

# The tragic crisis for Wotan in Wagner's Ring Cycle

ebooklet



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# **The tragic crisis for Wotan in Wagner's 'Der Ring des Nibelungen', what is its cause and final resolution ?**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Wagner's opera, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* explores a cosmic drama that places human existence in a spiritual context. Its focus is the interaction between spiritual realities and human consciousness, rather than an exploration of the conflict between man's will, and nature, as per Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. It is known that when writing the Ring, Wagner was reading the poetry of Hafiz<sup>1</sup> on the theme of the free human being. These influences played a role in Wagner's own philosophical struggle; however, it is my contention that the *Ring Cycle's* primary meaning transcends Wagner's conscious intellectuality.

The drama concerns the development of a philosophically and, more specifically, an ethically free humanity, free in the sense of having morality independent of direct impulses from a spiritual source. Such a theme implies the wresting of humanity's inner life from the Gods and thus, by implication, the potential to develop ethics which arise from within and are not implanted from without.

This essay argues that Wagner's magnificent '*Ring des Nibelungen*', explores primarily a spiritual, and as it were, a cosmic drama of great relevance to human existence. The reader who has, or who acquires, an acquaintance with the libretto of this opera will find it easier to follow the line of argument adopted in this essay. This drama concerns the development of a psychologically free humanity, specifically ethically free, that is independent of the commands of our creators. This theme implies the wresting of humanity's inner life from the Gods, and thus by implication the potential to develop ethics that arise from within, and not implanted from 'without'.

The '*Ring des Nibelungen*'<sup>2</sup> begins with an ominous prelude, the theft of gold placed within the Rhine. This mood deepens in scene Two of *The Rheingold*, as it becomes clear

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<sup>1</sup> David Marcus notes that in writing to August Röckel regarding Wotan and Siegfried, Wagner states that he was stimulated by verses from the pen of the Persian poet, Hafiz, "In this work of this Oriental I recognize a precocious striving after individualism" Wagner wrote; in *Penetrating Wagner's Ring: an Anthology*, ed. John Louis DeGaetani (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 1978), 198.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'Nibelung' in Wagner refers to a mythical Germanic nation, although in the Nibelungenlied, which is closely allied to the Icelandic Edda, it refers to a semi-mythical Nordic tribal nation, which is also identified with the Burgundians and their struggle against the Huns. Hermann Schneider, 1962, *Germanische Heldensage*, Berlin, Seiten 72-93. The term signifies "Sohn des Dunkels, oder, der nebligen Unterwelt" (Oskar Schade, 1882, *Altdeutsches Wörterbuch*, Halle, S. 648).

that the Gods' very existence is now under threat. Wotan has ordered that a magnificent new home for the Gods, Walhalla, be constructed. However the construction of Walhalla has been entrusted to potential enemies of the Gods, the giants. The giants had demanded as payment a lethal price - the goddess Freia, from whose presence in Asgard the gods derive their immortality. Although Wotan does not intend to actually hand her over, he had agreed to this demand, trusting to find a solution from the dangerous Loge. But Loge had made only a vague suggestion to Wotan regarding alternative remuneration. Friction develops between Wotan and his wife Fricka, who is outraged that the goddess Freia has (apparently) been promised as payment to the giants for their deeds.

The contract with the giants Fafner and Fasolt is engraved on the shaft of Wotan's spear, thus he can not renege on it: "You may not take back again from the giants, what you have given them as payment, or you shall yourself fragment the shaft of the spear" Siegf., Act 2 ("Nicht du darfst was als Zoll du gezahlt den Riesen wieder entreißen, du selbst zerspelltest deines Speers Schaft..."). The scene is thus set for the development of circumstances in which Wotan will be immersed in powerful and irreconcilable conflicts. Wotan insists that Loge offered to help find a different remuneration for the giants to that stipulated in the contract. Furthermore, the Rheingold has been stolen from the Rheinmaidens<sup>3</sup> by the dark elf Alberich, and forged into, amongst other things, a ring which confers power over the Gods on its wearer.

Loge, who is not one of the gods, but a somewhat malignant entity,<sup>4</sup> had suggested to Wotan that Alberich's gold-hoard and the ring be given to the giants. As Wotan carries out this suggestion, the ring of gold is cursed by Alberich, and this in turn causes a profound crisis for Wotan. Later Wotan declares he was cunningly lured by Loge "Cunningly did Loge tempt me...unwittingly I acted deceitfully, unfaithfully, made contracts that concealed discord, cunningly tempted me Loge" Walk., Act 2 ("...listig verlockte mich Loge... Unwissend trugvoll untreue übt' ich, band durch Verträge was Unheil barg; listig lockte mich Loge.").

### **The crisis: conflict between the Rule of Law and the goal of free human beings.**

It may at first appear that Loge's influence is the origin of the crisis and the consequent dilemma facing Wotan. However it is also true that Wotan has placed himself and his fellow gods on a collision course with his own laws, through being so reckless in responding to Loge's suggestion and in being so duplicitous in regard to bargaining with Freia. The cause of this behaviour becomes clearer when an additional crucial dynamic in Wotan's personality is seen, namely his interest in being creative outside the strictures of the laws governing creation; yet these laws in fact are administered by Wotan himself. That is, Wotan is not satisfied with his role as sovereign of the Gods and their orderly system, as indicated in his words; "Whoever lives, loves change and variety; therefore can I this game not pass by". Rheing., Act 1 ("Wandel und Wechsel liebt wer lebt; das

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<sup>3</sup> The Rheinmaidens appear to be pre-individuated beings, or non-individualized aspects of human consciousness, as Wagner's words tend to affirm, "Among the Rheinmaidens, love is just a phenomenon of Nature..." from *Cosima Wagner's Diaries; an Abridgement*, 1994, transl. M. Gregor-Dellin and D. Mack, p. 192, London.

<sup>4</sup> Loge or Loki was not a God, but rather he was the offspring of giants. "His father was Farbauti and his mother Lausen, Loki is the son of the giant Farbauti. His mother is Laufey or Nál. Loki is handsome and well made, but of a very fickle mood and most evil disposition." (*The Prose Edda, 'Gylfaginning'*, verse 33). It is obvious, as L. Köpnick (ref.16, S. 52) and also U. Müller (Ref. 8b) affirm, that Wagner's 'Ring' retains, at times, the broad character of personalities from the Edda, as well as using its alliteration.

Spiel darum kann ich nicht sparen..” ). A powerful strand of Wotan’s volition is in fact the urge to create and to love beings whose inner nature is independent of the all-encompassing laws of the Gods.

Rudolf Steiner taught that in the Ring Cycle, the Gods represent somewhat anthropomorphised spiritual beings, just as this expression does in the Edda. Therefore ‘the law of the Gods’ refers to dynamics that govern creation, and especially those that function formatively in the human soul.<sup>5</sup> Wotan then, is a god responsible for supervising creation, as it were, especially the consciousness processes of humankind. But remarkably, in *The Ring* he is shown as having two intentions. As shall become clear later, these laws are not actually encompassed by Wotan’s will – their origin is in still higher, but unspecified spiritual sphere.

Hence Wotan seeks to uphold the laws of the Gods - which are an expression of his own will - and yet he also seeks to bring into being humans who are psychologically genuinely free entities. As Wotan later says to Brünnhilde, “With disgust I find eternally only myself in all that I create. That Other, for which I yearn, that Other never see I; for the free being must create itself, servants only, mould I for me.” Walk., Act 2;2 (“Zum Ekel find’ ich ewig nur mich in Allem was ich erwirke ! Das And’re, das ich ersehne, das And’re erseh’ ich nie; denn selbst muß der Freie sich schaffen, Knechte erknet’ ich mir nur !”)

This additional dynamic is indicated soon in Wotan’s attitude to the golden ring, for he forces it from Alberich, an action whose morality has been questioned by critics, since Wotan is the god who preserves law and order. Wotan, in using force against Alberich, causes the curse on the ring, a curse with serious potential consequences for Walhalla. According to some critics he seized the ring from greed and envy<sup>6</sup>, as well as to ensure that a talisman which manifests and rivals his own power, is kept away from the evil Alberich. But Alberich with his ring is the sinister counter-part to Wotan, who in the Edda always wears the magical golden ring Draupnir, a potent talisman, made by a good dwarf, Sindri.<sup>7</sup> If Alberich’s will were to prevail he would prevent the freedom of other beings and hence of any future humans, and he would thereby undermine the sovereignty of Wotan through the imposition of a tyrannical regime. I conclude Wotan is thus obliged to remove the ring from Alberich for two ethically justified reasons, in particular to make possible the existence of future human beings who know intuitively what is ethical, and whose actions are based on that.

Furthermore, Wotan also strongly resists, for a while, giving the ring to the giants. Shaw understands this resistance and consequent yielding to mean that Wotan needed some time to realize that he must respect and uphold the Law, so the contract made by him

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<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Richard Wagner, Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 05 May 1905, Dornach 1936.

<sup>6</sup> Audrey Williamson, “*The Ring and Its Characters*” in John Louis DeGaetani, (edit.) Penetrating Wagner’s Ring: an Anthology, 1978, London. Williamson has a low opinion of Wotan here: “by stooping to Alberich’s level in his grasp for gold and the power it represents, Wotan has sacrificed the integrity of his own laws, and therefore his right to rule.” p. 273.

<sup>7</sup> Further parallelisms between these two are; Alberich wrenches the gold from the Rhein, thus devastating the Rhinemaidens, Wotan wrenches a branch from the *World Ash Tree* for his spear, but this is to ensure his power in Creation. Wotan sacrifices his eye for Fricka, whilst Alberich sacrifices love for the gold. Wotan did not intend to pay the giants with Freia, ie they are thus unfairly used as labour, whilst Alberich directly uses his elves as slaves. Draupnir is referred to in *Die Ältere Edda*, Skalda, 35.

with the giants has to be honoured.<sup>8</sup> It seems to me that this interpretation of the conflict within Wotan is incorrect, because it is incomplete, although certainly a major element of Wotan's crisis does begin to manifest itself here. The two giants in demanding the golden ring from Wotan, are in fact expressing their own form of self-centred 'freedom'.<sup>9</sup> In my view, Wotan in his encounter with the giants is caught in a conflict between the two dynamics central to his will, namely the yearning to create free human beings, (even if initially in the sense of unhindered expression of personal wishes), and his duty to uphold the law of the Gods. Wotan, while seeking to withhold the ring from the giant Fafner, is mysteriously warned by Erda,<sup>10</sup> that he must not retain the ring, and after intensive inner deliberation, he concurs.

To consider further this vital question of Wotan's response to the giants, it is essential to focus on that very important quality in Wotan mentioned above. One notes also that Wotan does eventually comply with the wise guidance from Erda, in allowing the ring to circulate. If Erda is the Earth-soul, then Wotan's crisis derives to some extent from the challenge to ensure that an evolutionary necessity for the Earth, sensed by this wisest of beings, is brought to fruition. It is clear then that Wotan has realized, with help from the primal mother Erda, (although not in full clarity) that he must not oppose expressions of freedom in other beings, such as Fafner. So Wotan yields the ring to the giants, not only because he seeks to uphold the law, but to be consistent to this other side of his nature, namely his intention to create beings who are independent, in their inner being, of the rule of the Gods, as Huber also concludes.<sup>11</sup>

Although it is human beings, not the giants whom Wotan actually seeks in this connection, there is no real contradiction here, for in the transcendentalism of the mythic world, all things are interconnected. What is happening now to the giants shall soon be possible for humans. My conclusion is that Wotan acted in these two instances - of Alberich and the giants - not through greed and in order to obey the Law, respectively, but through perception of the significance of the ring for the future of the world.

This explanation is strengthened by consideration of the very nature of the ring. The effect of the golden ring is to make manifest - or to intensify - the volitional capacity of its owner; hence for the vicious dark elf Alberich it is self-centred power,<sup>12</sup> for Fasolt and Fafner it is a possession to hold to themselves. There is obviously an ominous anti-social element here. But in the higher realms, for beings that transcend the normal human state,

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<sup>8</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, The Works of Bernard Shaw, (London: Constable, 1930) vol 19, pp. 194-6.

<sup>9</sup> Herhert Huber, 1988, Richard Wagner: Der Ring des Nibelungen, S. 155.

<sup>10</sup> Erda appears to be the Earth-soul, or Earth-mother, since 'Erda' is old High German for 'Erde', and as Huber points out (S. 167) she is also referred to as 'Mutter', (Siegf. Act 3). Further, as she is also called 'Wala' which etymologically is understood to mean 'choice', (Northern Antiquities of the Ancient Scandinavians, 1847, I. A. Blackwell, London, p. 568), the element of free choice is implied as a quality she has, and hence her intervention hints at freedom as a motivational force in the deepest level of deity.

<sup>11</sup> Huber, *ibid.*, S. 165, refs. to lines 1666-1670 and 808-811. Huber also points out that if the giants were to gain dominion over Wotan, via the ring, then the guarantee of a sphere of action in which freedom could exist, maintained by higher beings who ultimately sustain the cosmos for all beings - free and unfree - could disappear. Hence the need for a human hero.

<sup>12</sup> Huber, *ibid.*, refs. to lines 808-11 & 1666-70. He points out that Wotan in taking the ring to himself from Alberich, places it inside the sphere of influence ('Wirkungsfeld') between the Gods and the giants. This seems to have had the effect of bestowing upon the ring the power to damage the Gods and their realm, a power which it apparently did not previously have, as Alberich did not use it against Loge and Wotan in his time of need.

its nature changes; to Brünnhilde it signifies real love and for Wotan himself, his own sovereignty. In the middle, between the malignant dwarf, and the gods, is Siegfried, with whom it represents self-empowerment and self-awakening, processes deeply ethical in nature, as will be considered later. I shall consider the ring and its musical motif again, later. Even though then dynamics that the ring represents and enhances vary in these ways, they share a common feature: the consolidation of the owner's core volition, their will-nature. Since with the giants the ring intensifies their self-centred wishes - namely selfish possessiveness - if Wotan were to withhold the ring from the two giants, he would be contradicting his own intention to support the emergence of independence amongst the lower beings.

Wotan must now face the consequences of the chaos now entering into creation, partly through his own actions.<sup>13</sup> It appears, however, that Wotan's motivation and therefore his integrity is higher than it may at first appear. It seems to me that the origin of Wotan's crisis is not crass imperfections of his character, as some critics have concluded. Rather, Wotan's crisis derives from the much greater factor of evolutionary necessity, of which Wotan is a partially conscious agent. Regarding Wotan's personality defects, he did not in the end actually abrogate his sacred duty to uphold the contract which he made with the giants Fafner and Fasolt.<sup>14</sup> Wotan's crisis derives from a much greater factor of evolutionary necessity, for which he is a partially conscious agent. Furthermore, his breaking a particularly sacred branch off the world-ash tree appears to me not as 'sacrilegious',<sup>15</sup> but as an action through which Wotan was able to be empowered by the highest spiritual forces in creation. Some of these forces from the 'World Ash Tree' may be thought of as permeating his scion, Siegfried. Since it appears that Siegfried is destined to emerge renewed from the pyre in a new Age, he shall in turn, to some extent, perpetuate the quintessence of the past.

Indeed with regard to the giants, Wotan's surrender of the ring to them is a pivotal point in the opera, for it signifies that Wotan has decided to allow an element of free-will to permeate Creation. In fact Wotan could have simply returned the ring to the Rhine-daughters, and thereby nullified the possibility of a free-will element in creation. In making this decision, which conflicts so intensely with his primary duty as administrator of the laws of the Gods,<sup>16</sup> Wotan is affirming his intention to create beings with free-will. Wotan is probably still hoping - unaware of the tragic nature of the growing crisis - that he can harmoniously integrate this freedom-ferment into those dynamics which through him direct and order all creation.

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<sup>13</sup> Huber, *ibid.*, S. 207. Huber points out that there are in fact indications in the Edda that Wotan at times has a connection to evil or at least disharmonious and destructive events, for example, in „Die Odinsbeispiele“, verse 7 and its footnote. These occur in *“Die Edda”*, Genzmer, Band 2, S. 150.

<sup>14</sup> Sally Kester, 1985, *“The archetypal Motives of Cosmogony and Apocalypse in The Ring, in The Richard Wagner Centenary in Australia*, edit. Peter Dennison, pp. 99-116. Kester writes that “Wotan broke his sacred treaty with the giants”, but in fact both parties agreed to an alternative form of remuneration, namely the ring and the gold treasure. Kester also does not mention Wotan's defence of women's rights when he rebukes Fricka for upholding the 'marital rape' situation claimed by Hunding as his right. (Walk. Act 2 ).

<sup>15</sup> Sally Kester, *ibid.*, characterizes his deed as 'sacrilegious' p. 99. I note that the Norns themselves (in Götterd., Vorspiel) do not criticize or condemn Wotan for taking the 'most consecrated branch' "weihlichstem Aste" (Sieg. Act 1).

<sup>16</sup> Herbert Huber, *ibid.*, concludes that Wotan was here manifesting the 'innere Widersprüchlichkeit seines Willens'. "...Erst jetzt können gottgesetzte Weltordnung und (endliche) Freiheit wirksam sein, weil Wotan die (endlichen) Freien wirklich freigegeben hat, indem er ihnen mit die Ring die Möglichkeit gegeben hat, eine Zerstörung der göttlichen Weltordnung vorzunehmen. S. 170

As becomes apparent later, he has not at that stage fully accepted the fact that this can only succeed through his self-sacrifice, this is essential to his success. The crisis for Wotan is intense, even if at this stage subconsciously perceived. For not only is the end of the rule of the Gods inevitable, but if Wotan does not ensure that free human beings are in existence, then after the end of the 'Age of the Gods' the next Age shall dawn devoid of meaningful existence.

Wotan in harbouring this second creative urge which places himself outside the orderly system of world-becoming, made himself susceptible to the influence of Loge. Thus he places himself in a position of conflict between those Gods who demand that traditional dynamics are protected from any deviance, and on the other side, from forces operative in various beings that seek to express independence in their inner life. This situation is in part due to Loge, whose role is indicated through his progenitors, the two giants who survived the primeval flood. Loge's influence is that of a ferment, which has survived from a primeval age of fire and acts like a ferment in the present.<sup>17</sup>

Wagner's 'Loge' still refers to this dynamics suggested by the association of Loge with fire (of Brünnhilde's pyre), and also in that a major source used by Wagner for his *Edda* studies was the work of Karl Simrock.<sup>18</sup> Loge's influence is essential to ensure that a new element arises in creation. Loge is a metaphor of this dynamic, and in some respects has a parallel role in Wagner's 'Ring' cycle to that of Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*.<sup>19</sup> The result of Wotan acting under the influence of this being is that he now faces a dilemma arising from the incompatibility of these two dynamics. These are now moving on a collision course, precipitating an existential crisis for him and the other Gods.

The crisis intensifies for Wotan in connection with the tribe of the Wälsungs, his own mortal scions. In seeking to allow the new world-order to emerge through these people, Wotan has again come into bitter conflict with his wife Fricka. She confronts Wotan with the argument, "Are you tearing apart the bonds which you yourself have bound?" Walk., Act 2, Sc.1 ("Zerreissest die Bande, die selbst du gebunden?") The trouble centres on Wotan allowing an interrelationship to occur between human beings which has virtually always been forbidden, namely sensual love between siblings, in this case, Siegmund and Sieglinde.<sup>20</sup> What is depicted here as incest, I take as a symbol of a psychological change inside human consciousness, and consequently in social conditions.<sup>21</sup> Siegmund is a

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<sup>17</sup> Karl Simrock, 1874, *Handbuch der deutschen Mythologie, mit Einschluß der Nordischen* Simrock points out that Loki's (Loge's) father, the primordial giant Farbauti, was probably the one "who took shelter in the boat from the great Flood" (...der sich im Boote vor der großen Flut barg..) and his mother Lausen, another primeval giant(ess), was also it seems (in some mystical sense), "the treed island towards which Farbauti steered" (...die Laubinsel welcher Farbauti zuruderte"), S. 96. Thus both survived into the current Age.

<sup>18</sup> Volker Mertens, *Richard Wagner Handbuch*, 1986, Stuttgart, S. 34.

<sup>19</sup> This theme in the 'Ring' cycle is, like many others, adopted from those in the Edda. In *Lokis Zankreden*, v.10, Odhin specifically commands Vidar, a figure representing immense spirituality, to step back from the banquet table in Walhalla, in order that Loki may have a seat there. (!)

<sup>20</sup> These two, the parents of Siegfried, are of the Wälsung tribe (Völsung in the Edda), whose lineage commences with Sigi, a son of Wotan. Their grandfather Volsung was conceived with help from Freia.

<sup>21</sup> Just as the various Gods can be considered aspects of Wotan's own being, the 'incest' can refer to a changed - that is a more connected - relationship between aspects of human consciousness. This is a common literary technique in the mythology and fairy tales of earlier cultures, for example, in 'Allerleirauh' (Thousand Furs), where it is possible to consider that the incest theme is a symbolic

prototype of the truly free human being, Siegfried, whom Wotan wishes to create, hence the similarity of names.

In an exchange with Fricka, Wotan reveals an openness to this new inherently chaotic reality: “So learn of what does happen, even if it never occurred before” (“erfahre so, was von selbst sich fügt wie zuvor auch noch nie es geschehen”), Fricka replies bitterly, “Are you laughingly releasing Heaven’s hold?” (“Lösest lachend des Himmels Haft ?”) To this Wotan says, “The age-old constant norm is all you can comprehend, but for what has never yet existed – this *my* mind is seeking !” (“Stets Gewohntes nur magst du versteh’n; doch was noch nie sich traf, danach trachet mein Sinn.”) Again it is emphasized how Wotan’s will is focussed on the creation of independent human beings, with the implication of thereby (eventually) attaining to real morality, from within, rather than externally derived, or imposed.

A further dilemma for Wotan is that he has to strive for his new goal alone, because his wife Fricka is opposed to him. She is a representation of the will (possibly a part of his own will) that upholds the established order of things. In an extraordinary dialogue, Fricka finally asks, “What sublime deed could ever heroes effect, that to their gods would be barred, {and} whose favourable effects are active only in humans?” Walk., Act 2 (“Was Hehres sollten Helden je wirken, das ihren Göttern wäre verwehrt, deren Gunst in ihnen nur wirkt?”). This is a very significant question! The German text here doesn’t simply mean what ‘heroic’ deed, but what *sublime* deed could humans achieve that the Gods cannot. Furthermore, the inherent ‘favourable effects’ (or goodness of will) of this deed are said to be efficacious only in humans ! There is indeed a strange and baffling concept implied in Wotan’s words. It is no wonder that Wotan, seeing that Fricka does not see his vision, and will not relent, is in utter despair at the thought of consigning Siegmund to death, and cries out: “treacherously betray him who trusts me !” (“...trügend verrathen wer mir vertraut !”)

This is a tragic crisis for Wotan, who feels a deep love of his new creation. The attempts by Wotan to create here a free person, Siegmund, have failed. He has to lose his life through Wotan, in acquiescence to Fricka’s demand that Siegmund’s transgression of the Law be punished. The death of Siegmund expresses the bind in which Wotan is placed, as Huber writes (Huber 151): “ Wotan wills what is new and which can not be lead, which posits final freedom, just as he also wants the stability of an ordered world, despite the destructive actions of a final true freedom.”<sup>22</sup> It is possible, however, that Wotan is still acting here in an ambivalent manner, striving to create the free human being, yet also reinforcing his influence in Creation by bringing two of his own offspring together.

But Siegmund was in fact not a genuinely free entity, because as Fricka points out, Wotan was constantly working behind the scenes guiding his life, for example, planting the sword in the tree. (Walk., Act 2) So it becomes clear that Wotan is striving to create a person with genuine inner freedom, yet one who retains a responsive link to deity; this is supremely difficult, as the two dynamics appear mutually exclusive. The dilemma is intensified by Wotan’s struggle with the issue of a genuine inner freedom for humans, “How do I create that Other, who is no longer me, and whom from his own self does

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expression relating to past and a potential future human consciousness, and its interaction with cosmic influences.

<sup>22</sup> “Wotan will...das je Neue und Unableitbare, das die endliche Freiheit setzt, ebenso wie die Stabilität der Ordnungen, trotz der zerstörerischen Taten der endlichen Freiheit..”



what I alone will? Oh, distress of gods !” Walk., Act 2;2 (“Wie macht’ ich den Andren, der nicht mehr ich, und aus sich wirkte, was ich nur will ! - O göttliche Not !”)

The tragic element in the crisis develops further when Wotan is brought into conflict with his especially beloved daughter Brünnhilde. Conflict arises between them, not because Brünnhilde opposes his will, but because she boldly seeks to fulfil it. For Brünnhilde, in trying to protect Siegmund, seeks to do what Wotan himself is powerless to do. Wotan declares that she has now acted against his will regarding Siegmund, but Brünnhilde shows that she was true to his (and her) love for Siegmund, and that what she tried to carry out was in fact the true (but suppressed) will of Wotan. Wotan tells her: “You yourself created your punishment” (“..deine Strafe schufst du dir selbst”) however, in reality he is unable to protect her from the laws he administers. The punishment for this transgression is the loss her immortal nature; this plunges him into a terrible extension of his grief: [Speaking in his disguise] “The Walkyrie you mean, who yearned to do what he (Wotan) avoided – against himself? Siegf., Act 3 (“Die Walküre mein’st du, zu thun verlangte doch dem er wehrte zuwider sich selbst...”)

Wotan himself is forced to admit that he too is unfree: “In my own fetters I caught myself – I, the least free of all beings!” Walk., Act 2;2 (“In eigener Fessel fing ich mich...ich unfreiester Aller !”). This crisis is now more complex for Wotan, for he has betrayed Fricka in despatching a Walkyrie to protect Siegmund, although later his order is rescinded. But in rescinding the order, and thus ensuring Siegmund’s death, Wotan betrays his own intentions to strive towards the creating of free human beings. The tragedy inherent in the conflict for Wotan is deepened when he declares to Brünnhilde: “What are you except the blindly choosing impulse of my own will?” Walk., Act 2;3 (“Wer bist du als meines Willens blind wählende Kür? ”)

These words imply that Wotan in expelling her, faces the dilemma of undermining his own volitional powers, the forces of this will which form an integral part of his entelechy. Further, if Brünnhilde and Fricka are understood as representations of differing aspects of Wotan’s own will, then here Wotan is again experiencing a crisis, but within his own inner being. This dilemma of being caught between Fricka (upholding the age-old Law) and Brünnhilde (perception of the potential for renewal), is a direct result of Wotan’s quest for freedom amongst humans. Yet he can only characterize Brünnhilde’s actions as ‘blind’; his crisis is well expressed later by Erda: “Does he who taught defiance, punish defiance?” Siegf., Act 3;1 (“Der den Trotz lehrte straft den Trotz?”)

However, through the actions and sacrifice of Brünnhilde, Siegfried survives and matures, into an unrefined but fearless person, unaware of Wotan and the Gods. This inner distance of Siegfried from Wotan and indeed the entire milieu of the transcendent is affirmed by Wotan’s abrupt words: “He knows nothing of me.” Siegf., Act 2 (“Nichts weiß der von mir.“) Siegfried is endowed with a strong, elementary sense of independence, as his primitive qualities and rough life-style indicate. Siegfried is guided only by his ‘living Spear’, his own inherent volitional impulses, which are therefore free of control from the Laws of the Gods.<sup>23</sup> So he has the potential, when united to the

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<sup>23</sup> The spear had a potent role amongst old Germanic and Nordic tribes, which Wagner is here adopting. As Lutz Köpnick (1994) reports in “*Nothungs Modernität: Wagners „Ring” und die Poesie der Macht*”, München, “ das Schwert war ..Instrument der Wahrheit und Wahrheitsfindung, und ....es war ...mit einer Kraft ausgestattet, mit der transzendente Mächte in die menschliche Gesellschaft einbrach..” S. 51.

intuitive, feminine aspect of human nature, embodied in Brünnhilde, to mature into actual inner psychological freedom. One notes also that Brünnhilde herself has, significantly, the inner freedom to oppose the will of Wotan. Wagner understood Siegfried in this manner: “Siegfried lives entirely in the present, he is the hero, the finest gift of the will.”<sup>24</sup>

Siegfried is therefore potentially a free human being, but concomitant to this condition is the inherent faculty to destroy Wotan’s spear, that is Wotan’s sovereign authority over all beings. The incipient authority and independence of Siegfried’s inner being is indicated by his deed of grinding down the remnants of the sword of Wotan-Siegmond into finest powder and then re-moulding it into his own weapon. Through this action the sword, whilst retaining its potent substance, loses the imprint of Wotan’s design. Thus Siegfried precipitates the tragedy for Wotan, the end of Walhalla. As Huber expresses this, “Because Wotan wants to have free beings, he is exposed, powerlessly, to their decisions. This powerlessness the god placed upon himself, for as long and to the extent that he wants as a final goal the free human being.”<sup>25</sup>

This remarkable crisis was understood by Wagner himself in terms that have a loose affinity with Schopenhauer’s concept of the self-sacrifice of the will as the ideal action.<sup>26</sup> But the cause of the great tragic crisis in the Ring cycle is not fully explicable as Schopenhauerism. That Wagner’s view of the will and of philosophical pessimism was not quite in accordance with Schopenhauer’s own view, is indicated by the philosopher’s lukewarm reception of the ‘Ring’ text, leaving Wagner to puzzle over “why he did not pay more attention to my ‘Ring des Nibelungen’....”<sup>27</sup> As Ernest Newman writes, commenting on the dilemma of Wotan: “Wotan in fact was suffering from a very bad attack of Schopenhauerism, partly congenital and partly induced.”<sup>28</sup> In these wry words is the important implication that Wagner himself in his conscious intellectual mind may not have fully known the causes of the crisis that will bring an end to Wotan.

Thus he may interpolate various rationalizations into his ‘own’ text, or emphasize one aspect of a character during editorial work on the text, as many critics, e.g. Newman and Shaw, have concluded.<sup>29</sup> Wagner’s view would have changed in tandem with the

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<sup>24</sup> Wagner’s words noted by Cosima Wagner in, “*Cosima Wagner’s Diaries*”, *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>25</sup> Huber, *ibid.*, S. 209, Reference to line 2979, “Weil Wotan den Freien will, ist er der Entscheidung desselben ohnmächtig ausgeliefert. Diese Ohnmacht auferlegt sich der Gott selbst, solange und soweit er den endlichen Freien will”

<sup>26</sup> “*The letters of Richard Wagner*”, 1936, Transl. M Bozan, London. In a letter to August Röckel, 25 Jan 1854, “Wotan rises to the tragic dignity of *willing* his own destruction. This is the whole lesson we have got to learn from history, of mankind.....to will the thing that must be and ourselves to fulfil it..” Despite the nature of these words, as Dieter Borchmeyer (*Wagner Handbuch*, *ibid.*) rightly states, Wagner wrote his Ring Cycle before he became acquainted with Schopenhauer’s works., S. 109.

<sup>27</sup> *Cosima Diaries*, *ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>28</sup> Ernest Newman, “*The Ring of the Nibelungen*”, in *DeGaetani*, *ibid.*, p. 169. The reason for the discrepancy is partly that Wagner’s view of the philosophy of the Will preceded Schopenhauer’s, it was not a re-statement thereof. As Wagner said, (*Cosima Diaries*, *ibid.*, March 31<sup>st</sup> 1878), “..I discovered this before I knew about his philosophy....”, p. 304.

<sup>29</sup> An example of either rationalization or selection of only part of the significance of a character, is Wagner’s comment that the essence of Wotan’s crisis was the marital incompatibility with Fricka, “the mutual horror of lovelessness” between them (Letters of R. Wagner, *ibid.*, p. 261). A second example is Wagner’s comment to his wife Cosima, on Feb 16<sup>th</sup> 1878, that he “once felt sympathy for Alberich, who

inevitable changes in his own worldview, during the two decades it took him to complete the work.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the primary meaning of the *Ring Cycle* concerns spiritual dynamics which transcend Wagner's conscious intellect. Consequently, any attempt to interpret the tragic destiny of Wotan or other themes in the 'Ring des Nibelungen', purely from Wagner's own conscious mental processes is to miss the deeper message of this great opera. As Wagner himself became aware of inconsistencies and enigmatic passages in his text, he wrote that it defied rational analysis: "I see afresh how much there is, from the very nature of my poetical intention, which can only be made understandable by the music."<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

### A turning point in World History

The essence of the crisis for Wotan appears to be that two new stages in world history are dawning. Firstly, the efficacy of the primal wisdom ordering creation is fading, just as Erda, and the Norns proclaim.<sup>32</sup> This means that Creation with its various beings will cease to be responsive to, or have access to, the wisdom governing the world from Asgard. Secondly, in semi-conscious response to this Wotan, helped by Erda, yearns to create a new type of human being, who is inwardly free. But this requires the final sacrifice of Wotan, even more demanding than his earlier actions of sacrifice.<sup>33</sup> That is, until Wotan resigns himself to the death of the Gods, there can be no free human beings. The following thoughts of Wagner about Wotan's crisis tend to support this concept:

"Wotan can not extinguish the wrong-doing, without committing an unjust deed, the Gods are now educating humanity to this lofty goal, to be extinguishers of their own human guilt; and the goal of the Gods would be achieved, if they were to destroy themselves in this human-creation, that is, they would have to relinquish their direct influences in the freedom of the human consciousness."<sup>34</sup>

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represents the ugly person's longing for beauty", which is obviously only a minor aspect of the meaning of Alberich (*Diaries of Cosima Wagner*, *ibid.*, p. 300).

<sup>30</sup> Shaw, 1908, *Wagner Brevier*, "Nun vermag kein Mensch, dessen Geist lebendig und tätig ist, wie es der Wagners bis zu seinem Todestage war .....sein philosophisches Bewußtsein ein Vierteljahrhundert lang im Stillstand zu erhalten." S. 151 and also, *ibid.*, "...wenn der „Ring“ ein Ding sagt und ein nachher geschriebener Brief bezeugt, daß ein anderes Ding gemeint war, so muß man den Ring ...und den Brief (betrachten) als von verschiedenen Händen geschrieben.." S. 175.

<sup>31</sup> "Myth and Music" by Robert Donington, in *DeGaetani*, *ibid.*, quoting Wagner, p. 100.

<sup>32</sup> Erda says, "...all that exist, is ending. A grim day is dawning for the Gods ("..Alles, was ist, endet. Ein düst'rer Tag dämmert den Göttern..") (Rheing. Sc.4); die Drei Nornen say, "Wisdom of Ages ends. To the world the Wise speak no more." ("Zu End' ewiges Wissen ! Der Welt melden Weise nichts mehr.." (Götterd., Act 1).

<sup>33</sup> Wotan had earlier surrendered an eye at Mimir's Fountain, in the quest for wisdom, (Völuspa, vs. 18 & 22) and he also later underwent an initiation trial to learn more about the runes, expressed as, "I hung on the windy tree, nine nights long, wounded by the spear" ("Ich weiß, daß ich hing am windigen Baum neun Nächte lang, mit dem Ger verwundet..", (*Odins Runengedicht*, v.2).

<sup>34</sup> Richard Wagner, 1888, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 3. Aufl. Leipzig. Bd 2, S. 158 (quoted by Köpnick, S. 132. "...Wotan kann aber das Unrecht nicht tilgen, ohne neues Unrecht zu begehen.....zu dieser hohen Bestimmung, Tilger ihrer eigenen Schuld zu sein, erziehen nun die Götter den Menschen und ihre Absicht würde erreicht sein, wenn sie in dieser Menschenschöpfung sich selbst vernichteten, nämlich in der Freiheit des menschlichen Bewußtseins die Götter ihres unmittelbaren Einflusses sich selbst begeben müßten."

A new phase of history is approaching in the presence of which the old Order, wherein humans are controlled by the Gods, shall have to yield.<sup>35</sup> Wotan sees this in the framework of a new phase of human history, in which a different set of dynamics will prevail for humanity. As he declares to Erda, somewhat over-estimating his own will....: Wisdom of primeval mothers is coming to an end, your wisdom is dissipating before my will." Siegf., Act 3;2 ("Urmütter Weisheit geht zu Ende: dein Wissen verweht vor meinem Willen.")

If Wotan's volitional impulses do however succeed in harmonizing with the underlying evolutionary process, this would not be entirely his own achievement, as Wotan is unaware of the full implications of the momentous events that are moving to a climax.<sup>36</sup> It will only be with the active participation of Brünnhilde, an element of Wotan's will which he has spurned, that Creation shall move on into a new Age with a humanity endowed with a potential for inner freedom.

Consideration of the history of Western civilization from the Greco-Roman period onwards, and more specifically of Europe since the Renaissance, provides a basis for concluding that the underlying phenomenon which is explored and expressed in the 'Ring' cycle as Wotan's crisis, could be seen as the receding of human consciousness from its age-old condition, namely awareness of (or belief in) an all-embracing spiritual milieu.<sup>37</sup> In the earlier state of consciousness, religious feelings and a consequently holistic perspective naturally predominate. But as this state recedes, so humanity enters a mood of isolation from the super-sensible and even, to some extent, from the subtle interconnectedness of the natural world. This condition results in a focus on personal values, including personal love and volitional independence; the effect of this in the religious life was that a humanistic Deism arose, replacing traditional theism. Soon this resulted in atheism, on the one hand, or on the other hand, an almost despairing quest for an immanent and very personal God.<sup>38</sup>

The sword of Siegfried is in essence a new form of the sword of Wotan, and it is significant that early in 'Das Rheingold', as Wotan hesitates before entering Walhalla, and is "...seized by a great thought" (1;4) ("von einem großen Gedanken ergriffen.."), the musical theme of the sword '*Nothung*' briefly resounds. I suggest that Wotan has

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<sup>35</sup> G.B. Shaw commenting on Wotan's actions after the death of Siegmund, which lead to the death of Hunding, concludes that Wotan kills Hunding by a vehement gesture, "Wotan slays Hunding in dreadful fury through a movement of his Hand.." p. 78. Shaw therefore suggests that Wotan furiously rejects the implications (and perhaps value of) creating the free individual. But Wagner's stage directions do not indicate any violence, rather an introspective mood overcomes Wotan, who is "enveloped by cloud" and "leaning on his spear". Some interpreters sing the first of the "Go! " "Go!" quite softly; I conclude that Wotan's actions reveal that he is, instead, deeply contemplating how to proceed more successfully in his project, and what are the fuller implications of doing this.

<sup>36</sup> Wotan in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Act of Siegfried declares a lack of concern about the impending end of the system: "Um der Götter Ende gräm't mich die Angst nicht (mehr)...", but a little later in Act 1 of Die Götterdämmerung, he is described by Waltraute as deeply depressed by the coming end, and hopes for a solution to this: "...erlöst wäre Gott und Welt!"

<sup>37</sup> This viewpoint is particularly represented by Rudolf Steiner, in "Richard Wagner und die Mystik", a lecture held on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1907, Berlin; in R. Steiner, *Die Erkenntnis des Übersinnlichen in unserer Zeit*, 1959, Dornach, Switzerland.

<sup>38</sup> Deism emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> cent. (e.g. in Voltaire, Tindal) and posited, against Traditional Theism, a mechanical universe with a remote God. In the 18<sup>th</sup> cent. as Deity was finally 'driven out' of the universe, 'Immanence Theology' emerged, and often merged into pantheism, which itself became almost a form of atheism (e.g., Spinoza).

intuited in this moment that the impending crisis, that will bring such tragedy and challenges, shall be in part, be resolved; namely through the perpetuation of his intention through a future scion. Through Siegfried as the prototype of inwardly free humans there shall come into being people who wield the sword of individualized volition, but in which there will be however an element of Wotan's own being.

For the sword of the will, although smelted and re-moulded (that is, humanized) nevertheless has its origin in Wotan, in his own will-nature. However Wotan in this moment has not seen the second part of this solution, namely an harmonious integration of his volition (within future humans) with Brünnhilde. Unknown to Wotan, the hero must first unite to Brünnhilde, in whose heart lies another element of Wotan's will, namely his compassionate aspect, his love of the free human being. There is also within Brünnhilde an element of feminine wisdom, from her wise primordial mother, Erda, and also in Brünnhilde there is the impulse to selflessness, or sacrifice. The union of Brünnhilde to Siegfried only arises through the final climatic deed of her plunging into the flames of the funeral pyre. This new kind of human being shall proceed from Siegfried, when he is 're-born' with his sword, from the funeral-pyre in a future time-cycle.

It is at this point in this elucidation of the underlying tragedy of the *Ring Cycle* that the role of the golden ring and its musical motif needs further consideration. Certainly, in the non-divine world the ring is cursed, and brings much grief. However, it is my contention that the golden ring in enhancing personal egotism, constitutes in fact that vital catalyst which although inducing destructive selfishness, is doing so as an essential catalyst for the impulse to selflessness. In this way, the curse of self-centred egotism is renounced, at least by those who perceive its barrenness. This, in turn, implies a new and positive phase of existence is possible – although the Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods* stops just short of this next step.

However, there are various elements supportive of this contention, for example when Alberich is gloating over the possibility of a new empowered state through the ring, he says that he may obtain the "Welt Erbe (world inheritance)".<sup>39</sup> Yet it is clear, from the general tone of the *Ring Cycle* that what is essentially to be inherited from the world is something sublime, not evil. More significantly, there is a remarkable indicator in the musical score when the Rhine-daughters declare concerning the gold: "Only he who forswears courtship's power, only he who dispels love's pleasures, only he obtains the magic, to compel the gold into a circle." *Rheingold* 1;1 ("Nur wer der Minne Macht entsagt, nur wer der Liebe Lust verjagt, nur der erzielt sich den Zauber, zum Reif zu zwingen das Gold".) For Wagner places briefly, at this point, just prior to the first occurrence of the golden-ring motif, the Sacrifice motif, dimly and softly presented by trumpet and tuba. Furthermore the German text here refers more to personal self-centred 'love' than to actual selfless love. It also does not refer to a ring being made of gold, but rather to a 'circle'.

That Wagner refers to a circle, can be seen as supportive of the perspective elucidated in this article, wherein the emphasis is on the development of stages of consciousness. A circle indicates an enclosed, and closed-off, consciousness; the self-supportive, self-maintaining state that in its initial phase is self-centred, but at a later stage is expressive

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<sup>39</sup> The "World-inheritance".

of an highly integrated consciousness. Suggestive of this interpretation is also the fact that, as this first scene of *Das Rheingold* concludes, and Alberich's grim laughter resounds, the sacrifice motif resounds once more. So, the golden ring represents the process of 'inner rounded-ness' or, of being cut-off from the living world context, and loss of social ethics it brings. Yet this is the unavoidable pathway to true (ethical) individualism, and eventually fully integrated mind. It is surely for this reason that Wagner in the above initial reference to a 'ring', actually refers to it as 'circle' (Reif), rather than a ring.

The cause of the crisis that engulfs Wotan is his obedience to an impulse within him that impels him to ensure the emergence of free human beings. However, this impulse has ramifications not fully perceived by Wotan, so it may not originate within his own being. Indeed even the wise Erda is bewildered by aspects of the process, for example, the fate of Brünnhilde. This implies in turn that the actual causal factor behind the dynamics working towards a new phase in evolution are not fully known by either of these gods. This, in turn, implies the origin of the dynamics that necessitate such tragic events may derive from an unknown, perhaps ineffable higher sphere. Such a causative sphere and its beings, has a parallel in the Vanaheim<sup>40</sup> of the Edda. In any event, the *Ring Cycle* here turns our attention to remoter, higher aspects of the super-sensible, somewhat reminiscent of the ever higher stages of spirituality in the varying ranks of divinities or 'hierarchies' of mystical literature.

The deeply poignant tragedy is that Wotan has to learn that only through self-sacrifice will this goal be attained. Not realizing this earlier, he attempted to achieve his goal in Siegmund, then accomplished it, in a rudimentary form, in Siegfried. Siegfried however only 'becomes' the solution to the crisis after he is united to Brünnhilde, a process which itself shall require the removal of the Gods from the stage of life. It was Brünnhilde who felt love for Siegmund in that pivotal moment when he rejected the offer of entry into Walhalla,<sup>41</sup> and Brünnhilde who loves the similarly independent Siegfried. On behalf of both these 'heroes' she in effect sacrifices her life.

Since Brünnhilde is an aspect of the will of Wotan, and also a daughter of Erda, it is not primarily the destructive ferment carried by Loge that will claim the future; although it is *partly* due to the 'ferment' of Loge that the process occurs at all. Rather it will be the immensely positive 'ferment' of the primal wisdom of Erda and the power of Wotan, somewhat transformed, which lives on in posterity. This is indicated in the closing moments of the 'Ring' cycle, by the people who stand as spectators whilst the pyre consumes the Old World-Order. Wagner's decision to retain the current ending to the 'Ring' cycle supports the above conclusion as to the inherently dramatic, tragic but eventually sublime resolution of Wotan's dilemma. For in the current ending those

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<sup>40</sup> In the Edda, the Vanir of Vanaheim are another race of gods, of whom little is known, but it is probable (Simrock, *ibid.*, S. 54, 159-62) that they may represent a higher, more harmonious reality.

<sup>41</sup> Sandra Corse, 1990, "Wagner and the New Consciousness", London. Corse points out that Siegmund in rejecting Walhalla opened the way towards a future destiny for humans, based on a noble love. She also reports Wagner saying, without giving the primary source, that Brünnhilde was: "the perfect Human Being, the embodiment of Love in its highest fulfilment and potency", p. 186.

elements<sup>42</sup> I have elucidated here predominate, whereas in the alternative endings quite different dynamics are emphasised.<sup>43</sup>

The alternative endings do not place such emphasis on these potent cosmic dynamics and their tragic dimension. In the earliest version (of 28<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1848), there is little of the tragic element of Brünnhilde's sacrifice and the extinction of the Gods. Instead, Brünnhilde brings Siegfried to Wotan, urging him to rejoice; an ending which certainly supports the final positive outcome of the events implied in the current ending. Likewise in the second version (of Dec. 1848), which is a reworking of the first, the joyous outcome is emphasized, but not the dramatic elements are still lacking. For example, "the Gods just fade away in bliss" ("Erbleichtet in Wonne vor des Menschen That"). Whereas the current ending, the third version (of Dec. 1852), embodies all these potent elements, and was retained even after being replaced for a while by a fourth version (of May 1856). In this fourth version the emphasis is on a profoundly serene, quasi-Nirvanic (and faintly Schopenhaueristic) end of Brünnhilde, "...from re-incarnation released,...the blessed goal of all eternal things..." ("..von Wiedergeburt erlöst, ...alles Ew'gen sel'ges Ende...")

Various critics have reached the conclusion that there is a new beginning at the end of the 'Ring', "...the ending of the Götterdämmerung suggests...the end of one stage of Love and the beginning of the next..."<sup>44</sup> or, as Owen Lee expresses it, the final scene of 'Siegfried' refers to ... "the next evolutionary development in human nature...[and] man was meant to evolve beyond his present state."<sup>45</sup> The musical score supports this conclusion that within the sacrifices and apparently tragic ending, Brünnhilde-Siegfried is the solution to Wotan's dilemma.<sup>46</sup> The musical motifs of both Siegfried and of 'Erlösung' – achieved by Brünnhilde's deeds - resound during the last words of Brünnhilde. Within the dualistic entity Brünnhilde-Siegfried spiritual forces reside which will emerge as the humanity of a future Age.

Finally, as Donington points out, within the music at the end of the cycle during Brünnhilde's concluding words, "...there occurs a motif which is an inversion of the major-mode used to represent Erda".<sup>47</sup> This seems to me to indicate that through her sacrifice Brünnhilde is reversing the withering, dying process to which the world - for so long nurtured by her mother Erda – has become subject. Thus through a sacrificial death a new beginning is born, and a fresh new foundation is established, capable of nurturing and directing the world in a new Age.

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<sup>42</sup> That is, the themes of loving sacrifice, the end of the Gods, union of the two central characters, and re-emergence of them in a new Age as metamorphosed impulses of the now vanished Gods.

<sup>43</sup> Stewart Spencer, 1993, "Wagner's Ring of the Nibelungen; a Companion", London. In the Appendix Spencer has published the rejected endings.

<sup>44</sup> Sandra Corse, *ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>45</sup> Owen Lee, 1990, Wagner's Ring: Turning the Sky 'Round, New York, p. 95.

<sup>46</sup> Owen Lee, *ibid.*, Lee quotes Wagner writing to Röckel: "Siegfried alone is not the complete human being. He is only the half. It is only with Brünnhilde that Siegfried transforms the world." Lee does not give the source of the quote; but it is in a letter of 25<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1854, p. 26, in Bozán, *ibid.*, "The Letters of Richard Wagner".

<sup>47</sup> Donington, R., 1963, "Wagner's 'Ring' and its Symbols", London, p. 261.

**Appendix:** the theme briefly reviewed from Rudolf Steiner's perspective

Rudolf Steiner valued this opera very highly, indicating that deep esoteric truths were embedded in its music and text (libretto). To Steiner, the characters are all representative of either spiritual beings or human beings. For example, the water of the Rhine, is the usual consciousness of the human soul ('astrality'), hence the golden ring is associated with what he terms the 'Spirit-self', which arises as the soul undergoes spiritualization. Steiner explains that the scene of action of the magnificent opera is the fifth large epoch in evolution; by which he means history from about 7,000 BC through to another 6,000 yrs or so. In this epoch, it is the intention of the divine-spiritual beings that humanity should achieve the union of "Siegfried" with "Brünnhilde". That is, the development of an inherently ethical ego-sense, Siegfried, should enable eventually the presence in one's everyday personality of the Spirit-self (Brünnhilde).

It is precisely this concept, of human beings developing within themselves a source of ethics, and hence manifesting a real spirituality, which Rudolf Steiner argues for, in a philosophical context, in his first written work, "*The Philosophy of Freedom*" (1894).

To Steiner the greatness of the Ring Cycle puts it in the highest possible stage of artistic achievement, and it is therefore inspired. Like the music inwardly heard by Beethoven, it comes from the spiritual world to Wagner's conscious mind. The treatment of human evolution in this opera, as a struggle involving divine beings and the emergence of ethical individuals, is entirely compatible with, and is indeed a kind of pre-figuring, of Steiner's anthroposophical view of evolution of humanity through many lifetimes of learning.