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Daniel H. Foster

Excerpt

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Introduction

To be able to understand the relationship between Wagner and the Greeks one must be conversant with those primary sources that Wagner read and re-read throughout his life. This seems obvious.¹ But what does not seem so obvious, at least given the way that previous authors have approached this topic, is that one should also be conversant with the ways in which Wagner's understanding of the Greeks was influenced by secondary scholarship and scholars. And yet it is this academic research that sometimes, quite surprisingly, illuminates the murk of Wagner's prose and the peaks of his music. In fact I would argue that, as with all other modes of research, one can never really speak of the Greeks *per se*, much less Wagner and the Greeks, no matter how much scholars, Semele-like, may desire to gaze upon their subjects unadorned. Because even scholarship is political, one must recognize that Wagner's Grecocentrism was part of his own ideological bent as well as a larger national trend, a particular manifestation of the nineteenth-century German *Zeitgeist*. The way in which Wagner and his compatriots chose to dress up the Greeks says as much or more about them and about Germany as it does about Greece. But what does it say?

In his acute but all too brief appraisal of such philhellenism John Deathridge summarizes how and why Wagner and like-minded Germans used the Greeks: "from the start of his career Wagner was in thrall to the idea of the Greeks as the pristine source of a lost culture – an ideal of fundamental origins projected onto the utopian future of a society encumbered by alienated living and a lack of spiritual freedom."² While the compact truth of Deathridge's summary is striking, it omits one important detail. At least in Wagner's case this ideal of a "lost culture" was not merely a figment of the composer's imagination. It was also based on a surprisingly

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wide familiarity with classical scholars and scholarship, some of it the most respected of the period. Although previous works on the topic of Wagner and the Greeks have sometimes pointed this out, nevertheless, if they have developed the claim any further they have tended to focus primarily on Wagner's relationship to Friedrich Nietzsche and Johann Gustav Droysen, a landmark translator of Aeschylus and founder of Alexander studies. While these two men might have been co-chairs of the virtual classics department one could people with Wagner's professor friends and mentors, there were others too who were, at least in their own time, equally if not more esteemed.³ The two scholars that this book focuses on in addition to Nietzsche and Droysen are Karl Otfried Müller, an authority on all things Doric, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, whose *Aesthetics* presents a Grecocentric paradigm for the evolution of poetry. Information on how these classical influences impressed Wagner is best gathered from numerous sources: Wagner's own theoretical works, letters, and the so-called *Brown Book*; the catalogues of his Dresden library and his Wahnfried library; works about Wagner by other scholars; and the very detailed and helpful entries in Cosima's diaries about her and Wagner's life together, their discussions, and their nightly readings.⁴

One caveat though. And this is directed mostly at classicists.⁵ Despite Wagner's broad acquaintance with classical sources, scholars, and scholarship it is important to remember that he was not himself a scholar and we should not treat him as such. In the case of Greek scholars one assumes that the Greeks are an end, not a means. In the case of Wagner the opposite is true. For him the Greeks were a means, not an end.⁶ And this must sometimes make him seem rather dilettantish in his knowledge of antiquity. While not disqualifying his perspective it does complicate the goal of figuring out exactly what Wagner knew about the Greeks, to what extent he knew it, and how far it influenced his theoretical and musical works. But as we shall see later in this introduction, being a dilettante was in Wagner's case not all bad. In fact ignorance was in some cases more fruitful than knowledge.

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WAGNER AND HIS SOURCES

In an open letter to Friedrich Nietzsche, Wagner once told the classical philologist that, from his earliest childhood, Greece had a profound emotional and intellectual hold on him: “no boy could have had greater enthusiasm for classical antiquity than myself; although it was Greek mythology and history which interested me deeply, I also felt strongly drawn to the study of the Greek language, to such an extent in fact, that I was almost rebellious in my efforts to shirk my Latin tasks.”⁷ The self-portrait that Wagner paints here differs in one small but important detail from an earlier account that he gives in *Mein Leben* concerning the philhellenic tendencies of his boyhood. In *Mein Leben* Wagner tells us that his interest in Greek myths and stories far surpassed his interest in the grammatical forms of the Greek language itself:

With regard to the ancient languages I was also able to concentrate only as much as absolutely necessary to learn through them about subjects that stimulated me to reproduce their most characteristic aspects for myself. In this I was particularly attracted by Greek, because the stories from Greek mythology seized my imagination so strongly that I wanted to imagine their heroic figures speaking to me in their original tongue, in order to satisfy my longing for complete familiarity with them. Under these circumstances it can easily be imagined that the actual grammar would only be considered a tiresome obstacle and not an academic subject with its own attraction.⁸

Despite this early fascination with the Greeks it seems that Wagner's study of the ancient Greek language never progressed beyond his boyhood efforts. He was all his adult life a novice in the field of classics and, once out of school, he eventually lost most of his ability to read Greek texts in the original.⁹ The last time that Wagner contemplated relearning Greek was while he was living in Paris. He was ultimately persuaded by scholar and translator, Samuel Lehrs, not to waste his time. As Wagner tells it, Lehrs advised him that “the way I was and the music I had in me, I would find a way to extract knowledge from them [the Greeks] even without grammar and dictionary.”¹⁰

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But whatever one might say about the deterioration of his translating capabilities, Wagner's youthful interest in the Greeks is still impressive, and, significantly, it was not limited to tragedy alone. It also extended to epic. While still a young man Wagner even tried his hand at writing a Homeric-style epic. Entitled *Die Schlacht am Parnassus*, the poem was based on a story by Pausanias that tells of how the muses descended from Parnassus in the second century B.C. in order to help defend Greece against, appropriately enough, the Gauls.¹¹ In his "Autobiographical Sketch" he also claims that while still in his early teens he translated the first twelve books of the *Odyssey*.¹² This interest in Homer and the Greeks did not fizzle out as he grew older. In fact, it seems only to have grown to include comedy, lyric, history, rhetoric, and philosophy. As far as primary works are concerned, from various sources we know that Wagner owned, read, and re-read a wide selection of Greek authors (albeit mainly in German translation). Curt von Westernhagen's catalogue of Wagner's Dresden library includes not only the major tragedians, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, but also Aristophanes, Aristotle,¹³ Demosthenes, Herodotus, Homer, Pindar, Plato, Plutarch, Thucydides, and Xenophon. Although less represented, the catalogue lists Roman authors as well: Gaius Julius Caesar, Horace, Livy, Tacitus, and Virgil.¹⁴ The Wahnfried library catalogue, cross-referenced with the Dresden catalogue, Cosima's diaries, and Wagner's own writings, adds a few more names to the list of those primary authors that Wagner mentions by name.¹⁵ On the Greek side: Anaxagoras, Hesiod,¹⁶ Lucian, Polybius, Pythagoras, Sappho,¹⁷ Thales, and Zeno.¹⁸ And on the Roman side: Epicurus, Lucretius, Ovid, Pliny the Elder, and Seneca. There are also several other classical personages who, although not primarily remembered as authors, also figure prominently in Wagner's picture of antiquity: Alexander, Cato, Lycurgus, Pericles, and Thrasybulus. These at least are the ones that show up with any frequency in Wagner's writings and conversations. His knowledge of other historical and mythological figures probably extended far beyond this, given his reading of Plutarch and other primary and secondary sources particularly rich

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in such examples. Finally, although Pindar and Sappho are the only Greek lyric poets whom Wagner mentions by name, nevertheless, given the number of times he mentions lyric poetry in general and the importance that both he and his secondary sources place upon this genre, I think we can safely assume that Wagner did read some of the other lyric poets represented in his Wahnfried library. At least we can be relatively sure that he knew something about Anacreon, since he owned several editions of this lyric poet's works and had conducted the overture to Luigi Cherubini's opera-ballet, *Anacréon, ou L'amour fugitif*.¹⁹

In addition to this extensive list of primary sources Wagner was also aware of some of the most influential scholars and secondary sources of his era. These secondary authorities on antiquity can be broken down into two categories: (1) those classics scholars²⁰ whom Wagner knew personally and (2) those whom he knew through their work. Authors in the first category include Johann August Apel, Ernst Curtius, Wolfgang Helbig, Hermann Köchly, Samuel Lehrs, Oswald Marbach, Theodor Mommsen, Carl F. Nägelsbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, Friedrich Ritschl, Erwin Rohde, Julius Sillig, Heinrich von Stein, Adolf Wagner, Christian Hermann Weiss, and Hans von Wolzogen.²¹ Turning next to those authors whom Wagner knew through their scholarship alone, one can see that his libraries, especially his Wahnfried library, contained many more books on classical subjects than are listed here. I am including only those for whom there is strong evidence that Wagner actually read or was somehow familiar with their work:²² Friedrich Creuzer, Johann Gustav Droysen, Max Duncker, George Finlay, Constantin Frantz, Edward Gibbon, George Grote, Gottfried Hermann, Karl Dietrich Hüllmann, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Karl Philipp Moritz, Karl Otfried Müller, Barthold Georg Niebuhr, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, Friedrich Schlegel, Jean Charles Sismondi, Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker, Christoph Martin Wieland, Ulrich von Willamovitz-Moellendorf, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, and Johann Heinrich Voss.²³

For someone who was not himself a classical scholar these lists seem quite extensive. By any standard Wagner must be counted as

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an impressive amateur classicist, an amateur, that is, in the best (albeit Latin) sense of the word. Add to these lists the many other primary and secondary sources Wagner owned and read on other subjects, especially philosophy, history, and literature, and the image of an extremely well-read artist begins to emerge.

WAGNER, HEGEL, AND HEGEL'S *AESTHETICS*

In the context of secondary scholarship and its influence upon Wagner there is one more author and one particular work that deserve special attention. The author is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and the book is his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Although this particular author was more a philosopher than a classicist, he influenced not only Wagner's understanding of the Greeks but aesthetics in general, not to mention the fact that he was arguably the most influential thinker for Wagner and Germany during the composer's lifetime. But there is a serious problem in making the claim that Hegel and his *Aesthetics* deeply influenced Wagner and the *Ring*. Hegel's *Aesthetics* is never explicitly mentioned by Wagner in any of his recorded writings, conversations, or diaries. Nor is it listed in the catalogues for either his Dresden or Wahnfried libraries. Moreover, time and again when Wagner mentions Hegel it is often in a negative vein. And yet there are good reasons to believe that Hegel's *Aesthetics* did influence Wagner, directly as well as indirectly.²⁴

With respect to Germany in general one can at least assert, along with no less an authority than Friedrich Engels, that Hegel was "in the air" during Wagner's lifetime. His philosophy was like a perfume (or an air-borne pathogen, depending on your point of view) that "extensively permeated the most diversified sciences and saturated even popular literature and the daily press from which the average 'educated consciousness' derived its pabulum."²⁵ With respect to Wagner in particular, even beyond 1854, when the composer first discovered Schopenhauer and reputedly shifted much of his philosophical loyalties from Hegel to Schopenhauer, he remained deeply

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influenced by Hegel, Hegelian philosophy, and the Young Hegelians. To give just two important examples: (1) Hegel was the teacher of one of Wagner's favorite Greek scholars, Johann Gustav Droysen, and (2) he was the philosophical point of embarkation for one of Wagner's favorite philosophers, the Young Hegelian philosopher of love and compassion, Ludwig Feuerbach.

Even if the references are often negative, throughout his prose Wagner repeatedly refers both directly and indirectly to Hegel and Hegelian aesthetics. For example, at a key moment in his appendix to "Judaism in Music," Wagner calls Hegel's system of aesthetics "a dreary set of dialectic nothings" that has devastated German thinking ever since Kant and Schiller's interpretation of Kant were superseded by Hegel.²⁶ In his essay, "Music of the Future," Wagner claims to have come to his conclusions about the relationship between poetry and music only once he had all "the sayings of the most eminent art-critics in my head," among whom one might reasonably include Hegel.²⁷ We also know for certain that Wagner had a copy of Hegel's *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* in his Dresden library, and that, according to his own account in *Mein Leben*, he read the book as well. In his autobiography Wagner recounts how he struggled through this and probably other works by Hegel while living in Dresden: "For my introduction to the philosophy of Hegel I chose his *Philosophy of History*. Much of this impressed me, and it appeared as if I would gain admittance to the inner sanctum by this route. The more incomprehensible I found many of the most sweeping and speculative sentences of this tremendously famous intellect, who had been commended to me as the keystone of philosophical understanding, the more I felt impelled to get to the bottom of what was termed 'the absolute' and everything connected with it."²⁸ What this passage tells us is that Wagner only *began* his study of Hegel with the *Philosophy of History*; it is not improbable to suppose that he went on to read other works by Hegel as well. Supporting this conjecture there is also evidence that he read the *Phenomenology of Mind*. Friedrich Pecht, a friend of Wagner's from his Paris days, recounts how once while visiting Wagner in Dresden

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he found the composer struggling through some pages of the *Phenomenology of Mind*.²⁹

But the most conclusive evidence that Wagner was somehow influenced by Hegel's *Aesthetics* in particular is also the most illusive evidence: internal evidence from Wagner's writings. As with many things Wagnerian I am not the first person to notice the Hegelian slant to Wagner's writings. James Treadwell observes in his *Interpreting Wagner* that the composer's peculiar brand of aesthetics resembles that of Hegel (and Schiller and Lessing too, for that matter), insofar as it "is a kind of symbolic history, closer to myth-making than scholarship. It interprets all the individual phenomena of culture as manifestations of some deep universal tendency."³⁰ With maliciously felicitous phrasing that brings together Hegel and the Greeks and shows their influence on Wagner, Deathridge calls Wagner's three most formative enunciations of his aesthetics and politics – "The Art-Work of the Future," *Art and Revolution*, and *Opera and Drama* – a "quasi-Hegelian merry-go-round of ideas – presented at numbing length . . . which dogmatically asserted that the preservation *and* the annulment of Greek culture were part of an essential stage in the dialectical progress of history towards the 'purely human.'"³¹ In a more adulatory tone, when referring to Wagner's ideas about the synthesis of poetry and music, in 1885 Edouard Rod asserted that Wagner's "idea of a synthesis of the arts is completely Hegelian, especially that of the union of poetry and music, the two *subjective* arts, as opposed to the *objective* arts of architecture, sculpture, and painting, and with the philosopher [i.e., Hegel] as with the musician [i.e., Wagner] . . . the result is the supremacy of the dramatic form."³² Citing the political and philosophical climate and context in which Wagner reached maturity as a thinker, Dahlhaus and Deathridge cite the *Vormärz* period before the 1848 Revolution, when he and his comrades adopted the Hegelian dialectic as a way of expressing their ideas.³³ As Dahlhaus and Deathridge conclude, the *Vormärz* was "an era which left on his way of thinking a stamp that any changes in aesthetic or political convictions never expunged."³⁴

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But beyond what Treadwell, Dahlhaus, Deathridge, Rod and others have said about Hegel's influence on Wagner's theories and theoretical writings, I would argue that Hegel influenced Wagner's music as well. As Sandra Corse cogently argues and amply demonstrates, Wagner avidly "read and studied Hegel, and internal evidence in the *Ring* cycle and *Oper und Drama* shows the influence of Hegel."³⁵ Along with Corse I would argue that Wagner's interest in Hegel extended beyond a "mere" interest in philosophy. As an artist he was invested in how these philosophical notions were related to aesthetic practice as well as aesthetic theory. This investment is particularly evident with respect to Wagner's conception and application of the Greeks in the *Ring* cycle. For this reason much of the body of the present book compares both Wagner's *Ring* and his theoretical works with the theoretical model provided by Hegel's *Aesthetics*, a model that unifies poetry and politics in a decidedly German and Greco-centric fashion.

Before ending this introduction to Hegel, for those readers unacquainted with his *Aesthetics* it may be helpful here to give a very brief summary of his overall approach, that part of the *Aesthetics* that seems to have most influenced Wagner, and his national biases, which reinforced some of Wagner's own national biases. In the Introduction to his *Aesthetics* Hegel tells us that the original way of writing about aesthetics in Germany was by treating the subject "with regard to the feelings they were supposed to produce [i.e., in the audience], as, for instance, the feeling of pleasure, admiration, fear, pity, and so on."³⁶ But what Hegel offers is an approach that Adorno usefully refers to as "content-aesthetics [*Inhaltsästhetik*]."³⁷ Superseding both his German predecessors – what I would call reception-aesthetics – and more formally based aesthetics Hegel's content-aesthetics offers us a way to account for those things in art that do not necessarily agree with a certain pre-conceived notion about art. It is a way of "defining characteristics that contradict its [art's] fixed art-philosophical concept" and thus allowing us to recognize art's "otherness."³⁸ With respect to that part of the *Aesthetics* that interested Wagner most, it seems to have been Hegel's

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Grecocentric, evolutionary account of poetry as it developed from epic to lyric to drama. It is with this final stage, drama, that poetry culminates. It is the sublation or *Aufhebung* of epic and lyric, combining the epic objectivity of national action together with the lyric subjectivity of individual self-consciousness to produce individuals who act within and collide with the ethical order of the states. Because of his classical bias Hegel imagines this dialectic development of poetry to have occurred most paradigmatically in ancient Greece. By following the pinnacle of Attic tragedy and comedy, that drama eventually devolved into two sub-genres representative of its two constituents: epic and lyric drama. It is to these two genres that Hegel (as well as Wagner) attributes the national identities of French (epic) and Italian (lyric).

WAGNER AS DILETTANTE

While much may be said for Wagner's enthusiastic embrace of the Greeks, his interest in this as in most things did have its limits. Nietzsche was perhaps the first – but certainly not the last – to go on record as suggesting that Wagner was essentially a dilettante. As early as his "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth," while he was still friends with Wagner, Nietzsche cautiously suggested that "a superficial view of him [Wagner] might suggest that he was a born dilettante."³⁹ It was Thomas Mann, though, who took the greater leap forward by suggesting that the very key to understanding Wagner's greatness was to first understand that he was a dilettante through and through: "Wagner's art is a case of dilettantism that has been monumentalized by a supreme effort of the will and intelligence – dilettantism raised to the level of genius."⁴⁰ In the case of Wagner's interest in the Greeks, despite the breadth of his reading of classics and classical scholarship, one might still argue that he was somewhat dilettantish, especially from the perspective of today's very minutely trained classicists. In fact he sometimes seems to veer so sharply from the truth (that is, what we now take as truth in the field of classics) that one is tempted to correct rather than understand him. But such