

Wagner as Anarchist, Anarchists as Wagnerians

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Wagner was a declared anarchist. Max Nordau, 1892

None of the newspapers, in their obituaries of Richard Wagner ... mention the fact that he was an Anarchist.

Benjamin Tucker, 1883

I

IN ENGLISH and American literature, the right-wing politics of canonical modernist poets have been the subject of much controversy. While no one disputes that Yeats supported the Blue Shirts, an Irish version of Mussolini's supporters, or that Pound made radio broadcasts in support of Italian fascism, or that Eliot was anti-Semitic, many literary critics have taken the New Critical line that the biography of an artist is irrelevant to the work; that art transcends the political and therefore an attention to the politics of artworks only diminishes or trivializes those works. Richard Wagner's career prefigures some of these debates, because his political involvements and overt anti-Semitism were well-known in his own lifetime and because his posthumous adoption by the Third Reich has posed problems for his admirers. Like New Criticism, Anglo-American musicology has tended to privilege the formal analysis of canonical texts, with attention to influence and intertextuality and with a concomitant lack of emphasis on cultural politics.¹ Much of

¹ Along these lines Edward Said writes: 'I am struck by how much does not receive their [musicologists'] critical attention, and by how little is actually done by fine scholars who, for example, in studying a composer's notebooks or the structure of classical form, fail to connect those things to ideology, or social space, or power,

Wagner criticism, including the article in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980), the standard international reference work in the field, denies the importance of Wagner's politics to his art and life. Not only does the *Grove* virtually ignore Wagner's political writings,² but it also understates, more so than Wagner himself, his participation in the Dresden revolt of 1849: 'political convictions meant nothing to Wagner except in relation to the idea of musical drama.'³ Astonishingly, it even denies his anti-Semitism, referring to it in quotation marks ('his controversial "anti-Semitism"'), and writing of *Judaism in Music*: 'Though otherwise not hostile to Jews - indeed, he painted an affectionate picture of Samuel Lehrs, his philologist friend, in the story *Ein Ende in Paris* - he allowed himself to be seduced by the expression "Hebrew flavour" ... into identifying its composer's [Meyerbeer's] artistic problems with his personal origin ... In broadening his argument to include compositions by Jewish composers in general Wagner was merely being polemical'. The same *Grove* article, however, dismisses Theodor Adorno's interpretations in his book *Versuch über Wagner* as overly political: 'T.W. Adorno affected to hear in Wagner's rhythms the dictatorial gestures of the Kapellmeister' and 'the inflexibility of beat (which Adorno's ideological purpose led him to exaggerate)' [italics added]. Similarly, in the recent *Reading Wagner* L.J. Rather also attempts to exculpate Wagner from the charges of misogyny and anti-Semitism, partly by arguing that some of Wagner's best friends were Jewish and that women liked him, and also by drawing parallels to anti-Semitic or racist stereotypes in Marx ('On the Jewish Question'), Disraeli, and Moses Hess, as if the existence of such views explained or excused Wagner's.

While Wagner's anti-Semitism and his reception by the Nazis are common knowledge, another aspect of his politics has received less attention, and that is his relationship to anarchism. In this article I will explore the connections, real and alleged, between Wagner and

Elaborations, Columbia U.P. 1991, p.xvii.

² The only reference to them is this: 'He turned to writing essays on the theory of art (*Die Kunst und die Revolution*; *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*) and sketched, on Minna's and Liszt's persuasion, an opera scenario for Paris'.

³ Unsigned article, 'Richard Wagner', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 20, edited by Stanley Sadie, London 1980.

anarchism, connections explicitly made by Adorno, Bernard Shaw, Ford Madox Ford, 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 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 wrote that the *Ring* expressed 'a savage gospel of anarchy.'⁴ And in his 1911 memoirs, the English novelist Ford Madox Ford, whose father was a prominent music critic and Wagnerite, wrote that in the 1870s and 1880s Wagner's works were considered as 'tending to further socialism and the throwing of bombs.'⁵ Yet even those books on anarchism which concern themselves specifically with cultural politics do not devote much attention to the anarchist reception of Wagner.⁶ Because the charge of

⁴ Quoted in Andrew R. Carlson, *Anarchism in Germany: The Early Movement*, Metuchen, N.J. 1972, p.19.

⁵ Ford Madox Ford, *Memories and Impressions*, New York 1985, p.92. Anarchism and bombs were closely associated in the discourse of the times.

⁶ In *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France*, U. of Nebraska P. 1989, 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]". Wagner's *Art and Revolution* [*Die Kunst und die Revolution*] was first

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.⁷ 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 proto-fascist, virtually destined for admiration by the Nazis.⁸

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 co-operatively in the anonymous manner of medieval art' (p.217).

⁷ Hans Mayer writes: 'Für die beiden Künstler mit ähnlicher Thematik, Gustave Flaubert und Richard Wagner, bedeutete die europäische Revolution von 1848/49 einen Wendepunkt. Hier, bei Wagner, die Hinwendung zu den Erziehungslehren Arthur Schopenhauers; dort, bei Flaubert, die Geschichte des passiven Helden Frédéric Moreau'. *Wagner*, Hamburg 1959, p.54.

⁸ In *Musical Elaborations*, Edward Said argues that this admiration was not the result of a misreading: '[Wagner] was an openly proclaimed anti-Semite and ... both his ideological and aesthetic accounts of his own music as an emanation from German and Western European art depend to an appreciable degree upon his attempts to exclude, to excoriate, and, it is suggested, to exterminate what he calls the Jewish character. These repulsive ideas of his are so well known as to constitute today, almost 150 years after the fact, an *idée reçue*. Yet because Bayreuth and members of the Wagner family (especially Winifred) were especially close to Hitler, and Hitler's thought, there remains an unarguably close association in many minds between Wagner's music-dramas and the whole ghastly history of the Nazi onslaught upon humanity generally, the Jews in particular. The contamination is so great that any attempt to excuse Wagner for the fact that he died well before Hitler's ascendancy appears ridiculously, not to say, mendaciously, ineffective' (pp.40-41).

II: Wagner as Anarchist

Die Entarteten sind nicht immer Verbrecher, Prostituierte, Anarchisten und erklärte Wahnsinnige. Sie sind manchmal Schriftsteller und Künstler.
Max Nordau⁹

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.¹⁰ Wagner devotes several pages in his autobiography, *Mein Leben*, 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'.¹¹ 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'.¹² 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?'¹³ and the work of Feuerbach, whom Wagner describes as if

⁹ Max Nordau, *Entartung*, Berlin 1893, p.i.

¹⁰ Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, vol.2, New York 1937, p.45.

¹¹ Richard Wagner, *Mein Leben*, München 1983, Piper edition, p.398.

¹² Ivan Turgenev, *Rudin*, Baltimore, Md. 1973, p.63.

¹³ Wagner, *Mein Leben*, p.433.

he were an individualist anarchist: 'Repräsentant der rücksichtslos radikalen Befreiung des Individuums vom Drucke hemmender, dem Autoritätsglauben angehörender Vorstellungen'.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ The Kapellmeister posted signs - 'Seid ihr mit uns gegen fremde Truppen?' - on the barricades.¹⁶ 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'.¹⁷

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. It is, Curt von Westernhagen writes, 'lächerlich, Wagner einen Bakuninisten zu nennen und, wie Bernard Shaw es getan hat, in seinem Siegfried ein Ebenbild Bakunins zu erblicken'.¹⁸ But Ernest Newman notes that 'Bakunin seems to have exercised an uncanny fascination over him [Wagner]' and that 'although Wagner and his Wahnfried biographers downplayed his involvement, the composer was not a curious spectator but an active participant in

¹⁴ Wagner, *Mein Leben*, p.443.

¹⁵ Newman, *Wagner*, p.47.

¹⁶ Curt von Westernhagen, *Wagner*, Zürich 1968, p.134.

¹⁷ *The Letters of Richard Wagner: The Burrell Collection*, edited by John N. Burk, New York 1950, p.29.

¹⁸ Westernhagen, p.134. He also uses Bakunin's one recorded dismissive remark about Wagner as evidence that the regard was not mutual ('Wagner habe ich sofort als Phantasten erkannt und, obwohl mit demselben auch über Politik gesprochen, doch mich nie mit demselben zu einem gemeinsamen Handeln verbunden'). Bakunin, however, was presumably in custody at the time since this was 'nach den Prozeßakten' and he could have been protecting Wagner. Westernhagen claims that Wagner owned no political books while at Dresden and that politics barely touched 'sein inneres Geistesleben'. See L.J. Rather, *Reading Wagner*, on Wagner's books.

events.¹⁹ Another Wagner biographer, Hans Mayer, agrees with Newman, against Westernhagen and *Mein Leben*, that Wagner was genuinely involved in revolutionary politics.²⁰ 'Richard Wagner,' he writes, 'durchlebt diese revolutionäre deutsche Auseinandersetzung als ein Künstler und Politiker, der versuchen muß, seine philosophischen und literarischen Reminiszenzen aus Jungem Deutschland und Feuerbach, Proudhon und Stirner [two anarchist theoreticians] mit seinen eigenen besonderen künstlerischen Aspirationen in Verbindung zu bringen'.²¹ Mayer also recognizes the anarchist character of Siegfried and of Wagner's discussion of Antigone's relationship to the state in *Oper und Drama*.²² A more recent Wagner critic, Franz-Peter Opelt, finds anarchist and socialist ideas in Wagner's 1849 'Die Revolution' and suggests that the older Wagner did not entirely abandon these ideas: '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'.²³ André Reszler, in a 1971 article entitled, 'l'Esthétique de l'Anarchisme,' devotes a couple of pages to Wagner, whose aesthetic ideas, Reszler says, are indisputably anarchist.²⁴ In *The Aesthetic State* Josef Chytrý alludes to some of Wagner's anarchist influences, notably that of Proudhon, who, according to Chytrý, 'gave Wagner a lasting socioeconomic model of the ideal community' and whose distinction between property and possession

¹⁹ Ernest Newman, *Wagner*, pp.49-103.

²⁰ Mayer, *Wagner*, p.57. See note 7.

²¹ Mayer, *Wagner*, p.55.

²² Hans Mayer, 'The Ring of the Niebelung' in John L. Di Gaetani (ed), *Penetrating Wagner's Ring: An Anthology*, New York 1978, pp.148-149.

²³ Franz-Peter Opelt, *Richard Wagner - Revolutionär oder Staatsmusiker?*, Frankfurt 1987, p.221. Most and Hasselman were famous German-born anarchists.

²⁴ 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 correctly points out 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, p.88.

Wagner 'wholeheartedly accepted ... throughout his life'.²⁵ In her book on Picasso, Patricia Leighton observes that 'Courbet, Wagner, Mallarmé, Pissarro, Signac, Jarry and Apollinaire ... numbered themselves among those who - usually romantically - equated artistic with political liberation in anarchist terms'.²⁶

Wagner's contemporaries were more aware than we are of his reputation as a revolutionary. In *Memories and Impressions*, Ford Madox Ford, whose father, Francis Hueffer, was a prominent music critic, describes Wagner's English reception as follows:

In the seventies and eighties there were cries for the imprisonment alike of the critics who upheld and the artistes who performed the Music of the Future. The compositions of Wagner were denounced as being atheistic, sexually immoral, and tending to further socialism and the throwing of bombs. Wagnerites were threatened with assassination, and assaults between critics of the rival schools were things not unknown in the foyer of the opera. I really believe that my father, as the chief exponent of Wagner in these islands, did go in some personal danger.²⁷

Even more explicitly than Ford, the American historian Henry Adams (1838-1918), grandson and great-grandson of American presidents, associated Wagner with anarchy. In his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, he identifies himself as a 'conservative Christian anarchist', and in his letters too he frequently refers to himself thus, as in one instance in which he writes: 'As long as wheat sells at two shillings and cotton at 2½ pence, and our other staples in like style,

²⁵ Josef Chytrý, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought*, U. of California P. 1988, pp.282-286.

²⁶ Patricia Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914*, Princeton U.P. 1989, p.13.

²⁷ Eric Hobsbawm substantiates Ford's claim, writing 'the "music of the future" (*Zukunftsmusik*) of Wagner had a conscious socio-political dimension, in which even political revolutionaries of the left (Bernard Shaw; Victor Adler, the Austrian socialist leader; Plekhanov, the pioneer Russian Marxist) thought they discerned socialist elements which escape most of us today'. *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*, New York 1989, p.228.

I am an anarchist in politics and an impressionist in art as well as a symbolist in literature'. But it is in *The Education* that Adams gives his most complete account of his 'anarchism', and in the course of it he writes (in the third person, as throughout the text):

For thirty years or thereabouts, he had been repeating that he really must go to Baireuth. Suddenly Mrs. Lodge appeared on the horizon and bade him come ... Thirty years earlier, a Baireuth festival would have made an immense stride in his education, and the spirit of the master would have opened a vast new world. In 1901 the effect was altogether different from the spirit of the master ... 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 'Götterdämmerung'. Such a party saw no inspiration in Baireuth, where landscape, history, and audience were - relatively - stodgy, and where the only emotion was a musical dilettantism that the master had abhorred.

Yet Baireuth still amused even a conservative Christian anarchist who cared as little as 'Grane, mein Ross', whether the singers sang false, and who came only to learn what Wagner had supposed himself to mean. [Italics added]²⁸

Adams does not explain why 'Wagner was chiefly responsible for them [the anarchistic ferments] as artistic emotion', but presumably, as the remark in his letter suggests, he is referring to Wagner's influence on the French Symbolists, who were both Wagnerians and anarchist

²⁸ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Boston 1973, p.405.

sympathizers.²⁹ 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*. 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 also influenced Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Geniuses were also, according to Nordau, inclined to degeneracy. 'Er [Wagner] zeigt', Nordau writes, 'in seiner allgemeinen Geistesverfassung Verfolgungswahnsinn, Größenwahn und Mysticismus, in seinen Trieben verschwommene Menschenliebe, Anarchismus, Auflehnungs- und Widerspruchsucht'.³⁰ He presses the charge of anarchism as follows:

Wagner ist erklärter Anarchist. Er entwickelt die Lehre dieser Sekte im 'Kunstwerk der Zukunft': 'Alle Menschen haben nur ein gemeinschaftliches Bedürfnis ... das ist das Bedürfnis zu leben und glücklich zu sein. Hierin liegt das natürliche Band aller Menschen... Die besonderen Bedürfnisse, wie sie nach Zeit, Ort und Individualität sich kundgeben und steigern, können in dem vernünftigen Zustande der zukünftigen Menschheit allein die Grundlage der besonderen Vereinigungen abgeben ... Diese Vereinigungen werden gerade so wechseln, neu sich gestalten, sich lösen und wiederum knüpfen, als die Bedürfnisse wechseln und wiederkehren.' Er verhehlt nicht, daß dieser 'vernünftige Zustand der zukünftigen Menschheit' nur mit Gewalt herbeigeführt werden könne.³¹

Benjamin Tucker, a prominent American anarchist, publisher of

²⁹ Joan Halperin explains: 'Never before, not even in the era of romanticism, had society so ostracized the artist. Political corruption and social injustices contributed further to the alienation of young writers and painters, and they frequently came to associate their lot with that of the workers, under the ideologies of anarchism and socialism'. *Félix Fénélon: Anarchist and Aesthete in Fin-de-Siècle France*, Yale U.P. 1988, p.33.

³⁰ Nordau, *Entartung*, p.305.

³¹ Nordau, p.319.

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 labourer 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 good 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.³²

It was not unusual for Wagner's name to appear in Tucker's *Liberty*. One issue printed in full a translation of a letter from Wagner to Liszt. Another published a piece about *Parsifal* by Maurice Barrès, author of *L'ennemi des lois*, whose conversion to Wagnerism occurred simultaneously with his conversion to anarchism, concluded: 'Let us go to Wahnfried to honor, over Wagner's grave, the presentiments of a new ethic'. (Since Barrès later became a fully-fledged reactionary, he links the anarchist reception of Wagner with the fascist.) Shaw's response to Nordau took up almost an entire issue, and V. Yarres wrote an anarchist

³² Benjamin Tucker, *Liberty*, June 15, 1895, issue 315, p.1.

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.³³

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. Regarding Wagner's anarchist sympathies, Chamberlain writes:

Heute wagt man es kaum, das Wort Anarchist auszusprechen; für uns ist es so ziemlich gleichlautend mit Bombenleger, Brandstifter und Mörder. Nehme ich aber das Wort in dem paradoxen Sinne, den man ihm vor fünfzig Jahren beilegte, so finde ich mehrere Berührungspunkte zwischen der Wagner-Schiller'schen Denkart und dem Anarchismus Proudhon's. Wagner gebrauchte nicht ungern das Wort 'Anarchie'. So sagt er z. B. 1852: 'Wie soll ein Mensch, der durch und durch Methode ist, meine natürliche

³³ Tucker, *Liberty*, June 15, 1895, issue 315, p.1.

Anarchie begreifen können?' (U. 188); an anderem Orte heisst es: 'ich glaube mich lieber an das Chaos halten zu müssen als an das Bestehende' (II, 311); und in seiner Schrift vom November 1882, über die Aufführung des Parsifal, erklärt er die Vorzüglichkeit der Aufführung für eine Folge der 'Anarchie, indem ein Jeder thäte, was er wolle, nämlich das Richtige'.³⁴

But Chamberlain denies that Wagner was a 'political anarchist':

Welche Bedeutung dieser Berührung mit dem Anarchismus zukommt, dürfte von selbst erhellen. Sie findet nur bei dem negativen Werke statt. Die jetzige Welt wird als schlecht erkannt. Eine weitere Verwandtschaft zwischen Wagner und dem Anarchismus giebt es nicht, hat es nie gegeben und konnte es nie geben. Der politische Anarchist baut nicht auf Gott, er beruft sich nicht auf die 'Erfüllung der reinen Christuslehre', er betrachtet nicht das Königtum als 'den heiligen Mittelpunkt' des Staates, er lehrt nicht 'Regeneration' als Vorbedingung einer glücklichen Zukunft vor allem: der Anarchist zerreißt den Faden der Geschichte und versündigt sich durch diese freche That an der ganzen Natur.³⁵

The Wagner-anarchism connection persists 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, described in Richard Sonn's *Anarchism and Cultural Politics* and Joan Halperin's *Félix Fénéon*. 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'.³⁶ 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

³⁴ Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Richard Wagner*, München 1904, p.175.

³⁵ Chamberlain, p.177.

³⁶ *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics*, edited by David C. Large and William Weber, Cornell U.P. 1984, p.286.

'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'.³⁷ Chulkov particularly stresses the importance of music, which he says 'spontaneously represents the thing itself by itself'; similarly, political anarchists opposed representative government.³⁸

Why, other than the brief friendship with Bakunin, did such diverse thinkers as Tucker, Nordau, Ford, Chamberlain, and Adams associate 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. He circulated a petition for the release of the American anarchists in the Haymarket trial; Oscar Wilde was one of the signatories. 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 recognized in the *Ring*, the favorite anarchist buzzwords: freedom, liberty, individualism, community, revolution, destruction.

III: Property, Law, and *The Ring of the Niebelung*

La propriété, c'est le vol. Proudhon

Bernard Shaw 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 Bakoonin, an anticipation of the "overman" of Nietzsche'.³⁹ Siegfried

³⁷ Georgi Chulkov, *On Mystical Anarchism*, Letchworth 1971, pp.3-4 [my translation].

³⁸ Chulkov, p.4.

³⁹ Bernard Shaw, 'Siegfried', *Major Critical Essays*, New York 1986, Penguin edition, p.227.

is like Bakunin in his violent exuberance, as when, according to Shaw, he forges Nothung 'with the shouting exultation of the anarchist who destroys only to clear the ground for creation'⁴⁰ - an allusion to Bakunin's aphorism, 'die Lust der Zerstörung ist zugleich eine schaffende Lust'.

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.⁴¹

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 propose, Wagner's representation of Proudhon's famous dictum, 'property is theft'.⁴² Before Alberich steals the gold, it is not private property but part of the natural world. If Proudhon's influence on

⁴⁰ Shaw, 'Siegfried', p.232.

⁴¹ Quoted in L.J. Rather, *Reading Wagner*, Louisiana State U.P. 1990, p.249. The translation of Proudhon is by the American anarchist Benjamin Tucker.

⁴² 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 what it is, 'an index and manifestation of inequality and exploitation'. Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists*, London 1985, p.188.

Wagner is ignored, this may not be clear; in a rather silly essay that asks 'whose gold? whose ring?' Charles Fletcher-Cooke concludes that Alberich does not steal the gold because it didn't belong to anybody. Such a reading makes nonsense of the *Götterdämmerung* that follows.⁴³ 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.

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-blonds clad in armour and bearskins, singing tediously in mock-archaic German. An exception to this kind of production 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 Alberich, represented, as Adorno had suspected, as a Jew. Siegfried is the revolutionary who goes down to defeat, Brünnhilde, 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 encroachment upon the freedom of the individual.⁴⁴ Some anarchists, like William Godwin, believed that in an

⁴³ Charles Fletcher-Cooke, 'Whose Gold? Whose Ring?', in *Penetrating Wagner's Ring* (see note 22).

⁴⁴ Tom Bottomore, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, Harvard U.P. 1983, p.274.

anarchist society, censure would replace law;⁴⁵ Engels expected law, like the state, to 'wither away' under communism.⁴⁶ Proudhon thought that contractual relations could only flourish in the absence of the state.⁴⁷ Siegfried is *ein Freier* 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].⁴⁸

Like Bakunin, Kropotkin inveighed 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. In *Mutual Aid* Kropotkin also appealed to nature, arguing that 'primitive' peoples and social animals live cooperatively together without written laws. Thus, Kropotkin exhorts his readers: 'Instead of inanely repeating the old formula, "Respect the law", we say, "Despise law and all its attributes!" In place of the cowardly phrase, "Obey the law", our cry is "Revolt against all laws!"'.⁴⁹ In another essay, Kropotkin explains that law is always on the side of property:

If you analyze the law and strip off those cloudy fictions with which it has been draped in order to conceal its real origin, which is the right of the stronger, and its substance, which has ever been the consecration of all the tyrannies handed down to mankind through its long and bloody history; when you have comprehended

⁴⁵ Alan Ritter, *Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis*, Cambridge U.P. 1983, pp.31-35.

⁴⁶ Bottomore, p.275.

⁴⁷ Thomas, p.191. (See note 42).

⁴⁸ Sam Dolgoff, ed., *Bakunin on Anarchism*, Montreal 1972, p.261.

⁴⁹ Emile Capouya and Keitha Tompkins, eds., *The Essential Kropotkin*, New York 1975, p.31.

this, your contempt for the law will be profound indeed.⁵⁰

Wagner, whose 1848-49 prose is full of anarchist rhetoric, sounds much like both Bakunin and Kropotkin when he writes in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1849) that 'der wirkliche Mensch wird daher nicht eher vorhanden sein, als bis die wahre menschliche Natur, nicht willkürliche Staatsgesetzte, sein Leben gestalten und ordnen'.⁵¹ In the early poem 'Die Noth', which decries poverty and predicts revolution, Wagner drew on Bakunin's ideas.⁵² 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

⁵⁰ Capouya and Tompkins, p.16.

⁵¹ Richard Wagner, *Mein Denken: Eine Auswahl der Schriften*, edited by Martin Gregor-Dellin, München 1982, Piper edition, p.126.

⁵² The 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, pp.16-22.

capitalist Jay Gould is to Henry Adams what Alberich 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 unpublished article called 'The Gold Conspiracy'.⁵³ 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], it is clear that he is referring to his own anti-Semitic feelings.⁵⁴ Ezra Pound, as notorious an anti-Semite as Wagner, railed against 'usury' and the fetishization of gold; as David Kadlec points out, 'fascism and institutionalized anti-Semitism can emerge from an economic approach with anarchist roots'.⁵⁵

Wagner's biographer Ernest Newman recognizes elements of Proudhon's economics in Wagner, but scoffs at the composer's politics, writing: 'With the best will in the world, indeed, and with all one's admiration for Wagner's stupendous musical genius, it is sometimes hard to feel well-disposed towards him when reading his prose works. To say that the root of all our social misery is money, and that in 'property' originate 'all the crimes in myth and in history' - to carry on a brazen trade in facile half-truths of this kind, is to place oneself almost outside the pale of serious discussion'.⁵⁶ Newman dismisses such Wagnerian statements as 'our god is gold, our religion the pursuit of wealth',⁵⁷ yet other prominent nineteenth-century figures expressed similar attitudes. Raymond Williams observes that Romantics like Wordsworth and Shelley, protesting against their subjection to the market, 'defined, emphatically, their high calling, but they came to define and to

⁵³ Adams, *The Education*, pp. 269 & 286.

⁵⁴ Adams, p.335.

⁵⁵ David Kadlec, 'Imagism, Anarchism, and the Gold Standard', paper to the Modern Language Association, December 1991.

⁵⁶ Newman, 'The Ring of the Niebelung', *Penetrating Wagner's Ring*, pp.163-164. (See note 22).

⁵⁷ Quoted in Newman, 'The Ring', p.161. 'Unser Gott ist das Geld, unsere Religion der Gelderwerb' in *Die Kunst und Die Revolution*.

emphasize because they were convinced that the principles on which the new society was being organized were actively hostile to the necessary principles of art'.⁵⁸ William Morris wrote to a friend in 1883, 'Both my historical studies and my practical conflict with the philistinism of modern society have forced on me the conviction that art cannot have a real life and growth under the system of commercialism and profit-mongering' [italics original].⁵⁹ In William Dean Howells'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'.⁶⁰ Wagner also hated the subjection of art to the market, complaining in *Die Kunst und die Revolution* that contemporary art's 'wirkliches Wesen ist die Industrie, ihr moralischer Zweck der Gelderwerb, ihr ästhetisches Vorgeben die Unterhaltung der Gelangweilten'.⁶¹ 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.

T.W. Adorno's *Versuch über 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: 'Das erwachende Bewußtsein von den anarchischen Zügen der späten bürgerlichen Gesellschaft dechiffriert die Totalität als vorweltliche Anarchie. Sie wird vom Bürger Wagner noch verdammt, vom Musiker

⁵⁸ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, Columbia U.P. 1983, p.40.

⁵⁹ Quoted in E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic and Revolutionary*, Stanford U.P. 1976, p.98.

⁶⁰ William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, New York 1983, Penguin edition, p.151.

⁶¹ Wagner, *Mein Denken*, p.104.

schon gewünscht. Wenn im Ring mythische Gewalt und Vertrag sich verwirren, so setzt nicht bloß die Intuition von der Herkunft des Rechts sich durch, sondern auch die Erfahrung vom Unrecht einer Gesellschaft, die im Namen des Rechts beherrscht wird von Vertrag und Eigentum'.⁶² A number of different issues are raised here. Adorno seems to confirm the anarchist cast of Wagner's understanding of law and implies a correlation between his musical aesthetics and 'anarchy', understanding Wagner as a split subject: bourgeois/musician. Law and anarchy are interdependent in bourgeois society, as Adorno explains:

Die 'Verträge', denen der Ring, in Reminiszenz an Schopenhauer, so viel Gewicht zuteilt, setzen die Anarchie voraus. Notdürftig nur wird der Kampf aller gegen alle durch die aus ihm resultierende Rechtsordnungen geschichtet. Er bricht überall dort von neuem aus, wo keine ausdrückliche Vertragsordnung es verhindert. Wotan ist zu jeder Gewalttat bereit, sobald ihn nicht kodifizierte Verträge binden. Darüber hinaus erweisen sich gerade die Verträge Wotans, die den finsternen Naturzustand einschränken, zugleich als Fesseln, die ihm die Freiheit der ausweichenden Bewegung rauben und damit das Chaos wieder herstellen helfen. Bei Wagner enthüllt sich das Recht als Äquivalenzform des Unrechts.⁶³

Here Adorno defines 'anarchy' according to Hobbes, not according to anarchist theory. In Adorno's terms, Wagner is an anarchist in that he articulates bourgeois ideology. Shaw's claim that Siegfried is Bakunin is not persuasive to Adorno: 'zwischen dem Vatergott Wotan und Siegfried, seinem rettenden Widersacher und tödlichen Retter, ist in Wahrheit keine Grenze, und in ihrer Vereinigung zelebriert der Ring die Preisgabe der Revolution, die keine war'.⁶⁴ It is therefore Adorno who makes the strongest case for Wagner as reactionary, both in his operas and his life. Adorno's version of the Dresden affair is the following:

Der Verrat wohnt der Revolution selber inne. Es bedurfte nicht erst einer konformistischen Umwendung des späten Wagner gegenüber dem Gehalt seines Aufrührertums: dem Glauben an

⁶² Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, Frankfurt 1952, Suhrkamp edition, p.152.

⁶³ Adorno, pp.149-150.

⁶⁴ Adorno, p.169.

den Bauern und dem ans Nichts. Man braucht sich nur die Wirkung Bakunins auf ihn zu vergegenwärtigen. Wagner charakterisiert jenen, Newman zufolge: 'He cited the delight, at once childlike and demoniac, of the Russian people in fire, on which Rostopchin had reckoned in his strategic burning of Moscow', und Wagner legt den Anarchismus dahin aus, daß nichts notwendig sei als 'to set in motion a world-wide movement to convince the Russian peasant - in whom the natural goodness of oppressed human nature had maintained itself in the most childlike form - that the burning of their lords' castles, with everything that was in and about them, was completely right in itself and pleasing in the sight of God; from this there must result the destruction of everything which, rightly considered, must appear even to the most philosophical thinkers of civilised Europe, the real source of all the misery of the modern world'. Feuerzauber und Bodenständigkeit finden sich dergestalt noch am vorgeschobensten Punkt der Karriere des Politikers Wagner.⁶⁵

The problem with the above analysis is that it 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, another 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.⁶⁶ Wagner's turn to myth is, according to Adorno, revelatory of his reactionary nature; the composer is incapable of calling 'die übergreifende Totalität beim Namen'.⁶⁷ As a result, 'die Undurchsichtigkeit und Allmacht des sozialen Prozesses wird vom Individuum, das sie erfährt und das doch eben mit den herrschenden Mächten jenes Prozesses sich gleichsetzt, als metaphysisches Geheimnis verherrlicht'.⁶⁸ Adorno's remarks are

⁶⁵ Adorno, pp.175-176. The apocalyptic scenario he describes was part of much nineteenth-century revolutionary thought.

⁶⁶ Adorno, pp.34 & 54.

⁶⁷ Adorno, p.152.

⁶⁸ Adorno, p.152.

particularly persuasive when one considers the prominence of myth in modernist texts and the supposed modernist flight from history.⁶⁹ On the other hand, Adorno's generally negative account converts any critical stance into acquiescence or opportunism, thus ultimately confirming the account given by Wagner's conservative defenders.

IV: Coda

If Adorno's primary political referent for the cultural productions of his day was fascism, anarchism was a common political referent in the cultural discourse of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Among conservatives 'anarchy' was a pejorative that explicitly condemned an apparent artistic formlessness and implicitly attacked a suspected political radicalism. Nordau's 1892 *Entartung*, in which 'anarchy' is a frequent term of abuse, was written shortly after the high point of anarchist bombings in Paris. As anarchist assaults continued - President McKinley, for example, was assassinated by a self-proclaimed anarchist in 1900 - so did condemnation of 'anarchy' in the cultural sphere. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* was compared by critics to an anarchist bomb, and Cubism 'was immediately equated with anarchism'.⁷⁰

Charges that Wagner was an anarchist may have been a response to the sensuality of his orchestration and the 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

⁶⁹ In explaining the archaisms of the *Ring* as Wagner's inability to represent contemporary social forces, Adorno may be thinking of Marx's opening remarks in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in which Marx writes: 'The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language'. Political theatre, theatrical politics.

⁷⁰ Leighton, *Re-ordering the World*, pp.168 & 89.

domination'.⁷¹ '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 *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, Oswald Spengler mentions 'die impressionistischen Neigungen einer anarchischen Sinnlichkeit, das ganze Bündel moderner Sehnsüchte, Reize und Schmerzen, deren Ausdruck die Lyrik Baudelaire's und die Musik Wagners ist'.⁷² Nietzsche, in *Der Fall Wagner*, understands Brünnhilde'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.⁷³ 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'.⁷⁴ The word 'anarchy' appears in the critical discourse on later, high modernist works as a synonym for 'noise', unresolved dissonance, and disorder, for departures from the naturalized code of classical tonality which in turn suggest violations of the social and natural order. In forgetting the historical presence of political anarchists, we lose the force of these references to 'anarchy', which betray anxiety about politics as well as aesthetics and expose in the

⁷¹ Chytrý, *The Aesthetic State*, p.284.

⁷² Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, Band I, München 1923, p.47.

⁷³ Adorno, *Versuch*, p.152.

⁷⁴ Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, New York 1981, p.346.

aesthetic a displaced politics.⁷⁵

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 labour. 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 an instance of the affinity between artists and anarchists at the turn of the century. The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Richard Sonn points out, is akin to Kropotkin's idea of collective labour, and Josef Chytry writes of Wagner's 'faith in a modern *Kunstlerium*, a group of artists who are driven to create art in a collective work'.⁷⁶ The confusing overlap between reactionary and leftist positions and critiques in the fin-de-siècle is particularly apparent in anarchist politics.⁷⁷ It is this similarity that underlies and explains the contradictory political positions - anarchist, monarchist, nationalist, proto-fascist - Wagner took during his lifetime.

⁷⁵ The aesthetic as 'displaced politics' is an idea of Neil Larsen's in *Modernism and Hegemony*, Minnesota U.P. 1990. Walter Benjamin's often-cited essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', argues that the aestheticization of politics is specific to fascism. In an argument indebted to Benjamin's, Carl Dahlhaus describes the relationship between Wagner's aesthetics and politics as follows:

The worst damage that Wagnerism did to politics is to be found ... in a far-reaching aestheticization of the political conscious or subconscious ... Its fateful consequence was to glorify violence with a euphoria deriving from the spirit of music. Music could no more rise above politics than vice versa: politics cast its shadow on music, and was infected by music's emotionally charged irrationality in return. In the final analysis, then, it was the music and its elevation (as decreed by Schopenhauer and "enacted" by Wagner) to the realm of metaphysics which carried Wagnerianism into extra-musical precincts and turned it into a force in its own right. [Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, U. of California P. 1989, p.340]

⁷⁶ Chytry, p.285.

⁷⁷ In 'Socialism and Utopia' Adam Ulam points out the common traits of socialism and anarchism: 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, Boston 1967, p.119.

The critical disagreement about Wagner's politics is itself political. Shaw and Adorno are the two poles of Wagner interpretation - the *Ring* as anarcho-socialist, the *Ring* as fascist.⁷⁸ 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 the positive reception by Nazism. Polarized readings of Wagner's politics are exemplary of problems with interpretations of modernist politics, from the New Critical disavowal of the political to the current negative and monolithic view of many literary critics.

⁷⁸ On 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 U.P. 1976, p.1.

