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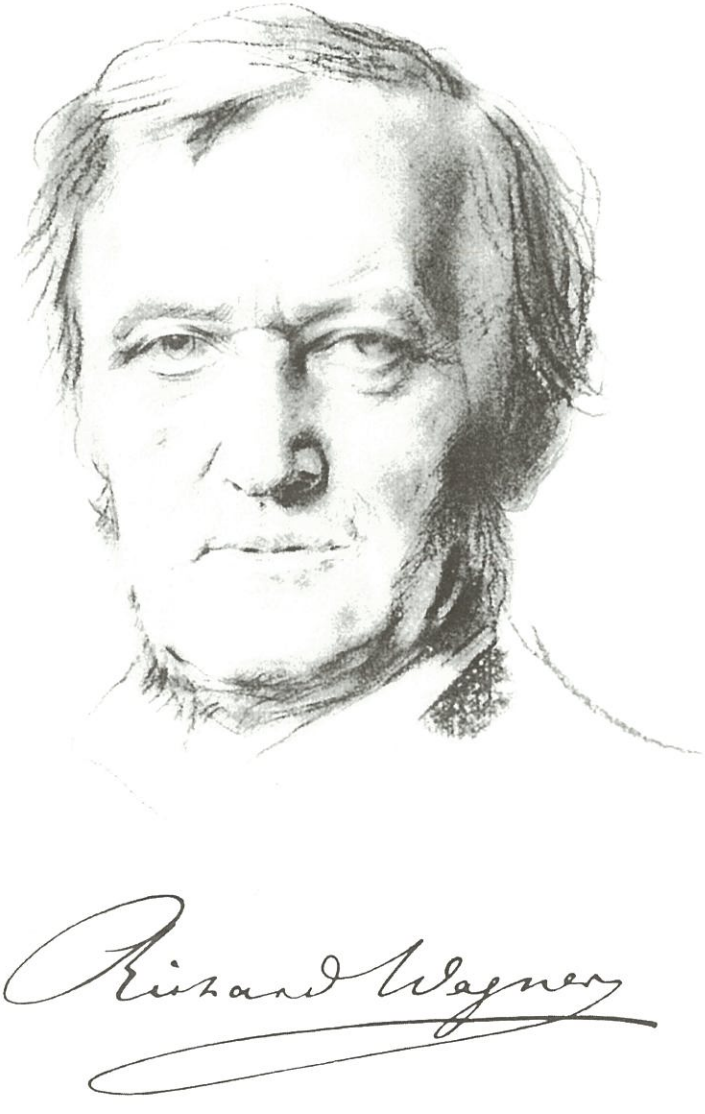
Leitmotive

The Wagner Quarterly



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EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

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The Editor's Thoughts

Virtually all of this issue is devoted to our sixth major article (over three years) written by a professional in the psychiatric field of medicine. Although many of our readers have expressed considerable interest in the previous articles in this category, not everyone is comfortable with or even recognizes the validity of psychology and psychiatry in general, but especially when it is used to help understand the arts. Possibly this at least partially explains the absence of many psychologically oriented articles in the Wagner literature.

As we noted recently, Bryan Magee—certainly a distinguished figure in Wagner studies—more than forty years ago outlined Wagner's early and profound comprehension of fundamental psychiatric principles long before Freud, the field's pre-eminent pioneer.

If we accept the notion that perhaps the most important single motivation for people to attend productions of Wagner's works is to be moved—emotionally moved—then it would seem to follow that if we are to understand what Wagner's art is all about, understanding the psychological and psychiatric foundations upon which he created his music dramas represents an extremely important step.

We hope that Dr. Goldberg's insights and careful explanations of the underlying motivations for the behavior of the various characters in *Götterdämmerung* (plus part of *Siegfried*) will make Wagner's intentions significantly more clear and therefore will be helpful in achieving a more comprehensive understanding.

LEITMOTIVE–*THE WAGNER QUARTERLY*

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LEITMOTIVE–*THE WAGNER QUARTERLY* is a journal intended for all persons interested in the works, life, and influence of Richard Wagner (1813–1883). Although many of our authors and readers are scholars affiliated with academic institutions, many are informed lay persons with a keen interest in Wagner studies.

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We invite all interested persons to submit articles for publication: please see the back cover.

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David Dalto, Founding Editor (1985–1989) Paul Schofield, Editor (1990)

About the Author

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Metropolitan Opera New York City 2011 © Ken Howard photo

Brünnhilde's (Deborah Voigt) working through of shame and loss of omnipotence has now taken a significant step forward as she embraces Siegfried (Jay Hunter Morris).

Further Thoughts on Love, Loss, and Transformation in Wagner's *Ring: Götterdämmerung*[1]

> *"...that I in grief might grow wise! Now I know what must be. All things, all things, all I know now; all to me is revealed!"*
>
> —Brünnhilde, Act III Finale (326)[2]

In this essay, I continue my exploration of themes of love, of loss, and especially of transformation in Wagner's *Ring* operas. An earlier paper discussed these themes in *Die Walküre*, the second of the four operas in the *Ring*.[3] In this sequel, I focus on *Götterdämmerung*, the final opera in the *Ring* cycle, with a few comments on the final act of *Siegfried*, the opera immediately preceding it. My overarching theme is Wagner's portrayal of the dynamics and processes of transformation in the character of Brünnhilde, whose journey from frightened and vulnerable young woman, recently stripped of her "godhood," to heroic woman of wisdom who "redeems" the world and paves the way for a new one is at the center of this opera. Siegfried, the second major character in this opera, also undergoes complex transformations, which I will also examine. And finally I make brief mention of Hagen, the third major character in the opera, who does not, and cannot, change.

1. A modified version of this article will be forthcoming in the Fall 2012 issue of Fort/Da, a publication of the Northern California Society for Psychoanalytic Psychology. A main difference is that the above version attempts to avoid technical psychoanalytic terms, substituting where possible reasonably accurate descriptions for lay readers.

2. Quotations are from Andrew Porter's English translation of the *Ring* (New York: Norton, 1976). Numbers following quotations are page numbers in this edition.

3. Goldberg, S. "Love, Loss and Transformation in Wagner's *Die Walküre*." *Leitmotive, The Wagner Quarterly*, Winter 2010–11, 7–16.

Interlude: Wagner's Musical Technique

Before delving into my main themes, I want to comment briefly on Wagner's musical technique and the way in which it renders psychological experience. In the earlier essay, I discussed Wagner's use of leitmotives as a means of linking thought and feeling, conscious and unconscious, and present and past. They also provide intimations of the future. Wagner's leitmotives, constantly in a process of transformation and yet retaining a certain constancy, reflect our experience of the movements of life itself. Psychological transformations in the characters are conveyed musically in new development of old material, in the use of familiar themes in novel juxtapositions with other familiar themes, and in the introduction of entirely new musical material. In the music, as in life itself, continuity and discontinuity, past and present, and unconscious and conscious mutually contextualize each other, mutually confer shape and meaning on each other. They provide what I referred to as an "orchestral" or musical register of experience that corresponds to the complexity and layering of our own lived experience.

Though the compositional technique and use of leitmotives remains essentially the same, so that the psychoanalytic considerations on the music in *Die Walküre* apply equally to our experience of the later *Ring* operas, there are certain shifts in the way that Wagner expresses himself musically, beginning with the final act of *Siegfried* and continuing into *Götterdämmerung*. This reflects the fact that many years had elapsed between the two periods of composition, with *Meistersinger* and especially *Tristan und Isolde* intervening. Though the verbal text of all four *Ring* operas, along with most of the music through the first two acts of *Siegfried*, was written during the same period during the 1850s, the music for the ending of *Siegfried* and all of *Götterdämmerung* was written more than a decade later—at a significantly different point in Wagner's own life and psychological development. Arguably, as Wagner approached the later years of his life, there was an evolution in his views of human psychology, including his understanding of memory, love, loss, and personal transformation. One wonders: was the delay in completing the *Ring* partly a result of Wagner's conscious or unconscious understanding that he did not yet have the psychological maturity and musical means to convey what he could envision only imprecisely at that earlier point?

In *Götterdämmerung*, leitmotives are used more flexibly in the sense that they are in a constant, churning process of development, in which they are more difficult to recognize. They are often layered above or below one or more other motives, constantly bumping into each other, transforming themselves

and other motives. They convey a staggering density of musical, narrative, and emotional information. More than before, memories linked to leitmotives are not so much reawakened as evocatively re-created in Wagner's more flexible, more constantly varying use of motivic materials. The dialectic of constancy and of transformation in the music is perhaps taken to new heights and poignancy in this opera.

Overall the music seems characterized by a darker, more somber and ominous palette. There is a sense of greater interiority to the music, which often seems more complex, more chromatic, more jagged, more multi-layered and constantly changing. (This is not to say that the music is more emotionally compelling—rather it is compelling in a somewhat different way). There are wide, unexpected, and disorienting intervals that punctuate the melodic line. From the opening two chords in *Götterdämmerung*, there is a sense of resolutions that are not really resolutions, but rather pose a question: and then what? How do we go deeper? These opening two chords introduce and anticipate a shift to a different, more complex musical and psychological register, the world of *Götterdämmerung*.

Psychological transformation

The important transformations in Brünnhilde involve love, loss, and the working through of shame and of mourning. Ultimately, they involve forgiveness and acceptance, and lead to the acquisition of wisdom. This core theme is captured poignantly and compactly in Brünnhilde's line: "that I in grief might grow wise. Now I know what must be. All things, all things, all I know now; all to me is revealed." My attempt to answer the related questions: what does she know? and how does she know it? is an organizing leitmotive at the heart of this essay.

A second theme, or leitmotive, woven throughout the text of this paper is the way in which Wagner explores two broad types of change, which are perhaps more accurately described as two poles of a continuum, with various intermediate and hybrid forms. The first example of change is more sudden, more magical, reversible, and more likely to involve some loss of psychological integration[4] (think of the Tarnhelm, of the magic potions, and of the rapid replacement of love by hate). The second kind of change is more gradual, less

4. Loss of integration is when the character's (e.g. Siegfried's) personality loses some of its wholeness, i.e. certain elements of one's personality temporarily (or permanently) no longer are functioning together with the other important elements of that personality. The wholeness of all of the elements of the personality also has a dynamic quality that can be moving toward or away from wholeness (i.e. when all elements function as a whole).

reversible, the result of psychological work, and, as contrasted to the first kind of change, more likely to involve movements toward psychological integration (think of Brünnhilde's gradual acceptance of herself as a mortal and sexual woman, of Siegfried's understanding of the meaning of love as he approaches death, and of Brünnhilde's access of wisdom at her final transformation). Though the latter type of change may appear on the surface to emerge in a brief moment, a closer reading reveals that that appearance is actually a moment of consolidation of processes that have been developing unconsciously for some period of time. An additional consideration is that the two types of change are not entirely mutually exclusive: a more magical and instantaneous change may catalyze a second and deeper type of transformation, as is often the case in romantic love.

A third theme has to do with the power of stories themselves—those we tell ourselves and those we are told by important others—in how we experience ourselves and how we act in the world. Stories shift our experience; experience alters our stories about ourselves. These stories are stories in words, but through Wagner's use of leitmotives, they are also stories in music. In words, ongoing changes in one's story correspond with shifts in memory, in revised internal organization, and in psychological transformation. Developments and transformations in musical stories also reflect shifts in the ways that the characters remember and experience their own ongoing psychological development. The appearance of new musical material, and especially the appearance of new musical themes, suggest the arrival of something new in the psychological world of the character. As stories shift in the present, they retrospectively transform and confer additional meanings on the past and on how the past continues to impact present experience. Without the interplay between past and present stories, experience becomes rigid and flattened, and we feel and become lost. (This is Hagen's situation).

Transformations in *Siegfried*, Act III

In the final minutes of *Siegfried* and continuing into the beginning of *Götterdämmerung*, we witness the ongoing process of Brünnhilde becoming a mortal woman, engaging initially tentatively and later more fully in a loving and sexual relationship with a man. In this process, she has to encounter and to begin to work through her loss of omnipotence and ensuing vulnerability and shame. She has lost her godhood, and feels stripped of her defenses. ("I have no defence, no shield; quite unarmed, a sorrowing maid." 238) When Siegfried awakens her from her prolonged sleep, she initially greets the sun

and the light of day in the leitmotive of awakening. The same leitmotive is employed later in the scene to suggest a broader theme of awakening of any sort. Almost immediately Brünnhilde greets Siegfried with longing and seems rapidly to fall in love with him. When he then approaches her and tries to embrace her, she recoils in horror and in shame ("No god dared to come near! The heroes bowed and knelt to the maiden." 239) It is not only Siegfried who, in a moment of psychological awakening, learns about the meaning of fear. The encounter with carnal love confronts Brünnhilde with fear of a type she has not experienced before—the fear of relating as an adult, sexual woman to a male suitor. We witness her gradually accepting her new position, in an elaborate dance of approach and avoidance, as finally her wavering ceases and she embraces Siegfried and her new emotional position. Brünnhilde's working through of shame and loss of omnipotence, initially experienced in *Die Walküre*, has now taken a significant step forward.

Transformations in *Götterdämmerung*, Act I

Early in *Götterdämmerung*, we don't know how long Brünnhilde and Siegfried have had together to consummate and to develop their new relationship, but clearly some time has passed since the end of *Siegfried*. While the kiss that awakens the sleeping Brünnhilde and the immediate "marriage" of the two characters has a somewhat instantaneous and magical quality, this is one instance in which an immediate, more magical change may catalyze the inner psychological work that leads toward a more enduring change. It is clear that they have both experienced a certain amount of psychological struggle and now, with the passage of time, have had a chance to actually get to know each other, to grapple with the tumultuous feelings they have experienced, and to begin to develop a more real and more complex human relationship. They have reciprocally awakened each other psychologically—Wagner seems to convey a clear message that such awakenings are bound to be interpersonal and mutual. That Brünnhilde is now a more sexually and emotionally mature woman is suggested in a gorgeous and sensuous new leitmotive, not previously heard, often referred to as the "new Brünnhilde" motive. (Siegfried also has new musical material.) It is as though, in musical terms, she now has a new name, a new identity. This soaring and sensuous melody is symphonically woven throughout much of the music subsequently heard, not only in this scene, but in the remainder of the opera. The appearance and musical development of this new leitmotive is reminiscent of a memorable scene in

Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*[5] in which Hans Castorp, as he comes to sexual maturity and begins for the first time to actually converse with the woman with whom he has been infatuated for some time, finds that he must speak to her in an entirely different language—French instead of his native German. Only a new language—musical or lexical—can seemingly do justice to the newness of this experience and to mark the underlying psychological transformation.

Almost immediately things become more complicated—as they inevitably do in love relationships that are moving away from the magical and toward the real. After the initial infatuation, depressive anxieties ensue. The opening chords of the prelude to *Götterdämmerung* repeat the leitmotive of awakening, but now in a much darker key and with more ominous and more complex coloration. In her opening lines in this opera, Brünnhilde realizes that along with romantic love come anxieties about loss and about not being able to live up to the expectations of her lover. Though Brünnhilde has become Siegfried's lover and taught him some of the secret knowledge she possessed from her tenure as a Valkyrie, she fears that that is not enough and that Siegfried will want something more, which inevitably he does. Brünnhilde then has to accept and to bear the shame that she feels in relation to knowing that Siegfried needs more than she can provide for him. ("I fear that you may now despise me; how can I serve you? I've no more to give." 253) Her capacity to bear disappointment and shame, to accept it as an unavoidable aspect of life and of love, reflects a deepening of her capacity for love and for mature relationship. Shame and its metabolism has already been a major theme in the *Ring* cycle, and will continue to be central in *Götterdämmerung.*

In yet another manifestation of this struggle, Brünnhilde has to accept another of the inevitable limitations of love and the experience of loss that accompanies it. In addition to the blissful feelings of fusion ("Apart, who can divide us? Divided, still we are one." 255)—she now realizes that she must allow her lover a degree of freedom ("My love for you bids you be gone" 252). These shifts are again reflected in the music—the bright and passionate qualities of the music at the end of *Siegfried* now begin to recede and the music begins to take on a less blissful and a somewhat darker, more portentous quality, reflecting the underlying psychological growth and awareness of vulnerability and depressive anxiety that has occurred, particularly in Brünnhilde. Passionate love music alternates with intimations of anxiety and loss. As is usual in Wagner, it is primarily the orchestra that conveys the music of internal

5. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain.* Translated by John Woods (New York: Vintage Press, 1996).

transformation.

By contrast with Brünnhilde, the changes in Siegfried in Act I seem more superficial, and his overall character less integrated. This is not surprising given his youth and his upbringing, which involves the absence of a mother and the perversion of his parenting by Mime. The story he has of himself and of where he comes from is both fragmentary and in important ways false. He has been able to engage in a relationship with Brünnhilde—the first and only truly caring relationship in his life. He learns from her, and for the first time, at least briefly, he has been able consciously to experience fear and vulnerability. He says that he will never forget Brünnhilde's love, but Brünnhilde, perhaps not so sure, prophetically admonishes him to remember his own story of the heroic events that brought them together, as proof of their love. ("Ah, but to prove you love me, remember only yourself; recall your deeds of glory; recall that raging fire...Recall how I lay on the rock...till your kiss awoke me to life." 253)

There is an adolescent quality and a sense that Siegfried still has far to go in terms of developing a more mature capacity for love and for relationship. Separation, shame, and depressive anxieties have far less meaning to Siegfried at this point than they do to Brünnhilde, and there is little sense of his struggle with these experiences. This will come only much later in the opera, when Siegfried recalls these earlier moments with Brünnhilde and they retrospectively take on quite different and deeper meanings. Siegfried will require more time and more experiences in the world—including further experiences of shame, vulnerability, and loss—to come to greater emotional maturity. But for now, whatever changes have occurred in Siegfried remain superficial and unintegrated, and are mostly not the result of significant internal psychological struggle.

Without Brünnhilde as organizing presence, and in his pursuit of worldly adventure, Siegfried is now vulnerable to a series of changes, regressive in nature, that involve magical transformations and sudden loss of contact with his own recent history and of its significance for him. He is easily seduced by Gutrune, Gunther, and Hagen, who offer a magical "potion" consisting of some combination of sex, friendship, stature, and worldly possessions. It is more than he can handle or really think about, and it has the effect of reinforcing his omnipotence. Not yet quite knowing who he is or what constitute his core values, he shifts in a chameleon-like manner. He has not only lost contact with Brünnhilde, and with parts of his personality that she represents (e.g. capacities for love, loyalty, incipient wisdom); he has lost contact with

San Francisco Opera 2011© Cory Weaver photo.

Having grappled with the tumultuous feelings they have experienced, Siegfried (Ian Storey) and Brünnhilde (Nina Stemme) begin to develop a more real and more complex human relationship. Götterdämmerung, *San Francisco Opera June 2011.*

himself. In a sense he dissociates,[6] but actually there is very little sense of a center from which he splits apart, unformed emotionally as he is. With the magical Tarnhelm, he can immediately shift identity or location, and just as quickly resume his former "self." Whatever forces of growth and processes of more gradual transformation were catalyzed in his time with Brünnhilde, he has little access to them now that she is not with him. He is unable to hold an image of her safely inside, nor is he able to sustain a stable image and story of himself. Disconnected from his history, the past can no longer usefully inform and enrich his present experience. The forest bird has told Siegfried where to find Brünnhilde, but he does not yet know enough about where to find himself, or, in a deeper way, to find Brünnhilde.

Götterdämmerung, Act II

Act II of *Götterdämmerung* involves shifts in Brünnhilde that, in contrast to the progressive changes we saw in Act I, now reflect dissociation and loss of her capacity to manage her emotional experience. These are malignant

6. "Dissociates" here refers to a mental movement away from a sense of psychological wholeness. Psychological wholeness includes the experience of having a cohesive center of experience where all of the personality elements work together. When disassociation occurs, it is a movement toward a mental state characterized by sectors (elements) of one's personality that are not in communication with each other. Psychological splitting is the mechanism that causes dissociation to occur.