tales concerning Odin's ongoing search that are of further relevance to understanding his character. The following arrangement of stories is an attempted chronology of Odin's quest; a clear organization is difficult due to the temporally ambiguous nature of the *Edda*.

The first two examples involve the acquisition of enchanted items from giants: he received a magic wand from Hlébarðr, and learned charms from Bolþorn, his maternal uncle. Because giants were the oldest, and often wisest, of all beings it was only natural that Odin would have received magical powers from them. Motz explains the significance of Odin's primal connection with the giants: "A one-eyed, mutilated god, he falls short – like the giants – of physical perfection; as father of all Æsir he is, like some giants, an ancestral figure, like some giants he is linked with the creation of the cosmos, and is versed in wisdom and magic craft. He was, moreover, taught and nurtured by giants in his youth."[14] The next two stories, probably the most widely known, are best classified as initiatory ordeals. *The Hávamál* contains Odin's autobiographical account of how he obtained rune-knowledge, which he accomplished by wounding himself with his spear *Gungnir*, and then hanging from the tree *Yggdrasil*, the world ash tree, for nine days and nights. His willingness to suffer for the sake of knowledge is further attested to by the poem *Völuspá,* wherein the seeress reminds Odin of how he sacrificed an eye in order to drink from Mimir's well. These two incidents are particularly illuminating with

respect to Odin's character and motivation; there is something almost admirable about a deity who is willing to risk life and limb for the sake of enlightenment. However, the final set of stories demonstrates that Odin, although he is wise and self-sacrificing, is unworthy of being designated as either a Norse *bodhisattva* or a messianic figure.

The Alfödr was not opposed to using deception or seduction, nor was he adverse to descending to the depths of Niflheim in order to meet his goals. In the account of Odin's acquisition of the mead of poetry from the giant Suttung, Odin, who is here called Bolwerk (evil doer), kills nine thralls, seduces Suttung's daughter Gunnlöd, and leads the giant to his own death at the hands of the Æsir. The final deed of importance is the resurrection of a dead *völva*, or prophetic witch, from whom Odin learned of *Ragnarök,* the final fate of the gods. It is possible that Odin was aware of the twilight of the gods before consulting the prophetess; however, she does enlighten him to some of the causes. Patricia Terry summarizes the main catalyst as "the recurrence of evil in the relations of the Æsir, warrior gods, and with the Vanir, the oldest fertility gods."[15] Although Odin knew that the end was inevitable, he never abandoned his quest for knowledge.

The influence that the impending doom of *Ragnarök* had on Odin's actions should not be overlooked. Many of his mysterious deeds, especially his fickleness towards favored champions, take on a greater meaning when viewed in this context. Odin would often appear on the battlefield wielding *Gungnir* in order to claim heroes and sometimes to turn the tide against the apparent victors. This is the case for Sigmund, whose magical sword was broken in two when Odin suddenly arrived on the scene during a decisive battle. Before this moment it appeared that the god of frenzy had blessed the Volsung, but

---

[14] Motz, 390.
[15] Patricia Terry, *Poems of the Elder Edda* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 9.

in his hour of need Odin seemingly betrayed him. *The Saga of the Volsungs* offers no explanation of the rationale behind Odin's actions, but according to the Norse belief-system a hero such as Sigmund would surely arrive at the gates of *Valhöll* after such a death. In fact, according to the *eddic* poem *Eiríksmál*, it is Sigmund and his son Sinfjötli who greet King Eirík Bloodaxe upon his arrival in *Valhöl.* In light of the onset of *Ragnarök*, during which time Odin will need all the *einherjar* [lone-fighters] he can muster, it was only logical that the Alfödr would want to choose his warriors during their prime.

By taking into account Odin's religious function as upholder of the cosmic order, the shamanic qualities of his character, the self-sacrifice and under-handed means by which he obtained his powers, and his underlying motivation with regards to *Ragnarök*, a clearer picture of his mythological incarnation can be presented. The Odin of the *Eddas*, *Sagas*, and folklore was unlike any other chief god of the Indo-European mythologies; he had more in common with Merlin than Zeus, was a consummate ascetic, and was a lover of knowledge with an ideology that was more existentialist than theologic. But above all, the mythological Odin is best described as The Divine Magician: an archetypal counterpart to the skalds and seers of the ancient Germanic intelligentsia.

Richard Wagner, in a letter to S. Röckl, described *The Ring*'s Wotan as "the substance of the Intelligence of the present."[16] Wagner made it clear to Röckl that he intended Wotan to embody the spirit of the age of enlightenment: a rational sovereign who would stop at nothing to enforce the rule of law. Yet the mythological figure that inspired Wagner's Wotan was far from enlightened, in the modern sense, and was more

[16] S. Röckl, *What does Richard Wagner Relate Concerning the Origin of His Nibelungen Poem and how does He Interpret It?* (London: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1907), 27.

concerned with acquiring magical knowledge than enforcing laws and treaties. While Wotan does possess many of Odin's defining characteristics, he is fundamentally distinct from his mythological counterpart due to the manner in which Wagner implemented these characteristics. In *I Saw the World End,* Deryck Cooke deduces seven defining characteristics that are common to both Wotan and Odin: "his status as chief of the gods, his knowing wife Fricka, his function as god of battle, his fortress Valhalla, his lack of an eye, his ravens and his spear."[17] Cooke claims that Wotan's spear is the only one of these "chief properties" from the Icelandic sources that Wagner altered drastically. However, it is clear that, while the spear is the property that was altered the most drastically, Wagner reinterpreted all seven of these properties in order to fit the context of *The Ring*'s storyline.

Wagner's Wotan is not *The Alfödr* of *The Eddas.* Although he is chief of the gods of *The Ring*, Wotan is only implicated as the patriarch of the Valkyries and the Volsungs; whereas Odin is often referred to as "the father of the gods." Of course Odin is not directly responsible for the parentage of all the Æsir, but he did father two of the most prominent gods, Thor and Balder, and is directly responsible for the creation of most living things by virtue of his role in the Ymir myth. In contrast, Wotan is never shown to be the father of Donner (Thor) and Wagner omits any allusion to Wotan's role in the creation myth. Wotan's status as ruler of the world is indicative of an earthly sovereign, while Odin's dominion has a more cosmological connotation due to his position as co-creator of the natural order. One can only speculate on Wagner's rationale for toning down the god's power, but surely a more powerful Wotan would appear less human and thus compromise his dramatic potential.

[17] Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End* (London: Clarendon Press, 1979), 143.

Wagner not only altered Odin's patriarchal relationship with the gods but also changed the nature of his matrimonial relationship with Frigg.[18] Wagner gave Fricka the concrete status of goddess of marriage; consequently she is portrayed in a prudish and nagging manner befitting Wagner's notion of a jealous and overly protective wife. While it is true that Frigg could be equally overprotective – indeed Odin was just as promiscuous as Wotan – she is never explicitly identified as having dominion over marriage and she was far from a prude. Lindow indicates that Frigg's original function was less specific than Fricka's: "the name Frigg is derived from an Indo-European root meaning 'love,' and … it was Frigg who was given the day of Venus, that is, Friday."[19] Furthermore, in the *Eddic* poem *Lokesenna*, Loki makes it clear that the goddess was a less than faithful wife. During his tirade against the Æsir, Loki alludes to an incident in which Odin's brothers, Vili and Vé, claimed Frigg for themselves.

> Shut up, Frigg! You are Fjörgyn's daughter
> And have ever been most eager for men,
> When Vili and Vé you allowed, wife of Vidrir [Odin],
> To embrace you.

It is apparent that Frigg and Odin's relationship in the Icelandic sources is a reflection of marriage in the Viking era. Although infidelity was undesirable, it was to be expected when husbands and wives were separated for extensive periods of time while men were off "a' viking." On the other hand, Wagner, through Fricka, imbued *The Ring* with his own subjective notions about matrimony; in fact, Wotan and Fricka's relationship is thought to have reflected Wagner's first marriage to Minna Planer.

[18] The name "Fricka" is used in reference to Wagner's character, while "Frigg" indicate the mythological goddess.
[19] Jon Lindow, *Handbook of Norse Mythology* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 129.

Although Wotan and Odin were both battle gods, Wagner underemphasized Odin's ferocity in order to make Wotan a more sympathetic character. Wotan is visibly upset when Fricka forces him to betray Siegmund in Act 2 of *The Valkyrie*, but Odin never once displays any emotion resembling remorse or regret after claiming the life of Sigmund in *The Volsung Saga*, of course Odin doesn't much exhibit capacity for emotion at all. Clearly Odin's adherents conceived of him as a bloodthirsty deity who often required human sacrifices in exchange for granting victory; the Roman Orosius mentions how the Cimbri sacrificed their Roman enemies by hanging them from trees, clearly a sacrifice to Odin, who was also known as " the hanged god." However, it appears that Wotan only required animal sacrifices, as is indicated when Hagen tells the vassals that "sacred oxen must be slaughtered; on Wotan's altar pour forth their blood!''[20] Granted that the Christian authors of the *Eddic* texts never mention human sacrifice, but nonetheless, Odin is still portrayed as a battle god whose support is granted according to his own desires, whereas Wotan's favor is subject to contractual obligations.

The storyline of *The Ring* gives Wotan's Hall of the Slain an entirely different function from that accorded to Valhalla in the Icelandic texts. Wotan employs the giants Fafner and Fasolt to build Walhall as a residential palace for the gods of *The Ring*, but Odin's Valhalla is only the abode of his *einherjar*. The mythological Valhalla was simply one of many halls in the realm of Asgard, but Wagner's Walhall encompasses the entire kingdom of the gods. In addition, Valhalla served as a type of training ground to prepare Odin's chosen slain for the final battle at *Ragnarök*, a motif that is entirely absent in *The Ring*. Instead, Wagner uses Walhall as a symbol of Wotan's greed and lust for power. This symbolism is first utilized in *Das Rheingold* when Wotan attempts to cheat

[20] Götterdümmerung, Act 2, Scene 3

the giants out of their payment and again in the closing act of *Götterdämmerung* when he has Walhall set aflame. Thus, Walhall marks both the beginning and end of Wotan's rule of law, while Valhalla represents a paradise appropriate to the worshippers of a warlike god.

A missing eye is an immediately recognizable physical characteristic that is common to both Odin and Wotan, but once again Wagner endowed this property with a symbolism that is unique to *The Ring*. The account of how Wotan lost his eye, as given by the first Norn in *Götterdämmerung*, is essentially the same story that the dead prophetess alludes to in *Völuspá*, except that Wagner omits the name of Mimir "probably to avoid confusion with Mime."[21] Odin's missing eye merely serves as a reminder of his sacrifice for the sake of knowledge, although it may have been derived from ancient notions concerning the "evil eye." On the other hand, Wotan's wound is an external representation of a psychological handicap. Through the course of Wotan's dialogue with Brünnhilde in Act 3, Scene 3 of *The Valkyrie* it becomes clear that he sacrificed his capacity for introspection along with his eye. Brünnhilde's statement that "because my eyes saw but one thing alone, one all-conquering fact that you could not face," implies that she understands Wotan better than he understands himself and that the god can no longer make sense of his own emotions.

Odin was said to have possessed two ravens, Hugin [Thought] and Munin [Memory], who sat on his shoulders and reported current events to him, but Wagner uses Wotan's ravens to foreshadow Siegfried's death at the hands of Hagen. In the third act of *Siegfried* Siegfried tells Wotan that the woodbird he was following has flown away, to which Wotan replies "it left you to save its life, the raven's ruler it knew was here." The

significance of the raven imagery is made apparent in *Götterdämmerung* when two ravens fly overhead immediately before Hagen stabs Siegfried; presumably the ravens were on their way to inform Wotan of the hero's death. Ravens are a universal symbol of death common to many mythologies and, therefore, Odin's association with ravens can be viewed as a representation of his function as a god of the dead. However, when seen in conjunction with Odin's other animal attendants, two wolves and an eight-legged horse, Hugin and Munin can be viewed as part of a broader set of symbols that represent Odin's relationship with the natural world. Once again the shamanic imagery is inescapable: "Scandinavian beliefs tell of helping spirits in the shape of animals visible only to the shaman."[2] By omitting these other "helping spirits," Wagner disowned much of Wotan's mystical heritage.

The most obvious indication that Wotan is not the divine magician that his predecessor was stems from the artistic liberty that Wagner took with respect to Odin's spear, *Gungnir*. The *Eddas* mention *Gungnir* as a weapon of war that was made by dwarves and as Odin's implement of self-torture, but Wagner gave Wotan's spear a purpose that has no basis in myth whatsoever; this purpose is explained in *Götterdämmerung* by the Second Norn: "truly sworn treaty-runes Wotan cut in the spear's shaft; he held it as control of the world." The Norns also explain that Wotan made the spear from a branch of the World Ash-Tree, and that in doing so he has brought about the twilight of the gods. According to Cooke, it is at this point that "Wagner altered the mythology drastically…to give the character of Wotan a quite different main

---

[21] Cooke, 144.
[2] Eliade, 383.

motivation."[23] It is through this "main motivation" that Wagner was able to dramatically reinterpret a mysterious and ancient deity into a complex and all-too human protagonist. Unlike *Gungnir*, Wotan's spear is not a weapon of war, but "an instrument of law (treaties, contracts), whereby he attempts to build up and control an ordered civilization of an authoritarian kind."[24] Cleary, Wagner's Wotan is a chief god who represents the juridical, rather than the cosmological, aspect of Dumézil's first function.

While the mythological Odin is best described as a divine magician or shaman, his counterpart in *The Ring* is more accurately defined as a lawgiver; moreover, he is a lawgiver whose divinity is only marginal in comparison to that of his predecessor. Odin's worldview was shaped by his knowledge of the coming of the end at *Ragnarök*, and ultimately by the somber outlook of the ancient Germanic tribes. Wotan, however, had a vision for the world that did not involve him being eaten by a giant wolf. Tietz describes Wotan's vision as "something like that of Thomas Hobbes in the *Leviathan*: a mutual relation based on obedience and protection founded on the natural instinct of self-preservation."[25] Wotan also differs from Odin with respect to the attitude with which he handles the impending doom of the order he has established. When Wotan finally foresees his own annihilation he begins to realize the superiority of love over power and eventually embraces the end of the old order like a Buddhist monk welcoming *Nirvana*. Wagner says as much himself: "he does not want to be pushed aside, but to fall – to be conquered."[26] On the other hand, Odin raged against *Ragnarök* with the same fatalistic attitude that he encouraged in his own warriors. According to Edith Hamilton's

[23] Cooke, 146.
[24] Cooke, 147.
[25] John Tietz, *Redemption or Annihilation: Love versus Power in Wagner's Ring* (New York: Peter Land, 1999), 98.

assessment of the Norse outlook on *Ragnarök* "the power of good is shown not by triumphantly conquering evil, but by continuing to resist evil while facing certain defeat."[27] It is apparent that Wagner reconstructed Odin to be more relevant to the sophistication of the age of enlightenment, and thus the character of Wotan conveys an ideology that is far removed from the ancient Germanic notion of heroism exhibited by Odin.

Reconstructing an extinct mythology based on scant literary and archeological evidence is a daunting task, but interpreting the *magnum opus* of an artist who has been dead for over a century can be equally challenging. Wagner's masterpiece is the product of one man's imagination; it was an attempt to convey the sophisticated ideas of the modern age. However, the mythology related in *The Eddas* was the result of a few marginally Christian scholars' attempts to preserve a set of dying traditions. Yet *The Ring* can certainly be viewed as a continuation of these traditions, even though it is distinct from *The Eddas* due to Wagner's dramatic reinterpretation of the original material. Just as *The Eddas* are full of contradictions and have been rendered nigh incomprehensible by the passage of time and the complexities of transmission and translation, similarly, *The Ring* is full of ambiguity and has fallen victim to over-analysis. Like modern artists, ancient peoples are believed to have developed mythologies through epiphany or subconscious revelation. Julian Jayne's commentary on the psychology of the *Iliad* seems especially appropriate here: "except for its later accretions, then, the epic itself was neither consciously composed nor consciously remembered but was successively and

[26] Röckl, 21.
[27] Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Tales of Gods and Heroes* (New York: Mentor Books, 1942), 309.

creatively changed with no more awareness than a pianist has of his improvisations."[28] Many critics have concluded that Wagner himself was not consciously aware of *The Ring's* ultimate meaning. At the same time, the confused nature of many of the *Eddic* texts makes it clear that Snorri and other scribes were similarly unaware of the mythology's underlying meaning.

[28] Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 73.