

WAGNER TO THE WASTE LAND

SWINBURNE · WILDE
SYMONS · SHAW · MOORE · YEATS
JOYCE · LAWRENCE · ELIOT



· STODDARD MARTIN ·

Wagner to “The Waste Land”

A Study of the Relationship of
Wagner to English Literature

Stoddard Martin



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Preface

The purpose of this book is to outline the relationship of the art, thought, life and “myth” of Richard Wagner to late Romantic and early Modernist literature in English. Definition of a Wagnerian tradition, while implicit, is not necessarily intended. If it were, the approach might properly be to explore the polarity between the “heroic vitalist” Wagnerism of Shaw and Lawrence and the more predominant “art for art’s sake” Wagnerism evident from Swinburne through the men of the 1890s to Joyce and Eliot. As it is, considering that Wagnerism was a product of that strain of Romanticism in which the cult of the individual artist reached a zenith, emphasis is given to the important individual writers themselves. The result is a succession of chapters on each. Exceptions to this are the first chapter and the last. The first deals with the French of the *fin-de-siècle* as a group, the intent being to collect from them Wagnerian motifs that became pertinent to the English, whom their Wagnerism and aesthetics in general influenced. The last deals with *The Waste Land* on its own, the intent being to emphasize the unique relevance of Wagner to it among Eliot’s works; also its particular status as an endpoint, graveyard perhaps even, of an epoch of Wagnerism in literature.

Taking on such a vast subject involves obvious risks. The mere student can hardly claim competence in all relevant areas. While an ideal of completeness and balance has been kept in mind, more attention has sometimes been devoted to areas where greater competence or interest has been felt. Considerations of space and competence have also led to neglect of some important matters and all-too-brief treatment of others. In this category fall the influence of English Romanticism on Wagner, Byron and Bulwer-Lytton in particular;¹ the importance of Grail legends to Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites in general, and of Nordic sagas to William Morris in particular. The influence of German Romantic philosophy in England from the time of Coleridge and Carlyle is a vital issue which is insufficiently explored in this primarily aesthetic study, as is

the later development of indigenous fascist thought. In general the reader must be warned that, since the bounds of the subject as a whole have not been previously charted, and since many of the possibilities raised can only be falsified or proved by the appearance of information either at present (as in the case of *The Waste Land*) or forever unavailable, unanswered questions have been raised and the method on occasion has become frankly speculative.

The only full-length studies on Wagner and literature to date are Max Moser's *Richard Wagner in der englischen Literatur des XIX Jahrhunderts* and Grange Woolley's *Richard Wagner et le symbolisme français*. In English the only volume on the subject is Elliott Zuckerman's *The First Hundred Years of Wagner's "Tristan"*, which provides the *Zeitgeist* and touches on much of what we shall discuss, but does not focus primarily on literature. A book entitled *Richard Wagner and the Modern British Novel* by Bernard di Gaetani is, I understand, under preparation at the time of writing. But the best existing work on Wagner and English literature has been done by William Blisset in his articles on Moore, Joyce and Lawrence; also Herbert Knust in his *Wagner, the King, and "The Waste Land"*, which is as detailed a study on Wagner's relationship to a single work as one could hope to find. Although these works have been helpful, most attention has been devoted to the works of the writers themselves, in conjunction with the germane criticism on them. Some effort has been made to give attention to works not frequently discussed – Symons's creative works, for instance, and the plays of Lawrence; also to aesthetic theory, where it coincided with Wagner's, as is the case with that of most of the men of the 1890s.

In general background much has been gained from Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God: Creative Mythologies*, a massive work which defines the type of the Western literary myth by close scrutiny of the mediaeval Tristan and Parzival epics, the related works of Wagner, and major novels of Joyce and Mann. Mann, whose novels provide the best examples in any language of how Wagner might be successfully adapted to literature, is referred to throughout. So too is Nietzsche, whose reaction against Wagner provides an essential link in any discussion of Wagner's relationship to subsequent art and thought. On the relationship of German Romantic philosophy to literature, Ronald Gray's *The German Tradition in Literature* has been useful; for an aesthetic overview of the entire period, Richard Ellmann's and Charles Fiedelson's *The Modern Tradition* and Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image*; for Modernism more particularly, two

classics on the subject, Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle* and Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era*. Other works that have been helpful on more specific matters are cited in the opening paragraphs to the relevant chapters.

On the relationship of Wagner and Romanticism to the rise of fascism, Houston Stewart Chamberlain's works, Eric Bentley's *The Cult of the Superman*, and Peter Viereck's *Metapolitics* have proved provocative. As to Wagner himself, a broad general knowledge of the music dramas and aesthetic theories has been assumed; also wide reading in the vast secondary literature, including such studies as Robert Gutman's *Richard Wagner: The Man, his Mind, and his Music*, Bryan Magee's *Aspects of Wagner* and Faber's recently published *Wagner Companion*. But the most useful works for determining the aspects of Wagner that inspired the literary imagination are undoubtedly the unique studies of literary artists themselves: Baudelaire's *Richard Wagner et "Tannhäuser" à Paris*, Nietzsche's *The Case of Wagner*, Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite*, Symons's Wagner essay in *Studies in Seven Arts* and Mann's "The Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner". As to knowledge of music beyond that of Wagner, this study proceeds from the position first enunciated by Baudelaire: that perception of the importance of Wagner to literature does not require a musicologist's expertise.²

Titles of foreign works are generally retained – *Götterdämmerung* instead of *The Twilight of the Gods* (or *Dusk Falls on the Gods*, as Shaw would have it), *La Revue wagnérienne* instead of *The Wagnerian Review*. Exceptions to this occur where usage has favoured the English – *The Flying Dutchman* instead of *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Beyond Good and Evil* instead of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. Translations are avoided except where the figures under discussion would naturally have read English versions, as in the case of the Ellis translation of Wagner's *Prose Works* and the Levy edition of the *Complete Works* of Nietzsche. Standard collections of each writer's works are used when available. Exceptions to this occur where new critical editions are preferable, as in the case of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; or where original texts provide pertinent passages amended in posthumous editions, as in the case of some of Lawrence's works. In references a short form is used after the first occurrence of the cited work, but full details of each work are provided in the notes following the text.

Finally, before starting our Parsifalian journey towards *The Waste Land*, it should be emphasized that this is a study of Wagner's *relationship* to some outstanding writers in English, not a strict

chronicle of his *influence* on them. Were it the latter, discussion would have to be confined to specific instances of Wagner-experience, reactions as recorded in letters and elsewhere, stated sympathies with Wagnerian aesthetics, and overt instances of *allusion* (direct reference) to Wagner's works. As it is not, discussion will move beyond conscious influences and allusions to more general *echoes* and *similarities* of subject, theme, configuration, myth, style, philosophy and metaphysics. Much of what we shall consider falls properly under the heading of *Zeitgeist* and is a matter of general sympathies between Wagner and other artists of the late Romantic epoch. It might be observed further that, though claims of direct and constant influence are not the point, influence in any case can only be felt when there is a receptive spirit in the individual artist and his native culture. From this perspective, the risks of overstepping the bounds of intelligent inquiry may turn out to be considerably less grave than they appear at the outset.

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I Wagner and the French

In 1850 Franz Liszt, having recently moved from Paris to Weimar to become court music director, produced the premiere of *Lohengrin*. Wagner's operas had been banned throughout most of Germany owing to his revolutionary activities in Dresden in 1849, and it was hoped that Liszt's production would lead to their quick acceptance elsewhere. This did not happen. Nevertheless, the premiere produced two articles that may have influenced the eventual acceptance of the idea of producing Wagner in Paris. The first, by Liszt himself, is notable for its citation in subsequent French writings on Wagner, including Baudelaire's *Richard Wagner et "Tannhäuser" à Paris* and Dujardin's *La Revue wagnérienne*. The second, by a poet sometimes described as the "grandfather" of the Symbolist movement, Gérard du Nerval, is notable as the first in a long series of admiring reactions to Wagner by this type of French man-of-letters.¹

Over the next decades the French came increasingly to recognize Wagner's significance to literature. In this introductory chapter we shall discuss this French background, making particular mention of figures such as Mallarmé and Laforgue who were most to influence the English. There are no studies in English of Wagner and the French, although Zuckerman in his *First Hundred Years of Wagner's "Tristan"* offers a chapter on the subject. Of French studies I have found Grange Woolley's *Richard Wagner et le symbolisme français* most helpful.

LES PREMIERS AMIS

The French were initially as reluctant to produce Wagner as the Germans. In the midst of a reaction to their own upheavals of 1848, they were wary of work by a revolutionary, especially work rumoured to be erotic and immoral. The conservative cultural climate of Second Empire Paris can be measured by the suppres-

sions in 1857 of *Madame Bovary* and *Les Fleurs du mal*. In the same year however, Théophile Gautier, considered by some as the "father" of the Symbolist movement, wrote an article on the controversial German composer which was no less sympathetic than Nerval's.² Gautier's words were noticed in influential artistic circles and may have helped pave the way for the Wagner productions in Paris in 1861. These productions were as much a *cause célèbre* for a young generation of artists as the premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps* was to be for their Modernist counterparts in 1913. For Paris at large, however, the productions were anything but a success. A typical comment from the Press was that *Le Vaisseau fantôme* (*The Flying Dutchman*) caused "le mal de mer".³ And the performances of *Tannhäuser* at the Opéra were subverted by the late-coming "gentlemen" of the Jockey Club, who were irate at Wagner's refusal to move the Venusberg ballet to the second act, so that they might have their customary show of legs.

It was in this atmosphere that Charles Baudelaire, first of the Symbolists in all but name, wrote the study which was to become the manifesto for literary Wagnerians of the following decades, and "to provide them with their favourite quotations about the interdependence of the arts".⁴ Stylistically, Baudelaire devoted his greatest attention to the prelude to *Lohengrin*, which moved him to an impressionistic prose reverie and to quotation of his own sonnet "Correspondances" (from *Fleurs du mal*) in which, he implied, he had been attempting a similar effect. Metaphysically, Baudelaire was most profoundly interested in the struggle of *Tannhäuser* between the erotic allures of Venus (which moved him to another prose reverie) and the redemptive love of the chaste Elisabeth; for in this the French poet saw a mirror-image of the erotic anguish and suspension between damnation and salvation which were the dominant motifs of his own life and work. *Wagner et "Tannhäuser" à Paris* was thus in effect as much a study of Baudelaire and his aesthetic as of Wagner and his. And in its final pages Baudelaire blended many of Wagner's theories from *Oper und Drama* with his own visions of a poetry-of-the-future to conclude,

Dans un avenir très-rapproché on pourrait bien voir non pas seulement des auteurs nouveaux, mais même des hommes anciennement accrédités, profiter, dans une mesure quelconque, des idées émises par Wagner, et passer heureusement à travers la brèche ouverte par Lui.⁵

Had Baudelaire lived, he might have proved the first "accredited" French poet to profit from the ideas of Wagner. As it was, his own creative gift was spent by the time he wrote his study, and he died a miserable death within a few years of its publication. Wagner was not again produced in Paris, nor his artistic influence generally felt, until the 1880s. Meanwhile Wagner himself, disillusioned by his reception in the French capital, departed suddenly, leaving others who had befriended him against the tide of popular opinion bemused. Léon Leroy, a critic prominent among *les premiers amis français*, saw the composer's flight as a demonstration of behaviour "nerveux et violent", but chose to interpret it as a sign of genius rather than mere rudeness.⁶ Like Baudelaire, Leroy was moved to write a study on Wagner; and he and a handful of minor artists took it upon themselves to keep the reputation of the German composer alive in the French capital through the 1860s. Increasingly this reputation came to be based on Wagner's personality and philosophy as well as his art. What attracted the French in these secondary areas is expressed by this recollection of the Master's countenance from the poet and composer Auguste de Gaspérini:

Au fond de ces expressions diverses de la physionomie, je démêlais le Tristan découragé par de trop lourdes épreuves et aspirant déjà, sans s'en douter peut-être, au *grand anéantissement*, le disciple convaincu de Bouddha et de Schopenhauer⁷

LES DÉCADENTS

After a period of nomadic wandering, the "convinced disciple" attracted the patronage of King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Ludwig intervened to have Wagner pardoned for his old revolutionary activities; and, back in his homeland at last, the composer began to produce new works. *Tristan und Isolde* was premiered in 1865, *Die Meistersinger* in 1868, and the first two dramas of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* shortly after. Wagner's reception in Bavaria was, for the time at least, as grand as he had dreamed of; and there was no longer any question of his first trying to establish himself in a non-German city such as Paris. Paris, if it wished Wagner, would henceforth have to come to him. And so it did. In the summer of 1869 three young Parisian *pèlerins* made their way to the Wagnerian retreat at Treibschén, to which another celebrated young pilgrim, Friedrich

Nietzsche, was also proceeding for the first time. The three – Catulle Mendès, his wife Judith Gautier and the Count Villiers de l'Isle-Adam – were of that generation that had just been coming of age during the *Tannhäuser* furore of 1861. Each was to play an important role in the development of Wagnerism in France in the following decades.

Mendès wrote an article about the pilgrimage, "Notes du Voyage", in which he took pains to flatter the Parisians with the information that Wagner "comptait la mort de Baudelaire et celle de Gaspérini parmi les plus grand chagrins de sa vie".⁸ Such partisanship was characteristic of this Franco-Jewish poet. During the following years, while war was bringing German unification at French expense and Wagner was publishing his most chauvinist and anti-Semitic pronouncements, Mendès continued to serve as his chief apologist to a hostile French public. In 1885 he contributed two articles to *La Revue wagnérienne*; in 1886 he published a book of essays entitled *Richard Wagner*; in 1899 he published a study of the influence of Wagner on French literature entitled *L'Oeuvre wagnérienne en France*. In every way Mendès encouraged the enthusiasm for Wagner among French poets until, by the 1890s, it had spilled over into such general affectation that one young Decadent actually assumed the *nom de plume* of Tristan Klingsor. On the other hand, Mendès was ever concerned to point out that Wagner's art was distinctly German, i.e. long-winded, lacking vivacity, laboured in development of character and idea; and that the French, while adapting Wagnerian forms and methods, should take care to make their art equally distinctive of their nation and race, i.e. "clair, précis, rapide au but . . . puissant, hautain, sublime et net".⁹

Besides being Mendès' wife, Judith Gautier was the daughter of Théophile Gautier and the "charmer" of Baudelaire. She became Wagner's amorous correspondent in 1877, just at the time he was beginning to compose *Parsifal*. Arguments have been raised against the widespread assumption that Gautier was Wagner's inspiration for Kundry; but much suggests it. Her father had described her adolescent personality as partaking of "épilepsie-catalepsie", and that is an apt description of the mysterious disposition to be found in Wagner's *femme fatale*.¹⁰ Moreover, Gautier's marriage to a Parisian Jew who had a professional curiosity in the creator of *Parsifal* suggests an intriguing parallel to the configuration of Kundry/Klingsor/Grail Knight. The Decadent Paris of the period has long been regarded as one inspiration for Wagner's Magic Garden, and

Gautier's position as a central female among the Decadents is the probable explanation for Wagner's sudden initiation of the correspondence. As the letters passed, Wagner's prime motive became to solicit lush fabrics and synthetic perfumes with which to decorate the music-room at Wahnfried where he was composing. The extent of the sixty-five-year-old's actual "amorous" intentions might be inferred from the fact that, when he fatigued with writing the letters himself, his wife Cosima took up the pen.

Count Villiers de l'Isle-Adam was, like Mendès, to remain a devout Wagnerian through the heyday of *La Revue wagnérienne*, to which he contributed a piece entitled "La Légende de Bayreuth". Of the three *pèlerins* of 1869 he was to be the most influential among subsequent writers, owing to his mystical drama *Axël* (1890). In English his appreciators would include W. B. Yeats and Arthur Symons. To the latter the Decadent *prince des poètes*, Paul Verlaine, was to comment, "I am far from sure that the philosophy of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam will not one day become the formula for our century."¹¹ What was this philosophy?

Fundamentally [Symons wrote], the belief . . . common to all Eastern mystics. And there is in everything he wrote a strangeness, certainly both instinctive and deliberate, which seems to me to be the natural consequence of his intellectual pride. It is part of his curiosity in souls – as in the equally sinister curiosity of Baudelaire – to prefer the complex to the simple, the perverse to the straightforward, the ambiguous to either. His heroes are incarnations of spiritual pride, and their tragedies are the shock of spirit against matter, the temptation of spirit by spiritual evil. They are on the margins of a wisdom too great for their capacity; they are haunted by dark powers, instincts of ambiguous passions. And in the women his genius created there is the immortal weariness of beauty; they are enigmas to themselves; they desire, and know not why they refrain, they do good and evil with the lifting of an eyelid, and are guilty and innocent of all the sins of the earth.¹²

This philosophy of Villiers, we see, echoed the attraction of Gaspérini to the Buddhistic and self-annihilating impulses in Wagner; also the attraction of Baudelaire to the sinful Venus, the struggles of Tannhäuser, and the strange sublime mist of the *Lohengrin* prelude. Among its major motifs were: the struggle against

erotic temptation; the quest for spiritual purity and transcendence; and the nature of woman as guilty and innocent, frenetically energized and immortally weary at the same time.

THE CASE OF *PARSIFAL*

Symons's description of Villiers's heroes as "incarnations of spiritual pride" might well be a description of Amfortas, and of his characters as "haunted by dark powers" and "on the margins of a wisdom too great for their capacity" a description of Kundry and Klingsor as well as several previous Wagnerian personae. Clearly the philosophy in which Verlaine perceived "the formula for our century" had much in common with the spirit of Wagner's last work. As Woolley has pointed out,

Trois de ses oeuvres les plus aimées, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, et surtout *Parsifal*, en juxtaposant les deux modes de la vie et de l'amour, l'érotique et le mystique, témoignent de la bataille spirituelle qui se livrait incessamment dans l'esprit du Maître et à laquelle il devait, sans aucun doute, une grande partie de son inspiration tonale. L'atmosphère mystique qui se répand autour de ses oeuvres relève surtout d'un vague panthéisme schopenhauerien, fataliste et bouddhique. Mais comme prétendrait Nietzsche, le mysticisme renonciateur du catholicisme chrétien n'est qu'une autre expression de ce pessimisme oriental néfaste. Ainsi *Parsifal*, l'oeuvre qui réconciliera le monde catholique avec Wagner, si elle marque le retour au catholicisme du Maître vieillissant, reste néanmoins, en parfaite harmonie avec le romantisme mystique et fataliste de ses oeuvres antérieures.¹³

Parsifal merged the ritualism of Christianity, on which the Catholic French had been brought up, with Eastern mysticism, which had been attracting the Parisian elite since the Parnassian 1850s and had by the 1880s become an essential in "the formula for our century". This metaphysical position could hardly help but make *Parsifal*, of all Wagner's *oeuvre*, a particular cult-work for a generation to whom the ultimate choice after a career of sensual indulgence was typically either "the pistol or the foot of the cross".¹⁴

The fact was nowhere more caustically analysed than in *The Case of Wagner*, a diatribe published in 1886 by that other "pilgrim" of

1869, Friedrich Nietzsche. In the years since Triebtschen Nietzsche had become disgusted with his youthful idol; and *The Case of Wagner* branded *Parsifal* as the ultimate "decadent" artwork, and its creator as "the artist of decadence".¹⁵ Nietzsche pitied the youths being "lured" to their "destruction" at Bayreuth in the manner in which he had observed first with the French in 1869. He railed against the deification of the artist which Wagner had encouraged, and which the French were imitating in their increasing cult-worship of poet-heroes such as Verlaine and Mallarmé. He criticized the "fog" and "unending melody" of the Wagnerian ideal, while that ideal was simultaneously being preached as aesthetic gospel from the pages of *La Revue wagnerienne*. Nietzsche charged Wagner, Bayreuth and *Parsifal* with the growth of Decadence in France, and for importation of the "disease" into Germany. At the same time he pointed out that the creator of *Parsifal* had himself absorbed much from the French, not only from Judith Gautier and pilgrim-aesthetes of various summers, but also from those like Flaubert who "loathed life" and sought to turn Art into a new religion. The characters of *Parsifal* were those of Flaubert writ large, Nietzsche contended; and the reason why the French were so quick to embrace Wagner's last drama was that it gave back in pseudo-heroic drapery the very types to be found in their own art.

The French influenced *Parsifal* and *Parsifal* the French, but just exactly how much? One answer might be found in the case of the Decadent *prince des poètes*. Early in his career, Verlaine, probably thinking as much of Baudelaire as of Wagner, alluded to Tannhäuser in a poem, "Nuit de Walpurgis classique". This allusion moves Woolley to remark, "C'est justement l'érotisme de décadent que . . . Nietzsche attaque dans la musique de Wagner que Verlaine semble traduire par ses vers".¹⁶ Such eroticism was *like* that of Wagner, but its origin was undoubtedly personal. This was even more clearly the case with the famous sonnet "Parsifal", one of three vaguely Wagner-inspired poems Verlaine wrote at the height of the Wagnerian vogue of the 1880s.¹⁷ Like Wagner's hero, Verlaine's Parsifal had to resist the sexual allurements of "les filles" and "la femme belle" before he could realize his true spiritual destiny. But, unlike Wagner's hero, Verlaine's was also called upon to resist the temptation of "la Chair de garçon". This signal difference, which Verlaine confessed to have been autobiographically inspired,¹⁸ demonstrates how the typical Decadent would

appropriate a Wagnerian framework to explore a situation fascinating to the "sinful" Paris of the time, but, more likely than not, foreign to Wagner's taste.

LA REVUE WAGNÉRIENNE

Verlaine found in Wagner an erotic suggestiveness on which he could expand, artistic models for the struggle between sin and salvation which he like Baudelaire regarded as the dominant theme in his life and art, and a metaphysic which had much in common with what he saw to be "the formula for our century". But Verlaine was no devout Wagnerian either in interest or in aesthetics. Widely recognized as the most musical of poets long before the Wagnerian 1880s, Verlaine hardly needed to imitate the methods of the *Meister* in the manner of some of his more fawning contemporaries. Though he published "Parsifal" in *La Revue wagnérienne*, he found the theoretical pronouncements of that journal tiresome, and had little time either for the growing enthusiasm for things German in general among younger poets.¹⁹ In sum, beyond what Woolley describes as "une certaine correspondance entre les dissonances de la musique de Wagner et du vers de Verlaine",²⁰ the sympathy between the work of the German "artist of decadence" and the premier French Decadent was not great.

But Verlaine's was not the only case. At the same time as his influence was at its peak, the Symbolist movement, as yet unnamed, was developing along self-consciously Wagnerian lines. Central to this was the above-mentioned *Revue wagnérienne*. This journal brought together the energies of many of the great French writers of the day, Mendès, Villiers and Verlaine, as we have seen. It also published some non-French Wagnerians, most notable among whom was Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the English philosopher and historian who was later to marry Wagner's daughter, become high-priest of the Wagner establishment at Bayreuth, and influence the growth of National Socialism through his metapolitical tract *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*. The man primarily responsible for the *Revue* was Edouard Dujardin, an ubiquitous enthusiast whose efforts were to help not only French poets of the 1880s, but also such English prose stylists of a latter day as George Moore and James Joyce. Though a poet and novelist of note in his own right, Dujardin was first and always an appreciator of other masters. The extent of his reverence for the old German *Meister* and