

Wagner and Shaw - A Synthesis

The man of action in the realm of art is a helpless being. If he has even the beginning of the sensitivity which is as essential to great action as it is to great art, he is irresistibly drawn to the luminous world, but within it he is an ingenuous, defenceless and, indeed, pathetic intruder. Yet his position has at least the compensation that he is not expected to talk sense, and certainly not to defend his strange and uninformed opinions intelligibly and effectively. He has the chartered license of the innocent as surely as the artist has in politics. There is some relief in this situation ; after the hard sword-play of realist politics in which a slip means dialectical death, it is soothing to play with light, bright foils in an exercise where we can make complete fools of ourselves without even a scratch. And the turn of the year is a pause on the road between two Bayreuth festivals,* where we live a little in the mood of the great sagas and reflect on the further human possibilities this is the time to re-read Shaw. How brilliant he was, and what insight he possessed what a great creature of both mind and character. How much I wish that in youth I had then had the wit to ask him all the questions I would like to ask him now how tragically often we feel that about old men we knew and loved when we were young. Above all, I would want to press him on the point of *Götterdämmerung* whether, indeed, it was an irrelevant, redundant addition to *The Ring*, previously conceived and long subsequently executed a grand opera, wantonly, almost carelessly attached to a supreme epic of the human mind and spirit: or whether Wagner was seeing once again a far vision, further even than Shaw could see; just as in *Parsefal* he saw beyond the reproaches of the suffering Nietzsche to something very near to the younger man's third metamorphosis-the unknown state beyond the superman-while Nietzsche felt only an intolerable loneliness at the seeming apostasy of the one other mortal who could sense the being beyond man.

It is, of course, possible to overestimate the reasoning as opposed to the purely intuitive faculty in a great artist. Wagner himself wrote to Roeckel on 23rd August 1856 Can an artist expect that what he has felt intuitively should be realised by others, seeing that he himself in the presence of his work, if it is true art, feels that he is confronted by a riddle, about which he, too, might have illusions just as another might." Shaw wrote, when defending himself from a charge of presumption in interpreting Wagner in a manner that was at variance with some of his expressed opinions "Nearly half a century has passed since the tetralogy was written and in that time the purpose of many half-instinctive acts of genius have become clearer to the common man than they were to the doers ~'. He might here have interpolated his reference to himself and Shakespeare in another context, where he explained that he could see further, not because he was greater than Shakespeare but because he was standing on his shoulders a charming tribute from posterity to great predecessors which, always, contains a profound truth. So, when Shaw disputes with Wagner his own meaning, I may be permitted to dispute with Shaw certain aspects of his interpretation.

Space does not here permit a recapitulation of his whole theme, but only of that part of his thesis which is germane to this argument. In this affair no reader should take Shaw at second hand; he should, himself, not only enjoy the brilliance of the exposition, but follow in every movement one of the furthest flights of this superb intellect, which is matched only in range and power by his Methuselah. It is, also, happily, very free of that strange clowning with which an oversensitive nature protected itself from the laughter of clowns by the odd process of getting the laugh in first entertaining as many of the jokes are, they always jar a little on any reader who is absorbed in the real profundities of Shaw's thought, which are sometimes almost entirely concealed by the mask of comedy; although he was really an Irishman, the Germans might find, in this respect, he was "English, all too English.

May I be permitted to assume a familiarity with Shaw's work, and to remind only of the themes which affect this discussion. Shaw saw in *The Ring* a mystic interpretation of modern civilisation. In his view "The dwarfs, giants, and Gods are dramatisations of the main orders of men: to wit, the instinctive, predatory, lustful, greedy people; the patient, toiling, stupid, respectful, money-worshipping people; and the intellectual, moral, talented people who devise and administer states and churches. History shows us only one order higher than the highest of these: namely, the order of heroes ". The only order of heroes which had then appeared was that Siegmund generation of brave but ineffective revolutionaries, which the Gods

of the existing system had been able, albeit with some misgiving at the time and some disastrous after-effects, to destroy. The character of the Siegfried generation of heroes - the order of heroes which was subsequently to succeed for a period - created some disagreement, or misunderstanding, between Wagner and Shaw; this is our subject.

An essential key to the riddle is a proper understanding of the character of Brünhilde in Shaw's thesis: he believes her to be the "truth-divining instinct in religion"; she is the "inner thought and will of godhead, the inspiration from the high life to the higher that is its divine element, and only becomes separated from it when its resort to kingship and temporal power has made it false to itself". Brünhilde is to the high god Wotan, who represents the highest prevailing order of men, his true will, his real self: he speaks to her as to himself. She is that "soul in godhead" which "cares only to make the highest best and the best higher", but when godhead has established its domination over the world by a mighty church, compelling obedience of its formidable state organisation, through its ally, the law, and when godhead itself becomes a prisoner of these regulations, conventions, customs, inhibitions, (which church in Shaw's sense represents) the "very dearest soul of godhead" can work nothing "but the confusion and destruction of the existing order" until it passes "completely away from godhead, and is reborn as the soul of the hero". Such it seems are the main themes of Wagner's great allegory as seen through the eyes of Bernard Shaw, the fullness of whose extraordinary gifts both of reason and intuition is still to be recognised.

When we consider the properties of the ring, the symbol of power which the dwarf Alberich has forged from the stolen gold of the Rhine, we approach the central point of the argument. It is clear that even in the view of Shaw the ring did not simply denote power through money; this is strange, because a realisation of the higher potentialities of the ring should have induced in him some reconsideration of his summary dismissal of *Götterdämmerung*, as we shall see later. It is true, of course, that the ring in the hands of the usurious dwarf, Alberich was simply the power of money, because money was all that he understood. At most, the only further use of the ring to him was power over his fellows - his craftsman brother Mime and the Niebelungen in general - by a satisfaction of the will-to-power in the narrow Adlerian sense of the desire to dominate. At its lowest, this is the will-to-power of the man who finds a crude delight in cracking the whip and compelling obedience, without purpose except fulfillment of the lowest needs of lust, luxury, and the basest of all pleasures, bullying. But the ring, like all power in finer hands, could serve altogether different purposes; it could become the instrument of the will to the highest achievement, the most sublime and beautiful creation. Wotan felt it "his highest duty to take the power out of such evil hands and use it in the interest of godhead.

In fact, being the embodiment of the established order he is ready to use some very dubious methods to get power into the right hands and keep it there. He is not even ready to yield the ring in exchange for Freia, the goddess of beauty and happiness, whose presence is essential to the very existence of the gods. The other gods cannot persuade him that Freia is worth it, "since for the highest god love is not the highest good, but only the universal delight that drives all living things to travail with renewed life. Life itself, with its accomplished marvels and infinite potentialities is the only force that godhead can worship". It is only "when Erda, the first mother of life, rises from her sleeping place in the heart of the earth, and warns him to yield the ring" that he obeys. The reason for her warning is rather clearer in the text than in the interpretation of Shaw, which is strange; for once his almost suspect lucidity fails him. On the whole it appears from the text that she warns Wotan he will "brood in care and fear's if he retains the ring which is power; and, so far as the care goes, at any rate, she was undoubtedly right!" "If then care shall torment me, thee must I capture, all must thou tell me!" replies Wotan. But Erda eludes him and disappears in the chasm where the other Gods prevent him from following. So Wotan turns from this dark, unknown care to the world of known and proved delight "To me, Freia! Thou shalt be freed. Bought with the gold, bring us our youth once again! Ye giants, now take your ring.

The old order, the highest type of man that society has yet evolved, fails before the supreme decision he will not sacrifice beauty of life to live with the care which is the only personal gift of the instrument of destiny. He sets joy before mission. If Shaw had studied this passage a little more deeply, he might have spared his censure of *Götterdämmerung*.

The great remaining question is whether even the hero is capable of that high decision. It was at this point that Wotan failed - even the high god representing the highest type of existing man when he encountered the terrible condition attaching to possession of the ring. He who commanded the power of the ring must renounce love. The dwarf Alberich had been driven by the refusal of love to renounce this most intense human happiness as no other man had been able to do ; so he was able to ravish the gold which the Rhine maidens and all others believed to be safe, because no man could bring himself to that final renunciation. It was harder for the high god, the most supremely gifted of men, to renounce love, because all love and beauty were his for the asking, than for the dwarf whom love had spurned. So the highest failed where the lowest had succeeded.

Shaw realises in another context that Wotan "could not bring himself to forswear love ", but he does not appear in his analysis of the fourth scene of the Rheingold to have grasped the full portent of the god turning back beneath Erda's warning, away from the cares of a supreme mission to the easier and ever-alluring choice of protracted delight. But it is at this moment, both in the text and in Shaw's interpretation, that the god first realises his own inadequacy : he knows now that the old order has failed, but Shaw ascribes this more to a variety of individually valid reasons than to failure in the supreme test of choice between joy and destiny. Now occurs to the god for the first time, as he enters Valhalla, the thought that the old order must be surpassed; the life force must rise again from the god to the hero. "to the creature in whom the god's unavailing thought shall have become effective will and life ". Shaw might here have quoted one of the deepest, most vibrant urges of Nietzsche "Sienen willen will nun der Geist, seine Welt gewinnt sich der Welt verlorene". The world awaited the heroic movement, which combines mind and will.

The question remained whether even the hero would be great enough. The young Wagner answered yes in Siegfried, and the old Wagner answered no in Gotterdammerung : that is the point which I believe Shaw missed ; (perhaps we can now see further than Shaw we are standing on Shaw's shoulders.) But this pessimism, or rather warning, of the old and worldly-wise Wagner, need not be the last word : a man with so deep a sense of the organic being of nature and destiny would never think in terms of last words. After Siegmund who failed, came Siegfried who succeeded for a time ; then must come the great third wave. But this triumph, this supreme achievement, the holy gift of creation, still, and always, demands the same price, imposes the iron condition of the last renunciation ; all lesser love must pass that the greater love may be realised. So man reaches the Platonic apotheosis, from one fair form to all fair forms.

It is at this point that we must pass beyond Shaw who sees in Gotterdammerung, as Nietzsche saw in Parsifal, the betrayal of the hero, the higher man who surpasses present humanity; they both believed him, for rather diverse reasons, to be not only desirable but essential. Yet, was Wagner's vision an abnegation of the higher conception, a reversion to the thing it had superseded, or a new and necessary superseding of the higher, which was still inadequate to the supreme purpose ? In Zarathustra, beyond the lion which represents the superman, comes the child which combines both the will to achievement and the will to beauty, "ein aus sich rollendes Rad, eine erste Bewegung. ein heiliges Ja-sagen ". If that, indeed, was Wagner's dream, Nietzsche could not complain, and Shaw would not; yet neither realised it.

But let us first see why Shaw thought Siegfried was the natural, logical and perfect end of the great epic ; a conception which, in his view made Gotterdammerung a mere grand opera, an irrelevant afterthought however inspired the music, a banal reversion to a trivial drama of human love. Siegfried was to Shaw the highest idea, beyond whom he could not see; and, except for his mystic moment in the third metamorphosis which he admitted he did not understand, the same is true of Nietzsche.

Siegfried is the revolutionary hero of the northern sagas ; Siegfried, too, is hellenism : Goethe's dream union of the romantic and classic movements come true. To meet him is, indeed, a moment of rapture to sentient natures who live beneath contemporary civilisation : not only do they say, " *verweile doch du bist so schön* ", but the exquisite memory of that moment, in a world which falls so far short of it, holds them for ever. It is inconceivable, a thought too bitter, that, when he comes at last, even Siegfried fails. How great the effort of mind, will and spirit to realise there must even be a *jenseits Siegfried*. It is the eternal genius of Wagner which alone sees the end necessity and senses the final beauty in the enchanted land of mingling shadow and sunshine where art in music and in poetry foresees thought.

To Shaw, the triumphant Siegfried-striding through the flames of convention and inhibition, after the overthrow of the old order, to his marriage with divine truth for the achievement of the new revolutionary world - was the dream which must come true, after the bitter failure of that movement of men he knew so well the Siegmund generation, to whom the gods had given but one gift, the art of living without happiness. It was too soon to know and, certainly too soon to face the necessity for that last effort, which we now know and face ; there is something even beyond Siegfried, and it must come.

But how far Siegfried took us beyond the present "I built up with my reason an optimistic world on Hellenic principles. believing that nothing was necessary for the realisation of such a world but that man should wish it . . . I conceived the personality of Siegfried ", wrote Wagner, in the days when he did not understand the limitations of pure will, that first necessity of all effective human actions, but not the only essential gift. Previously, as Shaw wrote, "although men felt all the charm of abounding life and abandonment to its impulses, they dared not, in their deep self mistrust, conceive it otherwise than as a force making for evil - one which must lead to universal ruin unless checked and literally mortified by self renunciation ". Wagner and Nietzsche, in this supreme conception they realised together, relieved us from the chains of centuries, and, in this respect, we must feel about them as Goethe felt about Luther. No wonder that for Shaw, as for Nietzsche, Siegfried was enough. Here was the new man "caring nothing for the gold ", from whose forehead looked out Wotan's own higher nature, the eye that it cost him to wed and maintain the established order of the old world. Siegfried embodied Shaw's real desires " it is necessary to breed a. race of men in whom the life-giving impulses predominate we must, like Prometheus, set to work, to make new men instead of vainly torturing old ones ". Shaw had in him still much of the happy "exultation of the anarchist destroying only to clear the ground for creation '~ , as he wrote of the singing Siegfried forging the sword. But after the clearing of the ground comes the creation, and it is the failure of Siegfried under this supreme test which Wagner dramatises in *Gotterdammerung*. That masterpiece was not an irrelevance but the supreme relevance ; it poses the final question.

This essay becomes what Shaw denounced as a "perversion of ingenuity" he wrote "the ultimate catastrophe of the saga cannot by any perversion of ingenuity be adapted to the perfectly clear allegorical design of the *Rheingold*, the *Walküre* and *Siegfried* ". Well let us see. We can certainly accompany Shaw to the point where Siegfried has defeated Wotan and the old order passed unscathed through the fires of the rules, ordinances and inhibitions of the system, to awaken the divine truth in the form of his destined bride Brünhilde, and has married her with the ring of power. The revolution has occurred, the new world is won, the epic is complete. Why, then, does Wagner not stop at the end of *Siegfried* ? - enquires Shaw. And we may well ask, too, why Wagner finds it necessary to begin *Gotterdammerung* and send the hero off in search of fresh "adventures which lead to his downfall and the ruin of all order and beauty on earth the only consolation being the final message that Shaw chiefly missed ; the return of nature for yet another renewal after the rest and peace of oblivion, the presage of rebirth in the recurring motif of destiny proving, affirming, and heralding another great upsurge of the life force.

The answer is, surely, that this is just what happens in real life, or has so far happened ; and twenty years later the older and wiser Wagner knew it. He also knew, in his final intuition, that there was life beyond all that he had previously conceived and, also, a higher hope. Siegfried failed for the reason that even heroes fail ; he was capable of human heroism but not divine love. To realise that higher love which is the prerequisite of supreme achievement he had to renounce the lesser loves of humanity that was always the condition of the ring. Like Alberich, like Wotan himself he had to pay the price of the ring, the terrible penalty of power, whether it be used for ignoble or for noble ends he was called at this point of victory and supreme opportunity to renounce love. He failed to renounce joy for the sake of destiny. That was easier for the greedy dwarf whom the beauties of love had already spurned it is, always, easier too for all the verneiners, for the life-deniers of the sad puritan tradition who can give up life so easily, because they have no life it was more difficult for the hero, for hellenism, with all nature, all life, all love, the sunshine and the flowers of heaven within them. It is easier for them to renounce what they never had it is harder to renounce when you have all. Yet the great renunciation was to be not denial but the supreme affirmation: the hero renouncing even the delights of human love for the sake of the life force, in dedication to the winning of ever higher forms. So he could fulfill the purpose of Erda whose eternal work was the "thrust of

the life energy of the world to higher and higher organisations ". All higher life must serve that purpose, and Siegfried was that life. He had to renounce the lower in order to achieve the greater. He had to set aside the human, even the superhuman, in service of the eternal ; not because he lacked life but because he had so much, not to deny but to affirm, not for frustration but for a higher fulfillment. He was called to that high destiny and he failed he was inadequate, he was not the final instrument of the life force. He had won the revolution and married divine truth with the ring of power ; that was not the end but only the opportunity for supreme creation. There we leave him at the end of Siegfried; then comes *Götterdämmerung*.

Now he sets out on "adventures" ; he wastes his time having a good time, laughing and living as it is good to laugh and live till destiny smiles with the smile that ends laughter ; drinks and swallows the potion ; falls in love with a woman and loses more time in dalliance turns against himself by his own errors the power of the life-force which is within him ; changes divine truth from his inspiration into an avenging deity, or, worse still, a jealous woman and finally dies superbly, realising in the last vision of his heroism the truth that he could see again, which he had failed because he surrendered to a weakness that was human, all too human.

Until the moment of destiny when the ring brought him, through power, supreme opportunity, and the possibility of union with divine truth, Siegfried's life was the right preparation of the artist in action for the final achievement. To sing with the birds in the forest and savour experiences, "conflicts where one learns to interpret the meaning of nature a little," is a far better training and development for the coming mission than to creep about some dreary cloister where man deludes himself in those dull, protecting, womb-assuring shades that he is combating instead of really serving the " *Geist der stets verneint* ". Life is a better training than denial, but, in the moment of destiny, of fulfillment, all these creative impulses of life must be fused in the one decisive purpose. As Schiller would have put it: *Bleiben die Blumen dem blühenden Lenze scheme das Schöne und flechte dich Kränze... Aber dem männlichen Alter ziemt's, einem ernsteren Gott zu dienen.*

The world awaited Siegfried as adult, but he was not there that is the tragedy of *Götterdämmerung*. It was not, as Shaw thought a reversion to the "panacea of love"; Wagner succumbing to the "panacea mania when his philosophy was exhausted". It was not "the conception of love as the fulfillment of our will to live and consequently our reconciler to life and death' something that so "completely satisfied the desire for life that after it the will to live ceases to trouble us, and we are at last content to achieve the highest happiness of death." Is it true that Wagner had written : "Can you conceive a moral action whose root is not renunciation ?" Yet renunciation, not to deny life but to fulfill life, is to find a synthesis of life and love at a higher level ; the greater life through love, Shaw's conflict between life and love was there surpassed. Wagner's concept of love was nearer to Goethe's "*Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen.*"

The message of *Götterdämmerung* was that if heroes fall short of that high demand they fail, and with them all their achievements their whole world passes, while nature prepares another renewal of the life-force. Because the hero was not called to deny life but to fulfill it, he needed *Ganzheit* the artist should not mutilate himself, but concentrate all his powers, all his acquired completeness of mind and body in his supreme work when the time comes. He must be a full man, but his *Ganzheit* must be applied, not dissipated. There comes a point where life must be entirely dedicated. The ring of power was won, the flames were surpassed, the union with the infinite possibility of divine truth achieved yet Siegfried sought "adventures" instead of supreme creation. So Siegfried died, after being granted a last enlightenment. The divine truth born of the god enters again the flames this time the fires of Siegfried's funeral pyre. The Valhalla of the old order perishes, also, in the holocaust of the world which the hero could not save, even after he had won it. Nature, the Rhine rises to take again the ring from the finger of the dead hero, whence no lesser power could wrest it. Peace comes through nature ; and healing and oblivion while the life-force prepares another renewal.

Shaw cannot see it at all ; yet in his almost derisive description of this scene he provides the final proof: "in the original poem, Brünhilde delays her self-immolation on the pyre of Siegfried to read the assembled choristers a homily on the love panacea" but "this disappears in the full score of *Nightfall of the Gods*,

which was not completed until he was on the verge of completing Parsifal, twenty years after the publication of the poem ". "He cut the homily out" and "for the main theme at the conclusion he selects a rapturous passage sung by Sieglinde in the third act of the Valkyries when Brünhilde inspires her with a sense of her high destiny as the mother of the unborn hero ". Quid est demonstratum: Götterdämmerung was written to show that the character of Siegfried was inadequate to this destiny, and must fail ; the end-achieving hero had still to come ; hence the final reversion to the great theme in the last message of divine truth to men in the completed cycle of The Ring.

Wagner alone saw beyond - beyond the vision of both Nietzsche and Shaw - to a new form, shadowy, as yet obscure, visible in outline only, but still a higher form : the mysterious shape of Parsifal. Here is the beginning of the will to power and the will to beauty in the mystical union which is all-achieving : the man comes who weeps because he has killed a swan rather than exults because he can kill a dragon, who holds the all-powerful spear on condition that he does not use it. Shaw should have understood that it is possible both to kill dragons and to weep over the death of swans in fact he did : at least in adumbration, that was the character of the man who in the practice of history Shaw admired the most he even introduced him to this work for a fleeting moment with the dubious observation that if there were now enough of him on earth " all our political, ecclesiastical and moral institutions would vanish to make way for a higher order. In the vision of Wagner the new being was seen dimly, very darkly through the veil of a time that was not yet. But we can understand that these are men who will be ready to renounce the lesser in order to achieve the greater, who will yield joy to serve destiny because some are called to strive greatly that higher forms may come. Greater love hath no man than this ; that he renounce the fullness of present life to serve the future life which shall thereby be brought to earth : this is "love that illumines, laughing at death ". But to make that love perfect, he must first possess life and love in its full rhythm ; he does not deny life but, through his final renunciation, fulfils life's creative purpose. He must have within him "die ewigen Melodien" and be "at one with all high things ". Otherwise the synthesis of life and love would not be there. He would not be the final hero, the symbol of that generation of the higher men which is ready to give all that all may be won. That is what men must aim at becoming ; this, I believe, is the message of The Ring.

Oswald Mosley 1962 - Reprinted from The European