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**THE CONSOLATIONS OF
HISTORY: THEMES OF
PROGRESS AND POTENTIAL
IN RICHARD WAGNER'S
*GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG***

Alexander H. Shapiro



The Consolations of History: Themes of Progress and Potential in Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*

In this book on Richard Wagner's compelling but enigmatic masterpiece *Götterdämmerung*, the final opera of his monumental *Ring* tetralogy, Alexander H. Shapiro advances an ambitious new interpretation which uncovers intriguing new facets to the work's profound insights into the human condition. By taking a fresh look at the philosophical and historical influences on Wagner, and critically reevaluating the composer's intellectual worldview as revealed in his own prose works, letters, and diary entries, the book challenges a number of conventional views that continue to impede a clear understanding of this work's meaning. The book argues that *Götterdämmerung*, and hence the *Ring* as a whole, achieves coherence when interpreted in terms of contemporary nineteenth-century theories of progress and, in particular, G.W.F. Hegel's philosophies of mind and history.

A central target of the book is the article of faith that has come to dominate Wagner scholarship over the years – that Wagner's encounter in 1854 with Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy conclusively altered the final message of the *Ring* from one of historical optimism to existential pessimism. The author contends that Schopenhauer's uncompromising denigration of the will and denial of the possibility for human progress find no place in the written text of the *Ring* or in a plausible reading of the final musical setting. In its place, the author discovers in the famous Immolation Scene a celebration of mankind's inexhaustible capacity for self-improvement and progress. The author makes the further compelling case that this message of progress is communicated not through Siegfried, the traditional male hero of the drama, but through Brünnhilde, the warrior goddess who becomes a mortal woman. In her role as a battle-tested world-historical prophet she is the true revolutionary change agent of Wagner's opera who has the strength and vision to comprehend and thereby shape human history.

This highly lucid and accessible study is aimed not only at scholars and researchers in the fields of opera studies, music and philosophy, and music history, but also Wagner enthusiasts, and readers and students interested in the history and philosophy of the nineteenth century.

Alexander H. Shapiro is a practicing lawyer and independent scholar based in New York, U.S. His published works include "McEwan and Forster: The Perfect Wagnerites" in *The Wagner Journal* (2011), and "'Drama of an Infinitely Superior Nature': Handel's Early English Oratorios and the Religious Sublime" in *Music & Letters* (1993).

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**For my wife Susanna and my daughters Sarah and Penelope –
the sweet lights of a new consolation**

“Nothing in the world wants to go backwards,” an old lizard said to me, “Everything strives forward, and, in the end, a great advancement of nature will occur. Stones will become plants, plants will become animals, animals will become people, and people will become Gods.”

“But,” I cried, “What will become of those good people, of the poor old Gods?”

“That will take care of itself, dear friend,” the lizard answered, “Probably they will abdicate, or be placed into retirement in some honorable way.”

I learned many other secrets from my hieroglyph-skinned *Naturphilosoph*; but I gave my word to reveal nothing. I now know more than Schelling and Hegel.

Heinrich Heine, “Lucca, the City” in
Travel Pictures, Part IV (1831)

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Preface

In late January 1854, Richard Wagner sent to August Röckel, his former colleague and co-revolutionary, a lengthy *apologia* for his dramatic poem *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, the ambitious and visionary text for the opera tetralogy which he had just begun to compose. Röckel was at the time serving out the fifth year of what would become a 13-year sentence at Waldheim prison in Saxony for his role in the Dresden uprising of May 1849. Wagner, himself implicated in the rebellion, was safe in exile in Switzerland. In the course of that letter, Wagner took time to refute Röckel's assessment of the French Republic's Reign of Terror of 1793–94: "I deny 'Robespierre' the tragic significance which he has hitherto had for you. . . . [H]e was not conscious of any higher purpose in the attainment of which he had recourse to unworthy means; no, it was in order to conceal his lack of any such purpose and his very real want of resource that he had recourse to the whole terrible machinery of the guillotine."¹ The purpose of this book is to demonstrate why it was no accident that the subject of the Reign of Terror and Maximilien Robespierre's role in history, tragic or otherwise, arose in the context of a discussion about the *Ring*.

The French Revolution had a scarring impact on the political, social, and psychological landscape of Europe, and during Wagner's formative years, politicians, philosophers, and historians were still trying to make sense of the cataclysm. As late as 1837, Thomas Carlyle, in his monumental account of the period, *The French Revolution*, would refer to the historic episode as "that world prodigy . . . whereat the world still gazes and shudders."² From Adolphe Thiers, Alphonse de Lamartine, and Francois Mignet in France to Archibald Alison and Thomas Carlyle in England, historians of the early decades of the nineteenth century wrote exhaustive narratives of the fall of the *ancien régime*, meticulously piecing together the myriad factual details in the hopes of better understanding the historical forces at work.³ The sheer scale and sweep of events from the storming of the Bastille to the glorious rise and ignominious fall of Napoleon seemed to reduce individuals to mere playthings of historical forces beyond any one person's control. And how to account for the sorrowful turn from inspiring Enlightenment ideals of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*, as eloquently articulated and logically derived from first principles by Voltaire, Rousseau, and other *philosophes*, to the brazen indifference to human life shown by Robespierre and his Committee on Public Safety?⁴ As Carlyle was forced to acknowledge in his book – hailed by John Stuart Mill in

the *London and Westminster Review* as “not so much a history, as an epic poem”⁵ – there was no precedent for that “new amazing Thing” called the Terror, and “History” would simply have to “admit, for once, that all the Names and Theorems yet known to her fall short.”⁶ A new vision of time and man was needed to comprehend and encompass the magnitude of these events, to place the political dislocations and anarchic violence into some form of intelligible framework.⁷

It fell to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, an unsalaried lecturer at the University of Jena, to articulate a philosophical answer to the historical challenge. The French Revolution was a major catalyst for Hegel’s intellectual development and had a critical impact on his philosophy.⁸ As he explored in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit*) of 1807, hastily completed as Napoleon’s troops were entering the city and the Revolution itself descended on Prussia, and would teach years later in his lectures at the University of Berlin, history marked a gradual but inevitable process of human spiritual enlightenment, ensuring an ever growing manifestation of freedom and reason in the world. From Hegel’s Olympian perspective on time and human affairs, the French Revolution was not an aberration, an ineradicable scar in the European psyche, but merely a stage in a grander program of human evolution. The great principles of the Enlightenment thinkers which had first inspired the Revolution would still prevail in the long term. In this way Hegel succeeded in “domesticating” the Terror, bringing this fatal moment into perspective, and discovering the enduring benefits to mankind of such a bloody struggle.⁹ Hegel’s impact on European thought cannot be overstated,¹⁰ and his groundbreaking historicist and historically confident mindset defined the thinking of the century from the Young Hegelian theories of Ludwig Feuerbach and David Friedrich Strauss to the historical and social commentary of Thomas Carlyle to the early socialism of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Karl Marx. As a result of Hegel’s influence, “confidence in the march of civilization reached an unprecedented peak” in the nineteenth century.¹¹

The poem of the *Ring* is singular for having been written in reverse order from 1848 to 1852 and then set to music in logical sequence over a period of over 20 years from 1853 to 1874. As a result, the last opera of the tetralogy, *Götterdämmerung*, curiously encapsulates both Wagner’s first germinal intentions for the work, as well as his last mature conclusions. In his compelling but famously tendentious guide to the *Ring*, *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898), George Bernard Shaw rejected *Götterdämmerung* as a mere operatic regression, unworthy of the completed music drama of the future and fully inconsistent with its philosophical aims. This jaundiced view of the work has continued to shape contemporary analysis. Wagner scholar Simon Williams, for one, has observed that “with *Götterdämmerung*, the *Ring*, it has sometimes been claimed, appears to lose coherence.”¹² This judgment, with varying degrees of fervor, is widely expressed among recent commentators.¹³ But this tendency to give *Götterdämmerung* the back of the hand is highly problematic; whatever structural failings the opera may have, it is the beginning and end of Wagner’s artistic vision for the *Ring* and therefore worthy of every consideration. The purpose of this book is to attempt to rehabilitate the fourth opera of the tetralogy by giving greater credence to its original dramatic

and philosophical aims, and thus rescue it from the critical disdain it has received over the years.

Commentators on the *Ring* over the last 100 years have almost uniformly identified love and compassion as the essential message of the work. But from the very start, Shaw rejected this view. Instead of love Shaw argued that the thesis of the *Ring* was a celebration of the life force of evolutionary growth: “The only faith which any reasonable disciple can gain from *The Ring* is *not in love, but in life* itself as a tireless power which is continuously driving onward and upward – not, please observe, being beckoned or drawn by *Das Ewige Weibliche* [sic] or any other external sentimentality, but growing from within, by its own inexplicable energy, into even higher and higher forms of organization.”¹⁴ My intention here is to salvage a version of this largely forgotten nineteenth-century interpretation and to show moreover – *pace* Shaw’s spirit – that it is *Götterdämmerung* which most forcefully makes this point. Although expressed with a late nineteenth-century Darwinian inflection, Shaw’s thesis statement is essentially an eighteenth-century postulate – originally articulated by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and then Immanuel Kant – of progress as immanent in nature. This theory of nature’s inevitable trajectory of self-improvement is augmented in Wagner’s case by a Hegelian faith in human agency to order the course of history. A number of scholars have already recognized Hegel’s impact on Wagner, but none has attempted to make sense of *Götterdämmerung*, and hence the *Ring* as a whole, in terms of Hegel’s philosophy of history.¹⁵ The thesis of this book is that *Götterdämmerung*, first conceived during the intellectual and political tumult of the revolutionary mid-century, is as much a story about the process and promise of history, and the consequent demands it makes on individuals caught up in its currents, as about the triumph of the human spirit. I argue that *Götterdämmerung*, and hence the *Ring* as a whole, achieves coherence when read in terms of contemporary nineteenth-century theories of progress.

Shaw glorified Siegfried as the robust symbol of iconoclastic activism, dismissing Brünnhilde as the purveyor of a trite dream of *amor vincit omnia*. Following on Shaw, the standard view of Siegfried is that he represents the revolution, its aspirations as well as its failures. But as I will argue, Wagner’s message of progress is not communicated through Siegfried, but through Brünnhilde – and moreover, not Brünnhilde in her familiar and stereotypical guise as the paragon of love and compassion, a quality disparaged by Shaw but welcomed by many commentators since then,¹⁶ but as a battle-tested Hegelian world-historical hero who has the strength and vision to comprehend and thereby shape human history. In this way, I not only take issue with the recurring view of Siegfried as an epoch-making revolutionary, but also qualify the standard reading of Brünnhilde as the untarnished standard-bearer of transcendent love. Neither of these traditional modes of interpretation adequately accounts for their roles in the drama.

But just as important, I also challenge the article of faith that has come to dominate Wagner scholarship, namely that Wagner’s encounter with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer in 1854 conclusively altered the final message of the *Ring*. In this reading both the revolutionary exuberance of Siegfried and the paeans to love associated with Brünnhilde cede pride of place to the *Weltschmerz* of Wotan

and a pessimistic message of renunciation.¹⁷ Carl Dahlhaus, in his seminal study *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas* (1971), was among the first of the twentieth-century scholars to methodically challenge the Schopenhauerian interpretation, but his tersely argued points need to be qualified, elaborated, and updated as I attempt to do here.¹⁸ It is my contention that whatever appeal Schopenhauer's philosophy had for Wagner – and I do not deny that it was great – Schopenhauer's uncompromising denigration of the will and denial of the possibility for human progress find no place in the written text of the *Ring*, nor in a plausible reading of the final musical setting. Instead, it is my intention to show, as a corollary to the principal theme of historical progress, that the *Ring* as completed in 1874 is fully consistent with Wagner's philosophical program of 1848–54 which embraced a sanguine faith in the march of history and the promise of human spiritual and cultural evolution.

Although a conductor and composer thoroughly devoted to his craft, Wagner was not at all insulated from the philosophical and political trends of his day. As a young man he was a committed follower of the reform agenda of the Young Germany movement.¹⁹ While in Paris living the *vie de bohème* from 1839 to 1842, he was also likely introduced to the socialist theories of Proudhon, whose treatise published there in 1840 asked *Qu'est que la Propriété?* (*What Is Property?*) and provocatively responded, “property is theft!”²⁰ Wagner's interest in radical political ideology did not diminish upon his joining the ranks of the establishment in 1842 as Royal Kapellmeister to the Dresden court of King Friedrich August II of Saxony. His assistant conductor Röckel was a disciple of Proudhon and deeply immersed in the political and social philosophies of the day. In the course of their professional collaboration and friendship, Röckel would have a profound intellectual influence on the composer.²¹ Thus, while in Dresden, Wagner not only engaged further with the thought of Proudhon but also explored the writings of Hegel – his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his Berlin lectures on *Die Philosophie der Geschichte* (*Philosophy of History*) first published in 1837 (2nd edition, Karl Hegel, 1840), a copy of which he had in his Dresden library²² – as well as those of the Young Hegelians, among them David Friedrich Strauss, Bruno Bauer, and Ludwig Feuerbach.²³ During this period of intellectual and political ferment, Wagner also fell under the spell of the revolutionary Mikhail Bakunin, a personal associate of Karl Marx, whose apocalyptic brand of utopian socialism was heavily influenced by Feuerbach's writings.

In the late 1840s Wagner began to give shape to his own political voice and sought to match his artistic endeavors to the same aspirations. In September 1848, he gave a speech at the Harmonie-Gesellschaft in Dresden on the occasion of the Tercentenary Festival of the Dresden Königlische Kapelle in which he toasted “the future of the Kapelle” with a distinctly Hegelian formula, noting that the present day was “the period of the human spirit's evolution to ever more distinct self-consciousness: in it that spirit has sought with surer tools to grasp its destiny.”²⁴ Some two months later, Wagner completed his verse draft of *Siegfried's Tod* (the libretto that would become *Götterdämmerung*) and turned his attention to a number of other dramas on heroic figures: *Friedrich I*, on the reign of Holy Roman Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa; *Achilleus*, inspired by Greek mythology;

and *Jesus von Nazareth*.²⁵ In February and March 1849, Wagner is believed to have tried his hand at a number of political tracts – *Die Revolution* (*The Revolution*) and *Der Mensch und die bestehende Gesellschaft* (*Man and Established Society*), although there is some circumstantial evidence that these may have been drafted by Röckel – and a poem, “*Die Noth*,” in the Feuerbachian vein, all of which were published in Röckel’s radical-left journal *Volksblätter*.²⁶ The Dresden uprising took place in May. On the eve of revolt, Wagner actually took editorial control over Röckel’s publication while Röckel was in hiding in Prague. Once Prussian troops entered the city and crushed the reformist opposition, Wagner himself became a wanted man and political refugee. He fled first to Zurich and then immediately on to Paris. With the spirit of revolution re-ignited, the precedent of the French Revolution came into focus once again. Wagner had kept a copy of Mignet’s two-volume history of the period, *Histoire de la Révolution Française, depuis 1789 jusqu’en 1814* (*History of the French Revolution from 1789 to 1814*; 1824) on his shelves in Dresden, and while briefly sheltered in Paris in 1849 immersed himself in Lamartine’s more recent account *Histoire des Girondins* (*History of the Girondists*; 1847).²⁷ Back in Zurich a month later Wagner returned to Proudhon and undertook a more rigorous study of Feuerbach.²⁸ In November 1849 he confessed to Karl Ritter, a friend from Dresden, his great indebtedness to Feuerbach, and some years later, in September 1852, he recommended that philosopher’s writings to Röckel as “uncommonly stimulating reading.”²⁹ It was in Zurich that Wagner integrated his thinking on music, culture, and social reform in three remarkable theoretical prose works, *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (*Art and Revolution*; 1849); *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*The Artwork of the Future*; 1849), dedicated to Feuerbach; and somewhat later *Oper und Drama* (*Opera and Drama*; 1851). Out of this intense intellectual engagement with the progressive thought of his day blossomed Wagner’s full elaboration of the *Ring* cycle in the form of three operas to precede *Siegfried’s Tod*.

In Switzerland Wagner had ample time on his hands to ponder the revolutionary moment in Europe and its failure to spark meaningful political change in Germany. But even after the disappointments both political and personal of 1848–49 there is little question that Wagner continued to embrace the optimism of his time and to maintain a faith in history.³⁰ In *The Artwork of the Future*, for example, Wagner confessed that “after a long battle between hope within and despair without, I gained the keenest, most steadfast belief in the future” (AF 19).³¹ Years later, in 1872, as he was completing the score for *Götterdämmerung* and at the same time organizing the publication of his collected works, Wagner prefaced his reprint of that essay with a quote from Thomas Carlyle that ecstatically anticipated the “Heroic Wise” of the future. Wagner made clear that at the time he wrote his revolutionary treatise “I was in complete accord with the last words of this summons of the grey-headed historian” (AF 24).

Taking this cue from Wagner himself, I place great reliance in the course of this book on Carlyle’s writings as a guide to understanding the philosophical issues that Wagner confronted in the *Ring*. Indeed, there are few authors of the nineteenth century who so completely capture the spirit, fervor, and logic of Wagner’s

own thought as Carlyle does. Immersed as Carlyle was in German philosophy and literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it is not hard to understand how his thinking and that of Wagner might converge. Although there is no conclusive evidence in the historical record that Wagner read the philosopher and historian earlier than the 1870s, it is certainly true that by the time he came to complete the *Ring* he had come to know and respect the historical and philosophical insights of this English scholar.³²

In addition to Carlyle, I use a Shakespeare play as a framework for approaching Wagner's dramatic agenda for *Götterdämmerung*. There is no question that Wagner identified strongly with Shakespeare and viewed himself as the heir to that playwright's legacy. As he announced in *Opera and Drama*, "the Drama of the Future, in strict keeping with its nature, will be born from the satisfaction of a need which Shakespearian Drama has aroused but not yet stilled."³³ His Dresden library held the complete works in translation by Schlegel and Tieck,³⁴ and from the start of his career Wagner was indebted to Shakespeare's plays for inspiration. Wagner's earliest creative efforts were based directly on the bard's work, most notably his play *Leubald: A Tragedy*, which followed *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and other Shakespearian precedents; the opera *Das Liebesverbot* (*The Ban on Love*; 1836), based on *Measure for Measure*; and *Die Feen* (*The Fairies*; 1834), which shares thematic and dramatic elements with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in its opposing worlds of fairies and humans. Cosima recorded in her diary Wagner's appraisal of Shakespeare's importance: "Shakespeare does not really belong to literature at all. . . . Through Shakespeare one can to some extent form a picture of a figure like Homer."³⁵ Wagner was not alone in his homage. Throughout the nineteenth century, Shakespeare was lionized among the Germans as one of the world's great poets, esteemed highly enough to stand alongside native sons Goethe and Schiller.³⁶

Notes

- 1 Letter to Röckel, 25/26 Jan. 1854, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, trans. Stewart Spencer and ed. Barry Millington (London 1987) (hereafter "SL"), 305–6.
- 2 Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (Modern Library 2002), 606.
- 3 Mike Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (Basic Books 2008), 105. By 1848, "the great French revolution of 1789 had been studied carefully by reactionaries, reformers and revolutionaries alike for lessons and warnings."
- 4 Aileen Kelly, *The Discovery of Chance: The Life and Thought of Alexander Herzen* (Harvard University Press 2016), 190.
- 5 Fred Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle: A Biography* (University of California Press 1993); Robert T. Kerlin, "Contemporary Criticism of Carlyle's 'French Revolution,'" *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (July 1912), 288.
- 6 Carlyle, *French Revolution*, 676–7.
- 7 Nathan Rotenstreich, "The Idea of Historical Progress and Its Assumptions," *History and Theory*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1971), 197. Kelly, *Discovery of Chance*, 95: "The destruction wrought by the Revolution of 1789 and the Napoleonic wars, the political and social upheavals in France culminating in the revolution of 1830 . . . intensified the need for some overarching explanation of existence that would make positive sense of the chaos of the present as a transitional stage in the passage to a state of earthly bliss. This was supplied by the concept of progress and its inevitability."

- 8 Larry Krasnoff, *Hegel's 'Phenomenology of Spirit': An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press 2008), 3; Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford University Press 2011), 5: "French Revolution will remain the burning center of Hegel's philosophy"; Steven B. Smith, "Hegel and the French Revolution: An Epitaph for Republicanism," *Social Research*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Spring 1989), 240–1: noting the "enduring grip of the French Revolution upon [Hegel's] thought" and his belief that the Revolution represented "one of the great watershed moments in modern history"; Kelly, *Discovery of Chance*, 190.
- 9 Smith, "Hegel and the French Revolution," 235: "It was Hegel's attempt ultimately to domesticate the revolution by regarding it as a 'moment' but only a moment in the collective *Bildung* of humanity."
- 10 Sandra Corse, *Wagner and the New Consciousness: Language and Love in the Ring* (Farleigh Dickinson University Press 1990), 16–17; Daniel H. Foster, *Wagner's 'Ring' Cycle and the Greeks* (Cambridge University Press 2010), 6–9; Hollinrake, "Philosophical Outlook," in *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music*, ed. Barry Millington (Thames and Hudson 1992), 143; Roger Scruton, *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung* (Allen Lane 2014), 19: in 1831 when Wagner enrolled at the University of Leipzig "it was Hegelian philosophy that dominated the faculties and captured the imagination of the young."
- 11 Rotenstreich, "The Idea of Historical Progress and Its Assumptions," 197; Kelly, *Discovery of Chance*, 95.
- 12 Simon Williams, *Wagner and the Romantic Hero* (Cambridge University Press 2004), 94.
- 13 Barry Emslie is the most vehement proponent of this view, stating in a recent article in the *The Wagner Journal* that *Götterdämmerung* is the "climax on every level of something of which it is no longer worthy." Barry Emslie, "The Kiss of the Dragon-Slayer," *The Wagner Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2013), 23; see also Barry Emslie, *Richard Wagner and the Centrality of Love* (The Boydell Press 2010), 87–92: referencing "knockabout story." John Deathridge notes the "alarming changes of personality and stagy effects (Shaw rightly abhorred them) that are still hard to take." John Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (University of California Press 2008), 72. Barry Millington concedes in *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth* that the opera is the "most stylistically regressive writing in the entire tetralogy." Barry Millington, *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth: Richard Wagner, His Work and His World* (Oxford University Press 2012), 106. Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht likewise observe in *Finding an Ending* that the "mechanics of *Götterdämmerung* are creaky and cumbersome." Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht, *Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner's Ring* (Oxford University Press 2004), 192. Foster comments, "Something is wrong with *Götterdämmerung*. Its music jars stylistically with the rest of the *Ring* and its plot does not seem to follow from *Siegfried's* optimistic ending." Foster, *Wagner's 'Ring'*, 197.
- 14 George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Niblung's Ring* (Dover Publications Inc. 1967), 67.
- 15 A number of scholars have identified and explored compelling connections between Wagner's *Ring* and Hegel's thought. See George G. Windell, "Hegel, Feuerbach and Wagner's *Ring*," *Central European History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1976); Corse, *Wagner and the New Consciousness*; Foster, *Wagner's 'Ring'*; Richard H. Bell, "Teleology, Providence and the 'Death of God': A New Perspective on the *Ring* Cycle's Debt to G.W.F. Hegel," *The Wagner Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2017); Richard Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future*, trans. Emma Warner, special edition of *The Wagner Journal* (recognizing Wagner's extensive use of Hegel's terminology). Windell, most notably, concludes, as I do, that Brünnhilde, not Siegfried, is Wagner's world-historical figure, but does not explore this insight in much depth. Windell, "Hegel, Feuerbach and Wagner's *Ring*," 46. Instead he examines how emotion and self-interest drive the dramatic developments of the plot towards the ultimate founding of a new world order, just as history in Hegel's theory is driven by "passion" towards unforeseen but rational ends. *Id.*, 48. Windell also demonstrates how

Hegel's theory of dialectical negation informs various concepts and musical themes throughout the *Ring*, including the opposition between Alberich, the dark-elf, and Wotan, as the light-elf, and the mirror-image rising and falling musical motif of the god's power and demise. Richard Bell, for his part, notes a number of Hegelian concepts at play in the *Ring*, such as a teleological process and divine sacrifice, while Daniel Foster adopts a more idiosyncratic interpretation based on Hegel's theory of aesthetics, reading the *Ring* as an allegory of the historical evolution and de-evolution of ancient Greek poetry and drama. Corse is the only commentator to date to attempt a thorough-going explication of the work in terms of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Corse identifies the Hegelian notion of dialectical progress as central to the *Ring*, but her attention is principally directed to the development of individual psychology through love, rather than the progress of the species in historical time. In Hegelian terms, Corse focuses on the development of consciousness in the individual ("shapes of consciousness") as opposed to the growth of Spirit which is a world-historical phenomenon ("shapes of a world"). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press 1977), 265 (§441); see Frederick C. Beiser, "'Morality' in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's 'Phenomenology of Spirit'*, ed. Kenneth R. Westphal (Wiley-Blackwell 2009), 209–10: "With spirit we are no longer dealing with the individual but the collective subject, no longer with this or that self but the spirit of a people as a whole." In Corse's interpretation, the apex of the drama is the mutual recognition and love between Siegfried and Brünnhilde, and Brünnhilde's final immolation is read principally as thematically reinforcing that moment and message of love. For Corse, Siegfried is the world-historical hero, while Brünnhilde is the last of the gods, who merely reflects her husband's heroic glory. As will be made clear in the course of this book, this interpretation follows the dialectical program of the *Phenomenology* only so far and thus fails adequately to account for *Götterdämmerung's* world-historical thesis. Insofar as the theme of history is concerned, Mary Cicora in *Wagner's Ring and German Drama: Comparative Studies in Mythology and History in Drama* (Greenwood Press 1999) and Daniel Foster in *Wagner's 'Ring'* pursue fascinating lines of inquiry into how the concepts of history and myth intertwine in the *Ring*.

- 16 See, e.g., Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End* (Oxford University Press 2002), 20: "Shaw's blindness to the significance of the love-element in the drama crippled his interpretation"; Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge 1979, repr. 1992), 140–1: "Brünnhilde's love for Siegfried features as the alternative to Wotan's resignation and renunciation of the world and looks forward in hope to reconciliation in the future"; the final theme is an expression of "rapturous love." More recent proponents of the love/compassion thesis are Simon Williams and Roger Scruton. Williams, *Wagner and the Romantic Hero*, 101: "Compassion as a force that changes people and brings about a less destructive world has triumphed and a utopia has come into view in our imagination if not in actuality"; Scruton, *The Ring of Truth*, 223: identifying the "compassion" to which Brünnhilde appeals "in her vindication at the opera's end."
- 17 While Cooke credits this reading (see Cooke, *I Saw the World End*, 22–3), he never had the opportunity to develop the argument fully in his unfinished analysis of the *Ring* that was published posthumously in 1979. At about the same time (1981), Stewart Spencer took up the torch, reading Brünnhilde's compassion as Schopenhauerian *caritas* and arguing that Wotan's "grand scheme for the regeneration of the world is now condemned to failure, because Wagner wills it so." Stewart Spencer, "Zieh hin! Ich kann dich nicht halten!," *Wagner*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (October 1981), 113–14. The Schopenhauerian theory has been more recently and keenly adopted by Warren Darcy. See, e.g., Warren Darcy, "The Metaphysics of Annihilation: Wagner, Schopenhauer, and the Ending of the 'Ring,'" *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 1994); Warren Darcy, "'The World Belongs to Alberich!' Wagner's Changing Attitude Towards the 'Ring,'" in *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion*, eds. Barry Millington

and Stewart Spencer (Thames and Hudson 1993); Warren Darcy, "'Everything That Is, Ends!': The Genesis and Meaning of the Erda Episode in 'Das Rheingold,'" *Musical Times*, Vol. 129, No. 1747 (Sep 1988); Warren Darcy, "The Pessimism of the 'Ring,'" *Opera Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1986). James Treadwell pursues the same theme, writing that "Wagner's revolutionary drama . . . seems to have hurled itself into the abyss between past and future, rather than bridging the gap as do those confidently optimistic first drafts of the story's end." James Treadwell, *Interpreting Wagner* (Yale University Press 2003), 88. Roger Scruton in *The Ring of Truth* is more equivocal in his approach to the *Ring*, seeming to accept as given the philosopher's influence ("Wotan's renunciation of the world recalls Schopenhauer's advocacy of the renunciation of the will," 291, and the cycle "ends in a spirit of resigned acceptance rather than visionary hope," 47) while at the same time finding a life-affirming message in the very act of renunciation ("the absolute value of life and love, revealed in the moment of their annihilation," 302). Emslie also takes the Schopenhauerian model for granted but is more alert to the contradictions inherent in this approach, noting that the "final act of renunciation and redemption not only takes the work onto a higher plane; it also makes nonsense of all the previous striving after power, after possession, even after *worldly* love. Instead, it exposes all these things as matters of lesser worth, as expressions of a lower, untrustworthy reality. . . . At the end the music drama narratively transcends itself . . . Yet at the point where structure and ideology meet, it does more than transcend itself, it contradicts itself." Emslie, *Centrality of Love*, 78–9. Marc Berry more strategically and transparently threads the interpretive needle by introducing two vectors of analysis in the *Ring*, contrasting the themes of Becoming (Hegel) and those of Being (Schopenhauer) which according to his analysis live uncomfortably side by side in the work, creating an "unresolved friction." Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner's Ring* (Ashgate 2006); Mark Berry, "The Positive Influence of Wagner Upon Nietzsche," *The Wagner Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1999). Foster similarly adopts a purposefully ambivalent stance, acknowledging the validity of both interpretative approaches and explaining their tension in terms of Wagner's own manipulation of ambiguity. Foster, *Wagner's 'Ring,'* 236, 249–52. See also Roger Hollinrake, *Nietzsche, Wagner and the Philosophy of Pessimism* (George Allen & Unwin 1982), 75; Leland J. Rather, *The Dream of Self-Destruction: Wagner's Ring and the Modern World* (Louisiana State University Press 1979).

- 18 Dahlhaus's argument rests on four points: (a) that Wotan's end does not signal the end of the world but only the downfall of the gods; (b) that Wagner eventually rejected the Schopenhauerian approach as evidenced by his letter to Mathilde Wesendonck; (c) that the love of Siegfried and Brünnhilde is destroyed by an outside agency, not from within; and that (d) the final theme is an expression of "rapturous love" rather than resignation. Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 103–4.
- 19 In the 1830s Wagner was introduced to the thought of the Young Germany movement principally through Heinrich Laube and Heinrich Heine and their writings. Hollinrake, "Philosophical Outlook," 143; Millington, *The Sorcerer*, 25; Stewart Spencer, "The 'Romantic Operas' and the Turn to Myth," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas Grey (Cambridge University Press 2008), 69. See also Mitchell Cohen, "To the Dresden Barricades: The Genesis of Wagner's Political Ideas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, 47; Rudiger Krohn, "The Revolutionary of 1848–49," in *Wagner Handbook*, eds. Ulrich Muller, Peter Wapnewski and trans. John Deathridge (Harvard University Press 1992), 157–8.
- 20 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What Is Property?* eds. Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith (Cambridge University Press 2008), 13–14; Cohen, "To the Dresden Barricades," 51; Krohn, "The Revolutionary," 157–8.
- 21 Krohn, "The Revolutionary," 157–8; Röckel was "well versed in the relevant political and socialist writings of these turbulent years, and he clearly exerted a lasting