FORM AND MONEY IN WAGNER'S RING AND GREEK TRAGEDY

The evidence for the influence of Greek tragedy on Wagner includes numerous statements by Wagner about Greek tragedy and numerous specific thematic similarities between Greek tragedy and his operas. This evidence has been repeatedly discussed,[1] and I do not have space here even to summarise it. Nor do I have space for any kind of overall interpretation, or to consider the musical dimension. I focus rather on suggesting a specific similarity between the *Ring* as a whole and the Aeschylean trilogy. In doing so I will suggest some influences on Wagner (or at least striking similarities) that - except where I acknowledge it - I have not found in any scholarship.

I must start by stating three things that *are* already well known. Firstly, there is the *similarity of form* between Aeschylus and the Ring. Wagner achieves Aeschylean coherence and economy by combining episodes that in his Nordic and Germanic sources were quite separate from each other, but also by eliminating numerous events and characters, so as to produce a single coherent narrative, marked by a sense of inexorability over three successive generations, in a trilogy[2] consisting of a few decisive actions in a sequence of (often agonistic) scenes, in many of which there are only two or three characters.

Secondly, the unity of the *Ring* depends largely on the *ring*: made by Alberich from gold stolen from the Rhine, the ring is then stolen from Alberich by Wotan, cursed by Alberich, paid by Wotan to the giants for building Valhalla, guarded by Fafner, coveted by Alberich and Mime, taken by Siegried after slaying Fafner, given by Siegfried to Brunnhilde , still coveted by Alberich and by Hagen, snatched from Brunnhilde by Siegfried, and finally returned to the Rhine. The ring is contested almost throughout the *Ring*, desired by dwarves, gods, and giants, mediating their interactions, and possessed in succession by a dwarf, a god, a giant, a dragon, a hero, an ex-Valkurie, the hero again, and finally the Rhinedaughters.

Thirdly, the ring - it is frequently emphasised by various characters - bestows great wealth, and power over the whole world.

---

[1] Most notably by Schadewaldt (1970) and Ewans (1982), recently by Foster (2010). See bibliography below.

[2] The Wagnerian trilogy is preceded by a 'Vorabend' (*Rheingold*), the Aeschylean is followed by a satyr-play.

With it Alberich forces the Nibelungs to amass for himself by their labour wealth that 'will increase in the future.' The desirability and cursed power of the ring expresses the ambivalence of *money*.

None of this is new.[3] My own suggestion begins with a simple observation about the relationship between form and theme.

It is the potential omnipotence of money, and its consequent near-universal desirability, that unifies the disparate mythical material combined by Wagner. The result is coherence not only of form but also of form with theme, for it is precisely the power of money that - in the *Ring* as in reality - brings together heterogeneous agents and mediates relations between them. Gold, says Alberich, is desired by 'all that lives', and he would rather Wotan take his life than the ring.[4]

Formal unity is created not just by the universal desirability of money but also by the temporal continuity inherent in the movement of money. At the end of *Rheingold*, as the gods triumphantly proceed to Valhalla, there appear the Rhinedaughters demanding their gold back, and then in *Die Walküre* Wotan, fearing that Alberich will regain the ring, declares that he must wrest it back from the giant to whom he paid it. At the end of *Agamemnon* the triumphant Aigisthos' plan to use Agamemnon's money to rule the citizens (1638-9) is met by prediction of the coming of Orestes, already foreseen by Kassandra. Throughout both *Ring* and *Oresteia* each success necessitates disaster. The principle that causes a metaphorical net to fall over Troy to punish its excess (*Agamemnon* 355-84, 461-75, etc.) seems to trap its conqueror in a net (1382-3, etc.). Wotan laments that 'these are the bonds that bind me; I, lord of contracts, am now a slave to the contracts', and that 'in my own fetters I caught myself'.

Oresteia

In a famous passage of his autobiography Wagner describes the powerful effect on him (in 1847) of reading Aeschylus in the translation by Droysen, in particular the *Oresteia*. Distinct (albeit loosely connected) epic narratives - the murders of Agamemnon and of Klutaimestra - were combined by Aeschylus[5] with previous and subsequent events into a

[3] E.g. on form see Ewans (1982) 63-6, on money Shaw (1923).

[4] The strange preference for money over life occurs at Sophokles *Antigone* 322, and is implied at Aeschylus *Septem* 697 (if correctly interpreted).

[5] This uncertain, because so much earlier Greek literature has been lost.

single narrative. What holds this new narrative together is conflict - over three generations - for the power and wealth of the royal household, which is disputed by the brothers Atreus and Thyestes, then taken from Atreus' son Agamemnon by Thyestes' son Aigisthos, from whom it is taken by Agamemnon's son Orestes. The violence of the successive struggles is frequently represented as for economic benefit, or at least in terms of economic exchange.[6] It also frequently seems impelled by unseen forces, in particular the curse and its agents.[7] Droysen sometimes even introduces the curse where it is not in the Greek, with the result that 'his *Oresteia* is the saga of a curse-ridden house'.[8] Similarly, Wagner in the *Ring* created coherence around curse-driven conflict for the emblem of money.

The Aeschylean and Wagnerian patterns are each obtained by condensing and reshaping a combination of traditional narratives. But the Germanic and Nordic narratives out of which Wagner created the Ring are so diverse[9] that he had to be more eclectic than Aeschylus in creating the 'unitarian (*einheitvolle*) form' which for the Greek tragic poet 'lay mapped out for him in the framework of the myth'.[10] A ring occurs in various of Wagner's sources, but without ever having the potential to confer mastery over the world.[11] He innovates by giving the ring not only universal power but also a structuring role from beginning to end of the narrative - by providing it with the Rhine as origin and final destination.[12] As for the curse on the ring, it did occur in the Prose Edda: the dwarf Andvari, robbed of treasure and ring by the gods, 'said that the ring should cost everyone who possessed it his life'.[13] But Alberich's curse on the ring is much more elaborate, bringing to its possessors not just death but unhappiness ('as long as he lives let him die yearning to

---

[6] *Agamemnon* 1331-42, 1561-3, 1638-9; *Libation Bearers* 135-6, 301, 306-13, 372, 518-21, 801, 943; *Eumenides* 319-20, 757-8.

[7] *Agamemnon* 1086-93, 1477, 1481--2, 1501-3, 1565, 1583-1602; *Libation-Bearers* 692, 924, 1075-6; *Eumenides* 417.

[8] Shown by Ewans (1982) 30.

[9] Detailed account in Cooke (1979).

[10] *Opera and Drama* 156. In tragedy, which took mythical compression to an extreme (155), myth expresses itself as a single decisive action in which a great idea reveals itself (156).

[11] For the closest to an exception see Cooke (1979) 138.

[12] In Wagner's sources the treasure (not the ring) is hidden or thrown into the Rhine, but not to conclude a narrative: Cooke (1979) 135.

[13] Cooke (1979) 223-4.

die, lord of the ring as slave of the ring'), and to those who do not possess it ravaging envy. The curse proves effective.

Thebes

The sources of Aeschylus' Theban trilogy were also diverse. One lost Theban epic (*Oidipodeia*) told the story of Oidipous, including his curse on his sons Eteokles and Polyneikes, another (*Thebais*) narrated the unsuccessful siege of Thebes by Polyneikes supported by seven external warriors, and a third (*Epigoni*) the eventual successful capture of Thebes by the sons of the slain seven. Droysen describes how Aeschylus concentrated these events into two trilogies, his mode being 'to increase affliction through affliction and *Schuld* (guilt, debt) through *Schuld*'.[14] The only surviving play, the *Septem*, frequently refers to invisible forces operating over generations, in particular to Oedipus' curse to the effect that his sons will divide their property by the sword.[15] Here too, as in *Oresteia* and *Ring*, diverse narratives have been combined around conflict for power and wealth. Scholars have detected numerous specific Aeschylean influences on Wagner without recognising this fundamental similarity, and they have neglected the Theban trilogy.

In his *Opera and Drama* (1851) Wagner discusses the Theban myth. The incest of Oedipus and Iocasta was not contrary to nature but rather an offence against custom (*Gewohnheit*). When subsequently Eteokles refused to abide by his oath to share the kingship with his brother Polyneikes, the citizens sided with Eteokles, and in doing so

> showed a practical instinct for the nature of property (*Eigenthum*), which everybody wanted to enjoy alone, not to share it with another. Every citizen who recognised in property the guarantee of customary (*gewohnte*) quiet, was thereby an accomplice of the unbrotherly deed of Eteokles, the supreme proprietor (*Eigenthümer*). The power of self-serving *Gewohnheit* thus supported Eteokles. (185).

Gewohnheit 'had already become their virtual lawgiver'. And in the subsequent rule of Kreon, who deprived Polyneikes of burial, the state (*Staat*) came to represent nothing but abstract *Gewohnheit*, only to be overthrown in the overthrow of Kreon (the *Staat* personified) by the

---

[14] 2.153. All translations are by myself (except for the letter to Liszt), but for Wagner's prose I give references to the unsatisfactory translation by Ashton Ellis.

[15] 819, 832, 840-1, 886, 894, 898, 945-6, 954, 977=988; and mentioned earlier at 70, 655, 695-701, 709, 720-3, 766-7. Note also 801-2, 842, 742-52 'a transgression born long ago, quickly punished but remaining to the third generation'.

pure human-love (*reine Menschenliebe*) embodied in Antigone. 'The love-curse (*Liebesfluch*) of Antigone annihilated the *Staat*.' The kernel of the concrete *Staat*

> appears to us us in the Oedipus-saga: as the seed of all crimes we recognise the sovereignty of Laios, who for the sake of its undiminished possession became an unnatural father. From this possession become ownership (*Eigenthum*), which amazingly is regarded as the basis of all good order, flows all the wickedness of myth and history.' (192).

But the downfall of the *Staat* is inevitable. In the Oedipus myth

> we win an intelligible picture of the whole history of humankind mankind from the beginnings of society to the necessary downfall (*Untergang*) of the *Staat*. (191).

The 'whole history of mankind' moves from nature to the *Staat* based on self-serving *Gewohnheit* and *Eigenthum*, and from there to the final destruction of the *Staat* by human love.

Opera and Drama was published in November 1851, in a period in which the Ring was taking shape in Wagner's mind. The relevance of its discussion of the Theban myth to the *Ring* was finally recognised in 1982 by Borchmeyer,[16] but even he did not describe the full significance for the *Ring* of Droysen's account of the Theban trilogy.

As well as reading Aeschylus in Droysen's translation, Wagner praised the *comments* of Droysen,[17] who describes as follows what he calls the main content (*Hauptinhalt*) of the trilogy to which *Septem* belonged.

> The most terrible paternal curse, the power of blind, inexhaustible wildness, rages on and on against the particular lineage, until the last branch withers, until the last memory of its unhappy existence is extinguished, and a new, milder *Geschlecht* (family, race) rules more happily in the palace of the Kadmea.[18]

Oedipus' curse is familiar from the *Septem*. But whence the 'new, milder *Geschlecht*'?

Droysen describes the trilogy as reconstructed by Welcker, but also proposes a reconstruction of his own, in which the sequence of plays is *Nemeans*, *Septem*, *Epigoni*. He assumes that in the lost *Epigoni* the sons of the seven slain besiegers of Thebes succeeded in destroying the

---

[16] Borchmeyer (1982) 306-7.

[17] Droysen (1932). It is important to be aware that Wagner in Dresden in 1847 possessed the 1832 edition, for Droysen's comments 'in the later versions appear substantially changed or abbreviated': von Westernhagen (1966) 39, 84.

[18] Droysen (1932) 2.109.

city rather than just capturing it. The only surviving fragment of the play mentioned marriage, from which Droysen infers that this was the marriage of Antigone to a son of Kreon. Fate was finally fulfilled in the downfall (*untergehen*) of the royal family, and of the city itself, at the hands of a new and milder *Geschlecht*, and the marriage of Antigone (to a relative, we note) formed a joyful contrast to the destruction (*Vernichtung*) of the city. Elsewhere Droysen characterises Aeschylean tragedy as a whole as moving from initial 'dark, silent doom (*Verhängnis*)' to the advent of 'a new, happier *Geschlecht*' (283). Wotan fathers a new race, the Wälsungs, a *Wunschgeschlecht*, that - in the context of the imminent downfall of the gods - he hopes will free him from guilt and conflict, and that in fact will embody the antithesis presented by heterosexual love (even if incestuous) to power. This idea is not found in Wotan's northern source, the *Volsunga saga*.[19]

As for the annihilated royal family, Laios became an unnatural father - Wagner tells us - for the sake of his undiminished possession of rulership, which grew into *Eigenthum* (ownership), the source of all crimes. Sovereign power is here united with wealth in *Eigenthum*, the persistent source and object of the conflict, from Laios exposing his son to Eteokles cursed to fight his own brother for *Eigenthum*. The *Septem* is a powerful dramatization of curse-driven conflict for *Eigenthum*, especially in the departure of Eteokles, impelled by the curse to divide his inheritance with the sword.[20] In both Aeschylean trilogies, as in the *Ring*, the curse is uttered by a victim in the persistent conflict for *Eigenthum* (Thyestes, Oedipus, Alberich). And most of the curse-driven conflict for the ring is, as in *Septem*, between brothers (Alberich-Mime, Fafner-Fasolt, Hagen-Gunther).

Prometheia

Numerous similarities have been observed between *Prometheia* and *Ring*. Here again, Wagner was also influenced by Droysen's *comments*.

Only one play of the trilogy survives (*Prometheus Bound*),[21] in which Zeus is the cosmic projection of the typical *turannos.* As a god, he does not express concern with money, but is frequently called *turannos*, and has the isolation and the absolute power bestowed on the human

[19] Cooke (1979) 282-307.
[20] 695, 700, 709, 720-33.
[21] In the lifetime of Wagener it was assumed to be by Aeschylus.

turannos by money,[22] as well as his *insecurity*: Zeus is no less anxious than Wotan to ensure a permanent future.

According to Droysen, the victory of Zeus was the victory of the human spirit (*Menschengeist*) embodied in his ally Prometheus. But subsequently the *Menschengeist* 'succumbed to the individual life (*Einzelleben*), the finiteness of creaturely existence', the *Gattung* (species, type) breaks up into individuals, innocence succumbs to wilfulness, and 'the blind selflessness of natural life comes to an end in the intense centralisation of selfishness and of consciousness'.[23] As a result, Zeus wants to destroy the human race, but Prometheus saves it and gives it the power to win back the world it has lost. Droysen had also explained (160) that Zeus wanted to create a new, more obedient *Geschlecht*. But Zeus is under the *curse* of his displaced father Kronos,

> for the ethical world which he rules is based on the overthrow of the previously ruling world order, and every age of the world that perishes, every declining epoch of history leaves the same curse as inheritance for its successor in the domination of the world.

From this paternal curse Zeus can be freed only by a hero born of - in a fragment from the play - 'a mortal woman from earth-born seed'. The influence of this liberating mortal hero (Herakles) on Wagner, and of much else in the *Prometheia*, has been recognised. But there is more. A morally serious combination - of a persistent curse, an order (political or cosmic) based on selfish individualism, the destruction of the order, and a new *Geschlecht* - occurs not only in Droysen's account of the *Prometheia*, but also in his account of the Theban trilogy combined with Wagner's account of the Theban myth, as well as in the *Ring*. The selfish individualism of tragic *Eigenthum* is in Wagner embodied in the cursed ring.

Isolation

It was in the latter half of the sixth century BCE, probably during the rule of the *turannos* Peisistratos, that coinage was introduced into Athens, in a period of significant and rapid cultural development that included the creation of the spectacular and entirely new genre of tragedy. Whether or not this development was facilitated by

---

[22] *PV* 186-7, 224-5, 304-6, etc.

[23] Droysen (1932) 2.210.

monetisation, tragedy develops in - and reflects - a world that had recently been rapidly and pervasively monetised by the arrival of coinage. This is an important and generally unrecognised fact about Athenian tragedy.

The unprecedented[24] *isolation* of the individual of Athenian tragedy, in conflict with those closest to him (Agamemnon, Orestes, Oedipus, Kreon, Eteokles, and Zeus among many others), owes something, I believe, to the isolating potential of the new all-pervasive phenomenon of money. In the Theban tragedies of Sophocles, for instance, Oedipus and Kreon are each preoccupied by money, described as *turannos*,[25] and alienated from their closest kin, a combination found also in the *turannoi* described in historiography and philosophy: the *turannos* Polycrates murdered his brothers, and eventually fell through trying to amass enough money to rule the whole of Greece.[26] In the *Oresteia* and Theban trilogy, within the family one individual struggles with another for its *Eigenthum*, which provides both content and form: the universal motivation it provides in the real world (as money) holds together the trilogic narrative. Similarly, in the *Ring* several of the leading individuals are isolated, each in conflict with his closest kin (Wotan with Fricka and Brünnhilde, Alberich with Mime, Fafner with Fasolt, Hagen with Gunther), and all these male characters are drawn into conflict for the ring, which gives coherence to the *Ring*. The isolating effect of money is expressed not only in the scenes of conflict over the ring but also, exquisitely, in Wotan's rejection of the pleas of the other gods, his kin, to give the ring to the giants (in return for Freia), until instructed to do so by Erda.

Props

In the *Ring*, in contrast to Aeschylus, the curse is embodied in a single object: money takes the form of a talismanic artefact, which in (premonetary) myth has magical power but seems to an audience in a monetised society to be also a *symbol* (of money). The same revealing combination of opposites - of money with premonetary (talismanic or

[24] In Homer even the otherwise isolated Odysseus has the firm support of Athena and of his family.

[25] Soph. *OT* 124-5, 380-90, 541-4, 873-4, etc.; *Ant*. 293 -301, 322, 326, 1036-9, 1056, 1062-3, etc.

[26] Herodotus 3.39, 122-5.

magical) object - occurs in the ring that bestowed invisibility and thereby sovereign power on Gyges.[27] Similarly, the *turannos* Polycrates threw his seal-ring - as an emblem of his monetised prosperity - into the sea to avoid the resentment of the gods.[28] The ring in Wagner, finally thrown into the Rhine, is an emblem of the *universal* power of money, while the *invisibility* of monetary power is embodied in another magical object (the *tarnhelm*), and its *substantiality* in the treasure of gold. The invisible ubiquity of monetary power is dramatically embodied in Alberich, made invisible by the *tarnhelm* ('I am everywhere'), using the ring to force the Nibelungs to produce wealth 'for him alone'. But gold partially reverts to being mere object when it covers Freia's body as ransom for her, rather as in Aeschylus' lost *Phrygians* it is weighed against Hektor's body as ransom for it.

Some other objects visible in the Ring also embody power. Donner's hammer, embodying the power of nature, yields to Wotan's contract-guarding spear, which also overcomes the sword Nothung (emblem of heroism and sexuality) wielded by Siegmund, but is eventually overcome by it wielded by Siegfried. Props in the Ring are limited in number but significant, as in Greek tragedy, in which they are sometimes magical and often *ambivalent*.[29] 'The gifts of enemies are no gifts', says Ajax before killing himself with the sword given him by Hector.[30] Siegmund proposes to kill Sieglinde and himself with 'this sword, which a deceiver gave to a true man, which betrays me to my enemy'. No less ambivalent is the ring, promising to its possessor unlimited power and wealth but also unhappiness and death, created through the renunciation of love but becoming the embodiment of the love between Siegfried and Brünnhilde.

As an example of an ambivalent stage property in the *Oresteia* consider the textile 'bought with silver' (949) on which Agamemnon walks into the house (to his death). Agamemnon hesitates to damage what he calls the wealth of the house, but Klytaimestra responds that the sea is inexhaustible in 'nourishing a wholly renewable gush, equal to silver, of much purple dye' (from a shellfish), and that 'the house does

---

[27] Plato *Republic* 359-60, 612b (ring and helmet of invisibility). On Wagner's devotion to Plato see von Westernhagen (1966) 50-1.

[28] It is narrated by Herodotus (3.41), of whose work Wagner possessed a copy at Dresden: von Westerhagen (1966) 94 .

[29] E.g. the magically destructive garments as gifts in Sophokles' *Trachiniai* and Euripides' *Medea*, the libations in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers.*

[30] Sophocles *Ajax* 665.

not know to be poor'. The natural source of this artefact is, as of the ring, a vast mass of water. But the natural inexhaustibility of sea and dye here matters only if there is inexhaustible silver to buy it, and this implies the *unlimitedness* which the Greeks saw as a dangerous characteristic of money, and which repeatedly marks the power and wealth bestowed by the ring.[31] The textile is closely associated[32] with the textile that Klytaimestra uses both to trap Agamemnon and as a shroud, describing it as 'a covering without limit (*apeiron*) . . bad wealth of cloth' (1382-3). The ambivalent textile is associated with the shocking unlimitedness of the money by which it is bought - one instance among many of Athenian tragedy using (premonetary) myth to represent the disruptive effect of money. At the end of *Libation-Bearers* Orestes addresses this same shroud as a physical link with the father he never met (as does Siegried addressing Nothung), while he descends into frenzy.

Nature and love against money and power?

We return to the relation of content to unitary form. According to Wagner the Germanic sagas were originally all variations of a definite type of event, a type that derived from one simple religious notion, taken from the beholding of nature. But subsequently Christianity 'annulled the religious faith, the fundamental view (*Grundanschaung*) of nature's essence' (162), with the result that the unity of the myth dispersed itself 'into a thousandfold plurality; the kernel of action into a vast quantity of actions'. Our natural inference that Wagner envisaged the unitarian form of the Ring as restoring the primaeval unity of Germanic Mythos is confirmed by the fact that it is from the narrative of Siegried that he derives his conception of the religious beholding of *nature* as underlying Germanic myth.

> In one saga - that of Siegfried - we may now look with some clarity into its original kernel, which teaches us no little about the essence of myth in general (161).

Set against the *single* abstract (invisible) power of money is the *single* notion that Wagner found at the root of authentic Germanic myth, *nature* embodied in the heroic individual (Siegfried).

---

[31] Wellgunde in *Rheingold* 1 ('Masslose Macht'), Wotan in *Rheingold* 2 ('Macht und Schätze . . ohne Mass'), Alberich in *Rheingold* 4 ('Macht ohne Mass'), Wotan in *Die Wälkurie* 2 ('masslose Macht').

[32] Taplin (1978) 79-82.

Wagner invented the forging of the ring from gold stolen from the Rhine, and so as transgressive against nature. But its creation also transgressed against love. Wagner also invented Alberich's renunciation - of the power and delight of heterosexual love - that is a precondition for the forging of the ring. This then resonates in Fafner's - and Wotan's - preference for the ring over Freia, and in the paradoxical transformation of the ring into an embodiment of love. Siegfried states that for love he would gladly forgo the world obtained by the ring.

This is not the place to enter the debate on the meaning of the ending of the *Ring* (in its various versions). Suffice it to say that it contains, not least in the music, an element of redemption - whether in the return of the ring to nature (the Rhine) or in the love of Brünnhilde for Siegfried - that has seemed at odds with Greek tragedy. For instance,

> in the *Ring* in general we find something profoundly alien to the spirit of an ancient tragedy . . . Wagner, believing in the essential goodness of human feelings, is not a true tragedian.'[33]

Greek tragedy does not on the whole set nature or love against money in tragedy.[34] But *Oresteia*, Theban trilogy, *Prometheia*,[35] and *Ring* each combines older narratives to conclude with a permanent end (in polis or cosmos) to the cycle of conflict driven by individual self-interest. The essential goodness of human feelings was the issue neither for Wagner nor for Aeschylus. What mattered for them both was (among much else) the hope inherent in the spectacular musical dramatisation of communal myth by which monetised individualism is permanently transcended.

---

[33] Lloyd-Jones (1982) 140; note also George Steiner's ill-informed antithesis between Greek tragedy and the optimism of *Götterdämmerung*: (1961) 127.

[34] Although the omnipotence of money is equated with *erōs* at e.g. Euripides *fr.* 324 and *fr. adesp.* 129. And those *Naturwesen* the satyrs are not infrequently ignorant or contemptuous of money in the remains of satyric drama.

[35] Not only in Droysen's reconstructions. The original version of *Septem* (third play in the trilogy) ended with the saving of the polis (793-6, 820) and by prefiguring the polis hero-cult of the fratricides (1002-4 were the final lines: cf. Pausanias 9.18.3). In general the Aeschylean transition from the age of heroes to the present is not unlike the 'Feurbachian' transition some have detected in the *Ring* from gods to humanity.

Conclusion

The 'closeness and affinity' of Wagner with Aeschylus[36] is paradoxical, given the vast gap in time and their many obvious differences. It derives, I suggest, from a specific similarity between their *historical* position. Fruitful influence across centuries and between different kinds of society is especially favoured by there being a specific similarity between the influencing and influenced works in respect of the historical conditions governing their main preoccupations. It is not just that Wagner admired Aeschylus and so was - as has often been noted - influenced by him in various details. Despite the enormous and unbridgeable differences between fifth-century Athens and mid-nineteenth century Germany, historical developments led both men to dramatise - each in his different way - the transcendence, by premonetary myth, of the universal power of monetised wealth that unifies both the content and the form of the myth.

Aeschylean tragedy was created in a society that on the one hand still accorded a central place to myth but on the other hand had been recently monetised. The Ring was created in a society that had long been monetised, but in which the power of money, its tendency as capital to dissolve all other relations, was advancing in the way memorably described in the Communist Manifesto the year after Wagner, soon to be revolutionary in Dresden, first read the *Oresteia*:

> All fixed, rusted relations with their following of ancient and venerable ideas and opinions are dissolved, all new-formed ones age before they can ossify. Everything established and standing evaporates, everything holy is profaned . . .

In a society becoming ever more pervaded by money, be it Athens or Dresden, the power of premonetary myth provides an effective way of relativizing the power of money.

What the form and content of the Aeschylean trilogy owed to the recent advent of a single omnipotent object of universal desire contributed to the possibility of its profound and fruitful influence on the mythical dramatisation of the power of money in the nineteenth century. But it was of course not by Aeschylus that Wagner was impelled to dramatize the omnipotence of money. In his letters and autobiography he sometimes alternates between absorption in the creative power of myth and disgust at having to be preoccupied with money. 'It is not my business to 'earn money'', he wrote to Liszt, 'but it is

---

[36] Nietzsche in his *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* (1976) 22.

the business of my admirers to give me as much money as I want, to do my work in a cheerful mood' (3/10/1855). In 1881 he wrote

> Clever though be the many thoughts expressed by mouth or pen about the invention of money and its enormous value as a civiliser, against such praise of it we should consider the curse to which it has always exposed in saga and poetry. If *gold* here appears as the demon strangling the innocence of humanity, our greatest poet shews at last the invention of paper money as devil's' mischief. The doom-laden ring of the Nibelungs might as a stock-exchange portfolio (*Börsenportefeuille*) bring to completion the gruesome picture of the ghostly master of the world.[37]

We cannot end without acknowledging the darker side of this vision. Just as the tragic Kreon projected the corrupting all-pervasiveness of money onto barbarian orientals, so Wagner associated it with the Jew, who 'rules, and will rule, so long as money remains the power before which all our doing and our activity lose their vigour'.[38]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Borchmeyer, D. (1991) *Richard Wagner. Theory and Theatre.* Oxford.(German original 1982).

Cooke, D. (1979) *I Saw the World End.* Oxford.

Drews, A. (1931) *Der Ideengehalt von Richard Wagners dramatischen Dichtungen.* Leipzig.

Droysen, J.G. (1932,) *Des Aischylos Werke. Uebersetzt von J.G. Droysen.* Berlin.

Ewans, M. (1982) *Wagner and Aeschylus. The Ring and the Oresteia.* London.

Foster, D.H. (2010) *Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks*. Cambridge.

Goldhill, S. (2008) 'Wagner's Greeks: the Politics of Hellenism', in Revermann M. and Wilson, P., *Performance, Iconography, Reception,*, 453-80. Oxford.

Lloyd-Jones, H. (1982) *Blood for the Ghosts*. London.

Owen Lee, M. (2003) *Athena Sings. Wagner and the Greeks*. Toronto.

Petsch, R. (1907) 'Der Ring der Nibelungen in seinen Beziehungen zur griechishen Tragödie und zur zeitgenössischen Philosophie', in *Richard Wagner Jahrbuch* 2.284-330.

Schadewaldt, W. (1970) *Hellas und Hesperien* 2.341-405.

Shaw, B. (1923) *The Perfect Wagnerite*. 4th ed. London.

Steiner, G. (1961) *The Death of Tragedy.* London.

Taplin, O. (1978) *Greek Tragedy in Action.* London.

Vetter, W. (1953) 'Richard Wagner und die Griechen', in *Die Musikforschung* 6.111-26.

Von Westernhagen, C. (1966) *Richard Wagner's Dresdener Bibliothek 1842-1839*. Wiesbaden.

Wilson, P.C. (1919) *Wagner's Dramas and Greek Tragedy*. New York.

[37] *Know Thyself* 269.

[38] Sophocles *Antigone* 1037-9; Wagner, *Judaism in Music* 81.