

CHAPTER 2

WAGNER AS ANARCHIST, ANARCHISTS AS WAGNERIANS

The compositions of Wagner were denounced as being atheistic, sexually immoral, and tending to further socialism and the throwing of bombs.

Ford Madox Ford

Richard Wagner's notorious essay "Judaism in Music" and his enthusiastic reception by the Nazis are common knowledge, but another aspect of his politics has received insufficient attention, and that is his relationship to anarchism. The connections between Wagner and anarchism are explicitly made by Theodor Adorno, Bernard Shaw, Max Nordau, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Max Nettlau, Benjamin Tucker, Henry Adams, the Russian "mystical anarchists," and the French Symbolists. The charge that Wagner was an anarchist can be read in two ways: as an arguable assessment of his politics and as a metaphorical, less transparent claim about his radical, "decentralizing" aesthetics — a claim typical of attacks on modernism.

Opera buffs, particularly Wagnerians, may know about Wagner's brief friendship with the famous anarchist Michael Bakunin. They may have read George Bernard Shaw's The Perfect Wagnerite, in which Siegfried is compared to Bakunin, and they may also be familiar with Die Kunst und die Revolution, Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft, and some of the radical remarks in the composer's correspondence. Less well-known, however, and therefore insufficiently explored in the Wagner literature, is the reception of Wagner by nineteenth-century anarchists, and the tendency of some conservative cultural critics to associate Wagner with anarchism. In 1876, for example, music critic Henri Malherbe claimed that the Ring expressed "a savage gospel of anarchy."¹ Yet even those books on anarchism which concern themselves specifically with cultural politics do not devote much attention to the anarchist reception of Wagner.² Because the charge of anarchist sympathies is not attributable solely to the brief friendship with Bakunin and because Wagner's enthusiastic reception by the Nazis has overshadowed his nineteenth-century reputation as a dangerous leftist, his "anarchism" deserves further consideration.

The texts that particularly elicited the charge of anarchism from conservatives and radicals alike are the Ring, his radical essays, and the poems "Die Noth" and "An einen Staatsanwalt." Wagner's music was also described by contemporary critics as "anarchic." He is usually described—in fact, he describes himself—as having turned from politics

to aesthetics when the 1848-49 revolutions failed. It is possible to argue either that Wagner was never in any sense an anarchist, or that he became an apostate to his revolutionary beliefs, or, as Theodor Adorno claims, that Wagner was a bourgeois, but bourgeois life is itself anarchic. Finally, one could read Wagner`s work and politics as protofascist, virtually destined for admiration by the Nazis.

Wagner and Bakunin

The story of Wagner, Bakunin, and the Dresden uprising appears in all the Wagner biographies. Ernest Newman gives the fullest account. Wagner had been attracted to political radicalism because his own artistic career seemed impeded by the existing order. One of his best friends, August Röckel, was politically active and introduced Bakunin to Wagner in Dresden in late 1848 or early 1849; on April 1, 1849, when Wagner conducted Beethoven`s Ninth, the anarchist supposedly came up to the Kapellmeister and told him that the performance had persuaded him that the work should be saved from the flames of the coming revolution. ³ Wagner devotes several pages in his autobiography, Mein Leben (My Life) to Bakunin, writing that he was astonished by the strange and imposing personality of the Russian, whom he describes as "kolossal, mit einer auf primitive Frische deutenden Wucht." ("colossal, with a force that suggested primitive vigor") ⁴ Turgenev, who also knew Bakunin

personally, painted a picture of him in the novel Rudin, emphasizing the same vitality and charisma and representing him at one point as a kind of musician:

Rudin possessed what is almost the highest secret—the music of eloquence. By striking certain heartstrings he could set all the others obscurely quivering and ringing. A listener might not understand precisely what was being talked about; but he would catch his breath, curtains would open wide before his eyes, something resplendent would burn dazzlingly ahead of him.⁵

Bakunin may have left his after-image not only in Rudin, but in the figure of Siegfried in the Ring. As Wagner began Siegfrieds Tod in this period, it is possible, as Bernard Shaw and Kurt Hildebrandt suggest, that he drew upon Bakunin for the character. Mein Leben gives further evidence of some anarchist sympathies, recording that Wagner read Proudhon's "What is Property?"⁶ and Feuerbach, whom Wagner apparently regarded as a kind of individualist anarchist.⁷ But as Newman observes, Wagner's autobiography also mitigates the degree of Wagner's involvement in the Dresden uprising, which cost the composer his livelihood and almost his freedom. The Kapellmeister posted signs —"Seid ihr mit uns gegen fremde Truppen?" ("Are you with us against foreign troops?")—on the barricades. When the uprising was defeated, Bakunin, Röckel and

Wagner fled but, unlike them, Wagner was fortunate enough to escape. A warrant was issued for his arrest. Contemporary evidence for Bakunin's influence on Wagner is apparent in Minna Wagner's letter of May 8, 1850, to her husband, in which she writes, "I was also against the association with Bakunin and Röckel, because I saw what a destructive influence they exercised on you."⁸

Some of Wagner's biographers scoff at the idea that he was ever a genuine revolutionary, suggesting either that he only hoped that a new regime would be more hospitable to his art, or that his political enthusiasms were short-lived. Curt von Westernhagen regards it as "ridiculous to call Wagner a Bakuninite and to see, as Bernard Shaw did, Bakunin's image in Siegfried."⁹ But Ernest Newman, Wagner's biographer, believes that Bakunin fascinated the composer and that Wagner and his circle later downplayed his involvement in the revolt.¹⁰ Hans Mayer and Franz-Peter Opelt pay particular attention to Wagner's political and philosophical interests. Mayer refers to Wagner's interest in Feuerbach, Proudhon, and Stirner; he recognizes both the anarchist character of Siegfried and of Antigone's relationship to the state in Oper und Drama.¹¹ Opelt finds anarchist and socialist ideas in Wagner's 1849 "Die Revolution" and suggests that even in the older Wagner these ideas endured.¹² André Reszler, in a 1971 article entitled, "l'Esthétique de l'Anarchisme," devotes a couple of pages to Wagner, whose aesthetic ideas —by which he means subject matter—are, Reszler says,

indisputably anarchist.¹³ And in The Aesthetic State Josef Chytry alludes to some of Wagner`s anarchist influences, notably that of Proudhon, who, according to Chytry, "gave Wagner a lasting socioeconomic model of the ideal community" and whose distinction between property and possession Wagner "wholeheartedly accepted...throughout his life."¹⁴

The Nordau Controversy

More explicitly than Ford Madox Ford, with his reference to "the throwing of bombs," Henry Adams associated Wagner with anarchy. His education, he has decided, required a visit to Bayreuth, and considering that visit Adams writes:

In 1901 the world had altogether changed, and Wagner had become a part of it, as familiar as Shakespeare or Bret Harte ... New York or Paris might be whatever one pleased—venal, sordid, vulgar—but society nursed there, in the rottenness of its decay, certain anarchistic ferments, and thought them proof of art. Perhaps they were; and at all events, Wagner was chiefly responsible for them as artistic emotion ... Adams had been carried with the tide till Brünhilde had become a habit and Ternina an ally. He too had played with anarchy; though not with socialism, which, to young men who nourished artistic emotions under the dome of

the Pantheon, seemed hopelessly bourgeois, and lowest middle-class. Bay Lodge and Joe Stickney had given birth to the wholly new and original party of Conservative Christian Anarchists, to restore true poetry under the inspiration of the "Götterdämmerung" (italics added).¹⁵

It is Wagner who inspires Adams and his friend to dub themselves "conservative Christian anarchists." Adams suggests a connection between Götterdämmerung, the Twilight of the Gods, and anarchy. In the final opera of the Ring power passes from the gods to human beings; this transition could be interpreted as anarchy in either the positive (anarchist) or negative (conventional) sense.

Adams's allusion to Wagner's responsibility "for [the anarchistic ferments] as artistic emotion" is also significant. Presumably he is referring to Wagner's influence on the French Symbolists, who were both Wagnerians and anarchist sympathizers. Adams's use of the word "decay" hints at another probable source.

In 1892 doctor-turned-journalist Max Nordau, the Allan Bloom of his day, published an attack on modern art and artists (including Tolstoy, Ibsen, and Wagner) entitled Entartung (Degeneration). The book was widely translated and discussed. Entartung was dedicated to Cesare Lombroso, psychiatrist and professor of forensic medicine, who developed the idea of "degeneracy" and conflated as pathological the motivations of

revolutionaries, including anarchists, and criminals ; Lombroso`s views influenced Conrad`s The Secret Agent. Geniuses were also, according to Nordau, inclined to degeneracy. "Wagner presents, " Nordau writes, "in the general constitution of his mind persecution mania, megalomania, and mysticism; in his instincts vague philanthropy, anarchism, a craving for revolt and contradiction." ¹⁶ He presses the charge of anarchism as follows:

Wagner is a declared anarchist. He distinctly develops the doctrine of this faction in The Artwork of the Future (p. 217) "All men have but one common need ... the need to live and be happy. Herein lies the natural bond of all men. It is only the particular needs which, according to the time, place, and individuality, manifest themselves and increase, which in the rational condition of future humanity can serve as the basis of particular associations...These associations will change, will take on another form, dissolve and reconstitute themselves as the needs themselves change and appear." He does not conceal the fact that this 'rational condition of future humanity' can be brought about only by force.

¹⁷

Benjamin Tucker, a prominent American anarchist, publisher of the Boston journal Liberty, and an ardent Wagnerian, asked Bernard Shaw,

well-known as both a progressive and a music critic, to respond to Nordau's book and Shaw agreed; his "A Degenerate's View of Nordau" (later retitled "The Sanity of Art") appeared in the July 27, 1895, issue of Liberty.

Ben Tucker was himself no Siegfried; he did not fit the various stereotypes of the anarchist: Russian aristocrat, immigrant laborer fighting capitalist exploitation, fanatical French bomb-thrower. Instead, Tucker was a New Englander of good family who dedicated his talents to the writing, translation, and promulgation of anarchist ideas. He also loved fine food, plays, and concerts, and he made a pilgrimage to Bayreuth at least once, in 1889. The following passage, presumably written by Tucker, appeared on page one of Liberty, demonstrating his agreement with the conservative Nordau:

None of the newspapers, in their obituaries of Richard Wagner, the greatest musical composer the world has yet seen, mention the fact that he was an Anarchist. Such, however, is the truth. For a long time he was intimately associated with Michael Bakounine, and imbibed the Russian reformer's enthusiasm for the destruction of the old order and the creation of the new. Once indeed, when Wagner went so far as to propose the destruction of the art treasures in the Dresden museum on the ground that the future would replace them with better, Bakounine was compelled to

restrain his ardor. It is interesting to know that the prophet of "the music of the future" foresaw also the society of the future.¹⁸

Because Tucker was a Wagner buff, it was not unusual for Wagner's name to appear in Liberty. One issue printed in full a translation of a letter from Wagner to Liszt. Shaw's response to Nordau took up almost an entire issue, and V. Yarres wrote an anarchist response to Shaw. In the June 15, 1895, issue of Liberty in which Shaw's "letter" appeared, Tucker commences the attack on Nordau on page one:

In his crazy production the degenerate Nordau (degenerate according to his own graphic descriptions of the symptoms of degeneracy), trying to prove that Wagner was irresponsible, quotes passages of a distinctly Anarchistic character, and triumphantly cries: Here, your idol was an Anarchist; isn't that conclusive evidence of his insanity? Seidl, the Wagnerian conductor, agrees with Nordau, for he pooh-poohs the idea that Wagner can be called an Anarchist. But Seidl is pursuing a dangerous course. On this point, Nordau is not yet open to successful attack, and, unless Seidl is ready to admit that Wagner was crazy, he had better refrain from protesting against the charge that Wagner had pronounced Anarchistic tendencies. It is true that Wagner's opinions took a

reactionary turn in his declining years, but the fact that for a long period he was a pronounced libertarian cannot be gainsaid.¹⁹

Wagner as Anarchist

The association of Wagner with anarchism did not disappear for some time after his death. In Houston Stewart Chamberlain's 1904 work Richard Wagner, the author, Wagner's son-in-law, claims that Wagner took the same position as Schiller, Proudhon, and Carlyle in characterizing contemporary life as chaos and anarchy, an overthrow of those conditions as the restoration of order. But in 1904 Chamberlain was aware of Wagner's anarchist sympathies, writing:

Today one scarcely dares utter the word "anarchist": for us it is virtually synonymous with bomb-thrower, arsonist, and murderer. If, however, I use the word in the paradoxical sense that accompanied it fifty years ago, I find a number of similarities [literally, contact-points] between the Wagner-Schiller mode of thought and the anarchism of Proudhon. Wagner liked to use the word "anarchy." He said for example, "How should someone who is utterly methodical grasp my natural anarchy?"; elsewhere he writes, " I prefer to hang onto chaos than to the existing order"; and in his text of November 1882 on the production of Parsifal, he

explains the preparations for the production as a result of "anarchy, in that everyone does what he wants, namely, the right thing." ²⁰

But after these cheerful admissions, Chamberlain`s tone changes. He vigorously denies that Wagner was a "political anarchist." Wagner, like the anarchists, recognizes the bad state of the world today, but there is no further relationship between anarchists and Wagner, never has been, never could be. His denials sound a bit too vehement. Chamberlain then, more persuasively, cites Wagner`s Christianity, support of the monarchy, and insistence on regeneration as evidence of his differences from anarchists. "The anarchist," he concludes grimly, "rips the thread of history and sins by this rude act on all of nature." ²¹

Chamberlain may mark the shift in Wagner`s reputation, from Wagner-as-anarchist to Wagner-as-fascist. When Chamberlain met Hitler in the 1920s, foresaw in him the leader of the Germans. It is worth noting that Hitler`s favorite opera was not one of the Ring cycle but Lohengrin; of the latter Hans Mayer writes, "It is rare in art, even in the art of Richard Wagner, for ecstasy and hatred to be so inseparable." ²²

The Wagner-anarchism connection also appears in both French and Russian Symbolism. Wagner`s popularity among and influence on French Symbolists, including Mallarmé, is well-known; less well-known are their anarchist sympathies. As one critic observes, "The French intelligentsia`s

attraction to Wagner was based not only on its perception of him as a stylistic innovator but also on its sense of him as a political radical."²³

In Russia, symbolists were also both Wagnerians and anarchists, but of an unusual ilk, dubbed by Georgi Chulkov "mystical anarchists." In his long essay "On Mystical Anarchism," Chulkov defines anarchism as "studies of the paths of individual's emancipation from the state"; philosophical anarchism as the "emancipation of the individual from moral and religious obligations, as taught by Nietzsche"; mysticism as the "opening of the unity of the individual to the world"; and mystical anarchism as the "studies of the paths of the final liberation, which consists in the liberated affirmation of the personality from the absolute beginning."²⁴

Chulkov particularly stresses the importance of music, which he says "spontaneously represents the thing itself by itself"; similarly, political anarchists opposed representative government.²⁵ Only the first and second are compatible with the goals of anarchists like Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Goldman (who also admired Nietzsche). Demonstrating one way that anarchism could be appropriated, Chulkov understands political anarchism as a necessary prelude to ethereal transformations of the self.

Wagner's Ring and Anarchist Theory

It is clear that Wagner used to have a reputation as an anarchist, but it may not yet be clear why, other than the brief friendship with Bakunin, such diverse thinkers as Chulkov, Tucker, Nordau, Ford, Chamberlain, and Adams associated Wagner with anarchism. George Bernard Shaw provides some answers. Although himself a Socialist and the author of an article entitled "The Impossibilities of Anarchism," Shaw's work, like that of William Morris, often appeared in anarchist periodicals like the London and American journals Liberty. During his early years in London Shaw associated with radicals of various stripes, including anarchists, and he once wrote an essay laying out the anarchist position. He circulated a petition for the release of the American anarchists in the Haymarket trial. Undoubtedly, Shaw had an insider's knowledge of anarchist theory and could speak with some authority — more so than Henry Adams — about anarchist critiques of capitalism and the State. He would have also known, and noticed in the Ring, the favorite anarchist buzzwords: freedom, liberty, individualism, community, revolution, destruction.

Shaw's The Perfect Wagnerite recognizes in Wagner a fellow critic of capitalism and the State. He sees anarchism personified in the figure of Siegfried, whom he characterizes as "a totally unmoral person, a born anarchist, the ideal of Bakunin, an anticipation of the `overman` of Nietzsche." ²⁶ Siegfried is like Bakunin in his violent exuberance, as when, according to Shaw, he forges the sword Nothung "with the shouting exultation of the anarchist who destroys only to clear the ground for

creation" ²⁷ —an allusion to Bakunin`s famous aphorism: "die Lust der Zerstörung ist zugleich eine schaffende Lust" ("the urge for destruction is also a creative urge").

As L.J. Rather has conjectured, Siegfried`s identity as anarchist may have yet another source in Proudhon`s What is Property? (1840).

Proudhon writes:

Property is the right to increase: this axiom will be for us like the name of the heart of the apocalypse, a name that includes the whole mystery of the beast. We know that whoever penetrated the mystery of this name would obtain understanding of the whole prophecy, and would overthrow the beast. Well, then! It will be by means of a profound interpretation of our axiom that we shall kill the sphinx of property...we are going to follow the coils of the old serpent, we shall number the homicidal twistings of this hideous taenia whose head, with its thousand suckers, always lies hidden from the sword of even its most high-spirited enemies ... For something other than courage is required to overthrow the monster; it was written that the monster would not die until a proletarian, armed with a magic rod, had taken its measure. ²⁸

The serpent strikingly suggests the dragon of the Ring and the proletarian, of course, suggests Siegfried. The "original sin" of the Ring, Alberich`s

theft of the Rhinemaidens' gold, is, I would therefore speculate, Wagner's representation of Proudhon's famous dictum, "property is theft."²⁹

Before Alberich steals the gold, it is not private property but part of the natural world, guarded by the Rhine Maidens. It becomes "property" after it is stolen; "property" is that which should belong to all yet has been expropriated by the few. If Proudhon's influence on Wagner is ignored, this may not be clear. The curse that falls upon the wearer of the ring results from the original injustice, the continued existence of which is ensured by the ring of power, which corrupts. Shaw ironically anticipates objections to readings like these:

And now, attentive Reader, we have reached the point at which some foolish person is sure to interrupt us by declaring that The Rhine Gold is what they call "a work of art" pure and simple, and that Wagner never dreamt of shareholders, tall hats, whitelead factories, and industrial and political questions looked at from the socialistic and humanitarian points of view.³⁰

The formalist predilection to interpret Wagner and the Ring according to some ahistorical or transcendent model results in performances as Wagner's detractors imagine them: overweight bleached-blondes clad in armor and bearskins, singing tediously in mock-archaic German. An exception was the famous 1976 Bayreuth centennial of the Ring;

produced by Patrick Chéreau and conducted by Pierre Boulez, it was, like Shaw's, a reading of the Ring cycle as anti-capitalist narrative. The gods are dressed as members of the haute bourgeoisie, those who control the means of production. The gold of Das Rheingold is capital itself, and greed to possess it infects the would-be plutocrat Alberich, represented, as Adorno had suspected, as a Jew. Siegfried is the revolutionary who goes down to defeat; Brünhilde, as Nietzsche had implied in Der Fall Wagner, is the fin-de-siècle New Woman. The end of the cycle is the end of the world as Bakunin imagined it. The Chéreau/ Boulez production caused outrage among some ardent Wagnerians (spiritual descendants, no doubt, of those Shaw and Mark Twain make such sport of), presumably because it stripped away the Germanic myths to expose a political text.

The critique of law is crucial to both anarchism and the Ring. But although Shaw proceeds to discuss law, he does not expressly relate the role of law in the Ring to the anarchist account of law, which shared various assumptions with Marxism and revolutionary socialism: namely, that law exists primarily to protect and maintain the unequal distribution of wealth and that it is an infringement upon the freedom of the individual.

³¹ Some anarchists, like William Godwin, believed that in an anarchist society, censure would replace law; ³² Engels expected law, like the state, to "wither away" under communism.³³ Proudhon thought that contractual relations could only flourish in the absence of the state.³⁴ Siegfried is ein Freier, "a free man" who is not bound by laws and contracts. In an 1871

discussion of the Paris Commune, in which anarchist theory briefly became practice, Bakunin articulates the anarchist position:

I am a fanatical lover of liberty ... I do not mean the formal liberty that is dispensed, measured out, and regulated by the State...I mean the only liberty worthy of the name, the liberty which implies the full development of all the material, intellectual, and moral capacities latent in every one of us; the liberty which knows no other restrictions but those set by the laws of our own nature [italics added].³⁵

In Mutual Aid Kropotkin, like Bakunin, appeals to nature, arguing that "primitive" peoples and social animals live cooperatively together without written laws. Kropotkin inveighs against law, describing it as a modern institution that replaced the unwritten relations of custom and that served to preserve the privileges of the rich and powerful. Thus, he exhorts his readers: "In place of the cowardly phrase, `Obey the law,` our cry is `Revolt against all laws!` " ³⁶ In another essay, Kropotkin explains that the law is "always on the side of property." ³⁷

Wagner, whose 1848-49 prose is full of anarchist rhetoric, sounds much like both Bakunin and Kropotkin when he writes in the 1849 Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft ("The Artwork of the Future") that "the real human being will not appear until true human nature, not the arbitrary

laws of the state, shape and order his life"[italics added].³⁸ In the early poem "Die Noth" ("Need") which decries poverty and predicts revolution, Wagner drew on Bakunin`s ideas.³⁹ The plot and libretto of the Ring further develop the critique of law and property.

If the human fault which dominates the Ring is greed, then gold is the catalyst for that greed, and gold, in turn, is an ingredient of the anti-Semitic discourse of the latter half of the nineteenth century. The capitalist Jay Gould is to Henry Adams what Alberic is to Wagner. One of Adams`s rare populist moments takes place when he supports William Jennings Bryant`s attack on the gold standard; Adams, like Wagner, was an anti-Semite, and he mentions in The Education "the famous, classical attempt of Gould to corner gold in September, 1869" about which Adams wrote an article called "The Gold Conspiracy."⁴⁰ When Adams confesses that `every political idea and personal prejudice he ever dallied with held him to the silver standard and made a barrier between him and gold" [italics added], he is surely alluding to his own anti-Semitic feelings.⁴¹

Wagner`s biographer Ernest Newman recognizes elements of Proudhon`s economics in Wagner, but scoffs at the composer`s politics. dismissing such Wagnerian statements as "our god is gold, our religion the pursuit of wealth."⁴² But other prominent nineteenth-century figures expressed similar attitudes. William Morris wrote a friend in 1883 that art could not flourish under "the system of commercialism and profit-mongering."⁴³ In William Dean Howell`s 1890 novel A Hazard of New

Fortunes the ex-Confederate Colonel Woodburn echoes Morris: "The law of commercialism is on everything in a commercial society... The final reward of art is money and not the pleasure of creating." ⁴⁴ Wagner also hated the subjection of art to the market, complaining in Die Kunst und die Revolution of contemporary art: "Its true essence is industry; its ethical aim, the gaining of gold; its aesthetic purpose, the entertainment of those whose time hangs heavily on their hands." ⁴⁵

However badly Wagner may have articulated the ideas of Proudhon, Feuerbach, Bakunin, Stirner, and Marx—and he wasn't always so bad at it—they should not be dismissed as either incidental to his art or destructive of it; the anti-capitalist critique was important to many artists and social revolutionaries, who were therefore often attracted to one another, and the Ring is much more interesting when understood as coded with contemporary social conflicts than as an updated myth about gods and giants.

Adorno on Wagner

In the transvaluation of Wagner, T.W. Adorno joins conservative critics in denying the composer's revolutionary impulses. Adorno's Versuch über Wagner (In Search of Wagner) recognizes a subtext of anarchy in the Ring and implicitly acknowledges Wagner's anarchist critique of law. For Adorno, as for Marx and for many anarchists, it is late bourgeois society

that is "anarchic," that is, violently competitive, prone to economic and social crises. In Adorno's words: "The realization that late bourgeois society possesses these anarchist features decodes the totality as prehistoric anarchy. This anarchy is still repudiated by Wagner the bourgeois, but it is already desired by Wagner the musician."⁴⁶ Adorno seems to confirm the anarchist cast of Wagner's understanding of law. He implies a correlation between his musical aesthetics and "anarchy." But he rejects the anarchist critique of law, writing that Wagner "confounds" legal contract and violence: "in Wagner, law is unmasked as the equivalent of lawlessness."⁴⁷ For anarchists, however, law was lawlessness, in the sense that it substituted implicit force for voluntary associations.

Adorno uses "anarchy" in the Hobbesian sense, not according to anarchist theory. In his terms, Wagner is an anarchist in that he articulates bourgeois ideology. Even Shaw's claim that Siegfried is Bakunin is not acceptable to Adorno, to whom "there is in fact no real demarcation line separating Wotan, the father of the gods, and Siegfried, his lethal rescuer and the antagonist who succors him, and in their union the Ring celebrates the capitulation of the revolution that never was."⁴⁸ It is therefore Adorno who makes the strongest case for Wagner as reactionary, both in his operas and his life. Of the Dresden revolt Adorno writes: "The betrayal is implicit in the rebellion. No late conversion to a conformist posture was required of the later Wagner; there was no need to repudiate his earlier

insurrectionary values: his belief in the peasantry and in nothingness, in the void."⁴⁹ This analysis conflates Wagner's recollection of Bakunin's ideas (from Mein Leben) with Wagner's own ideas and with Götterdämmerung. Adorno's devastatingly critical assessment of Wagner, an example of Frankfurt School "left pessimism," obliterates any position but the reactionary. Wagner is an anarchist, according to Adorno, only in the sense that he espouses the values of capitalism, itself anarchic; the leitmotif, for example, is the ancestor of film music and a relative of the advertisement.⁵⁰ Wagner's turn to myth is, according to Adorno, revelatory of his reactionary nature. Adorno's critique is particularly persuasive when one considers the prominence of myth in modernist texts and the supposed modernist flight from history.⁵¹ On the other hand, his generally negative account converts any critical stance into acquiescence or opportunism, thus ultimately confirming the account given by Wagner's conservative defenders.

Other Modes of Wagnerian "Anarchy"

Charges that Wagner was an anarchist may have been a response to the sensuality of his orchestration and its representation—even celebration—of adultery in Tristan and incest in Die Walküre, objectionable to many nineteenth-century moralists. Josef Chytrý writes of Wagner's "revolutionary commitment to the liberation of a sensuous-

erotic core to humanity that had been suppressed by a history of domination. " ⁵² "Anarchy" in the critical discourse around Wagnerism may refer obliquely to this sensuality, because sexual and political revolution are historically linked and because many anarchists advocated "free love." In The Decline of the West, Oswald Spengler mentions "the impressionistic tendencies of an anarchic sensuality, the whole bundle of modern yearnings, charms, and pains, whose expression is found in the poetry of Baudelaire and the music of Wagner." ⁵³ In Der Fall Wagner Nietzsche understands Brünhilde`s defiance of her father and her rescue by Siegfried as a metaphor for the emancipation of women, also commonly associated with anarchism.

Charges of "anarchy "may have yet another referent: that of Wagner`s formal musical innovations, his treatment of harmony, his dissonance and chromaticism, and the resultant undermining of classical tonality with its "centrist"—anarchists favored a dispersal of power—dependence on the tonic. This is presumably what Adorno means when he writes that anarchy is already desired by Wagner the musician. ⁵⁴ Like Adorno, Carl Schorske makes explicit analogies between music and politics, observing, "The task of the composer was to manipulate dissonance in the interests of consonance, just as a political leader in an institutional system manipulates movement, canalizing it to serve the purposes of established authority." ⁵⁵ In his own day Wagner,

with his "music of the future," represented the avant-garde musical camp, with Brahms cast by critics as the defender of tradition.

Richard Wagner was not an activist like Bakunin or an anarchist theoretician like Proudhon, but he did articulate, in the Ring and in his political pamphlets, anarchist ideas — a critique of the state, of capitalism and private property, of the division and exploitation of labor. His anarchist sympathies were recognized as such by both conservatives and anarchists. Wagner's evident interest in some anarchist ideas, such as those of Proudhon and Bakunin, is another instance of the affinity between artists and anarchists. The Gesamtkunstwerk, Richard Sonn points out, is akin to Kropotkin's idea of collective labor, and Josef Chytrý mentions Wagner's "faith in a modern Künstlertum, a group of artists who are driven to create art in a collective work." ⁵⁶

The confusing overlap between reactionary and leftist positions and critiques in the fin de siècle is particularly apparent in anarchist politics. ⁵⁷ It is this similarity that underlies and explains the contradictory political positions — anarchist, monarchist, nationalist, protofascist — Wagner took during his lifetime. The critical disagreement about Wagner's politics is itself political; polarized readings of Wagner's politics are exemplary of later critical debates in the interpretation of modernist politics.

Bernard Shaw and Theodor Adorno are the two poles of Wagner interpretation — the Ring as anarcho-socialist, the Ring as fascist. ⁵⁸ In

view of the Nazi appropriation of Bayreuth, a dismissal of either or both poles is odd and disturbing — odd since a more complex account of Wagner would to some degree diminish the identification of his work with Hitler, and disturbing since the affiliation with Bakunin and 1848 seems even less tolerable to some critics than his positive reception by the Nazi high brass.

The debate about Wagner's politics tends to focus on historical events in the public sphere. A quite different set of issues is raised by Joseph Conrad, the writer discussed in the following chapter, whose representation of anarchism has fueled debates about the private, psychological subject — in fictional characters and as repudiated aspects of the author himself.

¹ quoted in Andrew R. Carlson, Anarchism in Germany: The Early Movement, Metuchen, N.J. 1972) 19.

² In Anarchism and Cultural Politics Richard Sonn does mention the anarchist-Wagnerian connection, writing: "The cult that formed around Richard Wagner received just such an anarchist interpretation ... By the 1890s, Tristan and Isolde was playing at the Opéra to appreciative audiences, while the anarchists prepared propaganda claiming Wagner for themselves. A leaflet seized by the police...[read]: 'Supreme derision. This Wagner, of whom your admiration

makes a sort of demigod, was condemned to death in 1848 as a revolutionary, while his friend Bakunin was the first to formulate anarchist theories, and by this fact is seen to be a predecessor of Ravachol [anarchist bomber].¹ Wagner's Art and Revolution [Die Kunst und die Revolution] was first translated into French under the aegis of Jean Grave's Les Temps Nouveaux in 1895. The young Wagner foreshadowed Kropotkin's dream of a collective as well as total work of art produced cooperatively in the anonymous manner of medieval art" (217).

³ Ernest Newman, The Life of Richard Wagner, v. 2, New York 1937, 45.

⁴ Richard Wagner, Mein Leben (München: Piper 1983) p. 398.

⁵Ivan Turgenev, Rudin (Penguin: Baltimore, Md. 1973) 63.

⁶ Wagner, Mein Leben, 433.

⁷ Wagner, Mein Leben, 443. "Repräsentant der rücksichtslos radikalen Befreiung des Individuums vom Drucke hemmender, dem Autoritätsglauben angehörender Vorstellungen."

⁸ The Letters of Richard Wagner: The Burrell Collection, edited by John N. Burk, New York 1950, 29.

⁹ Westernhagen, Richard Wagner (Zürich: Atlantis Verlag, 1956) 134.

¹⁰ Ernest Newman, Wagner, 49-103.

¹¹ Hans Mayer, 'The Ring of the Niebelung' in John L. Di Gaetani, ed., Penetrating Wagner's Ring: An Anthology (New York: DaCapo, 1978) 148-49.

¹² Franz-Peter Opelt, Richard Wagner—Revolutionär oder Staatsmusikant? (Frankfurt: Peter Lang 1987) 221. "Es ginge zu weit, den späten Wagner bezüglich seines Begriffes von Sozialismus und Anarchie in die Richtung eines [Johann] Most oder Hasselman einordnen zu wollen, doch gewisse anarchistische Züge waren unverkennbar erhalten geblieben." Most and Hasselman were famous German-born anarchists.

¹³ André Reszler, 'L'Esthétique de L'Anarchisme,' Revue d'esthétique 24, number 2, 1971, p. 179. 'Si les idées politiques du jeune Wagner sont quelque peu anecdotiques, ses idées esthétiques sont indiscutablement anarchistes.' In a critique of Reszler, Hubert van den Berg writes that Bakunin was not yet strictly speaking an 'anarchist' when he knew Wagner and that Wagner supported constitutional monarchy. 'Anarchismus für oder gegen Moderne und

Avantgarde? : Zur "anarchistischen Ästhetik" von André Reszler,' Avant Garde 3, 88. But Albert Camus in The Rebel says that Bakunin was influenced by Proudhon as early as the 1840s.

¹⁴ Josef Chytry, The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1989) 282-86.

¹⁵ Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973) 405.

¹⁶ Nordau, 171.

¹⁷ Nordau, 179-80.

¹⁸ Benjamin Tucker, Liberty, June 15 1895, # 315, 1.

¹⁹ Tucker, Liberty, June 15, 1895, #315, 1.

²⁰Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Richard Wagner, (München : Verlagsanstalt F. Bruckmann, 1904) 175. My translation.

²¹ Chamberlain, p. 177. My translation.

²²Hans Mayer, Wagner (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1990) 43. "Verzückung und Haß treffen hier so hart aufeinander wie selten sonst vor Werken der Kunst, selbst der Kunst Richard Wagners."

²³ Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics, edited by David C. Large and William Weber, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1984) 286.

²⁴Gregori Chulkov, On Mystical Anarchism, (Letchworth, England: Prideaux Press, 1971), 3-4. My translation.

²⁵Chulkov,4.

²⁶ Bernard Shaw, "The Perfect Wagnerite" in Major Critical Essays (New York : Penguin, 1986) 227.

²⁷ Shaw, 232.

²⁸quoted in L.J. Rather, Reading Wagner (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1990) 249. The translation of Proudhon is by the American anarchist Benjamin Tucker.

²⁹ Proudhon distinguished between property and possession. Paul Thomas explains this as follows: "Property to be legitimate should be an extension of the self of the owner" rather than "an index and manifestation of inequality and exploitation." Paul Thomas, Karl Marx and the Anarchists (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London 1985), 188.

³⁰Shaw, 213.

³¹ Tom Bottomore, ed. A Dictionary of Marxist Thought, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1983) 274.

³²Alan Ritter, Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983) 31-35.

³³Bottomore, 275.

³⁴Thomas, 191.

³⁵Sam Dolgoff, ed., Bakunin on Anarchism (Black Rose Press: Montreal 1972) 261.

³⁶Emile Capouya and Keitha Tompkins, ed., The Essential Kropotkin, 31.

³⁷Capouya and Tompkins, 15.

³⁸Richard Wagner, Mein Denken: Eine Auswahl der Schriften, hrsg. Martin Gregor-Dellin, München 1982, Piper edition, p. 126. My translation.

³⁹The first and last stanzas—clearly anti-statist and anti-capitalist—of 'Die Noth' read as follows:

'Sie haben Kapital und Renten
und lieben sehr den Staat,
darin sie leben von Prozenten
und ärnten ohne Saat;
sie treiben Künst' und Wissenschaften,
vergnügen sich am Tugendhaften,
und leben bis zum Tod—
ohn' Dich zu kennen, Noth!

Denn über allen Trümmerstätten
blüht auf des Leben's Glück:
es blieb die Menschheit frei von Ketten,
und die Natur zurück.
Natur und Mensch—Ein Element!
vernichtet ist, was je sie trennt!
Die Freiheit Morgenroth —
entzündet hat's — DIE NOTH!

The references to freedom, ruins, and fire are akin to the
Ring; the political message is that poverty will fuel a
revolutionary cataclysm. Gedichte von Richard Wagner,
Berlin 1905, 16-22.

⁴⁰Adams, The Education, 269, 286.

⁴¹Adams, 335.

⁴²quoted in Newman, "The Ring, " 161. "Unser Gott aber ist
das Geld, unsere Religion der Gelderwerb" in Die Kunst
und Die Revolution.

⁴³quoted in E.P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to
Revolutionary (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1976)
98.

⁴⁴William Dean Howells, A Hazard of New Fortunes (New York : Penguin , 1983) 151.

⁴⁵Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn, ed.,Wagner On Music and Drama, translated by H. Ashton Ellis (New York: Da Capo, 1964) 37.

⁴⁶Theodor Adorno, In Search of Wagner (London: New Left Books, 1981) 119.

⁴⁷Adorno, 117.

⁴⁸Adorno, 132.

⁴⁹Adorno, 138.

⁵⁰Adorno, 34 and 54.

⁵¹In explaining the archaisms of the Ring as Wagner's inability to represent contemporary social forces, Adorno may have been thinking of Marx's opening remarks in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.

⁵²Chytry, The Aesthetic State, 284.

⁵³Oswald Spengler, Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte, Band 1, München 1923, p. 47. My translation.

⁵⁴Adorno, Versuch, 152.

⁵⁵Carl E. Schorske, Fin-de-Siècle Vienna, 346.

⁵⁶Chytry, 285.

⁵⁷In "Socialism and Utopia," Adam Ulam points out the common traits of socialism and conservatism: opposition to business and industrialism, solicitude for the common man, a tendency to blame Jews for capitalism. Utopias and Utopian Thought, edited by Frank E. Manuel (Beacon Press: Boston 1967) 119.

⁵⁸On this subject Carl Dahlhaus writes: "And even today, a hundred years after the founding of Bayreuth, people who write about Wagner veer to one pole or the other: to polemics or apologetics. (The writings of T.W. Adorno in one corner and Curt von Westernhagen in the other are sufficient illustration.)" Richard Wagner's Music Dramas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976) p. 1.