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Introduction

IT WAS through intensive engagement with the political upheavals of 1848–1849 that Richard Wagner became a philosopher. Although as a younger man he had attended university lectures on philosophy, he was repelled by the academic obscurities of his teachers. As a consequence of that unhappy experience, the discipline left little mark on his early intellectual development.¹ In the decade or so that followed, none of his writings display an interest in speculative thinking, even if philosophical texts were sometimes among his private readings.² That began to change when, in 1848, the exhilarating and real promise of social transformation arrived in Germany.³ Wagner enthusiastically involved himself in radical political conversations, writing short articles on the future of Europe and of Saxony, his home state. Those relatively simple contributions elevated his thought to a more abstract engagement with the social world than anything he had previously attempted in print. Over the following months, they grew in vision, vehemence, and complexity, culminating in a piece which called drastically for the elimination of every socially manufactured obstacle, including poverty, to human self-realization. For Wagner, that meant nothing less than the necessary downfall of the state. Soon afterwards, he collapsed the distinction between theorizing and activism when he joined the uprising that took place in Dresden in May 1849. It failed, inevitably, and Wagner went into extended

exile to avoid arrest. He began, almost immediately, the substantial works that mark his great philosophical phase.

What Wagner left behind, as he started a new life abroad, was a secure yet artistically dissatisfying position as Kapellmeister to the Saxon court. It might be expected that the urgency of securing a means of living together with a space now free of official duties would have seen him return to his musical projects. Instead, he threw himself into a series of philosophical writings, declaring that it 'is most essential that I should accomplish this work and send it into the world before going on with my immediate artistic productions.'⁴ The result was a quick succession of books of increasing size: *Art and Revolution* (1849), *The Artwork of the Future* (1849), and *Opera and Drama* (1851).⁵ This set of works is sometimes labelled the 'Zurich trilogy' in reference to Wagner's main place of residence at the time the books were written (though they were all published back in Saxony). However, it might be more descriptive to call them the 'post-Dresden trilogy', since the bruising events of 1848–1849, together with Wagner's refusal to yield to the counterrevolution's triumph, can be detected in much of the theoretical thought its volumes contain. This was not a sublimation of revolutionary activity but, for Wagner, a new way of engaging with it. Given the overlap and complementarity of the philosophical content of the three books, they will be treated in this study as elements of a single synthetic project.

Wagner's achievements in the trilogy are both intellectually audacious and philosophically impressive. To support his conception of a truly free community, he developed a theory of spontaneous action that challenges rationalist notions of freedom. He added to the idea of what should motivate us to act with and for others by way of a deepened notion of need (*Noth*), a notion which will be interpreted here as needfulness.⁶ This was the fulcrum for his many criticisms of the debilities that stem from the egoism of modern society. His revolutionary perspective also gave him a distinctive view of history. He rejected the notion of historical progress as promoted both by philosophers and writers of history, arguing that the

progressionist model fails to break adequately with the impairing social practices of the present. Instead, a complete reconception of the human community is required. Throughout the trilogy, there are discernible lines of repudiation of precepts that are recognizable from Kantian and Hegelian idealism. Any theory which prioritizes spirit or intellect is condemned as inimical to vital human experience. That experience includes, importantly, aesthetic life, as well as affective and need-responsive social relations.

We can describe Wagner's philosophical project as *aesthetic materialism*. In arguing for the possibility of a world in which the richest capacities of human beings are realizable—a world without social or self-alienation—he draws from the example of aesthetic productivity, characterized as uninhibited, free, shared, yet truly directed action. He secures his project of freedom by way of something he could attest to from his personal experience of creative practice. By this point in his life, he had already accomplished a great deal artistically, having completed *Rienzi*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*, as well as numerous poetic texts. That practice provided him with a readily available exemplar of the experience of freedom, one that was so powerful for him that he was certain that ideas of community and morality should be shaped around it.

In the decades immediately following his death, there was within Germany, at least, a vibrant interest in the philosophical content of the trilogy, much of which was independent of the hagiographical mission headquartered in Bayreuth.⁷ Outside Germany, however, there was largely indifference, and in more recent times that has given way to dismissiveness.⁸ Disentangling the reasons for that reaction—expressed at times by some who should really have known better—is made all the more difficult when they are uttered as bare opinions that exhibit little or no evidence of engagement with Wagner's texts.⁹ What value can there be in making a point of denying that some given writer is a philosopher without explaining where in their work they succeed or fail? It is even more puzzling that Wagner is pronounced unphilosophical even as, alongside that judgment, his dramatic creations—*Der*

Ring des Nibelungen (*The Ring of the Nibelung* or the *Ring* cycle) above all—are in some instances reverentially deciphered as texts of sublime human and philosophical wisdom. One reason to revisit the trilogy might be to see the interplay between its ideas and those of the *Ring* and other dramas. This book gives some space to that task without, however, losing sight of the keenness with which Wagner himself regarded theory and art as separable though not necessarily duelling endeavours. The first, in Wagner's hands, is essentially prescriptive, whereas the latter is experimental. Both should be studied by anyone interested in Wagner's intellectual commitments. Treating the dramas as though Wagner was otherwise silent on his opinions about human and social relations unmoors his work from the world in which it was created. Diligent negotiation of the trilogy—of Wagner's view of social reality, in particular—might end up dampening down the peculiar thesis that he is a thinker of transcendent meaning except when he is engaged in philosophical work.

Wagner himself might share part of the blame for the general disinterest in his mid-century philosophical writings. He put his books together at tremendous speed. None of them took more than several months to write, with little time evidently given to consideration of what makes a satisfyingly thematic volume. This is less true of the slimmest of the three, *Art and Revolution* (just sixty pages in its first edition). The other two contain material that is diverse not only in their range of topics but also in their methodologies. Invaluable insights on how words and music might work together in operatic composition, for example, sit together with theories of the state and ideas of human freedom. This is certainly unusual, but the product is not a jumble. Themes do not crisscross but are set out in different sections that the reader can readily isolate. No unprecedented level of patience is required. It would doubtless have been better had Wagner taken the time to make several books out of the brilliant but unwieldy *Opera and Drama* (a book of three parts amounting to about six hundred and forty pages). If, though, lapses of orderliness or thematic rigour

legitimately exclude Wagner from the rolls of philosophy, we can only wonder at the inconsistent standards applied by the discipline's gatekeepers. That is not to say that Wagner's claims are always well supported by argument or that he successfully avoids contradictory commitments. But pointing out those places where his philosophy does not work is not the same thing as claiming it has no merit. Wagner had little conceit about his own abilities and was easily shaken by even the mildest of criticism. He did not enter into intensive theoretical activity with a view to arrogating a name for himself as a philosopher but simply because he believed that consideration of the post-Dresden situation necessitated it.

Some readers are doubtful about the originality of Wagner's philosophy. There is the untested conclusion that the Wagner of the revolutionary period was an unsophisticated follower of Ludwig Feuerbach. Wagner again may have contributed to this negative perception of himself when professing inspiration from the great philosopher in his (later dropped) dedication of *The Artwork of the Future* to Feuerbach. As we shall see, Wagner takes Feuerbachian ideas in directions that are not mere twists on what he found in the original. Rather, he produces innovative recastings of some of those ideas, resulting in a new and independent philosophical position that deserves evaluation on its own terms.

It is difficult to know how much Wagner's personal prejudices have contributed to the neglect of his philosophical writings. An essay of 1850 made it clear that he harboured antisemitic views, and as his career progressed, his confidence in that bias only grew. Some scholars have attempted to interpret the ideas of the trilogy (they overlap with the 1850 essay) as encoded expressions of exclusionary nationalism. The complex mixture of Wagner's prejudices, the pernicious delusions and neuroses of the Bayreuth circle, and, of course, the co-option of his art to the politics of twentieth-century Germany had for some time understandably brought into question the morality of staging his works, some of which are themselves thought to employ antisemitic motifs. Given the troubling association of Wagner with the European

catastrophe, it is perhaps to be expected that his largely unheralded philosophical writings have slipped from view. The prose writings of Wagner's revolutionary period have, after all, considerably less cultural and historical weight than his operatic works or music dramas, as he preferred them to be called.

Finally, one might also speculate on the role played by the translations of Wagner's prose works into English, since it is predominantly within Britain that the most condescending reactions to his philosophical work are to be found.¹⁰ Criticism of William Ashton Ellis's immense labours in translating, in the eight-volume *Richard Wagner's Prose Works* collection, almost every nonliterary publication by Wagner is often excessive. What he gives us is, as one scholar aptly puts it, 'by no means always misleading.'¹¹ Nevertheless, the voice he creates for Wagner's trilogy, at least, does not capture that of the original where we find Wagner speak, for the most part, with a relative plainness that is without stylistic flourishes and archaic locutions, though not at all times without some deployment of emotive rhetoric. In English he too often arrives with amateur and ornate exuberance. And there is the terminological challenge that few Victorian translators could satisfactorily negotiate. Wagner adopts terms that, although common to German philosophy, had until relatively recently no agreed-upon or stipulated English equivalent. This affected the early reception of all the notable thinkers of that era (with multiple renderings of words, such as *Vorstellung*, *Geist*, and *Moral*, leading to avoidable confusion). The absence of a shared vocabulary, even if it is a result of diverse and uncoordinated decisions among translators, may lead to the damaging consequence that ideas are not appreciated as part of a wider philosophical context of debate since they are not expressed in a common disciplinary language. The technicalities employed by Wagner are too often indiscernible in the translations—both because of the choice of word and inconsistency of choice within some of the texts—and his contribution to philosophy in the wake of the decline of German idealism, among other things, is lost to the English reader. In order, then, both to

allow Wagner's seriousness to speak to us in the twenty-first century and to perceive his place within his intellectual context more readily, I have not used the translations found in the *Prose Works* (though references are given to it for the convenience of readers).

In considering Wagner as a philosopher of revolution, this book covers his thought up to 1852, the year in which the text of the *Ring's* fourth and final part was essentially completed. Wagner famously agonized over the right ending to *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*), the last part of the cycle, which though, confusingly for us, was the first of the four texts to be written, in 1848. He replaced the original in 1852. Several years later it too was revised in order to give voice to ideas drawn from Arthur Schopenhauer, a new philosophical inspiration (see chapter 6 below). However, he eventually settled for something that was more sympathetic to the 1852 notion of a new world for which human beings had responsibility, a notion that resonated with the revolutionary ideas of the trilogy even if they were no longer those that mattered most to him. The chronology of publications after 1852 shows a Wagner disengaged from the theory of revolution and philosophical advocacy for universal social emancipation. He did not constructively revisit the concepts he had developed to sustain a new notion of free human experience. The period essentially in view in this study is short yet astoundingly productive, beginning with spirited opinion pieces, advocating for political reform, moving on to quasi-insurrectionist literature, and culminating in the huge set of ideas contained in the trilogy. And alongside that work are not only the four parts of the *Ring*, with their historically embedded elements, but drafted texts for several other dramas, one on Jesus in particular, that voice lucid ideas of social revolution. Some level of sympathetic reconstruction is required simply to draw out the relevance of Wagner's ideas to the philosophical environment in which they were devised.

What should become visible in those ideas is the capacity of Wagner's aesthetic materialism to offer interesting and novel responses to the challenges posed by rationalism and idealism to how we are to understand social and individual freedom.

This study begins with a brief overview of the context and principal events of the 1848 revolution as they unfolded in Germany. We then move to a series of writings on various aspects of reform and revolution published by Wagner from June 1848 to April of the following year. His transformation across those pieces from constructive opponent of the existing regime to radical anarchist is discernible. The shift, as we shall see, was not the product of Wagner's abstracted theorizing about the future. It came in response to the evolving situation in which optimism for a new society drained away and was replaced by anger at the old authority's reversal of reformist concessions. These matters take us to the much-contested story of Wagner's role in the violent uprising in Dresden. Notwithstanding a defensible hostility to the heavy-handedness of the Saxon authorities as they sought to regain control of their capital city, Wagner's decision to involve himself in insurrection deserves some elaboration. It draws attention to a conflict between the peculiarly moral and abstract ideals that attracted him to revolution in principle and the reality of the violence in which his activism implicated him, even if his participation really was as minimal as he subsequently and controversially claimed. Wagner was profoundly troubled by the nature of the Uprising and quickly turned his revolutionary commitments to ever more purely philosophical reflections on what revolution involves and why it is required.

Those reflections are the main concern of chapter 2, where we will begin to see the core elements of Wagner's aesthetic materialism. His theory of revolution adopts a markedly unorthodox notion of history. Because he is committed to a framework which rests on certain ideas of the imperatives of nature, he does not see history as a progressive process, governed by extramaterial forces, which will result in the kind of free community he favours. Rather,

freedom is a break with history as conceived by the idealist model, which he perceives as the validation of an overbearing and ongoing process of oppression. History, in essence, has taken us in the wrong direction. And as a philosophical device, history is, he believes, ideologically employed to bind the political imagination to nothing more than improved versions of the present. In opposition to this, Wagner references the untapped energies of what he thinks of as real material forces, namely, the natural tendencies of human beings both singularly and when constituted collectively as 'the people'. We shall see why Wagner believes those forces must eventually assert themselves.

Wagner's idea of need, *Noth* (see above), is identified as the natural basis of some of the capacities whose suppression has produced an unfree egoistical society and lifeless individuality. Since it is a feeling, Wagner takes it to belong to the same general source as the involuntary, that is, spontaneous character that he ascribes to aesthetic experience: both are reliably truth bearing and healthily productive. In setting out a conception of a society of feeling and creativity, Wagner develops the related notions of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that is, the total work of art, and the consummate work of art. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is at one level an aesthetic ideal which urges the unification of the main artistic media in the creation of works of art. The notion of the consummate work of art indirectly implies that synthesis in that it refers to the great works of art of the Greeks, whose preeminent art-forms, Wagner maintains, encapsulate the ideal of totality. The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as we shall see, is not in its principal meaning, and contrary to much of the commentary, a pure theory of art as such. It is, in the specific context of Wagner's revolutionary theory, a vision of a society of aestheticized experience, involving cooperation towards shared ends and an intuitive sense of oneself as an individual and communal being. At the same time, Wagner believes that a new form of art practice will be characteristic of a genuinely free community, and it is in that space that his notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a theory of the artwork as such has

purchase, notwithstanding some of the plausible criticism it has received.

It is in the context of Wagner's notion of an aestheticized community that a consideration of the implications of his essay on Jewish composers in music seems most appropriate. The essay infamously argues that the Jews as outsiders to German culture cannot contribute to its ongoing reproduction. That objectionable view is difficult enough on its own terms and may moreover undermine the universalism which is at the centre of Wagner's thoughts on revolution and the constitution of a single *Volk*, that is, 'people' (across the entirety of the trilogy). The striking set of recommendations that Wagner offers at that essay's conclusion points unexpectedly, however, towards an emancipated future as one in which all groups—all ethnicities—have, through some considerable labour, overcome the social conditioning which had once confirmed them in states of egoism and separation.

Wagner's thoughts on freedom are examined across two separate chapters. Chapter 3 looks at his strictly philosophical account of freedom, with particular emphasis on its material dimensions, that is, its sensual and aesthetic qualities. Since it is within this set of ideas that Wagner is sometimes perceived as helplessly indebted to Feuerbach, a detailed look at that connection is important. The differences between the two thinkers are, in fact, substantial. Feuerbach is famously motivated by a reappropriation of human possibility through the deconstruction of theology, whereas the question of God—though not religious authority—holds virtually no interest for Wagner. The metaphysical framework of religion is transformed by Feuerbach into the language of anthropology, but at its extreme it tends to generate its own new abstractions. The challenge of articulating the materiality of personal feeling, need, and creative freedom drives Wagner's divergence from Feuerbach's main theoretical lines. He subtly reconfigures a range of concepts he finds in Feuerbach, though others he adopts in their original form. What emerges from that complex engagement leads, among other things, to a critical alternative to the

generalized version of Kantian rationalism that Wagner implicitly targets.

As the chapter shows, Wagner's use of the ideas of 'necessity' and 'control' stands in clear opposition to the Kantian usage where they serve as elements of reason's authority over human feeling. For Wagner, rather, necessity involves precisely that kind of responsiveness that is identifiable in creative aesthetic experience, and it is thereby a type of freedom marked by the absence of any notion of self-regulation or control. This radical notion of freedom is not intended as a recommendation for personal reform, nor is it just a different or competitor description of a thing that already exists. It cannot, Wagner holds, become a full reality without a transformation of the wider social world. At the same time, it stands as a critical model which philosophy can use against the counterintuitive artificiality of the idea of freedom as control or as the responses of necessity to reason's conclusions.

Examination of the characteristics of what Wagner understands as a positively transformed society, to some degree anticipated in the discussion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, brings the idea of the sociality of freedom into view. The fourth chapter sees Wagner grapple with the enormous challenge of developing an account of the relationship between the individual and the community in which neither is independent nor reducible to the other. His approach is based on a repudiation of the idea that either of these terms represents absolutes whose reconciliation is intractable in principle. Given his commitment to an aesthetic model of individual freedom, the role of the community must be accounted for in terms that are sympathetic to that freedom. Wagner develops a position not with a technical blueprint, with each part's individuation and dependency set out by argument. He turns, rather, to the force of the example given to us by what he regards as the so far unsurpassed arrangements for living enjoyed by the ancient Greeks. This example leans on a romanticized portrait of the Greek world as holistically comprising a set of dynamic principles which were geared towards the enhancement of individuality

and the simultaneous preservation of the community as a democratic order.

While Wagner sees the Greek precedent as motivating evidence of what the freest human beings can bring about among themselves, he insists that we cannot simply imitate their world. The Greeks were not universalists, and Wagner even posits that the inhuman iniquity of their societies is the principal reason for their decline. This is an intriguing and useful contention, and in understanding it we gain further access to the role that Wagner thinks nature plays in the constitution of healthy communities. The latter can be contrasted with what Wagner takes to be the life-destroying character of the modern 'political state'. This is quite in line with the anarchist views that he nurtured during the Dresden events. Contrary not only to the reformists of that period but the constitutionalists of German idealism, he perceives the political state as, in essence, a device which is geared primarily towards the protection of private property. It is therefore of a piece with all systems that have gained some autonomy over human needs, among which the desire for permanent possession—that is, possessiveness without love—he maintains, will not be found. In explaining the persistence of these arrangements, Wagner develops a number of original ideas that, like others examined across this study, have been overlooked by scholarship on nineteenth-century German social thought. He is interested in exploring the role of habit as the means by which individuals lose their dynamic connection with life and recede into their own personal interests, a sphere Wagner captures with the expansive term 'egoism'. A society of habituated egoism inhibits any form of personal development that threatens its own self-preservation. Instead, it promotes, Wagner maintains, the lifeforms of fashion, money, work, and luxury. Wagner deserves recognition on these points as a philosophically minded social critic who understands the legitimating role those lifeforms play. He is not a moralizer who denounces shallow preferences. The chapter closes with Wagner's theoretical considerations of freedom as a reconciliation of individual and community and the

destructive limitations of the idea of freedom as isolation from others. The political state upholds the idea of isolation, he argues, by encouraging and normalizing a condition of competition among individuals.

Chapter 5 departs from direct engagement with the theoretical writings. It offers a philosophical commentary on Wagner's completed and some of the unfinished dramatic works, covering the period from 1840 to 1852. The main objective, when considering the earlier pieces, is to identify the emergence of those ideas that later found expression in the trilogy. From the late 1840s, as this chapter will show, philosophical themes become increasingly important to core elements of Wagner's artistic creations. The musical and poetic characteristics of those works are not considered. The purpose of this chapter is certainly not to reduce the dramas to Wagner's philosophy or politics. The scope of his completed works, the *Ring* tetralogy in particular, is vast and spills beyond dramatized theory. That is to be expected of Wagner's uncompromising artistry. However, the usefulness of reading his philosophy as a way of understanding what he was thinking when devising some of the most significant of his dramatic figures should become clear. And to return to an earlier point, the idea that Wagner's dramas, rich in philosophy, can be cordoned off from the alleged philosophical emptiness of his theoretical work will be rejected. Wagner's embrace of Schopenhauer's philosophy just a few years after he had completed the last parts of the trilogy and the texts of the *Ring* might seem like a complete rupture with his revolutionary philosophy. However, part of the appeal of Schopenhauer, I will suggest in the concluding chapter, is explained by the affinities and compatibilities of some of the ideas of Wagner's revolutionary writings with those of his newly adopted philosopher.

This book, then, pursues a number of approaches that are not usually found in a philosophical monograph. Preceding the three

central chapters on freedom in its many dimensions there is a compressed account of the political history of Wagner's time and a review of the facts of his personal involvement in the Uprising. And finally, the discussion turns to the dramas, without considering their dramatic effect. At all points the endeavour is to get as close as possible to an understanding of the motivations, modalities, and achievements of Wagner as a philosopher of revolution. Wagner's name might, in principle, serve to draw attention to his ideas. What I want to show here, however, is that they are not mere curiosities or novelties that survive only through fortunate association with someone more famous for other accomplishments, but deserve attention as intellectually sensitive and original responses to the philosophical and political contexts of mid-nineteenth-century Germany.

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