

9-1-2015

THE EDGE-MAN OF BAYREUTH: RICHARD WAGNER, LIMINAL SPACE, AND THE POWER OF POTENTIAL

Heidi Lee Jensen

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Heidi Jensen

Candidate

Music

Department

This thesis is approved, and it is acceptable in quality
and form for publication:

Approved by the Thesis Committee:

Dr. Ana Alonso-Minutti, Chairperson

Prof. Michael Chapdelaine

Dr. Kristina Jacobsen-Bia

Dr. David Michael Bashwiner

**THE EDGE-MAN OF BAYREUTH:
RICHARD WAGNER, LIMINAL SPACE, AND THE POWER OF POTENTIAL**

By

HEIDI JENSEN

A.S., Behavioral Science, SUNY Monroe, 2005
B.A., Anthropology, University of Rochester, 2003

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Music

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

July, 2015

Dedication

But then I cried out in the house one morning: "a son is there!" How different the world now looked of a sudden! Happy the mother who saw all at once that my past and my future had now acquired a quite different meaning. ~Richard Wagner

To my son, I cannot wait to meet you.

Acknowledgments

I cannot express enough thanks to my committee for their continued support and encouragement: my committee chair, Dr. Ana Alonso-Minutti for her tireless work in reading and editing this thesis, helping me to improve my skills as a musicologist and writer; Prof. Michael Chapdelaine, for years of patience and wisdom in helping me to become a better guitarist and a calmer person; Dr. Kristina Jacobsen-Bia for giving me the opportunity to work with her and taking the time to guide me in my teaching and presentation skills; and Dr. David Michael Bashwiner for taking the time to listen to my ideas and being the most comprehensible theory teacher I have ever had. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Kevin Vigneau who inspired me to begin this project, and started me on the musicological path. Thank you for your support and for giving me opportunities in your class to share my love of music history with others. I offer my sincere appreciation for all I have learned from all of you toward becoming a better musician, scholar, writer, teacher, and person.

My completion of this thesis could not have been accomplished without the support of my husband, Jason Mullen: my deepest gratitude. Your encouragement when the times have been rough is much appreciated. I would also like to thank my friends Lauren Coons, Chelsea Toledo, and Rachael Boyd for supporting me and always making me smile.

Finally, to my parents, Donna and Fred Jensen: your continued belief in me has always been an anchor.

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores Richard Wagner's strategic use of liminal space in identity construction, as a means of navigating difficult life circumstances, gaining prestige as composer/historic figure, and as a method to obtain enduring notoriety for his works. Liminal spaces are a nexus of vulnerability and power. They are a locus of potential as they are a release from structural limitations, however they can also be a site of contested power and susceptibility. Young Wagner as an adolescent and a member of the lower middle class experienced the condition of economic marginality felt by many Germans of that time period. His adaptive strategies toward self-identity building included the necessity of navigating liminal spaces. As Wagner went through an imposed period of exile the knowledge he had previously gained of the utility of such liminal positions was further explored and allowed him increased freedom in both his behaviors and musical techniques. After a period of exile, the composer was reintegrated back into society and found patronship at long last. He then consciously attempted to create a permanent liminal space to house his art in the Bayreuth

festival. However, despite his attempts at creating an ideal liminal ritual event, the realities of structure rendered it a liminoid affair.

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Introduction

Composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) created a dynamic narrative for himself, yet strove to fabricate a static place for his legacy and his musical oeuvre. The power of both, resides in their position, always at the threshold, never crossing definite structure or agreed upon definition. Wagner attempted to place his creations outside of time and space. Whether in the future, deeper reality, or the unconscious, meaning was never to be found in the structures of everyday existence. In this light Wagner could be regarded as a mediator between two realms: order and disorder, structure and anti-structure. For him music occupied a space betwixt and between such realms, and intermediary linking the material and the ideological. Much like dreams between sleep and conscious waking, music stood at the margin between the two, as the only way to get a glimpse of true reality or gain understanding of self. Thus, Wagner came to understand this threshold, or liminal position, as one of great power. Threshold places are what Wagner flourished in, needed, and consciously created. Appropriating such positions allowed Wagner to simultaneously escape from the expectations and normative behaviors inherent in the role he was cast within the societal structures of his time, and achieve the prestige and respect he desired for both himself and his art. In the present study I argue that Wagner strategically positioned himself in such threshold places. *Threshold*, generally defined, is a point at which something may or may not happen, take effect, or become true. In other words, it is a point of possibilities or potentials. Anthropologist Victor Turner used the concept of “liminality” to delineate such a threshold position, a moment out of everyday time and space where history teeters on the

brink, full of potential energy. It is this liminal state, a moment outside of normal cultural space and time, which allows these possibilities to become visible. During such a state, one is released from usual constraints, roles, and status positions of societal structure, freed to experience new alliances perhaps the deeper connections of humanity. Turner used the term “communitas” to delineate such a shared feeling or group experience of unity that may occur in a liminal space.

Communitas often emerges during a period of transition when there is a leveling of statuses essentially creating a group of equals. Turner stated that, “prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, ‘edge-men,’ who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role playing and to enter in vital relations with other men in fact or imagination.”¹ Wagner himself could be considered such an edge-man. In fact he has been variously described as types of edge-men, as a prophet of the music of the future, a genius, and as the high priest of an aesthetic religion. Wagner’s festival ground at Bayreuth is often talked about using religious or otherworldly metaphors. Spectators make their pilgrimages to Bayreuth not to witness mere entertainment, as when one goes to the theater, but as if attending a sacred, life-altering event. The entire construction of Bayreuth was meant to change the relationship between the events on stage and the audience. Bayreuth was Wagner’s attempt to take normative steps to create the ideal environment for the facilitation of communitas, to create a permanent liminal space. This endeavor was fraught with problems; the process of creating a structure to house the un-structurable is a contradiction that is often only resolved in conflicting ways. Despite the

¹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 128.

realities that betrayed the ideal, Wagner's construction of Bayreuth was an attempt to "enter into vital relations with other men," if not directly, then most definitely indirectly in both the individual and collective imagination.²

Chapter one, "Social and Material Factors in the Development of Richard Wagner's Liminal Identity," investigates aspects of Wagner's social identity formation through the changing political and economic conditions of the time, with reference to Henri Tajfel's concept of *social identity* formation, and Victor Turner's work regarding liminality. I argue that navigating liminal positions in response to the problems of adolescence and economic marginality became a beneficial strategic vantage point for Wagner. He attempted to form a positive identity through alternative aesthetic means as structural constraints kept him from the usual channels of status building. This eventually led Wagner and many of his Young German peers to a complete rejection of the political structures at the time through participation in a political revolution. The failure of this uprising was immanently followed by a period of exile that proved extremely productive for Wagner's writings and theoretical ideas. Thus Wagner's participation in the 1848 Dresden uprising was significant not for its success but for its failure, as it allowed the composer to actively create new myths for himself, a new archetype for his art, and new initiatives for what he saw as an authoritarian and oppressive German society.

Chapter two, "From Exiled Outsider to Artist of the Future: The Creation of a Liminal Present Through an Imagined Future," discusses the issues surrounding Wagner's exile. After the failure of the uprising to bring about such a utopic political situation, Wagner was forced to live through a period of exile, residing in a liminal state betwixt and between.

² Ibid., 128.

While removed from his normal surroundings, not knowing when and if he could return, he was free to envision alternative situations and indeed wrote about such possibilities towards cultural change. Through his Zurich writings he imagined a future where humanity is unified through art, the normal roles inherent in everyday structure removed, allowing the experience of spontaneous *communitas*. Drawing from an imagined ancient Greek past to justify a future as yet unseen, Wagner, as prophet, envisioned a future new society, a universal brotherhood through and for his art. Thus, by means of his writings, the composer created an imagined future to be reintegrated back into where he could take his rightful status position. In Turner's work, liminality, in most instances, represents such a midpoint, a transition from one status position to another. For Wagner this transition would be going from a lowly composer of a corrupted art to the genius savior of its integrity, the prophet of a utopic future. Turner believed that whenever societal structure becomes too repressive, there are revolutionary ventures for a restoration of *communitas*. Indeed many significant social theorists of the time, such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Ludwig Feuerbach, whom both influenced Wagner greatly, reflected the utopic yearnings for a situation where one may experience *communitas*. However, when his idealistic hopes for such a political solution failed, Wagner became disillusioned.

Chapter three, "Wagner, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche: The Charismatic Founding of a Tragic Culture, Liminal Vision, Liminoid Reality," considers Wagner's strategic use of liminal roles in the accommodation of his changed viewpoint and as an aid in his struggles to reconcile his earlier vision with the structural reality he returned to. Wagner's period of political disillusion ended most notably in the fall of 1854 after he was introduced to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. This philosophy had a variety of implications for

Wagner as he experienced a turn around of sorts regarding several of his established beliefs. His new outlook manifested itself in the creative changes he placed in his writings and his musico-dramatic works. In regards to the construction of his personal identity, the concept of Schopenhauerian *genius* endowed Wagner with a philosophically justified position of admiration and influence outside the bounds of social structure. Enriched by such a viewpoint, Wagner still understood his art as occupying a liminal space outside of normal time, however it was now an internal space where music was the mediator between the ultimate oneness of all being and this phenomenal world. More specifically as genius composer, it was he who stood as liaison in between ultimate reality and the everyday world; a vessel through which creativity itself, residing in this place, was communicated through music or in some instances the unconscious of dreams. Wagner as representative of the Schopenhauerian concept of genius stood in between the inner most essence of the world and the veil of illusory everyday life. Much as a priest stands between God and congregants as an interpreter of deeper meaning thus rendering it comprehensible to the masses, Wagner as genius believed he was able to channel the deepest secrets of human willing through his music. As a model of Max Weber's *charismatic* leader, his authority however was legitimized through and dependent on the belief and support of his followers.

Wagner attempted to create a permanent liminal place outside of everyday social structure to house his art, a temple for his followers. In its early inception, his Bayreuth festival was to be a place of egalitarianism, attempting to escape the symbolic structures of hierarchy and excess that had been established in nineteenth-century opera. Once these status hierarchies and role incumbencies had been removed, those who listened were free to experience a deeper level of humanity, a *communitas* through the music. However, despite

the powerful and preternatural experience of *communitas*, its power cannot easily be transformed and applied to the organizational details needed for everyday material existence. This realization led Turner to differentiate between three different types of *communitas*: existential (spontaneous) *communitas*, an unplanned feeling of human connection among a group of equals; normative *communitas*, an attempt among those who experienced existential *communitas* to organize group members and create an enduring social system; and, ideological *communitas*, a utopian model society based on the feeling of existential *communitas*. Unlike the dreamlike and temporary state of *communitas* itself, a sustained will and cogent thought are needed to manifest structural reality. Therefore any attempt at structuralizing the anti-structural experience of *communitas*, as normative or ideological types attempt, is in some regard doomed to conflict and failure. Such contradictions occurred between Wagner's ideological and philosophical beliefs and the constraints imposed by social and financial structures.

In his meditation "Richard Wagner at Bayreuth," Friedrich Nietzsche slyly captured the betrayal between the noble ideological form that Bayreuth was supposed to take and the reality it assumed. The philosopher also addressed the humiliations Wagner endured throughout his life to achieve his vision. Nietzsche had wondered, "how the feeling and recognition that whole stretches of [Wagner's] life are marked by a grotesque lack of dignity must affect an artist."³ Wagner's life proved a constant struggle with the dynamic factors of reality, leaving him with no recourse but to become a mediator between his ideology and the conditions of his reality.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Richard Wagner at Bayreuth," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. trans., R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 205.

The financial support needed from his followers dwindled as Wagner fought to salvage the Bayreuth festival. He realized he needed to legitimate his authority from a place outside of everyday structure. Leading from a position of self-proclaimed musical genius had become inadequate. Wagner was to place himself in a position Turner considered as representative of *outsiderhood* as distinct from the state of liminality. Where liminality suggests a return in some way to the given social system and status roles, outsiderhood refers to the state of being permanently outside of the social system, either by forced situation, or voluntarily setting oneself apart, not engaging in the normal status occupation and role assumptions of the social system. Examples of such outsiders from various cultures might include shamans, healers, spirit mediums, diviners and priests. Through his writings, Wagner would imagine an art-religion guided by a poet-priest who would lead the world back to compassion through a rejuvenation of the symbols of Christianity. Despite his best attempts to cement his legacy and legitimate it through means beyond structure, he was inexorably linked to the liminoid structures of the post-industrial commodified world, creating tension between the liminal obligations of a sacred art-religion, and the optional attendance of an upper-class musical event. Wagner continued to struggle with these conflicts until the day he died; likewise Cosima and his heirs continue to mediate between a static state of reverence and dynamic innovation.

As a composer, writer, and historical icon, Wagner continues to be of interest not only to musicologists and performers, but also to scholars from diverse disciplines. This has resulted in a large repository of resources that addresses Wagner's output and persona from a myriad of methodological approaches most of which focus on either cultural or socio-

political matters, or on the specifically musical.⁴ Many also attempt to link the significance and meaning of Wagner and his work to contemporary societal norms and aesthetics. The study of Wagner's music has been approached from materialist, feminist, psychological, romanticist, philosophical, literary, and modernist perspectives. The present study adds to current musicological scholarship on Wagner by incorporating anthropological, sociological, and social psychology perspectives, all of which center on issues surrounding Victor Turner's concept of "liminality." I draw from a variety of concepts within the social sciences such as social psychologist Henri Tajfel's social identity theory, and Max Weber's sociological theory of charisma to add breadth and give further dimension to the matter in question.

Approaching Wagner from the concept of liminality provides a compelling means for both historical and social understanding. It is a perspective that is able to integrate the formerly mentioned viewpoints, allow for dynamism in identity formation, and embrace the power of potential within historical change. Wagner is an incredibly polarizing figure; love and hate for him can manifest in a single mind. This leaves a large prospect for bias in many interpretive works on the subject. My literature review focuses on Wagner scholarship that is in dialogue with my own specific interests, as well as major works that exemplify both sides of bias, supporters of Wagner as well as detractors.

Having a background in anthropology and philosophy, I came to the present research familiar with the works of Feuerbach, Schopenhauer, Weber, and Nietzsche, and with a desire to incorporate them into my narrative centered on Wagner. As such I was greatly

⁴ I will be focusing at this juncture primarily on previously translated critical and analytic texts.

inspired by the works of three authors who also contemplated the composer from philosophic and culturally analytic stances: Bryan Magee, Roger Scruton, and Eric Chafe.

In *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy*, Bryan Magee chronicles Wagner's relationship with philosophy throughout the entirety of his career.⁵ Magee begins with Wagner's early life under the influence of a Proudhon-inspired Young German movement, his dabbling into Hegel, and his engagement with the work of Feuerbach. Magee takes us chronologically through Wagner's experience, the historical circumstances and political situations he encountered, and the philosophies that accompanied them. The author explains the influence these factors had on Wagner's writing, musical works, personhood, and presents the importance of Wagner's discovery of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer with expertise. He details how the influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy brought about "a turn" with regard to Wagner's previously optimistic viewpoint. Further Magee gives an account as to how Wagner's intoxication with this philosophy eventually led to his cessation of work on *The Ring* and served as the main philosophical vehicle behind his creation of *Tristan and Isolde*. Wagner's devotion to Schopenhauerian philosophy would later reach its culmination in his adaptation of the grail myth, *Parsifal*. Magee has written various other texts on these subjects including a book specifically focusing on the philosophy of Schopenhauer,⁶ a two-part article on Schopenhauer and Wagner,⁷ the short but masterful book *Aspects of Wagner*,⁸ and an article entitled, "The Secret of Tristan and Isolde."⁹ As

⁵ Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord, Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000).

⁶ Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁷ Bryan Magee, "Schopenhauer and Wagner, I-II," *The Opera Quarterly* 1 (1983): 148-71.

⁸ Bryan Magee, *Aspects of Wagner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

such, Magee demonstrates mastery and ease in describing both Schopenhauer's philosophy as well as the take on Kant that Schopenhauer put forth. Magee has a deep appreciation of Wagner that might lead to a slightly biased view. Although there is a lack of musical analysis, Magee's astute understanding of philosophy contributes to a rich interpretation of Wagner's motivations as a human being, not just as an historical figure.

Roger Scruton's *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde* is similar in philosophical substance to Magee, as Scruton provides a philosophical outline from Kant to Schopenhauer. However Scruton supplies a more in-depth musical analysis of the work itself than what Magee offers.¹⁰ Further still, Scruton discusses the literary origin of the *Tristan* poem and examines Wagner's treatment of the original text by Gottfried von Strassburg at great length. As the title implies, Scruton's work hinges on the essential relationship between sex and the sacred; *Tristan* embodies the quasi-religious idea that redemption is paid for with sacrifice. Scruton maintains that the continuing importance of Wagner's art is that it may have the power to endow our everyday modern life with a sense of the sacred. For Scruton, as for Wagner, the greater capability of music drama is in upholding and reinvigorating the purpose of ritual and religion in our modern time period. The sacrifice Tristan and Isolde make serves to re-establish our faith in the potential of humanity and reinvigorate our will-to-live (which in this understanding is a good thing). The *death* of the lovers signifies the renewal of the community *in life*. Wagner, as well as Scruton, constructed this viewpoint from a combination of what they believed to be the ritual

⁹ Bryan Magee, "The Secret of Tristan and Isolde," *Philosophy* 82 (2007): 339-46.

¹⁰ Roger Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

purpose of Greek tragedy, and the ritual meaning behind Christian and religious symbolism.¹¹ The erotic presents a challenge to the inevitability of death, as a symbol of a union of individuals, and of the continuation of life. Beyond this overt symbolism, one could say that the higher purpose of art is to provide a brief glimpse of the possibilities beyond the current reality: to uncover the deeper connective tissue of humanity when it remains hidden by the muscle of societal structures. Conceptualizing the rejuvenation of community as coming from an experience of *communitas*, rather than through a truth of human nature or an experience of the divine, would sidestep philosophical debate over Scruton's use of such loaded terms. Scruton comes to the conclusion that *Tristan und Isolde* is essentially a modernist endeavor at its core. It serves to bring the magic and mysticism of life back to the disillusioned. However, Scruton does not explain what this magic is or where it lies. As such, terms such as liminality and *communitas* would aptly describe such a relational situation, in which the magic lies in potential.

In *The Tragic and the Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde*, Eric Chafe discusses the work's threefold path to redemption through an intense and precise examination of Wagner's philosophical influences, his personal adaptations to those influences, and a close analysis of the interplay of these forces on the workings of his musical style.¹² Chafe illustrates the Schopenhauerian overlay that Wagner placed on von Strassburg's poem as well as illuminating the major point with which Wagner disagreed with

¹¹ A similar outlook on the significance of Greek tragedy was put forth in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*.

¹² Eric Chafe, *The Tragic and the Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Schopenhauer on: the question of the metaphysics of sexual love. In a letter begun but never finished by Wagner, the composer attempts to describe why erotic love is not just a delusion of the will-to-live exerting in its blind driving force over us, but a path by which the individual may come to be conscious of a whole greater than themselves through the unity with another. This in turn will lead one to the true meaning of love, the metaphysical transcendence of this world and a unity with all. Chafe sites three stages that Wagner weaves symbolically into the work. The first is the growth from individual consciousness, where love merely represents the Will's blind force of desire, *bewusst* (consciously), the second, erotic love or the merging of two individual consciousness's into one, *einbewusst* (in-consciously), and finally beyond this phenomenal life to unconsciousness and death where all is one, *unbewusst* (un-consciously).

Chafe considers a dual perspective essential in understanding what he calls the "Tristan style." Wagner simultaneously dealt with love as a torment of desire, signifying the power that the Schopenhauerian will-to-live holds over us, yet at the same time as a way out of this world of illusions, revealing the path to redemption. Both points of view intermingle and proceed through *Tristan*, as the music holds both tonal and atonal elements, leading the work to be conceptualized as both a work of late romanticism and at the same juncture heralding the entrance of musical modernism. He details Wagner's engagement throughout *Tristan* with the numerous metaphors that pertain to his readings of Schopenhauer, for example there is discussion of dreams, and dream-like states as reflecting the path between unconscious reality, consciousness, and the symbolic contrast of sleep with the illusion of waking reality. Chafe covers these and more notions, all of which could be restated with terms relevant to the liminal. The real moment of power, which gives sexual love and

sacrifice metaphysical awareness, is gained from the experience of a state of transition, between sleep and waking, between sex and death, thus the in-between, the *liminal* is the sight of realization, it is the position of potential. In such terms the path to redemption is only endowed with metaphysical meaning through its passing through a liminal stage where one gains conscious awareness of a whole greater than the self through the experience of *communitas*.

In the book *Wagner Androgyne*, Jean-Jacques Nattiez wished to go beyond the limitations of various critical theories, such as Marxism, feminism, and structuralism. To accomplish this, Nattiez's centers his work on the concept of androgyny.¹³ For Nattiez the lore of the androgynous has the power to render visible an image of wholeness yet simultaneously denounces the actual existence of that state of being. There are spaces inherent in Wagner's music that are capable of presenting an image of wholeness, as well as allowing one to view multiple possibilities. However, these may be considered ambiguous spaces more representative of liminality rather than androgyny per se. The concept of *communitas* explains a temporary feeling of completeness, which cannot necessarily be pinned down or said to definitively exist. That being said, Nattiez's use of the term androgynous could be interchangeable with the term ambiguous.

John Louis DiGaetani believes that Wagner consciously chose ambiguity. In his book *Richard Wagner: New Light on a Musical Life*, he contends that, "Wagner was shrewd enough to realize that to be ambiguous is best so that most of the audience would be

¹³ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne*, trans. Stewart Spencer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

fascinated.”¹⁴ DiGaetani goes on to reason that Wagner realized that if audience members could already understand everything about a work of art, they would become bored, but if the work was consciously ambiguous the audience members could never quite understand what was being proposed thus they would be endlessly intrigued by it.¹⁵ Wagner did indeed consciously choose to be ambiguous, however, his motivation for creating and using ambiguous spaces would be better understood through the concept of strategic liminality, further witnessed in his desire to create circumstances that would replicate the experience of spontaneous communitas. Liminal space is one of power. It often gives individuals who are outside of the normal status structures a strategic position within which they can exert influence and gain in stature. This is why being in a liminal space was beneficial to Wagner, as it is a position of potentials and endless possibilities. In his earlier book *Wagner and Suicide*,¹⁶ DiGaetani described the often emotional, extreme behaviors of Wagner the man, as characteristic of bipolar disorder.¹⁷ This psychological viewpoint can be beneficially integrated into liminal theory. Liminal positions can allow for a loosening of normative social and moral behavior, thus extreme behaviors may occur, status or gender roles may be flipped, there may be increased sexual behavior, or complete sexual cessation, physical brutality, or excessive indulgence.

¹⁴ John Louis DiGaetani, *Richard Wagner: New Light on a Musical Life* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2013), 198.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ John Louis DiGaetani, *Wagner and Suicide* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003).

¹⁷ Daniel John Carroll, a graduate student in musicology at Boston University, has written a paper suggesting that Wagner may also have suffered from borderline personality disorder in addition to bipolar disorder. Consult the following link: <http://www.the-wagnerian.com/2012/08/the-psychopathology-of-richard-wagner.html>

Wagner's psychological motivations toward the erotic, and how such compulsions were mitigated within societal structure, are some of the concepts explored by Laurence Dreyfus in his book *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*.¹⁸ Dreyfus contends that Wagner's works demanded erotic dialogue be brought into the discourse of music criticism. He argues that during the first half of the nineteenth century critics were not able to discuss musical devices that conjured up erotic imagery in overt terms. However, Wagner's works required the use of these terms thus forcing them into public debate. Dreyfus used a wide variety of source materials. He discusses Wagner's musico-dramatic works, erotic obsessions, friends, and sought to reveal his creative intentions. Dreyfus discussed Wagner's philosophical influences, however relegated Wagner's use of these philosophies as merely a means toward the satisfaction of his own erotic nature. Nevertheless, Wagner's philosophical and political wanderings cannot be relegated to merely justification for erotic compulsions. It was his use of liminal positions as a dynamic form of strategic social identity building that allowed him the freedom to express erotic notions yet maintain a position of stature and increased behavioral potential outside of normative social roles.

Wagner's philosophical wanderings and especially his engagement with the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer served to launch a friendship with the young Friedrich Nietzsche. However, as Nietzsche's own unique philosophical beliefs were forged, Wagner's continued devotion to Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy became a point of contention between the two. As such, Nietzsche produced written works of lasting interest both for and against Wagner. The former is exemplified in first book *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of*

¹⁸ Laurence Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Music,¹⁹ and even to an extent in the last of his *Untimely Meditations* “Richard Wagner at Bayreuth.”²⁰ The latter is exemplified in essays such as “The Case of Wagner” and “Nietzsche Contra Wagner.”²¹ These works reveal a unique perspective of Wagner the man, derived from an interesting, if short-lived, friendship between these two monumental figures of modern Western philosophy. However, any reading of these works by Nietzsche should be tempered by considering the historical circumstances motivating their creation. Nietzsche, although trained to an extent in music, was not extraordinarily competent in the area of analysis. Furthermore, there were some personal offenses that had occurred between Nietzsche and Wagner that resulted in an unresolved bitterness, which tainted the comments of both. Therefore Nietzsche never quite considered Wagner’s works in themselves, but mostly as a means to express ideology. As Nietzsche’s own convictions split with both Schopenhauer and Wagner, his opinion and criticisms of Wagner works likewise changed, thus it is by reading between the lines that one may gain the most from Nietzsche’s later writings on Wagner. Nietzsche’s concept of the interaction between the characteristics of the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian* are utilized greatly by scholars and appear in narratives which characterize Wagner as a modernist, at the nexus of oppositional characteristics, continuity/discontinuity, solidity/fluidity, conflict/agreement.²² Indeed this kind of

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, ed. Raymond Geuss, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols: and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²² Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

ambiguous characterization of Wagner, as well as many examples of ambivalence towards both the man and his work, can be found beyond Nietzsche.

In his essay “The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner,” Thomas Mann also seemed to blend a politicized modernist view of Wagner into his analysis of musical works, typifying Wagner as part of a middle-class Germany that went from a failed revolution to disillusion then finally a pessimistic turning inward and acceptance of the state.²³ Beyond Wagner himself, Mann regarded his compositions not as music in the genuine sense, nor did Mann deem his dramatic text or verse literature in a true sense, rather it was an amalgamation of myth, symbolism, psychology, and some would say nationalism.²⁴ This ambiguity, I would argue, is what makes Wagner’s works so enduring.

Theodore Adorno’s *In Search of Wagner* came from a definite materialist bent, which makes it difficult to regard some of the critical commentary as balanced. Some of Adorno’s contentions about Wagner and his bourgeois traits are rather exaggerated.²⁵ In his 1963 essay “Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” Adorno reveals that his preoccupation with Wagner was perhaps fueled by his ambivalent feelings toward the man himself.²⁶ In this work Adorno discusses the essentially modernist characteristic that colors Wagner’s compositions: uncertainty. He goes on to say that this *uncertainty* is what is so exhilarating and captivating about Wagner’s music. Such a situation of uncertainty is not just representative of a trait

²³ Thomas Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985).

²⁴ Thomas Mann, *Past Masters and Other Papers*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1933).

²⁵ Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: New Left Books, 1981).

²⁶ Theodor Adorno, “Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans., Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 584-602.

loosely categorized under the term modernism but of what I will term as a *liminal* position. An explanation utilizing the perspective of liminality provides a fuller interpretation of such traits and their later repercussions.

Lydia Goehr explored the idea of aesthetic autonomy and its association to music drama, as discussed by Adorno, in an essay comparing *Tristan and Isolde* and *Don Giovanni*.²⁷ Her book *The Quest for Voice: On Music Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy*,²⁸ also examines issues of autonomy and formalism, as well as aspects of performance and points of response. Goehr utilizes Wagner and his canon to concentrate on standard themes found in German romantic criticism.

Wagner's musico-dramatic works fluctuate between moments of stability and instability of form, which may both serve to reify or undermine basic tonality. Attempts to explain or justify Wagner's harmonic creativity have been divided. Some of the earliest attempts occurred before the notion of a disintegration of tonality had been imagined. Indeed Wagner's innovation was simply regarded as enhancing of the tonal system through chromaticism. In his 1881 essay "Die Harmonik Richard Wagner's an den Leitmotiven aus *Tristan und Isolde*,"²⁹ Karl Mayrberger, inspired by his teacher Simon Sechter's system, sought to accredit the special characteristic of the so-called Tristan chord to its obscure tonal function and atypical intervallic construction. Wagner's use of the half-diminished seventh

²⁷ Lydia Goehr, "The Curse and Promise of the Absolutely Musical: *Tristan und Isolde* and *Don Giovanni*," in *The Don Giovanni Moment: Essays on the Legacy of an Opera*, ed. Daniel Alan Herwitz, Lydia Goehr (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

²⁸ Lydia Goehr, *The Quest for Voice: On Music Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

²⁹ Karl Mayrberger "Die Harmonik Richard Wagner's an den Leitmotiven aus *Tristan und Isolde*," in *Music Analysis in the Nineteenth Century I: Fugue, form, and style*, ed. Ian Bent (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 221.

chord to develop a sense of tonal ambiguity at moments of unpredictability and dramatic suspense has been a point of continuous discussion for theorists. One can easily discover this by examining the writings of early twentieth-century theorists such as Arnold Schoenberg, or Ernst Kurth. Kurth uses the label of romanticism when viewing Wagner's exploitation of ambiguity with regards to the Tristan chord. In his work "Romantic Harmony and its Crisis in Wagner's *Tristan*,"³⁰ Kurth stated that one of the characteristics that romanticism exploits is the ability to portray singular phenomena in a multivariate of ways, pointing out that romanticism thrives on both the attribute of concurrence and indeterminateness. Indeed the amorphous nature of the Tristan chord has allowed some theorists to label it as the starting point of the breakdown of tonality of which Wagner was often perceived at the threshold of. Such theorists fully regarded the tonally disruptive potential of the Tristan chord when viewed as a post-tonal or atonal entity, and explored the consequences of the disintegration of tonal order and the formal structures that relied on it.

In *Free Composition*, theorist Heinrich Schenker rallied against what he saw as the self-indulgence of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School and placed the blame firmly on Wagner.³¹ Schenker rejected the structural vitality of Wagnerian music drama in which everything within music should be in service of the drama, thus expression was to be the guiding principle of the musical structure. Schenker believed this opened the door to what he saw as the overtly exaggerated expression of Schoenberg and his pupils.

³⁰ Ernst Kurth, *Ernst Kurth: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. Lee Allen Rothfarb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³¹ Heinrich Schenker, *Free Composition*, ed., trans, Ernst Oster, (New York: 1935, 1979).

On the other side of the debate Alfred Lorenz defended the structural viability of Wagner's music dramas. Lorenz considered Wagner's work as reasonable, predictable formal musical structures that were loosely based on ideas presented in "Opera and Drama" about the poetic musical period.³² Lorenz maintained that Wagner created a network based on a few structures, the ABA and AAB (bar) forms. Lorenz did tend to impose boundaries on Wagner, which are potentially arbitrary, attempting to fit his musical structures into a system that had been reached ad hoc. Despite the problematic nature of Lorenz-imposed boundaries, he does leave room within those boundaries for variance, adding to the debate between those who regard Wagner as a tonal anarchist versus those who see him as a progressive more noteworthy for his reshaping of already existing compositional techniques than his destruction or rejection of them.

Carl Dahlhaus was extremely skeptical of Lorenz's ideas. Dahlhaus was greatly influenced by the perspective of Theodore Adorno, and like Adorno brought the political experience of the era to bear on his opinion of Lorenz's work. Dahlhaus saw Lorenz as a Nazi-supporter attempting to portray a hierarchical regimen onto Wagner's forms. *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas* indicates Dahlhaus's preference for focusing on small sections of the works rather than impose large formal structures.³³ He was more partial to an interpretive method rather than what he saw as a somewhat arbitrary formalist scheme. This approach allowed Dahlhaus to demonstrate the ambiguities and subtleties inherent in Wagner's work, often characterized as modernist qualities.

³² Stephen McClatchie, *Analyzing Wagner's Operas: Alfred Lorenz and German Nationalist Ideology*. (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester, 1998).

³³ Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans., Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Warren Darcy's *Wagner's Das Rheingold*, is an analysis of the work in its entirety utilizing the principles of voice leading.³⁴ Darcy believed that Dahlhaus denied larger scale formal architectural elements in Wagner's music, however he also realized that paying attention to formal structural elements should not come at the cost of devaluing issues of cultural and dramatic content as well as textual meaning. Darcy builds on the work of Robert Bailey, who regarded Wagner's use of tonality as an almost Monteverdian form of second practice. Darcy uses Bailey's concept of "expressive tonality" (the coupling of keys a semi-tone apart), much like the post-Schoenberg concept of extended tonality continuing to corroborate the value of diatonic principles in the work.³⁵ Darcy suggests that each note of a chromatic scale is permeated with semantic meaning; likewise each key, concurrently, is utilized for both linear and harmonic functions. Darcy reprises Bailey's concept of "associative tonality" (double-tonic complex), following the basic postulation that large-scale musico-dramatic forms are organized by not only motivic restatements but tonal reiterations as well.

In agreement with Darcy, Anthony Newcomb's Nietzsche-inspired title "The Birth of Music Out of the Spirit of Drama," supports his view that Wagner should be discussed as a composer who worked within the tradition of tonality and was capable of organizing large portions of musical time and space.³⁶ Newcomb recommends that analyses of Wagner should balance both large structures and the smallest subtleties that are often read as modernist

³⁴ Warren Darcy, *Wagner's Das Rheingold* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³⁵ Robert Bailey, "The Method of Composition," in *The Wagner companion*, eds., Peter Burbidge and Richard Sutton (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

³⁶ Anthony Newcomb, "The Birth of Music out of the Spirit of Drama: An Essay in Wagnerian Formal Analysis," *19th-Century Music* 5, no. 1 (1981): 38-66.

concepts. Case in point, Newcomb suggests that the most essential aspect of Wagner's form is its ambiguity.

John Daverio's *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology*³⁷ offers an analysis of a few sections of *Parsifal* where he furthers the portrayal of its fragmentary nature. Daverio suggests that it is a series of musical fragments that are what Wagner termed "rhetorical dialectics." Such fragments are spared from disassociation through what Wagner terms "the art of transition." The art of transition thrives on interruptions yet allows for continuation, both are intermingled, and generative. As Daverio proposes, romantic works strive for an intrinsic unity, but are contradicted by a general skepticism characteristic of the modern era of actually obtaining that ideal.

In opposition to an analysis of Wagner's works using formal models, Carolyn Abbate argued in her book *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*³⁸ that harmonic improvisation was one of the essential elements in Wotan's speech from Act II of *Die Walküre*, and that the various cadential structures were actually separate from, rather than constituting the overarching structure. Abbate calls to attention the unstructured elements and ambiguities that are a part of music drama.

Lawrence Kramer also expressed the significance of ambiguity in any tonal or harmonic analysis of Wagner's work. He like Darcy advocated the work of Bailey in examining the lack of exact formal boundaries. For Kramer, this concept coupled with Wagner's use of aggregation to reach termination was associated with the fulfillment of

³⁷ John Daverio *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993).

³⁸ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

libidinal desire. As such the interpretation in his book *Music as Cultural Practice* used Freudian concepts, alternating between musical and psychological perspectives.³⁹ Kramer proposes that Wagner's work is both progressive in its use of musical methodology but also in its portrayal of sexual ideology.

Thomas Grey utilizes an interpretive strategy that begins from a direct examination of the interface between Wagner's prose writing and his composition. In his book *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Context*, Grey considers the relationship between words and music, deciding that there is a contradistinction of inquiries and responses, where the dramatic and musical dimensions recurrently switch positions.⁴⁰ Grey also considers important technical concepts found in Wagner such as the difficult notion of the poetic-musical period as well as the often-addressed idea's of "endless melody," and leitmotif. Despite focusing on small-scale matters, Grey does not neglect how small and larger structural components interact.

In sum, while building on the works of these authors, my study further incorporates perspectives drawn from anthropology, as well as social theory, and social psychology to the historical interpretation of Wagner's identity construction. The anthropological constituent considers the appearance of ambiguity in various aspects of Wagner's selfhood, writings, and musical works through the concept of liminality.

Methodologically speaking, I aim to add a distinct social dimension to Wagner studies. My study will center on issues of liminality as developed by anthropologist Victor Turner, however will also employ other concepts drawn from the social sciences such as the

³⁹ Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

⁴⁰ Thomas Grey, *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

notion of social identity theory initiated by social psychologist Henri Tajfel, and sociologist Max Weber's concept of charisma. My study takes as point of departure a few theoretical assumptions: that there is a social element to identity, meaning that a segment of one's self-concept is acquired from recognized membership in a pertinent social group.⁴¹ That social influence occurs through referent informational influences, i.e. as one's social identity becomes evident, there is a tendency to adhere to the normative beliefs and behaviors of the perceived in-group, while rejecting the beliefs and behaviors of the out-group. Subjective ambivalence occurs when one recognizes differences between themselves and a fellow in-group member. In most cases this results in an attempt to adjust one's behavior, to mimic the individual(s) exhibiting the most typical examples of in-group behavior. If this is not rewarded sufficiently through either acceptance or the desired prestige, then an individual may choose to purposefully reject the behaviors of the so-called in-group. This can result in negative associations usually accompanying out-group status or it may result in an entirely new classification. It is in the definition this new classification of out-group or outsider status that I will be assisted by Turner's conceptualization of liminality.

Liminality is a space between definitive structures or groups. Turner describes it as anti-structure, which is

the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles, and being acutely conscious of membership in some corporate group such as a family, lineage, clan, tribe, or nation, or of affiliation with some pervasive social category such as a class, caste, sex- or age-division.⁴²

⁴¹ Henri Tajfel, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *Intergroup Relations: Essential Readings*, ed. Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams (New York: Psychology Press, 2001), 94-109.

⁴² Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology," *Rice University Studies* 60 (1974): 75.

In such a space the human is free to experience the wholeness of being without external constraints. In these moments there can occur a spontaneous feeling of understanding and oneness with others in this position outside normative roles, when the only linking force is the connection of a deeper human commonality. These spontaneous moments of *communitas* occur during periods of liminality, outside the fixed structures of society.

Consequently, Turner realized that liminal space was important not only for its marking periods of anti-structural/out-group time but also for understanding the ways in which individuals reacted to periods of time outside of normative structures as members of an out-group. Thus periods of disorder, out-group status, and liminal states are not confined to negative connotations; in essence these states may serve to bring human agency to the forefront, and endow those groups/individuals within these positions with powers and capacities of behavior that are beyond their usual social roles or societally imposed place in the status hierarchy. Thus a liminal outsider/out-group position may symbolize a form of social marginalization indexing both danger and power.⁴³

Drawing from both social identity theory and liminal theory, I ask: in what ways did Wagner attempt to use the typical channels provided by social structure to gain prestige and respect? How did his failures lead to an eventual rejection of these structural means? How did Wagner use what I term liminal spaces to gain prestige and navigate structure? Did he in fact consciously use liminal positions strategically to navigate the status hierarchies and financial systems that limited his creative vision? Did he envision Bayreuth as what could be termed a permanent liminal space to house his art and ensure its enduring notoriety? In

⁴³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge Classics, 1960, 2002), 117.

answering these questions, I engage in careful study and close scrutiny of the specific historical conditions, philosophical and political influences, and social circumstances that shaped Wagner's environment and, in turn, his choices in identity construction. To achieve this I rely heavily on comparative research.

Realizing the potential bias in all sources, I engage in comparative study with a wide variety of historical documents, juxtaposing these materials with one another. I begin with primary sources such as Wagner's own words expressed through personal diary entries, letters, writings, prose works, autobiography, and musical works. Further primary sources include letters, writings, and diary entries of those cohorts in direct as well as indirect communication with Wagner. Beyond primary sources immediately connected to Wagner I examine philosophical and historical works that may have either directly or indirectly influenced him in some way. I also utilize notable secondary sources, such as biographies, analyses, and interpretive writings on Wagner from scholars both contemporary and bygone across multiple disciplines, philosophical, sociological, musicological, and anthropological.

Chapter One:

Social and Material Factors in the Development of Richard Wagner's Liminal Identity

Introduction

In reference to Richard Wagner, notable biographer Ernst Newman stated that, “no great artist was ever so enormously affected in his views of the cosmos by the circumstances of his own life.”¹ Examining Wagner under the lens of social influence allows for the experience and the interpretation of Wagner as an adaptable human being and as a dynamic historical figure within the context of greater society. There has been research in a variety of areas of interest regarding the early life of the composer. Many accounts have attempted to analyze various aspects of Wagner's life and his behaviors through psychoanalytic frameworks. Aside from examining such internal motivations that shape individual behavior, focusing on a social component will add another layer. In this chapter I discuss the idea of “social identity” formation as defined by Henri Tajfel to examine Wagner's development. I will also employ the concept of liminality and consider the notion of ritual as a public method of identity marking and status recognition. The two anthropological figures that developed the latter two concepts were Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner respectively. Van Gennep initially created the trifold stages of the ritual process, separation, transition, and reintegration, after which Turner expanded upon the transitional or “liminal” phase. By examining Wagner's life chronologically I aim to contextualize the history and influences that surrounded him during his development, and briefly examine a few instances where

¹ Ernest Newman, *The Music of the Masters: Wagner* (London: John Lane Co.1912), 3.

social influences and situations may have notably influenced his identity formation. I argue that social facts beyond Wagner's control placed him in what could be regarded as positions of inferiority and marginality, which in turn led to his use of philosophies that correspond to characteristics of the liminal and finally his use and creation of liminal spaces as an adaptive strategy to overcome such constraints.²

Social Identity Theory, Social Ritual, and the Anthropological Development of the Concept of Liminal Theory

The self-concept or image an individual has of themselves is infinitely more complex than the concept of "social identity" presented here.³ As Tajfel stated, "the assumption is made that, however rich and complex may be an individual's view of himself or herself in relation to the surrounding world, social and physical, some aspects of that view are contributed to by the membership of certain social groups or categories."⁴ In other words, social identity as discussed in this study will pertain to that segment of Wagner's self-concept/image that was attained from his awareness of his membership of a social group(s) combined with the value and emotional significance he linked to that membership. "Seen

² Emile Durkheim defined social fact as a category of facts that "consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, that are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him." Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method*, ed. Steven Lukes, trans., W. D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1982), 52.

³ Philosophical questions regarding what "is" identity, or psychological theories of identity development per se are not going to be addressed in the present study.

⁴ Henri Tajfel, "Social Categorization, Social Identity, and Social Comparison," in *Differentiation between Social Groups*, ed., Henri Tajfel (London: Academic Press, 1978), 63.

from the intergroup perspective of social identity, social categorization can therefore be considered as a system of orientation which helps to create and define the individuals place in society.”⁵ Each society has a unique set of roles/identities that is understood by its members, thus the individual members comprehend their identities in socially defined terms. Society defines as well as creates the categories of its members in a dialectical relationship. An individual’s recognized identity depends not just the self but also society, thus changes in identity, social position, or role must in some way be recognized and validated by the society; in many cultures this is done through ritual. Ritual may allow a society to symbolically mark the transition or movement of an individual or a group from one socially recognized role to another. This transitional period in itself can simultaneously be both an advantageous and disadvantageous, as such the possibilities and strategies used in navigating the experience of such a position can serve to shape and guide an individual’s identity as well as the actions one is willing and able to take. Hence, it is useful to understand the origin and significance of the concept of this transitional, “liminal” period, which I will be using to frame my examination of Wagner.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep’s study of ritual within small-scale societies led to his most notable work, *Rites of Passage*.⁶ Here Van Gennep discussed rituals that occur with a change in individual social status,⁷ cohort group, and the society as a whole. Almost all rites from the individual to the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, eds., trans. Monika B. Vizedom, Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1960).

⁷ Van Gennep’s work is primarily connected with individual life-crisis rituals.

society as a whole involve some form of “passage,” a symbolic movement or transition from one status position or role to another.⁸ Van Gennep went on to clarify the three distinct phases that occur within a rite of passage. The first phase, separation, clearly draws the line between sacred space and time, and secular space and time. This is beyond just the act of entering a space denoted as holy, it also changes the quality of time; in a way it involves the construction of a cultural realm, which feels beyond or outside of the temporal space that measures normal secular processes. The next phase, transition, represents a space of ambiguity, a limbo that seems to lack the attributes of either the preceding phase or the subsequent phase. Van Gennep referred to this phase as a liminal period.⁹ Van Gennep labels the third and final phase, incorporation. The symbolic phenomena that accompany incorporation would be representative of the subject(s) returning to a new, stable, clearly defined position status or place within the whole society.¹⁰ Van Gennep’s studies primarily involved what could be termed as pre-industrial or ‘traditional’ social groups. However, in post-industrial societies some examples of symbolic rites of passage that are still commonly celebrated are marriages, funerals, graduations and, in some cultures, the transition from parental dependence to independent financial status.¹¹ All publically mark a transition from one state to another. Each position serves to define a social role complete with its own distinct set of rights and responsibilities. In many modern societies, a young adult’s identity is marked by an increasing set of both economic and personal freedoms outside of a familial

⁸ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 2-3.

⁹ This is the phase, which anthropologist Victor Turner, as well as I will be most concerned with and will return to in depth.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹¹ In numerous societies this is an extremely important piece of male identity construction specifically.

setting. This transition however may be extended or interrupted by a myriad of factors aside from the personal and/or psychological. Socio-economic, political, and structural factors may inhibit this identity transition for prolonged periods of time or permanently. This concept of an extended or permanent period of transition is connected to the work of anthropologist and folklorist Victor Turner. Turner focused on the particular qualities that characterize the participant's experience of this transitional/liminal phase. He observed that during the liminal phase there is a blurring of any lines of distinction as the subject(s) undergo a process of equalization or leveling. Defining factors such as gender or status roles that existed in the pre-liminal phase are erased; the subjects are forced toward structural invisibility, uniformity, and anonymity. However there is a form of compensation for these losses, as subjects gain a special type of freedom and power that they may exert despite their weakened position. As Turner noted, "the novices are, in fact, temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure. This weakens them, since they have no rights over others. But it also liberates them from structural obligations. It places them too in a close connection with asocial powers of life and death."¹² Thus there is a power beyond structure yet also a vulnerability dependent on that same structure. In liminality, the normal structural or moral order, rights, and obligations are suspended, and may even seem to be reversed, therefore "liminality . . . may also include subversive and ludic events."¹³ Liminality is a space between structure; it can be described as anti-structure, a moment of liberation of the

human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a

¹² Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology," *Rice University Studies* 60 (1974): 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

multiplicity of social roles, and being acutely conscious of membership in some corporate group such as a family, lineage, clan, tribe, or nation, or of affiliation with some pervasive social category such as a class, caste, sex- or age-division.¹⁴

In such a space the human is free to experience the wholeness of being without abstract external constraints. In these moments there can occur a spontaneous feeling of understanding and oneness with others in this space, outside of normative roles where the only linking force is the connection of a deeper human commonality, the experience of *communitas*. However, Turner goes on to state that “there is a dialectic here as the immediacy of *communitas* gives way to the mediacy of structure, while, in *rites de passage*, men are released from structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of *communitas*.”¹⁵ Turner is “certain” that, beyond the individual on the larger scale, “no society can function adequately without this dialectic” as well.¹⁶ If social structures become too ridged or repressive there may be a revolutionary impulse toward *communitas*. Nevertheless extended periods of *communitas* or a lack of stable societally acknowledged status positions, will once again lead society back to structure. However, completion of the full rite of passage may be stalled, as various structural or personal circumstances may prevent an individual or groups a return to a clearly defined societal position or status. Therefore the liminal phase itself may become institutionalized. Nevertheless this might be regarded in some ways beneficial, and the strategic use of a liminal position may give those previously in a marginal position a coping strategy to allow

¹⁴ Ibid., 75.

¹⁵ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969), 129.

¹⁶ Ibid.

them to reside between two worlds inclusively rather than be excluded from both. Sociologist and anthropologist Reuven Kahane suggests that, “because the individuals are simultaneously outsiders to and insiders of the existing order . . . they can behave freely and experimentally. Postmodern liminality, then, gives individuals institutional space to live with the strains and tensions that are inherent in the social complexity and rapid change of postmodern society.”¹⁷

I argue that the use of such a strategy can be extended to Wagner and his cohorts, as the rapid political, economic, and cultural changes that took place during the post-Napoleonic era in Europe created similar conditions and left a generation of youth in an economically marginal position. The structural restrictions and lack of social mobility that Wagner and his generation faced delayed or inhibited the usual completion of the symbolic rite of passage; an arrival at adulthood through movement and eventual reintegration into a higher status. Thus Wagner struggled to develop an identity that could reconcile his lack of financial success with his artistic ambitions. Recourse toward aesthetic differentiation and away from the typical material markings of status hierarchy often occurs when structures become too repressive and rigid. This stifling of individual identity creates a dialectical shift from structure back to the need for the free expression and deeper human connection of *communitas*. This need can manifest itself in revolutionary movements, such as the numerous uprisings across Europe, including Dresden, or it can occur within the individual, as it did with Wagner and many of his cohorts, resulting in alternative strategies of identity and value construction.

¹⁷ Reuven Kahane and Tamar Rapoport, “Institutionalization of Liminality,” in *The Origins of Postmodern Youth: Informal Youth Movements in a Comparative Perspective*, eds, Reuven Kahane and Tamar Rapoport (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 31.

Wagner as a Liminal Figure: Youth, Economic Marginality, and the Benefits of a Liminal Status

A liminal phase can be institutionalized for various reasons. Interestingly, for Turner, liminality is a condition that is temporary and its implication means that there will be a resolution or movement back to either a recognized or reconfigured position within society. He explains: “Thus, for me, liminality represents the midpoint of a transition in a status-sequence between two positions.”¹⁸ Therefore, in the liminal there is always the insinuation, belief, or hope that there will be movement at some point. Turner viewed liminal as distinct from other positions that are either permanently on the exterior of social structure (outsiders), or that can simultaneously identify and shift between multiple structural groups (marginal), or are structurally labeled by the society as inferior. For the anthropologist, outsiderhood then referred to the “condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system.”¹⁹ Thus, unlike the liminar who is moving from one socially defined position to another, the outsider is removed from positions that are recognized within the social structure. They are removed from the status positions, roles, and normative behaviors of that society; the removal may be temporary or permanent, it may be voluntarily, or situational.²⁰ “Such outsiders would include, in various cultures, shamans,

¹⁸ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 237.

¹⁹ Ibid., 233.

²⁰ This outsider position will be exemplified and further discussed in chapter 3 in regards to Wagner’s self-endowed position of poet-priest.

diviners, mediums, priests, those in monastic seclusion, hippies, hoboes, and gypsies.”²¹

Turner then goes on to discuss why the outsider should be distinguished from the “marginal;” it is this latter categorization that I will first relate to Wagner, as well as many of his social cohorts. Further, this position of marginality is where the nexus of in-group/out-group interaction for social identity development occurred as Wagner moved between groups of different status.²² Turner stated that marginals are “simultaneously members (by ascription, optation, self-definition, or achievement) of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to, one another.”²³ The anthropologist suggested that this category would include “migrant foreigners . . . persons of mixed ethnic origin, parvenus (upwardly mobile marginals), the declasses (downwardly mobile marginals), migrants from country to city, and women in a changed, nontraditional role.” He further made the observation that marginal often rely on their group of origin, whom would be considered the inferior group, to experience *communitas*, however the more prestigious group in which they mainly live to “aspire to higher status as their structural reference group.” Turner also noted that, “sometimes they become radical critics of structure from the perspective of *communitas*,” yet the same individuals may also at times deny “the affectually warmer and more egalitarian bond of *communitas*.”²⁴ There is an overlap between all of these three categories. They are not solid divisions but to some extent fluid and

²¹ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 233.

²² It is important to note that I will specifically be using Turner’s conception of the term “marginal” in this paper.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

continually shifting as are both societal conditions and personal identities. As we will shortly see, Wagner exemplifies such fluidity.

Wagner, along with many of his university friends, was a member of the lower middle class, not from aristocracy and without ties to merchant wealth. This was much the same cohort group represented by his later friends in the Young German movement, a loosely associated group of literary radicals that spoke for democratic ideals and rallied against the political and social conditions of the time. Although he initially aspired to the lifestyle of the elite, he experienced equality and a deeper bond with his group of origin, the lower middle class. Wagner, and those in this age/class position, developed an ideologically validated aesthetic form of cultural prestige, one that was eventually merged into a burgeoning nationalism. In the 1820s, a newfound belief in social mobility filled the German universities with hopeful students. As the actual prospect of social mobility declined towards the 1840s the youth that had no ties to either the old aristocracy or the new merchant wealth found themselves in a socio-economically marginal position, lacking in opportunities for the usual career-related, or financial means towards adult identity. This led to an extended liminal period for those attempting to complete the passage to adulthood.

As mentioned previously, institutionalized liminality may allow those that were previously marginalized and excluded from full participation in either status position the ability to live “freely and experimentally” between both positions, affording imagination and requiring creativity towards the design of new markers of, and paths toward, a positive social identity. Wagner and those in this position attempted to utilize cultural ties and aesthetic values to gain positive identity distinction. Further they attempted to shape a new kind of citizenship and forge their own societal space as German nationalism grew, questioning the

legitimacy of the hierarchical structure. This added to the doubt cast upon the validity of the position of those at the top. The lack of any clear and ascribed difference between those at the top and those at the bottom would come to result in revolution. Wagner's experience of marginality led to a certain freedom, level of creativity, and viewpoints not available to those still living within the role-playing of a particular society.²⁵ Wagner's experience of economic marginality, and extended liminality, furthered by his time as an outsider living in exile allowed him to bring together the numerous social factors, philosophical influences, and the experiences he, along with his social cohorts, had endured into some of his most significant writings on the state of music, opera, and art.

As an artist Wagner's single-minded devotion to his aesthetic goals led him to shirk various normative behaviors, roles, and endure a great deal of humiliation. His structurally imposed economic marginality and utilized liminal status allowed him to feel that he could override his moral and financial obligations. Wagner simultaneously strove for a higher-class group, which he deemed more culturally elite, while at the same time identifying with a lower class economic group. Wagner as well as others of his economic/age cohort group were waiting for a utopian future when they could (or would) be incorporated back into the society to take a better position, a society in which their actions would be considered the norm. Thus they could be considered as living in a kind of extended liminal position.

Wagner did not regard himself as being fully removed from the structures of his society or as completely rejecting them but as trying to renegotiate and elevate the status of a position/role that he sought to create and then fulfill. However in Wagner, as well as in the

²⁵ In regards to marginals Turner observed that, "they are highly conscious and self-conscious people and may produce from their ranks a disproportionately high number of writers, artists, and philosophers." Ibid.

minds of many of the economically-marginalized class of Young Germans, the conditions of society at the time did not allow financial stability, status elevation, or the free creation of such lofty artistic and utopian goals. Wagner's experience of economic marginalization forced his single-minded devotion toward aesthetic goals as a method of status equalization and prestige, when economic or positional gains were not an available method to gain access to an elevated status. These early experiences of structural marginalization and liminality introduced Wagner not only to the challenges but also the benefits of such a position. During his early years Wagner was without substantial agency in dictating the circumstances of his identity or of his life, his situation was shaped by the material economic, political, and cultural changes rapidly occurring within his society. As an individual agent he continued to navigate the margins and adapt to his situation. He would come to learn over time how to strategically take advantage of the freedoms and assets that come with such a position.

Wagner's Early History: The Liminal Power of Narrative in Identity Formation

It would be advantageous to briefly examine aspects of Wagner's individual history where material constraints and personal difficulties may have resulted in the need for him to demonstrate flexible, adaptable, and ultimately creative strategies towards his identity formation. Wilhelm Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany on May 22, 1813, a year before Napoleon Bonaparte's surrender in April of 1814. The ninth child of his father (on record), Carl Friedrich Wagner, a police actuary, and his mother Johanna (thought to have been the mistress of Prince Constantine), Wagner spent the first years of his life surrounded

by some of the most severe battles to take place in the war of liberation against Napoleon.²⁶

Carl Friedrich died from typhus in November of 1813 and the actor-painter Ludwig Geyer became his adoptive father. Wagner himself speculated that he was in fact his real father, and indeed it is not completely know whether or not Johanna had engaged in relations with the actor prior to Carl Friedrich's death. It is often a matter of conjecture that this lingering suspicion and doubt, including the fact that Geyer had been thought to have Jewish ancestry (which is actually false), would manifest in later psychological issues and identity concerns that Wagner held. Ludwig and Johanna were married in 1814, thus Geyer raised Richard as his own and as a child he went by the name of Richard Geyer until he was fourteen. Wagner was a sickly child and had been said to have a rather skinny, small-frame body with an unusually large head. As a child he developed a love of theater, perhaps inheriting this passion from his family, not just Geyer, as three of his older sisters had also been stage actors. Such a career was not particularly lucrative and his sisters struggled financially, as did his parents. This could be sighted as the reason why Johanna decided not to encourage Richard in the arts, as well as Geyer's wish that young Richard achieve greater success than his parents. Wagner did however chronicle an episode in his autobiography *My Life*, when he was supposedly called to Geyer's deathbed and asked to play a few tunes on the piano, to which Geyer responded with, "could it be that he has a talent for music?"²⁷ There is no other record of this happening outside of Wagner's own account so it may very well be a fabricated event, providing a good example of Wagner's conscious creation of his own narrative. He

²⁶ Eric Dorn Brose, "Patriotism, Nationalism, and the Liberation of Germany," in *German History 1789-1871: From the Holy Roman Empire to the Bismarckian Reich* (New York: Berghahn Books 2013).

²⁷ Richard Wagner, *My Life*, ed. Mary Whittall, trans. Andrew Gray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 6.

carefully shaped his own backstory to provide evidence of his genius, guided not by the normal structures of education but by the hand of destiny. Wagner would later attempt to strategically position himself as Beethoven's rightful successor and a continuer of the greatness of Germanic music. In this way one could consider Wagner as exhibiting characteristics associated with the liminal figure of the 'trickster,' as being both a narrative figure and a narrative force, the generator of his own myth.²⁸ It is important to keep in mind that his autobiography *My Life* was written numerous years after most of the events occurred. Evidence referred to outside of Wagner's own self-imagined myth in some instances contradicts, or alters the narrative he created and may portray a somewhat different picture.

Various external situational instabilities, as well as personal physiological disadvantages may have mitigated young Richard's identity development. A myriad of factors such as his family's lack of a secure financial situation, the close proximity of war that marked his early infant and childhood years, the infidelities of his parents, or the general problems associated with raising a large family on meager economic resources could have created significant tensions. Further, these problems may have drained his mother both financially and emotionally, leading to a weak maternal attachment with Richard. Despite professing a deep love and genuine tenderness for his mother in letters and in *My Life*, Wagner does hint his mother's lack of outward affection. Beyond these situational stresses Wagner had been a sickly child, and was said to be rather awkward and physically frail. He suffered from recurrent bouts of depression and irritability that began at a young age. Throughout his life he also experienced maladies and symptoms that in modern times could

²⁸ Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), xxiii.

perhaps be regarded as psychosomatic in cause. All of these factors could manifest in numerous psychological issues. To compensate for these personal disadvantages young Richard needed to display adaptability, and through that need developed a productive imagination. He learned to protect himself and fit in with his peers through over compensation in other areas. As a child he was known to have a quick wit and sharp tongue, which would often lead to arguments, however he was just as adept at getting out of a fight with diplomacy. Whatever he lacked in pure physical strength he made up for in agility, and creative play.

Richard began his schooling at the Dresden *Kreuzschule* in 1822, however he focused less on his studies, disliking the rules and formalities they implied and more on his imaginative stories and poems, perhaps hoping that his abundant creativity would cover what he was lacking in other areas. He preferred reading the mythic tales of Greek gods and heroes to the boring task of learning the grammatical rules of the Greek language. In 1827 he visited his uncle Adolf Wagner, who was to have a lasting influence on him. Adolf, a learned man, spent time with Richard reading Greek tragedies, and discussing of matters of philosophy. This in turn renewed young Wagner's interest in academics, after which he became partial to the attitudes and fashion of university students. He moved back to Leipzig with two of his sisters and his mother and in 1828 began the *Nicolaischule*. Much like his first attempt, he neglected his studies almost immediately, instead spending time writing his own tragic tales and trying his hand at musical composition inspired by the music of Beethoven and Carl Maria von Weber. His family was initially quite disturbed upon discovering what pursuits were actually taking time away from his schooling, as they did not fancy another poor artist

in the family. Undeterred, Wagner continued to struggle at teaching himself harmony.²⁹ Music provided a focus for Wagner's mental activities and in spite of his family's wishes he began taking lessons in harmony from a local musician, Christian Gottlieb Muller.³⁰ At first he did this covertly, when his mother and sisters were out of the house. These lessons lasted for three years and provided a solid background in harmony. Wagner disliked the boring academic style exercises, and downplayed the utility of these lessons in his autobiography. However, this seemed to be yet another attempt at furthering the legend of his self-made genius, or naturally endowed gift. This early education including the discovery and subsequent reverence of Beethoven is to be seen in his early works. He would come to deny that his music education was useful, and despite attempting to make his own piano transcriptions of the works of the masters (especially Beethoven), he would reject the idea of becoming a pianist.

As I mentioned, instruction in music availed me nothing, I went on with the process of arbitrary self-education by copying the scores of the masters I loved . . . [A]s far as I know, my transcriptions of the C minor and Ninth Symphony have been preserved to this day as souvenirs. The Ninth Symphony became the mystical lodestar of all my fantastic musical thoughts and aspirations.³¹

²⁹ To continued this endeavor Wagner oddly enough borrowed a book from the lending library of family friend, Friedrich Wieck, father of Clara (née Wieck) Schumann. Wagner believed he would be able to pay for the loan cost of the book over time with his pocket money. After failing to do so, and after months of gentle reminders from Wieck, the lender sent a bill for the entire price of the book to Wagner, who embarrassed and desperate, had to go to his mother for the payment. Needless to say neither his mother nor Wieck were happy with this, and so began a debt problem and perhaps a reputation that continued to plague Wagner throughout his life. His single-minded pursuit of his musical endeavors caused him to neglect his financial responsibility and he usually relied on another person to bail him out. Ernest Newman, *The Life Of Richard Wagner*, vol. 1, 1813-1848 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933), 63.

³⁰ Just prior to this Wagner, had become distracted by a crush he had on the daughter of a Jewish banker, she dumped him for another suitor. This was to be a rather difficult blow for Wagner's self esteem and perhaps manifested itself in some of the resentments he felt later in life.

³¹ Wagner, *My Life*, 35.

In his autobiography reality intermingles with fantasy, and provides a liminal indeterminate narrative space, one that can be directed by Wagner in accordance to his own representative desires. One such example in reality turns out to be the combining of two separate events under an imaginative gloss. In *My Life*, Wagner claims that an especially enthralling performance of Beethoven's *Fidelio* sung by the notable, and at the time young soprano, Wilhelmine Schroder-Devrient was a formative experience and the impetus for his entrance into the world of art. When discussing her performance he states, "whoever can remember this wonderful woman at that period of her life will certainly confirm in some fashion the almost demonic fire irresistibly kindled in them by the profoundly human and ecstatic performance of this incomparable artist."³² However, there are no other records of Wagner attending a performance by the singer of *Fidelio*, only those coming from Cosima's diaries of Wagner attending her performances of Bellini's *Romeo*.³³ Thus Wagner has embellished the memories in such ways as to emphasize a linkage to Beethoven in order to situate himself as his heir. There are other instances of strategic embellishment throughout Wagner's autobiography. He attaches the inspiration for most of his early endeavors to renowned figures of the western canon, the Greeks, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Beethoven, or in some cases mystical entities. He follows a very standard historicist formula by discussing why these past figures are so monumental, and explaining how they reveal a path that humanity has since left, the correct path, that will lead the way from the current forest of problems into a better future. In this way, Wagner soundly places himself retroactively in the timeline of those events as the prophetic savior. That is the liminal power of narrative, it

³² Ibid., 37.

³³ Cosima Wagner, Monday January 16, 1871, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, eds., Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, vol. 1, 1869-1877 (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1976), 322.

resides somewhere between reality and fantasy, in a nebulous position out of time but remaining and continuously renewed in the imagination, and Wagner had a very fertile imagination indeed.

By 1830 Wagner was still not progressing in school and left the *Nicolaischule*. At that time his growing appreciation of history was fostered more by his imagination, than by his schoolteachers or lessons. He blamed his loss of love for his philological studies on his teachers, and on the embarrassment and frustration he felt at being dropped down to a lower rank that he had previously been at the Dresden school. Wagner obviously felt that he had the ability to proceed at a higher level despite what his teachers believed. Their loss of faith in his abilities led to his complete rejection of them as authority figures. This incident reveals a pattern in Wagner's life: while he seemed to thrive on positive social reinforcement, he was deeply insulted when someone lacked belief in his abilities.³⁴ Wagner became stubborn and unwilling to cooperate in his education at the school: "I henceforth comported myself in such a manner as never to win the friendship of a teacher at this school."³⁵ Through this incident one can see how certain social factors were shaping Wagner's identity formation. As historian Ernest Newman observes, "All his life Wagner was quick to take offense at anything that hurt his self-esteem."³⁶ Wagner's response was reactionary, he outright rejected or became oppositional to the forces he experienced then pursued an alternative path to whatever status group he chose.

³⁴ Later in Wagner's life (discussed in Chapter 2) this type of indignity will, at least in his mind, be perpetrated by opera composer Giacomo Meyerbeer, resulting in an outpouring of personal bitterness and general of the cuff bigotry entitled *Judaism in Music* (Das Judenthum in der Musik).

³⁵ Wagner, *My Life*, 22.

³⁶ Newman, *The Life Of Richard Wagner*, 58.

Wagner, the Liminality of Adolescence, and the Need for Aesthetics-Based Identity

Young Wagner was experiencing a myriad of political and economic changes as the July Revolution in Paris (1830) had created a wave of backlash that spread across Europe in various manifestations. There was some fighting and agitation that spewed forth in Leipzig; university students marched and some buildings were ransacked. Wagner himself recalls taking part in these early outbursts: “This youthful madness was attributed to righteous indignation at really serious scandals, and I was able to own up to my part in these excesses without diffidence.”³⁷ The nature and direction of these initial student activities however, was to change when property or financial matters were at stake. The “really serious scandals” Wagner mentions make reference to the origin of the revolutions, the suffering and exasperations of the working classes. It was they, the working classes, who experienced first hand the injustices and exploitation of the industrial employers, and now it was they who rose up and had a stake in the events taking place.

The majority of university students that joined in were from the privileged classes, and their lack of a true stake in these uprisings was to become evident. Leipzig was without an armed militia, which led to students being recruited to protect the city. In reality this meant protection for upper classes that feared the actual repercussions of a revolt, most significantly the loss of their property. Wagner was excited by the prospect and wanted to be one of the student recruits. However as he well stated, “not yet a student myself, I anticipated the delights of academic status by half-impudent, half obsequious importuning of those

³⁷ Wagner, *My Life*, 41.

leaders of the student body I admired most.”³⁸ This is the kind of behavior and mindset that would characterize Wagner’s strategies at early identity formation and attempts at status elevation. His words and actions seem to reveal his desire to be a student based more on the perceived status and the privilege he associated with it, than on the actual educational benefit in itself. Further, he was not opposed to prostrating himself to those peers he saw as representing most clearly the characteristic that defined the desired in-group status.

At this point in his educational path it seemed apparent that the usual normative channels of achievement were not the way in which Wagner was going to experience success. The routes he chose toward achieving his status goals could be viewed as simultaneously bearing both negative societal connotations, such as shame, supplication, and ultimately failure, as well as positive social associations such as resourcefulness, creativity, and diligence. When given a situation such as the duty to “protect” the city with a group of individuals that Wagner wished to have as peers, he stayed the course till the very end, disposing his “duty” and enjoying the benefits of the endeavor. At this period Wagner was living a rather rough life as far as adolescent adventures go, with some rowdy types, many of which had been expelled from their university for various reason or had debts. However, he wrote, “thanks to the exceptional circumstances, they had found refuge in Leipzig, where they had been at first received with open arms.”³⁹ In some ways Wagner fit in perfectly with this disgraced and motely crew both in air and ambition. Many of them, like him wished to regain their utility and honor through their dutiful protection of the city in hopes of earning back their admittance as a student.

³⁸ Ibid., 42.

³⁹ Ibid.

Wagner at the time still needed to finish secondary school to realize his desires of joining the ranks of the university students. Later that year (1830) he entered the *Thomasschule*, so that he could matriculate with the least attendance possible. His teachers were not impressed by his work or his actual interest in education, thus the only option left open to him was to register under *studiosus musicae*. As a music student there were less matriculation requirements yet Wagner was allowed to wear the cap and colors of whichever club he chose. This seemed to be the best solution to both of his desires. As he stated, “straight from the interview with the rector, I ran as if shot from a gun to the fencing club, to present myself for admission to the Saxon club flashing my registration card. I attained my object: I could wear the colors of Saxonia, which were highly fashionable owing to the many congenial members in the clubs ranks.”⁴⁰ The other members of the club he chose were for the most part from either aristocratic families or from wealthy distinguished families from Saxony and particularly the capital Dresden. Wagner aspired to the higher status of these groups but this was difficult if not impossible to emulate through the channels at his disposal. He was not born into aristocracy, or the merchant class. He needed to create his own space. At first it was only to mimic outward appearances; it would eventually become an aesthetic space, with which he could feel like he fit in and was of equal value to his peers.

Even though he was not a member of either the nobility or the *nouveau riche*, Wagner aspired to their elevated status positions. The German Confederation of the 1820s and early 1830s saw an increased hope in the prospect of social mobility as the aristocracy was becoming of less importance and there were opportunities for industrial entrepreneurship. Wagner, like his Young German cohorts, was part of this larger social drama of rebellion,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 44.

attempting to procure status and distinguish himself through scholarly and aesthetic means. He was by no means alone in this position among his student peers either, as other members of the Saxon group were likewise not vacationing at home with their wealthy families. Wagner found camaraderie among these “most desperate and young reprobates” left wandering the streets of Leipzig over school break. He experienced an oscillation between wealthy, aristocratic, “dandified members of the student body,” and these “hooligans” who had “struck his fancy,” he himself did not fit into either category.⁴¹ However at both ends of the spectrum he gravitated towards the members of these groups that displayed the strongest characteristics. Wagner described himself as a “diminutive person,” thus it is easy to understand why he was in his own words “dazzled” by one of the “hooligans” he later befriended, a “heroic figure that towered head and shoulders above his companions,” with “incomparable good looks and strength.”⁴² It seems that Wagner often glorified those in possession of the characteristics he did not have but found desirable. In this regard the looks, strength, and general boisterousness of this group compensated for insufficient wealth or prestige. Wagner’s participation allowed him to make up for his lack of other opportunities for status building.

At only seventeen, Wagner, like many teens, engaged in a plethora of risky behaviors. German fraternities and student groups had a history of condoning dueling, fighting, gambling, and general roughneck conduct. For Wagner, this seemed to represent one route towards respect at this point in his life; he narrowly managed to escape injury or death, despite engaging in these behaviors. He was taking part in the relatively common social

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

experiences of various student associations such as fraternities, artistic circles, and intellectual debate societies that traditionally provided a venue for the transition from familial dependence to work/career personal independence. Historian Konrad H. Jarausch noted that such groups served to “socialize the future elite towards adult roles and form a safety valve for sporadic outbursts of violence, sexual license, etc.”⁴³ By briefly examining the historical formation of the German *Burschenschaft* pre-1848 revolution I aim to explain some of the common issues surrounding the student movement that Wagner participated in, and to provide a better understanding of the motivations that led to his participation in it.

Wagner as German Student/Citizen: Socio-economic Marginalization and New Routes Toward Status Elevation

Early nineteenth-century Germany was neither unified nor in possession of any participatory political structure. It remained a largely traditional society, with only the very beginnings of industrialization taking place. Following the downfall of the Holy Roman Empire and Napoleon’s defeat of Prussia, reformers, the bureaucratic intelligentsia, seized the opportunity to modernize the state, economy, army, and the overall social structure through an importation of liberal ideas. As Jarausch observed these reformers made possible the “emergence of a self-conscious *Bildungsbürgertum*, striving for equality with the noblesse of birth through education.”⁴⁴ The old enlightenment ideals that dictated the shape

⁴³ Konrad H. Jarausch, “The Sources of German Student Unrest 1815-1848,” *Historical Social Research* 24 (1974): 81.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

of education were replaced with the new ethos of *Bildung* (cultivation) and *Wissenschaft* (research). There was a change from merely educating a new group of public officials or bureaucrats to a neo-Hellenistic idealism. Philosophers such as Schelling and Fichte gave the intellectual a new sense of obligation, that through knowledge the scholar should refine the state. Thus modernization coupled with the rise of the intellectual bourgeois class, and a reformed consciousness of educational duty, created some of the first patches of student unrest.

This first wave of students during the post-Napoleonic period (1815-1817) clashed with their elders who were attempting to regain postwar stability; these students instead enjoyed the values of modernization that the reformers had brought. This was also a time when German nationalism was being propagated. The *allgemeine deutsche Burschenschaft*, a national organization created in 1818, “called for reform by [an] individual change of consciousness through the Christian-Germanic training of all spiritual and physical talents for the service of the nation.”⁴⁵ Prior to this, German student groups such as the *landmannschaften* (ancient regional fraternities) had been characterized by exposing negative aspects of adolescent life drinking, dueling, gambling, and womanizing. However counter to these elitist and licentious fraternities the *burschenschaften* was a new model type of student group “rejecting whoring, fighting, and running up debts as immature.”⁴⁶ This group sought to reestablish the morality of student life through honorable alternatives such as

⁴⁵ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 85.

fencing, gymnastics, and debate, to emancipate “the student from schoolboy to citizen of the academic community.”⁴⁷

The new groups sought to accept all students that upheld these honorable values regardless of regional origin or social distinction, reflecting the model for the new German state over all. Despite their efforts to depart from the brutish *Landsmannschaftler* past, many of the founding members of the new *Burschenschaft* were from the former era, thus, “a sectarian Teutonic, anti-Semitic romanticism colored their life style.”⁴⁸ This initial period proved to be more rhetorical than action based, as these groups still retained a somewhat liminal transitional nature. The members were reluctant to jeopardize future bureaucratic careers through active participation in dissent. At this time the majority of the members of these groups were comprised of aristocracy and wealthy middle class, the lower middle classed were underrepresented. It was also a time when there was still a great promise of social mobility, which would begin to fade as the universities became saturated with students.

Wagner was participating in what would be considered the second wave of students, characterized by on-the-ground political action and intellectual unrest. At this time holdovers from the first wave still remained, however they combined with the new action based mindset. The unfiltered egalitarianism of the old groups was beginning to diminish and was being replaced by structural division of an inner circle, and a larger following. Wagner strove to be a part of the inner circle. His behaviors represent an attempt to gain the benefits of participation in structures of adolescent transition to adulthood through engaging in conduct

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

that would otherwise be considered anti-normative. Through luck, he, for lack of a better term, got away with numerous instances of anti-normative behaviors considered usual for a teenager especially considering typical activities of the student groups at the time. However, Wagner continued to partake in these exploits (for instance, infidelity, running up debts) throughout his life, while at the same time striving for respect and prestige. Wagner, like his peers, was experiencing what Turner termed a *liminal period*, in this case it was the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. Student groups allowed Wagner and his peers to overcome their marginal status and take part in both realms (adult/child). Because the students were simultaneously both outsiders and insiders to the existing social order they were able to behave freely and engage in experimentation not open to those in a stable recognized status position. This freedom of behavior and experimentation would become integrated into Wagner's identity beyond a transitional phase.

Wagner's early efforts to make it on his own were always a struggle and he would continue in some form or another to rely on patronage from more stable individuals throughout his career—an attitude akin to the adolescent depending on parental support. Interestingly, the term patron in definition comes from the Latin *patronus* meaning a “protector or defender,” from the genitive *patris*, “father.” In many ways Wagner cultivated a liminal mindset during his early adolescent/young adult years that allowed him to function in a society itself going through a crisis of identity and self-definition. This perpetually liminal state enabled Wagner to freely engage in both, normative and anti-normative behaviors within social boundaries, with the hope that in the future he would be reintegrated into his rightful adult position as an artist/composer. Unfortunately he never fully arrived at a state of stable maturity when it came to his finances.

The dreams of youth for Wagner continued to be held long after many peers would have let them go. He was determined to keep them until they could become reality. Perhaps it was a result of this perpetual liminal mindset, a form of vestigial adolescence, that Wagner was able to continue on past the time most adults would quit and fold under the structural tensions and pressures of society. Throughout his life he would engage in extraordinarily humbling behaviors to gain the finances required to keep his artistic ambitions (and himself) alive. In a larger sense Wagner's perpetual liminal mindset allowed him the space to live within the strains of a rapidly changing society. Institutionalized liminality is a state, as mentioned previously, that is often relegated as a phenomenon of postmodern society. However it can also be considered a useful strategy for any individual during rapidly changing circumstances in which they cannot maintain or move to a stable position, and for Wagner the liminal aided him in many ways.

Spinning Humiliation in Love and Music: Young Germany's Revolutionary Strivings Towards Aesthetics-based Identities

Wagner's musical aspirations did not start out particularly well. He had difficulty finding his own unique identity as a composer and endured several failures and embarrassments from the beginning that would be transformed into accusations of dilettantism till the end. An example of an early humiliation was the debut of his Overture in B-flat major. Wagner wanted to write the score in three different colors of ink, albeit he ended up with only two. It still proved gimmicky enough to catch the eye of the Kapellmeister of the Leipzig Court Theatre and he scheduled a performance of it as the

opening for a special charity concert. Wagner had used a further contrivance to increase the piece's uniqueness: after every four bars he inserted a fifth bar consisting of a loud timpani strike on the second beat. Wagner went to the performance incognito; only the doorman knew he was there. The audience's response to the piece was somewhere between hilarity, and confusion. Needless to say after the piece ended Wagner slunk from the theater, tail between his legs, humiliated. As he recalled, "To get up and sidle through the rows of seats to the exit was awful. But nothing approached the agony in which I now came face-to-face once again with the door keeper: the singular look he gave me made an ineradicable impression, and for a long time thereafter I avoided the parterre of the Leipzig theater."⁴⁹

Humiliation was to continue for Wagner on the romantic front. He developed feelings for the daughter of Count Pachta, Jenny. However she did not return his love and made him shamefully publically well aware of that. Wagner's imagination would often idealize the objects of his affection turning them into images that could not exist on their own terms in reality, and he would recreate them in his own likeness. Jenny's other sister playfully flirted with Wagner as well, but purposefully also flirted with other aristocratic admirers in front of him much to his chagrin. This proved to be a substantial blow to Wagner's self esteem. However much like his feeling of rejection from his teachers earlier in his life, Wagner would come to deem those love affairs, which did not come to a desired ending, not worthy of his love in the first place.⁵⁰

In 1833 Wagner left Leipzig and moved to Würzburg to stay with his brother Albert. Albert had an appointment at the theatre there and acquired the job of chorus master for his

⁴⁹ Wagner, *My Life*, 53.

⁵⁰ Newman, *The Life Of Richard Wagner*, 93.

little brother. Thus Wagner gained his first professional job as a theatre choirmaster through a family connection. His duties began immediately and he was responsible for rehearsing the choir in a repertory that included operas by Weber, Cherubini, Rossini, and Beethoven. While he was becoming better familiarized with the work of these composers he began work on his first complete opera, *Die Feen* (The Fairies, 1834). It was a period of adult firsts for Wagner in many respects. It was at this time that he says he had his first love affair with one of the sopranos from the chorus—he, however, ducted out of the affair when the question of marriage occurred. Following this affair Wagner engaged in an illicit liaison with Friederike Galvani, stealing her from another man, her oboist fiancé. This conquest greatly boosted Wagner's self esteem and made him feel that he was accepted and had value. "That her fiancé, noticing all this, reacted with good grace and accepted his position with a touch of sadness but without any attempt to interfere aroused a certain self satisfaction in me for the first time in my life."⁵¹ Wagner goes on to mention that he had never thought he was capable of making a good impression on girls before this. This instance reflects Wagner's ability to disregard normative behaviors for his own gratification and self-esteem. He left Würzburg to return to Leipzig and lost contact with Friederike, leaving her free to return to the arms of her fiancé.

Wagner engaged in similar affairs throughout his life, showing a disregard of normative moral constraints and a lack of empathy towards the situation of the other individuals involved. Although it may also be possible to characterize him as hypersexual, I would argue that there were life-sustaining needs being fulfilled other than just the gratification of purely instinctual carnal desires. Wagner relied on woman for financial

⁵¹ Wagner, *My Life*, 76.

support, emotional reassurance, and personal validation. All of these factors in turn had a place in how he was able to situate himself with regard to his peer group, and within the society at large. Thus the life instinct involves more than pure sexual drives, it becomes coupled with the fulfillment of other needs shaped by life within a society. How one is *allowed* to positively mediate these instinctual desires is determined by societal norms and morals. An individual's choice to disregard certain normative rules to gain access to personal needs regulates how such an individual develops and is placed within society. If navigated through non-normative actions the result could be negative placement. Other factors, however, may come into play, those in a liminal position such as an adolescent, or those in a marginal, or outsider position may have the power to disregard certain normative rules and not gain negative connotations.

Wagner returned to Leipzig at the beginning of 1834 and, as his earnings from his former position were gone, another woman needed to provide for his artistic endeavors, in this case, his sister Rosalie. He continued to have difficulty mitigating the role women had in his life, both as a man and as an artist. Women played an array of parts in Wagner's life: protectors, patrons, performers, muses, and lovers. While the need for a woman's help in his financial life may have been perceived as emasculating, Wagner also required women to fulfill his physical desires. Problems aside, it was through a woman, his sister Rosalie, that Wagner first became acquainted with a man that was not only to be a close friend but an influential presence, Heinrich Laube.

Laube was one of the leaders of the Young German movement. The members of this group wished to free themselves of the constraints of ridged classical forms, and to exalt passion and irrationality over reason and repression. Thus previously idolized figures such as

Mozart and Goethe were brought down from their pedestals, as they were regarded as representations of these more reserved forms. The Young Germans were also critical of romantic figures such as E.T.A. Hoffman and Weber for their sentimentality. This group included various well-known literary figures such as Heinrich Heine, and Ludwig Börne. The increasing sense of a national consciousness at the time corresponded to uncertainty among artists. The position of the artist was still yet to be decided within the changing economic structures and increased sense of mobility that characterized the period. The question of what would come to characterize a quintessentially *German* art form swirled around. With regard to opera it was thought that German art must not be consumed by, but open to appropriating ideas from the French and the Italians. Wagner's first published article "On German Music," from 1834,⁵² and later critiques which appeared in Laube's paper *Zeitung für die elegante Welt*, discussed these concepts as well as the beauty of the Italian *bel canto* style above the overly academic tendencies of German composers.

Despite the somewhat liberal viewpoints of the Young Germans, Wagner included, there was a hint of authoritarianism that was derived from Saint-Simon's utopian form of socialism, in which society would be restructured into three classes, owners, workers, and the learned, who rule society in a form of benevolent totalitarianism. As Estelle Morgan states, "The Young Germans and Heine in particular were strongly influenced by the Saint-Simonists, who wanted to regenerate mankind by emphasizing the claims of matter and the senses."⁵³ The Saint-Simonists concept of an organic society followed the aggrandizement of

⁵² Richard Wagner, "On German Music," in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. and ed. W. Ashton Ellis, vol. 7 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & CO., Ltd., 1895), 83.

⁵³ Estelle Morgan, "Bourgeois and Philistine," *The Modern Language Review* 57 (1962): 69-72.

the element of the irrational as both an artistic and a political principle; individuals were to devote themselves unconditionally to the interests of the society at large. This utopian concept of a society of equals, where the individual's duty is always beyond his own rational interest, is a concept that will prove to be influential in Wagner's philosophical beliefs.

Turner believed that societies were maintained through a dialectic situation, oscillating between these utopic moments of equality felt through experience of *communitas*, and the organizational hierarchies needed to maintain the stability of a large-scale societal structure. As he stated, the "maximization of *communitas* provokes maximization of structure, which in its turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed *communitas*. The history of any great society provided evidence at the political level for this oscillation."⁵⁴ Wagner and the Young German's "revolutionary strivings for renewed *communitas*," stemmed from their disappointment over the political and economic outcomes of the previous revolution. They believed that industrialization had merely changed who the dominant social group was, as the hierarchical structure itself had remained the same. As Laube stated, "the development of the revolution has become different from what we anticipated," for often "the new had become worse than the old, the merchant with his purse in hand more disgusting than the old aristocrat with his genealogical tree."⁵⁵

Wagner had much in common with the other members of the Young German group, most, like him, were from lower middle-class backgrounds. They lambasted writers from the previous generation for ignoring peasant misery at the hand of an abusive aristocracy through

⁵⁴ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 129.

⁵⁵ Eric Dorn Brose, *German History 1789-1871: From the Holy Roman Empire to the Bismarckian Reich*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 222.

an overt romanticization of folk stories, or through escape into a glorification of ancient Greek culture. Figures like Ludwig Börne criticized formerly revered icons as being aloof to the problems of reality. In discussing Goethe Börne rebukes: “you had a great sword, but were always your own guardian.”⁵⁶ Wagner like his Young German cohorts was left without a means of establishing substantial financial or social status. Social mobility was believed possible in imagination, but began to decrease in reality as the 1830s moved forward. Many of Wagner’s generation were not born into aristocracy, were too young or had missed an opportunity at the initial grabs for owing a piece of industry. Their only recourse for status was through artistic and cultural endeavors; they sought to define what Germany was to become, and in essence, their place within it. Wagner’s imagination, like his fellow Young Germans conceived of a time in the future after revolution when they would gain the place and status they deemed worthy as artists and as Germans. Therefore the present was to be seen as a temporary or liminal situation, one that must structurally change for them to return to their proper roles, and status positions within society.

Cultural Capital Versus Capital, Wagner in Paris: Economic, and National Experiences of Marginality

As an adolescent Wagner seemed to embrace his economic and young adult marginality as he circulated between conflicting groups. He had friends who were like him, from the lower middle-class strata, who had not been able or willing to succeed through the traditional system of education, exemplary of the roughneck members of the Saxon club

⁵⁶ Ibid.

whom he befriended and later endowed with a positive almost mythic heroism. He also sought out friends that were well-to-do aristocrats, or those moneyed members of the parvenu class moving in the cultural circles he wished to be a part of. One such well-to-do friend was Theodor Apel. Apel was the son of a Leipzig councilman, who had become friends with Wagner when they both attended the *Nicolaischule*. Apel like many of his peers had an interest in artistic endeavors and aspired to be a poet, but pragmatically ended up studying law while at the University of Leipzig.

In the spring of 1834 Wagner and Apel took a trip to Bohemia, where they indulged in a hedonistic romp that included several luxuries, fine food, wines, and accommodations. They also engaged in spirited intellectual discussions and debates. Wagner had been given a taste of the finer things in life, so-to-speak, and he seemed to never forget it. His tendencies to live the life he thought he deserved, instead of the life he could actually afford, continued to cause him numerous problems throughout his life. Wagner held a marginal position between those of the upper classes with an amateur interest in the arts and culture and those like him of the lower classes—the suffering artists. Wagner’s bountiful possession of cultural capital gave him entrance and some form of equality with these artistically interested upper class individuals, yet his lack of actual capital kept him economically lower middle class. Living in this margin would prove a very significant path to tread, a path that would shape Wagner’s outlook.

When Wagner returned from his Bohemian adventure with Apel, he found that he had been offered a job as the musical director of Heinrich Bethmann’s theater company. Wagner initially had decided to decline the job, due to the run-down conditions of the company. However, prior to his exit he was offered a place to reside in the same building as the

theater's leading actress Christine Wilhelmine (Minna) Planer, and upon introduction, he was thoroughly taken with her. "I would thereby have the pleasure of living with the prettiest and nicest girl to be found at the time in *Lauschestadt*: this was the leading lady of the troupe, Fraulein Minna Planer."⁵⁷ Thus, Wagner took the job of musical director with the company inspired by the prospect of getting better acquainted with a woman. He married Minna in 1836 despite their relationship being rather unstable; indeed she left him for another man within months. However, a particular quote from Wagner seems to best characterize their long relationship.

I remained on continually good terms with Minna. I do not believe she ever felt any sort of passion or genuine love for me . . . [I] can only describe her feelings for me as, kind of heart, the sincerest desire for my success and prosperity . . . good-natured delight in characteristics of mine . . . all of which blended into a constant comfortable habit of mine.⁵⁸

Despite the tempestuous side of their relationship, the bond between them proved very strong. When Wagner took a job as the musical director of the theater of Riga, Latvia, he lived there with Minna and her sister, also a singer. At this time he worked on some comic operas as well as completing his five-act grand opera *Rienzi* in 1838. He was allowed little authority or room to be creative in the position at Riga and was rather miserable in general due to cramped living conditions with Minna and her illegitimate daughter, Natalie.⁵⁹ By 1839 Wagner had become mentally stifled with both German provincial musical life, and small town life itself. As Ernest Newman noted, "he saw, too, that there was no hope for him of the fortune that sometimes comes along with fame if he continued to pursue the ordinary

⁵⁷ Wagner, *My Life*, 87.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁵⁹ Natalie was raised as Minna's sister to avoid public scandal.

path of the German opera composer.”⁶⁰ Wagner came to believe, like many other hopeful artists and composers at the time, that what he needed was a success in Paris that would assure notoriety and increase his status as well as the respect that would come with it. Further it would aid him in getting the German theaters to support his endeavors, and give him added authority and control over his creative ideas. As Newman states, “The German theaters took their cue from Italy or Paris; only by a resounding success there could he win for himself a strategic position from which he could dictate terms to the German directors.”⁶¹ Wagner was in a great deal of debt at the time and was constantly hassled by creditors. He realized that in Paris he would be legally out of the reach of his German consignees.⁶² However, due to his large debts, getting there was not going to be simple, as both he and Minna’s passports had been impounded. As such they were forced to escape at night, crossing the border under a ditch to avoid guards, to finally be smuggled aboard a ship bound for London. Later in life Wagner stated that parts of this adventure had helped to inspire *Der fliegende Holländer*.⁶³

Paris, with its history of Grand Opera, drew many composers to make both a name for themselves and hopefully a fortune in this famous arena. Whereas German theaters bought an opera for a singular small payment, in Paris the composer could draw royalties for each performance, which would substantially increase the earning power. Although initially Wagner held those aspirations, the two years he spent in Paris were miserable. Paris at the time was under the liberal constitution monarchy of Louis Philippe I, otherwise known as the

⁶⁰ Newman, *The Life Of Richard Wagner*, 243.

⁶¹ Ibid., 243.

⁶² To this regard, Newman states: “to Paris, then, he was not merely led by choice; he was driven there by inexorable necessity. Ibid.

⁶³ Wagner, *My Life*, 158-160.

July Monarchy (1830-1848). French society was divided into a bourgeois elite holding most of the wealth and power and a bourgeois middle class that shared the rest with the working class and the peasant class. By far the most problematic factor was the lack of any social mobility, making it almost impossible to gain opportunity without prior connections or wealth. Wagner shared the resentment and anger felt by many of the lower classes, and experienced first hand the feeling of marginality both economically, and culturally. This was an experience similar to what he had economically been exposed to in his home country, and migrating to find opportunity was also a fairly common if not encouraged situation.

In Germany those who did not have ties to the *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* (economic citizenry) or the *Bildungsbürgertum* (educated citizenry) were actually encouraged to migrate. Cultural nationalists saw it as a way to get rid of those marginals who drew from already insufficient resources and as a way of spreading German cultural and national influence. Further it was believed that the poor as well as debtors and prisoners, might improve their lot through immigration.⁶⁴ Wagner was economically and status-wise in that marginal position. Like his financially marginalized cohorts, he was left to define himself through aesthetic, and later, nationalized cultural stereotypes.

At the time the image of a good German citizen was somewhat up for grabs. The recourse for emigration rather than integration was usually reserved for the rural colonial enterprises in the Americas, or other territories. Not the expensive city of Paris. Indeed many of Wagner's friends including his own brother-in-law questioned the sanity of his decision to move to Paris in the first place. Indeed it proved incredibly difficult for Wagner. With few

⁶⁴ Donna R. Gabaccia, Dirk Hoerder, and Adam Walaszek, "Emigration and Nation Building During the Mass Migrations from Europe," in *Citizenship and Those Who Leave: The Politics of Emigration and Expatriation*, eds., Nancy L. Green and François Weil (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 65-66.

connections he struggled to even get a simple hearing, or find a singer willing to work with him. This led Wagner himself to express the daydream of emigration to a far away colony as a solution to his financially and culturally marginalized position. “I used to fantasize for my poor wife about free countries in South America, where we could be entirely removed from these disconcerting apparitions, where people knew nothing of opera and music, and where we could easily earn a decent living through diligent labor.”⁶⁵ A somewhat idyllic wish, but it does make the point that Wagner, as well as many at this time of political, economic, and social re-structuring, fell between the cracks of the political and industrial agenda.

Despite the problems in Germany, Wagner began to openly critique the negative aspects of French society in particular. He described French opera as being in just as a detestable state as the rest of the bourgeois society, relegating art to a commodity merely produced for profit or fame. As a learning opportunity, his time in Paris did serve to enlighten Wagner to the harsh realities of the theater process, the cynicism, and problems with undertaking the grand artistic ideas he had entertained. However it also piled on more financial debt and led him to be even more desensitized to such matters. As Newman stated, Wagner came to the recognition that “an artistic ideal of the theater . . . can be realized, if at all, only through very imperfect and often unwilling human instruments.”⁶⁶ Even before he left Riga, Wagner assumed that he had the support of the prominent opera composer Giacomo (Jakob) Meyerbeer. However after moving to Paris Wagner’s faith in his assumed support system dwindled and he began to feel that Meyerbeer might be just playing lip service and perhaps not doing all he could to help him. This sense of betrayal coupled with

⁶⁵ Wagner, *My Life*, 182-183.

⁶⁶ Newman, *The Life Of Richard Wagner*, 257.

his failure to succeed in the Parisian arena spurred resentment.⁶⁷ Further, he had shamelessly thrown himself at Meyerbeer's feet for help in a number of letters he wrote. These humiliations could not have been a comfortable situation to face with regard to the maintenance of a positive self-identity.

Away from the Margin, Imagining the Other: The Creative Shaping of Wagner's Social Identity

Wagner's experience of economic marginality forced him to find a way to redefine his identity through alternative means due to the negative connotations of his lack of success and financial indebtedness. His failure in Paris both finically and in achieving any form of status elevation was turned around and given a positive spin. As Tajfel assumed, "people strive to define themselves positively," therefore "to maintain the self-esteem of their members, social groups must preserve a positive value distinctiveness." He further noted that, "under some conditions a negative social identity will result in an enhanced search for positive group distinctiveness."⁶⁸ Tajfel listed a few strategies that an individual may employ to gain positive valued distinctiveness, the first is through *individual mobility*, where "the individual may leave or dissociate himself from his erstwhile group."⁶⁹ In Wagner's case, as well as many other Young Germans at the time, upward mobility to a higher status group was

⁶⁷ Bryan Magee, *Aspects of Wagner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 24-25.

⁶⁸ Henri Tajfel as quoted by J. Turner and R. Brown, "Social Status, Cognitive Alternatives and Intergroup Relations," in *Differentiation between Social Groups*, ed., Henri Tajfel (London: Academic Press, 1978), 204.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

not a real possibility with the economic structures as they were, and he was not able to get any breaks as an opera composer in Paris. The second route Tajfel discussed is through *social creativity*, where “the group members may achieve positive value distinctiveness through altering or redefining the elements of the comparative situation.”⁷⁰ This can be done in a few ways, the in-group can be compared to the out-group on some *new dimension*, or an individual can *change one’s values* so that previously negative comparisons are perceived as positive, or one can *change the out-group* with which the in-group is compared. Wagner used all of these strategies to forge a positive identity for himself as specifically *German* artist.

Rather than accept the negative characteristics of his low status position, failure, and poverty, Wagner would appropriate formerly negative characteristics, his failures, struggles, and lack of material wealth into a noble endeavor to create *art for art’s sake*, instead of the reward of material wealth. The humiliations and suffering he experienced would turn into martyrdom for a greater cause. He would need to reevaluate the French and German music scene with new aesthetic and moral dimensions. His first impulses toward moving to Paris were for a greater chance for fame and economic success. However, Wagner’s inability to achieve these dimensions left him in a negative identity position with regards to the old rubric. He had to alter the dimensions, changing what angles reflected favorably to account for his lack of accomplishment in former markers of success. Thus Wagner began to apply a new comparative structure, and attempted to cast the blame of his situation on the state of society as a whole, more specifically on what he took to be the unsavory aspects of a specifically *French* national identity.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

In discussing possible reasons for the manifestation of prejudice and discrimination, Tajfel observed that some individuals “*need* prejudice in order to deal with their individual emotional problems or aggressions.”⁷¹ Tajfel stated that individuals like this may have a particular way of structuring their social world: “they *need* a clear, separate and distinct *outgroup* which can be sharply dichotomized from the group that they themselves, in their view, represent.”⁷² In *My Life* one can observe Wagner’s creation of the French *other* in opposition to the German. His acquaintance with the music of French composer Hector Berlioz would result in borrowing ideas from the *other* yet not quite giving him credit, neither as original creator, nor as an inspiration. This achieves two goals; it facilitates Wagner’s narrative myth of himself as the true German artist, and, through a dichotomization and essentialization of the French versus German identities, it allows Wagner to re-appropriate Berlioz’s ideas and place his own claims of authenticity on them.

In *My Life* Wagner discusses his oppositional feelings of admiration and uncertainty for Berlioz, characterizing him as a “unique and incomparable artist,” yet not able to “shake off an odd, profound and serious feeling of oppression provoked by his work as a whole.”⁷³ This “odd” feeling is Wagner’s imagined recognition of *foreignness*: “There remained in me a residue of reserve, as if toward a foreign element with which I could never become entirely familiar,” this is why he could “be so carried away by one of Berlioz’s longer works and yet at times so undeniably repelled or even bored by it.”⁷⁴ In the *other* Wagner can firmly place

⁷¹ Henri Tajfel, “Inter-individual Behavior and Inter-group Behavior,” in *Differentiation between Social Groups*, ed., Henri Tajfel (London: Academic Press, 1978), 56.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Wagner, *My Life*, 192.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

all of what he finds to be the negative excesses of opera at the time, as well as the reasons for his own underserved failure. He can easily borrow the features he enjoys but at the same time explain why his use of these devices would be different, and in his mind perhaps more authentic. Wagner's text-based works were more akin to the French and the Italians who at the time dominated that genre, than to German instrumental music. The Romantic generation had claimed that German instrumental music had a universal appeal. Thus, as Nicholas Vazsonyi noted, Wagner's "proximity to cultural rivals required an alternative account for the continued superiority and universality of German music and musicians."⁷⁵ Wagner wished to portray himself as the quintessential German artist, not interested in material gain, only in producing art for art's sake, willing to endure poverty, humiliation, and misery to fulfill his creative aspirations.

A Martyr in Paris: Wagner Returns to Germany a True German Artist

Despite being a bit more destitute, Wagner was fundamentally in the same economic category in Paris as he was in Germany, however the added dimension of nationality became both the cause, and in the end, the solution to his struggles. Wagner never managed to get any of his works performed in Paris, and had to eek out a living writing hack opera arrangements and musical criticism. It was at this time that Wagner began to reframe the financial poverty of his marginal situation as one of *chosen financial disinterest*. Like this, several other tropes would be combined to form a positive identity and help shape a desirable

⁷⁵ Nicholas Vazsonyi, "Marketing German Identity: Richard Wagner's 'Enterprise,'" *German Studies Review* 28 (2005): 335.

in-group for Wagner. In *My Life* Wagner would provide ample examples of the suffering and indignities that he faced while struggling in Paris (and beyond) while at the same time adding links that cemented his lineage to Beethoven as the next great German composer.

The concept of the artist as martyr, uncompromising, living only to see the completion of their creative vision, undeterred by the lack of financial gain became unified with the formation of a German nationalism and identity. Vazsonyi elaborates: “In this tale, to be German was to be poor, to be honest, genuine, to do things for their own sake, and not to be interested in success or commercial gain. To be a German artist was to be willing to suffer for that art, to martyr oneself for it.”⁷⁶ Thus Wagner could strategically take control of his marginal situation and turn his failures, financial hardships and suffering into a noble position defined through a nationalist trope. Moreover, Vazsonyi noted that, “Wagner projects his experience of failure and misery onto the experience of being German *per se* in Paris.”⁷⁷ This appropriation of the German identity by Wagner turned the poverty of his economic marginalization into a positive attribute of the society he lived in. He and his Young German cohorts rather than accept the negative aspects of their out-group position, reframed themselves as exhibiting the *true* aspects of the German cultural identity. “[T]he reasoning is circular: Germans are honest, therefore they are poor: their poverty proof of their honesty. Germans in Paris are also victims, persecuted by modern commercialism, which smothers good old-fashioned values.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Vazsonyi, “Marketing German Identity,” 333.

⁷⁷ Ibid..

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Wagner was in Paris at a peak time for the publication of revolutionary works of political interest. As such he met many like-minded individuals who would have an effect on his philosophical outlook and provide some inspiration for his later works. Samuel Lehrs was a philologist friend that would acquaint him with the backstories that would be used to create *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. More importantly, Lehrs would introduce the concepts discussed in two influential works of the time, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *Qu'est-ce que la propriété? Recherche sur le principe du droit et du gouvernement* (What is Property? An Inquiry Into the Principle of Right and Government) first published in Paris in 1840, and Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (The Essence of Christianity) published in 1841.⁷⁹ Wagner became actively involved in discussions about the main tenants of each work.⁸⁰ Finally, in 1842, his last year in Paris, *Reinzi* was accepted by the Dresden Hoftheater (partially through Meyerbeer's influence), and preparations were made for the premier. It was a success perhaps owing to the fact that the storyline captured the spirit of the times, so-to-speak. Reinzi ends the rule of a corrupt aristocracy and becomes a tribune of the people, however he becomes a victim of his own ambition and a conspiracy against him. Likewise, the German middle class at the time was calling for participation in political decision-making, freedom of the press, constitutional reform, and national unity. Wagner's premier of *Der fliegende Holländer* the following year (1843) did not meet with the same level of success, as audiences did not readily connect with its pensive quality.

In March of that year, with some reluctance, the composer took the post of Kapellmeister at the King of Saxony's court at Dresden. From the beginning Wagner made it

⁷⁹ Both of these works and their philosophical influence on Wagner will be discussed in chapter 2.

⁸⁰ Wagner would later come to draw on ideological themes from both books in crafting the dramatic story line of *The Ring*.

clear that he needed full administrative authority to make changes he deemed necessary for his post. He plunged into his duties and conducted notable works such as Gluck's *Armide*, wrote choral music for court occasions, and completed the verses for *Tannhäuser* (1843). Despite his rising reputation, Wagner was still struggling financially. To compensate for practical woes, as discussed previously, and give them a positive spin so-to-speak, Wagner began to accentuate his connections to great German musicians of the past, most notably Beethoven, and constructing for himself a direct lineage of German music. An example of this attitude was his petition to have Carl Maria von Weber's remains moved from London back to Dresden, the composer's hometown. Wagner prevailed and a ceremony took place that December. He presided over the memorial service in dramatic fashion, wrote the music for the funeral procession, and gave a stirring oration graveside ripe with nationalist overtones.

Aside from his continued professional struggles and precarious financial situation, this period of time saw Wagner's home-life and marriage at its most stable. Minna managed their money, more reasonably than her husband, and enjoyed her status as a Kapellmeister's wife. They did not have children, most likely due to an earlier miscarriage.⁸¹ Wagner's library at Dresden held many of the tales that would later serve as inspiration, such as von Strassburg's poem, *Tristan*, as well as editions of *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*. This was a productive time creatively for Wagner as the subjects of the music dramas that came after *The Ring* were already churning in his imagination; he even finished the first prose draft of *Die Meistersingers* in 1845. After the completion of the music for, and first performance of *Tannhäuser* that same year (1845), Wagner took a few months out to draft a paper,

⁸¹ Wagner would later cite this as one of the main tensions in their relationship.

“Concerning the Royal Orchestra,” methodically outlining reforms and improvements that he thought crucial to keep Dresden relevant and competitive.⁸² Wagner believed them to be fairly reasonable requests, reflecting the changes sought within German society as a whole. The reforms included modifications regarding the hiring policies, raising the salaries of orchestral players, downsizing the workload to more manageable levels, having a series of winter orchestral concerts to enhance the reputation of the Dresden court, and improving the orchestra layout so that the players could see one another and the conductor with more ease. After waiting a year for the results, Wagner was told that the proposal had been rejected. This must have been quite a blow to his self-esteem and status. It would undermine his authority as a director, and push him further in line with the coming rebellion.

Despite failure at the institution of reforms Wagner would press on and attempt another route to gain respect and make his mark as a conductor. He had set his sights on a performance of the notoriously difficult Ninth Symphony by Beethoven. This was much to the dismay of the opera house trustees, who worried that it would be an expensive failure. However, it turned out to be a notable success, adding to Wagner’s reputation, and aiding in his linkage from Beethoven the greatest of German composers to himself. As a narrative it demonstrates his triumph over situational odds and the doubts of those around him, achieving his goal through a pure faith in his own abilities, creating a heroic trope as composer/genius touched by providence: “At last I managed to resume composition of the third act of *Lohengrin* after having been interrupted in the middle of the bridal scene, and finished it by the end of the winter. After I had refreshed myself with the repetition of the Ninth Symphony

⁸² Newman, *The Life Of Richard Wagner*, 463.

at the Palm Sunday concert, put on by popular demand.”⁸³ The “popular demand” that occurred was owed to the ingenious advertising that Wagner used to generate public interest in the performance; this was a success crafted from start to finish by Wagner himself.

The next year (1847) Wagner was occupied with a production of Christoph Willibald Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Aulide*. Wagner admired Gluck’s operas, and agreed with Gluck’s choice to rid his operas of arbitrary symmetrical melodic periods if they inhibited the dramatic current. His arrangement of the opera highlighted Gluck’s melodic ideas yet remedied what Wagner saw as the disconnected nature of the arias and choruses. He linked them with preludes, postludes, and transitions, the art of which was to become a major stylistic source of pride for Wagner later on. He also wanted to eliminate predictability and sentimentality from the work, and did so by creating a new character, and getting rid of the predictable marriage of Achilles and Iphigenia at the end. Many traits and ideas to be found in Wagner’s later works were inaugurated in the activities he was engaging in at this point. That same year, he was busy working on *Lohengrin*, and engaged in studying *Aeschylus* (the *Oresteia* trilogy), *Aristophanes*, as well as numerous other Greek authors in German translation. The particular translation he read included commentary by Johan Gustav Droysen, who in the spirit of his own age interpreted *Aeschylus* as commemorating Greek nationhood and freedom. The similarities and message of nationalism was not lost on Wagner, and may have been influential in his interpretation and later usage as well.⁸⁴

⁸³ Wagner, *My Life*, 340.

⁸⁴ Michael Ewans, *Wagner and Aeschylus: The Ring and the Oresteia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 30.

The year 1848 was one of intense happenings and transformations for Wagner. It began on a solemn note as the composer's mother passed away in January. Wagner stated that he felt as though he was breaking the last connection with his family, as his brothers and sisters had all moved on and had families of their own: "On the short trip back to Dresden the realization of my complete loneliness came over me for the first time with full clarity."⁸⁵ At this point his family ties seemed severed; he felt a growing sense of futility in his position at Dresden, and was continually frustrated by conventional musical tastes and forms. Wagner, paralleling Germany's situation, was ready for a social change.

Unemployed Intellectuals: Student Surplus, Social Mobility in 1840s Germany

Wagner was not the only one at the time feeling stifled and without means to advance. Numerous professionals and students were also weary of the rigidity of the class structure and uncertainty of the monetary situation. Historian Konrad H. Jarausch noted that, "the unsettled economic prospects and insecure social status of journalists, barristers, and technical professionals added another element of frustration to the career expectations of students."⁸⁶ Through most of the 1820s and into the 1830s there was enhanced expectation for social mobility, however, "opportunities for upward mobility into the educated elite were drastically contracting in the 1840s." The Post-Napoleonic war created a lack of skilled workers that resulted in a huge influx of young Germans into the university system in hopes

⁸⁵ Wagner, *My Life*, 359.

⁸⁶ Konrad H. Jarausch, "The Sources of German Student Unrest 1815-1848," *Historical Social Research* 24 (1974): 102.

of obtaining a position. 1830 saw enrollment in German universities reach a peak creating a surplus of qualified academics a decade later. Every year from then the surplus of dissatisfied, educated, but unemployed or underemployed candidates grew. This became an especially difficult situation for those who were from lower middle origins, such as Wagner and many of his cohorts in the Young German group. Wagner at the time was employed but felt the futility of bureaucracy in attempting to make changes within his position. Though he was from the previous generation of students these issues resonated with him as well as many of his colleagues, whom as Jarausch suggested “felt themselves to be part of a restive academic proletariat blocked in its economic and political aspirations,” as a result it was they who “formed the potential leadership of a popular revolt.”⁸⁷ The belief in the possibility of social mobility is important in understanding why an individual such as Wagner, who seemed to have a stable position, would take part in an uprising that would jeopardize both his position at the time as well as his German citizenship.

Tajfel defined *social mobility* as “an individual’s perception (most often shared with many others) that he can improve in important ways his position in a social situation, or more generally move from one social position to another.”⁸⁸ Thus the individual must have the basic assumption that the structure of his social system is permeable and that as an individual, he has the ability to leave his group and move to any other group he feels suits him better. At the time Wagner’s experience of failure in creating the changes he wished to see within his post as Kapellmeister, coupled with his persistent financial difficulties, must

⁸⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁸⁸ Henri Tajfel, “Interindividual and Intergroup Behavior,” in *Differentiation between Social Groups*, ed., Henri Tajfel (London: Academic Press, 1978), 52.

have led him to feel a sense of futility in ever reaching the status he felt he deserved.

Therefore he, along with his fellow Young Germans, sought social change, to remedy their situation. Tajfel noted that the catalyst for *social change* was an individual's belief that he/she is stuck within a particular social group and cannot leave this group or join another either to improve or change the position or conditions of life. Thus, the only way for the individual to "change these conditions [or, for that matter, to resist the change of these conditions if he/she happens to be satisfied with them] is together with his/her group as a whole."⁸⁹ Tajfel also mentioned some mitigating components that may also factor in a group's effort at social change, such as whether or not the ruling or in-groups position is perceived as legitimate by the out-group.

In the case of Wagner's situation, as well as the political and economic conditions of Germany as a whole, these elements all came together to create the perfect storm. The perceived lack of individual social mobility brought economically marginalized groups together; a perceived lack of legitimacy of the ruling bodies created a situation ripe for revolution. The uprising that was to occur erupted from what Turner would aptly say was the "cumulative experience of whole peoples whose deepest material and spiritual needs and wants have long been denied any legitimate expression."⁹⁰ Turner would characterize such a conflict as arising from *primary processes*, "deep human needs for more direct and egalitarian ways of knowing and experiencing relationships, needs that have been frustrated or perverted by those secondary processes which constitute homeostatic functioning of

⁸⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁹⁰ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 110.

institutionalized social structure.”⁹¹ Indeed the philosophies that were circulating amongst Wagner and his cohorts seemed to convey utopic ideologies of egalitarianism and human connectivity beyond the hierarchical and materialistic structures in place. These ideologies captured the hope of perpetuating an environment that would allow them to gain the elevated status and financial security that would in turn take care of their all of their needs.

“To the Barricades!”⁹² The Revolution Begins for Wagner and His Friends

In 1848 the storm landed and outbreaks of civil unrest began first in Paris and Vienna, then sweeping across the German Confederation. Early in the 1840s Germany was beginning to experience the structural growing pains that accompany the shedding of an old socio-economic order. Industrialization had brought with it novel political and social problems. The number of bourgeoisie increased at the same time as the proletariat class emerged. For over a generation the population had been growing with nothing to mitigate the resulting increase in poverty. Unbalanced agrarian reforms that provided opportunity for some yet left others out, coupled with industrial legislations that had similar effect on already struggling artisans, and craftsman who had to fight to maintain guilds, all served to increase the overall societal tensions. Germans were tired of their ruler’s indifference to the plight of the working class. After recent scandals the people did not have the same respect for their monarchs as they once did. Further, the torrent of civil unrest created a sense of ennui and resignation in the monarchs themselves. As historian Eric Dorn Brose noted “the eroding legitimacy of

⁹¹ Ibid., 111.

⁹² Wagner, *My Life*, 393.

Germany's leaders, together with their paralyzing resignation to the coming deluge, translated into hesitation and weakness in March 1848. From one end of the confederation to the other, the aggrieved mass sensed this, were emboldened by it, and quickly prevailed.”⁹³ Violence and mass hysteria spread through the Confederation. Artisans rose up against the merchant manufactures, peasants and small landholders engaged in violence and protest against institutions that only benefited the rich, and in the royal forests, “a small army of cat musicians felled trees, burned the forester's home, and chased away Prussian soldiers.”⁹⁴ This was truly a revolution to which Wagner belonged. It involved his cohort group, artists, musicians, and the lower middle classes who freely engaged in the protests and acts of violence against the regime.

A pinnacle event occurred in Vienna, on March 13 (1848), when University students, and workers began to gather in increasing numbers outside the Diet building. Troops arrived to contain the masses but inexperienced leadership led to shots being fired into the crowd injuring many and killing four. This incited the mob to even more violence. They eventually gained control of the streets and marched on the palace to make their demands, which included a call for the resignation of Prince Metternich by a deadline of nightfall or more violence would ensue. The embattled rulers caved, Metternich resigned and fled the country, the troops were pulled out, censorship abolished, a civic guard was formed, and with a bit more pressure the rulers agreed to a constitution. On March 18 another large crowd gathered to hear the proclamation guaranteeing the former promises, the leaders, however, had

⁹³ Eric Dorn Brose, *German History 1789-1871: From the Holy Roman Empire to the Bismarckian Reich*, 242.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 240.

become to be wary of such a large crowd the square and ordered it cleared. In the chaos, two shots from an unknown source rang out. No one was killed, but the crowds lost faith in the promises that had been made. The people ran back to their neighborhoods and put up barricades. By the morning nearly three hundred soldiers and civilians had been killed in the disorder that ensued.

Barricades were also set up in Dresden, the capital of Saxony, where a small group mounted an unsuccessful revolution. Wagner was amongst the group of polemical journalist, anarchists, artists and idealists. Despite the somewhat utopic wishes of the group, Wagner may have been motivated by a desire for practical results that would serve to benefit him, securing a future that would grant him the status, and finances he desired. Wagner proposed the formation of a German National Theatre, complete with an elected director and a self-managed orchestra. Although Wagner had been in the stable position of royal Kapellmeister since 1843, he was not making enough money to get by. Wagner relayed an interesting moment in *My Life*, which may serve to convey his feelings about his position. In the midst of the uprising he ran across the first oboist of the Royal Orchestra who had joined the communal guard, the oboist proceeded to ask Wagner to intervene in the activities of his friend and assistant conductor Karl August Röckel, who had been going house to house to gain support and weapons for the revolutionaries. When Wagner openly expressed his sympathies for Röckel's activities, the oboist responded in shock asking, "Herr Kapellmeister, aren't you thinking of your position, and all you may lose by risking yourself in this way" to which Wagner "burst into laughter," and told him "my position wasn't worth much anyway."⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Wagner, *My Life*, 401.

Wagner had lost any regard for the status of his position and was frustrated by the general lack of control in his working conditions. As an artist working within German society he lacked the status, and financial gains he thought he deserved. Wagner was dismayed at the rejection of his ideas to improve the conditions he himself oversaw in his own theatre. His inability to gain in either the wealth or stature from his position compounded his feelings of futility. These factors led him to conclude, along with many of his contemporaries, that the only possible way to elevate their status was to attempt to change the political conditions and thereafter the social structure itself.⁹⁶

Wagner's assistant conductor at the time, as mentioned, was his friend Karl August Röckel—a position that Wagner helped him to obtain. Röckel had experienced the July Revolution in Paris and as such his political views had greatly been shaped by these events. Like Wagner, he had also been exposed to economic marginalization and experienced the same anger and frustration at the lack of status artists had. By the time he arrived in Dresden in 1843 he had already become politically active. Röckel was fairly well-read with regard to the favored texts among the young leftists of the day and became the channel through which most of the political ideologies that became influential to Wagner passed. The two would often take long walks together and it is no doubt that the conversations between them swerved toward the utopianism and revolutionary impulses of the time period. Wagner recalled: "During our walks together he had for some years past been entertaining me almost exclusively with the fruits of his readings in books on political economy, whose teachings he

⁹⁶ Despite the turmoil and the previously mentioned unpleasantness, Wagner reluctantly remained in his position until political necessity dictated otherwise. He began writing the prose for what would become the *Ring Cycle*. The manuscript, *Die Nibelungensage*, was dated October 4, 1848, that same month Wagner wrote a prose draft of *Siegfrieds Tod* (later *Gotterdammerung*). Wagner also completed the essay *Die Wibelungen: Weltgeschichte aus deer Sage* in the winter between 1848-9, as well as other various projects.

zealously applied to the improvement of his own shattered finances.”⁹⁷ Röckel’s intense study of these subjects and his zeal seems to have been a byproduct of the futility and hopelessness he felt toward his own financial situation. This was a shared feeling by all those of his and Wagner’s cohort group, which had experienced a stagnant class status and economic marginalization. In Wagner’s words,

things were really going rather badly for the poor fellow. He had long since abandoned all hope of earning a decent living from his musical career; his job as music director had become pure drudgery for him, and it paid so little that he could not possibly support his family . . . he had to plug along miserably, getting increasingly into debt, and for a long time had seen no alternative way to improve his situation as the breadwinner of a large family other than emigration to America.⁹⁸

Wagner may as well have been commenting on his own life at the time, as he was also experiencing a feeling of futility in his position. He was unable to meet with support in his plans to lead the Dresden Opera, and German opera as a whole into a place of greater prestige. Despite his stable position he continued to struggle financially, and still had debt to deal with. This feeling of futility in these individuals’ ability to change their fortune or status was pushing Wagner and his friends toward the desire for social change. The fact that Wagner’s library at Dresden did not contain political works until he had met Röckel leads us to believe that he was introduced to the work of Proudhon and Feuerbach through secondhand conversations as well.⁹⁹

Röckel introduced Wagner to Mikhail Bakunin, a Russian anarchist directly associated with Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Wagner describes Bakunin as “a

⁹⁷ Wagner, *My Life*, 363.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Rüdiger Krohn, “The Revolutionary of 1848-49,” in *The Wagner Handbook*, eds., Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 157.

remarkable man” with the “purest humanitarian idealism” yet “combined with a savagery utterly inimical to all culture.” Wagner portrays his relationship to Bakunin as fluctuating between, “instinctive horror and irresistible attraction.”¹⁰⁰ Such a battle would often rage in Wagner’s own mind between an instinct towards annihilation and the need to build and create. Though neither the works of Marx or Engel were found in Wagner’s Dresden Library it can be surmised that through Bakunin he was at least familiarized with their works. Due to Wagner’s participation in the insurrection at Dresden he was forced to leave the city in 1849. He took refuge first in Weimar with Franz Liszt, then using a false passport went to Switzerland.¹⁰¹ The uprising was put down that same year. Though the revolution itself was not successful for Wagner and his friends in regards to their material ambitions, it was, as Turner would say, a “success in establishing a new myth containing a new set of paradigms, goals, and incentives”¹⁰² for Wagner’s status as an artist. He had developed a means of dealing with his financial and status related problems living on the economic and cultural margins of German society. For his cohorts the last resort had been social revolution, and they had attempted to gain a foothold in the new national identity but had failed to actually change their material conditions.

After the uprising some of Wagner’s friends found themselves removed from the society they wished to change and imprisoned. Wagner himself was to be exiled, however the situation proved in some ways advantageous. As scholar Rüdiger Krohn appropriately noted, Wagner’s involvement with the uprising did not end with its failure but, “continued to make

¹⁰⁰ Wagner, *My Life*, 388.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 412.

¹⁰² Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 102.

itself felt in his writings on art, and not only in his Zurich essays.”¹⁰³ The composer gained a fresh perspective and was freed from the constraints of his former position in society.

Through his own narration he was about to create a liminal space, where his actions would be justified and his art would be sacred. The present would not matter as it was wrong, only the future, as he imagined it, would save society and consequently art.

¹⁰³ Krohn, *The Wagner Handbook*, 157.

Chapter Two:
From Exiled Outsider to Artist of the Future:
The Creation of a Liminal Present Through an Imagined Future

Introduction

By May 9, 1849 the insurgents of the Dresden uprising were in retreat and Richard Wagner was on the run, narrowly missing arrest. He managed to flee from his homeland to become a political exile, a banishment that would last for eleven long years. Exile is a liminal position; it is a place of both vulnerability and power, of displacement yet also liberation. For Wagner it was to be a punishment, however it was this very distance or ‘disengagement’ from social structure that gave him the freedom to evaluate modern society, and create his own mythic narrative. The condition of exile is deeply affective; it results in numerous emotions, attitudes, and moods. Historian Paul Tiyambe Zeleza described this state in his writings on notable exile Edward Said. Zeleza maintains that exile can be regarded, “as an existential and epistemological condition, as a spatial and temporal state of being, belonging, and becoming, and in its material and metaphorical contexts,” it may “loom large,” in one’s “personal, professional, and political life.”¹ The “material and metaphorical” conditions of Wagner’s experience of exile without a doubt “loomed large” in his life both personally and professionally. His position as an exile produced conditions and possibilities that were not

¹ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “The Politics and Poetics of Exile: Edward Said in Africa,” *Research in African Literatures* 36 (2005): 2.

completely visible or even imaginable to him prior, and the after effects of his liminal experience continued to shape his art and identity. Zeleza in his description further observed that the condition of exile is multifaceted, involving “spatial, ontological, and temporal displacements and entails alienation from homeland, family, language, and the continuities of self.”²

Wagner experienced all of these forms of “displacement.” He attempted to counter “alienation from his homeland” through his creation of the persona of the true *German* artist. He accepted the loss of his previous identity by manufacturing a new identity as a heroic political refugee. In his Zurich writings he was able to put a positive spin on any “continuities of self” that may not be particularly flattering through endowing himself as a genius. He admonished the modern era and imagined a future where art reflected a society free of materialism and egotism, a brotherhood of man. While in exile, a static place of outsiderhood, Wagner was forced to rethink his position individually. Yet his writings argued for a “universal fellowship of all mankind.”³ As anthropologist Victor Turner stated, “quite often this retreat from social structure may appear to take an individualistic form—as in the case of many post-Renaissance artists, writers, and philosophers. But if one looks closely at their productions, one often sees in them at least a plea for *communitas*.”⁴ Such a “plea” can be found in Wagner’s Zurich writings.

² Ibid., 3.

³ Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, vol. 1 of *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, ed. Ashton W. Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & CO., Ltd., 1895), 166.

⁴ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 260.

The narrative of Wagner's writings served to transform his static outsider position into a dynamic liminal period, a temporary place of waiting. Living as an exile removed many structural constraints and allowed Wagner to form his own explanatory narrative crafted from various philosophical and political sources. He and his Young German cohorts were waiting for a social revolution that would lead them to a future where they would be reintegrated back into society to take their rightful status and position as the artists of the future. Many of the figures that were so influential to Wagner's writings during his exile, especially Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Ludwig Feuerbach, also plead for *communitas*, espousing utopic ideologies that shunned the possession of individual property, materialism, and rationalism, instead upholding egalitarianism, aesthetic ideals, and liberating the irrational, properties all representative of *communitas*. Wagner finally returned to his homeland on August 12, 1860. A fortunate consequence of his banishment was that Wagner, unlike his fellows who had not known exile, was reintegrated into the social structure free from the normal repressions to creativity. Using Turner's image of the "novelistic hero," we can regard the composer as representative, to use Turner's description, of one who was also eventually

reintroduced into the structural domain, [but] for the 'twice born' (or converted) the *sting* of that domain—its ambitions, envies, and power struggles—has been removed . . . though remaining outwardly indistinguishable from others in this order of social structure is henceforth inwardly free from its despotic authority, is an autonomous source of creative behavior.⁵

Wagner had to ultimately accept the very structures he rallied against and downplay his role in the rebellion to keep things level with his future royal patron, King Ludwig II of Bavaria. A pattern that Turner further recognized,

⁵ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 260.

This acceptance or forgiveness . . . of structure in a movement of return from a liminal situation is a process that recurs again and again in Western literature, and indeed in the actual lives of many writers, artists, and political folk heroes from Dante and Lenin to Nehru and the African political exiles who become leaders.⁶

Wagner could be regarded as an example of this trope. Despite his eventual “acceptance” of royal patronage his liminal experience of exile gave him the freedom to imagine the future, and choose philosophies and political ideals that served to excuse some of his more questionable behaviors.

The Repercussions of a Failed Revolution: Freedom, Distance, and Destruction

The events leading up to Wagner’s exile began shortly after the Dresden uprising was thwarted as trained Prussian troops regained control of the city. The rebels were in retreat and some of Wagner’s friends and leading insurgents, August Röckel and Mikhail Bakunin, were arrested. Wagner was supposed to be residing with the two when authorities seized them, but was late to arrive, thereby escaping arrest by the narrowest of margins. Röckel and Bakunin both initially received death sentences for treason, but these sentences were eventually commuted to prison terms. At first Wagner did not realize the depth of the trouble he was in and considered going back to Dresden. Instead, his brother-in-law moved him quickly to Weimar under the care of his friend Franz Liszt. In a letter written to his wife Minna while at Weimar, just days after the failure of the revolution, Wagner attempted to make his wife understand why he chose to give up his stable position at Dresden and in favor of his political

⁶ Ibid., 260-61.

ideology. Needless to say Minna was not happy with her husband's choices. In laying out his reasons (discussed in the previous chapter) for joining the uprising, he noted:

Thus in a state of extreme discontent with my position and almost with my art, groaning under a burden which, unfortunately, you were not willing to understand, deep in debt, so much that my usual earnings would have satisfied my creditors only in the course of many years and under shameful deprivations, I was at variance with this world, I ceased to be an artist, I frittered away my creative powers and became a mere revolutionary (if not in deeds then, at least in conviction); that is, I was seeking in a wholly transformed world the ground for some new art creations of my spirit.⁷

The time spent with his friend Liszt in Weimar seemed to have refreshed Wagner's artistic spirit both emotionally and financially.⁸ He wrote to Minna of his renewed love for his art and dreams of satisfying her and more practically paying off his creditors through musical success: "This has given strength to my heart, and at one stroke I have become an entire *artist* again, I *love* my art again."⁹ When Wagner spoke of becoming an "entire artist again" he was referring to the *true* German artist who creates for the sake of art in-itself rather than to make material gains. However noble this idea was at the time, practical needs always seemed to intrude and it was this intersection of the practical and the ideological that created problems for Wagner at the behavioral level. His attempts at maintaining both of these needs, ideological, and material caused fluctuations in Wagner's identity as well as his statements. His outsider position as an exile gained him distance and freedom, both in reality and metaphorically from his situation of debt, and status immobility. This coupled with the

⁷ Richard Wagner to Minna, 14 May 1849, *Letters of Richard Wagner*, ed. John N. Burk (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950), 227.

⁸ Liszt promised to try and secure commissions for Wagner in Paris and London.

⁹ Richard Wagner to Minna, 14 May 1849, *Letters of Richard Wagner*, 228.

philosophical influence of his Young German cohorts, gave him many routes to seek justification as well as explanation of his anti-normative behavior and continued struggle.

Wagner deferred responsibility of his failures to a corrupt and unnatural social system. Only when the present system was replaced by one that recognized the power of art, would he take, what he believed to be, his rightful place as a true artist, and all his failures and past struggles would be no more. Wagner's imagination and description of this future served as a vehicle to extricate him from the weight and consequences of the present. His Zurich essays would place him firmly in a liminal position, a temporary space removed from the current society, awaiting the establishment of a new one.

Despite the political seriousness of Wagner's exile, it was also liberating. He enjoyed his time at Weimar, engaged in lively intellectual debates, shared his ideas, and spent ample time discussing his compositions. However, while he was enjoying a break, so-to-speak, from his job and debts, his wife Minna had realized the actual gravity of her husband's situation.¹⁰ She frantically wrote to him in Weimar imploring him to leave the country entirely. Despite an initial ignorance of the situation, Wagner had become all too aware of the actual price of revolution. The troops of Prussians had not been gentle to say the least in their effort of extinguishing the insurrectionists, and there were numerous reports of atrocities committed at the hands of the soldiers. The composer and his fellows were not men of violence per se, and perhaps did not realize that revolution was more a bodily matter on the ground than a lofty ideological matter of the mind.

¹⁰ She had been at home when the police came with a warrant for Wagner's arrest and he had been charged with treason, an offense punishable with death.

Wagner considered the perfect revolutionary as someone with nothing to lose, someone from a lower class than he and his friends. Wagner had some possessions and responsibilities, a wife, and a sense of moral obligation to them, thus he exhibited some characteristics of a middle-class morality. At the same time materially, however, he faced crushing debt, and, degradation at the hand of a system, which refused him social mobility. This left him in a position where he could participate in the revolt but only in so much as he did not have to get his hands dirty or completely lose the positive moral qualities often associated with his societal status. This mindset reveals the liminal position of the lower middle class in the revolutionary process. As he stated in the same letter to Minna,

Now the Dresden revolution and its whole result have taught me that I am not a real revolutionary by any means, and I have seen from the evil outcome of the revolt that a real and vicious revolutionary must proceed completely without scruple—he must not think of his wife and children, nor of his house and home—his only goal is: destruction . . . men of our type are not destined for this horrible task: we are revolutionaries only in order to be able to *construct* something on fresh ground; it is not *destruction* which attracts us, but the *formation of something new*, and that is why we are not the kind of men whom Destiny needs—these will arise from the lowest dregs of the people; we and our hearts cannot have anything in common with them . . . *Thus I AM PARTING with the revolution.*¹¹

Perhaps some of the bravado found in Wagner's claims was to demonstrate to an annoyed wife that his days as a revolutionary were over. More importantly however, his statements also served to characterize him as an artist, a visionary creator of structure, as opposed to a member of the lower classes, whom he regarded as merely blind destroyers of structure. This rejection of a mindset of destruction was also cited in chapter 1 as a reason why, even before the uprising had actually occurred, Wagner could not fully connect with his friend Mikhail Bakunin. Likewise, for Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, one of Wagner's primary influences during

¹¹ Richard Wagner to Minna, 14 May 1849, *Letters of Richard Wagner*, 227 (emphasis in original).

this period, it was also “impossible to accept an explanation of progress based on the violent destruction of opposing forces.”¹² Proudhon did not believe, unlike his younger contemporary Karl Marx, that progress could be gained through destruction.

From the moment Wagner left Dresden, he entered a liminal position, not knowing where he was going, if he could ever return, or what his future held. He had developed a fertile imagination from a young age. It was this imaginative space that allowed the composer to dream of a future that provided him with a revered status and a stable financial situation. The liminal space of exile released Wagner from the status incumbencies and role responsibilities of his former place in social structure, leaving him free to imagine himself re-entering society in a future where he would have such an elevated position. This imagined future, a space that only existed in Wagner’s mind, was invigorated by the potential of success. Early on in his exile, he continued to believe in a future when he would be reintegrated back into society at a new status position.

In such a transitional liminal space, ideas and renewed relationships can be tested for their generative capacity and viability, and new realities can be imagined. Wagner’s freedom from his previous position in his home country was symbolic in that it gave him time and space to imagine such a place of hope, and a future that assured the success he desired. He stated in that same post-revolution letter to Minna that Liszt wished to help lead his “talent out of the miserable situation in Germany and into the world’s broader path.” Wagner continued, “they say that here in Germany I would perish and that my art in the end would disgust even myself,” that they “must keep my creative powers fresh and joyous for the

¹² Mary B. Allen, “P.J. Proudhon in the Revolution of 1848,” *The Journal of Modern History* 24 (1952): 3.

world.”¹³ Wagner saw the impact of post-industrial social structures in the Germanic states and elsewhere as setting limitations on both himself as a human being, and as an artist. As Turner observed, “it might be well to see structure as a limit rather than as a theoretical point of departure.”¹⁴ It was the boundlessness of anti-structure that the liminal position of exile released for Wagner. This is precisely why Wagner’s imagination was so important; it allowed him to fill the gaps between the known and the unknown. Creative imagination can narrate the past and give hope to the present through faith in a better, if yet unknown, future.

Wagner’s liminality gave him the space to imagine without limit, to picture himself where he wanted to be and to foresee his creative vision. His imagination of the future, gained through the freedom of a transitional liminal position, was to become a notoriously misunderstood element of his myth. Part of this freedom was a method of justification in itself. In a letter to his friend about the prospect of deciding between “genuine offers of help from Paris” and his own “inner revulsion,” Wagner wrote:

I want to be *happy*, and man can be happy only when he is *free*: but only that man is free who is what he *can* be and therefore what he *must* be. The man, therefore, who satisfies the inner necessity of his being is free, since he feels at one with himself, because everything he does is at one with his nature and his true needs: but the man who follows not his inner but some outer necessity obeys a coercive force—he is unfree, a slave, unhappy.¹⁵

This passage allowed Wagner to deny responsibility for his own failures, particularly in Paris, by connecting his unhappiness with the notion of freedom or lack thereof. He believed

¹³ Richard Wagner to Minna, 14 May 1849, *Letters of Richard Wagner*, 227. “They,” in this sentence, referred to Liszt, his lover, Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein, and his patron, the Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna of Russia.

¹⁴ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 51.

¹⁵ Richard Wagner to Theodor Uhlig, 16 September 1849, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, eds. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 177.

that the only way to succeed in the Parisian arena was through obeying the “coercive force” of money. However, the true artist according to Wagner must be liberated beyond material and structural constraints, as every individual must follow his own set of needs and must be true to his nature.

Proudhon and Wagner: Dream of a “Dawn of Universal Regeneration”

Wagner first read Proudhon just after the uprising, while newly exiled in Paris.¹⁶ As he wrote in *My Life*, “there was no news from Germany for some time, and I tried to busy myself as best I could with reading . . . occupying myself with Proudhon’s writings, particularly with his *De La Propriété*.” Wagner mentioned that it provided him a “singularly rich consolation for [his] position.”¹⁷ The ‘position’ to which Wagner alluded was two-fold as he referred to both the physical loss of his property, as well as his position of ideological agreement with Proudhon. He had given up his job as Kapellmeister, his home, furniture, country, and at the time, he even believed his wife had left him in anger about his choice. The institution of property was one of the most significant legacies of the Revolution. For Proudhon, as well as others in his generation, this was a serious situation representing both theoretical and practical concerns. Revolutionary confiscations, dispossessions, and debates over the 1825 Law of Indemnity as well as threats to private fortunes posed by the idea that public utility might sometime override private rights, all represented forms of political

¹⁶ Despite the work’s initial publication occurring while he was in Paris the first fateful time, Wagner had not read *De La Propriété* himself. He had, however, already been familiarized with the work to some extent by his friend Röckel.

¹⁷ Richard Wagner, *My Life*, ed. Mary Whittall, trans. Andrew Gray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 420.

seizure for Proudhon. Proudhon's book held some very impassioned rhetoric. The passage below may serve to demonstrate why his thoughts may have been so attractive to Wagner.

The old civilization has run its race; a new sun is rising, and will soon renew the face of the earth. Let the present generation perish . . . Young man, exasperated by the corruption of the age, and absorbed in your zeal for justice! —If your country is dear to you, and if you have interests of humanity at heart . . . [c]ast off your old selfishness, and plunge into the rising flood of popular equality! There your regenerate soul will acquire new life and vigor; your heart . . . will be rejuvenated! Everything will wear a different look to your illuminated vision; new sentiments will engender new ideas within you; religion, morality, poetry, art, and language will appear before you in nobler and fairer forms; and thenceforth, sure of your faith, and thoughtfully enthusiastic, you will hail the dawn of universal regeneration!¹⁸

Proudhon's language must have been extremely appealing to Wagner and gave credence to his belief at the time that aesthetic forms would be ennobled after society takes its proper form.¹⁹ Proudhon began *What is Property?* by first going through the difficulties inherent in the legal foundations of property, which he thought stemmed from the confusion between three classifications: property, possession, and prescription. Proudhon attempted to reveal the unreasonable nature of these legal distinctions. To Proudhon the fundamental cause of inequality was “naked” property, not possession. For him “possession” meant to actually make personal use of the item or land, however “naked property” merely meant you had legal power or right over the thing but did not necessarily make personal use of it. As Proudhon explained by example, “the tenant, the farmer, the commandite, the usufructuary, are possessors; the owners who lets and lends, or the heir who is to come into possession on the death of a usufructuary, are proprietors.”

¹⁸ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What Is Property?: An Inquiry Into the Principle of Right and of Government* (Auckland: Floating Press, 1840), 323-24.

¹⁹ Despite the work's initial publication occurring while Wagner was in Paris the first fateful time, he had not read the work himself. He had, however, already been familiarized with the work to some extent by his friend Röckel.

Proudhon goes on to extend this idea to the institution of marriage: “If I may venture the comparison; a lover is a possessor, a husband a proprietor.”²⁰ For Proudhon the use of something for one’s own needs is a natural fact, whereas legal right to the products of a thing not through common use is ultimately unnatural. Likewise, the union of two humans is natural. However the contract of marriage is only obligatory. With regard to Wagner we can see an exploration of these concepts prior to his actual reading of Proudhon based on conversations he had with his friend and fellow Young German August Röckel.²¹ He had relayed to Wagner that Proudhon “wanted to do away completely with the institution of marriage as we knew it.”²² At first Wagner naively had asked his colleague if this would result in promiscuity, however Röckel responded that this would not be the case, as marriage was just a contractual institution and had little to do with the emotions holding individuals together. This fueled Wagner’s ideological stance and allowed him to engage in what would be considered anti-normative behavior while still being able to justify it and maintain claims to dignity. After reading Proudhon in Paris, Wagner adopted this concept of love in its so-called purest form without jealousy or obligation, as seen in his 1850 affair with Jessie Laussot, the English wife of a wealthy wine merchant. Their relationship (as well as her patronage to Wagner of 3000 francs) soured after a failed rendezvous. Jessie perhaps did not see things from Wagner’s somewhat Proudhon-and Feuerbach-inspired perspective with regards to the outcome of their illicit relationship. Wagner however explained the situation with these very ideals, portraying bourgeois morals and forms of structural constraint as

²⁰ Proudhon, *What Is Property?*, 84.

²¹ Wagner explored some of these concepts in his earliest opera *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love).

²² Wagner, *My Life*, 373.

institutions that serve to repress the true nature of love. After all he had engaged in the affair with Jessie before actually being “legally separated by priests and lawyers” from his wife Minna.²³ In a letter to Julie Ritter (another woman of means that would become a patron), Wagner elucidated his belief about Jessie: “Oh you must believe as I do that love dwells within her heart, and that I did not dream it: it lives . . . with all the unimpaired fullness of her truest nature! But her mortal foe continues to wield a terrible power: its agents are education, marriage, decorum, and business—and its mask is against love’s simple unaffectedness.”²⁴

Wagner, like Proudhon and Feuerbach, denounced relationships based on obligation, they should instead be based on unrestricted love. One of his earliest operas, *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love), from 1836, was a light Mediterranean inspired romp that placed young lovers in a situation of conflict with constrictive social institutions, however Wagner allowed free unrestricted love to win out in the end.²⁵ He would later use these ideals of unbounded love to justify his anti-normative behavior. All rhetoric aside, Wagner needed to balance the drudgery of making a living with his artistic vision, thus wooing a woman of means was a way to secure patronage. Such freedoms were especially open to Wagner while in the liminal position of exile. There he was free to look from outside normative social structures, cast judgment on bourgeoisie morals, and justify his behavior through chosen philosophical ideals.

Turner made similar observations as to the attitude of liminal groups on property and marriage. He explained that in “most societies differences in property correspond to major

²³ Richard Wagner to Julie Ritter, 26/27 June 1850, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, 203.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 204-5.

²⁵ Based on William play Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*.

differences in status.” Thus the need such groups feel to “‘liquidate’ property or ‘pool’ it together . . . is to erase the lines of structural cleavage that in ordinary life prevent men from entering into *communitas*.”²⁶ As to marriage, “source of the family, a basic cell of social structure in many cultures,” Turner noted that it may, “come under attack . . . as some seek to replace it” with a “‘primitive promiscuity,’ or by various forms of ‘group marriage.’ Sometimes this is held to demonstrate the triumph of love over jealousy.”²⁷ Interestingly, later in his career while under the somewhat difficult patronage of Ludwig II of Bavaria, Wagner put forth, upon surface appearance, a contrasting set of values with regard to sexual relations, as his final opera *Parsifal* exhibits the moral aesthetic of abstinence. This seemingly contradictory attitude is however just another method of removing status barriers to the “universal brotherhood” that Wagner had written of. As Turner observed, as opposed to promiscuity, “in other movements . . . celibacy becomes the rule and the relationship between sexes becomes a massive extension of the sibling bond.” Indeed “both attitudes towards sexuality are aimed at homogenizing the group by ‘liquidating’ its structural divisions.”²⁸ For Turner eliminating structural division was a step toward facilitating *communitas*, removing the status positions created by political and other organizational structures.

Ultimately Proudhon and Wagner would both realized that what was needed was a *social* revolution, a change in mentality that could not be reached through surface political solutions or structures. Proudhon had observed that the individuals involved in politics were

²⁶ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 246.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 246.

just as concerned with gaining political position for themselves as for working for social good or creating a just system of commerce. Upon seeing the failure of the revolution in the replacing of one group of despots for another, Proudhon was not sure that the answer to society's ills lay in a political cure. Rather, the people of the society must be led to choose the better path for themselves, one that balanced the needs of the individual ego and the society at large. This path would be guided by the discovery of what Proudhon believed was their own natural human needs as social beings.

Early on in his exile Wagner would continue to have faith in a structural/political solution for society. He and his cohorts came to view ancient Greek culture as exemplifying the type of structure that held the natural needs of the individual in harmony with the needs of the greater society. Thus Wagner still held out hope for a systematic solution. Proudhon believed that the needs of the individual as a social being must be taken into account. He argued that, "man is born a sociable being," but he also "loves independence and praise." Proudhon believed that the "difficulty of satisfying these different needs at the same time is the primary cause of despotism of the will and the appropriation, which results from it . . . Thus the greatest evils of humanity arise from man's misuse of his sociability."²⁹ He thought that the conflict between the needs of the society and the desires of the individual ego led to

²⁹ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What Is Property?: An Inquiry Into the Principle of Right and of Government*, eds., trans. Donald R. Kelly and Bonnie G. Smith. (Cambridge: University Press, 1994), 192.

struggle and created systems that were unbalanced.³⁰ For Proudhon this continuous struggle was a necessary irreducible part of obtaining stasis.³¹

Throughout his life, Wagner experienced this constant struggle between the needs of his own ego and the ideals he wished to portray. He was a social being yet needed to retain individuality and a positive identity distinction that he could not obtain from the society he was a part of. Despite his continued faith in structural resolution, it was his time outside of structure that allowed Wagner to create a positive identity and justify his anti-normative actions. His passage from lower to higher status depended on, to borrow a term from Turner, the “limbo of statuslessness,” that occurred between the two.³² While newly exiled from Germany, not knowing how long he would remain in that position, Wagner took it upon himself to write about a future and new form of art that would endow him with the elevated status and success he believed he deserved. Wagner had always been aware of the gap between his economic and socio-cultural statuses. He struggled financially to maintain his basic needs, was embarrassingly in debt, yet felt his art and wealth of cultural knowledge should garner him some self-respect.

Prior to the revolution, conversations with Röckel about Proudhon’s ideas had fired Wagner’s imagination, and as he stated in *My Life*, he “took pleasure in developing

³⁰ Proudhon believed that the bump and grind between these forces was constant, necessary, irreducible, and would eventually result in a state of equilibrium. Not a permanent state, but only a temporary stasis of a continual process of struggle and change. Thus the forces themselves remain constant and would not be synthesized or reduced, the act of struggle itself was a necessity and would facilitate enough modification to eventually reach a state of stasis.

³¹ Proudhon’s idea corresponds to Turner’s portrayal of human society as being comprised of both periods of normal structure punctuated by brief periods of anti-structure, *communitas*. Neither state destroys the other, the liminal period of anti-structure allows for free conceptualizing of different forms or modifications of structure, which may or may not be a result that becomes established once society returns to a normal period.

³² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co, 1969), 97.

conceptions of a possible form of human society which would correspond wholly, and indeed solely, to my highest artistic ideals.”³³ After the failure of the revolution in physically bringing about a society that corresponded to Wagner’s “artistic ideals,” the composer was forced to imagine and write about such a society. Inspired by Proudhon, Wagner and his friend Röckel dreamed of a society in which “everybody participated in the work at hand according to his powers and capacities,” where “work would cease to be a burden, and would become an occupation which would eventually assume an entirely artistic character.”³⁴ This utopic ideology, a form of organic societal growth stemming from a group of interconnected individuals, displays a desire for *communitas*, yet an attempt to balance it with the need to build a larger structure.³⁵ Turner, believed that such a commonwealth would “never build itself up out of individuals, but only out of small and even smaller communities: a nation is a community to the degree that it is a community of communities.”³⁶

For Turner, Proudhon, and Wagner, there was a conflict between the instinct towards individualism and our need to form larger social structures, however the solution to this discord remained slightly different for each. For Proudhon this conflict was necessary and neither good nor bad but just a part of life. As he stated “man, by his nature and his instinct, is predestined to society; but his personality, ever inconstant and multiform, is opposed to

³³ Wagner, *My Life*, 374.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 373-74.

³⁵ There is relevant reference from Turner’s work, as he quotes and then interprets the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (who was greatly influenced by Feuerbach) as he discussed how to balance centralism and decentralization toward the possibility of an organic commonwealth. “Buber’s phraseology . . . belongs to the perennial speech of *communitas*, not rejecting the possibility of structure, but conceiving of it merely as an outgrowth of direct and immediate relations between integral individuals.” Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 143.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

it.”³⁷ Proudhon felt that conflict between the ego of the individual and society would eventually be reconciled through man’s recognition and continued acceptance of his natural social instinct: “Thus, man is social by instinct and is every day becoming social by reflection and choice.”³⁸ Wagner would continue to struggle with the opposition between his egoistic desires as an individual and consciousness of a greater unity beyond himself, the place he believed true art stemmed from. After the continued failure of revolutionary means to change society, Wagner, like Proudhon before him, would eventually come to lose his faith in external socio-political solutions. However until that point reconciling this conflict would lead Wagner to create narratives that would strategically use liminal space.

The Meyerbeer Incident: Paris and Its Mercenary Moneylenders

Despite some initial portrayals of hopeful enthusiasm for the prospects of rewards in Paris or London, Wagner clearly realized that success would not be easy or perhaps even possible at all. He also realized that German theaters, save perhaps in Weimar, would be closed to him for quite a while now due to his involvement in the rebellion. Therefore, he reluctantly went back to Paris for a brief time. While there, he attempted in vain to get a commission for one of his operas. Wagner was not the only one who had lost faith in the possibility of this as was demonstrated by an awkward run-in he had with Giacomo Meyerbeer. Wagner caught sight of him in a shop obviously trying to avoid a run in, he was then further embarrassed when a naïve clerk brought them together. After a brief and rather

³⁷ Proudhon, *What Is Property?*, 189.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

unfriendly conversation about Wagner's intentions in Paris, Meyerbeer said abruptly that he had some pressing proof sheets to do and brushed Wagner off. The incident was to be the final straw in the young composer's already strained relations with his former backer. If Wagner had had any doubts left as to his suspicion that Meyerbeer was in fact disingenuous in his belief in, and support of his talent, it disappeared after that episode. Loss of money and lack of gained opportunity aside, it seemed that Meyerbeer had committed the cardinal sin with regard to Wagner's ego: doubting his talents.

Wagner needed others to believe in him to justify his sense of self-worth and to give him a positive identity distinction. He needed social approval above all else, especially the endorsement of those who were of a higher status with more economic resources than him. It was to be an unfortunate consequence that this anger, bitterness and feeling of betrayal would be carried far beyond Wagner's dislike of Meyerbeer, the individual, to the Jewish people in general.³⁹ Wagner had once called Paris "the plague-stricken capital of the world"—his

³⁹ A brief examination of the prejudices and historical situation experienced by Jewish-Europeans might provide some understanding into the financial associations. Prior to 1807 emancipation of the peasantry the Holy Roman Empire functioned under a principle of legal inequality. See David Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany, 1780-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). General citizenship was non-existent, as the inhabitants of the eighteenth-century German states "were not equal before the law. Further there was not just one law but instead a "complex patchwork of legal jurisdictions." (Blackbourn, 4). People were grouped into various categorizes, Jews, peasants, serfs, Roma (gypsies), aristocrats, aristocrats, etc., and all had separate expectations, of behavior, rights, duties, and privileges associated with their societal classification. The notion of citizenship was mostly to be found in urban centers, however it was reserved for the privileged few that had enough taxable income or had inherited citizen status by birth. Thus individuals or groups that were not born into the status, lacked the sufficient wealth to pay for it, or were not a member of the dominant religious group were thought of as mere inhabitants. Such people, including those wealthy enough to have earned some privilege still lacked, political rights, and could have their residency revoked as any time. The Jewish people were affected by such regulation in numerous ways. Despite a series of reforms that occurred in the Prussian empire from 1807-19 they were still not entirely emancipated (Blackbourn, 83). Many could not hold political office and were affected by several territorial laws and heavy taxation. The amassing of wealth itself could not still garner all the rights of citizenship but it could ensure a better status and the increased privileges associated with it. As such, wealth for these groups led to more than just material comfort, but to the dignity of basic identity recognition in a situation of alienation. As Germany struggled to determine both its physical borders and the imagined boundaries of its citizenship it was just as important to determine who would remain outside of those limits. Unfortunately this included not only the bordering French, but also the Jewish people within the border. Wagner had much to say about both groups. See

annoyance and disrespect for the French was plainly stated.⁴⁰ However, despite the vigor of his purported distaste for the French, Wagner had found another target to blame for his failure in the Parisian arena. In a letter to his friend Ferdinand Heine he wrote: “Spare me from expatiating here in more detail on the revolting baseness of Parisian art tendencies, especially in opera.” Wagner continued on in the same letter to fulminate against Meyerbeer specifically: “In recent decades under the mercenary influence of Meyerbeer, the condition of opera in Paris has become so ruinously horrible that it is useless for an honest man to devote himself to it.”⁴¹

From this letter we can infer some familiar tropes, yet also add another dimension. Wagner first exerts his distaste for the “baseness of Parisian (or French) art tendencies in general. This is an allusion that had been examined in chapter 1, as Wagner placed the blame of his failure on the systemic and political situation of the time, and specifically on the *French* characteristics as opposed to *German* traits. In the example above, Wagner appropriated honesty as a positive trait. The French/Parisian opera milieu was corrupt and based on course materialism rather than on art for it’s own sake. Thus those who succeed do so because they have money or connections not because of their raw talent or the inherent quality of their art. In contrast, a German, such as Wagner, is honest, with true talent, and engaged in creative pursuits for his own sake, rather than merely for the objective of financial

“German Jews in the Modern World,” in *The Virtual Jewish World: History*, last modified November 21, 2014, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/germany.html>.

⁴⁰ Wagner, *My Life*, 419.

⁴¹ Richard Wagner to Ferdinand Heine, 19 November 1849, *Letters of Richard Wagner*, 262-63.

gain. Thus Wagner, the artist, would not soil his identity as a true artist or sully his art itself by participating in such a vulgar, *French* exhibition.

What Wagner expressed in this letter to Heine also incorporated another point of accusation, as Meyerbeer, and later the Jewish people as a whole, became exemplary of the negative traits that Wagner would blame for his inability to succeed. For the composer it was not the French national identity itself, nor the political situation that had evolved and led opera to its dreadful state, but the “mercenary influence of Meyerbeer” that caused “the condition of opera in Paris to become ruinously horrible.”⁴² Wagner’s choice of the term “mercenary” in his description of Meyerbeer is telling. A mercenary is generally defined as a person who is not a member of any particular nation or group involved in conflict but takes part in it motivated by the prospect of monetary gain. Wagner’s description placed Meyerbeer outside of either the French or German nationality; interestingly, he was located in the same outsider position that Wagner himself epitomized as an exile. Yet Wagner’s creation of the ideological *other* places himself in sharp contrast to Meyerbeer, relegating the latter to a homogenized representation of disloyalty and sheer materialism. Such an angle placed the responsibility for Wagner’s difficulties away from himself or the larger structural inequities that were at work and placed the blame on an already marginalized figure. As Wagner conceded,

I am firmly convinced that I shall never succeeded in having an opera really performed at the Academy, at least not under present conditions, with its new ruling spirit and under the present regime. As things stand now Meyerbeer holds everything in his hand, that is, in his moneybag; and the morass of intrigue to be traversed is so big that fellows far more cunning than myself have long since given up the idea of waging a battle in which only money is decisive.⁴³

⁴² Ibid., 263

⁴³ Richard Wagner to Ferdinand Heine, 19 November 1849, *Letters of Richard Wagner*, 263.

Wagner was not alone in his condemnation of the post-industrial economic system. By 1848 Karl Marx had published his famous pamphlet entitled “Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei” (later known as The Communist Manifesto). Marx’s predecessors, including Proudhon, discussed earlier in the chapter, and Feuerbach had all been intensely critical of the political and economic situation. These three and Wagner had a further and more detrimental commonality, their association with a secularization of anti-Semitic thought. Indeed, as previously mentioned, while Wagner was stuck in Paris, still fuming about his encounter with Meyerbeer, helplessly waiting for news from Germany, he read Proudhon. In Proudhon’s writing Wagner found the beginnings of an ideological and racial devaluation of the Jewish people. As Dieter Borchmeyer stated, “this mixture of religious and racial anti-Semitism against the background of socialism, such as may be found in Proudhon’s thinking, constitutes the specific content of Wagner’s remarks on the Jewish question from the 1860s on.”⁴⁴ Interestingly, very few of the major nineteenth-century German writers were anti-Semitic, however many of the principle French writers were. This later led Friedrich Nietzsche to comment that Wagner did in fact belong in Paris in the company of the French decadents.⁴⁵

Wagner and many others at the time tied moral and nationalistic concepts to the use of wealth. An individual of means and status came to represent the gatekeeper toward either the utilization of wealth for the societal good or the creation of wealth for their own anti-

⁴⁴ Dieter Borchmeyer, “The Question of Anti-Semitism,” *The Wagner Handbook*, eds. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. John Deathridge (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 178.

⁴⁵ Borchmeyer says: “In this light it must be said that Wagner’s anti-Jewish sentiments were considerably more French than German in origin.” Ibid.

social private use. This dichotomous characterization became charged with moral and political judgment; utilization of wealth for public good, associated positively, for personal gain, negatively. This concept became exemplified further with the increased economic importance of third party financiers. The third party financier/usurer could be regarded as either a generous patron or a mercenary with all the negative connotations of the term depending on their choice of spending. This position unfortunately became coupled with the stereotype of the greedy Jewish individual and, specifically of the Jewish moneylender.

It will be in this regard that Wagner will later continue to characterize Meyerbeer in his narrative. Proudhon had discussed both the good and bad of such third party financiers. In his example “bankers” are labeled as “the greatest enemy of the landed and industrial aristocracy today, the incessant promoter of equality of fortunes . . . the most potent creator of wealth, and the main distributor of the products of art and Nature.”⁴⁶ However Proudhon likewise stated, that “the banker is also the most relentless collector of profits, increase and usury ever inspired by the demon of property.”⁴⁷ Unfortunately Wagner was to characterize Meyerbeer as the latter, a greedy and dishonest gatekeeper that would not let him into the Parisian arena. Thus with his hopes dashed yet again, Wagner continued on from France and settled down for the time being in Zurich where he was supported and befriended by various intellectuals.

Wagner’s Narrative Illuminating the Creative Darkness of Liminality

⁴⁶ Proudhon, *What Is Property?*, 346.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

While in Zurich, Wagner moved in various cultural circles. Free from his former duties, in an atmosphere of relative fellowship, yet considered an “outlaw,” Wagner discussed some of the unrestricted behaviors which were resultant of his liminal situation: “I too, in the mood of irresponsibility and merriment born of my despair at that time, let myself go in dithyrambic outpourings that took the theories of art and life that were forming in me to their most extreme conclusions.”⁴⁸ The freedom from structural commitments led Wagner to put down all the ideas that had been forming without reserve. He observed that the “extraordinary bird-like freedom” of his “outlaw existence” had the effect of making him “increasingly excitable.” He remarked: “I often became frightened myself at the excessive gusts of exaltation affecting my whole being, under the influence of which I was always ready to indulge the most singular eccentricities, no matter whom I might be with at the time.”⁴⁹ Wagner’s statement seemed to reflect a sense of personal estrangement coupled with a feeling of ease and freedom to explore his ideas beyond their normative structural boundaries. He continued on, “immediately after my arrival in Zurich I began setting down on paper my views on the nature of things, as formed under the pressure of my artistic experience and of the political excitement of the era.”⁵⁰

Wagner wrote a series of articles that he attempted to get published in the notable French journal *National*; in this manner he wished to, in his words, “air” his “revolutionary ideas about modern art and its relationship to society.”⁵¹ He failed to get them published in

⁴⁸ Wagner, *My Life*, 424.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 425.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

the journal but sent his first essay *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (Art and Revolution) off to Leipzig book dealer Otto Wigand, who did in fact publish it. At this point there is evidence that Wagner indeed thought to capitalize on his position as an outsider through some thoughtful promotion of this work. As he stated, “the provocative title *Art and Revolution*, as well as the tremendous notoriety surrounding a Royal Kapellmeister who had become a political refugee, had inspired this radically inclined publisher with the hope that the publication of my writing might give rise to a profitable scandal.”⁵² This self-promotion through a romanticization of his position as a “political refugee” worked and the essay was even given a second printing. Wagner stated in *My Life* that this was the first time he ever made money from his written works. Aware of the need to be adept at self-promotion, he seemed to be excited by the idea of the noble life of the laboring intellectual in exile—an exile in which the labor was rendered more difficult and poignant, marked, to use the words of Edward Said, by “a sense of dissonance engendered by estrangement, distance, dispersion, years of lostness and disorientation,” and thus requiring “an almost excessive deliberation, effort, expenditure of intellectual energy at restoration, reiteration, and affirmation that are undercut by doubt and irony.”⁵³

Wagner definitely experienced years of “lostness and disorientation” and perhaps more than that needed “affirmation” after his failures. Further, he expended a large amount of “intellectual energy” in the creation of his identity through the Zurich essays. In a letter to his friend Theodor Uhlig, Wagner deemed it “absolutely necessary for me to write these essays

⁵² Ibid., 426.

⁵³ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), xxxiii.

and send them out into the world before I continue with my more immediate artistic creations: I myself and all who are interested in me as an artist must be forced once and for all to come to a precise understanding of the issues involved.”⁵⁴

Wagner’s time in exile allowed him the liminal space outside of societal forms to combine the philosophical ideas he had encountered along with his first hand experience of revolution into a creative narrative work. Prior to continuing on as a composer, Wagner felt he needed to publically explain his situation. His ideas would come to negate any mundane explanation of failure. Wagner’s essays are a creative narration, drawing from the past, critiquing the present, and finding a way toward the future through a renewed form, all while attempting to explain away his own mistakes, and ensure a success for himself. As he stated in a letter to Ferdinand Heine, “I have poured out my heart to the world, i.e. to my friends, in my latest essay: the Art-work of the Future. From now on I shall cease to be a writer, and revert back to being an artist. Providing the outside world leaves me in peace, I shall create work upon work—for I am brimming over with subjects and artistic plans.”⁵⁵

As a prelude to Wagner’s epic musico-dramatic works, these essays are extremely creative and imaginative in their own right. In the same way, Turner had argued that,

creative imagination is far richer than imagery; it does not consist in the ability to evoke sense perception, and is not restricted to filling gaps in the map supplied by perception. It is called ‘creative’ because it is the ability to create concepts and conceptual systems that may correspond to nothing in the senses (even though they may correspond to something in reality), and also because it gives rise to unconventional ideas.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Richard Wagner to Theodor Uhlig, 16 September 1849, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, 176.

⁵⁵ Richard Wagner to Ferdinand Heine, Nov. 19th 1849, *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵⁶ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 51.

The anthropologist was speaking of the ability of the creative imagination to fill in the dark spaces between the known and unknown to devise new hypotheses or ideas. “To be brought fully into the light is the work of another phase of liminality: that of imageless thought, conceptualization at various degrees of abstractness, deductions both formal and informal, and inductive generalization.”⁵⁷ This “creative darkness of liminality” that Turner visualized was precisely the kind of thinking that Wagner engaged in to create his essays. These essays, in a way, extricate Wagner of any practical reasons for his failures or of any of the humiliations that had occurred regarding his own behavior; in another way they aided in the creation of a clear path toward future esteem and profitability as an artist. Wagner purported that “The Art-Work of the Future” “in fact contains an account of my entire history up to the present date.” In a letter to his friend Theodor Uhlig the composer admitted that he did not particularly care what critics thought of his essays, but as he stated, “there is only one thing that matters to me, and that is that they are read as widely as possible.”⁵⁸ Creating and publically propagating his own positive identity and narrative path for the future seemed to be of the utmost concern to Wagner as a way to gain followers, in other words, believers, unlike Meyerbeer, who would serve to justify his actions and abilities.

Feuerbach and Wagner: Thoughts on Death and Christianity

Despite the creativity that Wagner employed, most of the concepts he used in his essays were extrapolated from his understanding of the philosophical and political currents at

⁵⁷ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁸ Richard Wagner to Theodor Uhlig, 21/22 November 1849, Selected *Letters of Richard Wagner*, 181.

the time. In the case of his essay “The Art-work of the Future,” as scholar Eric Chafe remarked, “Wagner took over many of Feuerbach’s ideas wholesale.”⁵⁹ Wagner’s title, “The Art-work of the Future,” was a play on the title of Ludwig Feuerbach’s book, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*. Wagner also dedicated the essay itself to Feuerbach. In *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Feuerbach stated that the formation of a new philosophy for the modern era will depend on extracting the “necessity of a philosophy of man, that is, of anthropology,” from what was regarded as theology.⁶⁰ Feuerbach disagreed with the direct association of *being* with objects of thought, which he found at the root of theological speculation from Neo-Platonism to its culmination in Hegel’s idealism. He argued that existing things differ decisively from thought and are known by sense perception and feeling. He asked his readers to think as real, whole men, not as abstracted intellects. Wagner himself had been first acquainted with these basic ideas of Feuerbach through discussions with his friends in the Young German movement. The first of Feuerbach’s works that he read for himself was *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, after a friend in Zurich brought a copy to his house.⁶¹ As to his first impression upon reading it, Wagner conceded that the “very stimulating, lyrical style of the writer greatly fascinated” him “as a total layman.”⁶² He seemed to have been thoroughly taken by this first work, and it pleased him

⁵⁹ Eric Chafe, *The Tragic and the Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 30.

⁶⁰ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, INC., 1966), 3.

⁶¹ Piano teacher, Wilhelm Baumgartner.

⁶² Wagner, *My Life*, 430.

greatly, “as much for its tragic implications as for its social radicalism.”⁶³ However, Wagner considered it “a bit more difficult” to maintain his interest in *The Essence of Christianity*. Wagner found its large breadth of explanation in what he took to be the “the simple basic idea, the interpretation of religion from a purely psychological standpoint,” to be “sprawling, and willy-nilly.” Wagner was more engrossed with *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, and he even recommend it to Karl Ritter, suggesting that in becoming more acquainted with Feuerbach, “you should probably have begun with his essay on death and immortality.”⁶⁴

In *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, Feuerbach argued a point that seemed to oppose his viewpoint in *The Essence of Christianity* in which he maintained that the primary anxiety at the base of religion is a fear of death, specifically of the death of the individual, creating the need for an individualized soul in the afterlife.⁶⁵ However, in his earlier work, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, Feuerbach argued “that the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome had no conception of the immortality of the individual soul because they placed no stress on the concept of the individual. These civilizations saw the individual as a part of the human community which was already (comparatively, in relation to the individual) eternal.”⁶⁶ This concept serves to validate Wagner’s line of argument that the ancient Greeks represented an ideal form of communal society as opposed to egoistic form of modern society. *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* was first published anonymously in

⁶³ Ibid., 430.

⁶⁴ Richard Wagner to Karl Ritter, 19 November 1849, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, 180.

⁶⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Elliot (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 170-74.

⁶⁶ Eugene Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), 161.

1830 and set forth the issues with which young Feuerbach was to be concerned for the rest of his life. Its thesis is an outright denial of any personal immortality and a call to recognize, that which is truly infinite in the only life that man has. It must have been Wagner's agreement and interest in the aforementioned idea that gave him preference for this work, as the thesis may be frank but the language is also quite verbose. Feuerbach often repeats himself albeit in different styles, from the most delicate prose to vulgar satire to get his point across. Wagner must have gleaned some things from Feuerbach's writing style, as there are similarities between their overly verbose, "sprawling" and "willy-nilly" manners.

In *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach claimed that rather than man being created by God, it is man who created his gods, leading to the belief that all theology is in fact anthropology. Feuerbach developed this by showing how the primary aspects of Christian doctrine such as incarnation, the Trinity, God's justice, love, and the like, are projections of man's nature and thus disclose characteristics of the nature of man not of God. Feuerbach revealed that all theology or "religious experience" begins with man's ideal and needs, and cannot ever get beyond the merely human, thus ultimately can tell us only about man. Feuerbach described religion as being primarily "practical rather than theoretical: it is an 'art of life.' In religion man recognizes his helplessness, his dependence, and he seeks to overcome it by calling in the aid of the imagination."⁶⁷ Likewise, Wagner was quite accomplished at this "art of life," from a young age he, as shown in chapter 1, recognized his helplessness and dependence, and with his imagination overcame his situation, philosophically and with strategic actions.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 39.

Love as Community, Communitas as Love, Wagner's Communism

Feuerbach as well as Proudhon recognized that much of human conflict is a result of the friction between the individual ego and the needs of the larger social group. Wagner appropriated this concept and incorporated it into his own writings. Feuerbach believed that a way to solve the aforementioned divergence would be for humans to recognize the fact that they are naturally “species-beings,” part of a greater whole. He termed this relationship between the individual and his species-being, “I-Thou.”⁶⁸ There are several important points that Feuerbach outlined in order to reach the concept of I-Thou thinking. These will all become important to Wagner in different manifestations in his life, work, and writings. Feuerbach began with a deliberation on man's creation of monotheism. According to the philosopher, in monotheism man made himself the center and unifying force of nature, the direct object of worship, as opposed to polytheism where man was worshiped indirectly through the humanization of nature. In polytheistic religions, like those of the ancient Greeks, the individual was recognized as part of the species, whereas in monotheism, there is a unification of the species as an individual, “it personifies mankind into man, whom it calls God.”⁶⁹

According to Feuerbach the first stage of monotheism was Judaism. In the Old Testament Jehovah was specifically the God of the Jews, thus a representation of Israelite national consciousness. So there was a personification of man as a national rather than a

⁶⁸ This concept that would later come to be influential in the writings of discussed Martin Buber, and Victor Turner respectively.

⁶⁹ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 45.

universal being. “Thus, in the Old Testament nature, providence and miracles are all represented as servants of Israel, as a means to the satisfaction of man’s practical, egoistic needs.”⁷⁰ Feuerbach believed that Christianity from its beginning unified man with God.⁷¹ “The God of Christianity,” Feuerbach argued, “is essentially but universally man—man stripped of his individual limitations, man as species-being, man as an expression of the essentially human.”⁷² For Feuerbach the essential human traits are not individual, but always universal “they are properties of the species and connect men with each other instead of dividing them.”⁷³ However, in religion, all of man’s powers and essential characteristics are projected onto God thus taken away from man, essentially alienating man from his own worth. This form of alienation is in reality only a twisted representation of the relation between the individual and his species. “The antithesis of the divine and human is altogether illusory . . . it is nothing else than the antithesis between human nature in general and the human individual.”⁷⁴

This notion of religion as a reflection of man’s species-being is in itself a thought-provoking concept; Feuerbach explains using the phrase that man is both and I and Thou.⁷⁵ He states, “the single man for himself possesses the essence of man neither in himself as a moral being nor in himself as a thinking being. The essence of man is contained only in the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁷¹ It is important to note that Feuerbach was specifically talking about Protestant Christianity, as he believed that Catholicism obscured this concept with theology.

⁷² Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 46.

⁷³ Ibid..

⁷⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 13-14.

⁷⁵ This phrase becomes important to many subsequent scholars including Martin Buber, Turner directly, and Wagner indirectly.

community and unity of man with man; it is a unity, however, which rests on the reality of the distinction between I and thou.” To complete the train of thought Feuerbach continued, “Solitude is finiteness and limitation; community is freedom and infinity. Man for himself is man (in the ordinary sense); man with man—the unity of I and thou—is God.”⁷⁶

For Feuerbach, the complete *true* human, I and thou, was a universal being, not just an egoistic individual: “Man’s being went beyond his individual self and could not be understood without going beyond it.”⁷⁷ So the true essence of man, which is externalized in the form of God, is the unity of men together into *community*. Certain characteristics are essential to man, yet have the ability to transcend the individual. They are characteristic of the species and as such they direct man’s attention past his individual self. *Love* is one such characteristic, however it is not the love we recognize in the colloquial sense. To be moral man must recognize himself as a species-being and not just as an individual. For Feuerbach, “the highest expression of man and his unity with man is love.”⁷⁸ Thus Feuerbach’s concept of *love* is synonymous with *community*. He continued on about this idea of love in a description that places it in a liminal position, one that is synonymous with the idea of *communitas*:

Love is the middle term, the substantial bond, the principle of reconciliation between the perfect and the imperfect, the sinless and sinful being, the universal and the individual, the divine and the human. Love is God himself apart from it there is no God. Love makes man God, and God man. Love strengthens the weak, and weakens the strong, abases the high and raises the lowly, idealizes matter and materializes spirit. Love is the true unity of God and man, of spirit and nature. In love common nature is spirit, and the pre-eminent spirit is nature, Love is materialism; immaterial

⁷⁶ Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, 71

⁷⁷ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 119.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

love is a chimera. In the longing of love after the distant object, the abstract idealist involuntarily confirms the truth of sensuousness. But love is also the idealism of nature; love is also spirit, *espirit*. Love alone makes the nightingale a songstress; love alone gives the plant its corolla. And what wonders does not love work in our social life! What faith, creed, opinion separates, love unites.⁷⁹

The first line referring to love as a “middle term,” places love as a representation of community, or to use Turner’s expression, *communitas*, which is a liminal phenomenon.

Turner preferred the term *communitas* as it recognized the unstructured, spontaneous concept of direct connection between human beings, not tied to the spatial, temporal or categorical notions that the common vernacular of the term *community* implies. Normative behaviors and status roles often become ambiguous during such liminal periods, love/*communitas* is the space between the “perfect and the imperfect, the sinless and sinful being.” Feuerbach placed community/*communitas*, as a space between the “universal and the individual,” that “strengthens the weak, and weakens the strong, abases the high and raises the lowly.”

Likewise, according to Turner, periods of liminality may involve status or role elevation or reversal, both symbolic and actual. “There may be status elevation where the subject is conveyed irreversibly from a lower to a higher position,”⁸⁰ or status reversal in which superiors must accept ritual degradation the authority of those of low status. As Turner noted, “the strong are made weaker; the weak act as though they were strong.”⁸¹ Wagner’s view of this concept of love as what could be deemed *communitas* was demonstrated outright in his 1850 essay *Art and Climate*, he wrote, “There exists no higher *Power* than *Man’s Community*; there is naught so *worthy Love* as the *Brotherhood of Man*. But only through the

⁷⁹ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 48.

⁸⁰ Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 167.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

highest power of love can we attain perfect Freedom; for there exists no genuine Freedom but that in which each Man hath share.”⁸²

Wagner, like Feuerbach, recognized the liminal power of love/communitas. The composer continued on characterizing it as such, “the mediator between Power and Freedom, the redeemer without whom Power remains but violence, and Freedom but caprice, is therefore—Love.”⁸³ Other themes that Wagner will utilize are to be found in this statement, for example, redemption through love as a deeper connection to all, communitas. His conception of love/communitas as redemptive would become somewhat muddled upon the composer’s reading of Schopenhauer. Feuerbach’s notion that love was material as, “immaterial love is a chimera,”⁸⁴ would conflict with Schopenhauer’s idealism. Wagner already regarded death, or non-existence as the ultimate communitas so-to-speak. As he stated in “The Art-Work of the Future,” “the last completest renunciation of his personal egoism, the demonstration of his full ascension into universalism, a man can only show us by his death.”⁸⁵ Wagner was not speaking of any death, say by accident, but specifically of death that was in some sense a conscious sacrifice of the self to a greater entity, in reality or metaphorically.

The composer, however, continued to struggle with exactly what the relevance of love in the erotic sense was in regards to his newly embraced Schopenhauerian inspired beliefs. Prior to this, Wagner was firmly under the influence of Feuerbach. Wagner clarified

⁸² Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, vol. 1 of *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, 263.

⁸³ Ibid., 263.

⁸⁴ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 48.

⁸⁵ Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, vol. 1 of *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, 199.

in his essay *Art and Climate* that he was referring to the “love which issues from the Power of true and undistorted human nature,” and *not* as “that revelation from above, imposed on us by precept and command, and therefore never realized—like the Christians.”⁸⁶ He was referencing Feuerbach’s view that Christians love each other because it is a command from God that they must obey. Thus they obey it for egotistical reasons, to save their own individual souls, not through a spontaneous and natural recognition of their species-being as was the case with the bond of *communitas*/love that is coterminous with the essence of humanity. Feuerbach goes further, stating that the extreme alienation of religion is expressed in the fact that “in Christianity man is reduced to the individual, to a single person (God) each has aspects, but contains no distinction of sex. Christianity therefore does not recognize sexual distinction and sexual union as part of the human essence, does not see that two sexes make up man. It therefore robs man of sex” and “puts celibacy at the center of the Christian conception of life.”⁸⁷ Feuerbach argued that, “the Christian . . . in his excessive, transcendental subjectivity, conceived that he is, by himself, a perfect being. But sexual instinct runs counter to this view; it is in contradiction with his ideal: the Christian must therefore deny this instinct.” Thus in Christianity marriage is regarded as having only a moral but not a religious significance. “The Christian immediately identifies the species with the individual; hence he strips off the difference of sex as a burdensome, accidental adjunct.”⁸⁸ Feuerbach maintained that,

⁸⁶ Ibid., 263.

⁸⁷ Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, 55.

⁸⁸ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 167.

man and women together first constitute the true man; man and woman together are the existence of the race, for their union is the source of multiplicity, the source of other men. Hence the man, who does not deny his manhood, is conscious that he is only a part of a being, which needs another part for the making up of the whole of true humanity.⁸⁹

He believed that engaging in a sexual relation was a means towards being conscious of one's species-being, of connecting to the entire whole beyond the individual self, thus a path towards understanding the greater love of humanity. Wagner continued on Feuerbach's train of thought and created a continuum of natural love, love in the carnal sense, and love/communitas, where all were ordered into a logical progression. In the composer's words, "Love, which in its origin is nothing other than the liveliest utterance of nature, that proclaims itself in pure delight at physical existence," begins with "marital love, strides forward through love for children, friends, and brothers, right on to love for Universal Man."⁹⁰

Wagner explored this progression of love, beginning with sexual love between man and woman followed by paternal, filial, and finally universal love, in various manifestations. For the composer each "love" led to a realization or awareness of something greater than the individual self until a final consciousness of the ultimate love/unity communitas occurred. As previously discussed, Wagner's derivation of these stages of consciousness toward communitas was to cause problems in reconciliation with his later Schopenhauerian-inspired philosophical views.⁹¹ For Wagner "this love" that I will liken to an experience of

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, vol. 1 of *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, 263.

⁹¹ Schopenhauer believed the sex drive, was the most fundamental expression of the affirmation of the will to life. Each being naturally seeks its own well-being and self-preservation through offspring, thus it is a manifestation of egoism. That being said, Schopenhauer would not consider this a route away from egoism and toward self-less love, as Wagner will attempt to argue.

communitas, was “the wellspring of all true Art.”⁹² In his 1849 essay “The Art-Work of the Future,” Wagner directly utilized Feuerbach’s language, and relegated the individual’s coming to consciousness of species-being to a political evolution: “The exclusive, sole, and egoistic, can only take and never give: it can only let itself be born, but cannot bear; for bearing there is need of I and Thou, the passing over of Egoism into Communism.”⁹³ This statement appears to be an inkling of Marxist influence, however Wagner’s notion of communism was not Marxist per se, a socio-economic system based on common ownership, but as the antithesis to egoism, more akin to the concept of communitas, a recognition of a unity greater than the individual self.⁹⁴

Cultural Manifestations of Liminality

Beyond the Feuerbachian conception of love as instance of Turner’s communitas, which was akin to Wagner’s notion of love, Turner further stated that liminality was “not the only cultural manifestation of communitas.” Love/communitas was often symbolically represented by “the powers of the weak.” Turner mentioned that “characters such as beggars, simpletons, prostitutes, and jesters” were often characterized as having “magico-religious” or dangerous “polluting” properties, yet these figures would also embody “common humanity

⁹² Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, vol. 1 of *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, 263.

⁹³ Ibid., 78.

⁹⁴ There is no evidence that Wagner ever read Marx directly, although he may have gained an indirect influence through his conversations with figures such as Mikhail Bakunin, which may explain the impression of Marxist influence to be found in Wagner’s essays. He was more directly influenced by the writings of Proudhon and especially Feuerbach, than by Marx.

and morality.”⁹⁵ This concept was exemplified in Wagner’s characterization of Parsifal as a holy fool.⁹⁶ Turner continued, “all these mythic types are structurally inferior or ‘marginal,’ and in structured societies it is the ‘marginal’, or ‘inferior’ person or the ‘outsider’ who comes to symbolize . . . the sentient for humanity.”⁹⁷ Wagner himself, as previously mentioned, exemplified this position; as an outsider in exile, he held the powers of the weak, so-to-speak, which led him to an increased consciousness of the structural constraints and hierarchy he was formerly a part of.

Turner stated that these status-reversals experienced by the weak or through love/communitas, remind us that society is made up of “concrete idiosyncratic individuals, who, though differing in physical and mental endowment, are nevertheless regarded as equal in terms of shared humanity.”⁹⁸ Yet these reversals can also serve to reaffirm the “order of structure,” of the contrasting social model from communitas, “society as a structure of jural, political, and economic positions, offices, statuses, and roles, in which the individual is only ambiguously grasped behind the social persona.”⁹⁹ For Wagner this was precisely the

⁹⁵ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 110.

⁹⁶ The archetype of the ‘fool’ has been represented in numerous works of art, literature and myth from ancient to modern times. There have been various derivations of the fool character, wise, as exemplified in King Lear’s fool in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, prophetic, like Ivan Zheleznyi Kolpak, in Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov*, and holy, such as Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, to name just a few. The ‘pure fool’ is typified in the character Parsifal from first, Wolfram von Eschenbach’s and later Wagner’s *Parsifal*. Both tales of the Grail and its knights are steeped in Christian lore and symbolism. The Christian concept of the holy fool could be traced back to a passage in the King James Bible 1 Corinthians 3:18 when the apostle Paul wrote, “Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become ‘fools’ so that you may become wise.” In 1 Corinthians 4:10 Paul concedes, “We are fools for Christ’s sake.” Each ‘fool’ variation showed both vulnerability and power, which resulted from their liminal position, on the edge of normative structural roles.

⁹⁷ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 111.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

situation, the structural oppression of the individual *human* being, which Feuerbach aided him in dealing with. Wagner stated that he was “greatly indebted to him,” as Feuerbach became for him, “the proponent of the ruthlessly radical liberation of the individual from the bondage of conceptions associated with belief in traditional authority, and the initiated will.”¹⁰⁰

When Wagner discussed the “radical liberation of the individual” he was referring to individuals who have chosen to remove themselves from *nature* and enter society. Society eventually develops a normative structure that becomes institutionalized in the State. Wagner argued that, “the real man will therefore never be forthcoming, until true Human Nature, not the arbitrary statutes of the State, shall model and ordain his Life.”¹⁰¹ State structures, such as laws are static by comparison to art, which is dynamic and based on a continuous reaffirmation of humanity’s deeper connectivity. This staticism eventually leads to a gulf between the role of the state and the individual human’s true needs. Thus the actual needs of the individual and traditional state systems of authority are in conflict. The state however is a different group entity from that of *communitas*. As Turner explained, *communitas*, or the “open society,” differs from structure, or the “closed society,” in that “it is potentially or ideally extensible to the limits of humanity.”¹⁰² The closed boundaries of state structures are not coterminous with those of the human species, thus such structures do not allow for the “direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities.”¹⁰³ Static institutionalized

¹⁰⁰ Wagner, *My Life*, 430.

¹⁰¹ Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, vol. 1 of *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, 71.

¹⁰² Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 112.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 132.

structures such as laws, religious entities, and ethical norms, are unchanging and impose what essentially become arbitrary restrictions and patterns. Turner maintained that “relations between total beings are generative of symbols and metaphors and comparisons; art and religion are their products rather than legal and political structures.”¹⁰⁴ These generative symbols are brought about by the experience of *communitas*, which is what Wagner meant when he argued that true art would never flourish in arbitrary and restrictive state systems: “Art will never live, until its embodiments need to be subject only to the Laws of Nature.”¹⁰⁵

Wagner, like Turner discussed the opposition between arbitrary, constrictive institutionalized structural forms and the inner, natural, liberated form of art. Like many of his cohorts, Wagner considered modern life to be filled with all sorts of “errors, perversities, and unnatural distortions,” that come about while we are not truly living, our “mere existence, dictated by the maxims of this or that Religion, Nationality, or State.”¹⁰⁶ Beyond these fixed structures lay the true potential of mankind. Turner observed that, “prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, ‘edgemen,’ who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination.” The anthropologist continued “in their productions we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized in fixed structure.” In the words and writings of prophets and great artists there is often the creation of an “open morality,” itself an

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰⁵ Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, vol. 1 of *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, 71.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

expression of this evolutionary potential, or “life-force.”¹⁰⁷ Wagner is quite exemplary of this concept, his strategic use of liminality through his economic marginalization, followed by his period of exile, allowed him to engage in various non-normative behaviors both as a survival tactic, and as a series of strategic maneuvers toward success in the establishment of his artistic ideals. It was Wagner’s recognition of this human potential and his imagination at reconciling the gulf between his reality and a future he wanted that endowed his writings with such significance.

While in exile, Wagner creatively merged his experiences and philosophical influences into a plan for a future society that endowed him and his art a respectable place. It also placed him in a soundly in a liminal position. Turner discussed the distinction between the concepts of an “outsider” as opposed to a truly “liminal” being. The outsider is removed from the structures of society and does not expect to return. Wagner was never sure if and when he could return to Germany, however his Zurich essays created a narrative that devised a *future* place when he would not only return to society, but to the elevated status he desired, as the society itself had been reinvigorated. This then is demonstrative of a liminal position. Until then while living in the present, his anti-normative behavior, his failures, and his lower status were all temporary, not because of any fault of his own. While in this liminal position, waiting for the *future*, he was able to shirk the responsibilities and the normative rules of those living in the *present*.

Wagner’s Exiled World: An Imagined Future and Idealized Past

¹⁰⁷ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 128.

Wagner referenced an idealized past to give shape to his utopian future by outlining the contrasts between modern society and ancient Greek civilization. This was a common historicist tactic, characteristic of the German idealist position, in which ancient Greek culture was seen as both the political and social ideal. It was believed that in the Athenian polis, public and private interests were in a state of equilibrium, balance had been achieved between the needs of the individual and society. Wagner contrasted this ideal to the condition of modern society where these factors are instead in constant conflict or opposition. Wagner had hoped that the revolution would put an end to the conflict between these forces and bring back a balance between the needs of the individual and those of the greater society. Wagner did not however, completely romanticize the Greeks and did not wish to return to such a civilization despite the idyllic perspective. He believed that the system of slavery upon which the Greek economy was founded was the reason for the downfall of their civilization. Likewise, Wagner believed that the system of wage slavery within bourgeois society was to be the downfall of modern civilization. After the bourgeois emancipation everyone had become a slave to capital.¹⁰⁸ Thus for Wagner, in opposition to the “public art of the Greeks,” the “true essence” of modern art was “industry; its ethical aim, the gaining of gold; its aesthetic purpose, the entertainment of those whose time hangs heavily on their hands.”¹⁰⁹ He elevated the status of Greek drama, specifically tragedy, as a pinnacle of art from which there is a subsequent decline.

¹⁰⁸ In this point Wagner adopts the mindset of the early utopic socialists, such as Proudhon, and Feuerbach and inadvertently their successors Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Wagner, *Art and Revolution*, ed. William Ashton Ellis (London: Dodo Press, 1849, 2000), 12.

Art for the ancient Greeks was not merely for consumption, profit, or entertainment as part of a capitalist system, but was a significant religious and essentially communal experience in which “the whole populace was wont to witness the performances,” where as in modern society it was only the “affluent classes.” Wagner pronounced that: “The public art of the Greek . . . was the expression of the deepest and noblest principles of the people’s consciousness: with *us* the deepest and noblest of man’s consciousness is the direct opposite of this, namely the denunciation of public art.”¹¹⁰ *Public art* for Wagner meant that art for the Greeks was not just an external form of entertainment but also the ritualized experience of deep humanity, beyond individualized externalized trappings; it expressed the very essence of society and self, connecting all beings together, the experience of *communitas*. Wagner believed that the Greeks institutionalized this form of artistic communal awareness allowing them to be cognizant of a greater whole beyond their own egos.

The education of the Greek, from his earliest youth, made himself the subject of his own artistic treatment and artistic enjoyment, in body as in spirit; our foolish education, fashioned for the most part to fit us merely for future industrial gain, gives us a ridiculous, and withal arrogant satisfaction with our own unfitness for art, and forces us to seek the subjects of any kind of artistic amusement outside ourselves.¹¹¹

Wagner believed that art for the Greeks represented the deepest connections between human beings, the very fabric of society and self. Where as in modern culture individuals become estranged from essential characteristics of human nature and disconnected from each other, in short, they experience alienation. The modern person is indoctrinated into a social system based on extreme individualization, repression of basic aspects of human nature, separation from the products of labor, and disconnection from the greater community. Wagner believed

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

that as ancient Grecian civilization fell into fragmentation and decay so too did their highest art form, tragedy, as it was formerly representative of the harmonious balance between the needs of humanity and the essence of greater community: “Hand-in hand with the dissolution of the Athenian State, marched the downfall of Tragedy. As the spirit of *Community* split itself along a thousand lines of egoistic cleavage, so was the great-united work of Tragedy disintegrated into its individual factors.”¹¹²

The “spirit of *Community*” that Wagner discussed is exemplary of Turner’s concept of *communitas*. Turner asserted, “*communitas* breaks through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority.”¹¹³ Turner goes on to state “it is almost everywhere held to be sacred or ‘holy,’ possibly because it transgresses or dissolves norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships.” Wagner connected to the religious/ritual nature inherent in the performance of tragedy. Turner continued to describe the distinct characteristics of *communitas*,

instinctual energies are surely liberated by these processes, but I am now inclined to think that *communitas* is not solely the product of biologically inherited drives released from cultural constraint. Rather it is the product of peculiarly human faculties, which include rationality, volition, and memory, and which develop with experience of life in society.¹¹⁴

Turner stated that *communitas* is a result of not only repressed instinctual drives, but also a product of the rational aspects of cognition, developed from the social nature of humanity.

We could understand this as a combination of Feuerbach’s species recognition with

¹¹² Ibid., 5.

¹¹³ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 128.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 128.

Proudhon's rational freedom from contract. Likewise, Wagner argued that the Greek tragedian was inspired by both the god Apollo, "incarnated in actual living art" and by the god Dionysus, as "when, to all the rich elements of spontaneous art, the harvest of the fairest and most human life, he joined the bond of speech, and concentrating them all into one focus, brought forth the highest conceivable form of art—the DRAMA."¹¹⁵ Drama for Wagner was the common, human, emotional experience, the most fundamental being the experience and consciousness of our own mortality. The fear of death is both terrifying and yet calming as it represents a return to the non-existence from which we all came and will return to. The tragic is a unifying feeling, a shared awareness of this fundamental truth; it has the power to connect all human beings through the past and into the future. As all humans pass through life, this connection is constantly renewed through new human fodder, it is outside all of the finite structures of society, and beyond, yet intrinsically represented within the individual life, thus all that is truly new only may come from it.

Wagner believed that Greek art channeled all forms of human expression toward these ends. Greek art was an all-inclusive ritual event that engaged the total being, and fulfilled the needs of the whole human both as an individual and as a member of a society. As Wagner stated "the individual man . . . can experience no higher need than that which is common to all his kind; for, to be a *true* Need, it can only be such and one as he can satisfy in Community alone."¹¹⁶ He concluded that the highest duty for a *true* artist was to render the "fullest expression of Community" and this he only reaches through an understanding of drama. Drama portrays the universal in the particular; it goes beyond the individual to

¹¹⁵ Wagner, *Art and Revolution*, 3.

¹¹⁶ Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, vol. 1 of *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, 192.

portray our common being. It is a ritualized performance that results in the experience of *communitas*. This is where one may recognize the seeds of inspiration for Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Art, as a reflection of the state, had likewise dissolved into individual separate entities, music, poetry, dance, painting, architecture, etc. Each became focused solely on their own individual development, and surface beauty, rather than their inward connection to all of humanity, and the sublime. The main focus of art for Wagner was not the perfection of each individualized form itself, instead the goal and main aspiration of all arts combined should be towards the conveyance of drama. This is when the deepest and most innate human emotions and connection are experienced, tragedy of course being the most common type. He believed that only when the arts again become unified, their main objective to connect humanity to the deepest expressions of life, will art be rescued from this fragmented and exploitative profit based system and able to express the creative spirit of a freed humanity.

Wagner stated that the Athenian state and Greek tragedy operated under the symbolic function of Apollo, the idealized image of ancient man, portraying freedom, strength, and beauty. This cult of Apollo revitalized in the art of tragedy was gradually replaced by Christianity, which Wagner, like Feuerbach before him, characterized as a religion of egoism and slavery. The Christian passively waits through the misery of this life to get to the next life, effectively rendering life itself as a form of extended liminality. Wagner believed that Christianity was the ideological force that led to bourgeoisie society: "And thus we see with horror the spirit of modern Christianity embodied in a cotton-mill: to speed the rich, God had become our industry, which only holds the wretched Christian laborer to life until the

heavenly courses of the stars of commerce bring round the gracious dispensation that sends him to a better world.”¹¹⁷

For Wagner Christianity was distinct from the figure of Jesus Christ. Jesus symbolically represented the basic equality and brotherhood of all mankind, which stood in direct opposition to what Wagner considered to be the major downfall of the Athenian state society, its reliance on slavery. Apollo represented the free and beautiful people, but not all people, as the free were in direct opposition to the masses of slaves. Thus after the revolution of mankind, the society and artwork of the future would be represented by a return not just to the symbolic values of Apollo but those values in union with figure of Jesus of Nazareth representing a fundamental brotherhood of all humanity. Wagner’s characterization of the figure in his draft of the drama *Jesus of Nazareth* portrays Jesus as a revolutionary. This was a reflection perhaps of the way in which Wagner wanted to perceive his own identity at the time. Wagner’s goals for societal regeneration could be considered representative of what scholar Roger Griffin would consider to be and, archetypal revitalization movement. The author further mentioned, that historian Norman Cohn, whose work focused on persecutorial fanaticism, would regard the leader of such a movement as a “*propheta* who arises to lead the revolt of the Marginalized against the corrupt age and build a New Jerusalem.”¹¹⁸ Though never stated outright by the composer, there is a parallel sentiment in Wagner’s view of his own role in illuminating the need for a re-unification of religion with art.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, vol. 1 of *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, 49.

¹¹⁸ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 106.

¹¹⁹ I will return to this notion as well as the Weberian concept of *charisma* more thoroughly in chapter 3.

The Liminoid Revolution and Wagner as Prophet

Turner would characterize the revolution that Wagner desired and imagined as one that did not result in a reinvigoration of the old societal structure but resulted in a radical transformation of the old structures to a new structure, as “liminoid” rather and liminal: “*Liminoid phenomena*, on the other hand, are often parts of social critiques or even revolutionary manifestoes—books, plays, paintings, films, etc., exposing the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations.”¹²⁰ Thus Wagner’s Zurich essays, as well as the initial ideology behind his later Bayreuth festival could be classified as liminoid phenomena. A further aspect of the liminoid, according to Turner, is that it is optional by nature, not obligatory as he considered the liminal to be. Wagner envisioned a new community as emerging from the breakdown of the old, a society of equal persons, a *communitas* of free and total beings. Turner paints an accurate description of the way a new society may begin from a liminoid situation such as Wagner’s:

People who are similar in one important characteristic . . . withdraw symbolically, even actually, from the total system, from which they may in various degrees feel themselves ‘alienated’ to seek the glow of *communitas* among those with whom they share some cultural or biological feature they take to be their most signal mark of identity. Through the route of ‘social category’ they escape the alienating structure of a ‘social system’ into a *communitas* or social anti-structure.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Victor Turner, “Liminal to Liminoid, In Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology,” *Rice University Studies* 60 (1974): 86.

¹²¹ Victor Turner, “Variations on a Theme of Liminality,” *Secular Ritual: Forms and Meaning*, eds. Sally Moore, Barbara Myerhoff (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1977), 48, quoted in Roger Griffin *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 105.

Anthropologist Anthony Wallace's term *revitalization movement* could also be applied to effectively describe what Wagner was hoping for. Wallace (as paraphrased by Roger Griffin) would identify a further crucial element of this process as the appearance of a prophet who had a vision or revelation, on the basis of which,

now personally rejuvenated he . . . undertakes the salvation of the community by imposing through preaching and proselytizing 'a syncretism of both ancient and new fangled elements' . . . the crisis of the old society is thus resolved by a reaffirmation of identification with some definable cultural system which has been created through the agency of the leader.¹²²

Wagner became rejuvenated through his experience of the liminal; his early economic marginalization, and his subsequent time as an outsider in exile allowed him to view societal structure from an exterior vantage point. He had a new perspective both spatially, while away from his home, and temporally, as he was in a state of timeless limbo not knowing when and if he could return. During this separation from society Wagner entered the liminal, which to use the language of anthropologist Maurice Bloch (as paraphrased by Griffin) could be regarded as a "world beyond process." Where the initiates are able to see themselves and others "as part of something permanent, therefore life-transcending . . . thus empowered and transformed by their experience of liminality, they change into 'a permanently transcendental person who can therefore dominate the here and now' to which they originally belonged before their ritually induced schism from it."¹²³

¹²² Anthony Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," in *Anthony Wallace: Revitalization & Mazeways, Essays on Cultural Change* vol. 1, ed. Robert Grumet (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 181, quoted in Roger Griffin in *Modernism and Fascism*, 105-106.

¹²³ Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 4-6, quoted in *Ibid.*, 103.

Wagner was both humbled and empowered by his experience of the liminal. It gave him the vision and freedom to put forth his ideas of a revitalization of art through revolution, which would in turn create a new society based on *communitas*. The judgments he cast on the problems of modern society, and his liminal position as genius artist ultimately helped excuse his own failures and foibles. Upon the failure of the revolution by external group means, he turned inward toward individual disengagement. He considered himself as part of a greater permanent unity, a liminal figure, a genius mediator between the eternal irrational and the finite now.¹²⁴ Wagner's identification of himself in the role of prophetic visionary, genius composer, even charismatic leader would push him toward a plan to create a place of permanent *limonodality* in his Bayreuth festival. However his pessimism would never be quite all encompassing, and he would continue to look for societal change, however it would not depend on the will of the group anymore. He would view himself as the charismatic leader whose message would lead the way towards change.

¹²⁴ His conceptualization of his own genius as a composer would become strengthened upon his acquaintance with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer.

Chapter Three:
Wagner, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche:
The Charismatic Founding of a Tragic Culture, Liminal Vision, Liminoid Reality

Introduction

Richard Wagner, still in exile in Lucerne, was unable to attend the 1850 Weimar premier of *Lohengrin* his friend Franz Liszt had arranged for him. Despite his lack of attendance, the happening itself briefly rejuvenated the composer prompting him to publish the librettos of *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*. Much had occurred between the conception of those operas and their publication. The composer had been through a revolution, and while living in exile had focused on writing essays that expounded his new socio-political philosophies of art and life. As such his older compositional ideas did not match up with the vision purported in his 1849-1850 Zurich essays (discussed in Chapter 2) or more importantly his just published 1851 essay “Opera and Drama.” This gap in style and meaning prompted critical conversation among both his friends and detractors. To respond to the discrepancies between his new ideals and his older compositions, Wagner wrote “A Communication to My Friends” as a preface to the librettos. He meant this essay to be a signpost for his future in two ways. Publically he revealed his grand plans for a ritually-inspired festival of his works; second, he attempted to explain himself and address his critics through a self-defined and self-crowned title of genius.

Wagner's festival plans had, like his *Ring*, been forged from the fire of revolution and exile, crafted from the utopic ideals he had amalgamated from various philosophical influences and socio-political goals. Victor Turner used the term liminoid phenomena to differentiate such subversive revolutionary activities from more conservative "inversive" liminal activities that function within existing social structure. Liminoid phenomena according to Turner are "often parts of social critiques or even revolutionary manifestoes—books, plays, paintings, films, etc., exposing the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations."¹ Wagner's early revolutionary essays and festival ideals had been steeped in the optimism of creating a new society based on Greek ideals, and contained many concepts from the philosophies of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and especially Ludwig Feuerbach. However, as Wagner witnessed the failure of the revolution and the inertia of political action, he began to lose faith in his former socio-political ideals. Instead he came to embrace the pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer and continued to turn away from external solutions to man's situation.

Despite eventually gaining the patron he had long hoped, further problems and frustrations served to alter the festival and its creator's original vision. All of which led Wagner to transfer his previous belief in a liminoid mass political revolution to a belief in a liminal cultural rejuvenation led by a charismatic individual (himself). Many of the composer's supporters who bore witness to the earlier visions for the festival—Friedrich Nietzsche being the most notable and outspoken—called attention to the gulf between the idealism of the project's initial vision and the betrayals of its structural reality. Wagner would try to reconcile this through a strategic alteration of his earlier liminoid ideals to a

¹ Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology" *Rice University Studies* 60 (1974): 86.

more conservative liminal concept of a societal rejuvenation through an art-religion. He still hoped that as poet-priest he would lead society out of its state of fragmentation and egoism through an art-religion that culminated in a pilgrimage to Bayreuth. This vision however became more complex as the reality of the Bayreuth festival held truer to Turner's classification of a liminoid phenomena, as an event attended out of choice, such as a concert rather than an event attended out of social or moral obligation such as a church service. In this chapter, I show how, despite his best efforts, Wagner had a vision caught between a liminal ideal and a liminoid reality.

Sacred Festivals: Wagner Stages His Own Mythic Redemption

Wagner had finished his first prose draft of the poem of the *Ring*, "The Nibelung Myth," back in 1848, while his mind was saturated with the ideals of his Young German friends and thoughts of a societal revolution subsequently for and through art. While in exile, following the failed uprising, his essay "Art and Revolution" attacked the conventional opera system, sighting its baseness, pointless displays of virtuosity, and the part it played in the bourgeoisie system. Wagner, like many of his contemporaries, exalted Greek ideals and culture; he believed Greek society encompassed all of the traits of humanity and met the needs of both the individual and the society. Art was part of a public process of community awareness, allowing its members to each experience a greater oneness. Ancient Greek tragedy was capable of revealing our common humanity, and as a ritual event it fostered the experience of *communitas*. From the Greek Wagner took several concepts: the unity of drama and music, myth, and the notion of a national festival. However, he was not

attempting to merely imitate. Wagner melded philosophical ideas (previously discussed in Chapter 2), his direct experience as an exile, and his own imaginative Greek history into a plan for his own context and use. Wagner built a case for the need of a festival embracing these ideals in his next essay, “The Art-Work of the Future.” Wagner believed that a work that held these ideals would have the ability to bring the individualized fragments of art and self together, unifying both artist and audience in an experience of *communitas*. At the end of “A Communication to My Friends” Wagner first publicly made known his plans to at “some future time” have a “specially-appointed festival” to “produce those three Dramas with their Prelude, *in the course of three days and a fore-evening*.”² At the time the composer had not solidified the actual title or what the cycle would consist of, as he was still toying with “Siegfried’s Tod.” However, it revealed to his “friends” that Wagner had a grand idea to create his own festival long before he actually had any practical ability to do so. Wagner had even conceived of the place where such a festival would need to occur, a building that would not contain useless displays of ornate opulence but with an architectural design based entirely on the temporary needs of the production. Far from ornate, it would be made of simple planks, and be destroyed after the performances were over.

In an early letter to his friend Ernst Kietz, Wagner discussed that he was thinking of setting his poem of “Siegfried’s Tod” to music, however it was not to be performed in just some run of the mill theatre. Wagner stated that he was “toying with the boldest of plans,” and continued,

I would have a theatre erected here on the spot, made of planks, and have the most suitable singers join me here, and arrange everything necessary for this one special

² Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future: Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, ed. Ashton W. Ellis, vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & CO., Ltd., 1895), 391. [Emphasis in the original]

occasion, so that I could be certain of an outstanding performance of the opera. I would then send out invitations far and wide to all who were interested in my works, ensure that the auditorium was decently filled, give three performances—free, of course—one after the other in the space of a week, after which the theatre would then be demolished and the whole affair would be over and done with.³

Wagner's plan was to create a temporary space, simple in itself, to house an egalitarian gathering for all to witness a musico-dramatic myth. Upon the completion of the event the space would then be destroyed. Wagner's concept of this place parallels what Turner referred to as the "setting of a place that is not a place, and a time that is not a time."⁴ In this light Wagner's mythic music-dramatic work may be viewed as a form of *sacra* which, as Turner theorized,

May be the foci of hermeneutics or religious interpretations, sometimes in the form of myths . . . these symbols, visual and auditory, operate culturally as mnemonics . . . as 'storage bins' of information, not about pragmatic techniques, but about cosmologies, values, and cultural axioms, whereby society's deep knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another.⁵

In creating a momentary, liminal space, where everyone would have equal access to the performance, the function of space itself would only be in service to the work's needs.

Wagner eliminated the problems he saw associated with conventional opera, thereby vanquishing the idea of art as merely a vulgar spectacle for the bourgeois. The performance would be a temporary event, outside of normal structural space, and outside of normal temporal space. The audience would pass from their usual roles and positions in societal structure to a temporary space where those roles would be suspended, as they became

³ Richard Wagner to Ernst Kietz, 14 September 1850, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, eds., trans. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 216.

⁴ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 239.

⁵ Ibid.

audience members, after which they would return to their usual roles in normal structure. The entire episode and space would vanish after the ritual performance. Turner noted that there are two models of societal structure, normal structural time where individuals are involved in hierarchical role playing and status incumbency, and society as a *communitas* “of free and equal comrades—of total persons.”⁶ The ritual performance of Wagner’s festival would facilitate such an experience of egalitarianism through *communitas*. For the anthropologist, society as we experience it is a varying combination of both, normal structural time and moments of sacred anti-structure. As he noted, “even where there is no mythical or pseudohistorical account of such a state of affairs,” as *communitas*, “rituals may be performed in which egalitarian and cooperative behavior is characteristic, and in which secular distinctions of rank, office, and status are temporarily in abeyance or regarded as irrelevant.”⁷

Wagner’s initial festival plan seemed to be what could be considered a ritual occasion where, to quote Turner, individuals usually “deeply divided from one another in the secular or nonreligious world,” would “in certain ritual situations cooperate closely to ensure what is believed to be the maintenance of a cosmic order which transcends the contradictions and conflicts inherent in the mundane social system.”⁸ The “cosmic order” Turner referred to was the underling unity of humanity that had been obscured through the alienating forces of modern life. As Turner noted, practically all such rituals require a passage from one position in the “domain of structure” to another. In passing from structure to structure rituals may pass

⁶ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 238.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

through a state of *communitas*: “*Communitas* is almost always thought of or portrayed by actors as a timeless condition, an eternal now, as ‘a moment in and out of time,’ or as a state to which the structural view of time is not applicable.”⁹ It seemed to be this timeless condition, an experience of *communitas* that Wagner was hoping to evoke. His musico-dramatic works would provide a momentary respite from everyday structure and status hierarchies. The festival was to be a communal ritual event inspired by the unification of art and religion displayed in the performance of Greek tragedy.

Perhaps more noteworthy than the announcement of his festival plans, in this same essay, “A Communication to My Friends,” Wagner attempted to redeem his character and construct an identity that would serve to absolve him of his previous failures. This identity was based on what could be regarded as the liminal figure of the genius, a threshold character. Wagner’s narration of his personal development culminated in a specific definition of genius, one that attempted to explain some of his more questionable behaviors. In the composer’s words, he was trying to portray his “whole” self so that his “friends” may decide if they can “wholly” be his friends. In a jab at critics Wagner justified his tactic stating that he would not attempt to explain his works and character through “paths of abstract criticism,” like those who denounced him, but by pointing out his “evolutionary career,” and reviewing his works and “the moods of life that called them forth.”¹⁰ Wagner then strategically proceeded to outline his course of development as an artist. As an adolescent he struggled to form an individual identity. Wagner stated that his “first artistic Will,” like most adolescents, was “the impulse to imitate.” Thus he admits that like others, his first creations were

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, 286.

essentially imitations. He then stated that he believed that one's artistic ability was directly related to the force of their "receptive faculty,"¹¹ not as a result of some God-given talent.

To explain what he meant by receptive faculty Wagner set up a dichotomy between a development motivated by profit and one that develops from sympathy. He differentiated between what he termed the "un-artistic, political temperament," and the "un-political artistic temperament." The former, from youth, limits the impressions from outside, "which in the course of man's development, mounts to a calculation of the personal profit that his withstanding of the outer world will bring him, to a talent for referring this outer world to himself and never himself to it." The latter, however, "is marked by one feature: that its owner gives himself up without reserve to the impressions which move his emotional being to sympathy." Sympathy in this case might refer to a sense of empathy; the ability to 'tune in' to the underlying shared experience of mankind, to feel compassion, and communion with all of life. This then is what marks the "artistic temperament" for Wagner. Thus the more 'receptive' one is to these impressions, the more one will be 'filled up,' so-to-speak, until there is, in Wagner's words, an "ecstatic excess," after which the individual will get an "impulse to impart."¹² This impulse to impart is the artist's drive to create.

Wagner coupled the artistic temperament with the un-political, and the un-artistic with the political. The political is associated with structures of limitation, and repression that keep the individual from experiencing true humanity. Further, he was dismissive of those brought up within such structures, as he believed they were taught from a young age to conform and eventually became motivated only by profit, and personal gain. In Wagner's

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

narrative such characteristics take on a negative association, whereas those individuals who are extremely receptive to “sympathy” and do not, or are not able, to succumb to societal structures of repression and conformity gain a positive connotation. This narrative is an attempt to explain and justify Wagner’s own life troubles and behaviors while growing up. Rather than simply being an unusual child who struggled to fit in under the ordinary rubric, he, due to his extensive receptivity, disregarded the structures of society and was open to feelings of a whole greater than himself, which drove his need to create. The artist was essentially a receptacle in between the force or motive power of Life and the rest of society. The artist, as a result of his extreme receptivity is flooded to overflowing with the underlying life force, which then spills over in the form of creativity that he must share, the product of which is art. The artist was perpetually in a liminal space, a mediator between the whole and the individual, between the deeper anti-structural force of life and the illusions of structure.

Wagner created a further division within the category of artist. For him the most important part of art was the expression of this underlying connective essence, the *sublime*. This for him was true art. Where as art that was just art, for lack of a better term, did not express this deeper emotive content, it may be *beautiful* but not true art. As Friedrich Schiller noted, “the sublime opens to us a road to overstep the limits of the world of sense, in which the feeling of the beautiful would forever imprison us.”¹³ In Wagner’s words the artistic force was either “set in motion by *exclusively* artistic impressions,” or by “impressions *also* harvested from Life itself.”¹⁴ The artist that was completely filled by only “artistic

¹³ Friedrich Schiller, “On the Sublime,” *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays*, ed., Nathan Haskell Dole (Boston: F. A. Niccolls & Company, 1902), 131.

¹⁴ Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, 287. [Emphasis in the original]

impressions” had no room to absorb the impressions from the underlying force of “Life.” This individual “will develop as an *absolute* artist.”¹⁵ Wagner argued that the creations of absolute artists were based on the present, copying actuality, “not merely the actuality of the modern Present, but of Life in general—and treats it as her *absolute* foe.”¹⁶ Thus, this artist sees only the depressing state of man in conflict, but does not view art, as a potential force of unity, thus does not use any “Life Force” so-to-speak, to fashion art. Wagner continued to state that this class of artists included those involved in painting and especially in music.¹⁷ On the other side there were artists who had strengthened their “receptive force” toward receiving Life impressions. Wagner maintained that, “On the path along which this force evolves, Life itself is at last surveyed in the light of artistic impressions, and the impulse towards imparting which gathers from the overfill of these impressions is the only true *poetic force*.”¹⁸

At this juncture, for Wagner, it was the poet, not the musician, who was in tune with the underlying unity and force of Life. The poetic artist does not just portray life as it is, but attempts to shape life as it really is, as an underlying unity. Wagner placed an increased value on the type of artist he viewed himself as being, the true artist. Absolute artists, are in some sense just artists, they do not concern themselves or their art with the deeper aspects of life therefore they only encapsulate the circumstances as they are at the present time, or mimic the past. They do not attempt to create from reception of the underlying Life force, which

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Wagner will change this view upon his reading of Schopenhauer.

¹⁸ Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, 287.

would mark their art as true. The artist that creates motivated by these deeper impressions of the Life force can see past the surface divisions of everyday life that set man against man, and creates art that attempts to change the present and unify rather than mimic the divide. This deeper force is beyond the present everyday structures, thus it is truly generative of new ideas, truly imaginative.

Wagner's narration was a form of strategic identity building, setting the stage so-to-speak. He created a dichotomy between the negative materialistic being, and the absolute artist caught in the illusions and divisions of everyday reality on one hand, and the positive sympathetic being sensitive to the underlying unity of mankind, the true artist, whom could produce art that didn't just mimic the state of the world but could lead it toward change. This stage building, for lack of a better term, provided Wagner with a positive identity position to assume, that of the true artist, a role crafted and imaginatively matched to his own backstory. This culminated in Wagner's own definition of the term genius, one that just happened to fit with the happenstances of his own life.

Wagner's Genius: That One Accepted Gift

Wagner's evocation of genius seemed to have been one of the most rational things he could have done to explain himself in light of his critics at the time. It served to extricate him of the repercussions of some of his more eccentric behaviors and unsavory actions. However, the liminal nature of the term genius itself, residing somewhere between the normal and the exceptional, would later betray Wagner and repeal the very protection it initially gave as his behaviors could equally be explained as forms of madness, or degeneracy. The term genius,

like Wagner, evolved through the changing historical circumstances surrounding it. At points the term was used to describe both the most rational of individuals and analytic endeavors, yet it was also used to describe those who were the most in tune with the irrational and sensitive to instinct. I believe Wagner's evocation of the term genius as a gift of receptivity to the irrational proved a very rational way to color the happenstance of his own life and the characteristics of his art.

This particular conjuration of genius occurs in a few pages from Wagner's essay, "A Communication to My Friends" discussed earlier. Wagner takes the time to clarify that his "communication" is not for the purpose of making him out to be a "genius," at least not in the conventional sense as an endowment from God or some natural gift allotted at birth. Instead, for Wagner, a genius is an individual who is extremely receptive to an already existing "universal substance" that impresses upon the individual a communal force. It is an awareness of the overarching connectivity of all; this receptivity allows one to intensely experience empathy, or "sympathy" as Wagner puts it. When this "force," like that of individuality itself, "has been entirely crushed out by state-discipline, or by the complete fossilization of the outward forms of Life and Art," geniuses are in short supply.¹⁹ This, he believed, is "proof that they are not cast upon life by the caprice of God or Nature."²⁰

If the structural political conditions are oppressive to the individual and to the society in general, very few if any will be able to see beyond those surface constraints to proceed to produce true Art through a connection with the underlying "Life" force, as Wagner terms it. However, in epochs when there were few repressive structures geniuses were also unknown,

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 289.

as “no man was Genius, since all men were it.” Wagner sights “ages when both creative forces, the individualistic and the communistic, reacted on each other with all the freedom of unfettered nature, forever fresh-begetting and ever giving birth anew.”²¹ He, like many of his cohorts, held up ancient Greece as an example of such a culture with the perfect balance of the needs of the individual and that of the greater society, “when Speech, and Myth, and Art were really born.” Despite viewing ancient Greek society as a model Wagner does not expect art to create static monuments of the Ideal, rather, the goal was to create something dynamic in its potential to relate to all humans through time, and space. As Wagner states, “Art, must take that path which brings it into the most immediate contact with ever present Life; this path is that of *Drama*.”²² Drama is the common, human, emotional experience, most fundamentally the experience and awareness of our own mortality. The tragic is a unifying feeling, a shared realization of this fundamental truth; it has the power to connect all humans through the past and into the future.

Wagner believed that for art to be created within modern society, the artist was forced to bend to either the public’s worship of the past, or its predilection for fashion.²³ Therefore Wagner did not consider such artists to be *true artists* in the sense of his definition, rather, the true artist united past, present, and future through this universal and infinite human connection. Thus he must be at odds with the current society, ergo all true art, by its very nature, must be revolutionary. As Wagner elucidates, “[o]nly in times like ours, does one know or name these ‘Geniuses’; the sole name that we can find for those artistic forces which

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 280.

²³ Ibid.

withdraw themselves from the drill ground of the State and ruling Dogma, or from the sluggard bolstering-up of tottering forms of Art, to open out new pathways and fill them with their innate life.”²⁴ The “new” pathways Wagner was referring to were not in his words, “arbitrary” or “private” but part of the greater communal work of many individuals through time, “whose conscious or unconscious instinct has urged” them to fashion “newer molds of Life and Art.”²⁵ This “main causeway” that leads to the “new” is able to connect both the past and the future, and represents the whole of humanity whose task is innovation.

Wagner uses a myth to demonstrate the “prime energy” that characterizes a Genius. The myth is about the son of a Viking King and Wachelde, a sea-creature/ humanoid woman who was given gifts from the three Norns. The first gave strength, the second wisdom, and the King was pleased. The third Norn bestowed upon the child, “the ne’er-contented mind that ever broods the New.”²⁶ The King was upset at the gift and did not offer a reward to third Norn; insulted she took back the gift from the child. The child grew strong, wise and was always content. He never loved, but also never hated, he never felt the need to “change or venture.” Wate, as he was called, grew up, married and had a child, not for passionate reasons, but basically just because it was conveniently there as an option. Long story short, Wate had wisdom, strength and comfort, and he was always satisfied. Thus he did not experience desire, curiosity, drive, or passion, he was not in touch with the irrational. Wate lacked the basic instinctual awareness or inquiry of questionable situations especially when they should be heeded, he never experienced ill feelings towards others even when those very

²⁴ Ibid., 289.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 290.

feeling might warn him that those others could cause him harm. His inability to tune in with the basic drives of life and to be in touch with all the instinctual feelings of man, irrational as they may be, eventually cost him his life. “That one rejected gift: ‘the ne’er contented mind, that ever broods the New.’ The youngest Norn holds out to all of us when we are born, and through it alone might we each, one day, become a “Genius.”²⁷

In Wagner’s characterization, genius is a receptivity to an instinctual life force or drive that is not ever satisfied but continues to quest for the new, it is in all of us, yet repressed and subdued for various reasons, parental, educational, systemic. Wagner’s narrative is humbling, yet serves to transform what could be regarded as negative happenstances of his life into fortuitous circumstances. His struggles in life and difficulties in education and formal training or lack thereof is seen in a positive light as a reason that he was able to accept the Norn’s gift so-to speak. His father died before he had a chance to push the gift away, he did not get matriculated into the indoctrination that occurs in formal educational institutions. He was not a child prodigy and does not fit the colloquial understanding of genius. However, he renders the conventionally perceived traits of genius as ill conceived. As Wagner explains, “in our craze for education, ‘tis Chance alone that brings this gift within our grasp, —the accident of *not becoming educated*.”²⁸ Wagner turns the disadvantages he was born with into a fortuitous chance. This “gift” bestowed by chance, “never left poor untrained Wagner,” and made “Art and Life” his educators, instead of the usual institutions of higher learning which he had failed to thrive in. Mere “chance” becomes the reason why he is able to gain the divine gift. To place the accountability on “chance”

²⁷ Ibid., 291.

²⁸ Ibid.

takes away the hubris or egotism of crowing oneself as genius. Rather than take responsibility for his lack of ability in everyday routes Wagner, through endowing upon himself this carefully defined title, is able to occupy the role of genius, one that has occurred by chance, one that is open to all yet, because of the societal structures of the time is often repressed and thrown aside.

This title of genius excused Wagner from his anti-normative behavior. As sociologist Robert Nisbet aptly states, by the nineteenth century those thought to be genius “were excused from the ordinary conventionalities and could indulge in vices denied ordinary mortals simply because these vices, eccentricities, and unconventionalities sprang ineluctably from the individual's ‘genius.’”²⁹ The perks ordained to the “genius” club had been in formation long before Wagner joined its ranks. The French philosophers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment were crowning themselves geniuses as they were critiquing the old regime. They, like Wagner, looked at institutions of indoctrination such as the church and university with a faultfinding eye. By the nineteenth century, German Romantics had likewise linked themselves to the concept of historical genius through racial ancestry. “They found individuals in the past of towering intellect and spiritual being who had helped form and then express the Germanic soul or consciousness.”³⁰ The Romantic genius was marked not by the use of reason but through a plea to the irrational; feeling and instinct guided their experience.³¹ Prior to this the figure of the genius was to be found in Roman mythology,

²⁹ Robert Nisbet, “Genius,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 6 (1976): 99.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. “Geniuses were believed to have minds of such surpassing creativity or heroism that their rational limits could sometimes give way, leading to an affinity between genius and forms of insanity.”

believed to be an individual exemplar of the sacred spirit of nature that resides in all things, in other words the general unity that connects all particulars. It was also considered to be a tutelary spirit, protecting and guiding.³² In Roman mythology all things had a genius, each human's intellectual gifts and abilities stemmed from their soul, which was a genius. One would pray to a host of genii for numerous reasons.³³ This protective role was to become overlooked or separated out to its own path in folk and religious lore.

In the historical linkage of the Greek concept of the daemon with the Roman genii, the former served the same protective function as the latter Roman genii, however could also be malevolent. An early instance of daemon holding an ambiguous character is found in Plato's symposium, in the dialogue between Socrates and Agathon. Socrates is relaying a conversation he once held with the wise woman, Diotima of Mantinea about the concept of love. He relays that she characterized love as a mean between good and evil, "a great spirit (daemon), and like all spirits he is intermediate between the divine and the mortal."³⁴ The "daemon" love was a liminal being, one through which all is communicated between the sacred and profane, neither good nor bad. During the middle ages, genius as an allegorical figure was again cast as a mediator between the everyday and the divine, however he was given the further duty of moral guide. The Latin prose writer Apuleius combined the Roman

³² Although the idea of genius can probably be traced back to the corresponding Greek concept of a daemon, its origins most likely stem from even earlier Etruscan, or Ancient Egyptian sources. John Evans, "A New Type of Carausius," *Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society*, 4 (1904): 137.

³³ For example there was the genius of *cunina*, (of the cradle) who one would ask to protect the baby at its most vulnerable.

³⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas, and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 45-6. "Whose power is to interpret "between gods and men" a "mediator who spans the chasm which divides them" through which "the arts of the prophet and the priest, their sacrifices and mysteries and charms, and all, prophecy and incantation, find their way."

concept a protective genius with the daemons of Platonic cosmology.³⁵ As medieval prose scholar Denise Baker notes, “Apuleius establishes for the Middle Ages the precedent of casting Genius as a moral guide by equating this Roman god with the daemons of Platonic cosmology.”³⁶ In his text *De deo Socrates*, genius is categorized as daemon and identified as “one of the secondary gods who act as mediators between heaven and earth.”³⁷ Thus, like the Ancient Roman notion, we see the concept of genius taking on a dual role as protector and individualized mortal link to the unifying whole of immortality, however with the added duty of moral compass. In medieval allegory genius duty as mediator/priest was to regulate the actions of individuals through the elicitation of reason, this included guidance on instinctual drives like sexual activity.

Wagner, however, separated the notion of genius from its function as a protective spirit in the sense that it did not provide moral counsel or guide through rationality. Genius was essentially paired with the irrational as the instinctual needs of nature were not in themselves considered bad. For the composer increased “sensuality” was indeed a hallmark of genius. To some extent the forces of rationality and the imposed and unnatural chastity of the morality of religion actually became vilified.³⁸ Societal structures that sought to repress and control the natural, instinctual, and irrational, were regarded by Wagner and his

³⁵ Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis (c. 125 – c. 180 CE) his most notable work is the *Metamorphoses*, otherwise titled *The Golden Ass*, It is known as the only Latin novel that has survived in its entirety.

³⁶ Denise N. Baker, “The Priesthood of Genius: A Study of the Medieval Tradition,” *Speculum* 51, no. 2 (1976): 282.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ In *Roman de la Rose*, another famous French medieval poem by Jean de Meun the allegorical figure of Natura, tells her Priest Genius to excommunicate those who choose chastity over nature’s directive of species reproduction.

Romantic cohorts as negative; the main cause of the problematic state of human society.

Thus genius as a force that sought to repress such instincts through a call to rationality would not be a viable figure. However, Wagner's genius does still serve a tutelary function, rather than act as a moral conscious, its evocation gave him a viable excuse for his actions. Wagner as genius had the ability to shirk societal norms of behavior without moral judgment as it was just part of his "gift," which rendered him more sensitive than other men, more in tune, and thus more in need of the sensual. Further he was so fixated on the greater whole, the deeper level of "Life," that he lost track of his own and because of this he experienced difficulty functioning in the everyday world. In a sense, the evocation of Genius provided the perfect protective identity for Wagner at a time when he was most vulnerable.

From a Hopeful Liminal Artist of the Future to a Disillusioned Outsider

As 1851 came to a close Wagner still retained hope that there would be a revolution starting first in France, a hope he held on to well into 1852. After the continued failure of revolutionary means to change society, Wagner, like Proudhon before him, lost faith in external socio-political solutions. Aside from his waning belief in a renewed future state of society, 1852 brought the introduction of two people that were to be quite influential to Wagner's own future, Otto Wesendonck, a partner in a lucrative New York Silk Company, and his young wife, Mathilde. Otto was to become a rather substantial patron to Wagner, alleviating some of his material miseries at the time through financial support, and by supplying a reasonable abode within which to work. In the near future, however, it was

Mathilde who was to provide Wagner with artistic inspiration and mental support—both of which apparently were not to come from his wife Minna.

At that time, Wagner was at work on the *Ring*, a work based on political principles that he had since come to question, forcing him to reinterpret the work while still engaged on it. His previous political convictions, including the belief in a revolution through which a new societal structure would arise, had been the foundation of his artistic expectations and his own future as an artist to date. However, suddenly he felt there was no hope of revolutionary political and social change, no hope for the future integrity of art, thus no future where he would take his place in a status he felt he deserved. Wagner had essentially gone from a hopeful liminal position, waiting to be reintegrated into a new society, to a politically disillusioned outsider with no prospect of reintegration. This left him severely depressed even to the point of contemplating suicide. By 1854 Wagner was in debt again and charged with supporting himself, Minna, and her illegitimate daughter.

In the fall of 1854, an acquaintance and fellow political refugee, Georg Herwegh, introduced Wagner to the work of Arthur Schopenhauer. Wagner thus began a life-long and life-changing preoccupation with Schopenhauer's philosophy, which started by reading *The World as Will and Representation*. Thomas Mann called it "the greatest event in Wagner's life."³⁹ After this initial reading, Wagner re-read Schopenhauer several times, discussed him, and continued to deliberate on tenants of his philosophy for the remainder of his days. As the figure of Schopenhauer enters into Wagner's picture, the solution to the struggle between continuous needs of the individual and the greater society will become a problem solved through individual internal means of self-abnegation. Schopenhauer will effectively usurp the

³⁹ Thomas Mann, *Past Masters and Other Papers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1933), 57.

drive or potentiality within the individual and place it outside, or as a receptacle. The force of the Will controls us; the composer's genius is just a greater receptivity to the Will itself. Thus the genius becomes a liminal figure between two realms, a mediator to a greater force beyond the self of which the self is merely a small part.

The Schopenhauerian Interlude. Wagner as the Sensual Genius Composer: Sex and Aesthetic Contemplation for All

Schopenhauer believed that total reality must consist of a *phenomenal realm*; a highly differentiated world of material objects in space and time, plus a *noumenal realm*, which is a single, undifferentiated thing, spaceless, timeless, nonmaterial, and inaccessible to experience or knowledge. The noumena and the phenomena are the same reality perceived in two different ways. In our individuated bodily existence we are separate physical objects in space and time thus temporary manifestations in the phenomenal world of something that is noumenal, immaterial, timeless, spaceless. Therefore in the ultimate essence of our being we are all one.⁴⁰ Schopenhauer argued that this explained compassion/empathy and provided the foundation for morals or ethics. It is through compassion/empathy, the identification of ourselves with the *other*, that we get to know and understand one another and form bonds. In Kant's view the main thing uniting human beings was reason, therefore for him rationality was the foundation for ethics. Schopenhauer however, denied that what unites us is reason. For him the unifying force did not just involve the nature of human beings alone but the nature of all existence, as everything that exists, rational or not, participates in the ultimate

⁴⁰ Schopenhauer extended this to even include animals as well as humans.

oneness of being. Schopenhauer thought that life consists of endless willing, hoping, striving, and desiring that is inherently unsatisfiable; as the moment one wish is gratified another takes its place. Disappointment, frustration, illness, failure are common to the human experience leading eventually and inevitably to death. Thus happiness is only momentary and illusory, life is unavoidably tragic, and existence suffering. Since this harsh phenomenal world and the noumenal world are actually one and the same, the noumenal world must be something harsh as well, a blind, purposeless force or drive, entirely irrational and non-moral, unconcerned with anything to do with life or living beings. The noumenal realms manifestation in the phenomenal world was simply the irrational drive of existence that we see in ourselves, and all living things, thus all beings are the phenomenal embodiments of this noumenal force. Schopenhauer termed this force the “Will.” “The subject of cognition, appearing as an individual, is given the solution to the riddle: and this solution is *Will*. This and this alone gives him the key to his own appearance, reveals to him the meaning and shows him the inner workings of his essence, his deeds, his movements.”⁴¹ The only way away from life’s suffering was disengagement and denial of the Will, in other words self-negation, death of course representing the ultimate way to get underneath the veil of illusion.⁴²

Despite his extreme pessimism, Schopenhauer believed that it was possible for humans to momentarily escape the ever present Will and experience a moment of peace. Activities such as sex, art, and especially music, allowed a temporary consciousness of a greater infinite unity. All of our lives end in death, however all our lives also begin with an

⁴¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, eds., trans. Judith Norman, Alistar Welchman, and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 124.

⁴² Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 426. Schopenhauer believed that to commit suicide would actually be an affirmation of the Will: “a person who commits suicide stops living precisely because he cannot stop willing, and the will affirms itself here through the very abolition of its appearance.”

act of copulation. Hence, Schopenhauer believed that for most of us the strongest impulse next to the instinct for self-perseveration, “the will to life, expresses itself most strongly in the sex drive.”⁴³ Awareness of sex is ever present in our minds, albeit subliminally, which is why it is referred to it so often, for example in the form of the double-entendre. Therefore, understanding an individual’s sexuality becomes essential in understanding that individual. The fullest expression of the individual personality is a loving sexual relationship in which paradoxically the barriers and limitations of selfhood are transcended, when the individual’s sense of self experiences one-ness with the other person in the sexual encounter.

It is fundamentally this that in the higher phases of love gives such a poetical and sublime colour, nay, transcendental and hyperphysical turn to a man’s thoughts, whereby he appears to lose sight of his essentially material purpose. He is inspired by the spirit of the species, whose affairs are infinitely more important than any which concern mere individuals.⁴⁴

This concept is in many ways similar to Wagner’s Feuerbach-inspired continuum of love (discussed in Chapter 2), as one that flows from the initial transcendence of selfhood, through erotic love, to paternal, filial, and finally into awareness of the ultimate unity/brotherhood of all, love as *communitas*.

In his notes Schopenhauer himself would be even more explicit; he would say that orgasm is a seemingly metaphysical experience, even if very short, that reveals to us the nature of things, for just an instant. Our experience of art shares this special characteristic, taking us out of ourselves. When we are absorbed in a work of art, we entirely forget ourselves, and our sense of time seems to stop. Schopenhauer thought this was because we

⁴³ Ibid., 356.

⁴⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, “Metaphysics of Love,” in *Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer*, trans. Rudolf Dircks (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Library Press), 12.

do indeed perceive objects of art outside time and space. He believed that art was representational, revealing the universal in the particular, unveiling a glimpse of the forms (Platonic) themselves. Music alone among the arts was not representational; according to Schopenhauer it was the self-expression of something that cannot be represented at all, namely the noumena; music was “a *copy of the Will itself*.”⁴⁵ Music seems to speak to us from that deeper underlying unity, beyond what is accessible to language, understanding, or rational intellect. As such, Schopenhauer believed that music was a superior art. The great composers could be regarded as metaphysicians giving expression to truths about existence in a language that our intellects are unable to comprehend, or translate into words. For Schopenhauer, this was the nature of *genius*.

Wagner’s concept of genius (as previously discussed) became more pronounced upon his reading of Schopenhauer. On many fronts, his idea of genius already matched up with Schopenhauer’s portrayal. Schopenhauer, much like Wagner, believed that “for genius to emerge in an individual, it is as if a degree of cognitive power had been granted to him that is far in excess of the amount required for the service of the individual will.” Schopenhauer continued further to explain that this is why geniuses “tend to be lively to the point of distraction: the present is rarely enough for them because it does not fully engage their consciousness,” this is what endows them with a “relentless zeal” as “they are constantly on the lookout for new objects that would be worth considering.”⁴⁶ Thus just as Wagner had suggested through his mythic parable of Wotan, “the ne’er contented mind, that ever broods the New,” a lack of satisfaction with the present circumstances and an obsession with the

⁴⁵ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 285.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

new is the quintessential trait of a genius. This ability to see beyond the surface structures and singularities, to connect with the deeper substance of being, the greater whole, this awareness leaves the genius yearning for more than the everyday can provide.

Schopenhauer considered imagination an essential feature of genius. “Thus, imagination broadens, as much in quality as in quantity, the genius’s field of vision beyond objects that are actually presented to him. This is why an uncommonly strong imagination is the companion – in fact the condition – of genius.”⁴⁷ In a letter Wagner penned to Liszt months before his acquaintance with Schopenhauer’s work, he touched on many of these traits of genius. Wagner bluntly attempted to justify his need for extravagance as an aid in the daunting task of creative imagination: “I must at least help out my imagination and find means of encouraging my imaginative faculties. I cannot live like a dog, I cannot sleep on straw and drink common gin,” he continued imploring that he had an “intensely irritable, acute, and hugely voracious, yet uncommonly tender and delicate sensuality” one that must be fulfilled if he was to complete the “cruelly difficult task of creating in my mind a non-existent world.”⁴⁸ Wagner’s “delicate sensuality” needed to be fulfilled in order to fully utilize his genius imagination.

Schopenhauer reasoned that genius’s dis-satisfaction with the everyday was due to an excess of “cognitive power” that caused them to spend the majority of their time contemplating “life itself” thus failing to think about the course of their own life, which they

⁴⁷ Ibid., 210.

⁴⁸ Richard Wagner to Franz Liszt, 15 January 1854, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, eds., Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 297.

would pursue “rather clumsily.”⁴⁹ For Wagner this could easily be observed, as he in general made a mess of his education, failed at the usual channels of success, mishandled his finances, patrons, often his friendships, and his relations with women. However under the guise of genius these problematic social skills were to be considered a side effect of the “gift” of genius. Schopenhauer drew an opposition between the rational or abstract cognition of say a mathematician, and the intuitive cognition of a genius. He believed that “great genius is seldom paired with a preponderance of rationality; rather, the converse is generally the case and geniuses are often subject to violent and irrational passions.”⁵⁰ This may at times make the genius seem rude or eccentric when dealing with so-to-speak normal individuals. As Schopenhauer stated, the genius, “will not think so much about the person they are speaking *to*, as to the things they are speaking *about*, which they bear vividly in mind: thus they will judge or narrate too objectively for their own good and talk about things that it would be shrewder not to mention, etc.”⁵¹ Indeed many of Wagner’s contemporaries have attested to the composer’s bombastic narration of his poems, as well as his discourteous manner, ever-shifting moods, and one-sided friendships.

For both, Wagner and the philosopher, the primary characteristic of genius was an instinctual understanding and sensitivity to the deeper underlying fabric of reality. Schopenhauer introduced Wagner to his pessimistic vision of the underlying reality, the Will. The Will, never satisfied, drives us to strive for more things; as one desire is met, another will pop up in an endless stream of want until we die. For Wagner, prior to his acquaintance

⁴⁹ Ibid., 211.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 213.

⁵¹ Ibid.

with Schopenhauer, *satisfaction* was in itself problematic, being receptive to this force of constant yearning and desire was a positive gift that stoked the imagination and gave birth to genius. For Schopenhauer however, the Will in this regard was the cause of all suffering and essentially negative, one could only momentarily escape the misery through aesthetic contemplation. The philosopher believed that music was the most significant art form as it was a direct copy of the Will. Thus for Schopenhauer, “the creation of melody, the discovery of all the deepest secrets of human willing and sensation in it is the work of the genius,” whose activity comes not from conscious intention but from inspiration, for “the composer reveals the innermost nature of the world, and expresses the deepest wisdom in a language that his reason does not understand.”⁵² The composer/genius is guided by instinct not rationality in his service as mediator between the Will and the *phenomenal* illusions of everyday life. It was the job of a genius composer to use their instinctive gift of inspiration to convey these universal truths in a form that could be recognized and appreciated by those without the gift of genius, normal folk. In essence the genius’s “gift” is to give us all a moment of peace from the relentless needs of the Will through aesthetic contemplation.

The genius is preoccupied with their instinctual connection to the realm beyond, this provided an explanation for their eccentric behaviors in everyday life thus to an extent alleviating genius of moral constraints. For Wagner genius was not the force of reason controlling his desires, but rather, the cause of them. The often difficult to understand and eccentric behaviors of a genius can, as Schopenhauer stated, “actually verge on madness,”⁵³ and he aptly observed that, “it has been frequently noted that genius and madness are two

⁵² Ibid., 288.

⁵³ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 214.

sides of the same coin and blend into each other, and poetic enthusiasm has even been called a type of madness.”⁵⁴ The philosopher recounted that in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates stated that there are two types of madness, “one produced by human infirmity, the other was a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention.”⁵⁵ Madness caused by a “divine release” from custom is similar to Wagner’s conception of the true artist who is able to shake free of mere convention or imitation of the past. However madness “produced by human infirmity” could just as easily be applied to explain eccentric behavior. Wagner’s legacy revealed that divine gifts are not without cost, as the composer’s art and behavior was often characterized as a result of deviancy rather than genius.⁵⁶ What to friends and supporters could be deemed genius, to critics could, and often did condemn as madness or degeneracy. The essential factor as to whether Wagner was the receiver of the divine gift of genius or a madman was based on the earthly judgment of each individual and the verdict of society as a whole. The liminal position of the term genius is a place of both power and vulnerability. The divine gift must be socially recognized as genius and respected, or it will be considered madness and degraded. Thus, genius, the gift of divine madness, is a double-edged sword, as was the case with Wagner. The liminal nature of genius had the power to protect Wagner from his own behavior, yet this same protection was rendered null and void

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Plato, “Phaedrus,” in *Plato: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus* trans. by Harold North Fowler (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 531, 532.

⁵⁶ The ancient Greeks had believed that there was price for divine gifts, for example the gift of prophecy or metaphysical second sight could cost the individual their actual physical sight, or their reliability rendering their visions futile. A classic example would be the ancient Greek myth of Cassandra who could see the future but was cursed with no one believing prophecies thus she could not save anyone from their fate.

when the mantle of genius turned to madness for those who were not willing to recognize genius in a man they personally despised.

Wagner's Schopenhauerian Epiphany and a Frustrating Return to Structure

Wagner's disillusionment with political solutions and his new Schopenhauerian influence came together to reveal to the composer ideas that he had always wished to give voice to. He now realized that it was false to believe that society was getting better, as cruelty, selfishness, greed, and betrayal were always a part of life and always would be. The idea that these negativities could be swept away and replaced by a new order based on Feuerbachian love, and Proudhonian self fulfillment was an illusion. These things could not be gained from the phenomenal world, as our existence here is fleeting and illusory. Wagner had already believed that what is permanent is outside space and time. However, after Schopenhauer's influence he realized that the function of art could not be to unveil some future state of this world's affairs or find a path towards some new socio-political system. The true value of art was centered outside of the empirical world, outside of finite time and space. Art was to be about ultimate and permanent values, of the singular infinite existence that connected all. In 1849 Wagner had published his essays "Art and Revolution," and "The Artwork of the Future" in which he spoke of an equal unification of all the arts into a total artwork, *Gesamtkunstwerk*. However his newly acquired Schopenhauerian mindset led him to rethink the equality of all arts and by 1857 he was to publically recant this view. In his essay "On Franz Liszt's Symphonic Poems," he wrote: "music can never and in no possible

alliance cease to be the highest, the redeeming art.”⁵⁷ Thus his former synthesis of the arts was being publicly repudiated along with his optimistic view of a future world built on Hellenic principles. Henceforth Wagner was going to allow music to dominate the opera rather than being confined to a role no more important than words or stage action. The external action on the stage is merely the visible representation of reality (phenomenal), while the real import lies in the internal, unseeable (noumenal) reality that is the music. This simultaneously gives expression to both the external world of social actions, as well as the personal internal world of desires.

Wagner’s Schopenhauerian hiatus resulted in the creation of *Tristan and Isolde* and halted work on the *Ring* itself for seven years. Nevertheless in 1862, three years before the premier performance of *Tristan*, he still continued to plan for the work and set specific conditions under which a special festival performance of the work would occur. Wagner wanted to have the event in a smaller city away from the typical urban audience, further he wanted it to not have the same expectations and routines that he felt ruined modern theatre. His descriptions were still similar to his earlier visions for the physical structure that would someday house the festival. The structure would be temporary with a simple amphitheater design. Likewise, the materials used to construct it would be no-frills wood, with auditorium seating and an *invisible orchestra*. He did not want the audience distracted by the status visibility of the usual presence of opera boxes, and the class level separation of traditional venues. Wagner’s ideal audience members would be educated, and in a relaxed atmosphere

⁵⁷ Richard Wagner, “On Franz Liszt’s Symphonic Poems,” *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, ed., trans. W. Ashton Ellis, vol. 3 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & CO., Ltd., 1895), 246.

away from their working lives so that they may experience the unfolding drama, and fully engage with the musical sound emanating from beyond.

The composer figured that such a festival would have two possible sources of funding, either some kind of association or society of wealthy financiers together, or a singular royal patron. In the preface of his first public version of the “Ring” poem Wagner queried about who would give him the support he needed to complete the work, asking, “Will this prince be found?” Indeed a royal patron would come to the aid. Ludwig Otto Friedrich Wilhelm was only eighteen years old in 1864 when he ascended to the throne of Bavaria to become King Ludwig II. To quote Manfred Eger, author and director of the Richard Wagner Museum in Bayreuth, “Ludwig was pre-programmed for Wagner.”⁵⁸ The young King had grown up surrounded by the legendry of the swan-knight. Ludwig had read the poem *Lohengrin* at thirteen and at fifteen had first witnessed Wagner’s operatic version, after which the young prince became obsessed with Wagner’s music. He proceeded to read Wagner’s other libretti as well as some of his prose works such as “The Art-work of the Future,” “Opera and Drama,” and “Music of the Future.”

The new King first sought the composer out in the beginning of May 1864, after which he settled Wagner’s debts, and promised to aid him in his endeavors. However this was far from a happy ending. Wagner’s relationship with the King, much like the end result of his festival dreams in the creation of Bayreuth, proved both monumental and tempestuous, both were confounded by struggle and disappointment, yet also a continued hope and fascination. After their first encounter, they engaged in a series of enraptured

⁵⁸ Manfred Eger, “The Patronage of King Ludwig II,” in *The Wagner Handbook*, Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, eds., trans. John Deathridge (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 318.

correspondence. Each professing his worship and adoration of the other, as Eger well stated, “both men were carried away by feelings of ideal harmony, as yet blind to each others failings.”⁵⁹ Wagner for a time became close to the King, even so close as to become a source of advice in political matters. It was this unwanted source of political influence that soured the composer/ex-revolutionary’s already strained relations with several members of Ludwig’s cabinet. The situation resulted in several intrigues and issues that ultimately complicated both the composer’s financial backing and ultimately his relationship with the King.

Despite these problems, there was however an initial plan made for a festival theater in Munich with the aid of Wagner’s old friend from the Dresden uprising Gottfried Semper. Nevertheless these elaborate and expensive plans were never fully embraced by Wagner as such they never came to fruition. It would seem that reality would interject many a frustration and obstacle onto Wagner’s path to Bayreuth. As previously discussed, the term *communitas* as a moment of anti-structural experience, best described Wagner’s highest ambition for the festival. However as Turner stated “life in ‘structure’ is filled with objective difficulties: decisions have to be made, inclinations sacrificed to the wishes and needs of the group, and physical and social obstacles overcome at personal cost.”⁶⁰ Wagner experienced all of these concessions in his Bayreuth festival project. There were to be innumerable problems; the staging of the actual works and procuring of performers difficult and not in accordance with Wagner’s vision, problems in selection and construction of the actual site, and most pressing

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co, 1969), 139.

constant problems in securing funds, that lead inevitably to fundamental alteration of the composer's original ideal.

The initial choice of city seemed to be the result of several circumstances. Wagner had recalled fond memories of traveling through Bayreuth in 1835 this led him to suggest to his second wife Cosima that they might select Bayreuth for a favored residence. Perhaps more consequential, Wagner realized that for the performance of the *Ring* to be as he wished it, it must be staged away from Munich. King Ludwig had forced a production of *Das Rheingold* in Munich in September of 1869 and in the composer's eyes it had been a travesty. In a letter to Friedrich Feustel from 1871, chairman of Bayreuth's municipal representatives, Wagner laid out his reasons for selecting Bayreuth, which conformed to his list of requirements for a proper city within which to stage his grand musical dramas.

My reasons for choosing Bayreuth . . . as the place to carry out my plan . . . may be found in the demands that I have made upon such a locality. The place ought not to be a capital city with a permanent theatre, nor any of the more popular or larger resorts which especially in the summer, would attract quite the wrong sort of audience; it ought to be situated close to the heart of Germany, and be a Bavarian town . . . and I think it only right to do so in Bavaria, if I am to continue to enjoy the acts of kindness shown to me by the King of Bavaria. Moreover this friendly town and its environs left an attractive impression upon me years ago.⁶¹

Bayreuth's city fathers were receptive to the idea of Wagner staging the festival there and decided relatively quickly to offer the composer a plot of land to build on free of charge. Despite the ease of permission there were problems from the beginning. The first site Wagner chose was deemed unsuitable for building, so another site was suggested, however the landowner's refused to sell it, greatly frustrating the composer, finally the town persuaded Wagner to take a third plot of land they had recently acquired. While this all

⁶¹ Richard Wagner to Friedrich Feustel, 1 November 1871, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, eds., trans. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 782-83.

progressed Wagner continued composition of the *Ring*. It was also during this time that the composer solidified the utopian ideals of his festival. Discussions between him and his young philologist friend Friedrich Nietzsche refined and strengthened the theoretical and spiritual associations between the *Ring* festival and the ritual performances of ancient Greek tragedies.

Nietzsche, Wagner, and the Ideological Communitas of Bayreuth

Wagner first met Nietzsche on November 8, 1868.⁶² In a letter to his friend Erwin Rohde Nietzsche described the meeting, and his first impressions of Wagner.

I am introduced to Richard, and address to him a few words of respect . . . [H]e is, indeed, a fabulously lively and fiery man who speaks very rapidly, is very witty, and makes a private party like this one an extremely gay affair. In between, I had a longish conversation with him about Schopenhauer; you will understand how much I enjoyed hearing him speak of Schopenhauer with indescribable warmth, what he owed to him, how he is the only philosopher who has understood the essence of music.⁶³

Shortly after this first exciting meeting, Nietzsche was offered a job as an assistant professor of philology at the University of Basel. During the break after his first semester of teaching he took Wagner's invitation to visit him in Tribshen. Nietzsche often referred to his time in Tribschen as one of the best periods of his life, and he became a regular visitor to Wagner's home there. The letters from this period idolize Wagner, the philosopher gushed that Wagner "shows in all his qualities such an absolute and immaculate greatness," such an "unattainably noble and warm-hearted humanity," such a "depth of seriousness" that he always felt he was

⁶² Detrich Fischer-Dieskau, *Wagner and Nietzsche*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 25.

⁶³ Friedrich Nietzsche to Erwin Rohde, 9 November 1868, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed., trans. Christopher Middleton (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1996), 39.

in the “presence of one of the century’s elect.”⁶⁴ He did not replace his worship of Schopenhauer with Wagner; rather, he merged the two. For Nietzsche, Wagner, as man and as composer became the embodiment of Schopenhauer’s philosophy: “I have already written telling you how invaluable this genius of a man is to me, as a flesh-and-blood illustration of what Schopenhauer calls a genius.”⁶⁵ Nietzsche was awestruck with Wagner’s charisma, as likewise the Wagners were at first taken with the young Nietzsche. He stayed with them many times, shared family events, and holidays. In a letter he wrote to his mother and sister, one can see the pride Nietzsche felt in being on such intimate terms with fame: “I have had my Christmas with the Wagners in advance,” and had “the indescribable pleasure of attending a Wagner concert right beside them.”⁶⁶

In his letters it becomes clear that Nietzsche loved the Wagners, and as of 1871 their relationship was at a high point. The two men often held long conversations on many topics of mutual interest, music, Schopenhauer, the decadence of the current society, and Greek culture. Wagner introduced Nietzsche to many of the books he had read as a youth, and Nietzsche studied them along with Wagner’s own writings. He was especially intrigued by Wagner’s idea that Greek tragedy could be reconstructed in the nineteenth century by substituting the orchestra for the role of the chorus. In the beginning paragraphs of “Art and Revolution” Wagner asserted that Greek tragedy had come about through a union of the Apollonian and the Dionysian (as briefly discussed in Chapter 2), however he doesn’t really

⁶⁴ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche to Carl von Gersdorff, 28 September 1869, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 60.

⁶⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche to Franziska and Elisabeth Nietzsche, 23 December 1871, Ibid., 87.

develop the idea further. That was left to young Nietzsche, who attempted to illustrate that Greek tragedy did in fact developed out of music in his first book *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, published in 1871. It was his attempt at an academic validation of Wagner's written ideas. It was essentially a romantic work, heavily influenced by the ideas of Wagner and Schopenhauer, yet also touched on the ideas by other figures such as Hegel, and Schiller. A great many of the concepts considered in this book would lay the basic foundation on which Nietzsche's later philosophy would be built. It essentially deals with the perceived problems of modern society.

Each of the aforementioned influential figures including Nietzsche had a very similar characterization of late-nineteenth-century society. Modern culture was viewed as fragmented, without the unity and meaning that it was perceived previous societies had. Modern men were viewed as specialized, individualized creatures, without the ability to integrate or identify with the rest of society, or their own self, in a natural way. Nietzsche, like the others, questioned what was typical human culture, and what would be the best form of culture to make society whole again and create healthy individuals. His response to this query was in a way a typical romantic answer. He, like Wagner, examined a very idealized past society as the utopian solution to the present situation. Nietzsche argued that the ideal society would be archaic Greek (pre-ancient) society, the most powerful representation of that particular culture being fifth-century Attic tragedy. At this time, Nietzsche regarded Wagner's musico-dramatic works as the most similar form of such tragedy. The solution for the philosopher was to break with the structures of the time and form a new utopian "tragic culture," based and Wagnerian ideals.

Despite his Wagnerism, Nietzsche exerted his own distinctive perspective when examining the worth and meaning of life, and whether or not it is or can be justified. For Nietzsche the answer was essentially no, but he explained how a “tragic culture” could allow people to deal with this pessimistic fact in a healthy way. According to the philosopher, “archaic” Grecians were essentially metaphysical pessimists. He regarded the fact that Athenians of this period organized so much of their culture, political, and religious life around tragedy as evidence. They were in a way addicted to these ritualized depiction of destruction, where a heroic individual destroys themselves in a vain quest for self-knowledge, the most notable of course being Oedipus. Nietzsche thought people liked watching tragedy because while watching ritualized self-destruction, in some deep sense they intuit that they are viewing the truth of the human condition, or the nature of reality itself. In other words, Oedipus’s fate is the fate of humanity, and perhaps oneself. People derive pleasure from knowing this truth, despite not being able to alter one’s inevitable dissolution of self (death). This idea is complicated further; on one hand, our greatest fear is usually this ultimate dissolution of our self through death; on the other hand, it is perhaps the ultimate form of pleasure. It is pleasurable in the sense that it is a return to our natural state or primordial unity, what we were before we came into being and what we will all eventually return to. In a Schopenhauerian sense, it would be the pleasurable return to our natural state after a short stay in the illusory world of individuality; for Nietzsche, a return to the Dionysian primal unity after a tiny sojourn in the Apollonian “dream” of individuality. We enjoy watching tragedy such as the destruction of Oedipus because deep down inside we realize that our own destruction would be horrible, but we would also experience it as a pleasurable return.

In Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* for example, this is why death is coupled with ecstatic pleasure, as a return to this eternal unity. In Nietzsche's terms, it would be the experience of the "Dionysian orgiastic chorus," or in Schopenhauer's terms the experience of aesthetic contemplation. Essentially any time when one loses the sense of the differentiated individual self, it is just a taste of the real pleasure that one is thought to experience through genuine self-dissolution. So the inevitable dissolution of identity is both terrifying and gratifying at the same time. Likewise the knowledge that our identity is merely a brief illusion fated to be dissolved is both attractive yet also repugnant to us, which is why we like tragedy. In an Schopenhauerian sense, the paradox inherent in tragedy, the simultaneous experience of both pain and pleasure, is a reflection of an underlying metaphysical paradox. What most take to be the most real aspect of ourselves, our very individuality, is but an illusory appearance, the "veil of Maya" is in truth created by the non-individuated metaphysical entity, the Will: "The contrast between this genuine truth of nature and the cultural lie which pretends to be the only reality is like the contrast between the eternal core of things, the thing-in-itself, and the entire world of phenomena; just as tragedy, with its metaphysical solace, points to the eternal core of being despite the constant destruction of the phenomenal world."⁶⁷ Nietzsche thought that the realization of these basic truths of human reality aside from the pleasure of them could be terrifying to the point of revulsion. The good of tragedy is that it allows for the dissemination of this basic pessimistic truth about the world, however it is covered in an illusory appearance that makes it easier to stomach.

In the views described here we already have all the constituent elements of a profound and pessimistic way of looking at the world and thus, at the same time, of the doctrine of the mysteries taught by tragedy: the fundamental recognition that

⁶⁷ Ibid., 41.

everything which exists is a unity; the view that individuation is the primal source of all evil; and art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation can be broken, a premonition of unity restored.⁶⁸

Tragedy begins with the music and dancing of the chorus who are in the throws of Dionysian intoxication. This kind of collective music making is the art form that brings us as close as possible to the experience of the “eternal core of things.” However, Nietzsche thought this Dionysian form alone would be too much to handle. Thus tragedy needed to be balanced with an Apollonian form of individuation Nietzsche termed semblance or *schein*. It is *schein*, the Apollonian aspect, which allows the crowd to watch the tragedy without becoming too distraught, as the true Dionysian experience would be the most intense pleasure coupled with the most intense pain in the same collectivity with no distinction. Tragedy itself is *schein* in that the events on stage are portrayed by actors, and the words and actions are individual instances of general truths. In other words, although through the performance each member of the audience is facing a general but existentially real truth about human life, the experience on stage is occurring to some particular *other* individual, for example Oedipus or rather the actor playing Oedipus. Therefore, great tragedy consists of collectively intoxicating Dionysian music combined with pleasing individualized Apollonian illusion. At the time, Nietzsche viewed Wagner’s musical dramas as a merging of the Dionysian force of collective intoxication revealing the truths of humanity (orchestra), merged with Apollonian illusion of the words and actions of heroic individuals (voice/words).

In Nietzsche’s view modern society had begun to realize the limits of the false optimistic, illusory culture in which it was submerged. This inversion of the truth had created the state of cultural crisis characterizing late-nineteenth-century Europe. However Nietzsche

⁶⁸ Ibid., 52-53.

did recognize that music and art had gained precedents in Europe: “What hopes must stir in us when we are assured by the most reliable auspices that the reverse process, the gradual awakening of the Dionysian spirit, is taking place in the world in which we live!”⁶⁹ Nietzsche took revolutions in philosophy and music to be evidence that society was moving away from the current optimistic situation and back towards a state of affairs where a tragic culture would be possible. He pointed to the works of Kant and Schopenhauer in revealing the limits of rationalism, and showing that scientific optimism was merely an illusion. Musically, Nietzsche, like Wagner, regarded Beethoven as the first rediscovery of the power of Dionysian music. He sites Wagner’s music dramas as being the first attempt to merge this newly rediscovered Dionysian orchestral element with Apollonian mythic speech and actions.

From the Dionysiac ground of the German spirit a power has risen up which has nothing in common with the original conditions of the Socratic [optimistic/rational] culture and which can neither be explained nor excused by these conditions; rather, this culture feels it to be something terrifying and inexplicable, something overpowering and hostile, namely German music, as we see it in the mighty brilliant course it has run from Bach to Beethoven, from Beethoven to Wagner.⁷⁰

For Nietzsche and Wagner a culture built on the celebration of such tragedy would give us more consolation and satisfaction, as it is closer to the truth of things than the illusion of scientific or political optimism or religion. Nietzsche stated that “only as an aesthetic phenomena can the world be justified.”⁷¹ For him, this is the only way that the world is at all justifiable, and why life could be possibly be worth living despite the miserable truth. What

⁶⁹ Ibid., 93-94.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁷¹ Ibid., 9.

he meant by “aesthetic” is that the world is essentially a place of irrational occurrences. Things do not happen according to some overarching principle that we can understand, or some divine plan, they are neither good or bad, things just happen, creation and destruction. This is life, this is all we have, and Nietzsche felt we should embrace it fully.⁷²

Nietzsche’s pessimistic view is based on recognition of the truth of existence, coupled with an appreciation of this existence. The tragic experience (realization of pessimistic truth) should not destroy one’s enthusiasm for life but should affirm it. In the preface to the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche reviews his earlier thoughts on pessimism. He finds that it was over-simplified, and that there are in fact different types of pessimism. Pessimism can be either a strong or weak form depending on whether it negates this world, or affirms it. Nietzsche viewed both Schopenhauer and Christianity as weak forms, as they both negate this world albeit in opposite ways. Schopenhauer believed the underlying reality was the Will, and that the Will should be denied/negated; Christianity believed that God was the underlying reality, and that God should be embraced/affirmed. These differences, however, were irrelevant for Nietzsche. It was the relation to the everyday world that mattered, and to him both of these forms negate this world and thus life itself. Nietzsche was of the belief that since we must live in a world of illusion, we should at least choose illusions that give us a glimpse at truth and still that affirm life.

Of all the insights Nietzsche’s book presents, probably the most far reaching is the concept of the “Dionysian,” the notion that a primal and irrational force resides in all of us, and it should not be denied. The pleasure we take in this force, the impulses it creates, are a part of human nature and as such cannot be destroyed, fully controlled, or repressed. Failure

⁷² Ibid., 114.

to recognize this Dionysian/irrational part of humanity is what created the sickness inherent in modern society and simply ensured that these forces would eventually assert themselves in a far worse ways. A successful culture provides a structure that allows individuals to negotiate these impulses in a healthy way. Nietzsche and Wagner suggested that a tragic culture would achieve this.

Despite the book's negative feedback amongst Nietzsche's academic peers, Wagner was enthusiastic about it and it seemed to have brought he and the budding philosopher closer together. In a letter to an old friend Nietzsche wrote: "I have made an alliance with Wagner. You cannot imagine how close we are now, and how are plans coincide."⁷³ Nietzsche seemed to have had an idealistic dream, to be in his young adult stage of optimism when he wrote to his friend Erwin Rohde,

even if we do not find many people to share our views, I still believe that we can fairly—not without loses, of course—pull ourselves up out of this stream, and that we shall reach an island on which we shall not need to stop our ears with wax any more. Then we shall be teachers to each other; our books will be merely fishhooks for catching people into our monastic and artistic community. We shall love, work, enjoy for each other—perhaps this is the only way in which we can work for the *whole*.⁷⁴

This utopian haze lingered over young Friedrich until he realized he was merely clumped in with the rest of the Wagnerians, at which point the haze began to clear. In another letter to Rohde he wrote "I am told that *Nationalzeitung* recently had the cheek to count me among 'Wagner's literary lackeys.'"⁷⁵ This definitely fanned the embers of Nietzsche's desire to exert his own independent self, and he had to rebel if he was ever to gain independence from

⁷³ Friedrich Nietzsche to Erwin Rohde, January 28 1872, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 92.

⁷⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche to Erwin Rohde, December 15 1870, *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche to Erwin Rohde October 25 1872, *Ibid.*, 104.

Schopenhauer's all-encompassing philosophy and Wagner's all-encompassing personality. Further, Wagner had never really recognized genius in Nietzsche; hence, this one sided lack of validation was quite a psychological point of contention for the philosopher. Wagner had never finished his academic studies, and was flattered and to have a young member of academic circles around to validate his work. Further, Nietzsche was somewhat of a kindred spirit to him and provided the composer with some of the best conversations on topics of their shared interest. The loss of their friendship was deeply felt by both. Years later at the Bayreuth festival in 1882 Wagner said to Nietzsche's sister Elizabeth, "tell your brother, ever since he went away from me, I have been alone."⁷⁶

The split between them began slowly and quietly at first, as the philosopher began to excuse himself from Wagner's invitations. To his other friends he began speaking of Wagner with sarcastic tone, which slowly became meaner. In the beginning he was more than happy (and proud) to run errands or do favors for the Wagners, now he wanted to avoid being used by them. One of the last requests Nietzsche accepted was to write an "appeal to the German people" on behalf of the patron of Wagner's Bayreuth project. The last of Nietzsche's "Untimely Meditations" was entitled, "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth." In this piece Nietzsche was still writing from the perspective of a devoted friend, but this familiarity and the perceptive nature of Nietzsche's comments cut a little too close to home for Wagner. Nietzsche did however bestow a great deal of praise, referring to *Tristan and Isolde* as being "the actual opus metaphysicum of all art."⁷⁷ Nietzsche was very perceptive in his conceptual

⁷⁶ Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, *Wagner and Nietzsche*, ed., trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 180.

⁷⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed., trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 232.

understanding of Wagner's art but also spoke some painful truths about his former friend's life and personality. It was obvious that a level of passive-aggression had crept into his words. It was to be the first written trickle of the philosopher's sense of idealistic betrayal, one that would eventually gush in his latter works.

Nietzsche would later comment critically on the divide between the reality of the Bayreuth festival and the idealistic possibilities that had initially been envisioned. Even if Wagner's music did in some way elicit a form of spontaneous *communitas* that served to inspire a tragic culture, as both he and Nietzsche believed; as Turner astutely observed that it was, "the fate of all spontaneous *communitas* in history to undergo what most people see as a 'decline and fall' into structure and law."⁷⁸ This observation led Turner to differentiate between what he termed spontaneous or existential *communitas*, normative, and ideological. Normative *communitas* refers to any attempt at structuring what is otherwise an existential event; such an aim would occur over time when there became a "need to mobilize and organize resources" which in turn required "social control among members of the group in pursuance" of such endeavors. Turner believed that when the experience of *communitas* became subject to any forms of structural organization, the purity of this spontaneous anti-structural event had already been pushed into the realm of structure. When individuals create various utopian models of society based on achieving the experience of existential *communitas* Turner referred to it as ideological *communitas*. In the anthropologist's words, "it is at once an attempt to describe the external and visible effects—the outward form . . . of an inward experience of existential *communitas*, and to spell out the optimal social

⁷⁸ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 132.

conditions under which such experiences might be expected to flourish and multiply.”⁷⁹ This is exactly the kind of situation that Wagner had been describing in his Zurich essays. It was also to be the kind of utopic thinking that he and his young professor and friend Nietzsche had initially been engaged in, which is why the philosopher felt what he took to be a later ideological betrayal so deeply.

Nietzsche clung on as a friend to Wagner through the tough years of getting Bayreuth built. He still believed in the idealism of the project and its aim to revolutionize society through art. Therefore, he attended the inauguration and world premier of the *Ring* in August 1876. Moreover, he was also at Wagner’s home for the receptions held for the patrons. From statements he makes in *Ecce Homo* however, he was far from pleased. It seems that the *schein* was wearing off.

The beginnings of this book belong in the middle of the first Bayreuth festival; it presupposes a deep sense of alienation from everything around me there. Anyone who knows the sort of visions I was already having can guess what I felt when I woke up in Bayreuth one day. Just like a dream . . . And where was I? I did not recognize anything, I hardly recognized Wagner. I sifted through my memories in vain. Tribschen—a distant island of blissfulness: not a shadow of similarity. The incomparable days when the cornerstone was laid, the small society of people who *belonged* there, who celebrated, and who already had fingers for delicate matters: not a shadow of similarity. *What had happened?*—Wagner had been translated into German! The Wagnerians had gained control over Wagner!⁸⁰

The worst thing for Nietzsche was to watch Wagner catering to all this. Playing up to rich patrons and giving attention to people paying to see his work as if they meant something to him, and ignoring his friend Friedrich. To be fair, Wagner had struggled for years to see his works performed and to get Bayreuth built. Bayreuth, to Wagner and to those helping him at

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Ecce Homo,” *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, eds., Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 116-17.

the practical level, was more than just an idealistic vision of cultural and political revitalization. It was, to quote musicologist Hans Mayer, “a financial enterprise, a problem of organization of a highly unusual kind, and last but not least, a project of publicity and propaganda. This did not seem to concern Friedrich Nietzsche.”⁸¹ The philosopher felt deeply hurt by Wagner’s neglect and even more so by the idealistic betrayal. Nietzsche felt Wagner had denied everything they had believed. Rather than a meeting place for a subversive elite set of intellectuals meaning to improve society, he saw a bunch of wealthy ignorant aristocrats and phonies. These realizations made him very upset indeed. He wrote his sister, “I have had enough of it all! I do not want to even be at the first performance—but somewhere else, anywhere but here, where it is nothing but torment for me.”⁸² He dragged himself to the first cycle but sold his tickets for the second and left. As the philosopher noted, these mere admirers of Wagner’s music became Wagnerites, and their movement Wagnerism developed its own separate identity, simplified Wagner’s ideals, and created rituals that to some extent became disconnected from the composer who inspired them. Furthermore, the problematic realities inherent in the facilitation of a large-scale structural event resulted in the formation of a gap between the result and the initial conceptual ideal that inspired it. In the case of Bayreuth it continually involved the financial sustainability and viability of the festival.

⁸¹ Hans Mayer, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth: 1876-1976*, trans. Jack Zipes (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1976), 10.

⁸² Friedrich Nietzsche to Elizabeth Nietzsche, August 1 1876, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 147.

Structural Pains: The Financial Struggles of Bayreuth

At the beginning of the Bayreuth endeavor support came from numerous channels: the first Richard Wagner Society founded in Mannheim offered their full backing, and the Committee of Management which took charge of festival fund allocation included several prominent members of the Bayreuth community including the Mayor, Theodor Muncker. By early 1872, a patronage plan had been conceived for the festival. The goal was to sell 1000 certificates for a price of 300 thalers⁸³ each in return for guaranteed seats to all performances. The symbolic foundation stone of the festival theatre was laid on Wagner's fifty-ninth birthday, May 22, 1872. He and his family had left their house in Tribschen the month before and had settled permanently in Bayreuth. During the intermittent period Wagner continued his composition of *Götterdämmerung*, while at the same time maintaining an exhaustive regiment of correspondence and traveling around Europe giving concerts and soliciting potential patrons and benefactors. Further he was also overseeing matters of technical direction, allocating performers, and making artistic decisions along with administrative ones, all time-consuming and frustrating tasks.

Wagner realized the intense amount of labor involved in making this festival a reality, conceding to Cosima "what tremendous will power I need for my enterprise, yet inwardly how finished with life I am!"⁸⁴ By August 1873, only a third of the patrons' certificates had been sold, creating considerable financial worry. Wagner attempted to plead his case for the

⁸³ Short for *Vereinsthaler*, a silver coin circulated as 3-mark piece in the German Empire until 1908.

⁸⁴ Richard Wagner, November 6 1872, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, eds., Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, vol. 1, 1869-1877 (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1976), 552.

necessity of his festival as a form of revitalization for the German people to Otto von Bismarck, sending a copy of his essay *The Stage Festival Theatre in Bayreuth*, however the prince did not even acknowledge the letter. Adding to the insult, King Ludwig II also ignored Wagner's request for some form of financial assurance. Representatives from various Wagner societies sent out a formal call to the whole of Germany to support the endeavor, which turned out to be a dismal failure. At this point construction was halted on the project and the composer feared that it would be a ruin. Desperate, Wagner even attempted to spin the significance of the festival, he wrote an appeal to Kaiser Wilhelm I asking that he consider the 1876 festival as a five year celebration of the 1871 peace treaty signed with France, and as such reserve 100,000 thalers toward the event. This request came to nothing. Wagner then had a plan to present the theater to the town of Bayreuth. Finally, just before this occurred, January 1874, Ludwig conceded and advanced the stressed composer the 100,000 thalers he needed, however it was agreed that it was to be repaid through the money they received from patrons certificate sales.

While finishing *Götterdämmerung* as he was going through this financial struggle, Wagner complained to Cosima about the futility he was feeling. She wrote in her diary that she discovered her husband “utterly depressed,” and that he busted out in earnest: “What is the point of all this hard work with which I have burdened myself and which will only be abused? Who cares about it? What encouragement have I for working it all out so laboriously except the thought that it might be enjoyed? It is madness—where am I supposed to get the strength?”⁸⁵

The first rehearsals commenced in the still unfinished festival theater in 1875. By the

⁸⁵ Richard Wagner, as quoted by Cosima Wagner, November 13 1874, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 803.

end of that year Wagner learned that Bismarck had prevented a loan of 30,000 thalers that Kaiser Wilhelm was considering giving him. The loss of this money and the fact that most of the patrons' certificates had not been purchased caused more financial strife for Wagner. This lack of funding was to result in a pivotal change in the ideal of the original concept that the festival be free of charge. Despite all the financial woes, the Wagners had previously still reserved 500 free seats. Notwithstanding, reality left them with little choice but to reduce that number to fifty and charge for the rest of the seats. In the face of all these difficulties, the first Bayreuth Festival still occurred August 13, 1876. Two emperors were in attendance, Kaiser Wilhelm and Dom Pedro II of Brazil, and Wagner felt honored. However, artistically he was extremely disappointed and even embarrassed, as there were numerous performance-related issues to be addressed. Cosima wrote, "Costumes, scenery, everything must be done anew for the repeat performances. R. is very sad, says he wishes he could die!"⁸⁶ Critics took these early missteps as an opportunity to belittle the event in every way, and the general public came and went from the event without much ado. These early reactions crushed Wagner. To make matters worse the festival had ended in a 150,000-mark deficit that was Wagner's sole responsibility.⁸⁷ Again he tried to appeal to his estranged patron King Ludwig II, suggesting the festival theatre and its properties to be given over to Bavaria or the German Reich, after which they would pay an annual 100,000 marks, which would allow 500 or 600 seats to be given away free to those who could not afford them. This suggestion was ignored. He then sent a paper out to patrons to ask for donations toward the debt; only one person responded.

⁸⁶ Cosima Wagner, September 9 1876, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 922.

⁸⁷ Short for Goldmark, a form of currency used throughout the German Empire from 1873 to 1914.

At this point Wagner considered declaring the festival bankrupt and auctioning off his house *Wahnfried* to the highest bidder to settle the debts. It seemed he was fed up with the continued fight, as Cosima wrote in the spring of 1877, “R. says how sad it is that he has now reached the stage of wishing to hear nothing more about the *Ring des Nibelungen* and wishing the theatre would go up in flames.”⁸⁸ The Wagners took great efforts to reduce the debt: the composer gave concerts in London, which earned a small amount, Cosima gave up her 40,000-mark inheritance, and they even considered emigration to America. Wagner, no stranger to humbling himself in times of financial strife, even suggested giving the Bayreuth staging of the *Ring* to the Court Theatre in Munich, the very place he initially sought to keep it from. In the fall of 1877 a new Society of Patrons was formed and Wagner pitched his plans of staging all his works there between 1878 and 1883, thus he began to train and prepare singers, musicians, and conductors. All of his endeavors seemed to go nowhere, and the theatre at Bayreuth sat empty, all rehearsals and practices canceled. Seeing the abandonment of his vision took a toll on the 64-year-old composer, exacerbating and already existing heart condition.

The continued stress and struggle caused him to lose any faith he had in his earlier ideals for the project. Yet again, Ludwig finally gave in and granted an exhausted Wagner the remaining 100,000 to cover the deficit as an interest-bearing loan, which needed to be paid back out of the royalties of performances of the operas in Munich. In spite of all the strife, or maybe as a way out of it, Wagner worked on *Parsifal* from 1877-9. The composer called the work *ein Bühnenweihfestspiel* (a festival play for the consecration of the stage). Wagner saw *Parsifal* as a way to legitimate Bayreuth as a sacred place.

⁸⁸ Cosima Wagner, February 26 1877, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 950.

The work itself was a symbolic drama about redemption and compassion, the unity of all life told through myth and analogies of Christianity. He maintained that such a work could not be performed in a vulgar opera house along with the usual repertoire. Wagner created a quasi-religious and mystical aura for *Parsifal*, both in its composition and in his promotion of it. In turn this gave a temple-like significance to the failing Bayreuth Theater project. *Parsifal* as a sacred work required a sacred place with which to be performed, ritually, forever.

Wagner wrote a letter to the King describing these ideas, and the King, perhaps swept away in the mysticism, agreed to sponsor the next Bayreuth festival. Wagner finished the score in January of 1882, and began preparing for the summer performances, which went much better than the inaugural 1876 year. However much to the composer's chagrin he had needed to open all the performances except the first, which was reserved for patrons, to the ticket buying public. At the end of 1879, Wagner could no longer stomach the sight of his Bayreuth Theater empty and quiet; his hard fought vision so shortly lived. Thus he and his family traveled to Italy and stayed there till late summer, then slowly made their way back finally returning to Bayreuth in mid November 1880.

While Wagner was away, he continued the instrumentation of *Parsifal* and more importantly, did what he had done thirty years before while desperate and hopeless as a newly exiled being. The composer took to pen and began to write. He crafted several new documents beginning with "Religion and Art." These essays reveal the evolution of his belief in himself and society, as well as his vision for his art, which became exemplified in *Parsifal*. This last trove of Wagner's writings seemed to be a conscious attempt to sell the composition (*Parsifal*) to King Ludwig II and to the public as a sacred work, to save his Bayreuth vision and place himself firmly as the poet-priest of a larger ideal. This position would in turn serve

to save his identity and eradicate the failures and difficulties that the Bayreuth undertaking had involved. It would extricate the flaws in Wagner's vision by placing the blame firmly on the lack of support of his would be followers and the flaws inherent modern German society as a whole. However at this juncture the position would be that of an outsider rather than that of an exile in a liminal position awaiting return to structure, or as a genius with the ability to bridge the ordinary to the extraordinary. As Turner differentiated, "*liminality* represents the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions," whereas "*outsiderhood* refers to actions and relationships that do not flow from a recognized social status but originate outside it . . . such outsiders would include, in various cultures, shamans, diviners, mediums, and priests."⁸⁹ As poet-priest of an art-religion Wagner would become removed from structure, his power not reliant on the status incumbencies of societal structure, but ordained from beyond. Almost immediately after he returned to Bayreuth, Wagner penned a supplement to "Religion and Art," entitled "What Boots this Knowledge?" followed by "Know Thyself," written in the early part of 1881. In "What Boots," Wagner announced the targeted resumption of Bayreuth stage festival performances in 1882.

During this year Wagner was busy with the arrangements for his projected 1882 festival return and had a hand in all elements, from selecting principle singers and choosing scenery, to overseeing staging and rehearsals. In early fall of that same year his essay "Herodom and Christendom" was published and he began instrumentation of the third act of *Parsifal* while at Bayreuth. Wagner finished the work in January of 1882 while in Palermo Italy. He then returned to Bayreuth that summer for the last time to premier his final work. Despite the fact that Wagner had a porch specially built for his Royal Highness, King

⁸⁹ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 237.

Ludwig II failed to attend either the premier of the work or the subsequent fifteen performances after, which saddened the composer greatly. Although Wagner was fairly satisfied with the performances, he was not quite as sure of the audience's impression. Ironically, this was due to a request made of the audience to hold their applause, as to add to the sacred nature of the work.

Directly after the festival Wagner returned to Italy, this time to Venice, in a rented suit of apartments along the Grand Canal, this is where he was to take his final breath on February 13, 1883. Six months before his death, Wagner responded to Leipzig opera director Angelo Neumann's request to include *Parsifal* in performances at his theater by stating that, "*Parsifal* can only ever be part of what I have created in Bayreuth." The composer went on to explain: "my festival theater there will present this one work alone in a production that is to be repeated there year after year. This isolation is conditioned by the whole conception of the subject itself."⁹⁰ Wagner realized that the initial ideal of his Bayreuth vision was dependent on more than the same superfluous events that take place in the average opera house. The composer wanted more, he wanted a sacred ritual event. Pragmatically he also knew that this work would either save or sink the whole festival endeavor. This led him in the same letter to maintain that, "my Bayreuth creation stands or falls with *Parsifal*." Wagner was also concerned with how the work represented his legacy by saying: "of course, this creation will pass away with my death, for I know of no one, now or in the future, who could continue my work in the spirit of its creator."⁹¹ He had taken pains to create a legacy for himself and to promote his festival, his identity and his works. His legitimacy had always rested on his

⁹⁰ Richard Wagner to Angelo Neuman, 29 September 1882, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, 928.

⁹¹ Ibid.

somewhat argued claim towards authority, either as a composer, rather than a dilettante, as a philosopher, rather than a quasi-metaphysician or more importantly as a *true* German artist. His power was an authority gained through the strategic use of liminal and outsider positions best explained with the Weberian concept of *charisma*.

Wagner's Charismatic Authority: The Liminal Over the Liminoid

Charisma refers to a quality of leadership that appeals to non-rational motives. Max Weber explained, “the concept of ‘charisma’ (the gift of grace) was taken from the vocabulary of early Christianity.”⁹² The term *charisma* then,

could be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or . . . exceptional powers or qualities . . . not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a ‘leader.’⁹³

Weber continued on to say that in some circumstances this “peculiar kind of quality” was thought of as “resting on magical powers, whether of prophets, persons with a reputation for therapeutic or legal wisdom, leaders in the hunt, or heroes in war.” Further the sociologist believed that “how the quality . . . would be ultimately judged from any ethical, aesthetic, or other such point of view” would be “entirely indifferent for purposes of definition.”⁹⁴ This would allow one to examine such historical figures as Wagner, Jesus Christ, and even Adolf

⁹² Max Weber, *Economy and Society: and Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds., Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 216.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Hitler as all exhibiting the same definitive characteristics of charismatic leadership/authority, while leaving the realm of value judgments separate.

Weber thought the most important factor was how the individual was “actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his ‘followers’ or ‘disciples.’”⁹⁵ Thus although the magical or extraordinary power characteristic of charisma was thought to be endowed from sources beyond the structural realm, the power of the charismatic individual within that realm was entirely dependent on the strength of the belief of their followers. Therefore the faith of their followers was both a potential source of power and weakness. Wagner had come to experience both in his Bayreuth struggles, which is why he attempted to structure his own art-religion complete with a final call to the faithful in his *Parsifal* in hopes of strengthening his authority and legitimizing his festival and his future legacy.

Wagner’s earlier ambition was to be a part of a mass revolution that would change society; increased status, prestige, moral freedom, and monetary gains were some outcomes he was hoping for. However, after the failure of such a revolution, he found himself in a place outside of his former society, as an exile in a new liminal position, but not the one he had hoped for. He began to imagine his own society of the future through his writings, and began placing himself in a position of liminality, as a genius. Wagner’s concept of genius, as an individual that was more in tune with the non-rational being of the universe, was akin to Weber’s characterization of the charismatic individual. To quote sociologists Charles Wright Mills and Hans Gerth, “Weber’s conception of the charismatic leader is in continuity with the concept of ‘genius’ as it was applied since the Renaissance to artistic and intellectual

⁹⁵ Ibid.

leaders.”⁹⁶ Weber’s genius was an exceptional man who exceeded the limits of everyday routine. In this way Wagner attempted to legitimize himself. Wagner’s definition of genius, and his subsequent application of the term to himself, as well as his Schopenhauerian inspired role of genius composer, was a strategic act directed towards his potential followers/audience. As Weber maintains, “it is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma.”⁹⁷ Thus others’ *recognition* of his genius secured his validity as a composer and was the most necessary part of Wagner’s attempt at legitimation.

To Weber, it was not just the leader’s extraordinary acts, miracles, or feats that legitimated his authority, but “the conception that it is the duty of those subject to charismatic authority to recognize its genuineness and to act accordingly. Psychologically this recognition is a matter of complete personal devotion to the possessor of the quality, arising out of enthusiasm, or of despair and hope.”⁹⁸ Wagner did indeed subject his readers and his associates to this kind of scrutiny. He behaved and worded his writings in such a way that those who disagreed were either less than German, materialistic, or their art or personage was somehow fundamentally lacking. To show devotion was to recognize the master’s genius, then and only then could one also experience his gift. However, as discussed earlier, genius as a liminal figure can easily be disputed and turned into madness, as Wagner’s harsher critics revealed. His further financial struggles, loss of support from the former faithful, and

⁹⁶ H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 53.

⁹⁷ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: and Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 242.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

failure to solidify the viability of his Bayreuth enterprise, regardless of how monumental a feat it was, left the composer with little choice but to reposition himself again. This time his writings imagined an art-religion and positioned himself in a role beyond the instabilities of structure as poet-priest of Bayreuth. He himself as charismatic individual would lead an art movement of symbolic rejuvenation that would refresh religion and revitalize society. Weber observed that, “the bearers of charisma, the oracles of prophets . . . alone could integrate ‘new’ laws into the circle of what was upheld by tradition.”⁹⁹ Likewise Wagner was altogether able to introduce new uses of chromaticism into his musical works, introduce an influential stance on the unification of all arts, and latter combine art-religion into a new cultural revivalist theory.

Weber’s philosophical view of historical theory was built upon a balance between such charismatic movements, which could consist of both leaders and ideas, and rational *routinization* which included long lasting institutions of societal organization, and economic and material systems and interests. Rationalization was an important element in Weber’s concept of history. Weber believed in what Schiller had termed the de-divination of the world, which Weber then translated as the disenchantment of the world. For the sociologist, the building of institutional structures implied an increase in secular rationalization. However “the extent and direction of ‘rationalization’ is thus measured negatively in terms of the degree to which magical elements of thought are displaced, or positively by the extent to which ideas gain in systematic coherence and naturalistic consistency.”¹⁰⁰ The process of

⁹⁹ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds., H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 297.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 51.

rationalization is interspersed by historical breaks when the normal structural institutions and usual forms of life become inadequate in “mastering a growing state of tension, stress, or suffering.”¹⁰¹

Weber introduced the concept of charisma as a balancing factor against the inadequacies of such bureaucratic structures, in other words, as a way to reintroduce *magic* or enchantment back into a bleak world. The charismatic individual is usually at odds with the normal structures of society. Through their liminal position both as a member of that society yet outside normal organizational structures, the charismatic leader is able to present a new vision to potential followers who are also oppressed by the bureaucratic status quo. Thus the charismatic leader may be a revolutionary. Weber stated that “charisma, in its most potent forms, disrupts rational rule as well as tradition altogether and overturns all notions of sanctity . . . in this purely empirical and value-free sense charisma is indeed the specifically creative revolutionary force of history.”¹⁰² The charismatic individual sounds remarkably similar to Wagner’s notion of a true artist, who is also at odds with the society in which they function, therefore a revolutionary.

Weber further observed that historically, “revolution typically developed into associations of notables . . . after they had passed through a period of charismatic excitement that broke down class and status barriers in favor of one or several heroes.”¹⁰³ Wagner himself took part in revolutionary endeavors with several “notables” and became a mythic hero in some sense. This breaking down of class and status barriers toward a universal

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰² Ibid., 1117.

¹⁰³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: and Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 1130.

brotherhood, or as Turner would term it *communitas* is what the composer was conceiving of. The anthropologist likewise noted that the numerous traits that such charismatic “movements share with the liminal situation in traditional ritual systems suggest that these movements too have a liminal quality.” However unlike normal instances of liminal events, such movements are not institutionalized or preordained, instead they often occur in times of radical change.¹⁰⁴ This was very much the case with Wagner, the philosophical ideas that shaped his initial Zurich essays were gleaned from his Young German cohorts at a time of economic disparity, class disdain and political revolution.

Wagner struggled to give these ideals legitimacy, at first through socio-political changes however after this avenue failed the composer retreated and soon found the metaphysical realm of Schopenhauer and altered his original vision. The construction of Bayreuth seemed to complete that vision, the culmination of years of effort. In reality it was only to be marred by financial failure and a struggle for legitimacy. However as Turner noted, “religion and ritual . . . often sustain the legitimacy of social and political systems or provide symbols on which that legitimacy is most vitally expressed.” Wagner understood this. Further, he cultivated a realization that there was power in a position outside of structure. This led the composer to call on his Schopenhauerian faith toward a merging of art and religion. Art would serve to refresh the true meaning of the stale symbols of religion and revitalize its connection with humanity. This resulted in his last musical work *Parsifal*, as well as his last essays, most notably “Religion and Art.” Turner had observed that when “the legitimacy of cardinal social relations is impugned,” as in a failed or declining political system, “the ritual symbolic system too which has come to reinforce such relations ceases to

¹⁰⁴ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 248.

convince.”¹⁰⁵

This is precisely what Wagner argued in “Religion and Art,” that due to the materialistic state of society, the symbols of the Christian religion which began based on compassion had become controlled by agencies of power and monetary authority distorting and veiling the true original meaning of the symbols. This resulted in a religion that could no longer facilitate a society built on compassion, but was consequently stuck in the limbo of a corrupt economic situation. Wagner and his festival seemed to also be caught in such a limbo at the time of writing this essay. As Turner deduced “it is in this limbo of structure that religious movements, led by charismatic prophets, powerfully reassert the values of *communitas*.”¹⁰⁶ In his writings Wagner, as prophet, also asserted the power of *communitas*, eventually reaching what appeared to be the realization of his vision with the founding of the Bayreuth festival grounds. However, as Turner observed, once such a movement “attains its apogee and loses its impetus . . . the spontaneous forms of *communitas* are converted into institutionalized structure, or become routinized, often as ritual.”¹⁰⁷

Indeed, Wagner’s initial vision of his ultimate festival space, within which to provide the optimal condition necessary to facilitate *communitas* needed to be altered to fit the economic and bureaucratic circumstances. Thus despite his personal efforts and struggle, structural, economic systems, and the pragmatic concerns of reality turned his early Bayreuth idealism into a shell of its former self. Wagner was unable to muster the most important support he needed from his followers, financial assistance. As Weber stated, “the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

effectiveness of charisma rests on the faith of the ruled, their approval of the designated successor is indispensable.”¹⁰⁸ As Wagner was to discover, his friends’ faith in his vision and himself was requisite for the continued success of his enterprise. The liminal position he placed himself in as a charismatic leader drew as many detractors as it did backers, and when it came down to the fulfillment of material needs, far more skepticism than faith. The composer found himself in a position he was all too familiar with, the solution he turned was a familiar one as well. Wagner needed to return to a place of power he had been familiar with in many permutations throughout his life; a liminal place removed from the constrictions and responsibilities of societal structures and status roles. However this time rather than inhabit a liminal position with hope of reintegration into an revitalized society, he would assume the position of an outsider, as he would not be returning to either a changed society, or as a changed being. Wagner was to put himself in the place of a mediator between the sacred and the profane, the illusions of everyday and reality of the infinite.

Through his late writings and promotion of the work *Parsifal* Wagner attempted to strategically place himself in such an advantageous position, instead of earthly genius composer, as an agent of the sacred, the role of an outsider. The composer attempted to assume the role of poet-priest/master of the temple of Bayreuth, to solidify his ideals, and his work *Parsifal* as a sacred and repeated ritual occurrence. Despite his fears of who would continue the endeavor in his spirit after his demise, his Wagnerites helped to cement his legacy and myth long after he was gone. As Turner noted, when this kind of ritualization occurs the prophet and his followers actually become a “behavioral model to be represented

¹⁰⁸ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: and Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 1125.

in stereotyped and . . . selected form.”¹⁰⁹ Turner further assessed that, “the historical deeds of the prophet and his closest companions become a sacred history, impregnated with the mythical elements so typical of liminality.” This became true to an extent as Wagner worked very hard at the imagination of his own myth and legacy through strategic placement of himself and his works. Turner further observed that in ritual structure “both the deeds of the founder and his visions and messages achieve crystallization in the symbolic objects and activities of cyclical and repetitive rituals.”¹¹⁰ For Wagner, *Parsifal* would serve to consecrate Bayreuth, it would only take place there, leaving followers to make the pilgrimage to pay homage and be a part of the unifying power of the service/performance. As Turner noted “pilgrimages are liminal phenomena . . . they also exhibit in their social relations the quality of *communitas*.”¹¹¹

The composer believed that the music itself would serve to refresh ritual symbols, and revitalize them by reconnecting humanity with the deep level of conscious reality. This connection was exemplified in the trait of compassion. As he stated in the beginning of his essay “Religion and Art,” “Where Religion becomes artificial, it is reserved for Art to save the spirit of religion by recognizing the figurative value of the mythic symbols which the former would have us believe in their literal sense, and revealing their deep and hidden truth through an ideal presentation.”¹¹² This “ideal presentation” Wagner speaks of, was music, and not just any music, his own musico-dramatic works. Wagner maintained that we must,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 249.

¹¹¹ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 166.

¹¹² Richard Wagner, “Religion and Art,” in *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, ed., trans., W. Ashton, vol. 6 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & CO., Ltd., 1895), 213.

[k]eep our senses open to the mediator of the crushingly sublime, and let ourselves be gently led to reconciliation with this mortal life by the artistic teller of the great World-tragedy. This Poet priest, the only one who never lied, was ever sent to humankind at epochs of its direst error, as mediating friend: us, too, will he lead over to that reborn life, to set before us there in ideal truth the 'likeness' of this passing show, when the historian's realistic lie shall have long since been interred beneath the mouldering archives of our civilization.¹¹³

The type of rejuvenation that Wagner was seeking now was not based on a revolutionary reordering of society as he was seeking in his Zurich writings. Now he was writing about a regeneration of what he took to be the original meanings behind one of the main ordering forces of society, religion. It was a more conservative approach, more a revitalization of the status quo that would hopefully lead to a more respectful position for the poet-priest who led the way. The differences of these two forms of revitalization are discussed by Turner; Wagner's writings and vision for Bayreuth in many ways are at odds with the reality that occurred. In this way the Bayreuth enterprise seems to be a nexus of both what Turner would deem a liminal, and a liminoid situation.

The anthropologist attempted to illustrate the differences between liminal situations which he believed evolved historically earlier than liminoid situations, he took the latter to be a result of post-industrialization, as labor time and leisure time became oppositional entities. As Turner observed, "one *works* at the liminal, one *plays* with the liminoid."¹¹⁴ However, he maintained that liminal situations still do exist in post-industrial societies alongside the liminoid, although they are rare and often reduced from their original form. For example the initiation rights of fraternities or masonic orders have been reduced down conceptually from

¹¹³ Ibid., 247.

¹¹⁴ Victor Turner, "Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology." *Rice University Studies* 60 (1974): 86.

their original notion, the initiation of the neophyte to a new status, a rite of passage. Turner's examples of liminoid phenomena on the other hand, were "leisure genres of art, sport, pastimes, games, etc."¹¹⁵ Therefore liminal situations are usually considered obligatory and dependent on already established symbolic knowledge and are dependent on greater societal recognition. Whereas liminoid situations are considered a matter of choice, and are usually not dependent on already established symbols, they usually create their own forms and depend on recognition usually only by small groups, or sects. The liminoid can be removed from the basic process of rites of passage, and can also be individualized. As Turner explains, "the solitary artist creates the liminoid phenomena, the collectivity experiences collective liminal symbols."¹¹⁶ Likewise, Wagner as solitary artist, struggled, pushed, and shoved his festival at Bayreuth from vision to reality alone.

The conflict in Wagner's Bayreuth could be that it sits between both the concept of the liminal and the liminoid. Wagner's original vision was of a free festival, one that was on par with a liminal religious ritual, an event in which the entire community would participate, to be rejuvenated and re-enter normal structure with a refreshed mindset of connection and compassion. However various structural problems rendered Bayreuth more a liminoid genre. As Turner stated, "the liminoid is more like a commodity—indeed, often is a commodity, which one selects and pays for."¹¹⁷ Bayreuth turned from a free festival open to all, to a paid experience for wealthy educated elites. Liminal events, Turner noted, are often a result of a collective crisis or social process, often "enforced by socio-cultural 'necessity' . . . but

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 84.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 86.

contain the ‘freedom’ and the potentiality for the formation of new ideas, symbols, models, beliefs.” Therefore liminal phenomena tend to be more conservative and renew already established symbols, and reinforce the usual status roles and recognized structures. However liminal phenomena also contain the potential for change or creative possibilities that are outside or beyond the status quo. This seemed to have been the kind of conservative socio-cultural situation that provoked Wagner’s late concept of the festival, as opposed to his early days as a naïve revolutionary. Liminoid genres, on the other hand, are usually revolutionary and seek to create a new set of social structures and status roles, which are not yet recognized by greater society. That is why liminoid genres are usually the product of a smaller interest group or are “characteristically individual products,” thought they may have mass effects.¹¹⁸ Turner further stated that they often are “assigned to ‘leisure’ activities,” rather than activities that elicit greater social duties or awareness. He noted that current liminally-based phenomena would for example include the activities of churches or religious based sects, however ‘liminoid’ phenomena would include concerts, or other entertainment events of choice rather than moral or social obligation.¹¹⁹

As German society had shifted from the revolutionary state it had been into a more stable period, Wagner’s creation of Bayreuth, which initially came more from his own individual ideals, and those of the young German movement, seemed out of step with the current political climate. Wagner himself had also played down his revolutionary past just enough to fit in with his new royal patronage. In this new conservative fashion, rather than create a new world, Wagner wanted to refresh and revitalize the meaning of the symbols

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 85

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

already recognized in the old one. His idealistic plans to create conditions that would optimize spontaneous *communitas* resulted in an institutionalized liminoid structure, which itself became routinized in the form of a ritual performance, complete with the expectation of a pilgrimage to see a work (*Parsifal*) promoted as a kind of sacred relic only to be witnessed on Bayreuth's holy temple ground.

In regards to Turner's differentiation of the two genres, the composer attempted to overcome the liminoid result he was faced with in by covering it with a liminal ideology. The festival event in reality had become a concert experience that was an offering to only the rich and elite, an event attended by choice not obligation, therefore fitting more into what Turner would consider a liminoid phenomena. Wagner tried to overlay this structure with his written ideologies of "Religion and Art," which only served to create a contradiction between a liminal ideal and the liminoid structure. However Turner himself suggested, that perhaps in performance genres the clear distinction between these two classifications does not hold, noting that, "in fact, all performative genres demand an audience even as they abandon a congregation. Most of them, too, incarnate their plots or scores in the synchronized actions of players. It is only formally that these aesthetic progeny of ritual may be described as individual creations."¹²⁰ Thus such events regardless of their structure reach beyond the individual and become an instance of *communitas*, as the audience, and the performers together must all engage in a shared symbolic recognition. Perhaps such an instance alone is enough to reconcile Bayreuth's liminal/liminoid contradiction and with it define Wagner's legacy.

¹²⁰ Victor Turner, "Process, System, and Symbol: A New Anthropological Synthesis," *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 166.

Conclusion

After failing to attain his desired identity status using existing social norms, Richard Wagner sought an alternative aesthetics-based route. His participation in rebellion resulted in a period of exile, where in a liminal space, he was free to write of his hopes for a different future, a future that never materialized. After his disillusionment with political solutions, he discovered the work of Schopenhauer and found validation. He strategically positioned himself in the liminal role of genius composer, mediator between the noumena and the phenomenal world through music. Further, he attempted to create a permanent liminal space for his art, the temple of Bayreuth. Wagner's liminal positioning rendered his role as historical icon and charismatic leader of a movement (Wagnerism), a point of continuous debate.

Wagner was and continues to be a prismatic figure; many individuals have perpetuated and continually created different narratives around him through time and space seeking to appropriate both the composer as a symbolic entity, and his works to forge a set of meanings relevant to their own needs. Various models have been used to demonstrate such narratives. In Turner's theory of *social drama* historical change fluctuates rather than being a smooth process. Social dramas mediate between fixed states or structures, resolving crisis either through a return to the normal state/structure or by shedding light on new patterns or possibilities of structure through newly formed allegiances or oppositions. They can serve as an entryway into understanding a larger cultural aesthetic, dramatizing patterns of culture, and illustrating them through the generation of socio-cultural texts. However, these texts may remain stuck in the realm of aesthetics, mere descriptions whose utility is in depicting and

thus reifying normal patterns of culture. Thus, this model does not make room for potential new patterns of resolution either through individual or group agency, which are the active and performative aspects of culture.

Wagner did indeed create such social texts, and as a symbolic figure, his works (both musical and literary) became a revolving aspect of the cultural texts in his own time and continuing now as dynamic aspects of cultural performance. As cultural artifacts, Wagner's musical works and writings have remained actively involved in historical change. The encroachments of everyday structural realities, both economic and political, caused numerous conflicts in Wagner's attempt to retain a static liminal space for his art. Thus the structural constraints of time and place are reflected back in his legacy, the meaning of which has become part of a dynamic historical narrative.

Perhaps the most important implication of Wagner's legacy is his narrative of cultural renewal. Moving forward into the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, narratives of cultural renewal became less concerned with forms of universal brotherhood and increasingly intertwined with notions of national and racial identities. Likewise, Wagner's own writings mimic this effect. His earlier Zurich writings reflect notions of universal brotherhood; his later regeneration essays, unfortunately influenced by Arthur de Gobineau's theory of the Aryan supremacy, displayed racist, anti-Semitic, and mythic nationalist ideologies. Alongside a call for vegetarianism as a route back to the empathy he thought lost in capitalistic society, Wagner purported the purity of a specifically *Aryan* Christ's blood, as the symbolic pinnacle of the compassion of the human species. The sentiments these writings expressed are not unique, and in many ways reflect undercurrents already sweeping through *fin de siècle* Europe. Concepts of racial purity and nationalism, blood and soil (*Blut und*

Boden) were to become linked as Germany began to embrace what it took to be rural, *volk* culture.

While in the present study I do not link Wagner to a form of primordial modernism nor characterize him as a proto-fascist, my aim has been to portray him as an individual who adapted—both unconsciously and consciously—through changing historical conditions greater than the individual, strategically navigating socially derived circumstances. Perhaps the biggest testament of Wagner’s genius is his imagination and ability to alter others’ perspectives of him, to gain legitimacy and thwart criticism through positioning himself in places of liminal significance.

The conflict between liminoid structures and liminal sentiments can be witnessed in Wagner’s struggle for authority. He realized the power and continued potential of liminal phenomena, as a religion based on the continuous ritual connection of human beings through art. However, to structure such an un-structural phenomena as *communitas* already plants the seeds of decline within the event. Wagner could not overcome the economic and institutional realities of the post-industrial capitalist system that had already been established. This was his biggest barrier to building a structure that would guarantee the egalitarian quality of, and ensure the obligation toward a ritual religious event for all. This rendered the Bayreuth festival more a liminoid phenomena, despite Wagner’s best attempt to overlay it, and shape it into a profound liminal experience.

However, perhaps this failure once again can be turned into a saving grace for the composer. Rather than in a negative light, Turner saw the liminoid as “an advance in the

history of human freedom.”¹ The anthropologist stated that he enjoyed the “separation of an audience from performers and the liberation of scripts from cosmology and theology.”² He continued,

as a member of an audience I can see the theme and message of a play as one among a number of ‘subjunctive’ possibilities, a variant model for thought or action to be accepted or rejected after careful consideration. Even as audience people can be ‘moved’ by plays; they need not be ‘carried away’ by them—into another person’s utopia or ‘secular sacrum.’³

The audience may be “moved” or experience a moment of *communitas*, a moment of shared symbolic meaning, but not “carried away” by the experience. In the liminoid, choice is both a defining factor and the nexus of its potential. Turner believed that normal society, and the individual life for that matter, continually oscillates between the need for structure and the need for the experience of *communitas*. The best way to provide for this need has been a question that has preoccupied many a thinker. Turner observed that attempts to provide stable, structured, fulfillment of the need of *communitas*, no matter how utopic or idealistic, was doomed to failure. The experience of *communitas* is not a form of regression back to the primitive, as Adorno and Freud argued; it is just a shared element of humanity, one of many, neither good nor bad in itself. We need greater society and structure to survive but these very structures may take on a life on their own beyond the humans they are built to serve, thus effectively keeping us from our true unification, our species-being. We all need a moment free of this repression and these externally imposed categories, a moment to commune

¹ Victor Turner, “Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, (1979): 497.

² Ibid., 497.

³ Ibid.

together as human beings. The liminoid genre of post-industrial society may provide these moments without the need to surrender to an all-encompassing structure. These may be that instant of aesthetic contemplation that Schopenhauer believed freed us momentarily from the all-encompassing grasp of the Will. Adorno himself believed both in this primitive aspect and the fact that Wagner's music could allow us to glimpse it.

Looking toward the postmodern, these moments of chosen leisure time activities, which provide us a momentary respite from the daily grind of structure, could be regarded as a therapeutic break, allowing just enough comfort to keep us going in the very structure that does not fulfill us. Mere diversions that could be considered a form of regression back to a primitive nature, or a momentary comfort that keeps us from being conscious of, or revolting against, the real political and economic suppression we live under in a capitalist system. Yet these instances of relief could also, as Turner believed, hold the seeds of choice, an escape not only from the moment but from the all-encompassing capitalist system as well. That is perhaps optimistic, but I argue that, despite all his posturing and devotion to Schopenhauer's pessimistic view, Wagner was at heart an optimist. If not, he would not have had the fortitude to continue on as long as he did.

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