Religious Experience in the Work of Richard Wagner

Marcel Hébert

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Foreword by Stephen Schloesser
Religious Experience in the Work of

Richard Wagner
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FOREFOREWORD

Stephen Schloesser


These recent volumes have reminded readers of at least one aspect of the “Roman Catholic Modernists” that had been largely (if not entirely) forgotten: namely, these were intellectuals who were

1. Marcel Hébert’s “Three Moments in the Thought of Wagner” [Trois moments de la pensée de Wagner] first appeared in 1893 serialized in three issues of the Annales de Philosophie chrétienne (June–July, August–September, and October). The date seems particularly important regarding any book on Wagner published in France in this epoch. Alfred Dreyfus was arrested on October 15, 1894; he was court-martialed in January 1895. Although Hébert’s “Three Moments” preceded these events by one year, their publication as a unified whole in 1894 appeared in what was about to become (due largely to virulent anti-Semitism in certain Catholic quarters) the most bitter period in French church-state relations since the French Revolution. It would culminate in the anticlerical legislation of 1901–5, definitively expressed in the Act of Separation of Church and State.

fully engaged with the cultures of their times even as they attempted to preserve religious paradoxes. For more than a century now, these figures have been read through the lenses of caricatures produced after Pius X’s condemnations of 1907: Lamentabili sane exitu (July 3) and Pascendi dominici gregis (September 8). These stick figures emerged mostly from their opponents’ texts, not these scholars’ own works (which, in any event, have not been easily accessible to Anglophone readers). According to this calcified received narrative, “Modernists” had no understanding of or appreciation for what is lasting or continuous in culture in general, let alone Catholicism. Moreover, they were seen as having no interest in preserving any sense of transcendence, being focused exclusively on what is immanent, transient, historical, and culturally conditioned. In brief: they were positivist naïfs.

By Those Who Knew Them and The Reception of Pragmatism in France demonstrated just how gross a mischaracterization this was. Each of these figures was, in fact, preoccupied with the turn-of-the-century conundrum: how to maintain in paradoxical tension both tradition and innovation, continuity and discontinuity, transcendence and immanence, eternity and ephemerality. The Modernist as Philosopher revealed this same double-consciousness in the particularly complex figure of Hébert. Essays in that collection trace Hébert’s discovery and embrace of the insights of Immanuel Kant, perceived at that time as the binary opposite of Catholic neo-Scholasticism. Whereas the magisterium focused on Kant’s seeming severance of the relationship between how things appear to us and what they might be “in themselves,” Hébert deployed this same distinction between perceptible phenomena and imperceptible noumena for his defense of Christianity in modernity. In his writings, a modern religion must preserve the unchanging Ideal even as it leaves behind outdated formulations that have been historically conditioned.

The Modernist as Philosopher also shows Hébert’s immersion in the broad cultures of his day as especially evident in two areas: first, his profound internalization of the fin-de-siècle Symbolist movement, and second, his acquaintance with a truly remarkable range of
thinkers, including (among others) the French Jean-Jacques Rousseau, François-René de Chateaubriand, Ernest Renan, Henri Bergson, Émile Durkheim, and Marcellin Berthelot; the Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck; the Germans Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer; and the Americans Charles Peirce and William James. In vivid contrast to the cramped intellectual corner mapped out by the ecclesiastical documents condemning the Modernists circa 1907—namely, an absolute binary opposition between neo-medievalism and modernity—Hébert’s writings bring us back to modernity’s blooming, buzzing confusion, back to the vast canvas of intellectual life in the 1890s and 1900s. We remember that the Modernists collaborated with a great panoply of players trying to come to grips with paradigm shifts: political and industrial revolution, democracy and socialism, historicism and scientism. Although his critics seem not to have understood this, Hébert used his fundamental Kantian distinction between surface and depth, provisional and lasting, in order to preserve tradition and doctrine, not destroy it, for the educated of his time. Or, quoting the translators’ introduction: Hébert sought to defend religion against “unintelligent materialism” and “a sterile skepticism.”

One of several values of this new translation of Hébert’s Religious Experience in the Work of Wagner is that these same revelations of both Symbolism and a wide range of characters are broadened even further. Who would have imagined that Hébert had written a study of

3. The terms of the question were not so different from early-twentieth-century Louvain Thomism as it might seem at first glance. Maurice de Wulf (1867–1947), responding to Kantian challenges, set out his nineteenth-century “medieval scholasticism” as a middle way between two extremes of naive realism (phenomena) and idealism (noumena). In terms reminiscent of Charles Baudelaire’s two elements of modern beauty, de Wulf argued that knowledge was the product of two factors: the known external object and the knowing mind. De Wulf’s scholasticism “postulated a complicated process of mental abstraction that answered both concerns: against idealism, the object’s form genuinely becomes a part of the knowing mind by informing it; against naive realism, ‘the knower invests the thing known with something of himself’ without disfiguring it. In an epoch marked by positivism’s despair of going beyond external observation, de Wulf’s fundamental point offered great appeal: ‘We directly attain to reality and being’”; Stephen Schloesser, Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919–1933 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 34–35.
Richard Wagner’s operatic works and thoughts on the nature of religion? It seems unimaginable—and yet, as in any well-told tale, it unfolds with hindsight as something obvious and even necessary, since Wagner, especially in France, was that strange crossroad at which music, visual arts, literature, metaphysics, myth, religion, and “the social question” intersected—“strange” because one would rather expect that Wagner would have been reviled along with everything else German after the debacle of the Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune, 1870–71. This unity of the arts (actually, of all Reality) was the Symbolist endgame, and Wagner’s vision of the “Total Art Work” [Gesamtkunstwerk] was its preeminent expression. It is not so surprising, then, at least in retrospect, that Hébert should have been as passionately concerned about Wagner and Symbolism as he was about Kant and, a decade later, about James and Pragmatism.

Before viewing Hébert’s study of Wagner in context, it might be useful to revisit the broad outlines of the Symbolist movement. Recall that Symbolism arose in opposition to Realism and Naturalism. The painter Gustave Courbet put this most succinctly in his 1861 Realist Manifesto, provocatively published on Christmas Day:

> Above all, the art of painting can only consist of the representation of objects which are visible and tangible for the artist. . . .

> I maintain, in addition, that painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist of the representation of real and existing things. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is abstract, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting. 4

Note Courbet’s equivalences: what is real and existing is what is physical and visible. Conversely, what is abstract and not visible is, by extension, nonexistent.

After a long twentieth century filled with “-isms,” we can easily read Courbet as just one more aesthetic theory enjoying its fifteen

minutes of fame. In its day, however, it was a fiercely aggressive ideology. Against this one-dimensional reductionism of reality to what is perceptible and passing, the writer Charles Baudelaire insisted on preserving some element of “the eternal.” Two years after Courbet’s manifesto, Baudelaire provided one of his own in an essay entitled “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863). Here Baudelaire famously defined beauty as being “always and inevitably of a double composition ... made up of an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity it is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions.” Baudelaire explained: “By ‘modernity,’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.... This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with. By neglecting it, you cannot fail to tumble into the abyss of an abstract and indeterminate beauty.”

Baudelaire’s writings in the 1860s—including his “Richard Wagner and Tannhäuser in Paris” (1861)—unwittingly serve as the foundation for the Symbolist movement that would arise two decades after his untimely death in 1867. From the Symbolist perspective, the reductive intellectual and cultural reactions against early-nineteenth-century Romanticism—that is, Positivism, Realism and, after Darwin’s Origin of Species (1859), Naturalism—evacuated human existence of any mystery, fantasy, imagination, or dream world. In opposition to positivistic exclusive privileging of the visible, Symbolists gave pride of place to the invisible. The external world we perceive is actually a “forest of symbols,” a world of “correspondences” (compare Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondences” in the Flowers of Evil [1857]). Perceptible transitory objects correspond to (and hence can only suggest) imperceptible eternal elements.

Stéphane Mallarmé put the point even more radically: not only

can true reality not be seen; it cannot even be named—for to name something is already to have some mastery over it; it is to have com-
prehended the mystery. Hence, for Mallarmé reality can never be “copied” as the realists supposed; it can only be pointed to. He pro-
vided a typically elusive formula: “The ideal is to suggest [suggérer] the object. It is the perfect use of this mystery which constitutes the sym-
bol. An object must be gradually evoked in order to show a state of soul.”6 Beginning with “Richard Wagner, Revery of a French Poet” (August 1885), Mallarmé’s thought would play a key role in the brief but influential Revue wagnérienne (1885–88).7 Peter Nicholls writes:

The Revue was a tireless promoter of Wagner’s ideas, providing translations of key texts, like the 1870 essay on Beethoven, and placing the composer at the centre of the French literary avant-garde. The Revue was also successful in recasting Wagnerian themes in Symbolist format—[Teodor de Wyzewa, one of the founders], says one critic, was always keen “to cut Wagner to fit Mallarmé’s suits”—and at a time when, for political reasons, the composer’s work could be heard in concert but not on the French stage, the appropriation of his music for literary purposes could proceed largely unhindered.8

Mallarmé’s sophisticated nuance made his theory less accessible than Jean Moréas’s homey sartorial adaptation of Baudelaire’s fashionable element. One year after the foundation of the Revue wagnérienne, Moréas published his literary manifesto “Symbolism” [Le symbolisme] in Le Figaro (September 18, 1886). Moréas defined the task of symbolist poetry: “to clothe the Ideal in sensible form [à vêtir l’Idée d’une forme sensible].” The use of visible symbols was quasi-sacramental, an inten-
tional pointing beyond themselves so as to represent the Ideal: “Thus, in this art … none of the concrete phenomena are manifestations of

themselves: these are rather the sense-perceptible appearances whose destiny is to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial Ideals.”

The next month, Moréas cofounded the literary review Le Symboliste. 9

Although the concept was intentionally vague (since the purpose of Symbolist art was to render the Ideal unattainable), the method, at least in practice, was simple. These invisible realities could be evoked or “suggested” (Mallarmé) by taking “literary” texts—hence the appellation “littéraire”—and “commenting on” or “paraphrasing” them visually or musically. These texts could be taken from any kind of nonrealistic—or, to be more precise, anti-realistic—sources such as the Bible, classical antiquity, ancient mythologies, the “Orient,” or the esoteric. Anything would do so long as it facilitated the evocation or suggestion of the anti-material, the mystical, the imaginative, the hallucinatory, the dream state. Gustave Moreau’s The Apparition (1876) represents a biblical text; Edward Burne-Jones’s The Beguiling of Merlin (1872–77) illustrates Arthurian legends; Moreau’s Oedipus and the Sphinx (1864) and Franz von Stuck’s The Sphinx (1895) evoke Greek antiquity, mythology, and tragedy.

However, the ultimate expression of unity of literary texts, music, and visual representation was Wagnerian opera, the “Total Art Work” [Gesamtkunstwerk]. The Ring tetralogy—Rheingold (1869), Valkyrie (1870), Siegfried (1876), and Twilight of the Gods (1876)—an appropriately heroic undertaking whose composition spanned about twenty-six years (1848–74), resurrects Norse mythology; Parsifal (1882), which premiered three years prior to the founding of La Revue wagnérienne, draws on epic medieval Grail poems by Wolfram von Eschenbach and Chré-

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9. Jean Moréas, “Le Symbolisme,” Figaro (September 18, 1886); reprinted in Les premières armes du symbolisme: Documents, edited by Léon Vanier, 31–39, at 33, 34 (Paris: Vanier, 1889). It is worth noting that four decades earlier an art critic reporting on the Salon of 1842 had written that a mystical work expressed “a symbol and not a material action; it is the interpretation of an idea and not the reproduction of fact”; see Schloesser, Jazz Age Catholicism, 28. For Mallarmé and Moréas, see ibid., 215; for origins in Charles Baudelaire, see ibid., 166–67 and 252; for the Decadent application in Joris-Karl Huysmans, see ibid., 40–42. For Le Symboliste, see Michael Wroblewski, “Four Symbolist Periodicals: Toward the Definition of an Esthetic” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1977); Pamela A. Genova, Symbolist Journals: A Culture of Correspondence (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2002).
tien de Troyes. Maeterlinck’s play *Pelléas and Mélisande* (1893), appearing one year prior to Hébert’s *Wagner*, is set in an unidentified ancient epoch replete with king, castle, sea, and mysterious maiden emerging from deep within the forest. Claude Debussy’s operatic adaptation of Maeterlinck premiered about a decade later (1902) and became the new rallying point for French Symbolism.¹⁰

As Hébert walks his reader thematically through Wagner’s works, a surprising evolution in thought unfolds—again, surprising at first encounter but seemingly necessary in hindsight. It is an evolution in the idea of what constitutes the essential in human life. The capacity to overcome egoism and greed by means of freedom and ultimate self-renunciation governs the *Tetralogy* (1876). Earthly sexual love (and, again, ultimate self-renunciation) marks the myth of *Tristan and Isolde* (premiered 1865). But with *Parsifal* (1882), the drama has shifted to another plane entirely: the myth plays out on a genuinely metaphysical plane in sharp contrast to the (paradoxically) purely naturalist plane of the earthly Jesus. In *Parsifal*, love sheds its egoism and transcends itself as compassionate fellow-feeling. In this quintessential Symbolist drama, the eternal and transcendent play their roles behind ephemeral and temporal veils, allowing Hébert to pass seamlessly to his ultimate and recurrent endgame: conclusions about the nature of religion, doctrine, change, perception, and other leitmotifs already seen in *The Modernist as Philosopher*. Speaking for myself, however, Hébert’s reflections here seem both more appealing and more convincing, perhaps because they emerge organically from the long

journey walked with him through the unified body of Wagner’s work. There is also something more satisfying and conclusive here in the decade before the Modernist condemnations. New syntheses seem more possible in 1894–95 than they would after the fateful summer of 1903—that is, after the death of Leo XIII and the succession of Pius X.

In sum, Wagner serves as Hébert’s bridge between the narrow philosophical and theological world galvanized (positively or negatively) by Kantian concerns and Symbolism’s broader intellectual, literary, artistic, and musical world. Via Bayreuth, Hébert’s persistent problematic—how to synthesize the noumenal and phenomenal, Ideal and sensible, conceptual and sentimental, necessary and transient—clothes itself in the attire of a flâneur, escapes the narrow confines of the seminary walls, and heads off to stroll Paris’s grand boulevards. Rhetoric that can seem overly technical in The Modernist as Philosopher here finds its voice against the wider horizon of the operatic stage. The problem of the transcendent and the transient is no longer merely a stubborn concern of the Holy Office. It is, rather, the anxious problem of modernity itself, summed up in the question posed by Baudelaire’s painter of modern life: “how to represent the eternal and the immutable in the midst of all the chaos?”

The introduction to this volume provides an excellent overview of a complex situation. As Hébert’s Wagner is located, Symbolism’s appeal is laid out: “religion” itself was undergoing a seismic shift—away from the institutional and doctrinal (conceptual), toward the experiential, imaginative, intuitive, and emotional. The linkage drawn between Schopenhauer’s phenomenal-noumenal dyad, Wagner’s day-night imagery, and Hébert’s own Kantian contrasts in theological and ecclesiastical concerns is startling. Among the most memorable of Hébert’s valuable distinctions are those between the universal idea and transitory vehicle (Moréas’s fashionable clothing); the “superiority of image over abstract idea in its power of attraction” and the imperative not to isolate the image “from feeling”; and opposition between the

bare cold abstract “concept” and the “ideal element inseparable from the sensible”—a seeming allusion to Baudelaire’s “abyss of an abstract and indeterminate beauty.”

The quasi-sacramental unities of the sensible ideal and emotional concept elicit the question of Hébert’s decision to title his work _Le sentiment religieux_: “Religious Sentiment.” The choice of _sentiment_—which translates variously as “sentiment,” “experience,” or “feeling” according to context—signifies a radical departure from the title under which he had published this work in serial form just two years earlier: “Three Moments in the Thought [pensée] of Richard Wagner.” “Sentiment” and “thought” have meanings that are so opposed to one another that they might be considered as contraries. The same contrast is displayed in Hébert’s essay “Sentimental Evolution [Évolution sentimentale] of Richard Wagner” (1896), published one year after his book. Again, these are not evolving moments of “thought” in Wagner; they are evolving moments of sentiment, feeling, or experience.

Why this significant change, posing such a challenge for an English translator? The word’s ambiguity can be found in the title of one of the most significant nineteenth-century French novels, Gustave Flaubert’s _L’Éducation sentimentale_ (1869), traditionally translated as _Sentimental Education_. In his authoritative translation of Flaubert’s 1864 letter explaining the novel’s purpose, Francis Steegmuller used “feelings”: “Here I am, harnessed now and for the past month to a novel about modern life, which will be laid in Paris. I want to write the moral history of the men of my generation—or, more accurately, the history of their feelings. It’s a book about love, about passion; but passion such as can exist nowadays—that is to say, inactive.”

At the other end of the word’s spectrum is Henri Bremond’s monumental multivolume *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* (1916–33). Astonishingly enough, its first complete English translation back in the 1920s–30s used the word “thought” to translate *sentiment*: *The Literary History of Religious Thought in France*.\(^\text{16}\) The translator does not seem to have grasped that Bremond’s central problematic was writing a history of mysticism—that is, mystical experience (and not “thought”) as a religious phenomenon beginning in seventeenth-century modernity.\(^\text{17}\) In short, the word *sentiment* is admittedly a problem for the Anglophone translator.

How does the question of *sentiment* as feeling (or experience) figure in Hébert’s overall project and argument? In its simplest terms, the religious sentiment [*le sentiment religieux*] for Hébert is love as it evolves: romantic love as total devotion; love as *caritas* and compassion; and, seemingly, love as quasi-socialist, keeping in mind Hébert’s eventual turn toward socialism after the condemnations of 1907. Hébert’s project, moreover, seems to be an attempt to construct a “universal” and even “natural” religion—and for him this entails, above all, a morality. The genius of love in Hébert’s Wagner is that it is both a feeling [*sentiment*] and the kind of moral action elicited by emotional attraction (desire). Hébert writes, “The meaning of the word [love] remains undefined ... an impassioned, egoistic element; a superior disinterested element, the gift of self, of self-sacrifice ... a sacred character.” [29] This seems to be even more true for Abbé Mugnier: note his penultimate paragraph in which the “Ladies,” having

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experienced Bayreuth, witnessed the “mystical abyss,” and returned to the everyday, are told to go home and fulfill the domestic drudgeries that redeem family and society through “sacrifice and charity.” [113] The homiletic application of Brünnhilde’s self-immolating passion to the tasks of housecleaning and dishwashing is rhetorically well-crafted, but one wonders how Mugnier’s audience of “Ladies” actually felt about it.

Talar and Emery again emphasize in this volume (as they first did in The Modernist as Philosopher) that religious symbols serve a “regulatory” function for Hébert. Love as compassion “must affect us through suffering and pity, feelings common to all human beings.” [192] Moreover, it is a complex “sentiment,” neither merely emotional nor merely moral, that must evolve. Perhaps it is among the most accurate representations of the Ideal: “we admire pure love in Brünnhilde, more ideal still in Parsifal. . . . Charity is the core, the very essence of Religion.” [15–16] The extent of love’s evolution in the “socialist” (or at least societal) direction strikes the reader abruptly as Hébert leaps unself-consciously from Parsifal to St. Vincent de Paul! [88] As Hébert later writes (again foreshadowing his 1908 move to socialism), “the social question will never find a solution if it is isolated from the moral question.” [56]

In the end, Hébert’s “religious sentiment”—experienced feeling—cannot be isolated from either the imagination (cognition) or the moral (volition). Taken together, these elements theoretically separated into mind and will—“pure” and “practical” reason—will serve in a “regulatory” moral capacity. I wonder whether the specter haunting Hébert is not so much Schopenhauer and Wagner as Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was similarly preoccupied by the relationship between knowledge and action. Jacqueline Mariña summarizes Schleiermacher’s argument in On Freedom (1790–92):

how something is represented influences whether and how it is desired. . . . [Schleiermacher] notes that “even if in some particular case the preponderance of one impulse over others is based in such accidental determinations of the faculty of desire as having been produced through its
preceding activities, these in turn have their first ground in the faculty of representation.” Here how one understands the world is key to desire, the spring of action. Hence if I tell myself that a coworker is not doing his or her fair share of the work, I will have a different attitude to that person, and hence behave in different ways to him or her, than if I thought he or she was doing more than required.18

Our representations of the world, derived from experience, are images shot through with feeling. Those emotionally charged images attract us to pursue certain objects and steer us away from others. Conceptual representation and volitional desire are inextricably entangled in sentiment—felt experience—Hébert’s source of both religious and moral life.

Marcel Hébert (1851–1916) was raised in a family environment of exemplary piety conducive to a religious vocation. However, his fragile health, aggravated by the rigors of a seminary regime, for a time seemed to preclude its realization. Indeed, a combination of Hébert’s independent study of philosophy, which shortened his initial formation at seminary, and accommodation made during his years of theology made ordination to the priesthood in June of 1876 possible. He left seminary a convinced Thomist, but Hébert’s philosophical position altered appreciably after being encouraged to study modern philosophy, especially the work of Immanuel Kant, over the next several years. Kant’s critical philosophy provided the foundations for the priest’s symbolic reading of dogma, elaborated during his time at the École Fénelon in Paris, whose director he became in 1895. This radical turn in his thinking is already discernible in his writings in the 1880s and early 1890s, but comes insistently to the fore in subsequent work.¹

Marcel Hébert’s philosophical interests centered on epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of religion, and he had an equally strong interest in religious reform, all of which led him to hope for a necessary renewal of Catholicism. Why then did he write a work on Richard Wagner? Although he read widely in both primary and secondary sources on Wagner and had attended performances of Wagner’s operas,² it was not Hébert’s intention to offer in Le sentiment

² Hébert traveled to Bayreuth in 1892 and saw the Ring Cycle performed in Munich the following year.
religieux dans l’œuvre de Richard Wagner another piece of operatic criticism. Rather, Wagner’s works, both prose and musical, offered an occasion, indeed a vehicle, for the priest to advance some of his own views on religion. Art, philosophy, and religion intermingle in the book, but oriented toward a vision of a renewed Christianity already evident in Hébert’s previous publications.

Hébert may well have sensed in Wagner something of a kindred spirit—at least in the sense of a shared commitment to go beyond accepted conventions, to create new forms, all in service of human ideals. The artist’s use of myth, allegory, and symbol conform to Hébert’s program for a revisionist interpretation of Christianity that would preserve a role for its dogmas and liturgy while respecting minds formed by modernity. To those more familiar with the technical subtleties of Blondelian philosophy or the exacting exegesis of an Alfred Loisy, Hébert’s dialogic exchange between Plato and Darwin or his idealized conversation with an aged Capuchin priest at Assisi—or in the present case, an engagement with Wagner’s operatic works and reflections upon his art—may come as something of a surprise. It may be particularly unexpected for those who think they know Modernists from reading the works of their detractors, who characterized figures such as Hébert and Loisy as intellectualist and


4. Hébert contributed to the reformist tendencies of what would eventually be labeled—and stigmatized—as Modernism. Initiatives in critical historical method and in critical philosophy mounted pressure for revision in theology and the relations between the Catholic Church and society. These developments are explored in the essays contained in Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context, edited by Darrell Jodock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).


one-dimensional, refusing to engage with cultural tradition and with notions of transcendence.

Marcel Hébert is, after all, a rather marginal Modernist, thus overshadowed by figures who had greater prominence in efforts toward renewal. The literary form in which he advanced his quite radical ideas may very well have allowed them to escape censure for a time. If Hébert used a different sort of vehicle for his thought and took a road less traveled, his reformist agenda nonetheless falls within the Modernist trajectory. Much of his significance for Modernism lies in his adapting a symbolist reading of dogma akin to Loisy’s, but primarily from the perspective of critical philosophy rather than critical exegesis. Like Loisy and many other Modernists, Hébert held an evolutionary perspective on Christianity, one that he did not hesitate to apply to the very fundamentals of Christianity, including its notion of God, and eventually Christianity itself. In this he anticipated the intellectual trajectory of some of the more radical of his fellow Modernists—Albert Houtin, for example, who considered Hébert an “ideal Modernist.” Marcel Hébert remains significant for understanding Modernism, less perhaps for his direct influence on his contemporaries than by his indirect impact. As his ideas grew more radical and their expression more open, Rome took note. Authorities discovered in them a dynamic of thought that led not to a renewed Catholicism, but to atheism—as the Vatican condemnation of Modernism expressed openly.

7. See, for example, Hébert’s “The Last Idol: Study of the ‘Divine Personality’” and “Anonymous or Polyonymous: Second Study on the ‘Divine Personality,’” Modernist as Philosopher, 70–84 and 85–105, respectively.
9. Houtin, Ma vie laïque 1912–1926 (Paris: Rieder, 1928), 260. It is likely that Hébert’s unflinching commitment to follow his ideas through to the end, reflected in the studies referenced in note 7 above, for example, gained Houtin’s admiration. He also respected Hébert’s willingness to face the ecclesiastical consequences of his positions and his refusal to temporize in their statement. This supposition gains support from a comparison with Houtin’s view of Loisy as one who dissembled the radical nature of his conclusions under an outwardly religious persona.
10. The radical turn Hébert’s thinking had taken became apparent to the hierarchy in
Why Wagner?

Wagner lived in a time marked by political and industrial revolution and religious, scientific, and artistic experimentation; his works tapped into this intellectual and social turmoil, serving as a flashpoint for topics far removed from music. In France, for example, his reputation as an artist, thinker, and philosopher flourished even during the twenty years (1871–91) when his operas were essentially banned from the official French stage because of the popular riots they incensed (a result of a satirical anti-French text he published in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war). Indeed, he was better known in France for the strong reactions provoked by his political and aesthetic positions than for his music. He first gained popularity among socialists for his role in the Dresden Uprising of 1849, be-

1901. Given the choice of either retracting his positions or resigning his directorship, Hébert chose the latter and, after a liminal period, quietly left the church in 1903. He lived for a time in Brussels, where he offered courses (subsequently published) at the university. He eventually returned to Paris, where he died in 1916, unreconciled with the church.

Perception of an atheistic strain in Modernism emerges in the encyclical condemning it. Summing up its doctrinal section, the encyclical states, “These reasons suffice to show super-abundantly by how many roads Modernism leads to atheism and to the annihilation of all religion. The error of Protestantism made the first step on this path; that of Modernism makes the second; atheism makes the next”; Pascendi dominici gregis (1907), in All Things in Christ: Encyclicals and Selected Documents of Saint Pius X, edited by Vincent A. Yzermans, 119 (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1954).

11. The 1873 pamphlet Eine Kapitulation earned Wagner the title “the insulter of France”; it was translated by W. Ashton Ellis as “A Capitulation,” in Richard Wagner’s Prose Works (hereafter PW), vol. 5, Actors and Singers (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896), 5–33. Those performances of his music that did take place in 1850s and 1860s Paris were so marred by the rowdy audiences (against which Wagner protested) that it was difficult to hear the music.

before earning the respect of leftist musicians and artists, thanks to his close connections with Franz Liszt. He left France clouded in scandal after having infuriated the upper classes and humiliated Emperor Napoléon III by refusing to respect the norms of the Paris Opéra in his 1861 production of Tannhäuser.

Le wagnérisme, a term coined in France in the 1860s to describe the avant-garde enthusiasm for his artistic ideas, was predominantly a literary and philosophical movement, fueled by the many writers and artists who championed his vision. In an influential 1861 essay, poet Charles Baudelaire claimed Wagner as a kindred spirit fascinated by myth, symbols, and synesthesia. Baudelaire’s characterization of Wagner’s operas as “universally intelligible” because of his brilliant use of myth to encourage audiences to reflect on the contradictory impulses common to all humans (body and spirit, selfishness and generosity, love and hate, good and evil, heaven and hell), profoundly influenced a generation of French readers who came to consider Wagner as much (if not more) a philosopher and poet than a composer.

Those who admired Wagner’s work actively wrote articles and published journals dedicated to making his ideas better known, including La revue fantaisiste, begun in 1861 by Théophile Gautier and Catulle Mendès (Judith Gautier, their daughter and wife respectively, was a principal contributor and would later become Wagner’s lover), and L’esprit nouveau, founded by Auguste de Gaspérini in 1867. By far the best-known today, however, was the Revue wagnérienne, launched in 1885 by Édouard Dujardin after Wagner’s death in 1883 with the double goal of explaining the “Master’s” work to the public and making his genius universally known. Each issue features a variety of eclectic materials: European concert schedules, book and music reviews, attacks

13. Namely, Wagner refused the convention of including a ballet in the second act.
15. Édouard Dujardin, “À nos lecteurs,” in Revue wagnérienne 1 (1885–86) (repr. Geneva:
on the French music establishment, articles about Wagner’s formative influences (including Schopenhauer and Kant), excerpts of Wagner’s essays translated into French, and poetic homages dedicated to the great man and his characters. In its focus on Wagner’s use of myth and synesthesia, the Revue characterized Wagner as a Symbolist while creating a kind of school around its like-minded contributors, those writers and artists such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, J.-K. Huysmans, Paul Verlaine, Teodor de Wyzewa, and Odilon Redon, who shared Wagner’s passion for a total work of art and his externalization of the Idea; they would come to be known as Symbolists after the coinage of the term in 1886 by Jean Moréas.16

While these writers certainly profited from their association with Wagner, the composer’s reputation in France also benefited from their attention. The Revue’s goal of creating Wagner “propaganda,” as Dujardin put it, created a mystique about Wagner and his music, a mystique enhanced by the fact that the French were fascinated by medieval history and literature at this time.17 Furthermore, the Revue’s French translations of Wagner’s essays enabled Parisians to read him in their own tongue and to think critically about the history and symbolism underlying the operas they might have attended. The Revue also identified upcoming Wagner performances throughout Europe so as to increase familiarity with music little-performed in Paris.

Slatkine, 1968), 364. The Revue wagnérienne would last only three years. It began monthly publication in February 1885, continued from July to December of 1887 on a bimonthly basis, and published a final issue in July 1888. By the time it ceased publication it had become as much or more an organ of symbolism than of Wagner and his music; see Guichard, Musique et les lettres, 59–63, and Pamela A. Genova, “A Collective Experiment in Literary Journalism: The Case of La Revue Wagnérienne,” in Models of Collaboration in Nineteenth-Century French Literature: Several Authors, One Pen, edited by Seth Whidden, 137–51 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).


French pilgrims were well represented at Bayreuth at its inception in 1876, but they increased dramatically in the 1880s. By the 1890s, the Wagnerian experience had become an expected rite of passage for musicians and for the upper crust. This is clear in the appendix of this volume, where Abbé Arthur Mugnier, a famous confessor of fin-de-siècle notables, encourages his readers to take the trip to Bayreuth if they have not already done so.

Marcel Hébert’s 1892–94 writings on Wagner were thus conceived against a background of sustained popular interest in Wagner’s politics, writing, and music, an interest that had recently been intensified by the return of his operas to the Paris stage (Lohengrin at the Opéra in September 1891). The success of this production led to an all-star cast for the Walküre in 1893, which was met with rapturous praise in newspaper reviews (Dujardin wrote that while he did not think Wagner would replace the gospel, his operas were “a new gospel”). Such links between Wagner and religion were extremely common during this period and led to revivals of his work in theaters throughout France; newspaper debates about the importance of Wagner’s ideas on French society; and especially to critical works like Hébert’s, intended to explain the complex myth and allegory in Wagner’s work and to elucidate it for a new generation of French spectators. Such publicity facilitated favorable popular reception of Wagner’s work. Growing anti-Semitism in France, which culminated in the Dreyfus Affair just as Hébert’s volume was being published, meant that Wagner’s openly expressed opinions on Jews—so clearly outlined by Hébert in chapters 6 and 7—would not have constituted an obstacle to that reception.


19. Alfred Ernst’s L’Art de Richard Wagner: L’œuvre poétique (Paris: Plon, Nourrit, 1893) and Frédéric Wild’s Manuel pour les visiteurs de Bayreuth (Paris: Perrin, 1900) were contemporary to the composition of Hébert’s work.

20. Although the book bears the publication date 1895, Abbé Mugnier had reviewed it in November 1894, the very month Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of treason. For more on the influence of Wagner’s theories in the Dreyfus Affair, see Fulcher, French Cultural Politics and Music.
Whatever the primary source of Hébert’s personal interest in Wagner, interest there was, and in writing on him Hébert had a ready audience for his work, especially among the cultivated strata he sought to reach. But Hébert did not write about Wagner simply to attract readers. If that had been his intention, he could have chosen from among many other foreign artists in vogue at this time for their engagement with religious topics (he mentions many of them in his notes). Maurice Barrès was writing of “La mode russe” in the 1880s, for example, and Tolstoy and Dostoevsky rode the crest of a wave of enthusiasm for Russian literature that also included secondary novelists. By the 1890s Ibsen’s plays had been taken up by the Symbolists and were being performed regularly in Paris.

Hébert’s own interest in Wagner thus went well beyond the general, from his articles that originally appeared in the Annales de philosophie chrétienne in 1893, then published in booklet form in 1894 as Trois moments dans la vie de Richard Wagner, before their expansion into Le sentiment religieux dans l’oeuvre de Richard Wagner the following year; the bibliography of Hébert’s writings established by Albert Houtin in his Un prêtre symboliste: Marcel Hébert shows sustained engagement with Wagner’s work.

21. In Hébert, Plato and Darwin, Plato states, “One must work for the few, the pioneers of humanity; the multitude will come later”; 19.
In his treatment of the religious aspects of Wagner’s writings, Hébert is representative of a trend that had great resonance in fin-de-siècle France, concerned over depopulation, increased materialism, premature mortality, and general social degeneration, most of which were attributed to moral causes. This was also the case outside of France, in Anglo-Saxon countries particularly. In broad strokes,

There was a pervasive need for an emotional piety that was less vulnerable than orthodox religious observance to the desiccating effects of rapid social change, scientific progress, and higher biblical criticism. Thus even devout Christians sometimes found themselves searching for some kind of supplement, some added spiritual dimension to their traditional religious beliefs.

In more specific terms, such Christians welcomed the prominence of the theme of redemption in Wagner’s works and fastened upon his moral attitudes and religious symbols. The emotional impact of the music dramas is well attested by contemporaries and, for the religiously minded, could provide a welcome alternative to a preoccupation with ecclesiastical dogma. Thus Christians from a variety of denominational backgrounds, both clergy and laity, found spiritual content in Wagner’s art, to the extent that it was often invoked, as in Dujardin’s citation, as “a new gospel.”

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24. Max Nordau’s 1892 Entartung [Degeneration] accused most of the leading French intellectuals of driving their country into moral and physical decline. Many modern scholars have studied this phenomenon; see, for example, Robert Nye, Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).


26. This was true not only for Christians; many practicing Jews thoroughly enjoyed Wagnerian performances as a religious experience. Wagner’s popularity among them is evident from the anti-Semitic comments in the 1890s about Bayreuth being overrun by French Jews.
that led the half-Jewish Marcel Proust to equate attending a concert at Bayreuth to Mass in a Gothic cathedral.\(^{27}\)

Hébert’s philosophical preoccupations brought an additional dimension to his involvement with Wagnerism. As noted, although he had emerged from seminary an avid Thomist, further studies in philosophy convinced him of the necessity of coming to terms with the legacy of Kantian philosophy. In a paper read before the Société de Saint-Thomas d’Aquini in 1885 and subsequently published in the Annales, he attempted to counter an overly subjectivist reading of Kant, stressing the objectivity of reality, while in turn drawing attention to Aquinas’s sensitivity to the subjective side of human knowing.\(^{28}\) From Kant it was a short step to Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy. As early as 1882 Hébert reviewed the French translation of James Sully’s Pessimism: A History and a Critique, which gave prominence to Schopenhauer and his successor Edward von Hartmann.\(^{29}\) Subsequently, in another paper read before the Thomist society, he undertook the exposition and critique of Schopenhauer’s The World as Will and Representation.\(^{30}\) The importance of this philosophy for Wagner’s development pro-

\(^{27}\) Marcel Proust, “La Mort des Cathédrales,” Le Figaro (August 16, 1904).


\(^{29}\) Hébert, review of Le Pessimisme: Histoire et critique, by James Sully, in Bulletin critique d’histoire, de littérature et de théologie (February 1, 1882): 343–47.

\(^{30}\) Hébert, “Métaphysique de l’inconscient dans la doctrine de Schopenhauer,” Annales de philosophie chrétienne (February 1891): 401–29. Auguste Burdeau’s French translation of Schopenhauer’s World as Will, Le monde comme volonté et représentation, 3 vols. (Paris: Félix Alcan), had been published in 1888. Schopenhauer’s philosophy had been discussed in France since the 1850s, but its impact was limited prior to 1870. A number of factors combined to create a climate of pessimism in France that provided a receptive environment for Schopenhauer’s thought in the 1880s. In 1891 Édouard Rod gave this assessment of its impact: “His nationality has not prevented his writings from being acclimated to France. His name has become almost popular. He has been accepted as a guide, a kind of director of conscience, by a disillusioned and dejected youth who have taken as constant themes his most doleful aphorisms and have appropriated his habitual paradoxes. At the same time he became an object of dislike or misunderstanding for those who saw a national danger in this tendency of current mindset”; Rod, Les idées morales du temps présent (Paris: Perrin, 1905), cited in René-Pierre Colin, Schopenhauer en France: Un mythe naturaliste (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1979), 140. Colin gives a comprehensive picture of French assimilation of Schopenhauer from the 1850s onward.
vided an additional—and significant—point of contact. Kantian philosophy, with its elaboration by Schopenhauer, provided Hébert with a means for distinguishing image from reality; he applied that distinction to Scripture and dogma in differentiating their symbols from literal representations and in discerning the underlying truth such symbols conveyed. In the symbolic images put forth in Wagner’s operas Hébert discerned underlying metaphysical truth. Moreover, such truth appealed not only to intellect but also to the emotions.

A variety of converging factors, then, helps to explain Hébert’s interest in Wagner and why he could count on readers sharing that interest. It remains to be seen how Hébert found in Wagner a vehicle to advance other interests that bore upon the future of Catholicism as he perceived that future.

**Hébert’s Wagner**

Wagner’s works prior to 1848–49 fall outside of Hébert’s purview. Those two years marked a revolutionary period that included the Dresden uprising, which is the immediate context for the first of the phases of Wagner’s development identified in *Le sentiment religieux dans l’oeuvre de Richard Wagner.*

The text that forms the basis for analysis of Wagner’s religious ideas at this point is his poetic draft *Jesus of Nazareth.* Hébert characterizes this effort as “an example of what one could call Hegelian theology,” mingled with anarchist

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32. See p. 29 of the translation. Long before he studied Hegel’s main works during the
theory and with the humanistic philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach.\textsuperscript{33} The result, he concludes, is a distortion of Jesus’ doctrine and confusion between Christianity and asceticism, followed by an evolutionary naturalism that acknowledges no reality superior to humanity. Orthodox terminology, whether applied to Jesus or to God, overlays a metaphysical commitment to Nature, which, “on the whole, is everything.”\textsuperscript{34} Hébert concludes his analysis of Jesus of Nazareth with the observation, “This naturalistic faith would find its full expansion and adequate expression in the Ring of the Nibelung.”\textsuperscript{35}

Wagner became aware of Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy as early as 1852, but it was only in 1854 that he began seriously reading the philosopher’s work and became deeply impressed by what he found there.\textsuperscript{36} By then the text of the operatic dramas of the Ring had been written and the music partly so. Classical interpretations of the Ring have tended to stress either an optimistic view reflecting the influence of Feuerbach or a more pessimistic view consonant with the impact made by Schopenhauer’s thought. In his analysis of the Ring Mark Berry argues that this need not be an either-or choice, as Wag-

\textsuperscript{33} Feuerbach’s ideas also left their imprint on Wagner. Joachim Köhler points out that the “detailed theological speculation” of Jesus of Nazareth shows familiarity with Feuerbach’s thought: “Indeed the latter’s curious doctrine that death is the conciliatory sacrifice that man offers up to the community out of love recurs almost word for word in his Nazarene meditations”; Köhler, Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 261; see p. 33 of the translation. Feuerbach’s influence is also detectable in the Ring Cycle and in Tristan and Isolde. For Köhler, Tristan and Isolde appear as “idealized figures from [Feuerbach’s] Thoughts on Death and Immortality”; Köhler, Richard Wagner, 262; see also John J. Pohanka, Wagner the Mystic (Washington, D.C.: The Wagner Society of Washington, D.C., 2010), 25–31. For a thorough discussion of Wagner’s relation to Feuerbach, see Simon Rawidowicz, Feuerbachs Philosophie: Ursprung und Schicksal (1931; repr. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1964), 388–410.

\textsuperscript{34} See p. 32 of the translation.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 36.

ner was not a systematic thinker and tended to overlay ideas without always neatly resolving them.37 One way of doing a measure of justice to both influences is to acknowledge the presence of Feuerbach in the operatic text while seeing Schopenhauer’s imprint on the music of the later operas and in the interpretation Wagner brought to the completed cycle. The emphasis shifts from politics to metaphysics.38

Hébert’s reference to Wagner’s theories on love in Jesus of Nazareth and to the revolutionary Wagner of 1849 constitutes an implicit acknowledgement of Feuerbach’s influence, one that is openly connected to Wagner’s faith in a new humanity. There is more extensive discussion of Schopenhauer’s theories, with a view toward exposing both continuities and differences between those and ideas expressed in the Ring. Hébert points to a profound inconsistency in Schopenhauer’s rendering of the negation of the “will to life,” one instinctively sensed by Wagner and reflected in the role accorded in the Ring to the redemptive power of love. Wagner was aware of the modification he had introduced into Schopenhauer’s system but, like Hébert, tended to minimize its implications. Commentators have acknowledged a real difference from Schopenhauer, despite Wagner’s claim to remain within his framework.39 For Wagner, love is redemptive, insofar as it is “love in its highest sense, ready to suffer and sacrifice.”40 In the Ring the underlying framework remains naturalistic, but the characterization of love points the way forward to Christian charity.

The redemptive role of love continues in Tristan and Isolde. The attention given to myth and symbol in the Ring assumes greater prominence in Hébert’s exposition of the story of the tragic lovers. Here Schopenhauer’s philosophy provides the interpretive key for understanding the metaphysical significance of day and night. Brian Ma-

39. As Köhler bluntly put it, “Schopenhauer abhorred the world, whereas Wagner thought he could be reconciled with it through love”; Richard Wagner, 427–28.
40. See p. 57 of the translation.
gee's explanation of this symbolism provides an intelligible context for Hébert's treatment of this aspect of the opera:

The most pervasive imagery in the Tristan libretto is the imagery of day and night, which functions on many levels at once. Day is what keeps the lovers apart, while night and darkness unite them—so much is obvious. But Wagner relates the distinction between day and night to Schopenhauer's division of total reality into the phenomenal and noumenal realms: the realm of day is the realm of the phenomenal, the realm of night is the realm of the noumenal. We may say that it is the night that makes the lovers one, and unites them, but in fact it is in the realm of the noumenal alone that they are literally, that is to say, metaphysically, one. . . . So long as they are alive in this world they will be individually separate, kept apart not only by social forces but, at an altogether deeper level than that, by the metaphysics of phenomenal existence. Only death can release them from this phenomenal realm, liberating them from the realm of day into the realm of night. Here . . . they will be united in the most literal sense, undifferentiated, nameless, eternal. . . . They are singing metaphysics.  

Hébert points out that redemption through love is no longer accomplished in this life, on earth. In this Tristan and Isolde differs from the Ring. In Hébert's view Parsifal stands in contrast to both. It represents a restoration of value to life here below, a departure from Tristan and Isolde. But it does not simply come full circle back to the Ring, but spirals back at a greater height. Parsifal is seen as the product of a soul that has "discovered in its own depths an unrecognized faith against which he had struggled for far too long." In short, with his exposition of Parsifal Hébert will seek to make good his claim, stated in his

41. Magee, Tristan Chord, 218–19; see Gary Tomlinson, Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 73–108. In his study of Schopenhauer's philosophy, Magee points out that a difficulty with this symbolism is that it is counterintuitive. We associate truth with light and things being shrouded in darkness. In Tristan, light is the realm of illusion and not of truth or reality. Night, on the other hand, is not the realm of deceptive appearances, but of ultimate truth; Magee, The Philosophy of Schopenhauer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 385.

42. See p. 70 of the translation.
preface, that Wagner progressively, instinctively, returned to Christian sensibility.

It should be emphasized that Wagnerism in France—as elsewhere—tended to be quite diverse, providing a vehicle for a great variety of artistic, social, and political currents. Various followers used his music and his ideas in the service of their own agendas. While this has been the case for all of the operas under consideration here, it has been particularly true of Parsifal, as Anne Dzamba Sessa helpfully observes:

Nietzsche once described Parsifal as Christianity arranged for Wagnerians. The reverse is also true. Many Christian thinkers adopted Wagner, although not without considerable debate. They welcomed his concern with the theme of redemption and interpreted his leitmotivs as expressing a set of moral attitudes and religious symbols. . . . In essence, Wagner offered the listener the experience of religious emotion without requiring him or her necessarily to bother about its orthodoxy. Thus Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Presbyterians, clergy and lay people, on both sides of the Atlantic, found spiritual comfort in Wagner’s music dramas.

This is to say that Hébert’s Christianizing interpretation of Wagner, though not unique, does not go uncontested in Wagner scholarship and, in any case, has to be understood in light of Hébert’s understanding of Christianity at this point in his own intellectual trajectory.

43. Köhler states, “No other work by Wagner has invited such contradictory readings as Parsifal, and all of them can appeal to the piece itself for support”; Köhler, Richard Wagner, 600.


45. William Kinderman makes reference to the “wildly divergent views of Parsifal advanced by . . . commentators”; Kinderman, “Introduction: The Challenge of Wagner’s Parsifal,” in A Companion to Wagner’s “Parsifal,” edited by William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer, 4 (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2005). In that same volume, Ulrike Kienzle makes reference to the Christian elements that permeate Parsifal—the celebration of the Eucharist, the washing of the feet, the sorrow of Good Friday, and funeral rites—elements that disturb the nonreligious but that could be expected to resonate with devout Christians. However, Kienzle also remarks how Wagner “releases these traditional situations from the context of the church, and they become for him isolated elements upon which he could build a new interpretation or devise a different experience of spirituality,” which “has always disturbed devout Christians about Parsifal”;
For Hébert, developments in Schopenhauer’s philosophy between The World as Will and Representation (1818) and the second volume of “Supplements” published in 1844 made possible Wagner’s modification of the philosopher’s thought in Tristan and Isolde. Those same developments render possible a dual perspective on Parsifal as renouncer and as compassionate. In the latter, Charity conquers Egoism, and redemption, regeneration of the human species, is possible. Parsifal can be styled a work that is “profoundly, essentially religious, without however involving Wagner’s adherence to any official creed.” But since Wagner himself identifies this Charity with “liberating Christian charity,” Hébert can characterize Parsifal as “a faithful and harmonious echo” of the gospel and Wagner as a Christian in practice, if not in orthodox belief. Hébert summarized Wagner’s evolution in an article published in 1896:

It is our deeply held conviction that the Master’s thought was enlarged and enriched, that it was shaped by multiple influences that are easily specified and explained; but its internal unity subsists in the midst of these varied phases of evolution. The soul of man in quest of the Ideal—the Ideal realized in a love in which unselfishness, self-sacrifice, and renunciation increasingly predominate—there, in two lines, is Wagner’s entire poetic work. At the end of his life he recognized the supreme expression, the incomparable revelation of this love in the Gospel in which he had initially seen only a superstitious, gloomy asceticism, deadly for art.

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Kienzle, “Parsifal and Religion: A Christian Music Drama?” in Kinderman and Syer, Companion to Wagner’s “Parsifal,” 82–83. Alan David Aberbach holds that, while Wagner “may not have objected strenuously at being called a Christian, this designation served only as a convenient label and not as a measure of his religiosity.” For Wagner Christianity can be fulfilled only in transcending it; Aberbach, Richard Wagner’s Religious Ideas (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 207, 218.

46. See p. 85 of the translation.

47. Ibid., 86, 89. Hébert criticizes aspects of Wagner’s presentation of Christianity in the opera, e.g., the “fanciful” vegetarian interpretation of the Eucharist—which he judges to be offset by the songs that accompany the Eucharistic Supper or the reprobation of Jehovah and Judaism attributed to Schopenhauer’s influence. All this is offset by the perceived prominence of Charity in Parsifal and by Hébert’s Symbolist agenda.

Commenting on *Le sentiment religieux dans l’oeuvre de Richard Wagner*, Houtin judged that the book’s final chapter, thoroughly impregnated with symbolism, revealed its author’s true purpose in writing it.\(^{49}\) We may turn, then, from how, in Hébert’s perspective, Christianity assists in understanding Wagner to how Wagner may be of assistance in a practical understanding of Christianity.

**Hébert’s Christianity**

Scattered throughout early chapters of the book are indications of how Hébert wants to save Christian dogma for cultivated minds less and less inclined to take dogma literally. In chapter 2, discussion of the work of art in its ability to engage feeling and imagination as well as intellect provides the occasion to stress the connection between image and emotion, more forceful in their combination than abstract idea. In the course of his examination of the *Ring*, Hébert states, “Our religious language abounds in metaphors taken literally by our fathers.”\(^{50}\) He gives Fricka’s domain as that of “convention and tradition, viewed by a limited mind incapable of . . . correcting the letter of the law . . ., by maintaining, protecting custom because it is custom, and not because of the rational element it can contain.”\(^{51}\) The epigraph to the final chapter retrieves Paul’s contrast between the letter and the spirit. It is by discerning the latter that Hébert hopes to preserve Christianity among those who no longer find the letter credible. Fricka thus stands for those who would oppose such revisionist aims in their failure to recognize the metaphorical, sym-

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49. Houtin, *Prêtre symboliste*, 96. In “Évolution sentimentale de Richard Wagner,” Hébert himself commented openly on the necessity of distinguishing between the anthropomorphic images through which the imagination sought to represent the Divine, the Ideal, and the reality of that Ideal in itself. For Hébert, it was a question not of discarding images but of purifying them, of finding aesthetic, metaphysical, and religious symbols richer in moral content. Hence he could see Wagner, “sensing the insufficiency of the naturalist myths of paganism” in the *Tétralogie*, turning to “Christian symbols that provide consciousness with the ‘more spiritual,’ more ideal content after which it thirsts”; 253–54.

50. See p. 49 of the translation.

51. Ibid., 45–46.
bolic character of religious language and their persistence in insisting on a literal meaning. In chapter 5 it is clear that an appreciation of the deeper, symbolic significance of day and night is necessary to do justice to the interpretation of Tristan and Isolde. It is only when we come to Parsifal that these scattered hints begin to come into greater focus. A differentiation between belief and its formulation loosens the tight neo-Thomist connection between religious truth and its dogmatic expression, while suggesting that the spirit of the gospel can be penetrated even in the absence of a clearly formulated creed, Catholic or Protestant. Although the “imaginative formulations,” the “metaphysical hypotheses” that express religious feelings may contain “a strong dose of anthropomorphism and fiction,” they serve a regulative function, orienting activity and stimulating it. Parsifal shows Wagner’s appreciation of the practical dimension of dogmas and faith. In anticipating and answering a possible reproach to Wagner for having privileged the practical and undervalued the theoretical aspect of religion, Hébert is responding to a like criticism of his own view.

In short, the ideal element is inseparable from the material one in religious formulations if the former is to be assimilated in human consciousness. Yet, while the two elements cannot be separated, they can be distinguished. This distinction is foundational for Hébert’s “symbolist compromise.” The material element imparts a relative, transitory value to dogmas. Those who perceive this and are able to distinguish between the divine and the human element in dogmatic definitions may imagine themselves not to have faith, because they feel obligated to give adherence to the letter of the formula. When the intellectual milieu undergoes a profound transformation, as was the case at the time of Hébert’s writing, theological language grows distant from ordinary experience and becomes less and less intelli-

52. Further, the negative effects of overintellectualizing religion are suggested in the characterization of Erda; ibid., 54n64.
53. Ibid., 71.
54. Ibid., 76–77.
55. Ibid., 79.
gible—to the detriment of religious experience. An appreciation that the external elements, the theological formulations in which dogmas are expressed, are “indications, supports, and not religious life itself, means and not ends,” opens the way for allowing for evolution in the church’s teaching and provides room for faith. In his concluding chapter Hébert provides examples of where a literal understanding of biblical and ecclesiastical formulations have been given a progressive interpretation enlarging the scope of their meaning.

Hébert found in Wagner this ability to distinguish the universal ideal and the transitory vehicle through which it was communicated. He also encountered it in his reading of Schopenhauer. “Méta\phi{s}ique de l’inconscient dans la doctrine de Schopenhauer,” which Hébert published in the Annales de philosophie chrétienne in 1891, shows him to be a careful reader of the philosopher’s major work. As the title indicates, the article’s focal concern was the nature of Will as blind and unconscious foundational principle, which Hébert objects to on moral grounds. However, in his reading of Schopenhauer, he also would have encountered the philosopher’s views on religion. Schopenhauer acknowledged that the world religions taught profound truths, mingled, however, with other doctrines for which there were no real grounds for believing. Where religious dogmas made claims to embody literal truths about the nature and actions of divine beings, they were mistaken, taking anthropomorphic projection for transcendent reality. Where such dogmas embody practical attitudes about the world and human existence, they are mythical encryptions of immanent truths, useful for guiding conduct.

For Schopenhauer, as for Kant, religious truth is regulative, not constitutive. Religions can be thought of as metaphysics for the masses, guiding conduct and providing consolation through the use of images embedded in myths and allegories. Religion and philosophy thus are seen to have a common origin and to respond to the same questions regarding suffering and death. But religion does not always provide adequate answers to these. Philosophy has the capability of articulat-

56. Ibid., 96.
ing in more direct form what religion expresses more obliquely. Schopenhauer was convinced that, under dual pressure from the growth of scientific knowledge and from Kantian philosophy, the guardians of Christian orthodoxy were being forced to acknowledge the allegorical nature of its teachings. In doing so, Christianity was undergoing a process of purification, shedding its contingent accretions.\textsuperscript{57} Much of this resonates with what is present in \textit{Le sentiment religieux dans l’oeuvre de Richard Wagner}.

In Wagner’s “Religion and Art” (1880), Hébert read, “Religion has sunk into an artificial life, when she finds herself compelled to keep adding to the edifice of her dogmatic symbols, and thus conceals the one divinely True in her beneath an ever growing heap of incredibilities commended to belief.” Where religion has become artificial, it becomes art’s task “to rescue 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 profound, hidden truth through idealized representation.”\textsuperscript{58} Hébert could thus view Wagner as having embarked upon a parallel project.

“Platon et Darwin,” published a year after the essay on Schopenhauer, gives the initial airing of Hébert’s symbolist reading of Christian dogma. Elements that will appear in the writings on Wagner put in an appearance: images functioning not as portraits of reality but as symbols—“insufficient from the standpoint of curiosity, ample as a guide to action”; the superiority of image over abstract idea in its power of attraction, “for it appeals not less to the heart than to the intellect,” for “isolated from feeling,” the abstract idea is “but an empty form.”\textsuperscript{59}


\textsuperscript{59} Hébert, \textit{Plato and Darwin}, 40, 58, 59.
Hébert continued to develop his symbolist position in subsequent writings. When one of these, *Souvenirs d’Assise*, intended for private circulation among those whom he felt could benefit from the symbolist compromise, came to the attention of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the radical nature of his ideas became apparent. Rather than recant, Hébert eventually chose separation from the church.

Looking back upon Wagner and Christianity from the standpoint of 1908, following the Vatican condemnation of Modernism, Hébert posed the question of whether Wagner could be considered a precursor of the Modernists. His answer was both yes and no:

Yes, in the sense that he sought “the spirit” under “the letter.” But in so doing he has but joined the company of such great minds of his race as Kant or Hegel, for example, who have all tried to interpret dogmas and ceremonies, showing the noble and useful content in popular beliefs.

No, in the sense that the true Modernist is the one who believes in a possible evolution of the Church in the sense of new interpretations. It does not appear that Wagner was confident of an evolution of the ecclesiastical machine. He even seems convinced that the imaged form of art must replace the imaged form of religion.  

In 1894, however, the fuller implications of Hébert’s ideas and those of others that would be synthesized and condemned under the label of Modernism lay in the future. What was the reaction to Hébert’s *Wagner* at the time of its publication?

In a short review Abbé Henri Lesêtre summarized its contents and concluded by identifying two groups that could especially profit from it: well-intentioned people who only dabble in Christianity and “certain passionate theologians who believe themselves to enclose the gospel in their intransigent formulas like a bird in a cage.”

The reviewer was obviously sympathetic to a dogmatic development that can adapt the formula while preserving the religious substance. As

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the unfolding of the modernist crisis would show, maintaining this sort of distinction became increasingly difficult in practice.

In a somewhat longer discussion of Hébert’s book Abbé Félix Klein suggested that the three phases of Wagner’s development identified by Hébert were representative of the nineteenth century in its optimistic faith in science and in freedom, its disillusion and pessimistic outlook over the failure of those optimistic hopes, and a more recent appreciation of Christ and the gospel. The first of Lesêtre’s two groups are identified with the néo-chrétien movement, whose adherents manifest strong adherence to the moral dimension of Christianity while still holding reservations regarding its dogmas. Here Klein views Wagner as a precursor, for the respect for Christianity that is evident among contemporaries scarcely existed twenty years earlier, when Wagner professed his admiration for Christ and his teaching. In Wagner Klein sees an anticipation of current preoccupations, more favorable to Christianity and fueling hopes for its future.62

Abbé Arthur Mugnier provided the most extensive treatment of the book,63 finding Hébert’s account of Wagner’s religious evolution persuasive and his conclusions regarding the composer’s Christianity as established. Mugnier’s interests were literary and musical rather than seriously theological, and thus his remarks remain focused on Wagner rather than on the implications of his religiosity for interpreting Catholic dogma. Yet his social status (he was known as the “confessor of all Paris”), familiarity with Wagner’s music (he was a frequent presence at Bayreuth, which he considered a religious experience), and the forum he used to present his summary of the book (as part of a series of Sainte-Geneviève conferences given to a group of Parisian women) indicate the wide reception Hébert’s ideas re-


ceived. Mugnier's 1894 lecture was subsequently circulated in print.64

Not all reactions were so positive. In his biography of Hébert, Houtin provides several examples, of which a review by Pierre Batiffol may be taken as representative. In contrast to Mugnier, he notes Hébert’s theological views and finds them tinged with agnosticism.65 Agnosticism would feature as one of the central indictments against Modernism leveled by the Vatican condemnation in 1907, an indictment that could draw substance from Hébert’s publications subsequent to Le sentiment religieux dans l’œuvre de Richard Wagner, in which he stated his views with increasing openness.

Despite his criticism of Schopenhauer’s philosophy in “Mé-
taphysique de l’inconscient dans la doctrine de Schopenhauer” at the beginning of the 1890s, as the decade progressed Hébert’s own position evolved in ways that brought it closer to that philosopher’s understanding of religion. Indeed, in his “La Dernière Idole: Étude sur la personnalité divine” (1902) and “Anonyme ou polynyme: Se-
conde étude sur la ‘personnalité divine’” (1903),66 the application of a symbolist reading of religious doctrine to theistic imagery fulfilled Schopenhauer’s prediction:

Those who attempt to clear theism of anthropomorphism, while imaging that they touch only the shell, really strike at its innermost core. In their efforts to conceive its object in the abstract, they sublimate it to a vague, hazy form whose outline gradually vanishes entirely in the endeavour to avoid the human figure.67

64. Mugnier’s journal shows him to have been a regular visitor to Bayreuth, where he became acquainted with Cosima Wagner; Journal de l’Abbé Mugnier (1879–1939) (Paris: Mercure de France, 1985). Mugnier found his time at Bayreuth a strongly religious experience. “Listening to Parsifel was a revelation that was almost mystical, to the point of comparing this opera to ‘a Génie du christianisme on stage.’ He saw the religious side of it, the exaltation of a divine feeling that he scarcely found in Catholic ceremonies”; Ghislain de Diesbach, L’Abbé Mugnier: Le confesseur de Tout-Paris (Paris: Perrin, 2003), 140; see Journal de l’Abbé Mugnier (July 1901): 126.


66. See note 7.

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In translating Le sentiment religieux dans l’œuvre de Richard Wagner, we have opted for rendering “sentiment” as experience rather than feeling. Wagner devoted a long section to the relation between thought and feeling in “Opera and Drama,” stressing the role of the emotions in knowing. Commentators have noted, however, that the desired emotionalization of the intellect does not entail abdication of the latter. The word experience seems to capture both of these dimensions of knowing better than does feeling alone. Also, in the context of late-nineteenth-century religious thought, in both Protestant and Catholic camps there is a notable revaluation of religious experience. Auguste Sabatier (to whom William Gibson compared Hébert in the translator’s preface to Plato and Darwin) made liberal use of the term sentiment in the broader sense of experience, a practice followed by Anglophone commentators on Sabatier’s writings, especially his Esquisse d’une philosophie de la religion (1897). The reintegration of experience into theology was part of the reformist agenda to which Hébert contributed. Given the subjectivist stigma attached to the word expérience by neo-Thomist theologians, Hébert may have preferred sentiment as a term less likely to evoke opposition. So that the reader can gain a sense of the varied contexts in which sentiment occurs in the text (it is used to indicate feeling, intention, experience, consciousness), at each occurrence we have signaled its presence in brackets, with the exception of those times when it appears in the plural sentiments, where it is clearly intended as feelings.

We originally intended to use recognized English translations of Wagner’s prose works and correspondence, as well as those of oth-
er works Hébert cited, such as Schopenhauer’s. However, Hébert’s French translations of these German works do not always correspond closely to the English versions, thus leading us to privilege Hébert’s choices by modifying familiar English translations. In the case of Wagner’s correspondence, we have drawn upon the English translations by J. S. Shedlock of Richard Wagner’s Letters to His Dresden Friends: Theodor Uhlig, Wilhelm Fischer and Ferdinand Heine (1890)¹ and Francis Hueffer’s Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt (1889),² modifying them to reflect Hébert’s French text. On the other hand, Hébert’s translations of the prose works differ markedly from the accepted English version published by W. Ashton Ellis; we have thus chosen to privilege Hébert’s rendering. In each case, however, we have provided a reference to available translations for readers wishing to compare or to locate citations in context. This holds true for other instances where an English translation of a secondary work is cited. Andrew Porter, as well as Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, have published accessible poetic translations of the operas of the Ring cycle. Where Hébert cites Wagner’s texts in German we have opted to give a literal translation, which in most cases differs considerably from the available poetic versions. Once again, references to the English translations are provided for readers who wish to locate the citation in the libretti. Where we do cite an existing translation verbatim, this is indicated in the notes.

We would like to thank Rev. Martial Okoye for reviewing parts of the translation and Ute Hoefel for assistance with German translations.

ABBREVIATIONS

G.  Götterdämmerung: Dritter Tag aus der Trilogie; Der Ring des Nibelungen

GS  Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen

PW  Prose Works

R.  Das Rheingold: Vorspiel zu der Trilogie; Der Ring des Nibelungen

S.  Siegfried: Zweiter Tag aus der Trilogie; Der Ring des Nibelungen

W.  Die Walküre: Erster Tag aus der Trilogie; Der Ring des Nibelungen
Religious Experience in the Work of

Richard Wagner
The study we published last year was entitled Trois moments de la pensée de Richard Wagner. In it, we said and repeated that classifications of this kind are largely artificial and that the various phases in the evolution of a great artist’s thought are indivisibly united. We have not always been understood. Some interpreted these three phases in a mathematical sense; they considered them mutually exclusive. On the contrary, we gave this term its philosophical meaning, seeking to emphasize the dominance of specific intentions [sentiments] in specific periods.

Let us dispense with the titles and explanations that give rise to such sterile discussion in order to study Wagner’s works from a philosophical and religious perspective. In so doing, we shall be faithful to his method: we shall overlook conventional and contingent elements, extricating and highlighting nature’s essential tendencies—“the purely human element.” We shall apply this method to the Master’s own thought. Wagner, we can say, was never a philosopher or a theologian by trade.—It is precisely for this reason that his effort

1. Hébert, Trois moments de la pensée de Richard Wagner (Paris: Fischbacher, 1894), 67n2; 53; 70. Several chapters from this earlier work have been retained in this one, though considerably modified and developed. In particular, we have added a study on the project for a drama Jesus of Nazareth—of great interest and great importance from the standpoint of the evolution of Wagner’s religious thought. Chapters 2, 3, and 7 are completely new. [In Trois moments Hébert tried to show that “the optimistic pantheism of the Hegelian School finds a splendid expression indeed in the Tetralogy, Schopenhauer’s pessimism in Tristan and Isolde, and the Christian idea of renunciation in Parsifal.” In arguing for the preponderance of one of several coexistent tendencies in each phase of Wagner’s development, Hébert conceded that he may not have emphasized sufficiently their fundamental unity. In the work translated and reprinted in this volume, he attempted to correct this; Hébert, “Évolution sentimentale de Richard Wagner,” Annales de philosophie chrétienne 34 (April–September 1896): 247.]
toward solving the mystery of existence, his aspiration toward the Ideal, has a “purely human” sense.

Do we thus intend to pigeonhole Wagner, limiting him to one orthodoxy or another? By no means. On the one hand, we have no intention, as M. Kufferath seems to fear, of transforming Wagner into an “apostle steeped in piety,” but it is impossible, on the other, to ignore his progressive return to Christian sensibility [sentiment]. This return took place through pure intuition of genius, spontaneously and without labored discussion. To our mind, this is what constitutes its value.

Wagner’s case confirms the oft-repeated observation that man is Christian through what is best and most noble in him. If you take the moral claims, the ideal aspirations of the soul to their highest point and place yourself in the presence of the gospel, do you not then sense a perfect concordance, a divinely preestablished harmony?

Tertullian’s old argument about “the testimony of the instinctively Christian soul” still holds true.  


3. [In 1895 Hébert published a short piece in which he quoted an extract from one of Wagner’s letters that set forth the composer’s relation to Schopenhauer’s philosophy. Wagner positioned himself as knowing intuitively and expressing artistically what Schopenhauer articulated conceptually and systematically. Hébert finds additional support in this for his thesis that “Wagner’s return to Christian sensibility ‘took place spontaneously,’ without labored discussions, through pure intuition of genius… In the chapter on Parsifal, we have sought to shed light on this”; Hébert, “Richard Wagner et Schopenhauer,” L’Enseignement Chrétien (February 16, 1895): 104.]
Richard Wagner’s Ideal

Others more expert in artistic matters will give appropriate credit to Richard Wagner’s musical genius, his uncanny ability to grasp and translate the most minute resonances and movements of the soul, to embody feelings and characteristics in unforgettable themes that, like living beings, modify, develop, intermingle, structuring and adapting themselves to various circumstances. Wagner is a creator, a fact disputed only by those who examine his work through the lens of their own prejudice and ignorance.

So rich a nature, however, presents itself through numerous and varied forms. Wagner the artist is also a philosopher. Indeed, Wagner was unendingly preoccupied with the meaning of life and with seeking a solution to the universal mystery.

He felt duty-bound to bring the solution he glimpsed within the reach of everyone. He tried to disengage it from abstract formulas and to translate it into an artistic language accessible to all.¹

Wagner was under no illusion about the difficulties of such a task. He was one of those who, confident in their pursuit of a superior goal and convinced of their life as holy work, a painful but fruitful sacrifice to the Ideal, do not shrink before hardship and suffering.

¹. “Music is a language equally intelligible to all men and it was to be the reconciling power, the sovereign language which, resolving ideas and feelings [sentiments], proposed a universal voice [organe] for the artist’s most intimate intuition: a voice of unlimited scope, especially if theatrical representation’s bodily manifestation gave it the clarity that, until now, painting alone has been able to claim as its exclusive privilege”; Richard Wagner, “Lettre sur la musique,” in Quatre poèmes d’opéras (1860; repr. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1893), xvii. [The "Lettre sur la musique" was published by Wagner in 1860 to introduce the French public to his work.]
“The Work and Mission of My Life” is the truly significant title of a short autobiography Wagner published four years before his death. Complementing it with his “Letter on Music” provides an accurate summary of the ideas scattered throughout the ten volumes of his selected works.

Wagner once described the intense emotion he felt at the age of eight while thinking about Martin Luther during a trip to his uncle’s home in Eisleben, the great reformer’s native town. “My childhood instinct,” he said, “never led me astray. Had I not to preach a new artistic gospel? Had I not to suffer in its service all manner of insults and to reply in turn: This is my conviction. Here I stand; I can do no other, may God help me!”

It was not, as one might think, ambition or arrogance that inspired such words. Those acquainted with the details of Wagner’s life know what energy, what indomitable courage it took as he struggled for long years against poverty, insults, and opposition to achieve what his artistic conscience considered a sacred duty.

“I saw in opera,” he said, “an institution whose special purpose is almost exclusively to entertain, to amuse a population as bored as it is eager for pleasure; further, I saw it (opera) as obliged to seek financial gain to cover the expenditures necessitated by such alluring yet bombastic displays; and I cannot deny that there was real folly in wanting to turn this institution toward a diametrically opposed goal, that is to say, to use it to wrest people from their mundane daily interests and to encourage them to venerate and understand the best the human mind can conceive.”

There was a time when “the most challenging poems, like those of Aeschylus or Sophocles, could be


given to the public with the certainty that they would be perfectly un-
derstood.”

5. What reasons may we ascribe to so deplorable a change? First, there are social causes: ancient Rome through its tyranny, Christiani-
ty through its asceticism, modern industry through a thirst for luxury and profit that has seduced even artists, have suffocated art in turning the human mind away from reflection and delight in the forces of nature.6 Second, there are more specifically aesthetic causes, chief among them “the separation, the isolation of the different branches of art formerly united in comprehensive drama.”7 “The Art-
work of the Future” will once again bring all the individual arts to-
gether into a marvelous synthesis:8 there poetry will complete music in articulating ideas with a precision even the most delicate melodies cannot achieve; music will express the thousand and one nuances of feeling that word and scenic action cannot translate. The orches-
tra will no longer be “a monstrous guitar for the accompaniment of arias,”9 but a real, ever-present character translating the action into

5. Ibid.
8. “Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft” [*The Artwork of the Future*] (1849), GS 3 [in PW, vol. 1, Art Work of the Future, 69–213]. In his Études sur le XIXe Siècle (Lausanne: Payot, 1888), 90ff., M. Édouard Rod shows that the seeds for Wagner’s ideas can be found in the writings of Less-
ing, Herder, Hegel, and Schiller. Indeed, Hegel affirms that “drama offers the most complete union of all of art’s aspects” (Esthétique, trans. Charles Bénard [Paris: Germer-Baillère, 1875], 2:469), and that music “acquires its true development in becoming dramatic” (207); furthermore, speaking of opera, “music,” he says, “has then as its main essence the intimate aspect of the situation, the general and particular feelings in varied states, conflicts, struggles of passions, and it makes them stand out in a perfect manner through the most perfect expression of emo-
tions” (208). But what escapes Hegel, and what Wagner has so admirably understood, is the relation that exists, in the organic unity of drama, between the expressive emotional intensity of music and the intensity of the intellectual value of the language spoken. No one has bet-
ter studied and elucidated this major question than M. Houston Chamberlain in his work [Das Drama Richard Wagner’s (Leipzig: Druck und Verlag von Breitkopf and Härtel, 1892)], recently translated into French [as Le Drame wagnérien] (Paris: Chailley, 1894). [Translated as The Wagne-
rian Drama (London: John Lane, 1915)].
ardent emotions, commenting on, recalling, or foretelling events in turn. The power of expression will thus be taken to its furthest limits. Beethoven understood this: in his Ninth Symphony, he made the word “the pinnacle and the crowning glory of his sonorous edifice.... This symphony is the human gospel of future art.”

No genius has been spared times of trouble and temptation. Over the years 1839–42 Wagner seemed to hesitate a bit. He lived in Paris in total destitution with his first wife, the sweet and devoted Minna. Would it not have been better to have followed in the footsteps of so many others by catering to the tastes of the public, privileging the imagination and the senses, and thus acquiring a facile and profitable celebrity? Weakened by his hardship, he went into the conservatory after several days of extreme hunger; they were playing the Ninth Symphony. His ideal, momentarily obscured, reappeared in its initial splendor; its brilliance would never again be eclipsed. So much so that shortly thereafter, when the publisher Schlesinger proposed that Wagner write a popular play whose theme would be light and “without anything serious,” the publisher’s persuasive arguments and insistence were in vain. Wagner rejected this offer, which only a short time before would have filled him with joy, proudly citing Schiller: The artist is not a child dutifully receiving instruction from his contemporaries; it is he who must instruct!

It was only in 1848, however, that Wagner clearly recognized his definitive goal: “After finishing Lohengrin, a work thoroughly saturated with music, Wagner earnestly set to work on a new dramatic subject: Frederick Barbarossa. But as he advanced in his task, he understood more and more clearly that this work did not require the help of music, which, for him, came to mean that it ought not to include music. And with sudden clarity he realized that, up until that point, he had been asking the wrong question, not ‘how poetry and music can work in unison towards the achievement of a more supreme and exhaustive form of dramatic expression,’ but rather ‘what subject

calls for such lofty expression, and as a consequence requires it in a work of art claiming to be its perfect representation? That was the real problem to be addressed.”

And here is the response, provided by Wagner himself: “In a dramatic subject, what is addressed to reason alone can only be expressed in words. But as emotional content increases, another mode of expression becomes necessary and there comes a point where only the language of music is adequate to expressing it. This necessarily dictates the kinds of subjects available to the poet-musician: these are subjects of a purely human order, free of all convention.”

Indeed, to guarantee an action’s verisimilitude, it is necessary to take into account a multitude of particular elements, in the case of a prince or conqueror, for example, a connection to a specific country or period that cannot be translated into music and that have, moreover, only a secondary value for the “interior man,” that is, the real psychologist concerned by deep feeling, intense emotions, and interior action.

Where, then, can we find the “purely human” element, free of all convention and all contingency, this immediately and absolutely sympathetic essential core of human nature?

In myth, since it is especially here that “we see repeated in ev-

11. Chamberlain, Drame wagnérien, 22 [Wagnerian Drama, 13].
13. This core is sensitivity, the “emotional world,” to use M. Chamberlain’s expression (134) (see note 11, Drame wagnérien); but in this world, it is necessary that everything be essential, purely human. Besides, who knows what is essential to man? … In any case, sensitivity can be called the “in itself” of the world only in a relative sense, inasmuch as we oppose the conscious, the interior subjective emotion, to external objective spatial images. But as profound as this consciousness may be, it remains necessarily imperfect, phenomenal, and the in itself of ourselves and of the world, that is, a complete, adequate knowledge always eludes us (see Hébert, Trois moments, chap. 3). Let us no longer say that music is a direct revelation of the intimate essence of the world: although the sonorous image is not spatial as is the visual image, it is nevertheless determined by vibrations and nerve modifications that are not less material than in the case of luminous vibrations.
14. And not in myth exclusively. M. Chamberlain develops this point very well, particularly with regard to the Meistersinger; see Drame wagnérien, 54 and 123–56 [38–39 and 128–32 in the English translation].
ery period, constantly reshaped and reinvented by the great poets of cultured periods,” this “primitive and anonymous poem of the people.” The immense advantage of myth, and also of legend from all eras and nations, is “to understand uniquely the purely human aspects of an era and nation and to present them in a striking and original form, thenceforth legible at the merest glance.” On the one hand, this “simplicity of action dispenses with the need to explain external incidents, and, on the other, allows one to dedicate the bulk of the poem to developing the action’s internal logic.”

With this “purely human” element, Wagner hopes to create a form of art superior even to that of the Greeks, “ideal, purely human form, freed from the yoke of national tradition, thus calling on it to transform these traditions into purely human traditions answering only to eternal laws.”

What pedantry in this Germanic nonsense! Nevertheless, one cannot dispute Wagner’s elevated thought and nobility of character. At the beginning of his career, he was already expressing his sacred faith in the Ideal humorously: “I believe in God, in Mozart and in Beethoven; I also believe in their disciples and their apostles... I believe in the sacredness of the mind and in the truth of art one and indivisible... I believe that this art is from a divine source, and that it lives in the heart of all men illuminated by the celestial light... I believe in a final judgment, in which all those who, in this world, commercialize sublime and chaste art, all those who defile and degrade it by the baseness of their sentiments, by their vile lust for material pleasures, will be condemned to terrible suffering. I believe, on the other hand, that the faithful disciples of great art will be glorified, and that, enveloped in a heavenly fabric of sunbeams, fragrances, and melodious harmonies, they will return to lose themselves eternally in the bosom of the divine source of all harmony.”

16. Ibid., liii and lix.
17. Ibid., xvi.
Art and Philosophy

§ I. Art and Metaphysics

In an appendix attached to Houston Chamberlain’s interesting work *Drame wagnérien*, cited earlier, the author vigorously refutes the notion that Wagner’s works contain a philosophy.

He asks whether looking for philosophy in a work of art is not confusing abstraction with intuition. And he cites a fine passage from Schopenhauer beginning with the words “Abstract notions, however useful for life and however serviceable, necessary and productive for science, are eternally sterile for art.” Earlier, at the beginning of his remarkable article, “Tristan and Isolde,” Chamberlain cited Liszt: “Wagner is really too much a poet to dream of making philosophical proofs out of his dramas.”

Philosophical proofs! Abstract notions! But who has ever sought them in Wagner’s dramas? What an unfortunate misunderstanding! We find a similar error in M. Kufferath’s study, *Tristan et Iseult*; M. Kufferath takes issue with those who transform “the duet of Tristan and Isolde into a primarily philosophical treatise in which the author (might have) put Schopenhauer’s ideas into music and verse.”

Yet M. Kufferath is the first to include the “philosophical ideas specific to Wagner” among the elements that have contributed to the development of his dramas; he himself recognized that by present-

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3. Ibid., 184.
ing the throes of passion as the ultimate torture, Wagner “absolutely falls in with Schopenhauer’s theory on love”; furthermore, the author maintains that in the drama’s admirable concluding musical section “Wagner evidently sought to translate the vague sensation of a dissolution of all that is; it is, he adds, a poetic transcription of Nirvana, of Schopenhauer’s renunciation of the will to life.”

Since Schopenhauer’s influence is evident in Isolde’s enthusiastic and ardent final words, why would it not be apparent in the love duet? The solution to this seeming antinomy can be glimpsed.

We protest as strongly as M. Kufferath about those who interpret the Master of Bayreuth’s “mysterious parallelism of musical inspiration and poetic inspiration” in the narrow sense “of a kind of literal translation of words by sounds.” This is to confuse music with literature. All the more reason to refrain from confusing the work of art with abstraction and from seeking “theories,” “proofs,” or “treatises” in Wagner’s dramas.

The answer to the problem is that metaphysics, as distinct from experimental psychology or logic, is as much a work of feeling [sentiment] and imagination as of intellect. It has its own poetry, by turns melancholy, tender, or sublime, bracing or depressing, according to the nature and gravity of the problems that trouble the mind and the solutions it adopts.

In metaphysics certainty always supposes the instinctively influenced or freely accepted intervention of a profound emotion [sentiment], an obscure form of consciousness, a primitive and indescribable adaptation of human nature to the mysterious Reality in which it is immersed. Believing in the possibility of mathematical arguments in such a case proves complete ignorance of the problem’s parameters and conditions.

4. “Der Tod durch Liebesnoth” [“Death because of love’s misery”], GS 6:268 (380).—It is surely not a matter of knowing whether Tristan and Isolde are the interpreters of Schopenhauer’s morality. One ought to affirm that they are so “à rebours” as M. Chamberlain says (article cited on 11n1). Are they really victims of “desire,” of the “will to life”? That is the question.
6. Ibid., 237n.
7. Ibid., 214.
An example: “All the old proofs (of the existence of God) are fine,” as Charles Secrétan nicely puts it, “provided that one understand them without pedantry; but the real proof is impulsion, desire, which circulates among all the others and gives them strength. We aim toward perfection with each and every breath; our eyes seek it in the sky, our heart calls out for it in silence, we do not affirm it as a cold conclusion of thought, we affirm it by connecting ourselves to it, by penetrating it and by living in it. Our interior experience thus confirms the lesson of history, which shows us civilizations dying without God; it illuminates and completes the lofty abstraction of Aristotle: matter assumes a form, the animal we are becomes spirit in yielding to the allure of perfection.”

Impulsion, desire, aim, allure: is this not the “emotional world”? And then there is the great law: “man does not think without images.” Now, as Wagner says, “art subverts the image used to represent the concept to the imagination; it takes an allegory and transforms it into a painting expressing the notion fully; art (thus) transfigures the image into a (true) revelation.” The influence of this idealized image on the primitive emotion [sentiment] from which the idea was abstracted cannot be contested: the image feeds emotion that thereby attains its full intensity.

It is apparent that we have not left “the emotional world”: as an abstraction, the idea (metaphysical or religious) remains in the artist’s intelligence; music translates the emotion [sentiment] implied or determined by the theoretical idea.

§ 2. Art and Morality

The work of art would become a kind of abstraction in turn if it addressed itself to just one of the soul’s faculties, if it brought about the sensation of exquisite pleasure without awakening higher modes of thought.

9. Cited in Chamberlain, Drame wagnérien, 247 [see Wagnerian Drama, 224–25].
Furthermore, never will man, when viewing a painting of human life and not just the graceful curves of an arabesque or the shimmering colors of a silken fabric, never will he, in his human quality, be able to limit his attention to forms alone and to lose interest in the meaning of this life, in the direction, in the moral value of this activity whose efflorescence he admires as an artist.

It is from his heart of hearts that the “man-artist” must project this preoccupation with the meaning of life, this sympathy for what creates dignity, our nature’s nobility. Having the police control the work of art’s morality is to sink into the realm of the “letter which kills.”

“True art,” said Wagner, “can prosper only if it is based on true morality.” From that belief flow his untiring efforts to distinguish the “purely human” element, the very principle of morality buried, smothered, under conventions and artificial laws. From this belief flows his ardent desire to stir not only the senses, the imagination, but also the highest faculties of “the total man”: “The people who walked out of the theatre after the second act of Lohengrin,” Wagner wrote in 1850 to the manager of the Weimar theatre, M. Genast, “were not tired by the work’s duration, nor deafened by its din. If they were truly favorably predisposed, they yielded under the uncustomed effort required of them by a work which addresses not a quarter or half the man, but the total man. What would matter is to educate such an audience, and for that, it is essential to train it in the exercise of force, to shake off its torpor, in a word for audiences to resolve to come to the theatre not to be entertained, but to reflect. If you cannot teach them to be active even in pleasure, you will spread neither my works, nor my ideas.”

Without attributing undue influence on the edifying value of theatrical performances, it seems Wagner truly attained his goal: the

10. “Religion und Kunst” [“Religion and Art”] (1880), GS 10:251 (322) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 251].

11. See other texts on the theatre and in particular Wagner’s harsh appraisal of Italian music’s sensual character in Hébert, Trois moments, chaps. 2, 13, 14.
idealistic element so prominent in his works diverts the mind from emotions of an inferior order and allows it to enjoy an elevated and pure aesthetic pleasure. The animated, affecting expression of human passions likely always contains the risk of contagion, but in an essentially synthetic work such as Wagner’s no one has the right to isolate the music, for example, from the text determining its true character, and to judge this music only by the effect produced on overexcited or unstable nervous systems. One has no right to consider only passion’s intensity and its excessive transports in Sieglinde, Isolde, or Kundry and not to think simultaneously of the ideas these characters symbolize and express even in their ecstasy. “The long and passionate scene of love which fills the second scene (of Tristan and Isolde) from beginning to end,” says M. Kufferath quite correctly, “is not an erotic duet like those seen in so many fashionable operas,” but “an episode as painful as anything involving cruel fates.” “The great sadness of inescapable Destiny hovers over the outpourings (of the two lovers) and idealizes their passionate outburst.” Chamberlain has explained perfectly how, “through this stroke of genius (the drink of death, Todestrank), Wagner draws from an otherwise frivolous and superficially sensuous romance the sublime poem of hopeless but purest love.”

We cannot go into detail here. Furthermore, it is the unshakable belief in the absolute value of pity, goodness, and disinterested love exhibited in Wagner’s dramas that contribute particularly to their strong morality. But the devotion of a Senta, of an Elizabeth even, still involves a mixture of human passion; we admire pure love in
Brünnhilde and in Parsifal, where it is more ideal still: when Wagner composed Parsifal he had finally understood that Charity is the core, the very essence of Religion; that it is, if we may say so, simultaneously the “purely divine”\textsuperscript{17} and the “purely human.”

The sum and goal of the following pages is to draw attention to this evolution, the progress of religious experience [sentiment] in Wagner’s works.

\textsuperscript{17} Do not forget the definition, or better the intuition, of St. John the apostle: “God is Love” (1 Jn 4:16).
Outline of the Drama

Jesus of Nazareth

§1. History of the Outline

We shall not discuss works prior to the critical period of 1848–49:¹ “The day I made a conscious decision to give up my idea of a drama about Frederick Barbarossa,” said Wagner, “I entered a new and decisive period in my evolution as an artist and as a man. It was a period of conscious artistic will (heading) in a completely new direction. I had chosen (this path) driven by an unconscious need; as artist and as man, I thenceforth advanced on it toward a new world.”²

If the outline Jesus of Nazareth is not in the Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen, it is because the manuscript, like several others of this period, had been lost. Found and purchased by Madame Wagner after the death of the great artist, it was published by Siegfried Wagner in 1887.³

Let us begin by studying the conditions under which this unusual and important drama was conceived.

“I had sketched and finished Siegfried’s Death,” wrote Wagner in 1851,⁴

¹. Die Feen [The Fairies], Das Liebesverbot [The Ban on Love], Rienzi, Der fliegende Holländer [The Flying Dutchman], Tannhäuser, Lohengrin.
³. Wagner, Jesus von Nazareth: Ein dichterischer Entwurf aus dem Jahre 1848 (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Haertel, 1887) [PW, vol. 8, Posthumous, Etc.].
solely to satisfy an inner prompting, and not with any thought of producing it in our theatres which, given the dramatic means at hand, seemed to me thoroughly inadequate. . . . In the autumn of 1848, I was not considering the possibility of its performance; if I completed the text in verse, and made some attempts to compose the music, it was for my own self-gratification at a time when I was thoroughly revolted by the current events and had completely withdrawn from them. I was painfully aware of my sad isolation as an artist, and could find solace from the bitter anguish it caused only by giving free rein to an insatiable penchant for new projects. I felt drawn to compose a work that would enable the men of my time to understand and share my anguished state of mind. With Siegfried, the force of my desire had led me to the fount of the eternal Purely Human. This time, I understood that this desire could not be satisfied by (the constraints) of modern life; running away from this life, escaping its demands through self-annihilation, that was the (sole possible) recourse; thus did I come to the fount of all modern representations of this situation, namely to Jesus of Nazareth (exclusively considered as) human.

I had come to a tremendous and artistically relevant conclusion about the marvelous apparition of this Jesus: I distinguished between the symbolical Jesus and he who, thought of as existing at a specific time and in specific surroundings, is so easily called to heart and mind. I considered the time period and the overall setting in which a soul as loving and so love-hungry as that of Jesus evolved; in a world so dishonorable, so hollow, and so pitiful that he could neither abolish it nor replace it with another earthly order better responding to his soul’s desire, it was natural that the great Solitary One should have dreamed of a better world and to have yearned to leave this one in death. I saw the modern world filled with a baseness akin to that surrounding Jesus; and I felt the same desire. This desire comes naturally to all men who, in an evil and worthless society, experience the need for more noble feelings, in harmony with their purified nature. Death then is but the moment of despair, the act of destruction that we bring upon ourselves, since—in our isolation—we cannot destroy what is evil in the oppressive world. But the actual destruction of these outer, visible bonds would not be self-destruction, but a healthy manifestation of this desire. So I felt inclined to present the nature of Jesus—such

5. Wagner speaking, as we have said, “as artist,” distinguishes here the theological Christ from the historical Christ.
as it is revealed to our understanding of life’s movement—so that the self-sacrifice that Jesus achieved would appear as the incomplete expression of something deeper, namely, the instinct that drives individuals to revolt against a selfish society, a revolt which cannot but end in self-destruction for the altogether isolated individual. But it is in this very destruction that such revolt proclaims its true character; it reveals, indeed, that the real goal was not personal death, but negation of the egoistic society.

I sought to give my rebellious feelings free rein in sketching the drama, Jesus of Nazareth. However, two powerful objections held me back from finishing the preliminary draft: one arose from the contradictory nature of the well-known subject-matter; the other, from the impossibility of adapting this work to public performance. I could not express my modern approach to the question without offending popular conception of the subject, as inscribed in the collective mind as it had become through religious dogmas and everyday ideas. I would have to comment on those ideas, introduce changes out of motives more philosophical than artistic if I wished to draw people gradually from their customary point of view and lead them to the light that now shone for me. Even were I able to overcome this difficulty, I had to recognize that the only thing that could give this subject the meaning I intended was society’s present condition. Once it was destroyed by the revolution, its meaning disappeared. Public performance would have been meaningful only had it been possible to perform it at that particular time. And yet, I clearly understood, given the character of the unrest around me, that I must either remain completely rooted in old traditions, or bring new ideas to complete fruition. This clear-eyed and disabused look at the outside world revealed that I must give up my Jesus of Nazareth altogether…. Every line I might have written would have seemed laughable now that I saw the impossibility of letting artistic hope trick or numb me…. The Dresden uprising occurred; and I, like many others, regarded it as the beginning of a general uprising throughout Germany. Who could be so blind as to fail to see that there was no longer any choice, that now I must resolutely turn my back upon a world to which I had long since ceased to belong, because it no longer responded to my inmost nature?

This is what could be called the German phase of the history of Jesus of Nazareth’s outline; we shall now examine its French phase.
Because of his participation in the Dresden uprising,⁶ Wagner was driven out of Germany; he took refuge in Zurich. “My recent adventures,” he wrote on May 29, “have shown me the way to creating the most important and significant things my nature can produce.”⁷ Liszt persuades him to write a work specifically for Paris; Wagner is enthusiastic about this idea, goes to Paris, and seeks a collaborator: “I must create something new,” he says, “and that I can achieve only by doing everything myself. I am on the look-out for a young French poet willing to follow my idea: I shall arrange the subject myself; he will then compose his French verses as freely as possible.”⁸ And several days later: “My business is to write an opera for Paris; I can do nothing else.” But how can he possibly work in this whirlwind? He needs quiet, the joys of a home. He will thus ask his wife to come settle with him in Zurich: “When my wife has joined me, I shall set to work wholeheartedly. I shall send the sketch of a subject for Paris to Belloni, who will arrange a French version by Gustave Vaez;⁹ the latter should be able to complete his work in October. I shall then leave my wife for some time and return to Paris, to obtain by every means possible a commission for the said subject, then come back to Zurich to compose the music.”¹⁰ On the ninth of July Wagner informed Liszt that he had arrived at an arrangement with G. Vaez,¹¹ but it is in a letter dated August 9 addressed to Uhlig that he provides more precise details about the subject of his future work: “My friend Liszt absolutely wants me to write an opera for Paris: I have been there and

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⁸. Letter of June 5, 1849, from Wagner to Liszt, in Briefwechsel zwischen Wagner und Liszt, 1:22 [Correspondence Between Wagner and Liszt, 1:26].
⁹. Gustave Van Nieuvenhuyzen, called Vaez (Kufferath, Parsifal, 162).
¹⁰. From Wagner to Liszt, undated, in Briefwechsel zwischen Wagner und Liszt, 1:24 [Correspondence Between Wagner and Liszt, 1:28].
¹¹. From Wagner to Liszt, July 9, 1849, in Briefwechsel zwischen Wagner und Liszt, 1:31 [Correspondence Between Wagner and Liszt, 1:36].
made an arrangement with a well-known poet. I must provide him with the complete sketch of a libretto; he will translate it into French, and see about obtaining a commission for me from the Grand-Opéra. Now, besides my Siegfried, I have in mind two tragic and two comic subjects, but neither seems suitable for the French stage: I also have a fifth, and I care not in what language it is presented to the world: Jesus of Nazareth. I am thinking of offering this subject to the French and hope thus to be rid of the whole matter, for I sense the terror this poem will inspire in my collaborator. If he has the courage to stand by me during the stormy production such a project will surely entail, I shall look upon it as fate and continue to work; if he leaves me high and dry, all the better; I will then be freed from all temptation to work in this distasteful jamming language (in der mir verhassten schnatterteng Sprache). Knowing my disposition, you can imagine I have little taste for involving myself in this mess; so I proceed out of consideration for my creditors, to whom I shall send the French takings.”

In a letter of December 27, Wagner expresses an idea dear to him at that time, a sincere idea, we believe, since he had suffered and would suffer for it again: “The work of art cannot be created now, but only prepared by revolutionary means, by destroying and abolishing all that deserves to be destroyed and abolished. That is our work, and others will be the truly creative artists. This is the only way I can reconcile what I must do in Paris: the work I write for Paris can only be an element in the revolution, a positive sign of destruction. Today, destruction alone is necessary.” And Wagner expresses the goal of

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12. Siegfried’s Death later became the Twilight of the Gods.
14. Briefe von Wagner an Uhlig, Fischer, Heine, 21. And 19: “My aim is to create revolution everywhere I go. If I succumb, the defeat will be more honorable than a victory obtained by conventional means. Even without personal success I will have served the cause. Who holds out wins, and holding out for me means—for I am in no doubt about my force of will—to have money enough to live” [from Wagner to Uhlig, December 27, 1849, in Richard Wagner’s Letters to His Dresden Friends, 20 and 19].
participating in the publication of a fledgling periodical, every issue of which “would contain a full cannon charge that would destroy some moldering tower; the first toppled, the next would be attacked, and so on for as long as ammunition lasted.”

The passage from the “Communication” cited earlier reflects the revolutionary spirit in which Jesus of Nazareth was conceived. It is obvious that Wagner, in this respect, had taken a great step: he had at first believed that a German sovereign could place himself at the head of the socialist movement, since that corresponded to the true German imperial tradition, and that, in a century as our own, thanks to the power of widespread revolutionary ideas, he could accomplish Barbarossa’s great project. In any case, he quickly abandoned such dreams. His Vaterlandsverein speech, his outline of Barbarossa and his Siegfried’s Death are from summer of 1848; and yet, at the end of the same year Wagner was already drawing up the scenario for Jesus of Nazareth, which marked his passage to pure anarchism.”

It is nonetheless certain that in his letter of December 27, 1849, Wagner was not alluding to Jesus of Nazareth, but to the outline of Wieland the Smith.

As early as the fourteenth of October he wrote to Liszt, “You have pointed me toward Paris, and I do not refuse to go; but what I must choose and design for Paris cannot be done quickly; I must become someone else entirely while remaining the same. All my numerous preliminary drafts were made to be developed by me and in German.


16. Georges Noufflard, Richard Wagner d’après lui-même, 2nd ed. (Paris: Fischbacher, 1891), 3:22n; see in §2 the passages we summarize on Love and the Law.—Note that Wagner represents Barabbas and Judas as partisans of the national kingship. It even appears that Judas betrays his master solely to oblige him to perform the marvels that will at the same time assure the liberty of Jesus himself and the establishment of his earthly kingdom; see [Wagner], “Jesus von Nazareth,” 2, 12, 13, 21 [PW, vol. 8, Posthumous, Etc., 285, 291, 293, 297]. But Jesus renounces this kingship, wanting to found the new society on Love alone.

17. This outline is found in the third volume of the Gesammelte Werke.
When I consider things in practical terms, I see that subjects I might have intended for Paris (such as *Jesus of Nazareth*) are impossible for many reasons. Above all I need time for inspiration, which comes from a region remote from my everyday disposition. And there is my poem, *Siegfried*: after not having composed a note for two years, my whole artistic soul compels me to write music for it.”

In a letter to Uhlig of February 24, 1850, Wagner, who had just attended the forty-seventh performance of the *Prophet* and had noticed the prodigious success produced by this *spectacular* music [musique à effet] on a public lacking true artistic taste, speaks of his recent letter to Liszt in which he declared that “under no condition whatsoever” would he “write an opera for Paris”; at the most would he accept proposing *Lohengrin*, a work already finished and about which he “no longer cares,” to this public with preoccupations so different from his own.

Wagner would thus courageously obey the ideal impulse of his nature. He would scorn the immediate, inferior advantages that a Parisian success could have assured him, preferring to struggle and suffer, but at least to remain true to himself and to produce a work of art true to his conscience.

He is loath not to be the unique creator of a perfectly sincere work of art, sprung from a single inspiration.

Wagner returns constantly to the same subject: “If I could not warm to the idea of writing an opera for Paris,” he writes to Liszt on December 5, 1849, “it was primarily because of my artistic aversion to the French language. You will not understand this because you are a European, while I am German to the core. I conquered my aversion in

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18. Briefwechsel zwischen Wagner und Liszt, 1:42 [Correspondence Between Wagner and Liszt, 1:48 – 49].


20. “They said: deny yourself, become another, become Parisian in order to win over Paris. Now my resolution is this: remain just as you are, show the Parisians what you desire and can do; your goal is precisely to make them understand what you are!”; letter to Uhlig of December 27, 1849, *Briefe von Wagner an Uhlig, Fischer, Heine* [Richard Wagner’s Letters to His Dresden Friends, 18].
order to pursue an artistic undertaking that appeared rich in potential, but I must confess that it is impossible for me to set to music a poem completely foreign to me.”

What are the other practical impossibilities to which Wagner alludes in the letter of October 14? First of all, what he so aptly calls the “contradictory nature” of the subject in “A Communication to My Friends”: the impossibility of representing Jesus of Nazareth without highlighting the divine character of his mission. Furthermore, the impossibility of truly engaging the audience, short of introducing on stage a being of simple human form that would act and speak. But we cannot clearly explain the two terms of the antinomy without first having glimpsed the main lines of the proposed drama. We shall thus analyze it briefly.

§2. Analysis of the Outline

The drama Jesus of Nazareth is divided into five acts.

The first act takes place at Tiberias, in Galilee. Barabbas and Judas Iscariot discuss an immanent uprising against the Romans, its chances of success, and the likely part that Jesus could play in it. Jesus himself arrives, accompanied by his disciples. The Pharisee Levi (Matthew), seeing his daughter in danger of dying, had implored him to come and heal her. Jesus meets the funeral procession; he restores the child to life. Filled with gratitude, the Pharisee invites Jesus to sit at his table; Jesus accepts. Mary Magdalene, guilty of living in a sinful relationship with a nobleman of Herod’s court, is then brought to him. Jesus pardons the sinner; then, addressing himself to the guests—his disciples, the friends of Levi and the people of the crowd—expounds on his doctrine of Love.

In the second act, Jesus, on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, learns that a crowd is coming to make him king; he gets into a boat and, after having taught them and distributed bread and wine, gives the

21. Briefwechsel zwischen Wagner und Liszt, 1:42 [Correspondence Between Wagner and Liszt, 1:56]; see Briefe von Wagner an Uhlig, Fischer, Heine, the letter to Heine on 87.
signal to depart and removes himself from the enthusiastic masses.

In the third act we are present in Jerusalem at the council of Pilate; the governor rebukes Caiaphas and threatens him with Caesar’s anger, for a new rebellion, though promptly put down, has just broken out; its leader, Barabbas, has been taken and condemned. Caiaphas consults the people’s elders: what is the point of these troubles, especially those that Jesus will cause if he proclaims himself the Messiah? They have everything to lose! … Better that only one perish! … A Pharisee offers to capture Jesus without violence, aided by one of his disciples, Judas. The scene changes: on the square before the grand steps of the temple, the crowd spreads out, uttering cries of joy, strewing flowers and spreading carpets and raiment on the ground. Jesus arrives, riding on an ass; indignant at the sight of the merchants who overcrowd the temple, he takes his mount’s bridle and chases them from the sacred precincts. The crowd acclaims him and begs Jesus openly to proclaim himself the Messiah. Jesus explains that he is the messenger of God and the nature of the redemption he brings to men. The shock of the people, indoctrinated and inflamed by the Pharisees, soon gives way to hostile feelings. Jesus remains alone with his disciples: Do you also, he says to them, wish to abandon me? … Mary Magdalene offers to show them a secure retreat.

Act four: the Last Supper; the perfume poured by Magdalene on Jesus’ head; the final teaching and departure for the Garden of Olives. The Garden of Olives: Jesus betrayed by Judas and led away by soldiers. All the disciples flee, except Peter, who follows his master from afar.

At the fifth act, judgment by Pilate; Jesus’ condemnation.—John and the two Marys come back from Calvary; the two women announce that all is consummated. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter teaches the people who press forward asking for baptism.

Wagner, we see, follows the gospel step by step. He does, however, take certain liberties with the details. Some of these changes are of little importance: Jesus no longer resuscitates the daughter of Jairus, but the daughter of the publican Levi; the episode of Mary Magda-
lène is conflated with that of the adulterous woman. Other times, on the contrary, the alterations are unfortunate. “My friend, what do you come to do?” says Jesus at the Garden of Olives. “Hail, Master,” replies the traitor while embracing Jesus. And Jesus: “Judas, is it with a kiss that you betray the Son of Man!” Wagner replaces this very touching scene with this deplorably banal formulation: “Judas approaches Jesus in great haste: ‘Master,’ he says, ‘I have been looking for you for a long time!’ and he embraces him: the soldiers lead Jesus away.” The gospel recounts that after leaving the praetorium after the triple denial Jesus gives Peter one of those penetrating looks that stirs the soul to its core: overcome, Peter bursts into tears. There is an analogous scene in Wagner, but Jesus speaks and cries out, “Peter!” The silent scene of the gospel is so much more moving, more poignant. These are but small blemishes that might have been altered in the definitive text. In contrast, there are many successful interpretations and modifications dramatizing the gospel narrative, accenting the brilliance of Christ’s words and releasing their true spirit! Barabbas, transformed into a “fervent patriot” and represented as seeking to raise up the Jews against the Romans, speaks the famous words “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Barabbas understands at that moment that he cannot, as he hoped, count on the cooperation of Jesus and that he is alone in organizing the rebellion in which he is immediately vanquished and taken prisoner. In the third act, it is to his troubled apostles, shaken at seeing the people abandoning the One whom they acclaimed only a few moments before, that Jesus poses this heartrending question: “And you also, do you wish to abandon me?” It is in relation to Peter’s oaths of fidelity that Jesus declares it is not necessary to take an oath. In the fifth act, when the servant has recognized Peter and he flees in terror, the soldiers begin laughing and insulting Jesus: “Ah! So these are the heroes,” they exclaim, “with whom you wanted to overcome and rout us Romans!”

at first remains silent, then utters the prophetic words, “I say unto you, this man will be a Stone, a Rock, etc.” Our contemporaries often substitute a crude plot, with no depth or impact, for this most moving example of merciful pardon. The “natural man,” according to the apostle’s expression, incapable of escaping his servitude to baser instincts, judges others after himself; never will he believe that the most absolute purity may be compatible with the deepest tenderness. Wagner, on the contrary, successfully developed and enriched the gospel narrative by having Magdalene intervene in each of the great drama’s acts without altering the wholly ideal character of this absolute offering of herself to the One who restored and pardoned her. There is nothing more touching than the scene in which the sinner Magdalene throws herself at the feet of Mary, mother of Jesus, owns up to her faults and, whimpering, implores Mary to let Jesus, and the small flock accompanying him, accept her as the least among the servants.

But above all Wagner treats the august personality of the Savior with profound respect. There is no trace of those kinds of superficial judgment where the idea’s accuracy is sacrificed to literary artifice.

And nonetheless, in his meticulous work, M. Noufflard asserts without explanation that Wagner “did not view the son of Mary through the eyes of a believer and there did not dwell in him a God descended upon earth in order to die, but on the contrary, a man, truly man who wanted to live.” M. Noufflard relies solely on the passage already cited from the “Communication” where Wagner speaks above all “as an

24. If one followed logic, the meaning of the famous text of St. Luke (7:47) would be, “Many sins are forgiven her (you can conclude) because she has just shown me such great love.” It seems nonetheless that the Evangelist intended to establish a relation of causality between this love and divine pardon. In any case, to understand by this love Magdalene’s past mistakes, as is often done, is to place something abominable on the Savior’s lips.

25. 1 Cor 2:14.

26. “Sie begehre, als die niederste Magd der Gemeinde dienen zu dürfen” [she desires to be allowed to serve the community as the lowliest servant]. This will be the cry of the repentant Kundry: “Dienen … dienen!” [to serve … to serve]; GS10:365 (477).


28. See §1.
artist” and has the dramatic value of his subject in mind. In order to be thorough, M. Noufflard should have referred to the Outline itself, published before the second edition of his first volume. In this draft, Wagner, not focusing particularly on the theatrical side of the question, uses terms a strict orthodoxy would find unpalatable: “I am the Messiah and the Son of God; I tell you this that you may not be led astray and look for any other.” “Jesus announces his true mission, his title as son of God, the redemption of all peoples of the earth through him, not of the Jews alone.” “Jesus recounts his youth, his baptism by John, his sojourn in the wilderness; there did his task grow clear to him, and he looked upon himself not as David’s descendent, but as son of God.”

Wagner himself commented helpfully on this interesting passage:

Jesus descended from the line of David, out of which the Redeemer of the Jewish nation was to come: and yet David’s own lineage went back to Adam, the immediate offspring of God, from whom all men spring. When Jesus was baptized by John, the people recognized him as the heir of David; but he went into the wilderness and pondered: should he value his descent from David in its commonly accepted meaning? If he succeeded, he would become one among many great men of the world, reliant on the rich and the selfish!—As descendant of the oldest race, he might claim supreme dominion of the world and might justly spurn the Roman rule of violence. How would men be helped by the success of such an enterprise? One form of domination would replace another; only the titles (more apt) would change. Jesus went back farther still, to the founder of his race, to Adam, direct offspring of God. Might not a superhuman power be manifested in he who was conscious of a divine origin? Looking down upon Jerusalem from the pinnacle of the Temple, he was tempted to work a miracle in this temple consecrated to his divine Father. But wherein lies this power, and whom ought it to help, if not men? From man must come the power to help man, namely, the knowledge of himself before God, who manifests himself in man. So Jesus set aside Davidic descent: through Adam he descended from God and all men were his brothers: he could not release them from misery through an earthly kingship, but through fulfillment of the sublime divine mission he rec-
ognized (as his own); in this mission God made himself human so that through this man, the first to recognize God in himself, all men might attain consciousness (of the divine element in their nature). 29

Here indeed, in these last lines especially, is an example of what one could call Hegelian theology; Wagner, at this point, adopted its terms; later he would come to prefer those of Schopenhauer. The influence of Hegelian doctrine is more striking still in the three discourses that can be entitled “Love and the Law,” “Death,” and “Woman.” Those who still doubt the metaphysical preoccupations of Wagner and the influence of philosophical ideas on the composition of his dramas have only to read this brief passage. 30 Its pages are interesting because they bear witness to the arduous birth of thought in this otherwise powerfully organized mind; they prove the labor with which this mind, so alive, so admirably synthetic, so at ease in the midst of the undefined forms of feeling and music, attained a clarity and precision of ideas.

What, for example, is the Love extolled by Wagner, this Love, fundamental and eternal law and essence of beings, that knowing it and practicing it allows one to become, as Jesus, son of God and God himself? Wagner never explicitly says. Yet he cannot intend passionate love, which is precisely the cause of most of our sadness and misfortune. The meaning of the word remains undefined; one senses, one gathers, however, that Love as he conceives it contains alongside its impassioned, egoistic element, whose exclusive development engenders so many miseries, a superior, disinterested element, the gift of self, of devotion, which constitutes the nobility of love and confers upon it a sacred character.

Distinguishing these elements, analyzing the complex essence of love, would have preserved Wagner from a double exaggeration:

30. The booklet entitled Jesus of Nazareth encompasses three sections: (1) the outline of the drama itself; (2) explanations, expositions, sketches of maxims or of discourses of Christ; (3) thirty-two pages of citations taken from the entire New Testament, proving both that Wagner had prepared the subject and that he possessed a profound knowledge of Scripture.
he would not have claimed, in the first place, that present-day society rests solely on a material basis, the possession of women by husbands, of children by their parents, of riches by owners—a selfish, loveless possession, brutally constituted and protected by law; in the second place, he would not have maintained that in overthrowing this artificial and criminal system, in returning by the act itself to nature, pure love, which is supposed to fill up naturally the heart of man, would flood the universe, replacing conventions invented by human selfishness and becoming the unique and sufficient Law.

These two exaggerations are foundational for anarchist theory. Given the consciousness [sentiment] of evolution essential to German thinkers, how was it that Wagner did not understand that if the direction of human evolution (individual or collective) admittedly tends toward disinterested Love, its evolution nonetheless never proceeds ex nihilo? One ought not therefore to dream of destruction, but of the undefined progressive improvement of what already exists. Love in the heart of man, and probably men themselves, still feel the lowliness of their origins in a most pathetic way; nonetheless no one now would dare admit the legitimacy of a frankly self-centered love and would not approve of anyone who considered woman only as an instrument of pleasure or an abject slave. Will man ever control his animal instinct so that this ideal, purely disinterested love can fully bloom? Will we eventually love the beloved for himself instead of for oneself? Will we understand how absurd and reprehensible it is to force happiness on a person, to foist oneself on him as a unique source of joy or moral progress? When will human nature be refined enough that the expression, “freedom of love,” will no longer mean licentiousness? Utopia, it will be said. Quite possibly, but humanity advances only by assimilating what there is of truth in utopias; all that is needed is to refuse to accept them slavishly and also to distinguish in them the spirit from the letter. Civil or religious laws are thus no longer an obstacle; through them the parts of the Ideal already understood and accepted by the best are expressed and determined, and this portion increases from age to age.
Wagner was therefore wrong to interpret the doctrine of Jesus through his own anarchist doctrine. The Savior no more claimed to play the role of an economist than he did that of a historian or a natural philosopher. Tolstoy said it well: “Christ recognizes two sides of the parallelogram, two eternal, imperishable forces of which man’s life is comprised: the force of animal nature and the force of consciousness. Christ never mentions the animal force that, in asserting itself, always remains true to form and outside the will of man; he speaks only of divine force, calling man to the highest awareness of this force, to his most complete liberation and to his greatest development.” Why then does Tolstoy himself neglect one of the sides of the parallelogram, namely the inferior forces governed by scientific, economic, and social laws, and want to consider only the divine sentiment of Charity? Forgetting that “the letter kills and the spirit gives life,” he adheres to the literal interpretation of certain expressions, those, for example, of the Sermon on the Mount addressed to listeners who believed in the immanent end of the world, for whom, then, social, economic, and other questions were not relevant. From that stems the most deplorable exaggerations.

We have focused on the first discourse at length because of its close relationship to the Tetralogy, to which it could and should serve as preface or argument.

The two other studies, “Death” and “Woman,” are less interesting. They follow along similar lines: parents’ partial gift of their own substance, bequeathed to children, is a negation of egoism; death brings about the sacrifice of the individual to the universal. To understand and accept this offering of oneself, to give up one’s place vol-

32. See Mt 16:28; 24:34; 26:64; 1 Cor 15; 7:31; 2 Pt 3:11, 12; Rv 22:10, etc.
33. In issues 8–9 of the Revue wagnérienne 1 (1885–86): 237, M. Teodor de Wyzewa compares “The Religion of R. Wagner to the Religion of Count Leo Tolstoy” (“La religion de Richard Wagner et la religion du comte Léon Tolstoi”). Both end with Renunciation in Compassion. M. de Wyzewa recognizes that “Wagner more willingly shows the splendors of theory, Tolstoy its practical applications.” This is because Wagner has a preeminently artistic temperament, Tolstoy the nature of an essentially active apostle.
34. [I.e., “Love and the Law.”]
untarily so that a life more abundant and more varied follows upon our own, as the plant follows upon the seed, is to accomplish the law of Love, to cooperate in creation, to live the divine life and to escape thereby the destruction that frightens the egoist.

Wagner drowns these ideas in a wave of subtle speculation; but we know that these pages were not definitive; they would have been summed up in luminous and penetrating words placed on the Savior’s lips. Would Wagner have succeeded in this task? It is so difficult to have Christ speak a language worthy of him! Acceptable formulations such as these: “Not marriage hallows love,—but love hallows marriage” or “Who then is the thief: he who took from his neighbor what his neighbor had need of, or he who took from the rich man what he needed not?” allow us to glimpse the forms into which the nebulous and diffuse material of these essays might have been condensed.

Wagner’s state of mind at this time is apparent: he is in favor of an optimism or better a naturalist meliorism for which, on the whole, Nature is everything; Wagner still gives it the name of God, particularly when he considers the Law of life and the love governing it, but one should not harbor any illusion; in this system as in Hegel’s there is no God other than Nature. And this Nature is not, as for Spinoza, a perfect substance that deserves the name of God, although, by an inexplicable contradiction, it takes the form of an infinity of imperfect modes; it is an essence undergoing a perpetual passage from an inferior degree of being to a superior, an eternal fieri, an indeterminate perfectibility, in no way an infinite Perfection.

Do not Hegel and his disciples practice a sort of hypocrisy in continuing to use the word God when they no longer give it the meaning of perfect Being adopted by Plato, Aristotle, and the Christian tradition? Many have not been able to come to terms with this metaphysical Pharisaism and, rejecting the label of pantheists, have preferred the name monists. Wagner, who, in Jesus of Nazareth, had preserved the orthodox formulas and, we feel, a sincere kernel of belief,

35. Renan was the most brilliant popularizer of Hegel’s ideas in France.
soon abandoned this last bit of Christianity and openly professed that there is no reason to seek a reality superior to humanity—God and religions, according to Feuerbach’s teaching, being only the idealized aspirations of human nature.36

That Wagner was influenced by Feuerbach is beyond question. Wagner himself explains that this thinker attracted him “because he dismissed philosophy (we would say: metaphysics) in which he found theology in disguise.”37

And—to cite a writer beyond reproach—“Ludwig Feuerbach is no doubt the most advanced, if not the most serious expression of the antipathy (of the new German school for Christianity), and if the nineteenth century were to witness the end of the world, it is he who would surely be called the Antichrist. Feuerbach comes close to defining Christianity as a perversion of human nature and the Christian aesthetic as a perversion of the most secret instincts of the heart. . . . Believing in God and in the immortality of the soul is, in his opinion, as superstitious as believing in the Trinity and in miracles. Criticism of heaven is, for him, merely criticism of earth; theology must become anthropology. Any consideration of a higher world, any glance cast by man beyond himself and the real, any religious feeling, under whatever form it manifests itself, is but an illusion.”38 Such is indeed the doctrine that we find in the theoretical writings published at this

36. Wagner, Die Wibelungen (Summer 1848), GS 2:123 (162); “Oper und Drama” [“Opera and Drama”] (1850), GS 4:31 (41).
37. Preface to the third and fourth volumes of GS 3:3 (4).
38. “Feuerbach et la nouvelle école hégélienne,” Ernest Renan’s Études d’histoire religieuse (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, Libraires Éditeurs, 1863), 407 and 417. “When a German boasts of being impious,” adds Renan, “one ought never to believe his word. The German is not capable of being irreligious; religion, that is, the aspiration to the ideal world, is at the very core of his nature. When he wants to be atheistic, he is so devoutly and with a kind of unction. What if you practice the cult of the beautiful and the true; if the sanctity of morality speaks to your heart; if all beauty and all truth carry you to the threshold of the holy life; what if, having arrived there, you renounce the word, you cover your head, you intentionally confuse your thought and your language to say nothing limited in face of the infinite, how can you dare speak of atheism? If your faculties, resonating simultaneously, have never produced this great unique sound we call God, I have nothing more to say; you lack the essential and characteristic element of our nature” (417–18).
time. The confusion between Christianity and asceticism, which is, however, only a particular and very special application, often even an exaggeration, a degeneration of the Christian idea, returns time and again. So Christianity, according to Wagner, is diametrically opposed to the Aesthetic. Art, he writes in 1849, is joy in itself, the joy of living, of being conscious of oneself in the great Whole; it could not bloom in the period of the Roman Empire’s decadence. Abasement, universal degradation, consciousness of the complete loss of human dignity, distaste even for material pleasures, the only ones that could then remain, absolute discouragement with regard to all effort, all activity—these are, in fact, the characteristics of this deplorable time. And yet, since every state creates the form capable of representing it, the late Roman Empire created its own: “this could not be Art, it was Christianity.”

Also quite significant is the passage in which he opposes Love rising spontaneously from human nature, the Love he would soon glorify in the Tetralogy by embodying it in Brünnhilde, to Christian charity, object of a revelation, a teaching, a commandment, which makes it, in his mind, something external to the soul and artificial. But nothing is more characteristic than this letter written to Liszt on April 13, 1853:

How could you ever think that I would mock your generous outpourings? The forms through which we seek comfort from our misery depend upon our nature, our needs, the character of our education and the strength of our artistic feelings. Who would be heartless enough to believe that he has

40. "Oper und Drama" ["Opera and Drama"], GS 4:310 (383) [PW, vol. 2, Opera and Drama, 104].
42. Briefwechsel zwischen Wagner und Liszt, 235–37 [Correspondence Between Wagner and Liszt, 1:277 –79].
conceived the one legitimate form? Perhaps only he who has never had to give shape to his own hope and faith out of a personal need to do so, but who (as to an individual incapable of independent thought) has had it imposed on him by those around him. This shape is thus a simple postulate belonging to others. Consequently, the person in question has absolutely no interior life, and in order to maintain his own empty existence, he imposes the postulate first imposed on him by those around him, pretending it is his own. He who longs and hopes and believes willingly rejoices in the hope and faith of others: all arguments about the true form come entirely from the sheer stubbornness of always wanting to be right.

See, my friend, I also have a strong faith, for which I have been humiliated by politicians and jurists. I have faith in the future of the human race, and I draw that faith simply from my (inner) needs. I have succeeded in regarding natural and historical phenomena with love and freedom of expression; I have understood their essence and found in them no evil other than a lack of love (Lieblösigkeit). But I could only understand this lovelessness as a distraction, a distraction that will lead us from a state of natural unconsciousness to the discovery of the unique and necessary beauty of love. This science of practical activity is the responsibility of world history; the earth, nature itself, is the stage on which that decision must one day play out, since everything that leads us to this blessed science stems from it. The state of egoism (Lieblösigkeit) is a state of suffering for the human race: this suffering’s plenitude surrounds us now; it tortures your friend with a thousand burning wounds. But it is precisely in this suffering that we recognize the wonderful necessity of love. We desire it and cry out for it with an intensity that our painful experience alone makes possible. This is how we gained a strength that man in his natural state could not conceive. And this strength, expanded to all humanity, will create on this earth an existence no one will want to leave for a hereafter now become superfluous. Man will be happy, will live and love. And who would long to leave this life while he loves? . . .

I also believe in a hereafter: I have just shown it to you; if it is beyond my life, it is not beyond what I can feel, think, grasp, and comprehend, for I believe in mankind—and need nothing else!

We ask in all sincerity whether the protest “Who would desire to leave this life when he loves?” is not proof that at this time Wag-
ner did not experience the pessimistic anguish that tortured his soul when he wrote the passionate but gloomy drama, *Tristan and Isolde*, where love appears as a curse for life here below, a torment that death alone can end?

On the other hand, after reading the preceding texts, we do not think it possible to doubt that Wagner misunderstood, despised Christianity, that he had, by this time, replaced its ancient beliefs with an entirely naturalist and humanitarian faith. This naturalistic faith would find its full expansion and fitting expression in the *Ring of the Nibelung*. 
The Ring of the Nibelung
or Tetralogy

§1. The Revolutionary Idea

Siegfried’s Death,⁴ a completely revised poem in three acts, was turned into the magnificent drama The Ring of the Nibelung, the text³ of which was printed in 1853 and shared with just a few friends.³

This date is important. It was, in fact, on June 14, 1848, that Wagner delivered his famous speech to members of the “Fatherland Society.”⁴ A year later, at the beginning of May, the Dresden uprising

1. GS 2: Der Nibelungen-Mythus, followed by Siegfrieds Tod. M. Chamberlain brings out with remarkable clarity the marked differences that separate these outlines of The Ring of the Nibelung; see Chamberlain, Drame wagnérien, 168ff. [146ff]. The Ring of the Nibelung is divided into a prologue and three parts designed to be performed over four days, hence its name Tetralogy. We shall designate the various parts by their initial letter: R.: Das Rheingold (Gold of the Rhine); W.: Die Walküre (The Valkyrie); S.: Siegfried; G.: Götterdämmerung (Twilight of the Gods). [Hébert refers to the Schott edition (Mainz and Paris, 1876) but provides the French titles throughout. The translation here reflects Hébert’s renderings into French, or our translations where Hébert gives the German text without translation. References to two English translations of The Ring are also given for readers wishing to locate passages in the operas: Wagner, The Ring of the Nibelung, trans. Andrew Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), and Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, eds., Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000)].

2. The music for Das Rheingold was completed in 1854; that of Die Walküre in 1856; that of Siegfried in 1869; and that of Götterdämmerung in 1874.


4. [Vaterlandsverein, a radical republican society that emerged in the spring of 1848 as Saxony’s leading opposition movement; Hébert rendered this “Union des Patriotes.”]
broke out. Precisely what part had Wagner played? That task may be left to his biographers.

What is beyond all discussion is the enthusiasm with which he welcomed the reformist movement. Nonetheless, given the usual meaning of the word, the epithet revolutionary cannot be applied to him without several qualifications. The proof is in the letter Wagner addressed to Lüttichau, intendant of the royal theatres of Dresden, three days after his Fatherland Society speech, in which he recognizes how wrong he had been to show to so prosaic a public “the poetic image” of royalty he had dreamed.

What exactly was this ideal conception of the future role of roy-

5. In his work Wagner as I Knew Him (London: Longmans, Green, 1892), Ferdinand Praeger cites a letter by the Master to Edward Roeckel (brother of Auguste) in which these words appear: “Although I had not accepted a special rôle, yet was I present everywhere, actively super-intending the bringing in of convoys…. I was actively engaged in the revolutionary movement up to its final struggle and it was a pure accident that I, too, was not taken prisoner in company with Roeckel and Bakunin.” [Praeger’s translation. The text of the letter in Praeger has “with Heubner and Bakunin”; 189–90.] M. Chamberlain has raised such strong objections against the authenticity of this letter and more generally against the accuracy of the majority of Praeger’s citations (see Bayreuther Blätter, 1893 and 1894) that we insert this passage only with strong reservations.

[Hetbert is making reference to a discrepancy between the portrayal of Wagner’s involvement set forth in his autobiographical My Life, which tended to minimize his contributions, and that of eyewitness accounts and the royal investigation that present a different view; see Kohler, Richard Wagner, chap. 3, for an assessment of the evidence.]

On the other hand, in his pamphlet A Vindication (London: Kegan Trench, 1892), 44, also composed in order to refute a large number of Praeger’s assertions, W. Ashton Ellis cites these lines taken from the biography Richard Wagner (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1883, 162) by Richard Pohl: “Richard Wagner did not mount the barricades as has been claimed, but he accepted the ‘musical direction’ of the revolution; it was he who superintended the signals, the tocsin. He also organized convoys and roused the combatants by his speeches.”

Still, Wagner was not one of the organizers of the uprising. Bakunin expressly declared this in the course of his trial: “For me, Wagner has only ever been a visionary, and although I often spoke politics with him, nevertheless we never came to a mutual agreement over common action”; cited by Dinger, Richard Wagner’s gesitige Entwickelung, 1:179.

alty? Would the king, “the first, the truest republican,” be a simple president of the republic? Or on the contrary, would Wagner choose to present him as in the past, invested with an absolute power, free of parliamentary impediments, but completely devoted to the interests of his people, maintaining constant communication with them, to such degree that a kind of cooperation for the common good might develop between nation and king?

What is certain is that Wagner viewed the organization of the society of his time as defective, as fundamentally bad, and as needing to be modified from top to bottom. He felt the abolition of conventions, the return to the “purely human,” would bring about a new order of things in which social and artistic reform would be achieved simultaneously. Wagner never separated the two.

Such is the dream to which he alludes in the following passage, in which he explains his attitude in 1849: “The possibility of a radical change in the constitution of society seemed suddenly to reveal itself to me. . . . I thus turned toward the new movement that seemed so promising for my dream. But, after a brief examination of these systems, I became troubled, asking myself whether the purely human element, the foundation of the revolution, would not be forgotten in the midst of factional quarrels over the value of different forms of government, the differences among those being, of course, a simple question of preference.”

Wagner’s thinking went beyond the petty issue of factions: “Never,” he wrote in 1851 (never, that is, until 1849), “had I engaged in

7. See Dinger, Richard Wagner’s gestige Entwickelung, 124.
8. Ibid., 128, 133. Note that Wagner carefully distinguishes Koenigthum from Monarchismus, the constitutional monarchy whose abolition he desires. In the letter to Lüttichau, Wagner explains that if he delivered his speech, it was to refute the misconception that the very idea of republic entails the abolition of royalty.
9. [The “purely human” has been characterized as “an admittedly vague reformist ideal” that involved both “a set of values and an indictment of contemporary society. Its goals of inner freedom, selflessness, creativity-for-its-own-sake, and communal harmony could be achieved only by purging the social order of materialism, utilitarianism, and mindless hedonism”; David C. Large, “Wagner’s Bayreuth Disciples,” in Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics, 81.]
10. Wagner, L’oeuvre et la mission de ma vie, end of chap. 7.
politics in the strict sense of the word. I remember being interested only in those politics reflecting the revolutionary spirit, that is, the revolt of pure human nature against political-juristic formalism. . . . They interested me only when I could pull from phenomena the formal elements they had developed from traditional legal rights, and attain their internal core of purely human essence. Then, indeed, I found the same motive which impelled me, as an artist, to reject the defective physical form of the present in order to create a new perceptible form that would respond to the true essence of humanity—a form that could only be obtained by the destruction of the physical form of the present, thus through Revolution.”

The ideal sphere in which his thought moved is apparent. But as utopia contains the seeds of progress yet to come, men of ideas are always suspect to those who represent the established order; just as he had in his relations with Roeckel and his conduct during the uprising, Wagner had seriously compromised himself and was exiled not only from Saxony, but from Germany.

Having sought refuge in Zurich, he composed three of his most important theoretical works: “Art and Revolution,” “The Art-Work of the Future,” and “Opera and Drama.” Even if these works of analysis and criticism went against his natural proclivities, at least they allowed him “to free his mind from all uncertainty and all confusion” and to become fully aware of the particular character of his genius.

From then on his hesitation disappeared. An adventuresome and tireless traveler, he plunged into old myths as mysterious and thick as the ancient forests of Germania. He felt himself once more “the true unfettered artist.” The gaiety of Siegfried, the joy of living and acting, filled his own heart when, after having mended the two broken pieces of the sword—music and poetry—he leaped forth to fight the monster—false art, corrupted and corruptor—and to win the divine virgin, all grace and all light, harmony and truth. He, too, under-

13. Ibid.
stood the bird singing in the forest, the celestial being, “living symbol of the soul,” which sings deep thoughts for him to a melodious rhythm. Wagner, as we have said, had dreamed this fine dream of justice and love, which haunts the high-minded and generous of heart, and from which stemmed and would continue to stem improvement and progress for poor humanity.

He tells of this dream in his address of June 14.

After having demanded the abolition of aristocratic privileges and the establishment of a kind of universal suffrage, he adds:

When the enmity and jealousy separating different classes will have ceased to exist, and all those who draw breath in our dear German land shall be united into one great free people, then will we have attained our goal? We shall only just have begun. Then it will be necessary to study boldly, with all our reasoning power, the underlying causes for the misery of our present social condition: can man, the king of creation, with his outstanding physical, moral and aesthetic talents, have been destined by God to be the slave of an inert and base product of nature, of pale metal?  

Should money exert such degrading tyranny over man—the image of God—as to enslave the noble and free human will to the passions of usury and avarice? Such is the first battle that must engage miserable and fallen humanity in reconquering its liberty. This war will cause neither blood nor tears to flow. Victory is assured; from now on all will be convinced of this truth: humanity will attain supreme happiness when as many active men as the earth can feed will unite, pooling their varied talents, to meet, thanks to an exchange of labor, each other’s needs and contribute to universal happiness. We shall also recognize that human society is inherently corrupted when the energy of individuals is restricted and their powers cannot develop freely, completely. . . . We shall finally see society maintained by its members’ activity and not by money’s alleged activity. God will help us demonstrate and apply these principles. Then this diabolical prejudice of money will vanish like an evil spirit from

15. [“The Vaterlandsverein Speech,” in PW, vol. 4, Art and Politics, 138.]
16. It is money, not property, that Wagner attacks in this address, in which he declares moreover his rejection of the communist utopia [ibid., 138–39].
the shadows. With money will disappear its disgraceful consequences, public and private usury, the fraud of paper money and fraudulent speculation. Thus will the emancipation of the human race come about; thus will come to fruition the pure doctrine of Christ, now hidden from us by the magic of a dogma invented for the sole purpose of imposing it on a crude world of simple-minded barbarians.

Is this not an explanation of the strange theme running through the Tetralogy from beginning to end and giving it its unity: gold must be returned to the daughters of the Rhine, the deceptive metal returned to nature’s womb from which it should never have been extracted; that is, riches must be suppressed, and by the same token cupidity, ambition, and the innumerable miseries they unleash upon the world? The principle of these calamities is indeed the withering of the heart, the death of all disinterestedness, of all generous feeling, the egoism that, in the end, riches and power fatally engender. For, it is noteworthy that Wagner does not separate cupidity from ambition; it is not only gold, but a ring of gold that guarantees universal domination for its possessor.

And yet, what is the price of winning it? Renouncing love.17 And once love is extinguished in the heart, no one shrinks from any crime: Fafner kills his brother Fasolt; Mime, at first compassionate toward the unfortunate Sieglinde’s misfortune, wants to poison Siegfried, the very child he has adopted and raised, in order to possess the deadly gold; finally, Hagen cowardly murders the young hero. The gold brings misfortune even to those who touch it with pure hands and whose hearts, as that of Siegfried, are absolutely unfamiliar with dis-

17. R., 16, 18, etc. [Porter, 15, 16, etc.; Spencer and Millington, 68, 69, etc.]. It is impossible for us to analyze Wagner’s dramas here; we refer the reader to Richard Wagner, by Catulle Mendès (Paris: Charpentier, 1886), and for psychological analysis of characters and study of sources to Ernst, L’art de Richard Wagner, to the very interesting pamphlets: Lohengrin (1891), La Walkyrie (1893), Siegfried (1894), Tristan et Isolde (1894), and Parsifal (1893) of Kufferath. Un pèlerinage à Bayreuth, by Émile de Saint-Auban (Paris: Albert Savine, 1892) contains an excellent appreciation of Parsifal and Die Meistersinger; Albert Soubies’s Mélanges sur R. Wagner (Paris: Fischbacher, 1892) contains an interesting chapter on Die Feen. We cite here only works that are easy to read. The Wagnerian bibliography is remarkably extensive; a general catalog published recently includes 9,462 entries.
honest dealings. How strong is Alberich’s curse! How true his prophecy: “Glittering gold, for the one who desires to possess you, no more joy, no more happiness, but bitter troubles and terrible jealousies, fear, terror and death.”\textsuperscript{18}

But nothing equals, in their vigorous conciseness, Brünnhilde’s last words, a succinct summation of the entire poem: “It has swept away the race of the gods like a breath. . . . The store of my sacred wisdom, I bequeath to the world: These are no longer blessings: gold or godly pomp, houses, courtyards, lordly splendor, nor the false ties of dark agreements, or the hard law of hypocritical morals, but a single thing that during good and bad days renders us happy: Love!”\textsuperscript{19}

Such is indeed Wagner’s idea, the revolutionary Wagner of 1849, the friend of Roeckel and Bakunin. We see this in his theories on Love in Jesus of Nazareth\textsuperscript{20} or in the exalted tirades he contributed at that time to Roeckel’s democratic newspaper Volksblatter, in particular the enthusiastic article, a veritable dithyramb in honor of Revolution, that appeared scarcely a month before the Dresden uprising.

He represents Revolution as borne on the wing of the tempest, her head high, wreathed by lightning, holding a sword in one hand, a torch in the other, her gaze somber, stern, and menacing; and nonetheless, for those who dare to look her in the face, what an outpouring of pure love, what a radiance of happiness! She addresses all sufferers, all the victims of a selfish society: “I am,” she says, “the life which eternally creates and renews! . . . I come to destroy the power of the one over all, of the dead over the living, of matter over spirit; I desire to abolish the power of potentates, of the law and of property. Let man henceforth obey only himself, let his desire be his only law and his strength his whole possession; for there is no saint other than the free man, and there is nothing greater than he! . . . Let there be

\textsuperscript{18} R., 60 [Porter, 58; Spencer and Millington, 105–6].

\textsuperscript{19} G., 85 [Spencer and Millington, 362–63]: “Nicht Gut, nicht Gold, noch goettliche Pracht, etc.” [Not wealth, not gold, nor godly splendor] Wagner did not insert these words into the definitive text, but they are preserved in a note in GS 6:255 (363). If he deleted them, it is, he says, because their meaning appeared to him sufficiently expressed by the music.

\textsuperscript{20} See §2 of chap. 3.
no more hatred, nor envy, ill-will nor enmity! You must all proclaim yourselves brothers; and free, free in your will, free in your acts, free in your pleasures, you will know the value of life! I am the only God that all beings acknowledge, the great All that embraces all of nature and communicates life and joy to it!”\(^{21}\)

The same thesis is espoused by those in our day who preach the return to nature.\(^{22}\) “Laws,” they say, “have been necessary: from the beginning of humanoid existence, our ancestors used them as crutches. They supported them up until now. Let us reject this henceforth unnecessary and impeding apparatus. Dogmas and codes have instilled pity and justice in our blood: now that we have assimilated the better part it is no longer necessary to burden ourselves with their formulas. They are the fiber of the food we have digested. Let us eliminate this detritus. . . . Let us cast off this enormous mass of now dried-out fictions, prejudices that slow our progress, that obstruct our view and determine imaginary faults at the same time they legalize real crimes.”\(^{23}\)

One thus understands the criticisms of Wagner’s boldness in having brought the illicit love of a brother and a sister, Siegmund and Sieglinde, to the stage. To be sure, it could be noted that in primitive myths these marriages between twins appeared to symbolize the close connection between simultaneous phenomena;\(^{24}\) it could be added that, according to the Bible itself, the human race owes its growth to unions of this kind; but this would be to dodge the difficulty.

Wagner’s clear intent is to symbolize the reaction of nature against convention. The Aesir, whose chief was Odin (= Wotan) brought civilization into Scandinavia and replaced a reign of brutal force with

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22. What admirable symbols of the return to nature are these waters of the Rhine overrunning the scene at the end of the Twilight of the Gods, causing the debris of the former world to disappear forever, especially the Ring and Tamhelm, images of the tyrannies and hypocrisies of present day civilization!
24. In the present case, Spring and Love. Recall that in German love is gendered feminine; W., 21 [Porter, 91; Spencer and Millington, 135].
one of treaties and laws. In particular they had forbidden marriage between brother and sister. Thus the case chosen by Wagner becomes comprehensible: nature is the true love between two beings for whom the community of blood is merely a symbol of the kinship of souls; convention is the shameful slavery to which Hunding submitted Sieglinde and that his egoism dignifies with the name of marriage.

Sole earthly representatives of the divine race, Siegmund and Sieglinde alone could understand one another. The same celestial flame gleamed in their eyes. Their love is not the common love at first sight, a mutual obsession of two excitable and weak beings, but rather the immediate attraction, the reciprocal, irrevocable gift of two hearts living the same life.

Fricka, the “protector of marriage and of sacred oaths,” violently attacks this union of Siegmund and Sieglinde in a long discussion with Wotan. Wotan replies, “What evil have they done, these twins whom spring has united in love? Love has enchanted them!” Fricka, quite beside herself at this absence of moral sense, bursts forth in reproach: “You have never seen the like,” resumes Wotan with great calm, “well, witness it now; although it has never happened before, what does it matter? Know that it is a spontaneous union; be favorable to this love, and bless the bond of Siegmund and Sieglinde.”

It has been claimed that Fricka symbolizes reason, moral conscience. We do not agree. The true character of Wotan’s sterile spouse can be summed up in these words: “You can understand only what customarily occurs.”

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25. W., 6, 9, 16, 23 [Porter, 77, 80, 86, 93; Spencer and Millington, 123, 126, 131, 137].
26. “Der Ehe Hüterin—Um der Ehe heiligen Eid … ich klage” [“Matrimony’s guardian—for matrimony’s holy vow I grieve”]; W., 28 [Porter, 98; Spencer and Millington, 141–42].
27. W., 28, 31 [Porter, 98, 100; Spencer and Millington, 142–43, 144].
28. In a letter to Uhlig (November 12, 1851) Wagner said that Fricka represents mores (Sitte), which is not the same thing as morality considered under its absolute, ideal aspect [Richard Wagner’s Letters to His Dresden Friends, 137–41].
29. “Stets Gewohnthes nur magst du versteh’n”; W., 31 [Porter, 100; Spencer and Millington, 144].
letter of the law by an intelligent interpretation, maintaining, protecting custom because it is the custom, and not because of the rational element it may contain, such is her domain.

As for the marriage of Wotan and Fricka, it is easily explained: pure instinct (Wotan) would be a devastating torrent if it were not contained, directed by the totality of social conventions. But, in order to unite himself with Fricka, Wotan has had to sacrifice one of his eyes; that is, he sees only one aspect of things, the conventional, utilitarian side; the other, the true aspect of free nature, will forever elude him.

And yet Wotan loved Erda, Eternal Wisdom; he strove for intelligence; so he preserves in memory a vague intuition of a higher order of things in which marriage, for example, would not be regulated by laws established by and for the comfort and interests of the dominant class: “A sacrilege!” he exclaims, “the oath that unites two beings who do not love one another!” Fricka veils her face, declaring that she will defend lawful unions against all.

The scene would be comical if the formidable problem the spouses debate were not, fundamentally, that of free love, a thesis dear to many reformers and whose unexpected refutation we find in the course of the poem.

Revolution would modify and transform not only the social hier-

30. R., 22 [Porter, 21; Spencer and Millington, 72]; G., 6 [Porter, 248; Spencer and Millington, 281], on the other hand, presents the primitive myth.
32. S., 75 [Porter, 222; Spencer and Millington, 256].
33. W., 40 [Porter, 109; Spencer and Millington, 152].
34. W., 28 [Porter, 98; Spencer and Millington, 142].
35. One can apply to Siegmund and Sieglinde what M. Gaston Paris has justly said of Tristan and Isolde: "We see that the basic issue is the theory of the right of passion of which the romantics were so fond, the theory of the right of individual development of which poets and contemporary thinkers are so fond. This theory, however it presents itself, is as dangerous as it is seductive, but it constitutes, with the opposing theory of duty and submission, one of the poles between which the moral life of humanity eternally oscillates. The great danger it presents is that, made for exceptional natures and situations, it can be and it is often invoked outside of conditions that alone could make it admissible: poets easily imagine these conditions, but they are rarely encountered in real life and one is too easily led to believe them created for oneself"; Gaston Paris, “Tristan et Iseut,” Revue de Paris (April 15, 1894): 176.
archy, laws, property, and marriage, but also the religious order itself, which would be overthrown and destroyed. *Twilight of the Gods* is the significant title Wagner affixed to the *Tetralogy*’s final part.\(^{36}\) Up until that point Wagner’s God, although conceived in rather vague fashion as “the God of joy and happiness, the God who created music,”\(^ {37}\) remains nonetheless sentient, personal, distinct from the world; afterward he identified with the eternally creative force of nature, which finds its supreme expression in man—here we recognize the influence of the Hegelian school and of Feuerbach’s theories.\(^ {38}\)

Wotan, the master of the gods, will disappear, and with him the entire celestial court: henceforth the dominion of the world belongs to man, “man free, strong and noble, such as nature has made him.”\(^ {39}\) Siegfried, resplendent with youth and strength, symbolizes the new humanity. Wotan had sensed his coming and had predicted it to Fricka: “You understand only what happens customarily, but my thought turns to what has never before been seen. Listen: what the gods cannot do, what is impossible for me, he will accomplish, a hero without divine protection, independent from the gods!”\(^ {40}\) He speaks in the same way to his daughter Brünnhilde and hails in advance the absolutely free hero who has never bowed before divine power, who acts spontaneously to “create himself.”\(^ {41}\)

Look at Siegfried dashing into the forest, brandishing the sword forged with his own hands: “Nothing holds me back,” he cries, “nothing ties me down…. I have no country, no dwelling, no prop-

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36. The expression is borrowed from Edda. But in Edda, the twilight is followed by the renaissance of certain gods; for Wagner, humanity must replace the divinity. In Wagner’s initial draft, the gods were reinstated to their former status as masters of the world and a choir intoned the praises of Wotan; see GS 2:166 (214). Brünnhilde and Siegfried (see also the end of Siegfried’s Death) soared into the eternal joys of Valhalla.
37. “Ein glücklicher Abend” [*An auspicious evening*], GS 1:149.
38. See the previously cited work of Dinger, *Richard Wagner’s gestige Entwicklung*, vol. 1, chap. 5, §2. Compare, for example, the style of the address at the Fatherland Society (1848) with the article on Revolution (1849) in which nature and man have replaced God.
40. W., 31 [Porter, 100–1; Spencer and Millington, 144].
tery; I have received only my body, and I shall use it for all it is worth! I have but a sword and it is I who have forged it!”

One day he encounters Wotan. The god tries to obstruct his path with the lance on which are graven Runes, symbols of the religious and social traditions of old humanity: “Stand back,” Siegfried cries, “am I always to have an old man in my way?” And with a blow of his sword, he shatters Wotan’s lance. . . . “Go then,” declares the god, “I can no longer hold you back!”

And the “free man” resumes his triumphant march.

But what then is this “work” of which Wotan so often speaks, that only a free man can accomplish it?

Here we touch on the very heart of Wagner’s philosophy, on his metaphysical conception of the world. In the Tetracycle, the metaphysical idea and the revolutionary idea are closely connected, like the golden thread woven by the Norns.

§2. The Metaphysical Idea

We enjoy basing our subtle analyses and our complicated reasoning on naïve natural images reflecting ancient beliefs: the sun coursing through an azure heaven represented by the one-eyed Traveler cloaked in a blue, thunder from Donner’s heavy hammer, the rain-

42. S., 18, 80 [Porter, 167, 227; Spencer and Millington, 206–7, 260]; G., 21 [Porter, 264; Spencer and Millington, 294].

43. “Heil’ger Vertraege Treue-Runen schnitt in den Schaft er ein” [“Sacred treaties’ binding runes he carved into that shaft”]; S. 24; see 25 [Porter, 172; see 173; Spencer and Millington, 211, 212]; and G., 6, 7 [Porter, 249; Spencer and Millington, 281]; R., 27 [Porter, 26; Spencer and Millington, 77]. The Runes designate not only the runic characters, but a collection of practical maxims and moral rules relating to the common life of the ancient Germans. It is probable that in the present case it also concerns magical formulas (see Runenzauber, R., 33 [Porter, 31; Spencer and Millington, 82]), assuring Wotan dominion over the gods, giants, and dwarves. In Edda (the song of Sigurdrifa) are found interesting examples of these two kinds of runes that Sigurdrifa (Brünnhilde) teaches to Sigurd (Siegfried).

44. S., 81, 84 [Porter, 228, 231; Spencer and Millington, 261, 263–64].

45. W., 31, 40; S., 78: “erlösende Weltenthat” [“that deed will free our world;” Porter, 225; see Spencer and Millington, 258].

46. Wotan (Odin, Wodan, root Wehlen, F άημι ‘άημι) was originally the god of the storm;
bow become a splendid bridge spread across the earth and Valhalla.⁴⁷ Do we do this because of atavism, natural curiosity, distaste for our philosophies?

In many passages the god is still not completely separated from the phenomenon he personifies: Wotan is as one with the wind, the storm, and the Valkyrie appears in a cloud illuminated by lightning.

Nonetheless, when one approaches the study of a mythology as ancient as that of the Teutons or the Scandinavians, we must avoid imposing our modern conceptions on them. We cannot pronounce the word god without immediately envisaging, in the mind’s eye, the shining Ideal of moral perfection glimpsed by the Sages of Greece and popularized by the gospel.

Our barbarous ancestors did not attain such heights. Some, to be sure, felt their reason and conscience impacted by a superior influence that made them suspect a Destiny, a Justice, a Law beyond their gods; the multitude were content to personify the alternately benevolent and hostile forces of nature and to engage in self-interested relationships with them. Our religious language abounds in metaphors that our fathers took literally. Is it not through atavism that we raise our eyes toward the sky when we speak of God instead of communing with ourselves and withdrawing instinctively?

Aspice hoc sublime candens quem invocant omnes Jovem.⁴⁸

These old myths, filtered through Wagner’s consciousness and imagination, have undergone profound transformations. For him, Wotan is no longer just the sky, the light, or the sun, but indeed the productive force of nature, the creative, indefatigable, inexhaustible

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⁴⁷ R., 72 [Porter, 69–70; Spencer and Millington, 115–16].
⁴⁸ “Behold this shining one on high, Jove, whom all invoke.” This verse of Ennius has been commented on by Cicero, De natura Deorum 1.11. §XXV.
will causing in the world the unceasing movement of the vital whirlwind.**49**

But it is a purely instinctive will, whose unique goal is to preserve, to develop, to defend itself against the forces of adversity. This will is expressed in Wotan by an insatiable desire for domination that pushes him to have the giants construct Valhalla, at once a luxurious palace and a redoubtable fortress.**50**

Wotan’s selfish pride is the original transgression that lies at the source of all the world’s ills.**51** Even before Alberich wrests the gold from the daughters of the Rhine and forges the fatal ring, Wotan had concluded a sacrilegious treaty with the giants: in exchange for the *burg* that will give him complete security, he promised them Freia, the gracious goddess; he preferred power to love.

It follows that the creative will is corrupted at its foundation: natural instinct has given way to self-interested convention. All sorts of catastrophes must be expected. Note, indeed, that Wotan underhandedly seizes the gold from the Nibelung; he abandons Freia in order to keep the ring, token of sovereign power. His thirst for domination is ardent, inextinguishable, to the point that he exhausts himself in new creations in order to assure himself helpers and defenders. But these new beings—Sieg mund, Sieglinde, the Valkyries—are only reflections of himself; it is always he under other forms—these are the

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49. Obviously it is not a matter here of creation *ex nihilo*. For Wotan, to renounce creating is to renounce his power, his being; when he decides upon this abdication, he cries out, “Zu schauen kam ich, nicht zu schaffen!” [“I came to watch, not to act!”]; S., 44 [Porter, 193; Spencer and Millington, 229].

50. R., the entire beginning of scene 2, and 73 [Porter, 70; Spencer and Millington, 116].

51. “An allem was war, ist und wird, frevelst, Ewiger, du!” [“against all that was, is, and will be, you, Immortal, will sin”]; R., 59 [Porter, 57; Spencer and Millington, 104]. These words are addressed to Wotan by Alberich on the occasion of the seizure of the ring, but this theft is indissolubly linked to the episode of Freia, 20, 36 [Porter, 19–20, 34–35; Spencer and Millington, 70–71, 84–85]. . . . See the rest of Brünnhilde’s apostrophe to the gods: “Erschaut eure ewige Schuld!” [“behold your eternal disgrace”]; G., 83 [Porter, 326; Spencer and Millington, 349].

52. It follows that the real unity of the Tetralogy lies not in the external unity established among the four parts of the opera by the idea of gold stolen from the Daughters of the Rhine, passing from hand to hand and ultimately thrown back in the river waters; it is an internal unity resulting from the four parts forming a single “internal action,” a sole and unique tragedy that
same unfulfilled aspirations, the same anxieties, the same torturing anguish: “Agony! Agony!” cries Siegmund, son of Wotan. And Fricka throws in the face of her spouse this cruel rebuke: “These afflictions are your work!”

Ever since creative will wavered and abandoned the direction marked out for it by nature, ever since it substituted artificial conventions, unnatural “treaties” for love, at the heart of things have been pain and suffering, the laws that protect its selfish pleasures. Henceforth, the creature who obeys its nature will run afoul of the law and will become its victim. Wotan had this painful experience early on: he thrilled with joy in seeing Sieglinde and Siegmund love each other with the true love that nature inspires; from the free and joyous union of these two forces issuing directly from himself, he hoped to see a force, a more intense life arise; but the impassible Fricka reminds him of the established order’s requirements: and thus Wotan is reduced to the horrible necessity of decreeing Siegmund’s death!

How he then understands his transgression! How bitterly he regrets having abdicated his freedom! How clearly he sees that the present organization of things is inherently bad, that the orientation of the world must be changed: to enlighten instinct through intellect and to return to love that gives and vivifies, from egoism that knows only how to plunder and kill! He who used to shake at the very thought that his dominion could be at risk, today abdicates, willingly, this selfish and criminal power. Not only does he resign himself to his dethronement, but he longs for it; he calls for it with heartfelt desire: “Vanish then from my sight, divine splendor, false magnificence! Fall in ruins, palace that I have built! My work, I abandon! I desire but one thing: the ending, the ending!”

Thus Wagner correctly maintained that the Tetralogy was “the

occurs, in reality, in Wotan’s consciousness, that is, the soul of the world. This tragedy is the incessant, implacable struggle between the two basic tendencies from which all the world’s events emerge: egoism and renunciation.

54. W., 41 [Porter, 110; Spencer and Millington, 153].
most complete artistic expression” of his views on the world. Therein lies, indeed, a complete philosophy seemingly inspired by Schopenhauer. It is necessary to note, however, that the text of the Tetrality was finished in 1852, the same year in which Herwegh acquainted Wagner with the theories of the Frankfurt philosopher. Wagner showed enthusiasm for ideas that offered striking analogies with his own and immediately sent a copy of the Ring of the Nibelung to Schopenhauer as a token of “gratitude and veneration.”

Profound differences nonetheless separate Wagner’s philosophical conception from Schopenhauer’s theories.

The author of The World as Will and Representation argues that at the origin of things there lies a “will to life” (an effort, therefore a suffering and in essence an evil) that, to varying degrees, achieves itself, objectivates itself in the various beings that comprise the world. Such a will provides creatures with a thousand means of preservation and defense: intelligence, for example, is a powerful aid in the conservation of the individual and the propagation of the species. But man possesses a surplus, an excess of intelligence that is not used in service of the will. It will be used to apprise himself of his miserable state and to shake off the yoke of this tyrannical will. Aesthetic contemplation begins the deliverance that is completed by the practice of morality and of asceticism, by complete negation of the will to life.

It is generally believed that this negation manifests itself in absolute nothingness. Indeed, it seems that logically it should be so; but Schopenhauer repeatedly maintains that it is only a matter of a relative nothingness, of a negation of the current state that is itself, with all

55. Letter from Wagner to Uhlig, May 31, 1852 [Richard Wagner’s Letters to His Dresden Friends, 229].
56. See Friedrich von Hausegger, Wagner und Schopenhauer (Liepzig: Reinboth, 1892), 4n. “On December 23, 1852, Wagner finished the poem the Ring of the Nibelung and, during Christmas night, read it at the home of Dr. Wille. … He had a small number of copies printed … then, on February 11, 1853, he sent them to Liszt so that he could distribute them”; Noufflard, Richard Wagner d’après lui-même, 2:231, 232.
57. Here lies Schopenhauer’s sophism. All effort is not a suffering, an evil. Effort is only suffering when the activity expended and the activity available are disproportionate.
its miseries and suffering, a veritable negation. If one wished at any cost, adds Schopenhauer, to form a positive idea of this state, “there would be no other means than to point to the state of those who have attained a complete denial of the will, and to what is called ecstasy, rapture, illumination, union with God, etc.; but (this state) belongs to personal experience alone; it is impossible to communicate externally an idea of it to another.”

The analogy between Wotan and the “will to life” is evident; on both sides, it is the same supreme force, “will,” “desire” perpetually in movement, testifying to its inexhaustible fecundity through innumerable creations. But Wagner does not view it as bad in its essence; if he sometimes describes Wotan as “savage,” as “fierce,” he insists no less on his ardent desire for a better organization of the world, on his aspirations for intelligence, for love.


59. Schopenhauer, World as Representation, 1:§71.

60. R., 19, 28, etc. [Porter, 19, 26–27; Spencer and Millington, 70, 77–78].

61. R., 69 [Porter, 66; Spencer and Millington, 113]; S., 77 [Porter, 224; Spencer and Millington, 257]; G., 36, etc. [Porter, 278; Spencer and Millington, 307].

62. S., 74 [Porter, 221–22; Spencer and Millington, 255]; see in particular W., 37: “Zu wissen begehrt es den Gott,” etc. [“the god desires knowledge”] [Porter, 107; Spencer and Millington, 150].

63. W., 37: “In der Macht gehrt’ich nach Minne” [“in the midst of power I desire (sexual) love”] [Porter, 106; Spencer and Millington, 149]; W., 43: “Du liebst Siegmund” [“You love Siegmund”] [Porter, 112; Spencer and Millington, 154], 76, 77: “So thatest du was so gern thun ich begehrt” [“And so you did what I dearly longed to do”] [Porter, 146; Spencer and Millington, 186]. In the Tetralogy it is the dwarves who personify envy, hatred, base passions. It is the dwarf Alberich who renounces love (R., 18) [Porter, 16; Spencer and Millington, 69], but not sensual pleasures (R., 17) [Porter, 16; Spencer and Millington, 68]; with a payment of gold, he seduces a woman; by her he has a son, the murderer of Siegfried: “Des Hasses Frucht,” says Wotan, “hegt eine Frau; des Neides Kraft kreiss’t ihr im Schosse: das Wunder gelang dem Lieblosen” [“A woman carries the seed of hate, the force of envy stirs in her womb: the Unkind succeeded
True intelligence, reason, is personified not in Fricka, but in Erda, the one “who knows everything,”64 whose dream “full of thoughts”65 symbolizes so well the truth hidden in the heart of nature. Only effort—Wotan’s will—can evoke and lead it to full consciousness. It is Erda who predicts the end of his reign to Wotan; nonetheless she remains subject to Wotan; the latter, at his pleasure, calls her or makes her disappear, and clearly tells her that she must perish with him.66 It would be simple to translate the entire scene with Schopenhauer’s formulations: intellect makes the will understand that it must deny itself, and the will, annihilating itself through renunciation, destroys intellect at the same time.

However, despite these similarities, there exists a major difference between the two theories.

For Wagner, nature is fundamentally good. He disapproves not the being insofar as it is being, desire insofar as it is desire,67 but de-
sire transformed into ambition, into avarice, into base envy, defending itself through brutal force, shackling free nature through conventions. Should this nature be freed, deliverance will follow. Siegfried does not in any way represent a power opposed to Wotan; he is descended from Wotan; he himself is also his will, but his free, independent will. Above all, Siegfried has nothing of the ascetic about him: he does not immerse himself in contemplation, he acts and thinks of only one thing: running toward new exploits; he has not renounced the world’s pleasures, he is the personification of the joy of living, of exuberant gaiety; he has not cursed love, as the Nibelung—or as Schopenhauer—it is love that instructs him, transforms him, and makes him the true representative of the new humanity.

Until the very moment he awakens Brünnhilde, Siegfried possesses, in fact, only physical strength, whose brutality, it must be admitted, is barely concealed by the charms of his youth. Moral sense appears to be completely lacking in him. But Brünnhilde, daughter of Wotan and Erda, has inherited divine wisdom from her mother; what is more, on the day she did not fear to resist Wotan’s orders, the day she upheld against him the other aspect of things, the standpoint of truth and sincerity, and condemned the evasions, the craveness of a spirit in thrall to self-interested conventions, that day her intellect was revealed as moral conscience affirming the higher obligation of justice and goodness. This is the supreme knowledge that Brünnhilde seeks to communicate to Siegfried; from that moment on, his conscience will unite with physical strength; love will thus bring about the young hero’s perfect harmony of intellect and will.

Yet all this occurs here below, in this life. Obviously, such faith in na-
ture, in love, in humanity has nothing in common with the pessimist nightmare.

Absorbed in his abstract deductions, Schopenhauer lost sight of reality.⁷³ If he had drawn his conclusions rigorously, it is absolute nothingness that he ought to have proposed as the only redemption possible. By a happy inconsistency,⁷⁴ he attributes to the negation of the “will to life” the character of a relative nothingness, thereby admitting that this fierce “will to life” is not the very essence of being, but an accidental, transitory form, involving an exaggeration, a deviation, a degeneration that contrary tendencies—unselfishness, justice, and pity—can and must remedy.

Wagner, through his own reflection, had arrived at similar conclusions. Every bit as profound as Schopenhauer’s, his theory is both more logical and closer to reality. His artistic soul gave him a sense of nature’s beauty and goodness too acute for him not to have discovered the marvelous resources of transformation and of unlimited perfectibility underlying its shortcomings.

By instinct, he sensed what we ourselves maintain after laborious research, namely that the social question will never find a solution if it is isolated from the moral question.⁷⁵

Wagner’s metaphysic is thus not the result of empty speculation; it depends on seeing the conflict between egoism and love. His conclusions are of an essentially practical order: love alone can redeem, can save humanity, can bring about the “great work of universal deliverance” for which Wotan was yearning.⁷⁶

⁷³. See von Hausegger, Wagner und Schopenhauer, 40.
⁷⁴. Everything was explained when Schopenhauer recognized in his “Supplements” that the will is only the most intimate phenomenon of the thing in itself, not itself the thing in itself; see Schopenhauer, Le monde comme volonté et comme représentation, vol. 3, chap. 18, 10 [World as Will and Representation, trans. Payne, 2:197–98].
⁷⁵. “The world calls for a state of mind, not of law; more a mental reform than a material reform. One should not dream of setting men under a rule that forces happiness on them, but of suggesting to them a state of mind which allows happiness…. Who will make us love men? When will the well-being and the perfection of the other Me in their multiplicity [les autres moi] appear to us as a condition for complete development of our Self”; Barrès, Ennemi des Lois, 230.
⁷⁶. “Erloesende Weltenthat” [“deed that redeems the world”], S., 78 [Porter, 225; Spencer and Millington, 258].
By love, we mean here not physical, instinctive, selfish love, but love in its highest sense, devoted love, ready to suffer and sacrifice, of a man for his spouse, which then overflows and spreads to his children, his friends, encompasses his country and the whole of humanity. Most often, what is called free love would be merely the freedom of whim and of egoistic pleasure! Admittedly, if ever there were a spontaneous love, it is Siegfried’s for Brünnhilde, a joyous and wholesome passion, but alas! one of short duration, a wildflower of vivid, but ephemeral colors. Brünnhilde gives the young hero the most tender of farewells: “You want to retain your love for me,” exclaims the noble young woman, “remember yourself. Recall your great deeds! Recall the raging fire that blazed around the rock that you crossed without fear! … Recall the faithfulness that fills our souls! Recall the love that is our very life!” Siegfried replies with enthusiastic promises. Scarcely a few hours have gone by, and he is already seduced, fascinated by the charms of Gutrune. There is even a kind of contradiction between the ideal role that Siegfried must fill and his actual conduct. To avoid it, Wagner resorted to the artifice of a love potion poured by Hagen. The moral idea is quite clear: the love of pure sensibility, however passionate one may suppose it to be, remains an ardent emotion that another ardent emotion destroys in an instant. To passion there must be joined a higher element that secures its nobility and ensures its endurance.

One would look in vain for this greatness, this constancy in Sieg-
fried, in whose rough nature freedom is still subjected to instinct. It is in the more delicate consciousness of Brünnhilde that these virtues will be revealed. Alas! In becoming a woman she also will come to know the ill-fated hour at which selfish, instinctive love appears in the cruel form of jealousy and vengeance. With Hagen and Gunther, the lover, maddened with anguish, will plot the death of the hero. But Brünnhilde, in her initial existence, is the personification of the noble and generous aspirations of Wotan. As impenetrable, as cold as the silver breast-plate that protects her, her heart had never thrilled except to the sounds of battle. The cruel distress of Siegmund and of Sieglinde driven away, pursued, cursed by gods and men, their love more immense still than their misery, and their unshakeable loyalty, have given rise to a new feeling, pity: “I see what grief rends your heart; your sacred anguish I feel.” The sublime virgin no longer hesitates. She devotes herself completely to the defense, to the salvation of Siegmund and Sieglinde, and unhesitatingly sacrifices her divine privileges. Later, in front of Siegfried’s funeral pyre, she will joyous-

82. G., 60, 61, 62: Racheschwur [Porter, 303–5; Spencer and Millington, 328–31: oath of vengeance].
83. “She is his will,” W., 30, 36, 43, 71, 72 [Porter, 100, 106, 112, 140, 141; Spencer and Millington, 143, 149, 155, 180, 181], “the half of his soul,” W., 79 [Porter, 147; Spencer and Millington, 187]; “the expression of his most intimate thought,” W., 71; S., 90 [Porter, 140, 236–37; Spencer and Millington, 180, 269]; “but this thought is not, as with Eida, separated in her from love,” it through love that she attains full consciousness, S., 89, 90 [Porter, 236–37; Spencer and Millington, 268–69]; “it is before the funeral pyre that she cries out, ‘Now, I am whole!’” G., 83 [Porter, 326; Spencer and Millington, 349].
84. W., 52 [Porter, 121; Spencer and Millington, 163]. A strange thing! It is also in the heart of a goddess that the old Magus of Chaldee, author of the poem Gilgamesh, gave birth to this holy feeling of pity: “These old souls divided between love and friendship, already felt pity, a mysterious feeling originating, if one were to believe the sage of Chaldee, in the heart of a woman, but spelled out in an intelligible fashion by a male voice. To his wife, visibly moved at the suffering of Gilgamesh, Samas-Napistim addresses these words which are sublime in their simplicity: ‘You suffer, I see clearly, from the suffering of humanity’”; J. Sauverplane, “Une épopée babyloniennne,” Revue des religions 5 (May 1893): 51–53. The transcript of the poem of Gilgamesh dates from the seventh century B.C.
85. We cannot resist the urge to transcribe these lines sent by M. Paul Desjardins: “How pure and substantial a nourishment is this notion of true love! Who loves the most in The Valkyrie? Despite the profound and sad tenderness of Siegmund and Sieglinde, it is Brünnhilde
ly immolate her very life. From then on all egoism has disappeared. It is no longer the lover who speaks through Brünnhilde, it is the inspired prophetess. She sings the hymn of universal deliverance. The redemptive work is accomplished; not only the negative work: the disappearance of the old order of things for which Siegfried has given the signal in breaking Wotan’s spear, but also the positive work: the advent of a new world that will not know the old miseries. Egoism is vanquished, since at last a heart has truly and fully loved!

Siegfried, the strong and free Man, Brünnhilde, the loving and devoted Woman, thus symbolize the two aspects of ideal human Nature: freedom and love, strength and goodness.

86 G., 85 [Spencer and Millington, 362–63].
During the interval between the drafting and the musical composition of *Twilight of the Gods*, Wagner added to the initial text some words designed, he said, to give the final verses a more expressive form; they were pronounced by Brünnhilde as she prepared to throw herself on the funeral pyre:

I shall no longer direct my flight
Toward the feasts of Valhalla.
Do you know where I am going?
I leave the world-of-desire;
I flee forever this world-of-illusion;
I close behind me the gates
Of eternal becoming.
She who has become clear-sighted,
Set free from (the necessity of) rebirth,
Taking wing toward the holy world that she herself has chosen,
Toward the goal where tends (all that comprises) the universe,
Toward this world where there is no longer any desire, any illusion.
Do you know how I reached
The blessed end
Of all that is eternal?
The profound suffering
Of a grieving love

1. “It was necessary that the purest (of men) betray me for a woman to gain all-wisdom”; G., 83 [see Porter, 326; Spencer and Millington, 349].
Have opened my eyes:
I saw the world end.  

A reader the slightest bit familiar with Schopenhauer’s doctrine will immediately detect his influence here.

However, the somber pessimism of Schopenhauer is so completely at odds with what is known of Wagner’s courage, his energy, his gaiety, warmth, and distaste for asceticism, that many have trouble understanding the profound admiration he expressed for the Frankfurt philosopher’s theories.

We should not forget that Wagner had been driven from Germany, disabused of his fine dream of absolute liberty and universal fraternity, and that he went through a crisis of discouragement, of despair, that is preserved perfectly in his correspondence: “I have fallen back into my old sickness,” he wrote to Uhlig on January 12, 1852, “and the devil has hold of me again. Nothing can cure this dread of external impressions... I cruelly see and feel that nothing can satisfy me, that I will succeed at nothing... Every project I imagine appears in the emptiness of its impossibility. O God! How harsh, how tedious, and how senseless this world from which I distance myself! All that remains is the remorse to have engaged with it! And how this remorse is cruel! I gnaw at myself and will continue to do so until, to satisfy my hunger, I am utterly consumed. To tell the truth, I have been gnawing at myself for a long time now! When I look back on my life I recognize that there exists little worldly nourishment capable of satisfying a soul so needy as mine. Never, not even for a moment, have I felt the sweet and soft sensation of being truly sated. All I do is bump into walls and step on nails!”

It should come as no surprise, then, that Wagner approved of

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2. These verses are preserved in a note; GS 6:255 (363) [see Spencer and Millington, 363].
3. We are speaking of his absolute pessimism, not of the relative pessimism of his second mode.
4. Briefe von Wagner an Uhlig, Fischer, Heine, 144 [Richard Wagner’s Letters to His Dresden Friends, 169, 170]; also consult Noufflard, Richard Wagner d’après lui-même, vol. 2, chap. 11: “L’évolution pessimiste.” In the “Lettre sur la musique,” xlix, alluding to the period that followed the performance of Lohengrin at Weimar (1850), Wagner opposes his “pessimist dispositions” to his “former optimism.”
Schopenhauer’s anathemas against the desire to be, the will to live, and eagerly welcomed a doctrine that provided him with the metaphysical explanation and theoretical justification of his soul’s anguish.

In a letter to Liszt, he thus speaks of Schopenhauer in laudatory tones:

My music progresses slowly; apart from that, I have been entirely preoccupied with a man who, through his works alone, has come into my solitude like a gift from heaven: Arthur Schopenhauer, the greatest philosopher since Kant, whose thoughts he has plumbed, he himself has said. German professors willfully ignored him for forty years; but, to the disgrace of Germany, he has recently been discovered by an English critic. Compared to him, Hegel and his ilk are but charlatans! Schopenhauer’s basic idea, the final negation of the will to life, is terribly serious, but it alone can save us. This thought is not new to me, and indeed it cannot be understood by anyone who has not experienced it, but no one else has made it so clear for me. Sometimes I recall the storms of my heart, the terrible efforts with which, against my will, it would cling to the hope of life; yes, this hurricane often starts up again; at least now I have found what can calm it, what, in wakeful nights, may bring me sleep: the deep, ardent longing for death, for absolute unconsciousness, total non-existence, freedom from all dreams... the only final release!

I have often recognized your ideas; you express them differently because you are a believer, but I know you mean exactly the same thing... When I was reading Schopenhauer I was almost always with you; but you did not realize it. This is how I progressively mature: if I still play with art it is to pass the time.

For the love of my most beautiful life-dreams and the young Siegfried, I shall still finish the Nibelungen pieces... But, as I have never in my life enjoyed perfect love, I want to build a monument (compose a drama)

5. “When Wagner composed this poem, the Ring of the Nibelung, he was not as yet acquainted with Schopenhauer’s philosophy, yet I believe it would be difficult to characterize Wotan’s state of mind in the final scene of The Valkyrie more precisely than to say it reflects ‘the negation of the will to life’”; Chamberlain, Drame wagnérien, 182 [Wagnerian Drama, 161], see the “Selbstvernichtung,” GS 4:332 (404). M. Chamberlain’s interpretation is absolutely justified by what Wagner says in a passage relating to the Ring of the Nibelung, GS 8:6 (11).
to the most beautiful of all my dreams, in which, from beginning to end, that love may be for once thoroughly sated: I have in my head a Tristan and Isolde, the simplest and most opulent musical conception; I want to cover myself in the “black flag” floating at its end to die.⁶

Here Wagner himself suggests the true explanation of his Tristan. Interpreting such a work only for its dramatic interest or for its moving portrayal of a passion that, ever-ardent, builds up to the final ecstacy and Isolde’s last breath, is to misunderstand it.⁷

Wagner’s capacity for understanding was too great for him to limit it to a simple human-interest story. It was not enough for him to give his creations a general significance, to use, for example, the soul of Tristan and Isolde to show us human feelings raised to their highest degree of exaltation. For him, indeed, tragic art did not reside in exceptional events, in abnormal situations of human existence, but truly in life itself, in effort, struggle, and suffering.⁸

Beneath the psychological drama is thus hidden a metaphysical drama, which does not impact Tristan and Isolde’s smoldering passion. Far from contradicting or distracting from one another, the two dramas intermingle in the work of art as they do in reality, thus making them of the utmost interest for those capable of grasping the symbolism of their events and protagonists.

It is possible to interpret the first words of the grand duet of the second act as no more than the expression of an ardent and absolute passion.⁹ Similarly, one could understand their criticism of time and

⁶ Briefwechsel zwischen Wagner und Liszt, 2:45 [Correspondence Between Wagner and Liszt, 2:53–54]. Several weeks earlier he had written to him, “The world is bad, bad, thoroughly bad. Let us not give any importance to its honor, its glory and other trifles…. Such is my state of mind. And it is no thoughtless impulse, it is as hard and solid as a diamond. That sentiment alone gives me the strength to drag on the burden of life. I have a deadly hatred of all appearance, I no longer desire to hope, for it is self-deception”; ibid., 43 [50 in the English translation].

⁷ Read what we have already said on the subject of Tristan and Isolde in chapter 2 of this volume.

⁸ “Die ungeheure Tragik dieses Welten-Daseins” [“The immense tragedy of the life-worlds”], as he [Wagner] will later say in Religion und Kunst, GS 10:247 (317) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 247].

⁹ [Hébert notes that he has used the translation of Tristan published by Wagner himself
space outside of any metaphysical system: “O enemy of those who love, accursed distance! O lethal sloth of idle hours!”

But when the anathemas are exposed, the psychological interpretation appears wholly insufficient. The torch Isolde tramples underfoot could be a symbol of the light of moral conscience extinguished in her soul, but such an explanation does not suffice for the following passages:

Tristan: The day! It is the day which, wrapping you with its rays, hid Isolde from me, bearing her aloft to resemble the sun in all the splendor and light of its sovereign honor. . . . The star whose resplendent light brightened my temples with its radiance, the brilliant sun of worldly honor pierced my brow, the vain delights of its rays penetrating the innermost sanctum of my heart. . . . Oh! By then we were already dedicated to night: deceitful, spiteful day could part us with its tricks, but no longer fool us with its lies. The gaze sanctified by night laughs at the day’s vain radiance, its haughty glow; its flickering light no longer blinds us with its fleeting gleams. For he who has encountered death’s night with love, for whom its deep mystery has been revealed, the lies, the glory and honor, power and opulence of day are scattered as delicate dust in sun, no matter their imposing brilliance. . . . He retains one desire amid the vain faults of day—an ardent yearning for this sacred night where love’s exquisite pleasure, the eternal, matchless truth, smiles on him!

And here, at once, in the middle of an almost realistic analysis of passion, arises, freed from any symbol, the metaphysical idea: “The world and its fascinations pale,” cries Tristan; “the world that day’s illusory brilliance enlightens, the deceiving phantom world that day puts before me; and I am myself the world.”

M. Chamberlain prefers to translate: “When my sight grows

in Quatre poèmes d’opéra and that the duet to which he alludes is found at the beginning of Act 2, scene 2.

10. Wagner, Quatre poèmes d’opéra, 180.
11. Read the full passage, ibid., 180–84. [Emphasis is Hébert’s.]
12. Ibid., 184: “Descend on us, O Night of love,” etc.
13. Ibid. [Although Hébert attributes these words to Tristan, in the drama they are shared between him and Isolde, with the italicized phrase being sung together; emphasis is Hébert’s.]
dark . . . then I myself shall be the world.” “This statement,” he adds, “as those which precede and follow it, have an excessively vague meaning; it is the desire for death, an immense need to cease to be, to be merged with a whole, to be enveloped by it, to reach across infinity, ‘to dream in the immeasurable spaces.’ These are all feelings, not logical ideas.”

We repeat that this is a deplorable misunderstanding! As if we spoke of something other than feelings indissolubly connected to thought and as if, in such a matter, philosophy could be separated from feeling [sentiment]!

We are in perfect agreement about using the Wagner text cited by M. Chamberlain to interpret this passage: “Life and death, the importance and existence of the external world, here all depends exclusively on interior movements of the soul.”\(^{15}\) In the ecstasy of passion, the world does indeed disappear, it is of no interest; it no longer exists.

We insist on the fact that this psychological interpretation in no way exhausts the richness of Wagner’s thought. It is important to remember that at this time Wagner had just read Schopenhauer enthusiastically. And yet, the constant associations: life—light—individuality; death—night—unconsciousness only take on their full value when related to the individualist theory of the Frankfurt philosopher: “The world is my representation,”\(^ {16}\) a construction of my sensibility, of my conscious thought; let my consciousness fade and the world disappears.

This allows us to grasp the exact meaning of the symbols day and night: psychological consciousness, thought with its representative forms, is day and its illusions; night, on the other hand, is the suppression of consciousness and, in consequence, of perceptible appearances and of individuality.

Thus when Tristan arises from his bed of suffering, conscious of himself and aware of what surrounds him, he rediscovers his passion, his ardent desire to see Isolde again: “I did not stay where I awoke,” he says to Kurwenal. “But where did I tarry? I could not tell you. I did

\(^{15}\) Wagner, “Lettre sur la Musique,” lxi.

\(^{16}\) Schopenhauer, Le monde comme volonté et représentation; initial words of Book I, §1.
not see the sun there, I saw neither land nor people; but what did I see? I could not tell you. I was in a place where I had been for a long time, where I will forever go: the vast realm of universal night. There one knowledge alone remains for us: divine, eternal and prime oblivion.

How did I lose its premonition [sentiment avant-coureur]? Grasping and vague memory, is it you who have driven me back into the light of day? An ardent flame of love, all that was left, in carrying me off from the delightful twilight of death, brings me back to the light which with its deceptive brightness, still shines on you, Isolde.”

Night is thus indeed oblivion to external things and individuality itself. Here below, love confers this oblivion, but it is momentary. Only death makes these illusions, illusions called perceptible representations, divisions of time and space, separation of personalities, completely disappear.

This last question is discussed in the midst of the most tender effusions, in a delightful metaphysical hairsplitting on the value of a particle:

17. Wagner, Quatre poèmes d’opéra, 196.
18. Ibid., 186–88; German text GS 7:51 (72). We do not in any way dispute that Wagner, in his choice of expressions “day” and “night,” was inspired by the poets of the Middle Ages. We merely note that he has conspicuously enriched the meaning of these terms. For example, Gottfried von Strassburg’s couplet on the words mein and dein that M. Kufferath (Tristan et Iseult, 180) connects to the passage that we will cite has, of course, no metaphysical import. Wagner’s einbewusst, on the other hand, is the summary of an entire philosophy. The partisans of an exclusively psychological interpretation could counter, for example, this passage of Über Staat und Religion: “Dieses eben ist das Wesen der wahren Religion, dass sie, dem täuschenden Tageschein der Welt ab, in der Nacht des tiefsten Innern des menschlichen Gemüthes als anderes, von der Weltsonne gänzlich verschiedenes, nur aus dieser Tiefe aber wahrnehmbares Licht leuchet” (GS 8:25 (33)) [“For this is the essence of true religion: that, away from the deceptive day light of the world, it shines in the night of men’s inmost heart, with a light other than the world-sun’s light, and visible only from those depths”; see “On State and Religion,” PW, vol. 4, Art and Politics, 29–30]. We would reply by referring to the context in which the Schopenhauerian idea perpetually returns and alone gives the complete meaning of these expressions, to this sentence, for example: “Ihr innerster Kern (der Religion) ist Verneinung der Welt, d. h. Erkenntnis der Welt als eines nur auf einer Täuschung beruhenden, flüchtigen und traumartigen Zustandes, sowie erstrebte Erlösung aus ihr, vorbereitet durch Entsagung, erreicht durch den Glauben”; GS 8:20 (27). [“(Religion’s) innermost core is denial of the world, i.e., recognition of the world as a fleeting and dreamlike state based only on a deception, as well as a striving after redemption from it, prepared by renunciation, achieved by belief”; see “On State and Religion,” 23–24].
Isolde: Is not our love called Tristan and Isolde? This charming little word, this and, this bond of love, would it not, if Tristan died, be extinguished by his death?

Tristan: What would succumb to death, if not that which separates us, what prevents Tristan from loving Isolde forever, of living eternally for her alone?

Isolde: And if this little and were extinguished, would not Tristan’s death be the very death of Isolde?

Tristan: Then we would be inseparable, joined forever, unendingly, never awaking, never fearing, nameless in the bosom of love, living only for love. . . . I am no longer Tristan and you are no longer Isolde. No more dividing of names: a new consciousness, a new flame is lit; a single soul and a single consciousness (einbewusst) for eternity!”

The expression unity of consciousness (einbewusst) must be connected to another: unconsciousness (unbewusst). They mutually complete one another. Future existence, in fact, can be considered under a negative aspect, as cessation (un-bewusst), annihilation of the present forms of human consciousness, but this change does not entail the absolute destruction of all consciousness. How may this new form be conceived, what positive idea can we have of the other life? “A single soul, a single consciousness,” Wagner replies, more than separation of individuals (ein-bewusst). And, without being unfaithful to Schopenhauer’s thought, Wagner specifies, designating love as essence of this new manner of being, a subject on which Schopenhauer refused to be at all specific.

Nevertheless—and here is the great difference between Wagner’s doctrine at the time he composed Tristan and his earlier thesis in the Tetralogy—it is no longer in this life, on this earth, that love accomplishes its redemptive work. Here below, love, as a consequence of the separation of individuals, is fatally united to desire; and yet,

19. Wagner, Quatre poèmes d’opéra, 210; GS 7:81 (112).
desire is suffering, the wound that wrests despairing laments from Tristan and causes him to run toward death. Death alone can deliver love from its material fetters; it alone can give love its purity and its full effectiveness.

We have come a long way from the time when Wagner, under the influence of the Hegelian school, exalted conjugal love as developing and flourishing into pure love of humanity! Henceforth, he would no longer focus on children, friends, country, humanity. . . . Tristan sees in this world only Isolde, and Isolde Tristan. Without any concern for the fate of humanity, without even knowing whether there exists a humanity, they attain salvation, infinite happiness solely by dint of their mutual love consecrated by death.

In the initial draft of his poem (1855), Wagner had opposed “Parsifal the hero of renunciation to Tristan the hero of passion. In the third act, at the moment Tristan is stretched out at the feet of Isolde aspiring to death and not being able to die, Parsifal appears as a pilgrim seeking to console the lovers lost in their tormented ecstasies.”

In the spring of 1856, Wagner sketched out a Buddhist drama: The Victor [Die Sieger], in which “the Parsifal of renunciation reappeared under the name of Ananda, Ananda the hero of the renunciation of love, the ascetic of the East, the pure absolute.”

Renunciation and asceticism indeed haunted Wagner’s mind throughout this period, during which he was so strongly influenced both by the Buddha’s doctrine and by Schopenhauer’s theories. Ten

22. Wagner, Quatre poèmes d’opéra, 199.
23. Ibid., 204.
25. Wagner, Entwürfe, Gedanken, Fragmente: Aus nachgelassenen Papiern Zusammengestellt (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Hartel, 1885), 97. In the chapter entitled “Genesis” of his fine work on Parsifal, M. Kufferath explains how Wagner’s supreme work is the synthesis of his two unfinished dramas: Jesus of Nazareth and The Victor. The Victor (1856) was a purely Buddhist poem. It is also the negative doctrine of Schopenhauer that Wagner expressed in ending Parsifal in the first draft:

Great is the power of desire,
Greater the power of renunciation.
years later, he would take up anew the theme of Parsifal’s renunciation, but his thought had undergone a fresh change.

It is true that, at first, Parsifal bears a singular resemblance to Ananda, but upon closer examination of his soul, closer study of his intimate motives, what a difference we see between the Christian and the Buddhist ascetic! Parsifal forgets himself solely to think of others, to work without reprieve, without slackening, for the salvation of his fellows; contemplation and ecstasy are like a bath in which he finds renewed strength, but it is action, unceasing action\textsuperscript{26} to which he devotes all his energy; finally, if he renounces the consolations of love, it is because he perceives a more noble love in which intense pleasure makes room for the austere joys of devotion.

Even more complete is the opposition between Parsifal and Tristan: in his final drama, Wagner has restored to life a goal, a value stemming from the here below; he has proclaimed anew and embodied in Parsifal the duty that is imposed on every man of taking care of others to the point of forgetting himself, of dedicating himself to others.

How may this sudden change of ideas be explained? Is it only his instinct as an artist, his inner appreciation of life and action that have sustained and \textit{saved} Wagner in this perilous journey across the pessimistic doctrines of East and West? Is it necessary to invoke the memory of happy events\textsuperscript{27} that put an end to so much anguish and so many ordeals and illuminated his soul with the happiness that transfigures all things?

This explanation would suffice if Wagner had only retraced his steps and given us in Parsifal a second Siegfried. But he did nothing of the sort. The evolution of Wagner’s thought—as all true evolution—could be symbolized not by a circumference where the line always returns to the same point on the same plane, but rather by a

\textsuperscript{26} In \textit{Parsifal} read the canticle of the Knights at the end of the first act. The positive, active character of Parsifal’s pity is admirably expressed in the words that Parsifal himself addresses to Amfortas at the end of the third act: “O Blessed be your suffering, which gave pity’s mighty power (Kraft), and purest wisdom’s might (Macht) to the irresolute fool!”

\textsuperscript{27} His amnesty and return to Germany; the friendship with the King of Bavaria; his marriage with Mme von Bülow.
spiral: the line returns to a similar point always at a greater height.

It is thus important not to stop at external differences like decor, for example, as in the easily established contrast between the Rhine gold and the Graal,\textsuperscript{28} between Wotan’s palace and Monsalvat’s temple. The opposition runs deeper; it resides in the fundamental idea of the two works: on the one hand, Siegfried’s absolute independence with regard to the divinity, a condition indispensable for his redemptive role;\textsuperscript{29} on the other, Parsifal’s dependence on God who chooses him,\textsuperscript{30} sends him, sustains him, and transforms his whole life into a true miracle of divine grace.

The religious idea reappeared in Wagner’s thought, translating its own sublimity to the supreme work of the poet-musician. Parsifal, the flower of Wagner’s genius, is like a retraction of Twilight of the Gods, written at an age when broader experience of things and men discouraged trenchant paradoxes and absolute negations, when his soul, less absorbed by the exuberance of its own life, and above all less distracted by the seduction of material realities, discovered in its own depths an unrecognized faith against which he had struggled painfully for far too long.

\textsuperscript{28} See Ernst, \textit{Richard Wagner et le Drame contemporain}, 291. Wagner himself pointed out and explained this symbolism in the Wibelungen, GS 2:150 (194): “Aufgehen des idealen Inhaltes des Hortes in den heiligen Gral” [“Absorption of the ideal content of the hoard into the holy grail”].

\textsuperscript{29} See this volume, chapter 4, end of §1.

\textsuperscript{30} “Den ich erkor” [“Whom I chose”], Parsifal, words of the prophecy. If one wishes to understand Parsifal completely, one must not separate him from the theoretical writing “Religion and Art” that Wagner composed over the same period; we shall summarize this work in the following chapter.
“The heart,” said Pascal, “loves universal being naturally and itself naturally, in proportion to its commitment.”

Does Pascal mean to speak of nature as it or as it becomes under the influence of the Ideal, with effort and sacrifice?

In Brünnhilde, pure, absolutely disinterested love seems to spring up spontaneously from the soul of nature. How rare is this spontaneity! How often, on the contrary, one needs energy and cleverness to devise superior attractions that counterbalance the rough and violent instincts that draw us toward sensible pleasure!

As for Parsifal, he moves in a mystical milieu, a supernatural atmosphere. “No matter how one chooses to present such a character, one could never avoid the necessity of connecting him to a religion.”

In his last masterwork did Wagner then make an act of faith in Catholic or Lutheran dogma?

Here one risks confusing religion and dogmatics, belief and its formulation. We are convinced that Wagner did not give his adherence to any creed, Catholic or Protestant; we do not hesitate to maintain that he understood and better appreciated the spirit of the gospel and that Christian sensibilities [sentiments] were increasingly awakened in his soul.

1. For analysis of Parsifal, in addition to the works by Mendès, Ernst, Kufferath, Saint-Auban cited earlier, we refer to an interesting chapter by Édouard Schuré in Le Drame musical, vol. 2, Richard Wagner, son œuvre et son idée (1875; repr. Paris: Émile Perrin, 1886), 291. A good literal translation of Parsifal, by Judith Gautier, was published by A. Colin (1893).

2. “Hans Sachs is a sage, Parsifal is a saint. In whatever way, …” Chamberlain, Drame wagnerien, 243 [Wagnerian Drama, 220].
We cannot therefore accept M. Chamberlain’s statement, “There is no more Christianity in Parsifal than there is paganism in Tristan.”

In defense of this strange assertion, the author relies principally on an historical argument: “These works,” he adds, “are contemporaneous; Wagner worked on them simultaneously; they are connected by numerous lines of thought and they form for us, as in the Master’s thought, a whole.”

In 1855 Wagner had indeed sketched an outline of the text of Tristan that he completed two years later, at the time he was composing the music to The Valkyrie and Siegfried. Parsifal preoccupied him over the same period (1855), and in 1864, at the behest of King Ludwig II, he drew up the definitive project for this drama, which he finalized in 1877.

Yet these dates, considered independently from the work gestating in Wagner’s mind, should not mislead us. For example, only two years elapsed between the conclusion of the Tetrality and the initial outline of Tristan, and yet the difference between the joyous Siegfried and the morose Tristan is as great as that between night and day: it is because during these two years Wagner, as we have explained, became enthusiastic about Schopenhauer’s doctrine.

And in the same way that there were, so to speak, two Schopenhauers, he of The World as Will and Representation, vol. 1, in which redemption through art and morality appear only as a fortunate inconsistency, and of vol. 2 (Supplements) of the same work, in which exaggerations are corrected, therefore allowing for the establishment of a positive, practical doctrine, for Wagner there were also two ways of conceiving the philosopher’s system. His attention turned successively to the negative part, then to the positive part of the theory, thus

4. How then is one to explain that Wagner wrote the music for Siegfried in a thoroughly pessimist moment? The letter to Liszt cited on p. 62 of this volume provides the answer. What astonishing complexity in this rich nature! It was at the moment when the man had fallen into the deepest discouragement that the artist composed this score so full of gaiety and life.
5. See the end of chapter 5.
inspiring what M. Chamberlain himself calls “the two conceptions: Parsifal the renouncer and Parsifal the compassionate.”

Yes, Parsifal is connected to the Ring, but as its “antithesis”: “The drama of Parsifal, taken as a counterpart to the drama of the Ring of the Nibelungen, shows us an entire conception of the world in itself set against another conception of the world.”

Wagner himself explains it: “The search for the Grail now replaces the struggle for gold”; Charity has conquered Egoism.

Whether one uses, as does M. Chamberlain, the term idealization, or whether one says purification, as does M. Kufferath, or rather evolution, to designate this perfecting of the “conception of the world,” is of secondary importance, merely a question of terminology.

Could it be said that Die Wibelungen, from which we are borrowing the abovementioned quotation from Wagner, dates from 1848 and constitutes an historical sketch? That evolution would be wholly objective; it would represent the progress made not in Wagner’s mind, but in the history of humanity Wagner sought to sum up, to condense in his dramas.

That would also be to forget whatever feelings Wagner expressed about Christianity soon after this critical period of 1848–49. At the end of chapter 3 we quoted several characteristic passages; the reader may wish to compare them to what the Master said and wrote at the time he was composing Parsifal: the shift in ideas is complete.

In response to such a question we would gladly cite Wagner’s reply to Villiers de l’Isle-Adam. The latter asked Wagner whether or not he used the religious idea simply as a source of powerful theatrical effect:

“I shall always remember,” says Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, “the look that, from the depths of his extraordinarily blue eyes, Wagner fixed upon me.— But, he replied, if I did not experience in my soul the living light and love of this Christian faith of which you speak, to which my works all testify, in which I have embodied my spirit and devoted my life, would these be a lie, a trick? How could I be so childish as to exalt myself dispassionately for something I considered a fundamental deception? My art is my prayer: and believe me, true artists sing only what they believe, speak only of what they love, write only what they think; those who lie betray themselves by producing sterile and worthless work since no one can create a true work of art in the absence of personal engagement, in the absence of sincerity.

“Yes, he who tries to dissemble a fictive faith in an alleged work of art from such base interests as success or money betrays himself, producing only a dead work. . . . The work of an individual lacking in faith will never be the work of an artist, since it will always lack the living flame that sparks enthusiasm, flares up, grows larger, warms and fortifies; his work will always reek of cadavers, galvanized by frivolous craft. Nonetheless, let us agree: if on the one hand science, acting alone, can produce only clever amateurs, dishonest plagiarizers, great thieves of methods, of movements and expressions . . ., on the other hand faith, acting alone, can produce and proffer only sublime cries that, for want of self understanding, will seem alas! only incoherent outcries to the uninitiated. A true artist, he who creates, unites and transfigures, thus requires the two indissoluble gifts of science and faith. Since you ask me, know above all that I am a Christian, and that all that has attracted you to my work is in principle inspired and created by that alone.

“Such was the exact meaning of Richard Wagner’s reply that evening.”

12. Dinger (Richard Wagners gestige Entwicklung, 1:351) made the observation that prayer, which had disappeared from Wagner’s work since the Tetralogy, reappeared in Parsifal; but, he adds, Wagner does not “formulate” prayer there, he no longer prays himself, he leaves it to others to pray. We could cite as a counter-example the lamentations of Amfortas: “O all Merciful One, have pity on me!” that so clearly evoke the simple and short prayers, the heartfelt cries of the gospel. The true response is that Wagner was convinced at that time that music alone, and not words, could express religious feelings at their deepest. Also the silent prayer of Gurnemanz and some pages at the beginning of Parsifal’s first act are infinitely more religious and impressive than that of Rienzi: their prayer is in reality the admirable “theme of Faith” performed by the orchestra.

13. [In “Parsifal” and Wagner’s Christianity (London: H. Grevel, 1899), 37–38, David Irvine re-
Nevertheless, the absolute authenticity of such anecdotes can be suspect; it is best to consult what the author himself has written and published.

From 1850 onward, Wagner held that “the art-work is religion presented in a living form.” M. Chamberlain, who cites these fine words, appears to forget that the religion Wagner mentioned at this point was something absolutely vague and indeterminate, “the religion of the future,” that artists cannot invent, Wagner added, and that must spring forth from the heart of the people. In any case, he does not mention Christianity. At this time, as we have seen, Wagner confused it with asceticism. He had not yet taken the trouble to distinguish what he would later call the “inmost core,” the “ideal content” of Christianity, this absolute element so definitive that any “religion of the future” had to be a return to the gospel better explained and better applied.

A better grounded, more intelligent, and therefore more equitable way of judging Christianity appears in “On State and Religion,” written in 1864 at the time Wagner was sketching the initial outline for Parsifal. This essay contains an entire theory of religion, too important for us not to summarize it—all the more so since it raises questions about the term “illusion” so often used by Wagner in speaking of religious beliefs. What precisely does he mean? Is religion for him only a sublime fantasy, a brilliant mirage hypnotizing poor human victims, a mystic slumber full of infinitely sweet dreams

that refresh and reinvigorate the soul, but alas! for new battles and new sufferings? This theory of beneficial illusions, of necessary “life lies,” is specious.\textsuperscript{17} It is moreover irrefutable by logical arguments precisely because our higher beliefs depend much more on feelings [sentiments] than on logical abstractions. But one must say as much about our belief in the reality of the external world or about the existence of our fellow creatures: it is impossible to demonstrate this existence through logical, mathematical reasoning; it is impossible to argue decisively with those who would treat it as hallucination or mirage. That simply proves that the sensations and feelings [sentiments] through which we adapt ourselves to Reality cannot be reduced to “clear and distinct ideas” detached through abstraction.\textsuperscript{18}

No doubt the imaginative formulations, the metaphysical hypotheses we construct to justify our feelings contain a strong dose of anthropo-

\textsuperscript{17} According to Ibsen’s expression in The Wild Duck. In his recent work on Lourdes, M. Zola expresses an analogous theory: “When man,” he says, “has reached the depths of life’s misfortunes, he returns to the divine illusion; and the origin of all religion lies there, man, weak and bare, lacking the strength to live through his terrestrial misery without the everlasting lie of a paradise. To-day the experiment has been made; it seemed that science alone could not suffice, and that one would be compelled to leave a door open on the mysterious” [Émile Zola, Lourdes, trans. Ernest A. Vizetelly (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1897), 393–94]. It is precisely because M. Zola senses that there really is a “mystery” there that he should not unreservedly use the term illusion. It is without question that imaginative representations include subjective and artificial parts; but beneath the image there lies a universal and indestructible tendency. Man is free to pay no attention to this tendency; on the contrary, he can consider it as a normal orientation of his faculties toward a goal superior to simple animal life. Thus would we reply to the author’s question several lines earlier: “What was this imperious need of the things beyond, which tortured suffering humanity? Whence came it? Why should equality and justice be desired when they did not seem to exist in impassive nature? Man had set them in the unknown spheres of the mysterious, in the supernatural realms of religious paradises, and there contented his ardent thirst for them. That unquenchable thirst for happiness had ever consumed, and would consume him always” [Zola, Lourdes, trans. Vizetelly, 393]. M. Zola forgets that our dignity, our nobility is also to experience what the gospel calls the “hunger and thirst for justice”: in his best moments man does not hesitate to sacrifice practical instincts, happiness, life itself to the Ideal. “Impassive nature” does not explain this insatiable aspiration toward the Good and the Just; here then is an element that one could name super-natural; to treat it as illusion is to use a negative materialist formulation and to lower man to the level of animals.

\textsuperscript{18} See André Godfernaux, Le sentiment et la pensée et leurs principaux aspects physiologiques (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1894).
pomorphism and fiction, but experience allows a choice among these hypotheses and these formulations: on the one hand, some respond to all the circumstances of experience and, on the other hand, some orient activity, stimulate it, enable it to produce the best and finest acts. What other criterion of truth could we require from such a topic? Why then apply this term illusion to higher beliefs? Its use ought to be abandoned to partisans of an unintelligent materialism or of a sterile skepticism. Let us name them rather symbols, signs of this mysterious Reality to which each one of us adapts according to his temperament and his nature. This is, in fact, the meaning Wagner had in mind. This representation of the Divine constructed uniquely by the “category of illusion,” is, he says, “a kind of allegory, a translation of the inexpressible, of what cannot be perceived (by the senses) but known only by an immediate intuition (of consciousness), a translation in the language of ordinary life and of (ordinary) knowledge inexact in itself, but the only means one can use.”¹⁹ And to underscore this insufficiency, Wagner compares these allegories to the telling of a dream, always so pale and so incomplete that it satisfies neither the teller nor the listener.

These allegories imposed by religious authority are, Wagner continues, called dogmas. Necessary for the masses, who remain incapable of a direct, personal religious experience, they become dangerous only if, forgetting their nature, one seeks to apply laws of “causality” to them, that is to say, scientific knowledge. Decadence is at its height when religious authority seeks to be protected by the secular branch. From the moment the State protects the church, the latter falls from its divine preeminence and sinks to the level of an institution serving the inferior interests guaranteed by the State:

Is Religion destroyed in this way? Not at all! It lives on in its original source, its true and unique basis: in what the individual has of the most intimate, most profound, most sacred; that source is immune from the disputes of the Clergy and the State, the adversaries and partisans of the

supernatural. For the essence of true Religion is to be a light completely different from the light of the sun which shines in this world; it shines forth far from the deceiving brightness of the day, in the inmost depths, in the night of the human soul; it can be perceived only in these depths. It is from this innermost depth of the soul and not from the external world that true peace can come to us: our external sensory organs are designed only to satisfy the individual who feels himself isolated and needy in the presence of the world. It is impossible to recognize the foundational unity of all beings through these organs. This knowledge can only be granted by a new faculty of understanding: suddenly, as by grace (from above), it arises the moment we become aware, on whatever occasion rises, of the vanity of things of this world.

The truly religious man knows full well that he cannot communicate to others the personal intuition that fills him with happiness, neither theoretically nor through disputes or controversies. He can only convince them practically, by example: examples of renunciation, of sacrifice, of gentleness, of sublime serenity from the earnestness that permeates his whole life. The Saint, the Martyr, is consequently the true mediator of salvation.

Thanks to them, the masses understand, in the only manner accessible to them, what intuition (of the religious man) must encompass; they cannot yet appropriate this knowledge directly, but only through faith. A profound truth is revealed through the fact that people address God only through the mediation of the Saints whom they most love; it is a poor argument in favor of alleged modern progress that an English shopkeeper, for example, when he has put on his Sunday clothes and taken up the requisite book, imagines he is entering into direct and personal communication with God. 20

Already, a few pages earlier, Wagner had given the following wholly practical explanation of dogmas and faith. Religion’s essence, in his view, lies in the victory over selfishness, renunciation, suffering voluntarily accepted. “An idea,” he says, “which produces similar miracles and which we could perhaps, in opposition to the ordinary and practical manner of representing things, regard as an illusion,

must have a source so sublime, so incomparably above all the rest, that the only way of forming a representation of it is to perceive its supernatural effectiveness and to draw from that some conclusion.”

This passage clearly shows that Wagner gives the word illusion a thoroughly relative meaning: not being subject to the categories of ordinary knowledge, religious intuition seems to be a pure mirage. Hence the term “category of illusion” that, in Wagner’s thought, has the same meaning as the expression that has become current today: “category of the ideal.”

Perhaps the Master could be reproached for having viewed religion from an overly practical perspective and not having attributed any real value to the theoretical explanations it provides—about the formation of the world, for example. However, it seems that humanity believes no less in the theoretical dogma of creation than it does in the practical dogma of judgment. And we do not see why it would be any less legitimate to personify the principle of sufficient reason in a creator God than the principle of duty in a rewarding God.

Our primary criticism of Wagner’s theology would be directed, primarily, toward its overly negative character: “The basis of religion,” he says, “is to be conscious of the wretchedness of human existence; its innermost core is denial of the world, that is, to recognize that it has only a passing existence, resembling a dream, founded on pure appearance, and to aspire to the deliverance prepared by renunciation, awaited by faith.”

And yet, this renunciation—it cannot be repeated too often—is only a preliminary condition of religious life, a means, not in any way an end in itself. The end, the goal, is, as Christ said, “life and life to the fullest.” But life is a complex notion that can be considered, to be sure, from the perspective of personal fulfillment, but also from the perspective of moral improvement. The two points of view are moreover inseparable, since they constitute the psychological aspect and

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22. Ibid., GS 8:20 (27) [PW, vol. 4, Art and Politics, 23–24].
the *metaphysical* aspect of a being’s self-same evolution. When Wagner appears to limit religious experience [sentiment] to renunciation alone, his analysis is incomplete: he sees in this impulse, which elevates our dreams and our desires beyond the world and makes us long for a better world, only an instinct for happiness exasperated by the wretchedness of existence; he forgets the more noble instinct to which Christ, after having spoken of “happiness,” appealed: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

If we consider, on the contrary, the pages entitled “Religion and Art,” written in 1880, at a time when Wagner had just finished the text and was composing the music for *Parsifal*, the doctrine took on a positive character: what preoccupies Wagner is the idea of “regeneration,” of “redemption”; the duty of renunciation finds its complement, its completion, in active compassion, devoted charity.

But there is something more striking still: Wagner’s sincere admiration for this Christian religion that he had judged so severely since 1848.

Religion, according to him, contains a divine element, stemming from an absolute truth: belief in the wretchedness, in the precariousness of the world, and in the possibility of redemption. Brahminism posits its faith in metaphysical considerations that could be comprehended only by those “rich in spirit”; Buddhism also comes to depend on philosophical speculations. The Christian religion was different. “Its founder was not wise, but divine.” There is nothing simpler than his teaching; the allegories, the parables that Jesus uses are addressed to the imagination and feelings of the “poor in spirit,” whom they console and strengthen. But the “rich in spirit” were unsatisfied with this wholly practical doctrine. From that dissatisfaction came subtle arguments, the transformation of allegories into

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myths, and finally, as a result of disputes among sects, the creation of dogmas.

But the primitive divine element still lies at the heart of these myths and dogmas. For example: the belief in miracle is explained and justified by the fact that the greatest miracle—one could say the supernatural in itself—is precisely the conversion of a natural man who has succeeded in considering the world merely as appearance and in denying the will to life. Consequently, whatever the human speculations and the formulations that grew out of them, the supernatural, the divine element, is revealed in the moral change that befell the first disciples, and above all, is uniquely revealed in Jesus, since the conversion of the will was fully realized in his person.

The divine would thus be expressed in Jesus anthropomorphically; Jesus, his body nailed to the cross, the victim of excruciating tortures—is he not the example of perfect compassion, the irresistible model of patience and selflessness? Unfortunately, the Divine that revealed itself in the sacrifice of the all-loving Savior came to be identified with the Jewish Jehovah, the angry and punitive God; thence the decadence of Christianity and, in the end, modern atheism.

The role of art is to save the ideal element of religion in separating from the literal meaning of dogmas their true signification and translating this signification through increasingly expressive concrete images. That is what the divine artists Raphael and Michelangelo did. Poetry, shackled to the word, has only been able to add to the exaggerations of dogmatic formulations, in the case of Dante, for example. It fell to music, independent of both words and visual images, to translate the very essence of religion most faithfully.

In all this mythic interpretation of the Christian religion, in the reprobation of Jehovah and of Judaism, and finally in the predominance given to music over all the other arts, we readily recognize the influence of Schopenhauer.27 It is no less detectable in the two final

27. One will immediately be convinced of this in reading, in Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, sec. 68 [Le monde comme volonté et représentation, trans. Burdeau, 1:406; World as Will and Representation, trans. Payne, 1:387–88; World as Will and Representation, trans.
portions of “Religion and Art,” which also contain extremely interesting insights.

Wagner observed that human will, aware of its fall and despairing of attaining the Good, turned toward the Beautiful. Thus isolated, however, aesthetic pleasure became “little more than a heartless jesting,” curing nothing and abandoning humanity to the brutal regime of force, from the Greeks to the most uncouth Barbarians. “From time to time, between attacks of this blood lust, sages arose (Pythagoras, for example, the master of vegetarian doctrine) who established that the world suffers from a disorder which keeps it in a state of growing decadence.” Finally, “among the poorest and most despised of the world, appeared the Saviour, who taught the way of salvation, not through doctrines, but through examples. He gave his own blood and own flesh as final and supreme sacrifice of purification for all the blood spilled, for all the flesh torn by sin, and chose bread and wine for his disciples as their daily meal: ‘Take this from now on in memory of me!’ Such is the sole salutary worship of Christian faith: in performing it, one practices the whole doctrine of the Redeemer.”

This interpretation of the Eucharist as vegetarian meal is so fanciful that we will not attempt to refute it, contenting ourselves with contrasting it to the admirable end of Parsifal’s first act, in which the songs that accompany the Eucharistic supper express the pure doctrine of the gospel.

The way Wagner explains how the Christian religion quickly de-

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Norman, Welchman, and Janaway, 414–15], and sec. 70 [Burdeau, 1:424; Payne, 1:405–6; Norman et al.432–33] and in vol. 2, Supplements, chaps. 48 and 49. Here is a representative passage, taken from chap. 48: “One must not only look at men in time as entities independent of one another, but understand the Platonic idea of man which is related to the succession of human beings as eternity itself is to eternity drawn out in time. If we do not lose sight of the idea of man, we see that the fall of Adam represents man’s finite, animal, sinful nature, which makes him a finite being, subject to limitation, sin, suffering, and death. On the contrary, the life, teaching and death of Jesus Christ are the image of the eternal, supernatural side, of the freedom and deliverance of man. Every man is thus, as such and in potential, Adam as well as Jesus, according to how he understands himself and how his will then determines him; from that stem either inevitable death, or salvation and the conquest of eternal life”; Burdeau, 3:439 [Payne, 2:628].

generated into the Christian church is also rather forced: the primary cause for the trouble came from the church, which, when obliged to subdue inferior races through fear, had recourse to Jewish formulations for the formation of its dogma . . . ; in sum, “it is the law of Muhammad that has become the fundamental law of all our civilizations: ‘Surely it is not Jesus Christ the Redeemer who commanded a ruler to have chaplains preach before regiments ranged in battle; but, in pronouncing his name, the latter certainly thought of Jahweh or of Elohim who hated all other gods and wanted to know they had been subdued by his faithful people.’”

How then can the universal decadence of humanity be explained? The most plausible hypothesis for Wagner seems to be a violent geological revolution that required humanity to abandon a vegetarian diet and to feed upon flesh and blood. He then sums up the attempts made at various times to resolve the problem and to cure humanity: a vegetarian system, for example, a protective society for animals, temperance associations, or worker associations. From such mediocre results must one conclude the impossibility of deliverance? Certainly not, as this would lead to absolute pessimism. And yet, to accept this despairing theory is to abdicate human dignity: man’s mission is to recognize, history in hand, the sufferings that afflict the world and to remedy them by “consciously restoring the damaged caused by the unconscious Will that produces the universe.”

This idea of “redemption,” of a “regeneration” of the human species, is precisely what constitutes the internal “core,” the “soul” of

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29. Ibid., GS 10:233 (301) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 235, 233–34].
30. Ibid., GS 10:246 (316) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 246]. In Parsifal we would explain the symbolism of the lance that wounds and that heals in this way: it is the same will that tortures us with desire and that delivers us in denying itself.
31. “Der edelste Kern” [“The noblest kernel”], ibid., 247 (317) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 247]; that which he previously calls “die tiefste Grundlage” [“the deepest foundation”], GS 10:212 (276) [213], “den idealen Gehalt des Dogmas” [“the ideal content of the dogma”], GS 19:221 (286) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 222].
32. “Die alles klagende, alles sagende, tösende Seele der christlichen Religion” [“the endlessly complaining, all encompassing, sonorous soul of the Christian religion”], GS 10:250 (321) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 249].
Religion and what Wagner sought to separate from all allegory and all “theatrical display.”

Let us distinguish, not separate! we reply. If theatrical display is unnecessary for humanity, why did Wagner reincarnate the “soul of Christianity” in Parsifal? One can argue over the proportions required, but the fact remains that human consciousness cannot assimilate the ideal element profitably without the perceptible element. We rediscover this perceptible element in the very person of Christ, in his life and actions. But Wagner, who, in the tract “On State and Religion” does not even pronounce Christ’s name, refers to it constantly in his final essay. And with what expression of profound emotion! “Having the Redeemer’s thought in our heart,” he says, “let us acknowledge that it is not through the actions of men of the past, but through their sufferings that they draw us near and are worthy of occupying our thoughts, and that our interest must lie not with the victor, but with the vanquished heroes. Even if the regeneration of the human species were to come about, if universal peace, the peace of individual consciences shining forth were to be established, still we would have the sense of Existence’s awful tragedy, in the nature that surrounds us, in the power of the elements, in the manifestations of the Will which never cease to appear beneath and beside us in sea and desert, even in insects, in the worm that we inadvertently crush, and each day we should raise our eyes to the Redeemer nailed to the cross as to our supreme and most noble refuge.”

33. “Jenes theatralischen Gaukelwerkes” [“the theatrical hocus-pocus”]. GS 10:248 (318) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 247].

34. “Religion und Kunst,” GS 10:247 (317) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 246–47]. It was at Enge, near Zurich, recounts M. Kufferath (Parsifal, 1st ed., [1890, 168]), on Good Friday 1857, that Wagner, as he himself later said, “understood this sigh of deepest pity that resounded from the cross on Golgotha long ago, and which, this time, escaped from his own breast.” In a few hours, he wrote the tenderly moving verses that he later placed in the mouth of Gurnemanz and that explain the charm of Good Friday, this day of universal repentance and of universal pardon, when nature appears more beautiful, when grass and flowers, watered with the sinner’s tears, holy dew, lift their heads up again, when all creatures yearn for the Redeemer and with delight before man purified. From this moment Parsifal was conceived. But, we shall add, this mystical impression was short-lived; it was only many years later that it filled the soul of the Master.
In the Tetralogy Wagner claimed the essential immorality of ambitious and pleasure-seeking individuals’ egoism, in Tristan and Isolde the shortcomings of passion-love; now that he proclaims the obligation of devoted love, is it surprising to see him turn his gaze toward the perfect Model of renunciation and sacrifice?

We believe therefore in the sincerity of the sentiments expressed in the program Wagner composed in 1880 on the occasion of the performance before King Ludwig II of the overture of Parsifal, where he himself provides an explanation for this magnificent piece:

Love—Faith—Hope

First Theme: Love

“Take my body, take my blood in the name of our love!” (Repeated diminuendo by angels’ voices).

“Take my blood, take my body in remembrance of me!” (Again diminuendo.)

Second Theme: Faith

Promise of redemption through Faith. Firm and full of vitality, Faith is manifested, vigorous even in suffering.

To the renewed promise, Faith responds from the celestial heights—as though borne on the wings of the white dove—descending from above, taking hold of human hearts ever more completely and more fully, filling the world, the whole of nature before turning its gaze heavenward, gently soothed.

Then, once more, in solitude rises the cry of loving compassion: the agony, the sacred sweat of the Mount of Olives, the divine suffering of Golgotha;—the body grows pallid, the blood flows and gleams in the cup with a glow of benediction, spreading the joy of redemption by love upon all that live and suffer. We are prepared in seeing Amfortas, the sullied guardian of the sanctuary: will there be redemption for the cruel suffering of his soul? Once more we hear the promise—and we hope!35

Parsifal is thus a work that is profoundly, essentially religious, without, however, affiliating Wagner with any official theological creed.

35. Wagner, Entwürfe, Gedanken, Fragmente, 106.
But an intelligent man, who seeks to understand his feelings, his belief, cannot escape the need to formulate his thoughts. If he does not accept the credo\(^{36}\) of one church or another, he must replace it by a credo of his own invention or borrow from another powerful mind. It was Schopenhauer’s formulations that Wagner embraced at the time he composed Parsifal. In an appendix to “Religion and Art,” he recognizes that charity requires an almost excessive effort on the part of natural man. This is why our civilization is going to its ruin through lack of charity. But how can one love a world that one must constantly distrust? How can one love one’s neighbor, when the neighbor remains incomprehensible? What will provide this understanding, this knowledge? Schopenhauer’s philosophy.\(^{37}\) And Wagner adds, “Only the charity that has developed in compassion and that is manifested in compassion to the point of the complete destruction of the will itself, is liberating Christian charity, in which faith and hope are necessarily contained: faith as secure and infallible knowledge of the moral signification of the world, hope as the consoling conviction of the impossibility of being deceived by this knowledge.”\(^{38}\)

36. When the church formulates a dogma, it borrows its expressions from the predominant science or philosophy of the time. For example, the doctrine of the Eucharist was formulated by the Council of Trent in terms borrowed from scholastic theories—hence the obviously human element of relative, transitory value. The immense majority do not even realize it. Those who are capable of distinguishing between the divine element and the human element in dogmatic definitions—which the church does not prevent—often imagine themselves not to have faith because they believe themselves obligated to give absolute adherence to opinions they know to be inaccurate. The church, compelled to have an official language, cannot however constantly change its formulas, which it would have the right to do. It has an obligation, says the apostle, “to the Barbarians as well as to the Greeks, to the ignorant as well as to the learned.” And the most educated feel themselves too much a part of the crowd through their physical and moral misery not to have the charity to let the church adapt itself to the average intellectual level of humanity.

37. Was nützt diese Erkenntniss? GS 10:260 (333); see 256 (329): “It was reserved for a single great mind—and how long in coming—to shed light on the confusion over ten times worse than the secular sort with which the Jewish conception of God had enveloped the entire Christian world. If the misled thinker was finally able to set his foot firmly on the ground of a true morality, we owe it to Kant’s successor, Arthur Schopenhauer, the kind-hearted philosopher.” And farther on he declares that Schopenhauer’s philosophy must become “the foundation of all subsequent culture, intellectual and moral” [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 259 and 256].

38. Ibid., GS 10:260 (333) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 260].
What a curious mix of Christianity and Schopenhauerism! Wagner has merely replaced one dogmatism with another, so well in fact that a truly intelligent man could not do without it!

In any case, Wagner’s belief is no less sincere, no less intense, whether it has as its object the practical manifestation of divine charity in Jesus Christ or the theoretical justification of this virtue in the system of philosophy. It is the Divine, the Ideal, that appeared to him under the following guise: love.

And this itself explains an exaggeration for which Wagner is often criticized: having made Parsifal a fool, and in certain circumstances—even more serious—a naïf. He thought this would highlight the effectiveness of charity, since it would make up for the absence of intelligence and would be enough on its own to make Parsifal a hero.

Isolating charity from intelligence in this way created an abstraction, expressed a paradox. Taken literally, this paradox would lead to deplorable consequences. Indeed, it then allowed Nietzsche to assert that morality and religion are a denial of life, a symptom of the human race’s impoverishment and degeneration; he would be right to criticize Christianity for attempting to transform the world into a vast hospital in which the sick would perpetually be busy caring for

39. “Der reine Thor” [“the pure fool”]. Apparently, it is not a matter here of folly as normally understood. Is it only a lack of guile, of worldly cleverness? Is Parsifal such a child, an innocent? We believe this interpretation to be insufficient. The true explanation, in our opinion, is that, for Wagner, the noblest actions, like the most sublime ideas, must be spontaneous, arising from the unconscious. That is why Wagner presents us with Siegfried (physical heroism) and Parsifal (moral heroism) as “knowing nothing”; see Parsifal, GS, 335, 336; Siegfried [Schott edition], 81: Wagner’s “Nichts du weisst” [“you know nothing”] and “Unbewusst” [“unknowing”], 40.

40. “Durch Mitleid wissend, der reine Thor” [“knowing through compassion, the pure fool”].

41. One could compare this blind charity with the blind faith that Lohengrin, for example, requires from Elsa. It is the same exaggeration, stemming, we believe, from what Wagner accepted, as relates to the human will, of Luther’s, Hegel’s and Schopenhauer’s determinism. For him, free will is not having to submit to external constraint and to obey the “interior necessity” of his nature; see letter to Uhlig of January 19, 1849, cited by C. Benoît in Musiciens, 17. Therein lies the almost impulsive nature of several of his characters. Catholic doctrine, by contrast, has never abased free will before grace, the intellect before faith, any more than it has absorbed the world into God, the individual into the Whole, as occurs in the majority of philosophical systems.
the sick. From then on it would lead to the insoluble antinomy so often established between charity and the great law of the struggle for life. On the contrary, if intellectual progress were to occur in tandem with moral progress, it would perhaps lead to the establishment here below of agreement, harmony for existence, since it would abolish the misunderstandings, rivalries, and hatreds that generally come from vanity, from susceptibility, that is to say, from a lack of intelligence and foolishness more than from selfishness.

If Plato and Socrates were thus wrong in viewing only one side of the moral question, in claiming that man is evil because he is ignorant, one should not rush to the opposite extreme and imagine that maliciousness will be healed without curing ignorance. Wagner was wrong to embody this last paradox in Parsifal. What a difference from the Christ of the gospel! Jesus is “filled with compassion”; he is also “filled with truth”; he is the “Lamb of God,” but he is also “the light of the world.” The “holy fool” is the ascetic of the East, lost in his sterile dreams and not even imagining constructing a hospital or a school. The truly charitable man is Vincent de Paul, uniting the gifts of initiative, prudence, practical sense with an inexhaustible compassion, and all the talents of an organizer and able administrator.

Wagner clearly revealed his state of soul and his intentions in composing Parsifal when he told the following charming and touching legend: “In newly converted Sweden, a pastor’s children heard a Nixie singing on a riverbank, and accompanying herself on the harp. ‘Sing, sing,’ they cry out to her, ‘you will never obtain salvation!’ The Nixie sadly let fall her harp. The children heard her weeping and went to tell their father. He chastened them and sent a consoling message for the Nixie: ‘Nixie, no longer be sad,’ they called out to her, ‘our father says you can still attain salvation!’ Then, all through the night, they heard echoing on the river harmonies and songs so sweet that

42. The same paradox exists in “Ivan the Fool,” the popular story by Tolstoy. This thesis of blind goodness attracts few partisans in our time; proliferating work assistance programs can be considered a symptomatic reaction of intelligent Charity increasingly guided and assisted by Science.
they had never heard anything more delightful.—Now the Redeemer himself invites us to sing our longings, our faith and our hopes. The Christian church has left us its noblest heritage: the soul of Christianity, which is all-pitying, all-saying, and all-singing. Sacred music, soaring from the temple, could penetrate and animate nature, teaching humanity, in need of salvation, a new language to voice the infinite.”

It is in this divine language that Parsifal speaks to the poor human soul, ever anxious and discouraged. That is why this work will remain eternally beautiful, eternally consoling, like the gospel of which it is a faithful and harmonious echo.

43. “Religion und Kunst,” GS 10:250 (321) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 249].
“The Letter Kills, It Is the Spirit That Gives Life”

2 Corinthians 3:6

Wagner could have begun the treatise “Religion and Art” summarized earlier with this text from the apostle rather than using Schiller’s fine words.¹

Indeed, as of “Religion and Art,” he no longer limits himself, as before, to the external manifestations of Christianity; these manifestations, which can only reach their full potential for and through human nature, are necessarily marred by numerous imperfections. He seeks to penetrate the heart of things, to grasp the divine idea through its incomplete expressions. His ambition is to extract, to isolate the “ideal content” of dogmas and rites in order to present it to human consciousness in an artistic form allowing its intimate assimilation.

This is what constitutes the “return to Christian sensibility [sentiment]” of which we have spoken. The change was noted by Nietzsche and his disciples and bitterly criticized.²

Let us then recall³ Wagner’s contempt for the Christian religion in

1. “In the Christian religion I find an intrinsic disposition to the Highest and the Noblest, and its various manifestations in life appear to me so vapid and repugnant simply because they have missed the expression of that Highest” [German in original; translation is that of W. Ashton Ellis in PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 212].
2. In an article (Kunstwart, Dresden, November 1893, 61) M. Peter Gast uses the term renegade.
3. See citations in chap. 3, §2, pp. 34–35ff of this volume.
his first theoretical writings: Christian charity, he said in 1849, is something completely external and artificial. “Only,” he affirms nowadays, “the charity that has grown out of compassion and that manifests itself in compassion to the point of complete destruction of the will itself is liberating Christian charity.” After having opposed Nature to Christianity, Wagner thus reached the point of recognizing in Christianity the highest and most practical expression of the human ideal.

Christianity is a product of the Roman Empire’s decadence, he added; in its contempt for the body, it killed art. “In the same way,” he wrote twenty years later, “that Christianity rose up into universal Roman civilization, in our day Music came forth out of the chaos of modern civilization. Both tell us: our kingdom is not of this world. And that means: we come from within, you from without; we spring forth from the essence of things, you from their appearance.” And in the tract “Religion and Art,” written in 1880 during the composition of Parsifal, Wagner maintains—as we saw in the preceding chapter—that Art and Religion have one and the same soul, since through Art and through Religion is expressed, under different forms, the same essential teaching, the same insatiable aspiration of human nature toward the ideal.

Let us supplement these documents with the testimony of a man who had the good fortune to live on intimate terms with the great artist.

M. de Wolzogen has preserved Wagner’s significant response made the day after Parsifal’s completion, as they were discussing a new book produced by the materialist and atheist school.

“One should count oneself fortunate,” exclaimed Wagner, to have been imbued with religious traditions from childhood; nothing which comes from outside could replace them. However, it is only little by little that

4. “Was nützt diese Erkenntniss?” [“What Use Is this Knowledge?”] (1880), GS 10:260 (334) [this work was written as a supplement to PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art].
their profound meaning is further revealed through the happiness they bring us. Knowing that a Savior came remains the most precious blessing for mankind. Rejecting those traditions shows a great lack of freedom, an enslavement of thought caused by foolish demagogic influences. Yes, positively, such resistance is mere snobbery.”

Another time, speaking of a trenchant critic of Christianity, Wagner made this apt observation: “He writes on religion and on Christ like a Third form student who has just passed on to the Fourth.” Wagner pitied this man, who completely lacked serious understanding of the essence of the greatest, the unrivaled good created for man. Another time, we, who have had the good fortune of hearing him hold forth on such subjects, were given an example of his profound views on such sublime things: “One could say: since there have been so many saints, so many martyrs, why attribute divinity specially to Jesus? But it was by divine grace alone, by an illumination, an experience, an interior change, that they all became saints and martyrs, this is what transformed them from sinners into superhuman beings no longer resembling mere mortals. Buddha himself was a luxurious prince, living in his harem, before he received (celestial) illumination. He showed himself to be morally great, sublime in renouncing all earthly pleasures, but he was in no way divine. Jesus, on the contrary, was, from the beginning, completely without sin, without a shadow of passion, his was a total divine purity of nature. And yet he does not appear as an ‘interesting’ being or as inhuman. His wholly pure divinity is an altogether wholly pure humanity which must affect us through suffering and pity, feelings common to all human beings. It is a unique, incomparable vision.” And he concluded with this unforgettable statement: “All others need a Savior; He is the Savior.”

Because so many great and noble men have left us since 1883, the following words take on even greater value: “The Divine shone forth through human nature in its complete openness and purest beauty only one time, never to be repeated, and then it showed us the path to redemption. But this path leads to death; Christ has given us the example of a good death and it is a good life that leads us to it.”

One had to be there for these words to produce their full effect, to see the man who pronounced them, to hear the sound, the tone of his voice,
to contemplate his expressive look, the ardor of his features, his great seriousness, the profound emotion, the thrill of his entire being in such moments. When we try to explain his words to others they seem little more than artificial fragments composed in our own language. What was wholly life and truth in person becomes mere platitude from the mouth of the poor reporter. In person, one could grasp how what Wagner perceived became totally and immediately alive in him, a corporeal reality, a work of art. And at no time did he ever stop at the word; music spoke from the depth of this soul from which words originated, mysteriously mingling with them, and the form of the “hero” was revealed to listeners.

After such formal accounts, it is left to us to specify Wagner’s true thought with regard to theological formulations. It seems to be clearly expressed in a curious passage inserted in 1878 into the Bayreuth Blätter:

“From the Church’s beginnings,” he writes,

theologians have changed the God revealed by Jesus (and) have transformed a splendidly evident clarity\(^9\) into an increasingly incomprehensible problem. It is one of the most appalling misunderstandings of universal history to have interpreted the God of our Savior by the national God of Israel; the increasingly open and total atheism of the coarsest minds as well as the most cultivated has always been and is still the avenging consequence of this misunderstanding. . . . Who still knows Jesus? Historical critics perhaps? . . . How many times and with what accuracy has a critical examination of the Gospels already been made, has the origin and the composition of the Gospels been critically examined! One might have thought that critics, by eliminating falsehoods and inauthentic elements, would accurately and distinctly recognize the sublime figure of the Savior and his work. But this God revealed to us by Jesus, this God whom all the gods, the heroes, the sages of the world did not know and who was then revealed, not to Pharisees, scribes, or high priests, but only to poor shepherds and Galilean fishermen with a simplicity and a force altogether so

\(8\). See “Publikum und Popularität” [“Public and Popularity”] (1878), GS 10:86 (118) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art, 53–81].

\(9\). The word “Ersichtlichkeit” is difficult to translate; it is the visibility of the thing that is self-evident as opposed to the insoluble mystery of the problem.
powerful that from then on the world and all its wealth appeared to them as so much vanity,—this God who can no longer be revealed anew again because (in Jesus) he was (fully) revealed once, for the first time,—critics always view this God suspiciously because they feel obligated to see in him Jehovah the Creator such as the Jews imagine him.¹⁰

Fortunately, there are two kinds of critical minds and two kinds of scientific methods. Voltaire, the great critic, the idol of all free thinkers, knew “the Maid of Orleans” through historical documents available at the time and he thought himself justified in composing his ignominious poem. Schiller, not having any other documents, but either lacking criticism, or thanks to the poetic inspiration so scorned by free thinkers, recognized in the Maid of Orleans a “noble image of humanity.” And not only did his poetic panegyric of the heroine give the public an eternally moving work loved by all, but with his work he anticipated the historical critics of our time who, through a fortunate discovery of authentic documents, came to a just appreciation of this marvelous apparition. . . . Let us next examine the infant Jesus in the arms of the Madonna of Saint Sixtus. Schiller had sensed (through a kind of divination) what the miraculous liberator of his country really was; in the same way Rafael had the revelation of (what is in reality) this Savior of a deformed world, made unrecognizable by theology. Examine this child with his sunny look imbued with the firm resolution to save (men); he shines this look down on us, then

¹⁰. By this time Wagner detested the Jews to the point that he refused even to recognize in Judaism the stem that produced and bore the divine fruit: Christianity. According to him, “primitive Christianity” (that is, the doctrine of deliverance from egoism by love) was altered through its admixture with Jewish dogmas, and this “pure Christianity was nothing but a branch of the venerable Buddhism which, after Alexander’s expedition to India, spread to the shores of the Mediterranean”; Letter of Wagner to Liszt on Dante’s Divine Comedy, June 7, 1855, Briefwechsel zwischen Wagner und Liszt, 2:78; Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt, 2:91–100. In thus separating Christianity from Judaism in order to attach it to Buddhism, Wagner shows himself a faithful disciple of Schopenhauer, whose principal theories he summarizes in a passage of this letter to Liszt; see Schopenhauer, Le monde comme volonté et comme représentation, vol. 1, §68, 406 [World as Will and Representation, Payne, 1:387–88; Norman et al., 414–15], and Le monde comme volonté, 3:432 [Payne, 2:621–22]. Should one succeed in isolating Christian morality from its dogma, as Schopenhauer and Wagner wished, it would be no less true that Buddhism represents what is negative, “inhibiting”; Christianity, on the contrary, what is positive, active, and infinitely progressive in liberating effort; they are thus not reducible to one another; see Hermann Oldenburg, Le Bouddha, sa vie, sa doctrine, sa communauté (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1894); see especially 294.
indeed beyond us, on the world and farther still, beyond all the known worlds; ask yourself then if this look “signifies” or if it “is”? Is it therefore so impossible for theology to take the great step of conceding to science its incontestable truth in surrendering Jehovah to it and retaining for the world its God who was purely revealed in Jesus the Unique One?

A question of importance, continues Wagner. Shall it be left to the people to resolve it? That would risk concluding with no more than a “trivial profession of atheism.” Who knows whether, in the religious sphere as in the social sphere, we are not heading toward a new organization—if new Barbarians will not bring our current civilization to an end, to our decline? Then our complications would vanish, bringing about a return to the simplicity of origins that is perhaps, Wagner concludes, the return of Jesus predicted by Scripture: “theology would then be in agreement with the Gospel, the unbound knowledge of revelation without Jehovahistic subtleties would be given to us and we would thus obtain the result for which the Savior promised us his return.”

11. In other words, this masterpiece allows us to have, through experience [sentiment], a direct intuition of true reality, the Ideal, without mediation by a concept, a formula. We find the same idea in this lovely passage on the Madonna of Saint Sixtus: “the Virgin Mother rises, transfigured with the Son to whom she gave birth. What strikes us is a beauty that the ancient world, however gifted (in this way), could not even imagine. For this is not a case of Diana’s strict chastity and modest reserve, but love divine raised beyond all possibility of (even) knowing impurity, this love which, through innermost denial of the world, gave birth to the affirmation of redemption. And we see with our own eyes this inexpressible marvel, easy and pleasant to understand, clearly within our grasp, consonant with our most noble personal experiences and yet, it is, more than one can say, beyond all current experience. Of old, Greek sculptors held nature to an unattainable ideal; now painters no longer present the mystery of religious dogma to subtle reason, but to enraptured contemplation and they offer it unveiled, in an (intuitive) revelation, what reason cannot understand and what could not subsequently (rigorously) be formulated (in words)…. From the Virgin Mother’s arms the divine child casts upon the world this wonderful gaze which enables him to recognize, in the midst of the false appearances that stimulate desire, its true essence (and which shows it as) destined for death, condemned to death”; GS 10: 217 (282) [PW, vol. 6, Religion and Art]. Farther on, 222 (288), Wagner insists on the superiority of music over painting: the latter is still, through the visual image, tied to dogmatic formulation; music alone breaks completely free to “reveal with incomparable accuracy the very essence of the Christian religion.”
Is this only a beautiful dream, a pure illusion? But in that case the gospel itself, the gospel that sums up “the Law and the Prophets” in Love, would be a dream.\textsuperscript{12} On the other hand, reducing Christianity to the sole necessary and sufficient duty of divine Charity, is this not to apply to religious society an anarchist utopia that claims to replace all laws, all organization by Love alone? Are we faced then with an insoluble antinomy?

No, since it is an experience [sentiment] of love that protects us from the egoistical interpretation of “worship in spirit and in truth” that would reduce religion to something intimate, individual. “Spirit and truth,” this divine Charity, is precisely what causes us to accept religion, for common edification, under the form of society, of church, in accordance with the needs of our nature and as Christ established it here below.

But because a society necessarily supposes an external, material organization of ceremonies, of laws and of formulated beliefs, will we fall back into the idolatry of the Pharisees? Not at all, if we keep in mind that these external elements are in fact aids, indications, supports, and not religious life itself, means and not ends.

And to return to the matter considered by Wagner, is theology (whatever may be the exaggerations or errors of various theologians) really opposed to the gospel and, strictly speaking, do the two really need to agree once again? We do not believe so.

Theology is a heroic effort of the human intellect to interpret divine facts by using intellectual categories. These categories, slowly elaborated by the mind as it is influenced by inferior realities, are obviously insufficient as soon as they must express what surpasses the daily experience of consciousness or the senses. It is thus ungenerous to laugh at imperfect attempts, and the subtlest form of pride is perhaps to mock “the presumption of mind wishing to explain the universe in four words, to enclose the blue of the sky in a lekythos, to hold the infinite in a three-fingered frame.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Mt 7:12; 22:39, 40.
\textsuperscript{13} Renan, Preface to Ecclésiaste (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1882).
As long as theology always acknowledges mystery and proclaims it, this means it does not claim to comprehend the incomprehensible, to know and define the unknowable. It seeks to translate religious experience as exactly as possible into the metaphysical and scientific language of humanity. It follows that its formulations include an essentially human element to which one cannot attribute an absolute value. If the intellectual milieu undergoes a profound transformation, theological language becomes less and less intelligible, to the great detriment of religious experience [sentiment] itself.

We are currently experiencing one of these crises in which the renewal of philosophical, scientific, and historical ideas has rendered Christian theology a dead letter for the intellectual elite. Only those who do not believe in the heavenly “leaven” deposited in humanity by the hand of Christ can be confused about this. The action of this leaven appears slow indeed to us, we creatures of short duration! What does it matter? If the church is living in accordance with the law of all life, it will eventually adapt itself to the new milieu.

But where, it will be said, have you noticed any indication of evolution in the church’s teaching? Without going into tiresome detail, we reply thus: would the hearers of the Sermon on the Mount or even the authors of the synoptic gospels have foreseen the evolution of dogma expressed by the formulations of Nicea or of Trent? And, conversely, who then accepts literally, without comment, the statement “Jesus ascended to the heavens, descended to hell,” now that the old Chaldean conception of the world has been universally abandoned and that heaven is no longer placed above, hell at the center of the earth? After Galileo, can one explain the tenth chapter of Joshua in the same way as before the appearance of this great genius? Have

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14. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman takes and kneads into three measures of wheat until all the dough is leavened”; Mt 13:33.

15. Could it not be said, remarks St. George Mivart in this regard, that we are living in a pre-Copernican period? Just as before Copernicus and Galileo, the doctrine of the earth’s movement was offensive to “pious ears;” these “pious ears” are offended by more than one affirmation of biblical criticism. One can suppose that, in our own time as formerly, these alarms are without real foundation; Mivart, “Future of Christianity,” Forum 3 (March 1887): 1–14.
we not witnessed a progressive expansion of the interpretation of the
first pages of Genesis as the admirable discoveries of geology have
become more numerous and more significant?

Let us indulge in a personal reminiscence. During the time of our
philosophy studies at the seminary in Issy, we often conversed with
the venerable dean of the Sorbonne Faculty of Theology, M. Glaire.
He still defended the position that fossils are “nature’s joke” or better
the Divinity’s, and he was not adverse to God having created the petri-
fied animals and plants at the same time as the earth such as we see
it. In his Manuel biblique, M. Vigouroux mentions this opinion,16 and
in his Livres saints et la Critique rationaliste17 he devotes additional pages
to demonstrating its absurdity. The total superfluity of this refutation
for the great majority of theologians of our time is the best proof of
progress, of the slow but real evolution whose existence we assert.

To wish that the church would move more quickly than Science is
to forget that its mission is to direct the religious and moral evolution
of humanity, not to reveal the secrets of nature! But has Science now
spoken its final word on these amazingly complex questions? As of
yet it has only stammered. To cite but two examples: there exist nearly
as many ways of conceiving transformism as there are transformists;
and if we go on to the problems of Criticism, we find almost as many
systems about how the gospel narratives were composed and interre-
lations of these different narratives as there are exegetes. And would
one want the church to trouble humanity’s conscience by premature-
ly and abruptly modifying its official language in favor of a small elite
that would itself be embarrassed if the church asked it for a precise,
definitive solution to these difficult questions?

We must add to this uncertainty of scientific findings the impos-
sibility of discovering a formula that satisfies all types of minds, all
intellectual temperaments. One person attributes value only to the

428. [This book was a longstanding text for seminarians and ran to multiple editions; his note
(II:363) refers to the 1889 edition.]
17. Vigouroux, Les livres saints et la critique rationaliste (Paris: A. Roger et Chernoviz, 1891),
3:245–50. [Vigouroux expanded the original 1891 edition used by Hébert.]
material reality of facts, another to their ideal significance, to the extent that he prefers legend to history; one calls for metaphysical formulations; another, judging that truth consists less in verbal expression than in the very direction imparted to thought, to feelings [sentiments], to activity, is satisfied with practical views and moral exhortations. And yet, the church was made for all and must proportion itself to the average level of intelligence. Let us suppose that it did justice to the demands of some philosophical school; let us imagine—against all probability—that it agreed to renew its formulations in adopting for this purpose the language of the Idealists; instead of speaking of “God” it would henceforth say only the “Ideal”; instead of presenting Jesus to us as the “unique Son of God,” it would have us admire and adore in Him “the manifestation, to a unique, incomparable degree, of the Ideal in human nature.” Alas! It would thus have done the work of a dilettante, but forgotten its role as humanity’s mother and nurse. Indeed, made subtle in this way, dogmas strongly risk no longer having any practical influence on a great number of men; they will cease to stir the imagination and the heart, thus drawing the will toward the good; they will no longer be “forceful ideas” [idées-forces].

“Men of little faith,” shall we conclude with Christ, “why trouble yourselves?” Let progress be accomplished in all intellectual spheres; when Science and Criticism have arrived at unassailable conclusions, when humanity, less feeble, can finally18 “bear” the noble burden of truth, theological adaptation will come of itself. At that point dogmas and rites, necessary for every religious society, will cease being an obstacle and will again be a support; the simplification noted by Wagner will be achieved; intelligent and active Charity will increasingly appear as the essence of Religion, the very soul of Christianity, and then the promise of the divine Master will doubtless be fulfilled: “One flock and one Shepherd”!19

18. “I still have much to teach you,” Jesus said to his apostles, “but you are not, for the time being, capable of bearing these truths”; Jn 16:12.
Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig in 1813, a few months after the Battle of the Nations. It seems this date was prophetic. No one fought longer for life or for art, fought alone or with his disciples, and seventy years later death has eliminated the principal combatant without settling the quarrel. If ivy surrounds the Master’s tomb, in the shadow of Wahnfried, an olive tree has not yet grown there.

In what is one of the most curious psychological phenomena of the present, some have devoted a cult to Parsifal’s author, while others strive to reveal what he lacks or appears to lack—clarity, melody, sympathy for France—in order to diminish his genius.

Music had united us since Amphion and Orpheus. Now it divides us.

What is beyond dispute, at least, is the religious sensibility [sentiment] that enlivens Wagner’s work. To be sure, all art is religious, regardless of the intentions of those who use it. Relative success in capturing the ideal through a perceptible form is, in fact, the height of art. And yet, the ideal gravitates around the infinite, and it is unnecessary for artists to reveal ex professo the path from one or the other, since humans need only their instinct to embark upon it.

What is true of forms and colors is all the more true of sounds, the best conduits of the ideal. While painting and sculpture are pri-
arily surface arts, which lightly brush upon the human soul, music stirs it in its depths.

Compare a painting by Raphael and a symphony by Beethoven in terms of the effect produced; what a difference! Raphael uplifts me, touches me, without shaking my self-possession. By contrast, with Beethoven you fight for your own individuality. The first consists of sweet and mysterious ascension toward the beautiful. The second is revolution.

In a museum we stand absorbed, pensive. In an opera box, in a seat at the Conservatory, we sob, we react, we are no longer in possession of ourselves.

Thus stirred, who can say to what heights human sensibility can go? The more the soul expands, the more chance it has of encountering God.

Considered in this light, music can be defined as the religious art par excellence. Far from threatening or restricting this privilege, Richard Wagner contributed toward reinforcing and extending it. All those who have written about the Master have pointed out the distinctive dual nature of his work. From the outset his ambition was to absorb man in his entirety. Generally, musicians are content to speak to the ear and to the soul through the ear. Wagner is a conqueror who does not settle for limiting his empire. For him, art is everything or nothing. He thus joins the talent of a musician to that of a dramatist. Truth to tell, he is first and foremost a dramatic poet, and for him it is drama that produces music. Do not attempt, through abstraction, to separate what is united. Body and soul form what the scholastics called the human composite. The combination of poet and musician has produced the integral living person who is Richard Wagner. Bow to a single god in two persons.

Wagner was not on the wrong track if he sought to rattle the human machine more easily in striking repeatedly. But since religion is one of the cogs of this machine, and not the least important, it engages in movement with all the others.

Richard Wagner laid down a second law, of providing man with
what interests him, that is, himself. I do not know whether he knew Bossuet’s saying, “Man’s pleasure is man,” but he adapts his art to it. And there is some merit in doing so. Note that he is the contemporary of Dumas père and of Victor Hugo, for whom evoking milieu is a life-and-death question and local color nearly half of genius. Even today archaeology encumbers Victorien Sardou’s plays.

Disregarding the frame in order to focus on the portrait, Wagner looks into his own depths and draws all his inspiration from this examination of conscience.

And yet, if there exists in each of us a primordial, irreplaceable, and self-renewing feeling, surely it is religious feeling [sentiment]. What is more human, in man, than his need for the divine? And how may our nature be defined, if not by what it lacks? True life, which is interior life, proceeds by turns to desire, to fear, and to the love of the solution to the mystery of life that weighs upon us. Speak to me of these desires, these fears, this love if you wish to move me. There is no mirror in which one recognizes oneself with greater pride and emotion than in the analysis of religious experience [sentiment].

This analysis was the inevitable consequence of musical drama, at least as Richard Wagner conceived it. But in the absence of this conception, there were other causes capable of producing the same result.

They stem from the Master’s nationality, from his mindset, and from the particular circumstances of his life.

We are in the presence of a German, a Saxon, and although the War of 1870 cruelly contradicted the pages Mme de Staël devoted to the sentimentality of those across the Rhine, the mystical genius of that race should still be recognized, though not insistently.

You may recall the delightful composition in which Goethe fancifully describes the division of the world.¹ God gives flowers to one, to another fruit, to a third tithes and vintage wines. The ever absent-minded poet, being the last to present himself, finds there is nothing

¹. [Mugnier’s memory has credited Goethe, when the poem was actually written by Schiller. The details of the sharing out are also imperfectly recalled.]
left. “Do you wish,” the Lord says, “to share the sky with me?” And the poet accepts the proposition.

Goethe forgot to tell us that Germans are essentially poets, and consequently believe themselves to be on familiar terms with God, which is to say mystics, mysticism being nothing other than the most intimate expression of religious experience [sentiment].

Legend aside, what is the source of this disposition? Could it be that, when the mind is borne to abstraction, to the point of withering, the heart takes its revenge in abandoning itself to the effusions of piety? Could it be that, when one has put the entire universe into one’s head, creating and organizing it at will, only the invisible world and hopes of the beyond remain for the heart to claim? The German soul still tends to understand religious things, and Tacitus’s remark, Inesse sanctum aliquid, has not completely lost its meaning.

To this statement we can add that Wagner was endowed with a variety of gifts.

There are artists who are only artists. Wagner goes further. He is an artist and a thinker. Because one is a thinker only when one investigates the origin and the end of things, what he requires of his favorite philosophers, those to whose influence or tyranny he has submitted, Hegel, Feuerbach and Schopenhauer, is their assistance in helping him elaborate what M. Renan called the theory of the universe or the novel of the infinite.

But thought, theoretical or fictional, does not long remain at the level of thought; it quickly dissolves into feeling [sentiment]. Hence, as Wagner one day confessed, “The true artist sings only what he believes, speaks only what he loves, writes only what he thinks.”

And when thought, belief, and love grow through suffering, religious education is complete.

Certainly, there are few famous men whose lives have been devoid of suffering. And there is reason to be glad of that. It is a consecration. If Tasso had not known prison, would we be reading Jerusalem

2. [See previous note.]
3. [Imbued with something holy.]
Delivered? Corneille, less poor, would not be Corneille. Beethoven’s deafness made him all the greater. It is thus with Richard Wagner. Penury, setbacks, exile, deceptions, he experienced them all. There was a time when, wandering with his faithful dog in the Meudon wood, he would recite for it a verse of Jocelyn:

“Sole each other loving, poor dog let us love yet!”

“Never, not even for a moment,” he later wrote, “have I felt the sweet and soft sensation of being truly sated. All I do is bump into walls and step on nails.”

He added, “When I awake, it is to suffer.”

The words of Parsifal to the guilty knight could certainly be applied to him: “Blessed be your suffering!” It is thanks to suffering that he learned to look on high, to be sympathetic to men and circumstances, thus to bring art back from outside to inside, to restore the glory of its origins by making the theatre an annex of the temple and the orchestra a prayer.

I have tried to explain how religious experience [sentiment] must have sprung up from Wagner’s soul and spread itself throughout his work. It remains for me to enumerate the phases of such an experience, and the forms it had to take. Here I have a guide as delightful as he is trustworthy, in the person of Abbé Marcel Hébert, who has recently published a book entitled Du sentiment religieux dans l’œuvre de Richard Wagner.

The author has chosen a teaching career. He does this successfully at the École Fénelon. No one will contradict me if I assert that he has one of the finest philosophical minds of the Paris clergy. Two brilliant studies have already flowed from his pen: one on L’idée de Dieu dans Voltaire et dans Renan, the other a Dialogue entre Platon et Darwin. Wagner, one of the most provocative human minds of this century,

5. [See 61 of the translation.]
had to have attracted him. So he has devoted a work to the religious evolution of the Master’s thought, a definitive text whose dedication is touching.

Indeed, no genius of any kind has ever evolved more than Wagner. His genius evolved on political ground. The democrat who organized signals and tocsins in the uprising of 1849 died a faithful subject and friend of King Ludwig II.

Imagine Gustave Courbet, having brought down the Column, receiving a pension from Prince Jerome!7

There was a similar change in his own domain, that of art. He did not start by rejecting opera, with its duets and its arias, in order to develop the musical drama that bears his name.

He made his way toward legend just as slowly but surely. Little by little, he substituted myth for exact and true facts, facts revised and enriched by popular imagination. Rienzi opens up a passageway that ends with Parsifal.

The history of Wagner’s religious variations would be no less interesting to write.

But under the multiple and contradictory guises that feeling [sentiment] assumes, it persists, always identical. Early on Wagner sensed that the world is evil; that we suffocate in it, are lost within it. He sensed that the single cause of this individual or social evil resides in egoism, in the cult of the self, in everything that develops and favors it. Outside of the cloister, no one has more ardently longed for what he calls deliverance, salvation, redemption. There are few letters, and none of his plays where these words, though they are reserved words seemingly exclusive to religious vocabulary, are not repeated to repletion.

7. [Inspired by Trajan’s column, Napoleon erected the Vendôme Column in the Place Vendôme in 1808 to celebrate his victory at Austerlitz. During the Commune of Paris (1871) the painter Gustave Courbet had proposed disassembling it and rebuidling it at the Invalides, but the government took it down entirely, and Courbet was later held financially responsible for its destruction. Mugnier’s reference is thus to the unlikelihood of Prince Jerome, Napoleon’s youngest brother, conferring a pension on the person responsible for the disappearance of one of his family’s most celebrated monuments.]
Now, lest there be any confusion, our common sayings betray our usual mood.

But from whence come redemption, salvation, deliverance?

From love, Wagner replies, and he is right. It is necessary to emerge from oneself, to give of oneself, to be unstinting of oneself. Love creates family, country, art itself, for one can be an artist only if one expresses what is latent, if one decenters one’s soul, so to speak, transfuses it into others, imitates the pelican who gives his hungry little ones the best of himself.

For sole nourishment, he brings his heart.

Such is the religious sentiment that dominates Wagner’s work while penetrating it.

But, however identical in content, he necessarily had to suffer the effects of the successive crises that made this man’s life an interior drama, superior indeed to those plays that have been performed, for the soul is not exhausted in such productions and every author can humbly say that the most perfect of what he has composed will always remain unpublished.

Wagner dreamed this redemption through love as an anarchist, a naturalist, a pessimist, and as a Christian. M. Hébert excels at explaining these various attitudes, in connecting the links of this chain, and we shall try to follow him, with unequal steps, as Virgil said, non passibus aequis. 8

Leaving aside all dramas prior to 1848, the outline entitled Jesus of Nazareth was the subject of Hébert’s first study.

From his own setbacks Wagner had drawn a radical conclusion. A society in which his art was not understood had to be condemned. He thus avidly called for revolution. One had broken out on the banks of the Elbe, but emptiness set in upon the ruins it wrought.

Such a disappointment must have increased his bitterness, if not his skepticism. Yet never was a soul less tempted to be skeptical than Wagner.

Rather he sought consolation. When under duress, finding a pre-
decessor can help. This is how the former Kapelmeister of Dresden opened the gospel, and after reading it from a revolutionary’s perspective, he persuaded himself that Christ had been in the same situation as he, that he had fought against the egoism of his time, that he had been defeated in battle and that death appeared to him as the sole means of escaping the impasse into which fate, combined with Pharisaic hatred, had chased him. Already the Son of God had prefigured this sacrifice by renouncing kingship, despite the overtures that, perhaps, had been made by Barabbas, an impenitent anarchist—the exercise of any power whatsoever being incompatible with selflessness, the foundation of every society.

What a strange commentary on the gospel and a fanciful Christ, you may say. Fantasy for fantasy, how I prefer this testy figure to the pencil sketch so lightly traced by M. Renan! Even in altering his mission, Wagner respected the character of Goethe’s revered “teacher of the people.” Under the sway of such respect, Wagner interrupted a work that could have caused a scandal and whose nature excluded the very possibility of its performance.

Wagner’s fundamental error in Jesus of Nazareth was to believe that redemption through love is accomplished violently and that it must first destroy everything in order to save everything. In condemning Christ to die so as not to survive defeat and in giving this death the meaning of a final protest, Wagner not only misunderstood Christ’s intentions; he misunderstood the law of progress. Nothing comes from nothing. The imperfect here below is the condition of the perfect. If society is sick, we will not heal it more quickly in hastening its death. We must use and prolong the breath that remains. A spark patiently drawn from the cinders will soon relight the hearth.

Anarchists would like to follow in the Creator’s footsteps. They forget that accidents, not substances, belong to us.

9. [A number of deadly anarchist bombings in Paris from 1892 to 1894 terrorized the public and led to trials that brought widespread public attention to the anarchists’ philosophy and motivations; see John Merriman, The Dynamite Club: How a Bombing in Fin-de-Siècle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2012)].
No sooner had Wagner outlined this drama than the figure of Christ grew dim in his sight. Persisting in seeing only the negative side of the gospel, he defended nature against grace. Well before him, the young Aurore Dupin, who would one day become George Sand, experienced such a temptation, also resulting in unbelief, at the chateau of Nohant.

The same person did, in fact, utter these two statements: “I have come to bring life. Ego veni ut vitam habeant.” And: “Renounce yourself. Abnege temet ipsum.” But, instead of reconciling them in showing that sacrifice is the condition of all life, they are too often set in opposition to one another.

A breath of naturalism thus passed over Wagner, a breath that came from the Hermitage of Jean-Jacques, after having been dulled by Feuerbach. This was close to the time when French philosophers and novelists were preaching the divine right of passion. Wagner rallied to them all the more eagerly as he had just been exiled in the aftermath of the uprising in which he had been involved.

He protested in the name of liberty, in four successive poems, the first of which appeared toward 1852. I want to speak of the Tetralogy to which V. Hugo’s Légende des Siècles can be compared for the extravagance of ideas and the profusion of images it contains. Both epics are hewn from the same Cyclopean block.

Both advocate redemption through love.

But this time, to symbolize egoism, the operatic poet discovered the Rhine gold and Valhalla. It is gold that engages all the evil passions, that makes tears, sweat, and blood flow, gold desired solely because it procures pleasure and power, that is, satisfies personality, inflates the human self beyond measure.

It is Valhalla, the superb palace where Wotan forges laws that are chains.

How can redemption be brought about? From whence will come salvation? Who or what will deliver creation and creative force itself? Love, but love as a return to nature, love that acknowledges neither God nor Master, love that burns legal codes and sweeps away the
pieces of Wotan’s broken scepter; love whose reign is inaugurated by humanity and by humanity alone. Brünnhilde is Wotan’s daughter, and she carries out his desires, since the old sovereign’s heart is better than his head; Brünnhilde, self-sacrifice personified, the living negation of egoism, will become the universal redemptrix only when the young and handsome Siegfried comes, in the mystery play, to awake her on her burning rock with a look and a smile. Only then will the gold be given back to the water-sprites and Valhalla be consumed in flames.

This is, perhaps, a powerful conception but one whose exaggerations need correcting.

No, man is not sufficient unto himself, and the secret of happiness does not lie in unleashing the forces of nature.

Experience has proven rather that they need to be contained. Wagner was wrong to place the cause of all evil in the external world, since flesh, blood, and soul are the primary guilty parties. Nature must rid itself of the virus it willingly contracted; to hasten its cure, it would do well to consult all the doctors of heaven and earth.

When the ancient cry “The gods are disappearing!” is uttered, take care, men will not be long in following. The twilight of the gods announces and precedes the night of humanity.

It did not take long for Wagner to realize that earthly paradise was a memory, not a hope. Personal hardship, joined with repeated lack of success, threw him into a despair modeled on that of the metaphysician of Frankfurt. From this period dates Tristan and Isolde, in which he set Schopenhauer to music.

Both advocate redemption through love, but the beautiful dream is no longer earthly. In order to bring about the unity of consciousness that constitutes the ideal of Tristan and Isolde, to suppress the conjunction and (Tristan and Isolde), death is necessary. In the author’s thought, life here below has become an obstacle alongside laws, giants, dwarves, and gods of the Tetralogy. The only possible salvation lies beyond the grave.

Thus the artist overturns his initial conception of life. He hum-
bles what he formerly exalted. His imagination led him from one extreme to another, for pessimism freed from German terminology is but an exclusive point of view. Indeed, if Tristan and Isolde do interest me, they represent, in the end, only a fraction of humanity. What care have they for the rest of the world? It is said that their love delivers them from egoism, but I argue that it pushes them deeper into it. Only this time it is shared egoism.

Wagner could never permanently commit himself to a doctrine only imperfectly suited to his genius.

His soul resembled the river defined by Pascal: a road that moves. In moving, he encountered Christ and his work anew.

Moreover, he personified himself in Siegfried. This time, the bird that chirped a hymn of life into his ear guided him to Calvary. How could it have been otherwise? No doubt, Wagner always liked Schopenhauer, who would will to him the fine portrait that can be admired in the salon at Wahnfried if a friendly hand opens the door. But he had at his side a golden-hearted virtuoso named Franz Liszt, whose beneficent influence has not been sufficiently noted. Was it not Liszt who pulled Wagner out of the shadows, was it not he who exhibited him at Weimar, who paid his debts, who always and everywhere defended him, as he defended Antoine Rubinstein who has just died and who gloried in being his godson?

The proximity of the Hungarian pianist, who eventually became family, brought Wagner good fortune. Little by little he came back to a more orthodox religious experience [sentiment] than that which had previously inspired him, and that would find its definitive expression in Parsifal.

No doubt, as M. Hébert has so clearly demonstrated, this final piece has nothing dogmatic about it. It is no less animated by the spirit of the gospel.

Wagner, whose life goal was none other than deliverance through love, than the defeat of egoism in all its forms, still did not understand that this love had existed long before, and that Christ had purified the alloyed gold in designating it under a new name: Charity.
Yet it is here that the great man took a decisive step; Charity has Sacrifice as its companion and Compassion as its distinctive mark. The world, suffering like Amfortas from a wound inflicted by egoism, will be delivered only by a “man of integrity who listens to his heart.” That is why Parsifal resists all temptations in the magic park, and why no ill thought distracts him from his “sacred task.” That is why he possesses all the tenderness of compassion, breaking his bow and throwing his arrows before the inanimate remains of the swan, his first victim, until the wound of Titurel’s son bleeds in his own flesh:

Blessed Lord, I hear your lament which cries out to me:
“Deliver me, save me from the hands of the godless!”

For one can think of others only if one denies the pleasure that brings everything back to the self; one can only save them when one partakes of their suffering.

Moreover, the date of the poem is significant. It was Good Friday of the year 1300 that Dante undertook his triple pilgrimage. It was Good Friday of the year 1857 that Wagner conceived of Parsifal. The eyes of the artist, purified by his diligent contemplation of the ideal, recognized the redeemer his heart adored in the man suspended on the cross.

His masterpiece finished, Richard Wagner could intone his nunc dimitiss: “Quia viderunt oculi salutare tuum.”10

He died in 1883, in a Venetian palace. His body was brought back to Bayreuth, as had been that of Weber, his first master, to Dresden, some years before.

Go to Bayreuth, Ladies. After having greeted the statue of Jean-Paul, after having called to mind the smiling and melancholy figure of Frederick’s sister, the margravine, you will ascend the hill where Wagner’s genius lives forever and awaits you.

When, with Gurnemanz, you yearn for the coming of the liberator, with all the yearnings of the patriarchs; when the forest and its

10. [Now you may dismiss me: “For my eyes have seen your salvation”; Lk 2:29, 30.]
trees give way to the temple and its columns, you witness the rhythmic march of knights under the vaults of Montsalvat, you will take in the sobs uttered by Amfortas from his sickbed and understand why he refused to celebrate the rite, despite the reproaches of Titurel and the cries of his brothers; when you hear Kundry clothed in sackcloth repeating, “To serve, to serve”; when you see salvation dawn and flourish everywhere, in nature and in the human heart; the new pontiff touch the lance of the fisher king who heals and, advancing to the altar with firm step, discover the cup that shines radiantly, elevating it slowly and piously before the bowed heads; when you have filled your eyes with these visions, your ears with these harmonies that ascend from “the mystic abyss” or that descend from the heights of heaven, then rediscovering the gift of tears, lost since the Middle Ages, you will extend your arms toward the Grail, saying, “Here indeed is the ideal that geniuses like Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner present to a thirsting humanity; take it all of you and drink of it: it is the blood which gives life!”

Then you will come back, Ladies, more resolved than ever to persevere in the work that is yours, because you are Christian and French: the redemption of family and society through sacrifice and charity.

And you will experience, in the accomplishment of this mission, what Wagner savored, on the eve of his life, as the supreme good, which he made the very name of his villa: Wahnfried, the peace of the imagination.


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