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Lady Music: The Female Characters in the Works of Richard Wagner,

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The singer Anja Silja, whose voice has brought many of Wagner's female characters to life, writes:

> Wagner's women live in a dream world. There is hardly any real figure in his operas—all are figures of dreams: Elsa, Elisabeth, Senta, even Isolde. [. . .] They have no "normal" fate.[1]

And yet, these women, as Silja writes, are "[. . .] possessed by an obsession for salvation that leads them to their death."[2] Wagner himself says much the same when he writes about Senta in *The Flying Dutchman*:

> Like Ahasverus, he yearns for his sufferings to be ended by Death; the Dutchman, however, may gain this redemption, denied to the [Eternal] Jew, at the hands of—a *Woman* who, of very love, shall sacrifice herself for him. [. . .] [T]his Woman [. . .] [is] the quintessence of womankind; and yet the still [not] manifest, the longed-for, the dreamt-of, the infinitely womanly Woman,—let me out with it in one word: *the Woman of the Future*.[3]

This means that in Wagner, the central theme is on the one hand the women who do "not yet exist"; that is, virtual women who are not made of flesh and blood. On the other hand, these female characters thrive towards death eagerly: and death is something that cannot be conceivable without living—and therefore mortal—flesh. What does this paradox mean? The female body as the representation of sensuality and mortality has a long tradition in the Occident. If, however, not the individual, real woman, but rather the "symbolic woman" is in question, what then hides behind this idea of redemption and mortality, which permeates all of Wagner's works and repeatedly takes the form of a female figure? Wagner designated music as a "woman." However, whom—of from what—should music redeem, and why can music achieve its end only in female form? I will attempt to formulate a few ideas to these questions—and in the process will make a few short digressions into the history of religion and media theory.

Redemption, Sacrifice, Incest

First, the term "redemption": as Jeffrey Peter Bauer has shown, this term takes on very different forms in Wagner according to the period in which a specific oeuvre was produced. However, what is common to all of these varying concepts of "redemption" is that they are derived from religious (primarily Christian) images, and that redemption is always expressed in the topos of "love." In Wagner, "love" surpasses all boundaries and laws of "normal" life, and must simultaneously find its ultimate expression in the motif of "sacrifice." The connection between sacrifice and love is in itself deeply Christian: Wagner himself repeatedly referred to the story of salvation on the Cross. The same is the case with the "effeminization" of the Christian concept of sacrifice, which had become part of secular-Christian body of thought long before Wagner's time.[4] Jochen Hörisch writes that "[a]ll of Novalis's Abendmahltexte (Texts of the Eucharist) have a striking similarity: they feminize and eroticize the Christian sacrament."[5] This is even the case in Goethe, who essentially tries to "[. . .] put an end in general to the logic of the sacrifice. [. . .]" In an odd concurrence, Goethe, Novalis, and de Sade transcribe the story of the sacrifice of a godly son into the story of the sacrifice of women."[6]

The motif of incest, which is of central importance for Wagner and which is closely related to the effeminization of sacrifice, also occurs much earlier than in Wagner. The motif of an incestuous love affair between brother and sister hardly played a role in the literature prior to 1800. If it was present, it was a "curse" that hovered as a doomed over a relationship. However, this already changes in Goethe: for example, in the figure of Mignon in Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship). in the course of the nineteenth century , the incest motif became increasingly erotically charged. The union of two people related by blood bonds gradually became the motif of the highest, most complete form of "true love." This was not a love that called for sexual abstinence—just the opposite. Incest became the expression of final fulfillment—a fulfillment that took the lovers beyond the boundaries of the Ego and which, in the narratives, almost always ended in the beloved's/sister's death. As a motif of "true love," brother-sister incest plays an important role especially in the Germanophone world. Up to 1945, there is hardly a notable author who does not address the motif of the love between brother and sister. An exception to this are the German-Jewish authors, who indeed saw in the incest motif a secularized Christian myth.

They either did not deal with the topic at all, or they contextualized it in an analogy of German-Jewish "assimilation."[7]

One could now,of course, explain the obvious relation between the secularized and effeminized metaphors of redemption in Wagner with his anti-Jewish impetus by referring to the fact that the images of racist anti-Semitism were in any case sexually laden. This shows alone in the strange redefinition of the term *Blutschande* (literally "disgrace of the blood") that occurs within the anti-Semitic context. If *Blutschande* once signified the sin of sexual intercourse within the family, hence incest, it took on a new meaning among anti-Semites of the nineteenth- and early twentieth century, now designating the sin of intercourse with an "Other" of "foreign blood".[8] Where the term was used in this sense it always referred to the blood of the "Jew."This aspect is important, but in my discussion I would like to present yet another perspective that also includes the an answer to the question why Wagner attributed a feminine form not only to his concept of redemption via the loving victim/sacrifice, but also to music itself.

Udo Bermbach calls the term of 'love' in Wagner's oeuvre a "metaphor of communication theory". He writes:

> If one understands love to be a metaphor of communication theory, then it follows that Wagner surprisingly (indeed, completely in the sense of the modern feminist differentiation) distinguishes between biological and social gender, or in social-scientific terms, between "sex" and "gender."[9]

This designation of "love" as a "metaphor of communication theory" is revealing. Wagner himself seems to justify this when he writes: "I cannot conceive the spirit of Music as aught but *Love*."[10] What connects music and love? And why does music redeem—in a feminized form? To answer this one should take the statement seriously that love—and therewith music—are to be understood as metaphors of communication theory. Wagner was no pioneer concerning the effeminization of sacrifice and the incest motif. However, he was a pioneer concerning the function of music. In order to comprehend this innovation, one must take another look at his concept of love.

"Love" in Wagner

Wagner understood "love" to be: complete union, dissolution into one another, the I and the Other being no longer discernable. An example of this is when Tristan says to Isolde: "Tristan—you, / I—Isolde / No longer Tristan!" and Isolde answers: "You—Isolde, / Tristan—I / No longer Isolde!"[11] Such an image of the inability to differentiate between two lovers, which to a certain extent recalls the incest motif, had already been developed by Goethe with his characters Eduard and Ottilie in the *Wahverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*). However, what is innovative about Wagner is how he parallels the lovers' dissolution into one another to the relationship of text and music. I will immediately return to this point, but first I have to point to the Christian foundation of Wagner's ideal of love.

In order to do this, I will make a short digression into the relationship between religion and symbolic gender order. In general, one can say that the religious message of a culture is reflected in the laws that regulate sexuality and the relationship between the sexes. The mirrored quality of the Christian message of salvation and the symbolic gender order becomes most apparent when compared to Jewish tradition. I will do this briefly, basing my discussion, of course, on the cultural codification of the gender order within both religions, not on the ways sexuality and gender is actually lived and experienced by men and women.

Symbolic Gender Order: Jewish

"Jewish civilization does not bestow orders of merit for celibacy," remarks David Biale laconically in his book *Eros and the Jews.*[12] The Jewish religion is unfamiliar with the negative image of sexual desire that dominated Christian thought for many epochs. Sexuality is seen as part of the human condition: as a precondition of reproduction, it offers the possibility to encounter Death's sting, pointing to life itself and yet, it is also a symptom of human vulnerabiltiy and of the difference between God and Man. According to Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Director of the Department of Biblical Civilization at the Rabbinical College, the God of Israel

> [. . .] is only male by gender, not by sex. He is not at all phallic, and cannot represent male virility and sexual potency. Anthropomorphic biblical language uses body imagery of the arm, right hand, back, face and mouth, but God is not imagined below the waist. [. . .] God is asexual, or transsexual, or meta-sexual (depending on how we view this phenomenon); but he is never sexed.[13]

Also, God does not behave in sexual ways. "God is the 'husband' of Israel in the powerful marital metaphor." However, God does not kiss, embrace, fondle, or otherwise express physical affection for Israel. Precisely because God is "no model for sexuality," as Frymer-Kensky explains, there is a strict separation between the Sexual and the Holy in Jewish rituals. If the differentiation between God and Man is reflected in the fact that God is conceived of as being incorporeal and without gender, then the vulnerability of the mortal human is *emphasized and ritualized* by the stress on gender difference. Circumcision ,marks the male body as such, whereas the *nidda* laws, related to the female blood, emphasize the uniqueness of the female body. In general, both circumcision and *nidda* stress the gender difference. The word *nidda* is etymologically related to *niddad*, which essentially means "removed" or "separated."[14] The laws of *nidda* are often translated as "impurity rules" and interpreted as a degradation of the female body during menstruation and following delivery. However, it is absurd to assume that in a religious tradition in which descendants and reproduction know highest valorisation (in the Orthodox interpretation, no unmarried man is allowed access to rabbinical or synagogical-liturgical functions), the female body should be negatively connoted precisely in those moments during which it has given birth or shows symptoms of its generative capabilities. The function of *nidda* seems to be the accentuation of sexual difference—comparable to that of circumcision, leading Susannah Heschel to raise the question:

> Whose Vagina is it? Or do we understand the Vagina as a symbol, maybe a parallel to the phallus, a symbol charged with the emotional significance forming the sexual identity? […] Nidda-laws turn the vagina into a transcendental sign of sexual identity and the Jewish status.[15]

In other words, the symbolic gender order of the Jewish tradition emphasizes sexual difference. It is in this sexual difference that the law is recognized by man and woman of an insurmountable difference between God and Man..

Symbolic Gender Order: Christian

A completely different message of salvation is reflected in the Christian gender order. In that the Christian God had assumed a human body in His son, the difference between God and Human is effaced. This is the Christian message of salvation that is solemnly celebrated in the Eucharist: At Holy Communion the union of the godly and human body takes place. With His becoming human and incarnate, the Christian God also assumes a sex. Or, to be more

precise: two sexes, one of which signifies the wounded body, mortality itself, the other signifies the victory over mortality.

The gender coding of this is shown in many representations from the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period and their interpretation has led to a controversy between the medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum[16] and the art historian Leo Steinberg concerning the sexuality of Christ.[17] In the illustrations that they have analysed, it becomes clear that the image of the Christian Redeemer—different from the God of Israel—is clearly gendered. This gendering is two-fold. Based on a series of representations from the Middle Ages which are substantiated by texts of many holy women, Bynum illustrates that the body of the crucified was vested with all of the insignia of femininity. His sacrificed blood was shown as (the) feminine nourishing breast, and in many representations, the wounds even took the form of a bleeding vulva.

Contrary to this, Steinberg refers to numerous depictions—above all, those from the late middle ages and early Renaissance art—that stress the Redeemer's masculinity. Not only does the Mother of God point to the newly-born Savior's member, but the genitals were also emphasized in representations of the crucifixion. From this, Steinberg points to a connection between "erection" and "resurrection."[18] According to Steinberg, this erection is not in a sexual way, but rather designated the victory of the spirit – incarnated in masculinty – over the Flesh.

This gendered codification of the Savior's body led on the one hand to a sexualization of religiosity that we are familiar with for instance from the sermons and treatises by Meister Eckehart, Abelaerd, Bernard de Clairveaux, and other Mystics. On the other hand, the ideal of an erotic union with God also had an influence upon the symbolic gender order and sexuality itself. This is comparable to the Jewish religion—only with reversed premises.

If the Jewish tradition stresses gender difference, then the Christian gender order idealized their union. For this reason, Paul's metaphors for marriage are similar to his images of Holy Communion. "Because there is one loaf of bread," he states, "all of us, though many, are one body" (1 Cor. 10:17). He designates the individual believers as "different parts of one body," which "are one body in union with Christ" (Rom. 12:5; see also 1 Cor. 12:12 and 27). Christ

is said to be the head of the church, which is "his body" (Eph. 5:23 and 28). And the relation of the sexes is conceived of by the same principles: In marriage, the man is to be the head and the woman the body of the thus unified couple. Paul even goes further to say: "Men ought to love their wives just as they love their own bodies. A man who loves his wife loves himself" (Eph. 5:28). Clearer than via this image of a head that marries its own body, the doctrine of the insolubility of marriage can hardly be explained; a doctrine that of all the religions of the world Christianity alone has proclaimed. We are therefore dealing with two almost contrary gender orders. In one, the stress is on gender difference, and sexuality presents "consolation" in the face of the unsurmountable fact that this difference cannot be neutralized. In the other, gender difference ceases to exist with the ideal of its complete and final union, an ideal that mirrors the unification with God. Now, this in turn forms the basis of the ideal of symbiosis and unification which surfaces time and again in Wagner's artistic work and designates the role of his female characters.

Alphabet and Gender

What does the Christian ideal of symbiosis have to do with Wagner's concept of music as woman? In order to answer this question, I must once again make a short detour and shift to media theory and media history. The nineteenth century—especially its second half—is often interpreted as the epoch of a language crisis. It is owing to this crisis around 1900 that linguistics, that is, the birth of psychoanalysis, comes into being. A few of the basic preconditions for this crisis are found in the alphabet—or rather, in the Occident's written culture, which for its part is also closely connected to the history of music.

In the western Occident, the history of music is closely linked to the development and the role of the notation system. Wagner saw the orchestra as the Greek Chorus' heritage, "The relevance of *the Chorus of the Greek tragedy* for the drama's necessary sense can be found *in the modern orchestra* alone, so that it might develop itself therein free from every confinement into an immeasurably diverse manifestation."[19] Wagner thus drew a line that lead directly from the beginning of the age of the alphabet up to the greatest scores of the nineteenth century. But if the Greek tragedy was still partly standing in the traditions of an oral society, the orchestration of the instruments in the 19th century relied on an ingenious system of signs. And yet, what Wagner pursued was the ideal that music's overwhelming power should lead to the disappearance of the orchestration, of musical techniques, and the

rational system—the system of signs—that stands behind it. He wanted Music to have precisely this effect: that techniques and rationality should not be discernable. In a letter to Mathilde Wesendonk, he writes:

> Now consider my music, which with its fine, fine esoteric-fluid juices penetrates sensitivity's most subtle pores to the very marrow of life in order to overcome everything except for cleverness and the self-won power of preservation. Everything that deludes the personality is washed away, and only the wonderful, sublime sigh of the unconsciousness' confession remains.[20]

With Wagner the orchestra, with its many musical strands that are branched and woven-together, is responsible for successfully bestowing a body onto the text. It is the "[. . .] spirit of music, which swept forth from the poet's innermost conscience, that now hovers above him and leads him on the path of redemption," are his own words.[21] This statement is in keeping with his idea of the relationship between text and music and harkens forth Goethe's image of the "Eternal Feminine" that leads us upward.

Vilém Flusser has written about the technical images of the nineteenth century. According to him, photography and film were discovered "[. . .] in order to charge the texts again."[22] With his concept of music, which develops itself at the same time as photography, Wagner executes something similar—for the ear. At the same time, one should not forget that his concept of the *Festspielsaal* (opera hall) with a darkened auditorium, a sunken orchestra pit, which allows the music to rise forth from the "mystical abyss"—indeed, the bringing together of visual and acoustic impression in and of itself already anticipates the modern-day film theater.

Now, you may ask me what does this grand orchestral music have to do with the crisis of language in the nineteenth century? Wagner, for whom the relation of music and text represented "receiving" and "productive" elements of the musical drama, found in music and the large orchestra one of the answers to the nineteenth century's crisis of language. Its main element can be reworded as a dissolution of the spoken word in the text and vice-versa. This development, which first became clearly palpable in the nineteenth century, is connected to the system writing itself.

In contrast to the Semitic alphabet, which emerged around 1000 BC, the Greek alphabet that was developed around 200 years later consists of phonetic signs which not only comprise the

consonants, but also the vowels. The so-called ‘complete alphabet’ resulted in the fact that in Occidental thought, oral and written expression were in competition with one another: the written word was rational, accountable, and at the same time, testimony of an immortal spirit; the spoken word, however, was incalculable, fleeting, and, like the speaking body itself, fashioned by passing time. These assignments were attributed a visual, “natural” character: writing—which connoted logical thought, rationality, a scientific quality—was equated with “masculinity” (and was named accordingly as *Vatersprache* (“father language”) by the scholars of the Middle Ages). Contrary to this, the fleeting, changing word of the oral language which was bound to the body was considered “feminine” and was named “mother tongue.” (‘Muttersprache’) It was from these symbolic assignments to both levels of language that the well-known gender categories have been derived: the masculine, male body as the signifier of intellect, and the female body as the signifier of materiality—and also mortality. The entire dichotomy that so strongly influenced the Occident—intellect and body, culture and nature—found its visual and therewith biologized expression in these gender categories.

In contrast to this, the consonant-alphabet implies that texts written in Semitic script can only be read by those who can *speak* the language; that is, by whoever can infer from the content which word could be meant. This importance of speaking resulted in the preservation of a strong oral tradition in Jewish religion and secular Jewish traditions: the written and the spoken word were considered two distinct and interrelated forms of communication. – quite in contrast to the relation of the written and spoken word that developped fromt the Greek alphabet. In the Jewish tradition, the Holy Scripture became canonized - since its publication by Ezra around 440 BC, it was not permitted to change a single word – but on the other hand, the oral exegesis provided for a continually renewed interpretation and reception of the text. The passing on of the Holy Scripture from generation to generation therefore occurred via the speaking body.

This parallel of oral and written qualities was visually expressed in the gender order. The gender order that emerged from this system of writing marks the male body as the signifier of the written word, of the writing itself, while the female body is the signifier of the spoken word, of orality. This applies to both the Semitic and the Greek alphabet. However, while femininity as the “incarnation of the spoken language” in the Greek and Christian tradition ultimately led to speechlessness—oral qualities being increasingly equated with the language

of superstition and credulity—it gained a completely different meaning in the consonant-alphabet's system of writing. Here, the female body, which stands for the vowels, the *unwritten* signs, refers to the "blank spaces" of the Semitic alphabet, to the "postponed *physis*," the "resonating body," without which the signs can not come to life. The female body is not the signifier of revelation—that is ascribed to the Holy TExt, which in its turn ascribed to the male body via the circumcision—but the female body is the signifier of the revelation's "enunciation," for the "spoken," "oral Torah."[23] This means that both symbolic functions—the male body as the signifier of the sign and the female body as an "enunciation" of the sign—depended upon one another. Sounds without the signs are insignificant, and conversely, signs can only come to life via the enunciation. The previously described gender order of the Jewish tradition corresponds to this gender codification of written and oral language.

Crisis of Language and Music

This discussion has possibly shown what the crisis of language in the nineteenth century could have to do with Wagner's concept of music as woman. With the "complete" alphabet, from which the entire European Occidental culture would emerge, not only a competition had arisen between written and oral expression—it had also brought about a gradual superimposition and reorganization of the spoken word and consequently of the speaking body, according to the laws and logic of writing. Christ as the "Word became Flesh" is *the* symbolic figure of the basic relationships of writing and speech, and of spirit and material.

The history of the Christian society can be read as the chronicle of a long historical process, in the course of which the spoken word slowly became regulated and restructured: a process that would rapidly accelerate with the invention of Gutenbergs printing press and which, around 1800, parallel to the beginning of a comprehensive alphabetization, accompanied a gradual identification of the spoken and the written word. We, today speak as we wrote, and we write as we speak: the spoken word has spilled over into written language and was "assimilated" by it. Exactly this impossibility to discern between writing and speaking stands at the beginning of the crisis of language which took hold in the nineteenth century. It was expressed in, among other things, a new concept of Jewish "foreignness." This concept of "foreignness" is not unimportant in order to comprehend both Wagner's idea of music as

woman and his anti-Semitic impetus. The following discussion should shed more light on these topics.

Crisis of Language and Assimilation

In her essay "Language as Locus of Contention with Jews and Jewry during and after the Enlightenment in Germany, 1780-1933," Shulamit Volkov has developed a narrative of the relationship between Jews and Christians during and after the Enlightenment that focuses on language.[24] She shows to what extent Herder's philosophy of language—according to which language simultaneously became a part of the physical identity of the individual—forms the basis of the "national feeling". This was possibly why Arndt defines the German Fatherland as a place *wo allein die deutsche Zunge klingt* ("where only the German tongue resounds").[25] According to Herder, such a materiality of the language was also valid for the Jews, who spoke a language that was in accordance with their religion. For him, this clearly meant that when Jews speak the German language, they not only betray their own identity, but they also infiltrate a foreign body of language. Here, one already recognizes—on the level of language—the anti-Semitic *topos* of the "Jewish poison" that creeps into the collective body of the German people and "destroyse" it from within. The idea that assimilation had to fail because Jews could never make a "proper German" language their own became a permanent topos of anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century and led some to judge Heine's and Börne's oeuvre of being "unauthentic". "There is no doubt that they have all necessary capabilities; however, their *style* betrays them—their *language*, their *tone* alone."[26] In Richard Wagner's *Judentum in der Musik* (*Jewry in Music*), this idea was most clearly formulated and simultaneously transferred onto every form of artistic creation:

> Above all, it generally must be confirmed that the Jew speaks the modern European language only as an acquired and not as a native language, and that this prevents him from being able to express himself in a sovereign and fluent manner. A language, its expression, and its development is not the work of single persons, but rather a historical collective work: only he who has unconsciously been raised in this commonness also takes part in all of its creations.[27]

Of particular interest in this criticism of the "other language" of the Jew is, on the one hand, the fact that neither speaking and writing nor speech and the creation of artworks are differentiated. This reflects the non-differentiation between speech and text in the complete phonetic alphabet. Paradoxically, this "linguistic nationalism" (Volkov) that was based on *speaking* could only therefore be so widely disseminated and gain such an influence because

the printing of books, movable print, and the general alphabetization had contributed to a standardization of thought and speech in other fields.[28] On the other hand, the quote makes apparent the source from which Wagner—perhaps subconsciously—took his idea of the resonating text (in female form).

For many poets and writers, this crisis of language, which had led to the superimposition of writing and speech, expressed a crisis of creating and thinking. This crisis was determined by the feeling that not the Self speaks, but rather, is spoken. Rimbaud's famous dictum from 1871 says nothing less than this: "C'est faux de dire: je pense. On devrait dire: on me pense. Je est un autre." (It is incorrect to say: I think. One should say: 'One thinks me.' 'I' is another.")[29] Similarly Hofmannsthal' in his *Lord Chandos-Brief* (*Lord Chandos Letter*): "Everything collapsed into pieces before me [. . .] [and] the individual words swam about me [. . .] they are whirlpools [. . .] that never stop swirling and through which one enters into emptiness."[30] For him, "the ability to think or to speak coherently about anything is lost."[31] For both Rimbaud and Hofmannsthal, whom I cite only as examples of many late nineteenth-century artists, the crisis of language is experienced as a crisis of the subject and as a crisis of the artist.

Rimbaud's reaction is to search for a new language: he tries to find the materiality of the spoken word that is not imprisoned by the written word. "I discovered the color of the vowels! *A* black, *E* white, *I* red, *O* blue, *U* green. [. . .] I determined every consonant's form and movement. With instinctive rhythms I flattered myself to have discovered a poetic word that would someday be accessible to all senses."[32] In contrast, Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos concludes that, for him, this language that represents "a completely feverish thinking" that is "more direct, more fluid, more glowing than words," because it is a "language none of whose words is known to me; a language in which inanimate things speak to me."[33] Rimbaud searches for the "absolute" language, but Hofmannsthal turns his attention to the failure of such a search—and he can do so because he preserves a sharp division between writing's existence and its signs; between the spoken language and writing about the language.

It may seem inadmissible to compare Rimbaud and Hofmannsthal with each other; however, within the scope of the crisis of language, this comparison presents itself. Also, the texts of Rimbaud are filled with allusions to Christ, the cross, and the Eucharist, while in the writings of Hofmannsthal (who even thoug babtized, was of Jewish family), something in keeping

with the Jewish tradition of the parallel between writing and speech seems to have been preserved.

Wagner's answer to the crisis of language is different: he assigns *music* the role that once characterised spoken language. He makes himself the creator of a form of "speaking" and of a materiality which are expressed in the 'voices' of the *instruments.* He does not attempt to free the texts from the constraints of the written word; rather, he attempts to give them a body—a "body of sound" in the literal sense. However, since music (and especially his great scores) are dependent upon the notation system (that is a written system), this means that he makes use of musical techniques brought about by the system of writing in order to make the texts resonate. And precisely for this reason, he calls music "woman." He wants his audience to forget that in reality, this music has to do with a system of signs and a "father language." As Wagner would have it, the musical sound should contain all those elements that are particular unto the spoken language: as the sap of life that flows through the individual and the collective body. In short: Wagner places music in the position of a spoken language that has been imprisoned by the written word and has lost its materiality. This reversal occurs all the more easily due to the fact that the alphabet's original task is to transform phonemes, or sounds into visual signs.

In doing this, Wagner harks back to a model that actually is characteristic of the Jewish tradition: femininity as "enunciation of the signs." Therefore, his equation of music with woman is obvious. It ressembles these strange telepathic, magical, or intuitive powers which many of his female characters possess. Their powers appear as a metaphor for the traditional equation of femininity and the spoken language with the mysterious powers of the body. However, at the same time, these female characters bemoan the loss of their magical powers. As Isolde laments:

> Degenerate race! Unworthy of your ancestors! How, o Mother, did you dispose of the power of ruling sea and tempest? O feeble art of the sorceress, still cooking up curative potions! Be stirred in me once again, bold power; rise up from my breast where you have lain concealed![34]

Wagner wants more than just the "enunciation of the signs" that implies the differentiation of the sexes and the coexistence of text and voice. He demands the *union* of sign and body. Precisely this stands behind his concept of "love" as unification and symbiosis, the

effacement of any difference between two lovers. The "sign" should become "body," and the "body" should give itself completely to the signs or to the procreative power of poetry. In Tristan, he resolves to "go just once into a symphonical rave," and to allow the lovers "to drown, to sink" in the fullness of the sound, "in the billowing flush, in the crashing sound, in the universe of the world-breath."[35] Only after the tones completely dissolve into the text and are formed by these will the notes have found their completion and redemption—a redemption from the crisis of language that also implies a crisis of art and culture.

Based on these premises, a reading of Wagner's own statements about the character of Elsa and about his "love" for to this character (his own creation, mind you) via the aspect of a gender-laden relationship of written and spoken word is in order. His description includes all elements that were addressed earlier: love, redemption, the unconscious, and the role of art. Perhaps he was only able to so clearly scenarize this relationship because he did not yet have the capabilities that he would later have in the *Ring* to express these thoughts in music itself. (Jean-Jacques Nattiez has shown that the entire *Ring* is to be read as one metaphorical translation of Wagner's conception of the history of music.[36]) In the followin quotation it suffices to put the word "music" in the place of "Elsa" in order to recognize why for him music had a 'female body':

> *Elsa* is the Unconscious, the Undeliberate (*Unwillkürliche*), into which Lohengrin's conscious, deliberate (*willkürliche*) being yearns to be redeemed; but this *yearning*, again, is itself the unconscious, undeliberate Necessity in Lohengrin, whereby he feels himself akin to Elsa's being. [. . .] This woman, who with clear foreknowledge rushes on her doom, for sake of Love's imperative behest,—who, amid the ecstasy of adoration, wills yet to lose her all, if so be she cannot all-embrace her loved one; this woman, who in her contact with this Lohengrin, of all men, must founder, and in doing so, must shipwreck her beloved too; this woman, who can love but thus and not otherwise, who, by the very outburst of her jealousy, wakes first from out the thrill of worship into the full reality of Love, and by her wreck reveals its essence to him who had not fathomed it as yet; this glorious woman, before whom Lohengrin must vanish, for the reason that his own specific nature could not understand her,—I had found her *now:* and the random shaft that I had shot towards the treasure dreamt but hitherto *unknown*, was my own Lohengrin, whom now I must give up as lost; to track more certainly the footsteps of that *true Woman-hood*, which should one day bring to me and all the world redemption, after Man-hood's egoism, even in its noblest form, had shivered into self-crushed dust before her.—Elsa, the Woman,—Woman hitherto not understood by me, and understood at last,—that most positive expression of the purest instinct of the senses, —made me a Revolutionary at one blow. She was the Spirit of the People, for whose redeeming hand I too, as artist-man, was longing.—[37]

With the figure of Elsa, Wagner had created a concept of music that implied on the one hand the subordination of the sound to the text, but that on the other hand expressed a notations system "become flesh," it was the attribution of senses to the signs. That is the work of union, the self-sacrificing "love" that he is concerned with. This conflation makes him a "complete revolutionary." Wagner was not a revolutionary in the fields of politics or the creation of myth. However, in the field of music, it cannot be denied that he set new standards that many later composers with completely different textual or aesthetic goals had to deal with. If he says of these innovations that they were inspired by a woman, then by this, he of course does not mean a "real" woman, but rather, the *image* of woman that he charges with a new meaning. This is comparable to the technical images that serve the 'magical charging' of the texts. He means a system of notation that owes its foundation to the laws of the "father language," but which emerges from this in female form: as the body of the score.

Translated by David James Prickett

Notes

1 Anja Silja, Die Sehnsucht nach dem Unerreichbaren. Wege und Irrwege (Berlin: Parthas, 1999), 19.

[2] Silja, *Die Sehnsucht*, 61.

[3] Richard Wagner, "Bemerkungen zur Aufführung der Oper Der fliegende Holländer" (1852), in R. Wagner, *Dichtungen und Schriften*, vol. 2, 50. Translation taken from *A Communication to my Friends*, trans. William Ashton Ellis, online, http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wagcomm.htm (Taken "[f]rom among the many references to the *Mittheilung*, in the *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt* and the *Letters to Uhlig, Fischer and Heine* [. . .].").

[4] One could counter that one of the first literary works in which this secular "self-sacrifice" arises—namely Goethe's *Werther*—does not stage a "female sacrifice." However, it is to be argued that here it has to do with a approximation of models of femininity, as is later shown both in the literature of the *Empfindsamkeit* ("Sentimentality") and later in the appropriation of "hysteric" symptoms via author and artist. "The appropriation of the female death as one of Werther's last attempts at stabilization—or, the attempt to embody the Other, the Female—fails and thereby exposes purely and simply the creation of the discourse of the *Feminine*." Susanne Komfort-Hein, "Phantasmen empfindsamer Suche nach dem 'reinen' Selbst. Zu einer literarischen Initiationsgeschichte des modernen Subjekts im 18. Jahrhundert," in *Metis*, Spec. issue of *Reinheit* 6, no. 11 (1997): 88.

[5] Jochen Hörisch, *Brot und Wein. Die Poesie des Abendmahls.* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1992), 180.

[6] Hörisch, *Brot und Wein*, 180-81.

[7] This is seen most clearly in Kurt Münzer, *Der Weg nach Zion* (Berlin: Axel Junckers, 1907).

[8] For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Christina von Braun, "Die Blutschande – Wandllungen eines Begriffs: Vom Inzesttabu zu den Nürnberger Rassengesetzen," in C. von Braun, *Die Schamlose Schönheit des Vergangenen. Zum Verhältnis von Geschlecht und Geschichte* (Frankfurt a/M: Neue Kritik, 1989).

[9] Udo Bermbach, *Utopische Potentiale in Wagners Frauengestalten*, in *"Das Weib der Zukunft." Frauengestalten und Frauenstimmen bei Richard Wagner*, ed. Susanne Vill, 70-83 (Stuttgart:, 2000), 73.

[10] Qtd. in Bermbach, 72. Translation taken from *A Communication to my Friends*, trans. William Ashton Ellis.

[11] *Tristan and Isolde*, II:2. English translation: http://www.rwagner.net/libretti/tristan/e-tristan-a2s2.html

[12] David Biale, *Eros and the Jews. From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 217.

[13] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Law and Philosophy: The Case of Sex in the Bible," in *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality*, ed. Jonathan Magonet, (Providence: Berghahn, 1995), 4.

[14] Hannah Rockman, "Sexual Behavior Among Orthodox Jews: A Review of Laws and Guidelines," in *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality*, ed. Jonathan Magonet, (Providence: Berghahn, 1995).

[15] Susannah Heschel, "Sind Juden Männer? Können Frauen jüdisch sein? Die gesellschaftliche Definition des männlichen / weiblichen Körpers," in *"Der schenje Jidd." Das Bild des "jüdischen Körpers" in Mythos und Ritual* (Vienna: Picus, 1998), 95.

[16] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

[17] Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon/October Book, 1983); 2nd expanded ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).

[18] Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, 83.

[19] Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama*, ed. and comm. by Klaus Kropfinger (Stuttgart: 1984), 349.

[20] Richard Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonk, *Tagebücher und Briefe* 1853-1871, ed. Walther Golther (Berlin, 1906), 170.

[21] Beethoven (1870), SSD IX, 125.

[22] Vilém Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotographie* (Verlag European Photography) 5. Aufl., Göttingen 1991 , 16.

[23] For more on this topic see Christina von Braun, *Versuch über den Schwindel. Religion Schrift Bild Geschlecht.* (Munich: Pendo, 2001), ch. 2.

[24] Shulamit Volkov, "Sprache als Ort der Auseinandersetzung mit Juden und Judentum in und nach der Aufklärung in Deutschland, 1780-1933,"in S. Volkov, *Das jüdische Projekt der Moderne* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2001).

[25] Qtd. in Volkov, "Sprache," 86.

[26] Volkov, "Sprache," 93.

[27] Qtd. in Volkov, "Sprache," 94.

[28] Benedict Anderson, *Die Erfindung der Nation. Zur Karriere eines folgenreichen Konzepts*, expanded ed. (Berlin: Ullstein, 1998).

[29] "C'est faux de dire: je pense. On devrait dire: on me panse. Je est un autre." Arthur Rimbaud, *Seherbriefe*, in *Sämtliche Dichtungen.* Bilingual Ed. Trans. Walter Küchler (Munich: 1997), 367f.

[30] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Der Brief*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 31 (Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe), ed. Ellen Ritter (Frankfurt a/M: Fischer,), 46.

[31] *Ibid*, 48.

[32] Arthur Rimbaud, *Gedichte*, ed. Barck, 99.

[33] Hofmannsthal, *Der Brief*, 54. Translation taken from Ritchie Robertson, "Language and the Unsayable in German Thought and Poetry from Nietzsche to Celan," online, http://www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/index.php?A=14&B=5

[34] Wagner, *Tristan and Isolde*, Piano Accompaniment. Qtd. in Susanne Vill, "Das Weib der Zukunft," in *"Das Weib der Zukunft." Frauengestalten und Frauenstimmen bei Richard Wagner*, ed. Susanne Vill, 6-33 (Stuttgart: 2000), 20.

[35] Wagner, *Tristan and Isolde*, Piano Accompaniment, 391f. Qtd. in Susanne Vill, "Das Weib der Zukunft," 20.

[36] Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner androgyne* (Paris: 1990), 14.

[37] Richard Wagner, *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* (1851), in R. Wagner, *Dichtungen und Schriften*, vol. 6, 278. Translation taken from *A Communication to my Friends*, trans. William Ashton Ellis, online, http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wagcomm.htm#pag341