Wagner's Fiery Brook

Richard Wagner wrote the libretto for *Der Ring des Nibelungen* with the voice of a young utopian socialist, fully intoxicated by the views of the revolutionary German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. These mythical "Nibelung poems" expressed many of the composer's most fundamental views of his youth, from the need for social reform to his constant desire for sexual gratification. Bryan Magee asserts in his philosophical examination of Wagner, *The Tristan Chord*, "[Feuerbach] had, when his ideas were new, a greater influence on Wagner than any other philosopher until the mid-1850s" (48). Although few of Wagner's youthful Feuerbachian ideals survived the composer's later immersion in Schopenhauer's philosophy unscathed, the initial period of optimism for the future is clear in the libretto of *Der Ring*. In his *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, Magee states, "In the final outcome Wagner's reading of Schopenhauer did not result in any textual alterations to *The Ring*" (347). This should not be read as an attempt to diminish the profound influence Schopenhauer had on the very core of Wagner's thought. Because, also according to Magee, "(Schopenhauer's) influence on the music, and on the synthesis of the music with the drama, was prodigious" (*Schopenhauer* 347). Feuerbach's two most widely-read works, *The Essence of Christianity* and *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, were absorbed by Wagner's entire consciousness, like no other work would until he read Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*.

Wagner wrote the libretto of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* just as he was fully examining the complex theories proposed by Feuerbach. Ludwig Feuerbach's most well-known work, *The Essence of Christianity*, was published in 1841, followed two years later by *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* in 1843. Along with obvious

references to these works throughout the text of *Der Ring*, both were ever present, just below the surface of Wagner's conscious thoughts throughout the time he drafted the librettos. Wagner first came in contact with the ideas of Feuerbach while still in Dresden, probably in 1848, the same year in which the libretto for *Siegfried's Tod* was written. After taking up residence in Switzerland, following the failed Dresden uprising of 1849, Wagner began to study Feuerbach in earnest (Magee *Tristan*). Following two years of intense study and theoretical writing, the libretto for *Der junge Siegfried* was completed in 1851, as a means of providing context to certain important concepts for the general public, so that they might better understand the intended profundity of *Siegfried's Tod*. Later in that same year, the libretto for *Die Walküre* was written in order to create a means for the interested audience member to truly appreciate the depth of Brünnhilde's complex character. *Das Rheingold* was written by Wagner immediately before *Die Walküre* as a preface for a now epic-length three-opera "music-drama," the likes of which had never even been contemplated by Wagner previously. *Siegfried's Tod* eventually became *Götterdämmerung*, and *Der junge Siegfried* later became simply *Siegfried*, after it became apparent to Wagner that his young, idealistic hero, Siegfried, had been usurped as the protagonist of the tetralogy by the father of the gods, Wotan. These facts, which may appear at first to be of interest only to the scholar of literary history, are critically important in establishing a timeline of composition, which is absolutely necessary to understanding the expression of Wagner's philosophical theories. It is these theories that serve to hold together these four independent, yet inseparable, librettos (or "poems" in Wagner's words) and the completed operas themselves.

Feuerbach's most influential work was done in the field of theology, and it was *The Essence of Christianity* which first drew Wagner to his philosophy. In *The Essence* Feuerbach places the love of humanity above the false deities of the past, "Love conquers God" (53). Feuerbach saw the power of love as limitless in its potential, "love universalizes; it makes God a common being, the love of whom is one with the love of man" (*Essence* 247). The traditional concept of faith in God as the creator of mankind and the surrounding world was to Feuerbach illogical and dangerous. It was in fact human beings who, in their need for profound answers to mysterious questions, created a god of their own, "Religion is the dream of the human mind" (*Essence* xix). Onto this god they projected all the most prized qualities possessed by human beings, thus God was created in the image of man, not vice versa. In his 1843 work, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Feuerbach presents his basic concept of God, "The Christian God is himself only an abstraction of human love and an image of it" (*Principles* 52).

The librettos of *Der Ring*'s four operas are based on Feuerbach's idea of the inevitable conflict between love and power. In each of the four *Ring* operas, there are many parallel, yet fiercely independent, relationships based on combinations of, and bloody conflicts between, these two powerful forces. Love is presented by Wagner as the purest of emotions, so pure that it is capable of transcending societal constraints, preordained fate, even one's inevitable death. Wagner puts forth the idea of power as the eternal nemesis of love, particularly the type of power exercised by the dominant society over individuals seen as deviant. He explores the tremendous complexity of the interaction between innocent love and corrupt power by developing characters who tend to embody either one or the other, or by casting the fates of two characters who are

confronted with an opportunity to go in either direction. The triumph of love over the desire for power in the different characters' circumstances is a sure indication of an honorable fate in the hands of Wagner. Always a factor, however, is the realization that an "honorable fate" may entail a conclusion to one's existence under heroically painful conditions. Conversely, when power is victorious within a given character or pair of characters, a tragic end is nearly certain. Tragedy is one of the central pillars of Greek drama, a form of art deeply revered by Wagner.

Wagner sees only one thing as worthy of sacrifice and worship, and that is love. Wagner's fascination with love seems to be focussed on the power of love, which leads to a truly fascinating paradox; is love really any different from power when it is used as a means to accomplish a specific goal? In an 1856 letter to his friend Röckel, Wagner seems to recognize this:

" '[Brünnhilde] declares that in love alone is blessedness to be found, without (unfortunately) making quite clear what the true nature of love is, which in the development of the myth we find playing the part of destructive genius' " (quot. in Magee, *Schopenhauer* 341).

Throughout the librettos, Wagner seems to make the controversial observation that in most cases what passes for love in a society, is actually just a mask that conceals our true desire for power over the object of our affection. A concept that would not be lost on a young disciple of Wagner's, Friedrich Nietzsche, another Feuerbachian thinker.

Thomas E. Wartenberg explains the basis for Wagner's fascination with the radical theologian, "Feuerbach offered his contemporaries a way out of the social upheaval they felt around them, by showing them the possibility of a new form of life in which their humanity could express itself in relations of love and affirmation" (vii). Therefore, if Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophy is to be understood in the context of

Wagner's *Ring*, the concept of love must be examined, beginning with Feuerbach's extensive analysis of the subject in *The Essence of Christianity*. It is *love* that both empowers human beings and "conquers" gods (Feuerbach *Essence* 53). It is *love* that both gives our species strength and leads it down the dangerous path of religious worship. Understanding humans as members of a "species" was central to Feuerbach's thinking, "Man has his highest being, his God, in himself; not in himself as an individual, but in his essential nature, his species" (*Essence* 281). Feuerbach wanted to kill the idea of God, along with the society dependent on that idea, by showing human beings that "Love is God, love is the absolute being," (*Essence* 48) not vice versa. Feuerbach did not simply see love as one important aspect of human relationships, but rather as the very essence of human existence, "Love is passion, and passion alone is the distinctive mark of existence" (*Principles* 52).

Wagner and Feuerbach were kindred spirits in their shared belief concerning the power of love to redeem a world that was currently corrupt and decaying. Bryan Magee, in his *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, explains, "The subject of 'redemption through love', as it is usually labeled, runs through the whole of Wagner's output from his very first opera to his very last" (345). Feuerbach's definition of love served as a basis for Wagner's ideal form of love, experienced by only two couples in *Der Ring*. Siegmund and his sister, Sieglinde, share a love based on blood and nature, with no regard for the societal constructions of marriage or disapproval of incest. Feuerbach defined "the essence of marriage" in simple, yet unconventional, terms: marriage is "the free bond of love…sacred in itself, by the very nature of the union" (*Essence* 271). Siegfried and Brünnhilde share a "free bond," until the forces and value systems of their society sever

their intimate connection. This 'natural' love of Feuerbach is not constrained by any societal structure or regulations, nor by traditional concepts of acceptable partners, in fact just the opposite is true, "love is freedom" (*Essence* 246).

Feuerbach was not a philosopher content with setting forth an inventory of theories and insights into the way humans behave, or have behaved in the past, and then washing his hands of them. Instead, his was a deeply prescriptive philosophy of the future, an idea that instantly resonated with the young, politically inclined Wagner of the late 1840s. Feuerbach's book *The Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843) provided answers to many of the disorienting questions raised in Feuerbach's previous work, and also inspired Wagner to write his 1850 polemic, *The Work of Art of the Future*. Where to begin: "The new philosophy bases itself on the truth of love, on the truth of feeling…In love, in feeling in general, every human being confesses to the truth of the new philosophy" (*Principles* 53). All previous beliefs in gods, or in one God, are no longer present in Feuerbach's philosophy of the future, "Love is not only objectively but also subjectively the criterion of being, the criterion of truth and reality" (*Principles* 227). Wagner certainly had these ideas in mind, when he placed these future-oriented words in the mouth of Wotan, the protagonist of the entire *Ring* cycle. The leader of the gods addresses his wife, a statement that can also be understood as Wagner speaking to his audience:

> Your concern
> is for things that have been;
> but what is still to come—
> to that turn all my thoughts. (100)

Wagner adopted Feuerbach's theory that humans created God in their own image, giving their deity limitless amounts of the most cherished aspects of the dominant society

of the day. Each unique god in *Der Ring* symbolizes a virtue of the society which surrounded Wagner in the mid-19th century. From the pagan gods of Norse tradition through the God of Christianity, every deity represents valued characteristics of the human psyche. Society looks most favorably upon justice accompanied by the power to enforce it. Therefore Wotan, the god of contracts and simultaneously the god of war, is seen as the leader of his clan of Nordic idols. Society accepts aggression as a necessary aspect of human interactions, especially when evil is confronted, so Donner, the god of Thunder, is the projection of that small part of every human being that desires to simply annihilate their enemies rather than employ reason and empathy when resolving conflict. Marriage has been a sacred part of human custom for thousands of years, so the necessity to create a stubborn deity to protect this union is clear. Fricka serves as the powerful and endlessly jealous guardian of marriage. An examination of the character of Fricka offers an important insight into human beings' intuitive feelings about the real basis for many traditional marriages (see Feuerbach's analysis above). Love is a universal emotion experienced by all human beings in one form or another, so it is a natural desire to think of such an emotion as necessarily positive and well-intentioned. Therefore, when it came time to create a deity to embody the feeling of love, that particular super-human had to be perceived as pure, beautiful, and honest. The goddess Freia is this beautiful ideal and symbol of naïve, innocent love. Humans are all too quick to abandon this ideal however, when their personal or social sense of power is threatened, as has been shown by the dominant class throughout history, and as Wagner depicts with painful honesty throughout *Der Ring*.

When one of the other main aspects of our personality is threatened, it is usually our love that is neglected most readily and severely. Wagner stated his message most explicitly in *Das Rheingold*. Love, or Freia, is seen as expendable as soon as she inhibits Wotan's half-blind lust for power. Ransoming off love seems reasonable to the chief of the gods, despite the fact that he along with every other character, except Alberich, values 'love' as an abstract theoretical concept. This reveals what Wagner sees as one of the basest forms of hypocrisy human beings as a race are guilty of committing. Wagner the dramatic poet hopes to show his disgust for the gods' action by placing their obviously dishonorable acts in front of the audience, whose moral ideals are supposedly exemplified by these once-mythical figures.

In Feuerbach's view, it is the struggle between love and power that has shaped the cultural and theological history of the world. Wagner gives the reader a brief history of this dichotomy in *Das Rheingold*. The very first scene of the entire *Ring* cycle is the simplest form of conflict, so simple that even a young child could understand the implications of the actions of the characters, without understanding one word of the language or recognizing any significance in Wagner's musical innovations. In the depths of the river Rhine, Alberich is the physical embodiment of loveless lust for power, or greed, and the Rhinemaidens are the protectors of the genuine love of nature and each other. Later this simplicity will be one of the first casualties of the power versus love war. The assumption of the Rhinemaidens that no man would ever willingly renounce love, even to gain total power over this world, shows the Wagner-Feuerbachian concept of love as the supreme state of interaction between human beings and the surrounding natural world. Woglinde laughs confidently to her sister maiden Wellgunde:

He must renounce
all joys of love,
before he masters the magic,
a ring to forge from the gold.

To which Wellgunde replies:

And that's a thing
that will never be:
all men who live must love;
no one could ever renounce it. (15)

Of course Alberich does offer his renunciation, "Love, I curse you forever," (16) the singular act which sets in motion the subsequent downfall of the gods and the destruction of the world ruled by them. The superficial analysis of this chain of events is obvious, the loveless world is created and destroyed by the violation of nature and the natural order by one evil dwarf. This is not the only message intended by Wagner, however. In this first scene, Alberich is the loveless, disfigured symbol of the industrial societies of the 18th and 19th centuries. Once such impoverished individuals realize their miserable lot, it is only a matter of time before they turn their backs on the very qualities that define their existence, of which love is the most important. The culture that results from unnatural industrialization is a loveless, deceitful realm where no one is honest and nature is seen as secondary to the material desires of humans. The cold reality of this world is what Wagner deals with in the subsequent three scenes of *Das Rheingold*.

Fasolt and Fafner present a miniature version of the conflict between love and power. Fasolt and Fafner completed Walhalla together and each expected to receive their fair compensation, Friea, the goddess of love. However there is an obvious problem; only one goddess of love to be split between two "needy" giants. Fasolt is determined to have Friea, "a woman / so charming and fair" (24) to live in his arms. Conversely, Fafner

is just interested in the power over the gods that could be won be possessing Freia. Fafner explains his vision to Fasolt, "Freia's charms / mean nothing," but the gods depend on Freia's golden apples to remain young, so long as the giants control Freia, the gods will grow old and weak, thus allowing Fasolt and Fafner to gain control over the whole clan. The tension between love and the power is clear, yet the eventual resolution is hardly as simple as a compromise between the two giants. Loge gives the reader a clear perspective of Wagner's personal belief on the situation:

> In this whole wide world
> nothing at all
> is of greater worth to a man
> than woman's beauty and love! (29)

Loge does mention the one exception to this rule, Alberich, which immediately catches the interest of Fafner, who is also willing to "renounce" the love of Friea as means to achieve unlimited power. Fafner offers to accept Alberich's gold as a fair payment for completing the castle, but he must first persuade Fasolt, who is reluctant to sacrifice his dream of the lovely Freia. Fasolt is confronted with the essential question of existence: whether or not to reject any possibility of love in order to gain wealth, power, even immortality? In the end he begrudgingly consents to Fafner's will, thus beginning anew the fateful chain reaction of theft, betrayal and murder. Power has triumphed over love in this instance, and because of this, all parties are fated to suffer tragic ends.

Before Fasolt first shows his desire for Freia, the gods dwell in a purely loveless world, devoid of any pure affection and passion. Thus the irony that it is a physically gigantic, grotesque being who introduces the beautiful concept of love into the world of the gods. When Fasolt speaks of Freia, the love motive is heard for the first time in *Der Ring*. It is the motive that the audience hears only in instances of true love. The

traditional view of this situation would not support the notion of a goddess being ransomed off to an aging pair of giants as an ideal example of marital bliss. And Wagner is not trying to present Fasolt and Freia as an ideal, but rather as one of the many forms in which love can thrive, a view much different from that of the dominant societies throughout history. Fasolt and Freia are not husband and wife, in fact, they have never even met, and when the goddess first sets eyes on the giants, she is instantly horrified at the prospect of spending a lifetime with the two brutes. But none of this makes the love that Fasolt feels for Freia any less honest and true. He worked for years on the majestic 'hall of the slain' (Walhalla) with Freia as his sole motivation. This physically powerful giant is not interested in the gold of Alberich, nor dominion over one single worldly creature, he merely wants to live out the remainder of his years with "Freia, the fair one" (23). It is this naïve love that costs him his life to his power-lusting brother, and it his unwillingness to lose sight of this love that makes Wotan place the cursed ring on the pile to conceal the beauty of Friea from Fasolt's eyes. Thus power relegates love to a subservient position as an emotion of the weak and dying the instant that Fafner's spear descends with its lethal force upon the head of Fasolt.

Die Walküre introduces human beings into *Der Ring* and signals the beginning of the truly precipitous decline of the gods. Near the beginning of this opera, Wotan defends the power of human beings, in this case a specific human being, Siegmund, to a skeptical Fricka:

Fricka: What marvel can be worked
by these mortals?
What is the deed which gods cannot do?

Wotan: Do you rate their [mortals] own
achievement so low?

In many ways, Wotan's question is still relevant to a person who is confronted by it in the beginning of the 21st century, and is definitely not an accidental profundity on the part of a very Feuerbach-conscious Richard Wagner.

The purest loving relationship in Wagner's *Ring* is the union of Siegmund and Sieglinde, the children of Wälse (Wotan). Love was not responsible for merely bonding Siegmund and Sieglinde together once they had met, it was also the force that drove Siegmund to Hunding's dwelling, "A girl in distress / called for my aid…I came to help her…that ill-fated bride" (83-84). The "girl" in question was being forced to "marry a husband she feared," (83) a not uncommon situation in many cultures. Hunding happened to be a kinsmen of the "cruel brothers" (84) of the "ill-fated bride." In fleeing from the wrath of society, represented in Act I scene two by Hunding and his kinsmen, Siegmund is led into the home of his own loving sister. Thus fate secures its cruel hold on the Wälsung offspring. Society, represented by Fricka in Act II scene one, is horrified by the incestuous nature of the relationship between brother and sister as well as the breaking of sacred marriage vows sworn by Hunding and Sieglinde. As has already been shown, Wagner did not believe in the tradition of marriage, presenting it as a form of institutionalized rape. Nature plays an important role in the brief relationship between Siegmund and his sister, with Siegmund's moving song to Sieglinde in which he compares her to Spring, "You are the Spring / that Spring I have yearned for / in frost and in winter's ice" (91). This is one of the clearest references to Feuerbach and his nature-based philosophy of love that can be found anywhere in the entire four opera masterpiece.

Hunding's marriage to Sieglinde is presented by Wagner as the antithesis to the natural love of the Wälsung siblings. Sieglinde did not want to marry Hunding, because their union was based more on politics and power than on love, as is the case in many marriages throughout history. Despite the lack of love and happiness between Sieglinde and Hunding, their marriage is perceived as respectable and productive in the eyes of the rest of the world. Surprisingly, it is Wotan who recognizes Hunding for what he is, a tyrannical husband not worthy of a seat at the great table of heroes, "for Walhall he is not fit" (97). This understanding causes Wotan to label Hunding a "slave" (125) and then strike him dead out of disgust that this loveless symbol of the human race has killed Wotan's own son, the most brave and noble of all humans.

Wotan's affection for Brünnhilde is the most powerful example of love that is not based on sexual attraction, but never-the-less natural and true. Wotan sacrifices everything, first for power's sake and then for love, though he admits this to himself only after Brünnhilde questions the motivation behind his actions. Wotan confesses to Brünnhilde why he, the ruler of the gods had desired the ring in the first place, "When youth's delightful / pleasures had waned / I longed in my heart for power" (106). Yet even as he wore the ring on his finger, "The longing for love would not leave me; in my power I felt its enchantment" (106). Power and love meet once again when Wotan is forced to order Brünnhilde to let Hunding win his battle with Siegmund. In this case, Wotan chooses his desire to maintain his authority as the god of laws and contracts over his desire to protect his own son, whom he dearly loves, "Though I love him, I must forsake him / murder the son I love so" (110). Brünnhilde has always shown loyalty to Wotan, until she was confronted by Siegmund's love for Sieglinde, "I saw that one thing

/ which you could not / Siegmund I beheld" (145-146). She saw in Wotan's will that he loved his son, Siegmund, thus she speaks to her father, "You were not betrayed / though I broke your command" (146). Wotan cannot see his own inner emotions, because of his missing eye, so he continues to deny his own love for Brünnhilde, "You indulged your love / now let it lead you / from me you haved turned away" (147). Instead of recognizing his own desire to express his love toward Brünnhilde or Siegmund, Wotan continues to be ruled by the social conventions engraved on his spear.

Not only can love unite human beings and bring about the end of all gods; love is even able to conquer fate in two places in *Die Walküre*. The first occurrence of this is seen when Siegmund convinces Brünnhilde not to take him to Walhalla the day of his battle with Hunding. By being willing to kill Sieglinde rather than face a day in Walhalla without her, Siegmund reveals a depth of love with which Brünnhilde is utterly unacquainted. Second, Wotan's love for Brünnhilde causes him to surround her with Loge's magic fire while she is under the spell of magic sleep atop her rocky crag. This has the effect of altering, or suspending fate, instead of leaving Brünnhilde unprotected, defenseless to the first opportunistic rapist who should happen upon the newly-transformed ex-Valkyrie, Wotan has determined, "One alone wins [Brünnhilde] as bride / one freer than I, the god" (151). The father of the gods is willing to suspend fate for "the holiest pride of my heart," (150) not just his daughter, but the very notion of love as well. Once again the Feuerbachian idea of love being the answer to the question of immortality is relevant in this context. Where there is no love, then fate must be accepted without resistance; however, if true love is threatened by fate, then it is the duty of those lovers to defend their relationship, even if this leads to their eventual death.

Unsurpassed in its purity and Feuerbachian essence is Siegried's love for his childhood home and source of his only feelings of pleasure, untamed nature. Bountiful nature provides Siegfried with the only love he knows, despite Mime's insistence to the opposite, "You love your dear old Mime" (Wagner 162). Mime speaks of a love which is based on power, not pure emotion, "You should learn to obey me / who always showed you such love" (159). Wagner portrays Mime more harshly than any character other than Alberich, because his lies concerning love are seen as blasphemous to Wagner. Mime could not teach Siegfried love because the dwarf never experienced love, and love, unlike faith, cannot be feigned. Siegfried is the mythological hero, unbounded by society or history, he is "the harbinger of the new order" (Magee, *Schopenhauer* 331). Every skill and instinct that serve Wagner's true hero throughout the rest of the music-drama are things he has in fact learned from either his own nature or the nature that surrounds him, "I learned from [animals] / what love must be" (162).

Wagner saves his most complex love-power relationship for the two central characters of *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried and Brünnhilde. Throughout the final scene of *Siegfried*, Brünnhilde's repeated use of water imagery and Siegfried's fire imagery, are proclamations that their's is a love based on the elemental qualities of natural love. When Brünnhilde refuses to relinquish Siegfried's ring back to the Rhinemaidens in order to save the world in Act I, scene 3 of *Götterdämmerung*, she verbalizes a central theory of Feuerbach, the growing independence of human being from God:

> One glance at the shining ring…
> I hold dearer
> than all the gods'
> eternal, loveless delights.
> The shine of this gold
> tells me that Siegfried loves me. (276)

Brünnhilde was conceived as a Valkyrie, intended only to serve as an instrument in Wotan's scheme to possess the ring once again, and therefore control the entire world. It is not with power that she is now threatening the gods, but with love. She once was dependent on the gods to guide her and give her life meaning, but now, after suffering the wrath of an angry father, Wotan's daughter has gained her independence. It is Brünnhilde's love for Siegfried that gives him the guidance necessary to fulfill his mission, a mission that will result in the "twilight" of their father and grandfather, respectively. To Feuerbach emancipating love was the only force that could free human beings from the dominion of theology some day, and for Wagner that day was at hand in *Götterdämmerung*. Blind lust for power is capable of causing great suffering and shame, as Wotan well knows, but it is only love which can deliver the fatal blow to his band of immortals. Brunnhilde's glorious hero, Siegfried, never experiences the drive for power that ensures Wotan's demise, instead, he embodies the most Feuerbachian of Wagner's ideals, he values love more than power. When Siegfried refuses to return the ring to the Rhinemaidens, it is not because he wants to retain his power, but because they attempt to persuade him solely with personal threats and prophecies of doom:

> The world's wealth
> I could win me by this ring:
> for a glance of love
> I would exchange it;
> if you had smiled the ring would be yours. (311)

Originally Wagner had placed the grand conclusions of Feuerbach into the mouth of Brünnhilde during her final soliloquy, this became known as "the Feuerbach ending":

> Though the race of gods
> Passed away like a breath,
> Though I leave behind me

A world without rulers,
I now bequeath to that world
My most sacred wisdom's hoard.-
Not wealth, not gold,
Nor godly pomp;
Not house, not garth,
Nor lordly splendour;
Not troubled treaties'
Treacherous bonds,
Not smooth-tongued custom's
Stern decree:
Blessed in joy and sorrow
Love alone can be.-
(trans. Stewart Spencer, in Magee *Tristan* 55)

From rejection of worldly possessions and "treacherous bonds," to the rejection of "custom's stern decree," these lines encompass every important Feuerbachian idea adopted by Wagner. The composer's later belief in the hopelessness of social reform is seen in Wotan's desire to end all existence in one immense conflagration. But most important is the idea that love can never be killed. Brünnhilde understands Siegfried's misguided actions too late to save their physical love, "He, truest of all men / betrayed me / that I in grief might grow wise!" (326). She leaves no doubt as to the depth of her love by riding onto his world-consuming funeral pyre, "in sacred yearning / with him ever one!" (328). She knows it is this same pyre that will bring the end for the gods as well, so bids farewell to her heavenly father, "Rest now, rest now, O god!" (326).

When Wagner finally perfected the conflagration in *Götterdämmerung*, he found words no longer to be sufficient, Brünnhilde does not deliver a sermon to the reader in the libretto, all that remains is her engulfing love of Siegfried. Feuerbach's most important belief had survived in Wagner's libretto for over 20 years of alterations and revisions, and withstood the philosophical inferno that is Arthur Schopenhauer. *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ends with one of the most compelling pieces of stage direction in the

history of opera, “Bright flames seize on the hall of the gods. When the gods are entirely hidden by the flames, the curtain falls” (329). How appropriate an ending for an epic music-drama based in large part on the philosophical ideas of Ludwig Feuerbach, whose last name can be translated from German as ‘fiery brook’. The Feuerbachian ending of the 1850s had long since been altered by years of composition and literary revision by the time *Der Ring* was first staged in 1876. The naïve, idealistic concepts of the young Hegelian who wrote the original “Nibelung poems” in 1848 had been distorted almost beyond recognition the day the first audience gathered in Bayreuth. Despite every obstacle, love had survived, Siegfried’s funeral pyre symbolizes the ultimate power of love to triumph over every other force. Love had indeed conquered the world of the gods with its consuming fire, and by doing so had also conquered the very language of human beings. In Wagner’s earlier efforts to create the ultimate ending to *Der Ring*, he had realized that words were simply not adequate to express the emotions he wished to convey to the audience (Magee, *Schopenhauer* 347). Only love was left for the human race to communicate by, with music serving as its timeless, universal grammar. All that remained for the future was the “radical redemption of the human spirit” (Wartenberg vii) based on the new philosophy of “love – love alone” (Magee, *Tristan* 55). A culture based on love of man and love of nature is bound to follow the death of the historic world order, founded on superstitious belief in gods and long-held decadent values. Though Feuerbach’s utopia is never realized on stage or in the text, Wagner’s *Ring* remains a dramatic monument to the power of philosophy to inspire transcendent works of art.

Dustin Tune

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