Richard Wagner and the Greeks

An essay by WOLFGANG SCHADEWALDT, translated by DAVID C. DURST with a response by JOHN DEATHRIDGE

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Wolfgang Schadewaldt, one of the most prominent German classicists of the twentieth century, was born in Berlin in 1900. During his distinguished career, Schadewaldt was appointed to various professorships at Königsberg (1928), Freiburg (1929), Leipzig (1934), Berlin (1941), and Tübingen (1950). Among his most important publications are: *Iliasstudien* (3rd edn., 1966), *Von Homers Welt und Werk* (4th edn., 1965) *Hellas und Hesperien, Gesammelte Schriften zur Antike und zur neueren Literatur* (2nd edn., 1970), *Griechisches Theater, Übersetzungen von acht griechischen Dramen* (1964), and the posthumously published four-volume *Tübinger Vorlesungen* comprising *Die Anfänge der Philosophie bei den Griechen* (vol. 1, 1978), *Die Anfänge der Geschichtsschreibung bei den Griechen* (vol. 2, 1982), *Die frühgriechische Lyrik* (vol. 3, 1989), and *Die griechische Tragödie* (vol. 4, 1992). Wolfgang Schadewaldt died in 1974.

'Richard Wagner and the Greeks' is the first of three lectures which Schadewaldt gave at Bayreuth between 1962 and 1964; the opening lecture first appeared in the *Lohengrin-Programmheft der Bayreuther Festspiele* in 1962. The second lecture, entitled '*The Ring of the Nibelung* and Aeschylus' *Prometheus*', analyses in detail the connection between Wagner's *Ring* and its Greek archetype, first discussed in the opening lecture. The third lecture, entitled simply 'Supplement', concludes Schadewaldt's series of lectures with a renewed attempt to define in more precise terms the relationship of Wagner to the Greeks. A fourth and final lecture, entitled 'The Original Structure of

Greek Tragedy and its Earliest Development in Aeschylus', was drafted but never delivered. Along with a short preface, the first three lectures appeared in *Theater heute* 10 in 1967 under the general title 'Richard Wagner and the Greeks', before then being reprinted in the enlarged two-volume collection of Schadewaldt's essays *Hellas und Hesperien*, published in 1970 to mark his seventieth birthday. The three lectures were delivered at the request of Richard Wagner's grandson, Wieland Wagner, who as director of the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus* in the post-war period transformed the production of the operas, stressing their universality over their purely German significance. On their appearance in *Theater heute* and *Hellas und Hesperien*, Schadewaldt dedicated the lectures to the memory of Wieland Wagner, who died in 1966.

The study of the Greek elements in Wagner's thought and art reflects just one example of the many investigations Schadewaldt conducted into the influence of the Greeks on modern authors, such as Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin, and Kleist. In a series of lectures designed for a non-specialist audience, Schadewaldt elected not to provide chapter and verse for quotations. Wherever possible, I have translated the quotations as they appear in standard English editions; citations and annotations, the latter of which have been kept to a minimum, appear in the translator's endnotes.

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WOLFGANG SCHADEWALDT

In a letter to Friedrich Nietzsche dated 12 June 1872, written in connection with the publication and public reception of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Richard Wagner recalls the path of his own education. He does not, he says, 'believe that there could have been a young lad with a greater enthusiasm for classical antiquity' than himself in his student days at the Kreuz Grammar School in Dresden.[2] While at the time most captivated by Greek mythology and history, Wagner also felt strongly drawn to the study of the Greek language. His 'enthusiasm' was such that it attracted the attention of his favourite teacher at the school, Doctor Sillig, who 'strongly urged me to adopt philology as my

profession'.[3] Later of course, at the St Nicholas and St Thomas School in Leipzig, 'these tastes and inclinations were completely rooted out', and as time passed Wagner must have come to doubt whether his interest in Greek antiquity had ever really been serious. But the 'continual reviving of these tastes and inclinations' during his later development convinced him that 'something had been stifled in me by a fatal system of schooling'.[4] 'Again and again, amid the most distressing tasks of a life entirely removed from these studies, the only way by which I seemed to be able to gain a *breath of freedom* was by plunging into this antique world, however much I was now handicapped by having well-nigh forgotten the language.'[5] Richard Wagner also speaks of how other musicians, while perhaps having a fluent understanding of Greek, could make no use of it in their conducting, composing and playing of music, 'whereas I, strange to say, had worked out from Greek antiquity *an ideal for my artistic vision,* despite my restricted intercourse with it'.[6]

This comment by the fifty-nine year old composer on 'his own educational experience' strikes one as important enough.[7] 'Plunging' into the ancient Greek world as the 'only way to gain a breath of freedom', antiquity as the province from which he developed 'an ideal for his artistic vision': such are the phrases Wagner uses with decisive clarity to characterize the personal and artistic meaning Greek antiquity had for him. In no way was the ancient Greek world for Wagner simply a cultural force of the past. His study of the Greeks was motivated not only by personal predilection or dispassionate scholarly interest (regardless of how strong this inclination may have been). He was occupied with the Greeks almost all his life. Time and time again, in a variety of ways and with striking urgency, Wagner seizes upon the Greeks in order creatively to appropriate Greek religion and myth, Greek poetry and thought, and the Greek idea of culture for his own artistic purpose. Greece constitutes an extraordinarily vital element in Richard Wagner's entire life, character and artistic activity, and should not be overlooked as an essential factor in his overall development.

The lecture that follows represents an attempt to highlight the Greek components of Wagner's intellectual and artistic development. Above all, two things should be emphasized: the influence of Greek elements deeply embedded in Wagner's thought and art, and the kind of Hellenism still productively at work in Wagner's nineteenth century. First, we will trace

Richard Wagner's study of Greek antiquity during the main periods of his life. For this endeavour we will rely especially on his autobiographical testimony. We will then consider the consequences that his study of the Greeks had for his theoretical understanding of art as well as for the fundamental character of his own artistic work.

Youth

Wagner's interest in the Greeks was first sparked while a youth in Dresden and Leipzig (from around 1822 to 1827). At this time, as he recalls in his autobiography *My Life*, and in keeping with his letter to Nietzsche, Greek history captured Wagner's imagination to the extent that the names of Marathon, Salamis, and Thermopylae came to constitute for him 'nothing less than a historical canon'.[8] His youthful enthusiasm was vitally linked to the war of liberation of modern Greece; in this revolt of the Greeks against the Turks, Wagner saw something akin to a reappearance of the struggle of the Hellenes against the Persians.[9] What is more, at this time Greek mythological tales took such a strong hold upon his imagination that, Wagner states, 'I tried to imagine their heroes speaking to me in their native tongue, so as to satisfy my longing for complete familiarity with them.'[10] Here, the kindness and understanding of his most beloved teacher, Sillig, must have provided Wagner with the impetus necessary to complete various assignments at an early age: verse translations from Greek, original poems and exercises in recitation, notably Hector's farewell to Andromache in the *Iliad*.

Yet what appears to have been most decisive for Wagner in this early period was the influence of a figure from his own immediate surroundings: his uncle *Adolf Wagner* (b. 1774). After taking his degree in theology and philology, this notable man had studied language after language and, moreover, made a name for himself as an independent writer and translator. In Jena he had met Schiller. Adolf Wagner could thus tell his young nephew of Schiller, just as he could produce a letter he had received from Goethe. Amongst his translations was one of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. As a translator, Adolf Wagner objected to exact imitation and ridiculed 'Grecifying', as he – a professed opponent of all idealizing Grecomania – labelled an immoderate partiality to Greek archetypes. It is thus possible, indeed probable, that Richard Wagner received early on from his uncle the impetus for his own free and creative relationship to the Greeks, which never

sought to imitate in the classicizing manner. His uncle's rich collection of books was the greatest of attractions for the young Wagner, and he recounts in a charming way how his uncle (who believed himself to be, after his friend Ludwig Tieck, one of the great reciters) read him a Greek tragedy and did not hold it against the young boy when he fell fast asleep during the recitation.[11]

Of course, what followed was the period in which the dæmon of music first took powerful hold of the boy. It was also at this same time that Wagner was put back a year on his transfer from Dresden to the rigorous St Thomas School in Leipzig, despite the fact that he had already translated twelve books of Homer into German. It was above all this humiliating experience of 'being put back' that led to the estrangement from the Greeks of which he speaks in his letter to Nietzsche. Once more he attempted, in private lessons, to read Sophocles in the original language. But neither the teacher nor the surroundings were such as to make these lessons a success. The teacher was not the right man, and the room in which the lessons took place looked out on a tannery, whose 'repulsive odour affected my nerves so strongly that it ruined Sophocles and Greek for me altogether'.[12]

Paris

Wagner's years in Paris (1839-42) form the second period of his now more conscious, mature, and comprehensive appropriation of Greek antiquity. Nearly thirty years old, beset by severe financial constraints and often hard at work, yet now for the first time striving to establish himself as a writer, Wagner is drawn anew, 'amidst the most distressing troubles', to antiquity and to the Greeks. And again, it is a personality who exerts great influence on Wagner in his new encounter with the ancients: the somewhat older *Samuel Lehrs* (born in 1806 in Königsberg). Lehrs, brother of the prominent scholar Karl Lehrs, professor of classical philology at the University of Königsberg, had come to Paris around 1837 as a freelance who did not want to be tied down to a fixed profession. As a classical scholar hardly inferior to his brother, Samuel Lehrs carried out editorial work in the field of Greek epic and didactic poetry, and especially Oppian, for the Didot Publishing House in Paris. While in Paris, however, Lehrs lived in destitution right up to his premature death in 1843, deeply mourned by Wagner. This man, who was well-versed in many disciplines beyond his own more narrow specialization and who, despite his

constant struggle with poverty, 'always preserved an even temper and showed himself in every way to be a model of disinterestedness and self-sacrifice',[13] first became acquainted with Wagner as a 'fellow-sufferer in Parisian poverty': 'we soon became so intimate that I had him dropping in nearly every evening with my other friend Anders.'[14] In those days, the study of Greek and Roman antiquity often led to the investigation of the early forms of the German language – objectively speaking, a legitimate and very fruitful connection which has since been almost completely lost. Like other classicists of the period, Lehrs also concerned himself with the early history of the Germanic world, and it was he who, with a yearbook of the *Königsberger Deutschen Gesellschaft*, provided Wagner with ideas not only for *Tannhäuser* and the Tournament of Song on the Wartburg, but also for *Meistersinger* and *Lohengrin*.[15] One can hardly overestimate the stimulus Lehrs provided for Wagner's interest in Greek antiquity, especially if one considers how invigorating an all-night conversation between friends can be and how receptive the man of genius is for just such an unintended flowering of ideas. The interest in Greek culture was in any case so strong that Wagner considered turning 'his attention again to the great authors of ancient Greece in the original language'. But Lehrs dissuaded Wagner from this effort – just as Goethe had done in a corresponding case forty years earlier with his friend Schiller (see his letter of 28 September 1800) – 'with the well-meant consolation, that as I could only be born once, and that with music in me, I should learn to understand this branch of knowledge without the help of grammar or lexicon; whereas if Greek were to be studied with real enjoyment, it was no joke, and would not suffer being relegated to a secondary place'.[16] Wagner appears to have followed this advice. An avid reader all his life, he managed to acquire – even without ever brushing up his grammatical and lexical skills – 'the required knowledge of Greek', and attained over the years a remarkable breadth of learning in classical studies.

Breakthrough

The third decisive period in Richard Wagner's engagement with the Greeks heralds the 'breakthrough', as one may no doubt term it. Set off by an experience akin to a 'stroke of genius', this breakthrough now led to his real encounter with the Greeks and was soon to have a creative influence on his thought and art.

We find Wagner again in Dresden, where since 1843 he has been working as court conductor, a position offering financial security but also new difficulties and worries. Despite these, Wagner achieves in this period his first great successes: the performances of *Rienzi* (October 1842), *The Flying Dutchman* (January 1843), and *Tannhäuser* (October 1845). Wagner is now hard at work on *Lohengrin*; he has completed the libretto and read it to Ferdinand Hiller's small circle of friends, and in the summer of 1847, after the composition of the third act, is busy with the first and second acts. Meanwhile, as Wagner himself emphasizes, he had gathered together a collection of books which included the ancient authors. Wagner admits of course that he had to facilitate his study of Greek and Roman antiquity 'by our translations that have become classics in their own right'; 'for it had already became clear to me in the case of Homer, which I had acquired in the original, that next to my work as court conductor I would have to reckon with a bit too much time, if I wanted to regain my earlier knowledge of Greek.' Wagner was thus forced to set aside once more his still strong inclination to master the ancient language. Nonetheless, in a most characteristic fashion he stressed how, now equipped with his collection of books, he believed himself to be capable of finding 'enough solace to offset the nuisances with which I clearly must reckon in my occupation and social position'. What is more, he moved into a spacious apartment in the former Marcolini palace (where Napoleon had once stayed), which placed at his disposal a large garden planted with beautiful trees. The glorious summer of 1847 was another circumstance which put him in a happy frame of mind, something Wagner otherwise did not often enjoy. It is in this period, he reports, that friends were astonished to hear him 'speak, often with great animation, about Greek literature and history, yet never about music'.[17] Wagner also vividly depicts the way – all the while he was composing *Lohengrin* – in the solitude of his studies Greek antiquity now filled him 'with such an overwhelming enthusiasm that, whenever I entered into conversation, and by hook or crook had managed to get it round to this theme, I could only speak in terms of the strongest emotion'.[18] 'Enjoying the pleasure of almost complete seclusion', throughout this summer Wagner was able to maintain 'a frame of mind exceedingly favourable to the completion of *Lohengrin*'.[19] What engendered this 'frame of mind' – 'a serenity which I experienced with *a quite new intensity*' – were 'my studies, which I pursued eagerly all the time I was working on my opera'.[20] The following words, with which Wagner many years

later speaks of his studies, document the crucial importance of this experience: 'For the first time I now mastered Aeschylus with mature feeling and understanding. Droysen's eloquent commentaries in particular helped to bring before my imagination the intoxicating effect of the production of an Athenian tragedy, so that I could see the *Oresteia* with my mind's eye, as though it were actually being performed, and *the power of its effect* on me was something I had never experienced. Nothing, however, could equal the sublime emotion with which the *Agamemnon* inspired me, and right up to the end of the *Eumenides* I remained in a state of rapture, and since then I have never really been completely reconciled to modern literature. My ideas about the meaning of drama, and theatre in particular, were crucially shaped by these impressions.'[21]

Wagner also mentions his study of Aristophanes and Plato. In particular, he claims to have gained from Plato's *Symposium* 'such deep insight into the wonderful beauty of Greek life that I felt myself more truly at home in Athens than in any conditions which the modern world has to offer'.[22] And Wagner describes further how, beyond his engagement with the historians of the ancient world, Droysen, Niebuhr and Gibbon, he proceeds to explore early German history, where Jakob Grimm becomes his intellectual guide. Wagner explains how he became acquainted with the *Nibelungenlied* and how, above all, the *Volsunga Saga* opened up for him the mythical world, which he had known before only through the ancient *Book of Heroes*.

'All this was sinking into my mind and slowly maturing, whilst with true ecstasy of delight I was finishing the music of the first two acts of *Lohengrin*, which were now at last completed.'[23] And, Wagner continues, 'I now succeeded in shutting out the past and building up for myself a new world of the future, which presented itself with ever-growing clarity to my mind as the refuge to which I might retreat from all the miseries of modern opera and theatre life. At the same time, my health and temper were settling down into a mode of almost unclouded serenity, which made me long oblivious of all the worries of my position.'[24] Reports of daily excursions to the immediate surroundings and the newly acquired opportunity for good-humored association with friends and acquaintances complete the picture Wagner paints of an extremely happy time of his life, a time characterized by both creative conception and creative reception. Visitors to the Marcolini estate garden are said to have found Wagner often on the highest branches of a tree or on the neck of Neptune, 'which figured as the centre of a colossal group of statues, in

a basin unfortunately always dry, dating from the glorious time when it was owned by the Marcolinis'. Beyond the reported events, it is the glamour of the description, the unusual liberty and warmth of his language, which seem here to reveal that Wagner's encounter with the Greeks, and especially with Aeschylus, while completing the sketch of *Lohengrin* in the summer of 1847, reflects something truly momentous, something which we find otherwise only in our great creative poets and Hellenists. Particularly striking is the affinity with Schiller's discovery of the Greeks and especially Homer in the summer of 1788 in Rudolstadt and Volkstedt. During that time, Schiller writes to Körner (20 August 1788): 'I am reading now almost nothing besides Homer ... In the next two years I have decided not to read any modern authors ... none does me any good; each takes me away from myself, and the ancients now give me true pleasure.' Schiller's orientation towards the Greeks was likewise decisive, and, as with Schiller, Wagner's creative appropriation of the Greeks had lasting effects.

Further engagement with the Greeks

From the 'breakthrough' in the summer of 1847, the Greeks and everything Greek remained a constant presence in Wagner's later life. There were new encounters, such as that with Homer's *Odyssey* in the summer of 1850 during his exile in Zürich: 'I was exceedingly cheered during those days by the perusal of the *Odyssey*, which I had not read for so long and which had fallen into my hands by chance. Homer's suffering hero, always homesick yet condemned to perpetual wandering, and always valiantly overcoming all difficulties, was strangely sympathetic to me [Wagner means: corresponded with his own fate].'[25] At the same time, Wagner engages more extensively with the major works of contemporary classical scholarship with a romantic-historical character. Beginning with Droysen, who had given him access to Aeschylus, Wagner presses forward to the work of Welcker, Boeckh, and above all Karl Otfried Müller; he acquaints himself with Müller's formidably learned work on the Dorians and later, in retrospect, can say of this important scholar that 'through the depth of his investigations he showed the Dorian character in a different light from that which one had once imagined, through, for instance, the Apollo Belvedere.' Here, his dismissal of the Apollo Belvedere is not so much a dismissal of Winckelmann as of the imitative classicism from which Wagner consciously kept a clear distance.

The Austrian poet Johann Nordmann confirms the impression we have of the comprehensive erudition of Wagner in his later years. After a visit, Nordmann reports that he 'spoke of the Greek dramatists with an appreciation one might seek in vain in a specialist of the discipline'. Further confirmation comes from Wagner's own long series of theoretical writings which begins in 1849. Here he displays an immediate command and abundant knowledge of Greek art and poetry, religion and myth. One after another, these writings bear out his own claim that his 'ideas concerning the meaning of drama and theatre in particular' were 'crucially shaped by the impressions he had of the Greeks'. For the time being we can simply point to Wagner's own original interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which he develops in *Opera and Drama* and which, next to the oft-cited interpretation of Hegel, deserves more attention than it has received to date.

Instead of providing further individual examples of his knowledge of the Greeks, I will refer to Wagner's reading of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, which he held on three consecutive evenings at the beginning of 1880 in the Villa Angri at Naples. 'It is', writes Cosima of the reading, 'as if I had never seen Richard so radiant, enlivened, and at one with what he reads. The [original Athenian] performance cannot have been more sublime than this presentation. The first cries of Cassandra were heart-rending.' And a quarter of a century later, the Russian painter Paul von Joukowsky, who also attended the reading, still recalls: 'Her cry still rings in my ears: "Apollo, Apollo!"' Wagner is said to have stated of the entire trilogy: 'I believe it is in every way the most perfect tragedy: religiously, philosophically, poetically and artistically. One can set beside it the historical plays of Shakespeare, but Shakespeare had no Athenian state, no founding of the Areopagus at the end.' And he makes further pertinent comments on the 'exhaustion of Clytaemnestra, her disdain for the Chorus which allowed and even approved of the murder of Iphigeneia'. Of especial significance for a precise understanding of his interpretation is the way Wagner comprehends and emphasizes the death of Agamemnon as the 'expiatory' death of the father, in accordance with Clytaemnestra's declaration that 'Lovingly, as befits a daughter, Iphigeneia shall meet her father, absolved, in the next world, and shall fling her arms around him and kiss him.'[26] 'These are the special, incomprehensible features', and Wagner adds: 'In all seriousness, it fits in with my own work.'

Especially telling are the connections Wagner made in this period between

Aeschylus and his own compositions. Of the choral songs of the 'libation bearers' and 'their flood, their ever recurring torrent of lamentation': 'I know something similar and that is the second act of *Tristan and Isolde*.' Wagner also speaks of the 'glorious end of the *Eumenides*': it inspires the most far-reaching thoughts and comparisons. 'In one of his works', Wagner says he has 'united the ideal and the real world in a way which reminds him of the "creation of the Areopagus" as the keystone of a sublime work of art: I refer to Hans Sachs' response at the conclusion of *Meistersinger*.' Thus, in Wagner's own words, a significant portion of *Meistersinger* is grounded in the tragic art of Aeschylus.

Influence on Thought and Art

In this second part of my lecture, I will consider the material influence Wagner's encounter with the Greeks had upon his own theoretical writings on art and his great theatrical works. In order to have a clear starting-point, I will call attention again to Wagner's own claims:
that he 'worked out an ideal for his artistic vision by recourse to classical antiquity (and this means principally Greek antiquity)';
that 'his ideas on the meaning of drama and theatre in particular' were 'crucially shaped by these impressions';
that Wagner, as explained in his essay 'The Music of the Future', searched for 'a prototype' for his idea of festival performance: 'I found it in the theatre of ancient Athens, a space where theatre opened only on especially sacred days of festivity, where, along with the enjoyment of art, a religious festival was celebrated.' Wagner here also refers further to Aeschylus and Sophocles.

Thought

Three essays best document the first powerful effects the 'breakthrough' had on Wagner's theory of art: the essay *Art and Revolution* from the summer of 1849, *The Art-Work of the Future* from the autumn of the same year, which was dedicated to the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, and then the great treatise *Opera and Drama* from the beginning of 1851.

In these writings, what had long been germinating in Wagner's thoughts and then grasped in tentative experiments was now articulated decisively and firmly in great historical narratives, inferences and programmatic images of the future, accompanied by constant reference to the Greeks.

As is well known, Richard Wagner had for some time been dissatisfied with Romantic grand opera in the style of Bellini, Meyerbeer, Marschner *et al.* In *Rienzi* – the work with which he first aspired to make a name for himself – Wagner still paid tribute to this style, but then in *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser* he released himself from it step by step, before finding his own distinctive form of balanced dramatic architecture in *Lohengrin.* In these early works, above all, he had progressively mastered the operatic element he hated most, the chorus, by integrating it – up to and including *Lohengrin* – ever more closely into the dramatic action. Furthermore, as early as *The Flying Dutchman*, he began to develop the unifying *leitmotiv* of the action of the music drama where, as he reports, in Senta's Ballad about the Dutchman a musical motif spreads itself the entire drama. Wagner had already mastered all this. Now, in the creative hiatus of his exile in Zürich, he undertakes the radical *destruction of opera* and *new construction* – not of 'music drama' but, as he once said, of *tragedy*. Renaissance opera wanted to revive this tragedy, the tragedy of the Greeks. According to Wagner, however, its true renewal remained a task for the 'art-work of the future'. In the destruction of opera and the new construction of music-dramatic tragedy, Wagner was guided by the perceptions and conclusions of contemporary historians of classical antiquity, such as Boeckh, Otfried Müller, Welcker, and Droysen. They were all in the process of elaborating a new and highly stratified image of Greek antiquity, contrasting sharply with classicism. Three principal ideas of this new scholarship became programmatic in Wagner's theoretical writings on art: the tragedy of the Greeks is understood as a religious festival; its material, popular myth, is taken to be the sensuous-figural expression of the primordial wisdom of the nation; and tragedy itself is perceived as a unified work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), in which poetry, music, and dance (by a group) form an original vital unity. Particularly noteworthy is the way Wagner's intellectual development is influenced by the conclusions of scholarly research. In this respect, his Hellenism differs from the Hellenism at work in the poets and creative figures of the neo-humanist tradition up to and including the older Goethe. Like those artists, though, Wagner took up his scholarship with a passion for production and always sought to turn theory into creative practice.

It is impossible, though without doubt necessary, to show in detail here how in his theoretical writings Wagner develops the three principal ideas – unified work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), festival performance, and national

saga or *mythos* – with constant reference to Greek history, art, and life. For Wagner, ascertaining and validating his own ideas by recourse to the Greeks becomes a fundamental way of thinking. 'On reflection', he states at the beginning of his essay *Art and Revolution*, 'we cannot take one step forward in our art without confronting its intimate connection with the art of ancient Greece. For, in point of fact, our modern art is but one link in the artistic development of the whole of Europe; and this development found its starting-point with the Greeks.'[27] From these origins, Wagner traces the way that what for the Greeks was still unified in *mousikê* gradually differentiates itself into individual art-forms: in their estranged and degenerate versions of this original unity, music, dance, and poetry – taken separately – lose their original identity and become 'solitary' arts. Such is the fate of poetry, to name just one example: 'Poetry is no longer poetic, it no longer presents, but only describes, only mediates ... it has shrivelled to dry, mute signs, and become a manner of writing, a style' – and we might add: has become 'literature'. This is an idea which an eminent music historian in Munich, Thrasybulos Georgiades, has recently brought home to us again in his comprehensive historical survey.[28] And concerning *mythos*, Wagner writes: 'only from the Greek world-view has the genuine artwork of drama been able as yet to blossom forth. But this drama's stuff was the *mythos*; and from its essence alone can we learn to comprehend the highest Greek art, and its form that so enchants us... Greek tragedy is the artistic embodiment of the spirit and contents of Greek *mythos*.'[29] In this *mythos*, however, 'all the creative energy of the nation contributes towards a sensuous realization (as yet unpremeditated) of the broadest grouping of the most manifold phenomena, and in the most concentrated form.'[30] 'The incomparable thing about the *mythos* is that it is true for all time, and its content, however tightly concentrated, is inexhaustible throughout the ages.'[31] 'The tragic poet merely imparted the content and essence of the *mythos* in the most conclusive and intelligible manner; his tragedy is nothing other than the artistic completion of the *mythos* itself; while the *mythos* is the poetic creation of a community's view of life.'[32] And in *Opera and Drama*, Wagner interprets the myth of Oedipus up to the sacrificial death of Antigone as 'an intelligible picture of the whole history of mankind, from the beginnings of society to the inevitable downfall of the state' (which is no longer necessary, but rather superfluous in a future where 'every individual will in some way truly be an artist').[33]

Wagner's strong orientation towards the Greeks remains, however, at all times just that: an orientation, that is, an apprehension of the fundamental characteristics of great art through the irretrievably lost Greek prototype. For Wagner, it is never a matter of copying Greek tragedy, and *mythos* must always be experienced and realized in a new fashion. Consciousness of historical distance, informed by the beginnings of historicism in the nineteenth century, is always active in Wagner's artistic sensibility. Accordingly, the new tragedy, which he seeks and in which the tragedy of the Greeks is to be reborn, can never be achieved simply by performing Sophocles' *Antigone* with new romantic music. That was attempted in Potsdam in 1842, when *Antigone* was first performed complete and in a new production, on the modern stage, featuring Donner's translation and Mendelssohn's music. In this performance, organized by Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia at the request of influential artists and scholars, Wagner saw only an 'unavoidable lie'; in a spirit of constructive anger, he repeatedly condemned this production, which at the time created a great stir. On the contrary, Wagner believed that, in its aim and its content, the new *mythos* would have to rise out of the spirit of the contemporary age and be 'socialist' and 'humane', while its material would be taken from the new knowledge of German and Northern European national saga. Thus, the lord of this new tragedy is to be Apollo, but an Apollo now in communion with Jesus. At the conclusion of *Art and Revolution*, Wagner writes: 'Jesus would have shown us that we are all alike men and brothers; while Apollo would have stamped this mighty bond of brotherhood with the seal of strength. ... The two most sublime teachers of mankind: Jesus, who suffered for all men; and Apollo, who raised them to their joyful dignity!'[34] The tragedies that arise from this new world will be 'festivals of humanity': 'in them, the free, strong, and beautiful individual will celebrate' – as was first established as an ideal by the Greeks – 'the joys and pains of his love, and in love accomplish the great sacrifice of his life with sublime dignity, free from all convention and etiquette.'

Perhaps the most important example of the way Wagner understands how to exercise his decisive transformation on the Greeks' established archetypes is his conviction that in the new music drama the ancient chorus must assume the form of the modern orchestra.

The ancient *orchêstra* was the dance-stage on which the chorus sang and moved; it also harboured the element of lyrical music, from which dramatic

action was born. Now, it is to be transformed into the *orchestra*; that is, into the instrumental orchestra which 'is merely audible' and 'which is our most original, indeed our only really creative innovation in the sphere of art.' The emphasis has moved from the chorus in the *orchêstra* to the orchestra itself, i.e., to 'harmony's realized thought in its highest, most vital mobility.'[35] As the realization in dance of the musical element that sustains the tragedy, Wagner's conception of the tragic chorus leads far beyond Schlegel's restricted but influential thesis about the ancient chorus as the ideal spectator. On the other hand, Nietzsche's notion of the birth of tragedy from the spirit of music is already clearly prefigured in Wagner's Zürich writings. Again, the orchestra corresponds to the ancient chorus in its relation to the plot, but not in the banal sense of a commentary through *leitmotiv* on the staged events; instead, 'as a premonition, the absolute melody of the orchestra points in a preparatory fashion to the verse-melody of the actor' or is derived from it 'as a memory of the thought of the instrumental motif'. In this way, the dialogue of the actor can preserve the 'naive precision which constitutes the true life of the drama'. This all-embracing significance of the modern orchestra as the historically inevitable continuation of the ancient chorus, Wagner once captured in a comparison, which (it is no coincidence) in its inexhaustible imaginative complexity assumed the form of a Homeric simile.

Wagner had earlier compared the orchestra – as the 'conqueror of the endless floods of harmony' – to a ship.[36] Now, 'as conquered harmony', the orchestra is compared to a

> deep, but limpid mountain-lake lit by the rays of the sun to its very bottom; a lake whose whole surrounding shores are plainly visible from every point upon it. From tree-trunks reared upon the rocky soil washed down from the hills since time immemorial, a boat has now been built; bound fast with iron clamps, well-stocked with oars and rudder, it has been shaped and fitted closely to the aim of being carried by the waters and cutting through them. This boat, now launched upon the lake, urged forward by the pulsing oars, and guided by its helm, is the verse-melody of the dramatic singer, borne on the sounding surges of the orchestra. The boat is a thing quite other than the mirror of the lake, and yet it is built and fitted with sole regard to

> the water and in an exact adjustment to its qualities; on land the boat is of no use at all, or at most for breaking into common firewood, to feed a humble kitchen hearth. Only on the lake does it become a joyous thing of life: it is carried and yet it moves, it is moved and yet always at rest; as it sweeps across the lake it draws our gaze forever back to itself, like the point, enacted, of the billowing lake's existence, which before had seemed to us without a purpose. Yet the boat does not float on the surface of the water-mirror: the lake can only carry it on one steady course, if it plunges in the water one full portion of its fronting body. A flimsy plank, that merely grazed the surface of the lake, would be tossed hither and thither by the waves, without direction, whichever way their waters streamed; whereas a lumpish stone, again, must sink into them. But not only does the boat embed itself within the lake with one full side of its body: the helm which governs its direction, and the oar which gives it motion, both gain their governing and moving force only from their contact with the water, which first empowers the effective pressure of the guiding hand. With every forward thrust, the oar cuts deep into the ringing surface of the water; raised high, it lets the clinging drip flow back again in drops of melody.[37]

Wagner believes that it is not necessary for him 'to explain this simile, in order to make clear the relation involved in the contact of the word-tone-melody of the human voice with the orchestra.'[38]

Wagner also, with great perspicuity, grasped the ancient *theatron*, that amphitheatrical show-place of the theatre, and simultaneously provided it with a creatively modern interpretation. He speaks of the arrangement of the interior space of the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus* and argues that once the spectator has taken his seat he will find himself 'in an actual "theatron", that is, a space intended for no other purpose than his looking in it... Between him and the image to be looked at there is nothing plainly visible, merely a distance held in suspense by architectural means between the two proscenia; whereby the scene is removed as it were to the unapproachable world of dreams, while the phantasmal music sounding from the "mystic gulf", like vapours rising from the holy womb of Gaia (the Earth) beneath the Pythia's seat, inspires him with

that clairvoyance in which the scenic picture melts into the truest effigy of life itself.'[39] Here, the performing space of the Greek theatre, located under the bright open sky, is transformed into the dark interior of the modern theatre. At the same time, however, Wagner also interprets the scenic image in a way that distances it from any kind of naturalistic representation. In a footnote to the passage cited above, Wagner criticizes 'the scandalous forward thrust of the scenic image, so that the spectator can almost touch it'.[40]

Art

We can already hear Greek elements resonating in the theatrical work Wagner completed before the breakthrough of 1847. This is not surprising but, indeed, to be expected from a man who, as our biographical overview has shown, involved himself, from childhood, with Greek myth and poetry. After all, it is pretty well characteristic of any outstanding person that a new development is never entirely new, but is there in embryo before it forces its way through to his consciousness.

It may seem bold at first to perceive a kind of essential affinity between the Flying Dutchman and the figure of Odysseus. Yet it exists, and in *A Communication to My Friends*, Wagner was unequivocal in his belief in just such a connection. And beyond the Dutchman, who like Odysseus is a seaman, Wagner also placed Tannhäuser in the same mythical relationship:

> The figure of the 'Flying Dutchman' is a mythical creation of the people: a primal trait of human nature speaks out from it . . . the longing after rest amidst the storms of life. In the blithe world of Greece we meet with it in the wanderings of Odysseus and his longing for home, house, hearth, and wife . . . The Christian, without a home on earth, embodied this trait in the figure of the 'Wandering Jew' . . . At the close of the Middle Ages a new, more active impulse led the nations to fresh life . . . The sea, in its turn, became the soil of life; yet no longer the narrow land-locked sea of the Hellenic world, but the great ocean that girdles all the earth. Here comes a break with the old world; the longing of Odysseus for home and hearth and wedded wife, fed by the sufferings of the 'Wandering Jew' until it became a yearning for death, had reached the level of a craving for a new, unknown home, invisible as yet, but dimly boded. This hugely diffused feature confronts us in the *mythos* of the

> 'Flying Dutchman' . . . Here we light upon a remarkable mixture, a blend, created by the imagination of the people, of the character of Odysseus with that of the Wandering Jew . . . Like Ahasuerus, the Dutchman yearns for his sufferings to be ended by death; and he may gain this redemption, denied to the undying Jew, at the hands of a woman who, of very love, shall sacrifice herself for him. . . . But this woman is no longer Odysseus' Penelope, caring for hearth and home, as courted in the days of old, but the quintessence of womankind; and yet the still unmanifest, the longed-for, the dreamt-of, the infinitely womanly woman.[41]

One notes how a fundamental motif in Wagner's own personal life influences this interpretation (both composite and differentiated) of the myth of Odysseus and the Flying Dutchman: the 'longing after rest amidst the storms of life'. Meanwhile, there also exists an intimate rapport between Tannhäuser and the fate of Odysseus. Odysseus tears himself away from the arms of the nymph Calypso, flees from the allurements of the witch Circe, and is carried home by his longing for the wordly intimacy of his wife. 'Infinitely intensified and extended in content', this corresponds to the path Tannhäuser takes from Venus to Elizabeth.

But there is still more. Behind the action in *Lohengrin*, we see the outlines of a Greek archetype. Wagner himself notes: 'Who does not know the story of "Zeus and Semele"? The god loves a mortal woman, and for sake of this love, approaches her in human form; but the woman finds she does not know her lover as he really is, and, urged on by love's own ardour, demands that her consort show himself in the full sensual manifestation of his being. Zeus knows that he must elude her, that his true aspect must destroy her.'[42] Similarly, out of desire for the full sensual reality of her lover, Elsa must seek the destructive knowledge of the name and character of her beloved.

If in *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin* we can already recognize mythical palimpsests, where behind new forms of artistic expression the ancient script may still be seen, then it is in the tetralogical *Ring* cycle that we find the greatest example of Wagner's conscious attempt to fuse the material of Germanic saga with the dramatic construction of Greek myth. The 'breakthrough' to the Greeks in the summer of 1847, marked by the 'powerful impression' Aeschylus made on Wagner, now comes into force. Far from

resulting in mere imitation, variation, adaptation or poetification of the Greek example, the breakthrough engenders a highly productive 'primordial creation of the pre-formed', a process only superficially paradoxical.

Let us first list some important dates: as early as 1848, after the rapid completion of the *Nibelung* study in late summer, and around the time of the sketch of the drama of Achilles (subsequently put aside), comes the first draft of *Siegfried's Death* as a single drama (12-28 November). Soon afterwards, Wagner expands the plan, and in 1851 in a letter to his friend Theodor Uhlig writes: 'Along with *Siegfried*, still some big ideas in my head; three dramas with a three-act prelude.'[43] In the years that follow, Wagner completes the libretto of the tetralogy in reverse order, moving from *Siegfried's Death* (later *Twilight of the Gods*) to *Young Siegfried*, *Valkyrie* and *Rhinegold* (originally entitled *The Theft of the Rhinegold*) and in 1853 prints private copies for his friends.

The immediate consequence of Wagner's encounter with Aeschylus is the expansion of *Siegfried's Death*, originally designed as a single drama, into a tetralogy. Likewise, he develops the first three dramas, *Rhinegold*, *Valkyrie*, and *Siegfried*, on the model of Aeschylus' lost *Prometheus* trilogy, as reconstructed by Droysen (we have only *Prometheus Bound*) in his Aeschylus translation of 1832 (and again 1841), with which Wagner was familiar.[44] Yet this Greek archetype is buried so deep beneath the poetic structure of *The Ring,* and the vital transformation of the original into the new configuration is so utterly successful, that for over half a century this important connection between the two works remained undiscovered. Nietzsche perhaps knew of it from his discussions with Wagner. In the fourth essay of his *Untimely Meditations, Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* (1875-6), Nietzsche speaks of 'such approximations and affinities between Aeschylus and Richard Wagner that we are reminded, almost palpably, of the very relative nature of all concepts of time ... We experience phenomena which are so peculiar they would hang in the air, incomprehensible to us, if we could not look back over a tremendous space of time and connect them with their Greek counterparts.'[45] Robert Petsch deserves credit for having first noted the facts of the case in 1907, and Arthur Drews (1931) and Paul Maas (1932) have confirmed and clarified the connection so completely that today there can no longer be any doubt about it.

As is well known, Wagner took the main figures and general course of events of *The Ring* primarily from the prose narrative of the late *Volsunga*

Saga. With a sure touch, he also took a number of dramatically effective moments from this same source and, no doubt, from a number of Eddic poems. But Wagner could not build the entire structure of a tetralogy from this material alone. Though he may also have had a certain familiarity with Fouqué's trilogy *The Hero of the North* through the heroic drama *Sigurd the Dragonslayer* (1808), it was without doubt the Aeschylean example that exerted the decisive influence on the fundamental structure of the tetralogy; it harnessed Wagner's creative powers in a productive way and allowed him to develop them in a new direction. Along with a wealth of individual insights, he extrapolated from Droysen's reconstruction of Aeschylus' *Prometheia* the compositional principle of trilogic (or tetralogic) unity and, therewith, the great dramatic organization of events. (It may be noted that today we reconstruct the *Prometheus* trilogy in a different way from Droysen, and for the most part see in the extant *Prometheus Bound* the first and not the second play of the trilogy. But for our purposes we can disregard this fact.)[46]

According to Droysen, the first of the three Aeschylus plays dealt with the *theft of fire,* the second with the Titan's *binding,* and the third with his *release.* In Wagner's *Ring* libretto, correspondingly, the first drama was originally called *The Theft* and was to present the theft of the Rhinegold; the second, *Valkyrie*, was to end with the binding of Brünnhilde, to which she explicitly alludes in *Twilight of the Gods* ('He bound me to the rock'); then in *Siegfried* comes Brünnhilde's release.[47]

In the first drama of the *Prometheus* trilogy, according to Droysen, we have the building of the royal citadel of the young god Zeus. In Wagner's first drama, we have the erecting of Valhalla by the giants. A 'protective helmet' in Aeschylus (according to Droysen) corresponds to the 'magical helmet' of Alberich in *Rhinegold.*

The Rhine-daughters have their exact counterpart in the chorus of Oceanids in *Prometheus Bound*, and the giants in the Titans who (supposedly) form the chorus in Aeschylus' third play. The clairvoyant mother of Brünnhilde, Wala-Erda, is a clear imitation of the mother of Prometheus, Gaia-Themis. Wala-Erda rises up to her waist from the earth just as Gaia does in a whole series of representations in Greek art, which Wagner would surely have known.

The close connection between Loge and Prometheus, who both deal with fire (also understood as the origin of the human arts), forces itself upon the

reader. Wagner's Wotan has many traits in common with Homer's and Aeschylus' Zeus; Brünnhilde's charms in many ways parallel those of Zeus' daughter, Athene; and the quarrel between Wotan and his wife Fricka at the beginning of the second act of the *Valkyrie* reminds one 'not accidentally' of the squabbles between Zeus and Hera in Homer's *Iliad*, especially the well-known scenes in Books Four and Fourteen. Ultimately, the very idea of having the actions of gods superimposed on those of men points in a general way to Homer's *Iliad* as a model. But more important: the central scene of the *Valkyrie*, in which Brünnhilde shows Sieglinde the way to safety beyond the grips of the pursuing Wotan (himself moved to this act by Fricka) and proclaims to her that she 'bears within her protecting womb the noblest hero of the world' (*Sketch of 1852:* Strobel), proves to be an unmistakable mirror image of the equally central scene in *Prometheus Bound.* As Io is pursued by Hera, Prometheus shows her the way over the earth and reveals to her that she will give birth to Epaphus in Egypt. Through Epaphus, Io becomes the ancestor of Prometheus' liberator, Heracles, just as Sieglinde becomes the mother of Brünnhilde's liberator, Siegfried.

We could pursue this still further in more detail, but I will restrict myself here to only two more important connections. At the beginning of Droysen's introduction, we read of 'the gray primordial time, when the half-light of coming-into-being still lingered on the earth and in the sea', and of the genesis and destruction of existing things, of the 'timeless', of the 'time lacking fruitful procreation'. It is this very same half-light of evolution, as Paul Maas masterfully revealed, that also constitutes the theme which Wagner musically constructs in E flat major in his *Prelude* to *Rhinegold*, which forms the prelude to the entire work. Most decisive, however, is the following. In the Germanic sources Wagner used, the story of the Ring – upon which rests a curse and which in the end leads to the destruction of Siegfried and Brünnhilde – is in no way connected to the sagas of the twilight of the gods. In the first draft of *Twilight of the Gods* (that is, the original single drama *Siegfried's Death*), there is no connection between the downfall of the hero and that of the gods; after his death, Siegfried is taken by Brünnhilde to the gods as 'guarantor of eternal might'. In its tetralogical form, the *Ring* libretto unites two themes in a new way: the tragedy of the primordial guilt of the divine Wotan is linked to the tragedy of the innocent, 'free and strong', mortal Siegfried. The themes are held together by the motif of the Ring, forged from the gold of the Rhine. The Ring

comes to Siegfried only after a guilty act of robbery brings it first to the young gods, then the giants, and on to Fafner, the murderer of his brother Fasolt. This coupling of the tragedy of the hero with the fate of the gods is what first makes the *Ring* poem what it is, and it is refracted onto the Nibelung composition from Aeschylus' *Prometheia.* The *Prometheus* deals with the weal and woe of the newly established yet ever vulnerable dominion of Zeus. Prometheus alone is privy to the dangerous secret which threatens the continuance of Zeus' regime and which Zeus, in vain, attempts to have Prometheus reveal. In Aeschylus, of course, a reconciliation of the Titan with Zeus is ultimately achieved, and this for the time being rescues Zeus' dominion which, as a regime of justice, determines the contemporary world order. As originally planned, Wagner's drama of Siegfried's death would have first developed the fundamental theme of redeeming love, which had already appeared in *The Flying Dutchman*, and then would have situated the couple Siegfried and Brünnhilde next to the Dutchman and Senta, Tannhäuser and Elisabeth, and Lohengrin and Elsa, although perhaps in a grander and darker mode. As originally planned, the conclusion of *Siegfried's Death* develops further the 'transfiguration' of the lovers at the end of *The Flying Dutchman* (see Wagner's stage directions) by deifying Siegfried and Brünnhilde. Following Aeschylus, the single drama of *Siegfried's Death* is also already situated within the horizon of divine action, if only marginally. By having the love-plot between Siegfried and Brünnhilde enter into an uninterrupted relation with the sublime action of the twilight of the gods, Wagner's Nibelung poem reaches beyond the fate of men and heroes and becomes a universal poem in the Aeschylean sense.

Wagner's works are permeated by a thematic complex, which corresponds to the significant elements of his personal life, and which, with astonishing consistency, is transmitted to all his characters: illusion, dark disquietude, manic unrest, a searching for impassioned satisfaction, intoxicating pleasure, the joy of love, of power, and again the loathing of life, the deepest need to forget, to find tranquillity, to renounce, to die, the lust for death in renunciation, and above all else, like a bright light breaking in, the possibility of the truest devotion, the dissolution of self in a woman's love, which provides peace and redemption in ultimate selflessness and complete fidelity. It is the theme of Faust, inscribed in the new subjectivity of the nineteenth century. Its opening strains are clearly heard in the relationship between Adriano and Irene in *Rienzi,* and are then, as Nietzsche once put it, subjected

to ever greater 'moral ennoblement and enlargement' in the relationships between the Dutchman and Senta, Tannhäuser and Elisabeth.[48] With Siegfried and Brünnhilde in *The Ring*, again to quote from Nietzsche, this same theme then 'attains to an elevation and sanctity of mood that makes us think of the glowing ice- and snow-covered peaks of the Alps'.[49]

In a concluding section it would have been appropriate to show how, beyond the question of motifs and themes, one can perceive in Wagner's expanded *Ring* and, indeed, in his entire later work a change in staging and style of plot, on which again the Aeschylean example exerts a creative influence. It involves the transformation from a *dramatically strict, articulated* structure of action to a more *epic flowing* one.

The epic element was of course always present in Wagner's drama. One need only think of the Rome Narration in *Tannhäuser*. In *Lohengrin*, Wagner's dramatic art first attains its architectural balance by constructing in the round fundamental situations of life (instead of mere dramatic events) and creating individual characters of greater plasticity who are not just abstract 'figures' and whose speech is gathered into a complete utterance. To be sure, as the revised version of *Siegfried's Death*, *Twilight of the Gods* still maintains an articulated dramatic structure. But in the three subsequent dramas which Wagner develops out of *Siegfried's Death*, and especially in the *Valkyrie* and *Siegfried*, the movement towards an 'epic' plot-structure is visible. This epic structure can be observed in a magnificent, expansive, and tranquil staging, within which character and dialogue freely unfold. Of course, Wagner also aims his staging at the articulated theatrical moment as an effective means of achieving surprise, the unexpected and paradox. But the theatrical moment is now achieved by gradual intensification. In the staging, the opposition of two characters as clear antipodes is more forcefully developed; the dialogue becomes ever more authentically conversational; and – just as in Aeschylus and, above all, in *Prometheus* – the narrative exposition takes up ever more space. Throughout *Tristan*, *Meistersinger,* and *Parsifal,* Wagner maintains this expansive, powerfully epic, Aeschylean mode of staging.

We must restrict ourselves to these contexts and these indications concerning the Aeschylean element in Wagner's dramatic art. Because Wagner's intimate knowledge of the structure and elements of ancient tragedy was no less profound than his power of poetic appropriation, there is here an immense opportunity for more detailed research.

In general, we should guard against the exaggerated and historically inept assertion that Wagner's music drama represents a revival of Greek tragedy. Greek tragedy was historically unique and is impossible to 'revive'. Nevertheless, one may still maintain, in a more sober and historically circumspect way, that like no one else in the nineteenth century (understood here as beginning with the deaths of Hegel and Goethe), Richard Wagner took up with enthusiasm and new historical awareness the Greek archetypes and preserved them by an adept transformation. On this basis, he created in his work an astounding amalgam, which fused various cultural goals and modern ideas reflective of his own personal preoccupations into an artistic whole. Everything German, Christian and Greek, socialist (in its modern ideal sense), humanistic, and European, is united with what is inexpressibly characteristic of the modern individual to form a work of art in which Greek elements play a decisively constructive role, despite all their inherent limitations for the contemporary mind. As is so often the case, the Greek element manifests itself in three ways: it provides structure, acts as world-forming, and assists the creation of authentic figures, in which individual potential and human fate confront one another. This entire construction assumes the condition of the nineteenth century, and (as Nietzsche is later to grasp with almost excessive perspicacity) speaks to the subjective situation of the torn, worldless, and desperate individual in an age which has lost its old ties but not formed new ones. Wagner's distinctive achievement was to have brought discipline to this form of modern individuality through art and in art. While others sought to realize themselves as individuals in the private sphere of the bourgeois, the psychological and the subjective, Wagner succeeded in relating their problematic to the great, historic, cultural forces at work in Europe. He 'turned towards the Elysian fields' in order to project the image of the modern individual onto the broad horizon of forces, figures, mythical fates, and world events. In a great magnifying glass, Wagner lets the image of the modern individual, which combines the characteristics of Odysseus and Prometheus, confront its own sense of tragedy. Ultimately, this is the simple, indisputable truth about Richard Wagner's personal character and his art; it is also the reason for his growing influence in Europe and beyond, which no criticism can stem.

NOTES

1 Among the studies, to which the following lecture recognizes its indebtedness, are the following: Robert Petsch, 'Der Ring der Nibelungen in Beziehung zur griechischen Tragödie und zur zeitgenössischen Philosophie', *Richard Wagner-Jahrbuch* 2 (1907) 284-332; Otto Strobel, *Skizzen und Entwürfe zur Ringdichtung* (Munich 1930); Arthur Drews, *Der Ideengehalt von Richard Wagners dramatischen Dichtungen* (Leipzig 1931), with 'Besprechung' by Paul Maas, *Gnomon* 8 (1932) 174-6; Walther Vetter, 'Richard Wagner und die Griechen', *Die Musikforschung* 6 (1953) 111-26; and Curt von Westernhagen, *Richard Wagner* (Zürich 1956), ch. 6, 132ff., 'Das Beispiel der griechischen Tragödie'.
2 E. Foerster-Nietzsche (ed.), *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence,* tr. C.V. Kerr (New York 1921) 125. [As indicated in the translator's preface, existing translations of quotations from (mostly) Wagner's writings have been consulted *passim*, and retained where possible, but here and elsewhere modified in the interests of accuracy and decent English. For convenience, references to such writings are, however, given in the form of references to the translations, if only so that inquisitive readers may have an alternative version – and can see for themselves how bad exisiting translations of Wagner's prose works are (edd.).]
3 Ibid. 126.
4 Ibid. 126.
5 Ibid. 126.
6 Ibid. 126.
7 Ibid. 125.
8 Richard Wagner, *My Life*, 2 vols. (New York 1911) I 47.
9 Ibid. I 4-5.
10 Ibid. I 15.
11 Ibid. I 27.
12 Ibid. I 46.
13 Ibid. I 210.
14 Ibid. I 211.
15 Richard Wagner, *Prose Works,* tr. W. Ashton Ellis, 8 vols (London 1895-9), III 312.
16 Wagner, *My Life*, I 256-7.
17 Ibid. I 411.
18 Ibid. I 411.
19 Ibid. I 415.
20 Ibid. I 415.
21 Ibid. I 415.
22 Ibid. I 416.
23 Ibid. I 416.
24 Ibid. I 416.
25 Ibid. I 541.
26 Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1555-9.
27 Wagner, *Prose Works,* III 32.
28 T. Georgiades, *Musik und Rhythmus bei den Griechen* (Hamburg 1958).
29 Wagner, *Prose Works,* II 153-5.
30 Ibid. 154.
31 Ibid. 191.
32 Ibid. 156.

33 Ibid. 191.
34 Wagner, *Prose Works,* III 65.
35 Wagner, *Prose Works,* II 307.
36 Ibid. 301.
37 Ibid. 314-15.
38 Ibid. 315.
39 Wagner, *Prose Works*, V 337.
40 Ibid. 337.
41 Wagner, *Prose Works*, III 307-8.
42 Ibid. 334.
43 Richard Wagner, *Letters to his Dresden Friends* (New York 1972) 127.
44 J.G. Droysen's translation (*Des Aischylos Werke,* 4th edn., 1884) was reissued, rev. W. Nestle (4th edn., Stuttgart 1957).
45 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge 1983) 208-9.
46 Since Schadewaldt, one might add, 'we today' are less sure whether the *Prometheia* was a connected trilogy/tetralogy or indeed (and especially) was by Aeschylus at all: see in particular M. Griffith, *The Authenticity of Prometheus Bound* (Cambridge 1977).
47 In Schadewaldt's German text, this and the next three paragraphs are in note form. The translation has converted them into continuous prose.
48 Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations,* 202.
49 Ibid.

Wagner, the Greeks and Wolfgang Schadewaldt

JOHN DEATHRIDGE

At the beginning of his lecture Wolfgang Schadewaldt cites Wagner on his lifelong enthusiasm for the Greeks. Plunging into a study of the Greeks, Wagner wrote, was 'the one and only way ... to gain a breath of freedom' from a life dominated by 'distressing tasks'. And Greek antiquity was the province out of which the 'ideal' of his 'artistic vision' developed. These comments suggest that from the start of his career Wagner was in thrall to the idea of the Greeks as the pristine source of a lost culture – an ideal of fundamental origins projected onto the utopian future of a society encumbered by alienated living and a lack of spiritual freedom.

This reading of two tiny phrases plucked from Wagner's many published words on the Greeks may look heavy-handed. But the weakness of the several existing discussions of his relationship to the Greeks, many of them influenced

by Schadewaldt, is that the larger context of his love affair with neo-Hellenism in the German Idealist tradition, which clarifies the problematic weight that he implicitly attached to everything he said about the ancient world, is presented in only atrophied form, or neglected altogether. Hugh Lloyd-Jones acknowledged Schadewaldt's influence at the end of his own interesting essay on Wagner and the Greeks, but immediately qualified it by remarking that his German colleague's attitude was 'more reverential' than his, adding a bit cheekily, though significantly, that his own piece 'was not written for Bayreuth'.[1]

Lloyd-Jones clearly sensed a problem. Schadewaldt was of course sophisticated enough to know that talking about Wagner and the Greeks can be like talking about chalk and cheese. Towards the end of his lecture he writes that 'we should guard against the exaggerated and historically inept assertion that Wagner's music drama represents a revival of Greek tragedy.' Yet he is also prepared to play down the difference by treating the relationship between Wagner and the Greeks metaphorically. Thus Wagner '"turned toward the Elysian fields" in order to project the image of the modern individual onto the broad horizon of forces, figures, mythical fates, and world events. In a great magnifying glass, [he] lets the image of the modern individual, which combines the characteristics of Odysseus and Prometheus, confront its own sense of tragedy.' Wagner, it seems, can reach out and shake hands with Homer and Aeschylus over the ages after all.

Lloyd-Jones is more unequivocal. He finds 'something profoundly alien to the spirit of an ancient tragedy' in the *Ring*, and frankly admits: Wagner 'is not a true tragedian. Nor is the theodicy of the *Ring* significantly like a Greek theodicy.'[2] There are other questions, too, simmering under the surface of Schadewaldt's text. How could Wagner be so enthusiastic about Greek culture, to the extent of incorporating specific situations from ancient tragedy and allusions to Greek literature in his own works, yet at the same time seem so distant from it? And why did Bayreuth in the 1960s need a 'reverential' view of the subject when the climate of opinion there had already been influenced by the positive scepticism of Wieland Wagner? Wieland's scepticism, after all, was deemed to be quite radical at the time: it was directed not only towards his grandfather's problematic advocacy of German supremacy in his prose works in which the Greeks play a prominent role, but also towards the creative fall-out from the rebarbative idea of German dominance in the works themselves.

It is not hard to see in the phrases from Wagner's writings about the Greeks a central thread of German speculative philosophy – or at least some of its loose ends – which was spun out in a variety of ways by many intellectuals of Wagner's generation and before. Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) is probably the clearest statement of the idea that the educated citizen living among the fragments of modern life, despite advances in legal reform and scientific knowledge, is still in need of meaningful aesthetic experience that might lead to a conscious unification of culture such as the Greeks seemed to have created quite naturally. Schiller was not suggesting that modern citizens should become Greeks, but rather that the Greeks were a prelapsarian moment of cultural immediacy which we moderns, in our own way, should seek to regain.

In a nationalist corner of German Idealism, Fichte posited a unified Germany as an *a priori* category in his *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808) and presented German as the only remaining primordial language in touch with nature. Here, too, Fichte's model was the supposed purity of Greek culture, in particular its roots in a 'natural' congruence of language and nation, and – for nationalists of Fichte's generation at any rate – its unblemished racial character. The heady influence of Fichte's ideas on German thought and practice in the nineteenth century, incidentally, is perhaps the reason why the issue of language and nation, in which Wagner played a not insignificant role, and for which classical studies provided a formidable example, gradually came to be defined in terms of ethnic categories rather than the broader historical agenda of Schiller's and Humboldt's liberal humanism.

In Wagner's time, the German Idealists' view of Greek culture as an ideal of perfection was essentially a moral category, but one at the core of politically very diverse visions of the future. Wagner, who was never less than an omnivorous consumer of current ideas, occupied equally diverse positions in the debate, which is why his view of the Greeks can take on disconcertingly different forms. Early in his life, as Schadewaldt points out, he identified with the Greeks in the name of the liberal humanistic education in philology he received from his teachers, and especially his uncle Adolf, who was indeed a scholar of considerable local repute. Schadewaldt does not make it quite clear, however, that in the years leading up to the Dresden revolution of 1849, Wagner's attitude towards the Greeks became more left-wing and simultaneously more racist. Now the Greeks were placed in the service of a

quasi-Hegelian merry-go-round of ideas – presented at numbing length in his essays *Art and Revolution* (1849) and *Opera and Drama* (1852) – which dogmatically asserted that the preservation *and* the annulment of Greek culture were part of an essential stage in the dialectical progress of history towards the 'purely human' (which did not, however, include the Jews or the French) and the so-called Artwork of the Future.

Roughly speaking, there was also a third, much more decisively nationalist, phase in Wagner's political thinking (and not surprisingly an even more embarrassingly blatant anti-semitic and anti-French one) which he expounded in a long series of essays collectively published in the 1860s under the title *German Art and German Politics*. His view of the Greeks played a significant role here too, even though he seemed at first to be returning to his earlier undialectical thinking with a simple proposal of marriage between the Greek ideal and the German spirit.[3] The idea is not dissimilar to the wedding of Helen and Faust in the second part of Goethe's *Faust*. But in fact it is saturated with racial prejudice which places it at a considerable distance from what Schadewaldt himself described in his third lecture (not translated here) as Goethe's 'straightforwardly naive embrace of the Greeks' (*unmittelbar naives Ergreifen der Griechen*).[4]

In brief, the threads of this last, highly idiosyncratic, and far from naive, phase of Wagner's neo-Hellenism, in which Schadewaldt appears to take no interest, can be disentangled as follows. The Greeks gave birth to art; but what has been long overdue among the modern races is the rebirth of this true spirit of art, the original vitality of which, in a Fichtean twist, only the German race, returning to its primordial 'natural' language and cleansed of all Jewish and French influence, is capable of embodying. The guarantee of the Wagnerian Artwork of the Future is therefore threefold: it will ennoble the individual through a heroic dramatic art based in part on the Greek ideal and borne on the wings of German music; it will stipulate the creation of a purified and hence unified culture of the kind once supposedly possessed by the Greeks; and it will underwrite the integration of the German race, not with debilitating criticism or scientific reasoning, but with a mystical belief in the supremacy of the racially pure but yet-to-be-created German nation-state. Above all, this belief is to be succoured by the experience of the Wagnerian work of art 'dedicated to trust in the German spirit' (a part of the wording at the head of the first printed scores of the *Ring*) in a building dedicated in turn to its

performance. And this in particular is intended as a modern reincarnation of an ancient rite: just as Greek tragedy was celebrated communally at the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens, so the German people is to celebrate Wagner's drama in a special place. For the Greek, or for the German, the uplifting experience of tragedy was, or is to be, a reflection of unified nationhood and enduring spiritual vitality.

The Greeks in other words – homogenized, idealized, unified, purified, communalized, culturally deified – finally become the principal touchstone of Wagner's utopian fatherland of the future. Wagner sets out this mission clearly enough in his writings, and denial of its existence invariably comes from those who have not read them. Nor is it just the benefit of hindsight that gives them at times an air of fascist rodomontade. Ernest Newman was probably right when he surmised that King Ludwig II (who in any case did not share Wagner's anti-semitic views) had the publication of *German Art and German Politics* suspended because of its vicious polemics against the French.[5] And Wagner's visceral attacks on the Jews were hardly greeted with equanimity either, even though many of his contemporaries, aware of his greatness as an artist, were prepared to overlook them.

But in the aftermath of the Second World War, when memories of Hitler's patronage of Bayreuth were still fresh, history finally took its toll on the dramas themselves, which in Germany began to look as if they would be sullied for ever by Wagner's political obsessions. Holding on firmly to the idea that there was still a core of humanity in the works, Wieland Wagner set about 'clearing out the attic', as he put it, to find out where it was. One of the first steps he took in removing the bric-a-brac was his 1952 Bayreuth production of the *Ring* which Frederic Spotts has memorably described as 'a penance by Bayreuth for its honoured place in the Third Reich'.[6] The Germanic heroic epic vanished and in its place the astonished (not to say in part infuriated) audience witnessed a 'timeless' tragedy in the manner of Aeschylus. The Nordic gods looked like Greek sculptures, and Wotan and Siegfried behaved as if they were Zeus and Heracles, while Brünnhilde's conflict with Wotan resembled Antigone's with Creon. The principal stage feature, too, was a disc that consciously recreated the *orchêstra* of the Greek theatre. The drama was played without a stage-curtain, which gave the audience the exciting impression that they were participating in the action unfolding before them. In the Greek theatre there was no double proscenium arch and no 'phantasmal

music sounding from the "mystic gulf", like vapours rising from the holy womb of Gaia beneath the Pythia's seat'.[7] In short, there was not the palpable distance between the audience and the players that there is in Bayreuth. Indeed the difference is so fundamental that it is hard to agree with Schadewaldt's assertion that Wagner 'with great perspicuity grasped the ancient *theatron*'. In creating an illusion of direct involvement with the drama almost as if the 'mystic gulf' of the sunken orchestra no longer existed, however, Wieland would probably have agreed with Schadewaldt, if only because the idea of a *Ring* purified of any association with the appalling inhumanity of the events for which Bayreuth in the Third Reich acted as a prestigious show-case was at the time more important to him politically than any quibble about historical verisimilitude.

Wieland's recourse to the Greeks in the 'de-Germanification' of his grandfather's works came to a climax in his 1958 Bayreuth production of *Lohengrin*, generally considered to be one of his finest. This was the moment when he realised the full import of the fact that Wagner had been reading Aeschylus when he composed the opera. And it was in the wake of the success of this production that he invited Schadewaldt to Bayreuth: his first lecture duly appeared in the programme book for the *Lohengrin* performances in 1962. It is not clear whether Wieland was aware of his guest speaker's earlier sympathies with National Socialism. As a young academic, Schadewaldt had played a not insignificant role in the notorious election of Heidegger to the Rectorship of Freiburg University in 1933,[8] and his continued prestige with the Nazi hierarchy until the end of the war is proved by the appearance of his work in several publications maintaining (for instance) that 'the awakening of the racial instinct of our people allows us to feel our affinity in blood and kind to both peoples of the Greco-Roman world.'[9] In a way it is irrelevant whether Wieland was aware of this or not, since in any case he quite openly regarded himself as compromised (if not more so than Schadewaldt) in view of the support he had willingly received as a young man from Hitler himself.[10] The irony can hardly be overlooked, however, that in their endeavour to expunge the problematical past of Wagner's dramas, as well as their own, Wieland and Schadewaldt both resorted to a similarly sanitized view of the Greeks as Wagner himself had exploited to gain credence for the idea of German supremacy in the first place.

'No, we do not want to be Greeks again', Wagner declared after the 1848-9

revolution, but only because the historical distance from the Greeks had taught the German people not to make the same mistakes. 'What the Greeks did not know, and the precise reason they had to go to their ruin, is what we do know.'[11] And what the ancients did not know, according to Wagner, was the meaning of history and the efficacy of revolution. A reversal of their fate is therefore in order: the destruction of their 'timeless' myth through a lack of historical awareness can now become the recreation of that myth in a new form which will be indestructible for all time, provided that the people for whom it is intended remain active in the name of their historical destiny. Thus for Wagner there is no longer a place in modern tragedy for the Greek hero who valiantly subjects himself to the inevitable blows of fate. But there is room for the hero whose primal strength is conditioned by the melancholy history of those around him and nourished by his instinctive ambition to overcome that history with great deeds, whatever the cost.

Schadewaldt is therefore right to stress Wagner's awareness of the historical distance that separated him from the Greeks. This is not the same thing as saying, however, that Wagner recognized that one of the main differences betweeen himself and the Greeks was the idea of history itself, almost as if he regretted that the ancient tragedians had never read the complete works of Hegel. As a consequence, and contrary to what he himself expected, his new tragedies, in which 'the free, strong, and beautiful individual will celebrate the joy and pain of his love . . . free from all convention and etiquette', today look less like 'timeless' myths than historical allegories in mythic guise about the tenacious illusions of modernity and in particular about the tragedy of German nationhood.

This is not quite what Wieland Wagner meant when he spoke of 'clearing out the attic'. Indeed, Schadewaldt played a small, though by no means unimportant, role in helping Wieland perpetuate the myth that Wagner's dramas could be seen through the lens of the Greeks, with their origins in the more problematic nationalist corners of German Idealism greatly diminished, and cleansed of their immediate past in pre-war Bayreuth. Once cumbersome beings in the service of German nationalist ideology, they shed their skins, so to speak, to metamorphose into creatures of sublime beauty and universal truth. With the support of Schadewaldt's lectures on Wagner and the Greeks, they became essentially works without a palpable history, despite the clamour in the wings, which can still be heard, that they are nothing of the sort.

NOTES

1 H. Lloyd-Jones, *Blood for the Ghosts* (London 1982) 142.
2 Lloyd-Jones, *Blood for the Ghosts*, 141.
3 R. Wagner, *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen* (Leipzig 1911-14) VIII 64-5.
4 W. Schadewaldt, *Hellas und Hesperien* (Zurich 1970) II 386.
5 E. Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner* (Cambridge 1976) IV 106-7.
6 F. Spotts, *Bayreuth. A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven 1994) 239.
7 R. Wagner, *On Music and Drama* (New York 1995) 366.
8 H. Ott, *Martin Heidegger. A Political Life*, tr. A. Blunden (London 1993) 142-3.
9 Editor's foreword in H. Berve (ed.), *Das neue Bild der Antike* (Leipzig 1942) I 7. Schadewaldt's article 'Homer und sein Jahrhundert' I 51-90.
10 Spotts, *Bayreuth*, 193-8.
11 Wagner, *Schriften*, III 30. For a different translation, see Wagner, *Prose Works* I 53.