WAGNER: The Great Precursor of Grandeur

WAGNER AND SCHOPENHAUER

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Only from time to time are truly essential and unique works on Wagnerian cosmology published, texts that do not follow the current trend to speak of Wagner according to the mentality of a moviegoer or an assistant to the most recent recital of some singer in the latest fashion, but that instead manages to rise with Wagner to the idea of Art and Life itself.

It is remarkable that in the Prologue the author, E. Sans, expressly states his tribute to the great thinker Henri Lichtenberger, together with his work “Richard Wagner Poet and Thinker,” as “the best book ever written in French on the Maestro, and from which I have drawn the best of my inspiration.” This book must be reviewed because without doubt the work of Lichtenberger, despite the difficulty in obtaining its only French edition, is the best introduction to serious Wagnerianism for those who do not understand German, so that Sans continues that ascertained line that penetrates straight into the Wagnerian sense of life with seriousness, knowledge and depth.

And with this preamble I hope to have removed any doubt about the impossibility of merely reading this book during a weekend on the beach or to treat it as if it were some fashionable novel emblazoned with one of those recent Literary Prizes created to distract the bored beneath their beach umbrellas or something to try to increase somewhat the statistical “ratio” of books read each year in middling Spanish. No, this is a hard and difficult book that must be read not only in French but also with careful attention and meditation every five minutes. Above all, and hoping with this to prevent some other intrepid but inadequate readings of this work of genius, this also requires some prior knowledge of the foundations of Schopen-
hauerian philosophy, I do not say thorough, but at least minimal and with knowledge of the language.

In a word, this is not a work with which to divert one or to pass the time, not claiming to distract but to give form, not intended to brighten the holidays but to give sense to a life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Who knows anything about the life of Lichtenberger? And for this very reason almost nothing is known about Edouard Sans, Doctor of Philosophy and Letters, specialist in the German language and for years responsible for the official teaching of French in Germany. Sans is one of those people for whom thought, art and formation are the wealth of life, and in this case his focus is always on Wagner and his works. Brilliant public speaker, I have been able to attend a couple of his lectures on Wagnerian themes that show a profound and reflective knowledge of each and every one of the aspects of Wagner, from the musical to the philosophic.

INTRODUCTION

Wagner was not a philosopher, and in reality he was never truly interested in “Philosophy and Science” as system and according to the concepts called “professional.” Instead Wagner was well aware of the lines of thought of what we call essential and Vital Philosophy, not in detail but in its fundamental basis as an explanation of the World, Life and Man. We know he read Hegel with disgust, Kant with difficulty and Feuerbach with passion. But without doubt the great change in the thinking of Wagner came with the “intellectual” contribution he received from Schopenhauer in 1854, a fact he recognized repeatedly and without reserve when thereafter calling Schopenhauer “our philosopher” and expressing absolute respect and admiration for his thought.

And in reality this Introduction raises the essence of the problem: the worldview.

There are two major “serious” ways to understand Life and the World: the Optimistic and Pessimistic, or as Lichtenberger said: With a vision of Power or a Religious Vision. To be fair I would say there is a third way of looking at life: the Stupid one, usually the majority view, and consisting in not considering anything and trying to live for the immediate pleasures of the body in the best way possible,
while trying to feed the “soul” with T.V. and inanities (at best using Wagner as background music at the wedding of a son for his wedding march).

But, if we adjust ourselves to a certain seriousness, we can see that Wagner began his Drama with an optimistic view of the world, taken from Feuerbach, perfectly reflected in the personality of Siegfried, who is confident of himself and faces his destiny with the Will to Power, only to turn quickly with the reading of “The World As Will and Representation” to a Pessimistic Worldview inevitably assuming Pain and the Tragedy of Life, Parsifal being the paradigm of this measure of man who as a Redeemer feeling Compassion for Suffering.

This Pessimistic vision that Wagner totally assumes (and that in the Ring Cycle causes him to put his focus more on Wotan and Brunhilde than on Siegfried), manifests in three major areas:

The Metaphysical level that analyses the tragedy of Life and the value of intuition and feeling in the face of the material and Reason.

The Ethical level that assumes Pity, redemption and the unity of beings in suffering and Love.

The Aesthetic level that by focussing on Art and Tragic works through the aesthetic way for the redemption of Man engulfed in Pain and Suffering. And after conceiving of Music as the essence of the Will Beyond Time and Space, or rather as the liberation from the Mundane, from the bondage of the individual.

THE ENCOUNTER WITH SCHOPENHAUER AND HIS PHILOSOPHY

Before beginning a deep analysis of the impact of these three vital levels of the thought of Schopenhauer on Wagner, in two Chapters the book presents when and how Wagner came to read Schopenhauer, received from the hands of his friend Herwegh during his exile in Zurich, first in a partial way in 1852, with its discovery bursting forth in 1854 on reading the main work of the thinker.

Wagner first felt himself attracted by what was most superficial: By Schopenhauer’s aesthetic conception of music made the centre of the arts, and by his direct and comprehensible language when compared with “the confusion and charlatanism of Hegel’s language.” But in 1854 Wagner already took on the global idea of Schopenhauer’s thought. It is important to emphasize that Wagner never failed
to show his admiration and respect for Schopenhauer although the latter certainly provided grounds for Wagner to be bothered by him, thus showing the falsehood of those understandings of Wagner as an irritable and cranky person. Schopenhauer did not sympathize with the group of his friends exiled in Zurich, partly due to the political position they had had, but moreover because when he received Wagner’s gift of the poem of the “Ring,” Schopenhauer criticized it harshly considering it to be “contrary to morality,” and sent Wagner these words concerning the musical: “I remain loyal to Rossini and Mozart” (we shall later discuss why Schopenhauer had this preference for pure music over the Music Drama). Nevertheless Wagner never criticized Schopenhauer but on the contrary transmitted and exalted him during his literary and philosophical evenings in Tribschen with a continual praise of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, and it was Wagner who encouraged Nietzsche to write an absolute defence of the Schopenhauerian worldview in “The Birth of Tragedy.”

Interestingly, in the letter to Liszt of January 24, 1858, Wagner emphasizes he is genial to Calderon for his “Life is a Dream,” a work that clearly coincides 100% with the Schopenhauerian vision in its negation of the authenticity of the phenomenal world and its tragic view of life (“Since man’s greatest crime is to be born”).

The Second Chapter of the book is devoted to introducing the reader to the essence of the philosophy of Schopenhauer, assuming a minimum of previous knowledge. The most important thing is to understand his absolute criticism of “Representation,” everything material and superficial, what is nowadays the only “important” thing. As well as the tragic vision of Will, the vital force that with incredible strength pushes man to Desire, the antithesis of every Suffering and Tragedy.

Desire is objectified in thousands of themes, materializing in time and space and having no borders, as insatiable desire always ending in the dissatisfaction of the unleashed Will and in Suffering, in tragedy and death without satisfaction of desire.

For Schopenhauer, in line with Buddhism, the renunciation and overcoming of desire is the only solution, though requiring a constant struggle that is never able to eliminate the unbridled Will but only achieves more or less control over it. Everything that is “individual,” that is subject to time and space, exists in imperfection and suffering. One can only defeat the particular and rise to the ideal by avoiding desires and deceptions.

Music (and art in general) is seen as no solution to desire, which is something only removed through an Ethical idea, but as giving repose, a moment of elevation outside time and space, calming the whirlwind of pain and desire.
AGAINST TIME AND SPACE

Time and Space are the basis of the principle of Reason, or rather the Representative, and are moreover the basic element of individualization. Thus they are the elements that condition the ideal. Space individualizes and multiplies the general; Time makes it ephemeral.

In “Tristan and Isolde” Wagner wanted to address this essential theme of Schopenhauerian thought that was fully accepted by him.

Wagner’s text “What Boots This Knowledge?” (written in 1880) bears radically on the idea of the time and space of Schopenhauer, and states: “Peace, calm, inner felicity, are only to be found there where the where and when do not exist.” Theme that we know explicitly from his Parsifal in Montsalvat, that “place without time or space” (everyone remembers the enigmatic words of Gurnemanz in this regard), but that has its poetic version in “Tristan.”

Tristan and Isolde curse time and space; their love is invincible if it is beyond the Time and Space that separates them with its limits and tragedies. Everything that concretizes them makes them separate and what enables them to rise above “representative things” unites them. So their love is especially free when removed from their relation to the elements Time (by drinking the philtre and believing in the Death that frees them from Time) or Place (in the Night, when “they are not” in any specific location, beyond every “place” in the dark). And their tragedy begins when they do not die and are confronted with the reality of the barque arriving at the port, or when Night ends and Day arrives, or rather reality. Individualization, the concrete, representation, the end of Dream, is the curse that takes them and us to Suffering and Tragedy, desire, decrepitude, limitation of the ideal, stupid vulgar temporal reality.

A friend rightly said that any new “Tristan and Isolde” would end when they must go to the bathroom; there Representation would mock their Will to Love and the ideal, since the vulgarity of concrete life with its logical necessities is the best antidote to the Ideal. Wagner wrote his work “The Public in Space and Time” that discusses these concepts: “When Giordano Bruno was sent to the stake he would have been honoured in the Buddhist Orient as a saint. Time and space make genius an anomaly, an aberration.”
What words better suited to our times, life at present with its egalitarian taboos, making genius into an aberration that annoys the present era?

INTUITION AGAINST REPRESENTATIONAL LOGIC

Clearly representation, material reality, has a value and must be taken into account in life, and is clearly linked to the laws of Logic and Science. But what Feuerbach and Schopenhauer suggested is that this logical “knowledge,” that is purely utilitarian for Hegel (and later for Marx and with him for the actual materialist world), does not discover the essence of things or the Value of Life, but is only a tool for time and place, not for essence and the meaning of an existence. Logical knowledge does not prevent Suffering and Tragedy, or give meaning to their actions.

In this Wagner is fully consistent with the two thinkers who most influenced him. And with the essence of Greek tragedy, which already treated this theme with an absolute certainty in “Oedipus Rex.” Oedipus follows logic and the latter carries him irremediably to disaster, until he understands his error has been to trust himself to his senses and logic and not look within, so that in the end he plucks out his eyes, a symbol that he rejects “seeing the superficial, the material.”

In Feuerbach the rejection of material logic comes through his appeal to feeling, to the defence of sensuality and power (so that what moves Siegfried is his Will to Power, not logic). In Schopenhauer Knowledge of the Tragedy of Life and the adoption of an Ethics of Renunciation is what allows the embrace of the inevitable (time and place with their consequences), without claiming “to understand this illogical material,” but to overcome it through his tragic acceptance. Wotan or Parsifal do not attempt to reason but to Feel, in the case of Wotan from a given moment when through Renunciation he “accepts” the inevitable destiny of the Gods in disaster, and of Parsifal through Compassion, and thus they overcome the drama.

When Wotan tries to reason (in the “Rhine Gold”) to achieve Power, he only manages to throw everything into Tragedy. Loki, the great thinker, only manages to plunge the world into a curse. Only when Wotan accepts tragedy and ceases to reason, when he stops and leaves fate in the hands of the New Man (without claiming to intervene, since his interventions are always disastrous) does the drama begin to be resolved.

Similarly Parsifal will find the Path of Montsalvat only when he ceases to seek it in the Spatial and encounters his Compassion and accepts Suffering. Wagner con-
ceived the drama on an intuitive, sentimental basis, not on the basis of logic, something that coincides with his preferred philosophers. The answer Wotan gives to Rockel when the latter asks him why destroy Valhalla if the Rhine Maidens already hold the Ring after the death of Brunhilde. And Wagner writes in his letter dated 1/25/1854 that it is actually Wotan who destroys Valhalla with his feeling and intimate desire that it should be so. Not Siegfried or Brunhilde, nor the Ring, but Wotan feels the desire to end the power of the Gods. Such is the feeling of the one who writes the poem, not the logic of facts. “The artist is the one who is aware of the unconscious,” he writes in Opera and Drama, long before Schopenhauer gave him the philosophical basis for precisely this same idea. Becoming aware of the Will (the unconscious) is the way to excel in Schopenhauer, against those who ignore the Will and fall into the traps of Representation, the material, through Logic.

Therefore Wagner states: “The ideal artistic form is the one which can be fully understood without reflection, that goes directly from the artist’s heart.” (Letter to Villot 1860).

In this respect Wagner criticizes “Science” when it attempts to assume a “guiding” role in consciousness, as in the case of animal Vivisection for example, and in his “Open Letter to Ernst Weber” states that for science knowledge is only a logical theme, a psychological interest, while for Wagner (as for Schopenhauer) this is a matter of Science being directed by the Ethical sense. “The poet searches the world for moral order, the scientist seeks mechanical order,” and the evil is when this representative mechanical order claims to dominate above everything else.

SUFFERING IN THE WORLD

The principal experience of Schopenhauer is well known: Well-being is only the absence of suffering, while suffering is the only real thing. The achievement of a desire only brings immediate and temporary pleasure, but is absolutely unable to last and is always followed by another unsatisfied desire, or worse, again relegated to another real pain. Enough a toothache to jettison every satisfied desire.

With the satisfaction of desire the Will to desire dims for an instant, but this is only an instant in a life of desires and sufferings. Amfortas finds a moment of peace in his bath but the pain is soon replenished. Klingsor attempts to eliminate desire by castration, but with this he only removes “his” temporal desire within space and time, yet not “desire in itself,” its essence. Hence he continues dissatisfied and his
desire is the same although his “space and time” does not allow the desire to be fulfilled.

In this sense actual consumerism would be as if Amfortas would wish to heal himself in his bath every ten minutes! The continuous satisfaction of desires as a cure is only an illusion, neither closing the wound nor able to satisfy anyone except fools.

The tragic reality is that many do not dare to look reality in the face, attempting to escape while not strong enough to accept reality and seek to overcome it. Wagner accepts the fact of the World as pain, but at the same time he comes to terms with Redemption, the solution to suffering through Compassion and Knowledge of that Pain. “To believe the World only has a physical representative meaning, and not a Moral meaning, this is the Capital Error, the most nefarious and the true perversity of thought.” (“Parerga” by Schopenhauer).

Thus we enter one of the fundamental Chapters of the thought of Wagner under the clear influence of Schopenhauer: Pity. Not as a feeling of sympathy but as an assumption of the suffering of each being as one’s own. Or to transcend Time and Space so that there is no grief of here and now, but the Eternal Pain of everyone and always.

This is not something “moral,” but something Mystical that must have a general sense against egotism, annihilating the individual I in favour of the global I, or rather considering the community as I.

In his “Letter to Ernst Weber” Wagner states that thanks to Schopenhauer “he discovered Pity as the only true moral foundation.”

The importance of this fact in the personal life and work of Wagner is fundamental, and it goes without saying that this awareness was also the basis of his “Parsifal.”

And in suffering Death does not apply, because Death is precisely the end of individual suffering, although not of the vital pain of the world. Siegfried recovers love and lucidity when he dies, returning to pronounce “Brunhilde”! Death liberates and is not pain but redemption, the escape from Time and Space. Therefore the Hindus consider Nirvana, or rather total annihilation, the cessation of reincarnation, to be the maximum goal of the “saint,” since to live again is the penalty of sin. Wagner in “The Art-Work of the Future,” also before reading Schopenhauer, already “intuits” death as liberation (this intuition of Wagner’s is always previous
to the concepts he would later rationalize with Schopenhauer): “Death deprives men of their personal egoism and dilutes it completely in the Community,” always denying suicide that is no more than a “material” hoax, not an inner Overcoming. Suicide is like the castration of Klingsor, a material deception when what is needed is to eliminate the desire and Will of the soul.

COMPASSION AND REDEMPTION

For Schopenhauer Pity (in the sense of intimate compassion, taking on the pain of others and overcoming personal egoism) is the Virtue par excellence. Far superior to Love.

The best friend of Schopenhauer was his dog “Brahma” (the name already says much), because he was incapable of being a hypocrite. There is giving in Love but also receiving, while true Compassion only gives. Therefore Compassion is free from hypocrisy, and is pure.

Thus if Love is the basis of Redemption in the works of Wagner before Parsifal, the total sublimation given in Parsifal is the overcoming of Love through pure Compassion.

There is moreover in Wagner an overcoming of the radical pessimist idea of Schopenhauer, since in Wagner death is never the end, but the price for Redemption. Paying the price through Death or through Renunciation, by Compassion and Suffering, the Redeemer is the “optimistic” figure Wagner the artist intuits and thereby overcomes the radical pessimism of the philosopher.

Redemption begins with the idea that the World is united in suffering and evil, but that it is possible to overcome this reality through the consciousness of suffering and compassion. Parsifal overcomes his Will but not to annihilate himself in Buddhist Nirvana, the ideal of Schopenhauer, but to bring health to the entire world through compassion.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF PITY

Vegetarianism and the condemnation of vivisection are direct consequences of Schopenhauerian philosophy. First the idea of the World as a Global Entity, so that the animal’s suffering is something that concerns the Superior Man and touches
him with equal force as human pain, since the difference is in “Time and Space,” not in the essence. Suffering is objectified in a man or an animal, but the essential is the same, the Tragedy of Life and Man that takes on an awareness of suffering and in Compassion seeks a Path of Redemption and the overcoming of this tragic Life, and that must see in the pain of the animal the same essence of all the pain in the World.

Wagner goes further in this topic: He stresses that the suffering of the most sensitive animals causes him more compassion than that of men, because a man can overcome suffering by understanding the tragedy of life in such a way that a superior sense of life can reduce the suffering by giving it meaning. But the animal remains alone before suffering, and is pure suffering that feels and cannot overcome. In suffering the animal is a tragedy without meaning for him. His vegetarianism must also be understood in this sense, shared by both the philosopher and Wagner, who explicitly specifies the abstention from meat of the community of the Grail.

We must emphasize the difference with Kant, who believes that the animal has no rights, but that we must be pious to animals as an “exercise” for being so with men, in a word, in accord with the classical moral that a man cruel to animals will also be cruel to men so that therefore he criticizes such behaviour, not for the sake of the animals but for the sake of thereby showing the immorality of cruelty to men. In contrast to Wagner and Schopenhauer for whom animals are part of this global unity of suffering and sensibility, and for whom cruelty to animals is an evil in itself without reference to men.

Nevertheless Schopenhauer and Wagner alike do not take their vegetarian moral idea to unacceptable extremes. Both assumed that the grief over the death of an insect is in any event less than the suffering caused by the insect with its bite, such that both refused to go to the extremes of the Hindustani religions on these themes. Even when accepting the principle of the unity of living beings they did not take extremist positions but only defended a “general principle of action”: to avoid unnecessary suffering and always have pity for the pain of every living being.

DENIAL OF THE WILL TO LIVE

In Schopenhauer this is the only possible way to overcome the suffering and tragedy of Life and the Will: To negate them through knowledge. Or rather to become aware of the inability of desire to give happiness, and therefore to refuse to
play along with the traps of the Will, the illusions of Desire and Pleasure. We are not talking about wanting to die or commit suicide, something that is merely a trap that in any case solves “your” case, but to assume a philosophy of Life that overcomes desire, thus helping to overcome the vital dramas that we irremediably suffer.

Wagner took this as a hard truth, very hard: “The final negation of the Will to Live has a terrible gravity, but is the only redemptive solution” (Letter to Liszt 1854).

One must fundamentally understand this theme that is at base perfectly reflected in Wotan once he ceases to want (desire!) to intervene in the world, after his encounter as “The Traveller” with Siegfried. And that is also reflected in the position, much more Wagnerian as we shall see, of Sachs towards Eva.

The common man, Wagner says in his letter to Liszt, lives believing in Desire and the illusions of the representative, and is suddenly faced with the terrible seriousness of life, pain, tragedy, illness, tragedy or misery, with dissatisfaction and the temporality of everything he desires and obtains. Sooner or later he discovers the deception of life and he is stunned, helpless. Because the vulgar man has only one defence: the ignorance and lack of sensibility that make him suffer without actually catching a glimpse of the drama of Life. But for the sensible man, for the man who “understands,” the drama and pain of the world is unbearable if not known in advance, if he is not ready for it and in this sense the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Wagner prepares humanity to endure the pain of the world with compassion and the idea of Resurrection and Resignation. It is a difficult and painful path, like that of Parsifal marching towards Montsalvat.

The castration of Klingsor is a warning (as Wagner himself explains in his presentation of Parsifal, 1865) that the solution is not to eliminate “desire” on the level of the material, the representative, or to obstruct desire in Time and Space. That is useless because Desire, pain, is in the soul, in the Will.

For Wagner the solution is in Sachs or King Mark, in Renunciation and compassionate Love for others, negating the Will and assuming suffering overcoming it in the feelings of the soul. So one sees the most influence of Schopenhauer on the Wagnerian work when through his reading Wagner led Redemption within, to the ethical theme, and abandoned the “optimistic” idea of Siegfried, a redemption in the exterior world through social action in the Representative.
Wagner was certainly not very favourable to religion in general before 1854, and his writings of the early days (especially Art and Revolution) launched specific charges against Christianity:

1 — Christianity is anti-natural, promoting a divorce between man and Nature, following the ideas of Feuerbach.
2 — The Church is linked to the terrestrial world and dirties herself through contact with it, something seen in the criticism made in Tannhäuser against the Papacy.
3 — Religion has narrowed the capacities of art restricting sensuality and condemning the free expression of feelings as sin. This was the principal accusation of Feuerbach against “the religions” on the aesthetic level.

The reading of Schopenhauer led Wagner to change his absolute ideas, and later he would go much further than Schopenhauer on this topic, promoting the religious far beyond the considerations of the philosopher himself.

For Schopenhauer, a “religious atheist” as he called himself, his total rejection of theology and the “logical” bases of religions is compensated by his consideration for the ascetic and mystical aspect of Christianity and thus he considers the religious sentiment to be positive, not by its “objective truth,” but through its support for the negation of the Will, through its being the basis on which many people find consolation and Piety through Suffering.

Wagner will not only achieve this favourable vision but in “Religion and Art” will give to the arts the mission to bring forth the essence of religion whereas dogma only serves to disturb that same essence. In other words, he will overcome the “formal” errors of religions by reaching into their intimate message, become spiritual and positive through Art. In “Religion and Art” Wagner claims that the essence of religion is the dissatisfaction of man before the world and its pain, and hence a search for the understanding of this dissatisfaction.

Thus Wagner reveals that the music of Handel reflects the positive of Religion, while the letter of the Biblical words then sung in no way correspond to the feeling of the music. Art discovers the real sense, as the “theological letter” spoils that message. He says: “The text that is sung in great religious compositions is not felt by the audience based on their conceptual meaning, but only serves as material for the Voice as a musical instrument.” Therefore music (art) prompts us to religious feeling, not the Biblical texts.
Just as Wagner does not blame religion for the calamitous state of modern man, but blames man himself: “It is useless to cast the blame for the actual situation elsewhere; the error comes from the decay of humanity itself.”

Wagner is Christian by an active pessimism: The world is sin but redemption exists.

Whereas Schopenhauer is nearer to Buddhism, a religion without God whose heaven is in individual annihilation.

MUSICAL ART THEORY

As already mentioned Schopenhauer devotes considerable space in his major works to the subject of Music, to the creation of a certain “philosophy of music.”

The first thing to notice is that there are themes that “come to men” directly, in some “pre-existing” form, without requiring anything more. One of these is the sense of colour (why do some colours excite and others calm?) but above all the theme of harmony, the direct action of some combinations of sound on the feelings. In this way music is a “direct” art based on a natural feeling pre-existent to musical formation or preparation.

Therefore Music for Schopenhauer is a direct expression of the Will, and as such is not conceptual or rational but sensitive. That is why Schopenhauer criticizes Wagner and the so-called “program music” in general that abandons “musical purity” mixing music with “concepts of representation.” So the philosopher prefers Rossini or Mozart as musicians of beauty and perfect harmony, while he criticizes the idea of music as part of the dramatic art (drama, music and text) as a rupture of the purity of music as pure Will and as a miscegenation with the world of the representative (the theatrical).

Wagner had already pronounced on this before coming to know Schopenhauer in his “Opera and Drama,” where he exposes the limits of music and criticizes the separation of music, theatre and poetry, advocating their unity in music drama.

Music gives feeling, poetry tells us the reason for this feeling in a beautiful manner, dramatic theatre reveals the environment of Time and Space that man requires for understanding.
So while Wagner was enthused by Schopenhauer’s idea of the superiority of music he did not entirely renounce his ideas expressed in “Opera and Drama,” but only softened them: Tristan and Parsifal are works in which the “plot” leaves more to music in the “interior” and “lets things happen” if we purchase them with the Ring. Wagner claims the musical element more as something interior in comparison with, for example, the cosmological explications (much more political, in the sense implied in the representational) of Gold.

We actually believe that Art is for Wagner something “serious,” the most serious, and in reality the political has as its only goal the achievement of the material conditions for the expansion of Art, or rather for the elevation of man. Thus the opera is rejected as an agreeable distraction (with Rossini in the forefront) or as spectacle and show (with the Great Opera sought by Meyerbeer).

The theatre as something to assist digestion after a good dinner and music as “theme music” is the opposite of Wagner.

**SCHOPENHAUER AND THE RING-CYCLE**

When Wagner was initiated in depth to Schopenhauer (1854 to 1856) he had already written the entire script of the Ring. On the night of December 23, 1852 Wagner read it to his friends the Willes. This work was much influenced by Wagner’s position at that time of sensible optimism, Love and the Will to Power of Feuerbach. In every way Wagner already unconsciously adopted the principles he would then conceptualize through Schopenhauer. The futility of Desire in Alberich (who is a perfect image of the unbridled Will of desire in Schopenhauer), and the character of Wotan are charged with vital importance after 1854.

In “My Life” Wagner says: “I went back to read my poem of the Nibelung and was amazed to recognize that what I had discovered in the theory (of Schopenhauer) was already familiar to me in my own poetic conception. It was then that I realized my Wotan completely and, astounded, set out to study the work of Schopenhauer further.” After this he reworked parts of the poem, while he went forward with the musical composition, but now much more focussed on Wotan and Brunhilda as the centre of the drama.
In this sense Siegfried is a “residue of Wagnerian thought previous to 1854,” while Wotan and Brunhilde are already treated according to the new ideas he had with passion adopted.

GENIUS AND VITALISM

Hatred of noise and ugliness was fundamental in Wagner and Schopenhauer, neither could create unless he were surrounded by tranquillity and doubtless beauty. Thus we should not be surprised to see every place where Wagner composed had immense natural beauty and was far from city noise.

One speaks in the vulgar media of the eagerness for luxury in Wagner, but they do not realize that this was not luxury but beauty. Wagner and Schopenhauer shared certain character traits: an immense sensitivity, awareness of genius, irritability with the vulgar, ability to suffer for the pain of others. Thus both wanted to be isolated and needed tranquil surroundings since any ugliness or disturbance others might cause them irked them tremendously.

The isolation of Schopenhauer is not the product of a retiring disposition, but of an experience of dissatisfaction and deception from human contact. We know the story of Schopenhauer coming every day to a Café and putting a gold coin on the counter. On leaving he would pick it up again. One day the waiter asked him why he deposited that coin. The philosopher told him: “Every day I deposit that coin on the counter to give to the first person I hear speak an intelligent and beautiful conversation…but each day I have to take it back with me.”

In Wagner the consciousness of genius and superiority over the general vulgarity was as strong as in Schopenhauer, but Wagner was fortunate to be surrounded by a circle of friends that allowed him to live in a cultured “social” environment, whereas for Schopenhauer the solution he adopted was a powerful progressive isolation. We see that for Wagner not every redeemer, those in Renunciation, is defeated or must die to redeem and be compassionate. Sachs, Parsifal, Mark or Wolfram live and do not die or renounce their lives, but are compassionate for the joy of others. They are those who “are Conscious” of pain and Compassion, but are the complete opposite of Siegfried, he who has no fear, no consciousness of pain, or “bad conscience,” no change or doubt, because he is conceived beneath a vision external to Schopenhauer.
WAGNER AND THE POLITICAL

After a clearly revolutionary first phase, when he advocated the liquidation of the State and the idea of the leadership of a “man of the people who was the first among the people, the freest of free men,” Wagner left pure political illusions behind him, though he always remained faithful to two principles that caused him immense problems:

1 – German nationalism, the idea of Community and Race. The end of egoism and the end of the individualization given by Time and Place is precisely to feel oneself united to the Community, to the people. Wagner denounced the German decadence produced by money and individual egoism. The friendship and coincidence of ideas between the Count de Gobineau (then already famous for his “Essay on the Inequality of Races”) and Wagner. For Wagner in “Heroism and Christianity” every race must recognize its unity in suffering, and they must all feel that awareness of shared pain. Hence there is no “hatred” or “racist contempt” in Wagner.

But for Wagner, following Gobineau, the White Race is the race that has been more conscious of suffering in the World and had known how to overcome the limitations of Time-Space in order “to know the essence.” In this sense Wagner supports “racism” through a sense that assigns a different sensibility to each race.

Proud of the German people, always supporting their unity and the Reich, which entailed many problems in his life, and more later.

Evidently this part of Wagnerian thought is difficult for Edouard Sans to assess, tied as he is to the “politically correct” of the present moment and against the support Wagner rendered for the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War with his text “Who is German?” and the text “August 25,th of 1870, the German Army in Paris.” For this reason Wagner declared, “I am the most German, I am the spirit of the most German.”

2 – A radical critique of Judaism, coinciding in this with Schopenhauer. He did not reject the individual Jew, and had good Jewish friends and admirers, but he rejected “Judaism” as a conception of the world. Together with his preferred philosopher he considered Judaism as the archetype of a “progressive” and “materialist” vision of the world, a lack of Piety caused by their Bible and their cruelty through their degradation of the peaceful and compassionate root of Christianity. This was not an aggressive anti-Judaism but defensive, against the actions that Judaism entailed.
There was no possibility of redemption for this Judaism, since for such redemption they must “cease to be such,” that is, lose their essence as Jew. This position brought very serious problems in his time and in our own. In any case we remember the words of Hermann Levi in a letter of April 13, 1882: “The combat that Wagner undertook against Judaism in music and art comes from the highest motives… and so his behaviour with myself, with Josef Rubinstein and other Jews who he appreciated deeply.”

THE PESSIMIST CRISIS OF WAGNER

When Wagner read Schopenhauer he was undergoing a profound pessimist crisis that made him much more receptive. Exiled, unable to act on the public artistically, convinced of the failure of revolutionary projects, his petitions to return to Germany rejected, with economic problems and his dependence on donations from friends, and worst of all his conviction of the impossibility of his love for Matilde and with his wife Minna away travelling and their matrimonial love already broken. Thus Wagner knew anguish and pain, even more so given his extreme sensibility, and he himself intuited the folly of Desire and the traps of Life, Suffering and the desperation of finding solutions within the Representative…on reading Schopenhauer he had but to “re-discover” his own intuitions and give them a coherent conceptual form. But Wagner, like Schopenhauer, had moreover a serious vision of life and existence, both of them removed from those superficial forms of living that led Calderón to say, “Blessed are those who are deceived.” No, in Wagner self-deception, an easy superficial life, is not possible. His vital seriousness impelled him to seek the final reasons and ultimate consequences. Schopenhauer is the only one to offer him a logical form and solution to the vital drama.

Pessimism is not understood as a position of fatigue and decadence. Nietzsche himself in his “Birth of Tragedy” (when he was in his Schopenhauerian phase) indicates exactly what is meant by active pessimism: “Must pessimism always be a sign of decadence? No, there is a pessimism of the Strong.” In Wagner pessimism was always active, strong but conscious, compassionate and Redemptive.

WAGNER IS NOT SCHOPENHAUER

Although we have seen and shall see the great influence that the discovery of the Schopenhauerian philosophy had on Wagner, Wagner never took it as a whole, not
even in its really most central themes. With Schopenhauer Wagner conceptualized
his own previous intuitions, adapted them for some themes, but never ceased to
note great differences.

In the first place Wagner is a passionate man who has highs and lows and puts his
entire passion of life into his deeds and works. Whereas Schopenhauer is retreating
and reclusive in an isolated and comfortable life, conformed to his idea of negating
desire and passion, Wagner will never cease to be passionate though he recognizes
the necessity of Renunciation and the futility of desire. In a word, Wagner is much
more “human” and vitalist, and he never denies being so.

Wagner sensed, and thus expressed in his art, the possibility of Redemption, and
the Joy of this Redemption, something unheard of and impossible in the realm of
the purely Schopenhauerian. For Schopenhauer compassion is a virtue but not a
solution for the world, closer to the Buddhist positions in which there is no Re-
demption other than Nirvana, the annihilation of the Will in Nothingness. Enough
to hear the song of the joy of life in the third act of The Meistersingers or the hope
in the Song of Good Friday to understand that Wagner has an idea of complete real
Redemption, not merely an individual one. In Schopenhauer one can find a light
for the superior individual able to dominate desire and the Will, but he never ac-
cepts Redemption for the real Collective, in the world of representation.

And here we have another difference: Wagner loves the simple people, and espe-
cially in Germany. Wagner believes in redemption for the entire people through a
Genius Redeemer, Unique and special, but a redeemer for everyone, a Christ, not
redemption for a minority. Schopenhauer always despised the people, and ap-
plauded every crushing of the popular movements of his age. Absolutely faithful
to his philosophy he had no hope that “quantity” could be elevated, and gave the
masses no more value than to be the décor of “Time and Space” for the deeds of
some few superior geniuses. Wagner instead recognizes the necessity for the Hero
and genius, and abhors the idea of the equality of the mass, but on condition that
the Genius acts on behalf of simple people.

In Wagner the contempt for money was absolute, despite the fame for waste given
to him by his enemies; he never worried about money and was never stingy but
generous and if he sometimes spent beyond his means he never did so for selfish
hoarding. He sought to surround himself with beauty and intelligence, art and na-
ture, not money. Schopenhauer lived as a rentier but was sullen and thrifty because
of it, always worried about having the money that allowed him to live isolated
from the world.
Wagner was not an atheist and never stopped believing in Christ, even when he was most distant from religion, and he later found in religion (not in the Churches but in ascetic and devout Christianity) the centre of Redemption through Pity or Piety. Schopenhauer was an atheist, though he appreciated the content of devotion and unselfish love, but only as an “aid to the diffusion of Mercy,” not as a solution and much less as an extramundane reality.

In a word Wagner wants to reform Art and drama to educate the public and wants a superior minority to seek the Redemption of the people, eliminating materialism and establishing an Artistic State that provides for the needy out of compassion and Love. This is but a utopia for Schopenhauer, who only aspires to see some few geniuses be able to understand the Suffering of the World and thereby bear the cross of Life with dignity. The others are left at the mercy of their folly and to the destiny of falling uselessly into the traps and phantasms of the mundane desire the Will imposes on them. The philosopher pities the pain of others but cannot do more than show them the way of negation of the Will. Those unable to do this must merit the hell of the world as their well-deserved punishment.

WAGNER AND PROGRESS

Both Schopenhauer and Wagner were absolutely anti-dialectical: “Progress through chimeras is the dream of our century, as the resurrection of the dead was for the Ninth Century. Every Age has its utopia” (The World As Will and Representation), so that Hegel and Marx are the furthest away from Schopenhauerian thought. Wagner sweetens that position while denying any interest in the Material Progress of the Representative, but concedes the possibility and interest in the progress of the spirit, thought and knowledge. Whereas in Schopenhauer there is no possibility of changing the future and humanity is doomed to dance after desire and the runaway Will to go to its extinction, and the redemption of the genius able to control the Will and take Pity on the world is only an isolated case.

In his “Kunstwerk der Zukunft” Wagner shows very well his rejection of the modern progress of the representative, the material: “Everything that so-called modern civilization brings with it, a taste for luxury, the superfluous that makes us forget the essential needs, fashion that is the worst of tyrannies”…”We are converted into a people of readers of the press, such has been our loss.” Progress in this material and social sense taken as a “value in itself” is a disaster that leads to decadence.
For Wagner progress only has a guiding meaning in the world of knowledge and feeling, not in representation.

LOVE

Schopenhauer devoted a Chapter in his major work “Metaphysics of Sexual Love” that refers to Love as a trick of Nature for the sake of reproduction. We satisfy egoism in the form of pleasure rather than as a possibility of reproduction, which without this “reward” would be more difficult to achieve through the egoism of normal people. Hence the philosopher’s views on women are nowadays not exactly “politically correct.”

Nevertheless in this text Schopenhauer addresses a theme almost incomprehensible for him: The suicide of frustrated lovers, the death of love, the desire for annihilation when love unites and Space-Time separates. In his important letter of December 1, 1858 to Matilde he relates how after slowly rereading Schopenhauer during those moments so sensitive to him, he is able to “correct” a theme of the philosopher, and the theme is precisely “to indicate clearly the way to the annihilation of the Will through Love, not only through abstract philanthropy (as Schopenhauer indicates) but through True Love, a path not accepted by Schopenhauer.” Wagner understands that authentic Love is a contact with the ideal, or rather with serenity, and that suffering is precisely the return to the mean and stingy reality of Space-Time.

The error of Tannhäuser or Kundry is not to let themselves be carried away by Love, but not to know how to associate natural sensual Love with spirituality and depth, as Tannhäuser says: “I only know Love in the happiness of pleasure.” So that while Schopenhauer says: “Every pure true love is Piety, and every love that is not Piety is only egoism,” according to his understanding that sensual love is only a trap of egoism, whereas Wagner gives to Love, perhaps for having felt so deeply and in a form so spiritual as with Matilde, a special dimension, the love of the sensual elevated to the ideal, reaching the spirit and both uniting in a state beyond Time-Space, always clear momentarily, thereby being another way, together with Compassion, for annihilating the unbridled Will of Desire.

For him physical Love without this superior elevation is a prostitution, the sin of Klingsor, “love” converted to “Gold,” since if Alberich curses Love that is because he is convinced he can buy “purely sensual love” with Gold. Alberich curses the ideal of Love, not the deception of Nature, pleasure and sex.
Wagner wrote to Matilde on January 1, 1859: “The sensation that dominates me when I comprehend the sweetness and delicacy, but also the chastity with which you have loved me, is fantastic.” Chastity is not continence or the absence of desire, but elevation and the subordination of such desire to the ideal.

If we want to understand this Love a little more and its difference from the feeling of Love-Compassion, we remember what Wagner himself said in the letter of October 1, 1858 to Mathilde: “What characterizes Pity is what is not determined by the individual qualities of the person who suffers, but only by his own suffering. In contrast, in Love we must rise up to unite with the other, and we can only share this ideal with someone whose qualities are the most similar to our “ideal.”

Love in Wagner, expressed in his “Tristan,” contains much of Schopenhauer, but in the Third Act the lovers already unite not in the unbridled sensuality of the First Act, in their love as a product of the Will, but in what produces in them an ideal union, a Love outside Space-Time, a Love that is total union in an “other world,” a “suicide for Love,” which Schopenhauer did not understand, and that Wagner had felt with Matilde, the ideal Love outside temporal Representation.

Schopenhauer is actually very close to Buddhism, a religion without God, that has its “heaven” in individual annihilation.

While in his texts on Tristan Thomas Mann could see no more than sensuality unleashed to the maximum, and an intellectual renunciation before difficulties, in Wagner this is not a renunciation but ideal Pure Love that unites them once they have overcome the anxieties of reality accepting Death.

APPENDICES:

This book ends with an appendix of Wagnerian texts on Schopenhauer, translated into French, with letters and diary extracts from Venice. And finally a bibliographic index.

Of course the detailed reading of this book offers much more than can be written in an article and is a book with immense possibilities, as many as have the thought and art of Richard Wagner.
And we must be clear that Edouard Sans, like myself, always makes clear that Wagner, as an artist, person and intuitive is far superior to Schopenhauer. The philosopher provides systematization, intellectual awareness, but Wagner exceeds the straitjacket of any system of thought and leads to Life and Art.