

# Redemption from the Redeemer? Review Article on Roger Scruton and Wagner's 'Parsifal'

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Wagner's *Parsifal* has the curious honour of being the subject of the final book by Roger Scruton, philosopher, composer, novelist, doyen of English conservatism and one of the most prolific public intellectuals in the UK of the last fifty years, who died in January 2020.<sup>1</sup> Not long before, Scruton sent his publisher, Allen Lane, the manuscript of *Wagner's 'Parsifal': The Music of Redemption*, which appeared in May 2020 (hereafter WP). That Wagner's music dramas occupied a significant niche within Scruton's thought was already evident from two previous books: *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's 'Ring of the Nibelung'* (Allen Lane: London, 2016) [hereafter RT]; and *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde'* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004) [hereafter DDH].<sup>2</sup> But precisely what these works meant to him remains as enigmatic as the music drama that is the subject of his final book. The present review article focuses on WP but with reference to RT and DDH for comparison and context, and aims to consider the following questions in a critical, non-polemical vein: What lay behind Scruton's long-term love of Wagner? Can his philosophical engagement with Wagner's works be understood as a single, coherent project? What is the legacy of his Wagner criticism? And how might we come to terms with it today?



Roger Scruton poses next to his portrait by Lantian D at the Mall Galleries, 2016

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Max Erwin, Jan Czarnecki and Férdia Stone-Davis for their helpful comments on previous versions of this article.

<sup>2</sup> See also Roger Scruton, Chapter 9, 'The trial of Richard Wagner', and Chapter 10, 'A first shot at *The Ring*', *Understanding Music: Philosophy and Interpretation* (London and New York, 2009), 118–30 and 131–61 respectively.

In WP, Scruton confronts the ethical and philosophical riddle posed by this notorious work, arguing that *Parsifal*, above all the music, provides an answer to nothing less than the riddle of human nature.<sup>3</sup> For Scruton, *Parsifal* powerfully expresses complex ideas of sin, sacrifice and redemption so central to Christian theology but in a way that divests them of their specifically religious form. Chapter 1, 'The Quest', sets out the basic story and themes of *Parsifal* by way of introduction. The title perhaps refers to Scruton's own 'quest' in the book as well as that of the titular protagonist and the universal search for forgiveness and resolution thematised in the work. Chapter 2, 'Wagner's Treatment of the Story', at over forty pages the longest chapter in the book, surveys the literary, religious and mythological sources for Wagner's drama and his process of adaptation, interspersed with detailed interpretation and analysis. Chapter 3 ('Confronting the Enigma') and Chapter 4 ('Sin, Love and Redemption') elaborate on ideas introduced in Chapters 1 and 2, focusing on selected moments in the drama, and the book ends with two further chapters, one on the music and the other consisting of an annotated list of musical motifs.

Why *Parsifal*? Not only is Wagner's final work the subject of Scruton's final book, but it may be the Wagnerian drama that comes closest to resembling Scruton's own image as a public figure and what he stood for: after all, *Parsifal* is a work preoccupied by the idea of a dying tradition and an (all-male) community, dealing in a provocative mixture of sacred and secular phenomena, and outwardly dominated by the character of austere religious ritual. In addition, it may well be Wagner's most dialectical work, an aspect that clearly fascinated Scruton, although he opted for terms such as 'paradox' (WP ix, 6, 19, 46) and 'union of opposites' (WP 58, 59) that might be less obviously *marxisant* than 'dialectic'. WP returns to topics that Scruton had previously explored in relation to *Tristan und Isolde*: sexuality and love, *eros* and *agapē*, transcendence and freedom, self and other, the duality of the human subject. But in WP, as the subtitle of the book tells us, Scruton also addresses the mother of all Wagnerian themes: redemption. He traces the idea back to its theological roots in Christ's suffering on the cross but asks what redemption might mean in a secular world. In Scruton's words:

One of the many puzzles presented by *Parsifal* lies here: what is meant by redemption, when judgement and reward have no real part in it? To answer that question we must explore the deep questions of philosophical anthropology raised by Wagner's drama, and also resist the temptation to interpret the opera in such a way that the question does not arise. (WP 67)

Scruton's engagement with Wagner's works, especially with *Parsifal*, suggests an ambivalence towards religion partly echoed by Wagner himself. Somewhere in each book Scruton quotes the famous opening of Wagner's essay 'Religion and Art' (1880) as emblematic of his own interpretation of religion:

It is reserved to art to salvage the kernel of religion, inasmuch as the mythical images which religion would wish to be believed as true are apprehended in art for their

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<sup>3</sup> Previous reviews of WP include: Colin Clarke, 'Roger Scruton's Final Word on Parsifal', *Rhinegold Publishing* (29 May 2020), <[https://www.rhinegold.co.uk/opera\\_now/roger-scrutons-final-word-on-parsifal/](https://www.rhinegold.co.uk/opera_now/roger-scrutons-final-word-on-parsifal/)> (accessed 1 Dec. 2020); and Daniel Johnson, 'A Path Open to Us All', *The Critic* (Jun. 2020), <<https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/june-2020/a-path-open-to-us-all/>> (accessed 1 Dec. 2020).

symbolic value, and through ideal representation of those symbols art reveals the concealed deep truth within them (quoted in DDH 7; RT 40; WP 9).<sup>4</sup>

Wagner's statement, reflecting a mythological interpretation of religion, conversely supports Scruton's general call to resacralise art for a supposedly disenchanted secular society. It also resonated with Feuerbach's critique of religion as the alienation of properly human powers, a critique which had influenced the *Ring*, as Scruton himself previously noted in a sympathetic discussion of Feuerbach's idea (e.g. RT 23–4, 185–6). Wagner's greatest works, in other words, show us the way to reappropriate those powers for humanity and thereby to redeem humanity itself from the sins of modern life.

Despite this broad meeting of minds, there are moments when Scruton's conservative humanism (religion as 'cultural' value) sits uneasily with Wagner's in-your-face appropriation of Christian iconography and ritual in *Parsifal*, as in the following passage:

in Wagner's drama that doctrine [the doctrine of transubstantiation] is reduced to a metaphor. The 'love-feast' celebrated at Monsalvat is about solidarity here and now, not life beyond the grave, and the most striking feature of the Redeemer is not his real presence at the altar, but his real absence from the lives of those who call to him, as Amfortas calls to him in vain. (WP 17)

By suggesting (with touching Anglican diffidence) that the doctrine of transubstantiation in Act I may be 'reduced to a metaphor', he seems to deny the element of theological mystery, transformation and almost posthuman otherness at the heart of the work. Nonetheless, Scruton's larger point of emphasising the significance of religion in *Parsifal* as a kind of purely human, cultural practice is valid. To complement this approach in WP, he draws catholicly on various fields including the anthropology of religion, notably René Girard's work on sacrifice, violence and ritual (WP 96–7) and Mary Douglas's ethic of pollution and taboo (WP 71, 80).

Some of the tensions around the idea of the sacred were already apparent in DDH as well as in the book's colourful reception history. The book made an impression on the composer James MacMillan during the composition of his opera *The Sacrifice* as well as his *St John Passion* (completed in 2006 and 2007 respectively), both of which incorporate musical quotations of *Tristan und Isolde*. By all accounts DDH moved MacMillan to interpret *Tristan und Isolde* in sincerely religious terms and therefore to take it as a model for his own composition.<sup>5</sup> But in view of Wagner's radical appropriation of religion for mythological humanist ends, or rather Scruton's admiration of that idea, it seems MacMillan overlooked the careful ambiguity in Scruton's argument.<sup>6</sup>

In WP, as in his previous Wagner books, Scruton is clearly motivated by the contemporary (which is to say timeless) significance of Wagner's works and the view of

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, tr. and ed. William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols. (London, 1892–9; facsimile repr. 1993–5); vi. *Religion and Art*, 213. Scruton cites Ellis's translation when quoting these words in WP, but the translation he quotes (WP 9) differs substantially from Ellis's, suggesting that Scruton tacitly modified it.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Phillip Cooke for pointing this out to me. See Dominic Wells, Chapter 2 'Sacrificial Passions: The Influence of Wagner and Scruton in James MacMillan's *The Sacrifice* and *St John Passion*', *Contemporary Music and Spirituality*, ed. Robert Sholl and Sander van Maas (Abingdon, 2016), 37–52.

<sup>6</sup> A similar point is made by Dominic Wells (note 5), 43–4.

'human nature' expressed in them. The modern significance of these works, for Scruton, testifies to their timelessness and vice versa. Their timelessness in turn is a function of Wagner's interest in myth, which Scruton describes as an 'eternal present' as opposed to 'an imagined past' (RT 289). The privileges accorded to myth (timeless, universal, unconscious) eliminate historical distance and historical difference, both within the works themselves and in the works' relation to the historical present. The twin Classical conceptions of time, *chronos* (clock time) and *kairos* (qualitative, experiential time), offer Scruton an interpretative frame for *Parsifal* (WP 13, 20), but his discussion of *kairos* implies a drift from its specific, dialectical significance towards a sort of flattened-out eternity, or circularity. In this sense, Gurnemann's famous words 'zum Raum wird hier die Zeit' have a profoundly conservative ring.

More than religion, it is German Idealist philosophy that provides the interpretative basis for Scruton's Wagner, above all Immanuel Kant's dual notion of human beings 'both as natural objects, governed by causal laws, and as free subjects, accountable for what they do' (WP 106). Kant's normative ideal of autonomy is the lens through which Scruton views not only the philosophical ideas presented in Wagner's works but also their aesthetic form. In the introduction to WP, Scruton highlights 'the force, in Wagner's life as well as his art, of the ideal of artistic objectivity':

The true work of art, Wagner believed, stands above human life in a posture of impartial judgement. The artist is the servant of such a work, duty-bound to express its inner truth in intelligible symbols. Each true work of art is shaped, for Wagner, by its own unifying idea, through which some deep and vital aspect of the human condition achieves imaginative embodiment. The artist's own life is as likely to be an impediment as a stimulus to the creative endeavour, and in any case must be insulated from the creative process. (WP vii-viii)

The passage articulates several aspects of Scruton's approach to Wagner and to aesthetics more broadly, which may be parsed as follows:

1. the artwork as transcending history and society ('stands above human life');
2. the quasi-deified status of the artwork ('in a posture of impartial judgement', 'the artist is the servant of such a work');
3. artistic expression of the 'human condition' as a timeless truth;
4. the artist's life as occupying a private sphere ('insulated from the creative process').

When read in context, Scruton's defence of 'the ideal of artistic objectivity' is really a defence of *Parsifal* against charges of anti-Semitism which, Scruton claims, 'has become a kind of orthodoxy among critics today' (WP vii). The Preface as a whole (WP vii-ix) reads as an apologia for the author's decision to avoid the subject of racial purity and contamination in *Parsifal*. Yet there is a reference later on to Kundry as a figure of the 'Wandering Jew' and therefore as an assault on Aryan purity, a characterisation Scruton weakly dismisses in an offhand remark ('Such a view of course overlooks Kundry's Nordic credentials as Gundryggia the Valkyrie', WP 41). This is just one example of Scruton's tendentious exclusion of the unsavoury, one that seems to mirror the violence of exclusion in *Parsifal* on which the idea of a 'pure' community is founded. But it is precisely the above-mentioned elements of a pseudo-Kantian aesthetic theory that give Scruton permission, as it were, to treat Wagner's works in dubious isolation from the world, from history and from the composer's own life and writings.



Immanuel Kant, the 'dry old sage of Königsberg', whose philosophy Scruton believed to be 'vindicated' in the works of Wagner. Engraving (1791) after Veit Hans Schnorr

The nature of Scruton's philosophical interpretation of Wagner had been more candidly declared in the opening pages of DDH. 'My greatest debt', he confides there:

is to Immanuel Kant, the dry old sage of Königsberg, for whom neither music nor the erotic had any evident appeal, but who was nevertheless the ultimate inspiration behind the view of human nature that is expressed and vindicated in Wagner's operas, and which finds its most surprising and moving elaboration in the tale of Tristan and Isolde. While this book is a guide to Wagner's music drama, it can also be read in another way as a case study in the Kantian philosophy of man. (DDH v-vi)

Scruton aptly characterises the semi-autonomous nature of his philosophical engagement with Wagner's works. The caveats loom larger than he may have wished: the link

is ultimately tenuous, even allowing for the lack of a direct historical relationship or intellectual influence between Kant and Wagner (manifestly not Scruton's concern in any case). Regardless of Kant's far-reaching impact on modern thought, this 18th-century *Aufklärer* is a world away from the disconsolate modernity of Wagner's project, and it remains unclear what may really be gained by attributing to Kant 'the view of human nature that is expressed and vindicated in Wagner's operas'.

If the central drama of *Tristan und Isolde* played out the Kantian duality of 'human nature', for Scruton the *Ring* dramatises Hegel's notion of self-consciousness which emerges in dialectical encounters between self and other and between master and slave, an interpretation he shared with Nietzsche (e.g. RT 218–19). In WP Scruton identifies the same process of individuation in Parsifal's journey from ignorance to self-conscious knowledge via an erotically charged encounter with the other. Scruton argues quite rightly that the hero's central encounter with Kundry in Act II is the pivot on which the drama turns, and his reading involves an analysis of the enharmonic modulation during Kundry's kiss (from E sharp/F sharp to F/G flat) as 'the thin edge between consolation and transgression' (WP 75–7). The coincidence of sexual awakening and invocation of the mother (like the equivalent moment in Act III of *Siegfried*) is perennial proof of Wagner's presaging psychoanalytic theory. Scruton takes a different tack, however, showing that what Parsifal learns at this moment is his attachment to social, ethical and natural bonds, or in other words, his belonging to what Scruton terms 'traditional communities' (WP 16). In the concluding pages to Chapter 4, he states: 'We are alone, with only one firm base from which to begin our explorations.' The answer is given unequivocally at the start of the next paragraph: 'This firm base is the mother. What we know of love we learn from her; but we learn it by osmosis rather than enquiry' (WP 124). These bonds and 'traditional communities' apparently also include 'the traditional Christian vow of marriage' (WP 16). With that in mind, perhaps *The Magic Flute*, say, or *Fidelio* would have made a more suitable operatic vehicle than any of Wagner's operas for some of the themes that truly exercised the author.

Scruton's interest in the autonomy of the subject sometimes conflicts with his political ideology. In the opening chapter of WP, he issues a critique of liberal individualism, associated with 'the world of contracts and deals', but it is a critique that could be expressed as easily by a socialist as by a Burkean conservative:

Associated with the world of contracts and deals is the liberal individualist picture of society, as a network of agreements between people, protected by their rights, who freely commit to each other and as freely dissolve their commitments when the job is done. [...] *Liberal individualism is an attractive philosophy, [...]. But it does not describe real human beings.* What matters to us, far more than our deals and bargains, are the ties that we never contracted, that we stumbled into through passion and temptation, as well as the ties that could never be chosen, like those that bind us to our parents, our country, and our religious and cultural inheritance. (WP 17; emphasis added)

It would not have taken much to add 'social class', or Karl Marx's 'species-being', to the above-quoted series of 'ties that could never be chosen'. In any case, the discussion of 'contracts and deals' recalls the ideas of bourgeois property and legal contract so central to the *Ring*, which Scruton had explored in RT with reference to John Locke, G.W.F. Hegel and Marx (e.g. RT 247–8). Scruton was clearly aware that critiques of

individualism are by no means confined to the political right and that if Wagner shared that critique, it was as a product of Left Hegelianism of the 1840s.

So much for Wagner's works as political allegory and ethical wisdom. What about their aesthetic form (that is, beyond the Kantian notion of aesthetic autonomy discussed above)? '*Parsifal* has the form of a triptych', Scruton observes, alluding to the symmetry of the work's overall structure:

Acts 1 and III are set in Monsalvat, Act II in the magic castle of Klingsor. The main characters stand outlined and face to face as in a painting. If there is movement it is the place that moves and not the people, unless the people are simply features of the place, like the knights and flower-maidens. (WP 24)

The analogy with medieval iconography is nicely suggestive of the paradoxical interplay between motion and stasis in the work. The image of the triptych makes a reappearance in Chapter 3:

The three tableaux of Wagner's triptych belong together, and display a deep unity – a holistic experience that is the life of religion in its entirety. The three troubled characters – Amfortas, Kundry and Klingsor – belong together, and as the drama proceeds, the relations of dependence that unite them, and which tie each of them to Parsifal's redeeming mission, become ever stronger and tighter. (WP 89)

As it happens, Scruton's Wagner oeuvre also forms a triptych of sorts: in WP Scruton returns to many of the themes of DDH, his first book on Wagner, owing partly to the inherent connections between *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* (medieval literary source material, themes of *eros* and *agapē*, Christian symbolism), while in between these two comes his book on the *Ring* (its subject matter in a sense more straightforwardly political). However, the three titles are not obviously styled as a trilogy of any kind. In what feels like a mixture of modesty and obliviousness, WP curiously refrains from citing either DDH or RT. Indeed, each study comes across as a fresh attempt rather than the next instalment in a continuing project.<sup>7</sup> It may (or may not) be surprising, then, that Scruton's three Wagner books follow a roughly similar pattern both in content and formal design. The opening three chapters of each book fall into something of formula:

1. an introduction to Wagner's aesthetic programme and/or the relations between life and art;
2. presentation of the literary source material of the drama and/or the intellectual ferment in which it was reworked by Wagner;
3. Scruton's narration of the plot of the drama (complete with musical examples).

Either immediately after or towards the end of each book comes a chapter devoted to the music, and in all three books the final chapter or appendix provides an inventory of the leitmotifs or musical examples.

In spite of this apparent formula, the material in all three books is somewhat disparately organised, at times making the argument hard to follow. As Hugo Shirley noted in a review of RT,<sup>8</sup> Scruton retreads the same ground in different chapters, repeating chunks of material and describing whole scenes that have been previously introduced

<sup>7</sup> DDH is cited twice in the footnotes of RT: 364 n. 10, 366 n. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Hugo Shirley, review of Roger Scruton, *The Ring of Truth*, in *Opera* (Nov. 2016), 1484–6, and on the author's personal website: <<http://hugoshirley.blogspot.com/2016/11/book-review-of-truth-by-roger.html>> (accessed 1 Dec. 2020).

or discussed. The mythic ritual of storytelling is thus reproduced in the form of Scruton's Wagner books, and he evidently took pleasure in glossing Wagner's works and their plots. There is a degree of mimesis here, as the loosely repetitive form of his Wagner books reproduces the tendency in Wagner's own works (particularly the *Ring*) to narrate the story several times over, albeit from different points of view.

Another consequence of the loose structure of WP is that it does not really have an ending. In this regard, WP undercuts any imitation of the Wagnerian drama where so much weight tends to be placed on a final, redemptive resolution. Chapter 4 ('Sin, Love and Redemption') is the nearest thing to a conclusion in WP, and Chapters 5 and 6, on the music and the leitmotifs respectively, feel more like an appendix to the book proper than substantial chapters in their own right. While it may be fitting in one sense that music is given the last word in WP, in reality the argument dissipates into mere technical analysis (grounded in not uncritical readings of Austro-German theorists Ernst Kurth, Hugo Riemann, Alfred Lorenz and Heinrich Schenker) and motif nomenclature.

The decision to bracket off the music in one chapter of each book, at least nominally, is telling (DDH, Chapter 4, 'The Music of *Tristan*'; RT, Chapter 4, 'How the Music Works'; WP, Chapter 5, 'The Music'). Scruton's adherence to a 'leitmotif' system (expanded from most previous studies, especially in RT) places him in the tolerably old-fashioned tradition of Wagner appreciation beginning with Hans von Wolzogen. It is also consistent with his almost total avoidance of the theatrical element of Wagner's works, as if he approached them as essentially tone poems – or perhaps as mythological tales that can be told and retold in literary paraphrase incorporating description of a musical score. While Scruton liked to emphasise drama as the key to Wagner's works (e.g. DDH 114; RT 41), it is 'drama' in a vaguely abstracted or metaphorical sense, as Scruton only reluctantly refers to the materiality of theatre or to issues of stage production. When he does refer to actual productions of the works, it is mostly to criticise all but the most traditional, his *bête noire* being *Regietheater* or anything remotely resembling it (e.g. RT 6, 269; WP 65–6). Interestingly, he admits that 'it is hard to envisage a straight version of *Parsifal*, in which the composer's stage directions prevail' (WP 66) given the theatrical demands of the composer's stage directions – which may have been reason enough for Scruton to abandon any critically engaged attempt at doing so and ensconce himself in 'Scrutopia',<sup>9</sup> content with playing Wagner in domestic piano arrangements.

Most of the musical examples in WP contain no sung words at all (in German or English), although there are extensive quotations from both languages in his prose renditions of the drama in all three books. Scruton's respect for the music may only have gone so far, for there is not a single citation or reference of a musical score in any edition in any of the three studies, nor are there descriptive labels for the copious musical examples in DDH and WP (with the exception of the Leitmotif Appendices). There is at least a bibliography in DDH, including a section headed 'Works by Richard Wagner' (DDH 225), but no edition of the musical works is identified there ('Works by Richard Wagner' apparently meant 'Prose Works by Richard Wagner'). The examples in all

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<sup>9</sup> The playful, though probably unironic, name Scruton gave to his Wiltshire estate.



three studies seem to be taken wholesale from piano scores of Wagner's works and, in the case of WP, contain a few conspicuous typographical errors.<sup>10</sup>

Why fixate so pedantically on scholarly and musicological desiderata in a posthumous publication intended for a wide readership? Firstly, Scruton's output is significant enough to merit high editorial and scholarly standards regardless of the readership. Secondly, it tells us something about Scruton's relationship with Wagner's operas that he chose not to credit the work of publishers, editors and translators on which he relied. The hubristic unwillingness to cite relevant scholarship and editions may be a feature of his publications more generally, but it raises particular problems in the case of Wagner, as suggested above. Perhaps a third justification is suggested by the back cover of WP which pays tribute to the late author as 'uniquely both a leading philosopher and musicologist'. The double disciplinary role (philosopher and musicologist) is hardly unique today, and in any case, given that the musicological apparatus of WP leaves so much to be desired, the epithet 'musicologist' is grossly misleading.

If Scruton was not actually a musicologist *per se*, his foremost contribution to music scholarship was in the field of Aesthetics and in the Philosophy of Music (in the so-called 'Analytic' tradition).<sup>11</sup> His argument in WP thrives on a paradox that to some extent may be true of all music aesthetics in Romanticism:

In what way and to what extent does this faith, which offers no compensating afterlife, nevertheless console us for our sorrow? And what part is played in this by the sacrifice of a Redeemer who has long ago gone from this world? *Answering such questions in words leads always to puzzlement and paradox. But they are answered by the music, which connects suffering and compassion, sin and forgiveness, downfall and redemption, in a web of necessity, healing the fractures and uniting the warring parts of human life in a way that is clear, convincing and uncanny.* (WP 19; emphasis added)

The task he set himself in WP was that of explicating a meaning that is said to reside above all in the music, that resides in the music (and nowhere else) precisely because it lies beyond rational comprehension and articulation.

Scruton's status as the foremost intellectual figurehead of right-wing conservatism in the UK belied the various ambiguities, shifts and polemical strategies that characterise his work. Even the label 'conservative' might have been something of a ruse. Reviewing Scruton's *The Uses of Pessimism*, Maximilian de Gaynesford chided that it was 'simply mischievous of him to continue calling himself [a conservative]' when 'the villain is the present itself' and 'the solution is not to conserve but to replace'.<sup>12</sup> At times, Scruton might be read as a peculiar kind of closet utopian in a leftist tradition. Anyway, the reader expecting to encounter a distinctly 'conservative' or right-wing interpretation of Wagner may be subtly challenged, if not bewildered, by the range of topics, discourses and interpretations that come within Scruton's orbit. In light of the main ideas he explores

<sup>10</sup> Errata in the musical examples of WP include: B sharp accidental missing in b. 3, Kundry, 'da traf mich' (WP 50); F sharp accidental missing in b. 1 (WP 128).

<sup>11</sup> See especially Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford, 1997); and Scruton, *Understanding Music* (note 2).

<sup>12</sup> Maximilian de Gaynesford, 'A Fallacious Utopian' [review of Roger Scruton, *The Uses of Pessimism: and The Dangers of False Hope* (London, 2010)], *The London Magazine* (Feb.–Mar., 2011), 71–4, on 72.



Slavoj Žižek, Scruton's ideological adversary, but a philosopher with whom he had much in common.

across these three titles – sexual desire, the relationship between love and law, political and social theory, theories of value, all rooted in the German Idealist philosophical tradition – the Wagner commentator Scruton most closely approaches, ironically, is the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, one of the targets of Scruton's polemical *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands*. It may be that, in the end, Scruton's own political and ideological commitments prevented him from engaging with some of the most stimulating and provocative commentary on Wagner of the last twenty years.<sup>13</sup>

Among the Wagner critics Scruton *did* engage with are Thomas Mann, Deryck Cooke, Bernard Williams, Bryan Magee, Michael Tanner (who, incidentally, had been one of Scruton's doctoral co-supervisors) and above all, Robin Holloway. At the risk of conflating these diverse figures, they may be said loosely to comprise (among many others) a critical tradition that Scruton's writings continued. Such as it is, this tradition has tended to uphold some degree of separation between Wagner's 'noble art' and his 'deplorable life' (in paraphrase), or to interpret Wagner's ideological coming of age as a shift from hopeful, revolutionary politics to pessimistic, 'apolitical' conservatism, often via the influence of Schopenhauerian philosophy or Wagner's unconscious inklings of it.<sup>14</sup>

For example, Scruton followed a number of previous commentators in mapping onto the genesis of the *Ring* a gradual abandonment of erstwhile revolutionary optimism, e.g.: 'It can fairly be said that when Wagner composed the poem of *Siegfrieds Tod* [1848], his initial libretto for what was eventually to become the *Ring* cycle, he was

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death* (New York and London, 2002). In a discussion of narratives in the *Ring* (RT 235), Scruton quoted favourably from Alain Badiou's *Five Lessons on Wagner*, tr. Susan Spitzer (London, 2010), a book that also features a long afterword by Žižek. Scruton's brief discussion of Badiou's Wagner is free of the polemics with which he tackled both Badiou and Žižek in Roger Scruton, *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left* (London, 2015, 2019; originally published 1985).

<sup>14</sup> Mark Berry makes astute comparisons between Michael Tanner's approach to Wagner and that of Scruton, in 'Approaches to Interpretation' (subsection in co-authored 'Introduction'), *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner's 'Der Ring des Nibelungen'*, ed. Mark Berry and Nicholas Vazsonyi (Cambridge, 2020), 42–3.

a Feuerbachian, who saw the task of the artist as complementing that of the political revolutionary' (RT 46; cf. RT 292). Such narratives of personal evolution may tell us more about the author's own autobiography than about Wagner. The final scene of *Siegfrieds Tod* has Wotan reinstated in Valhalla alongside Siegfried ('hardly the stuff of revolution', noted John Deathridge),<sup>15</sup> and as Wagner expanded it into *The Ring of the Nibelung* via Scandinavian myth, the project became more invested in the anarchic destruction of the old order, not less. (After all, the demise of the gods is pessimistic only from the point of view of the gods.) As for Scruton, a thinker whose politics had been shaped indelibly by the 1968 student uprisings in Paris and whose influences have been as mixed as the topics he would address in more than fifty books, it may not be so fanciful to speculate that he saw his mirror-image in Wagner's wide reading and in the latter's fabled ideological trajectory from radical to conservative.

In a sense, WP is a strangely untimely book about a music drama energised by millenarian expectation and simultaneously weighed down by the past to the point of inertia. If the critical approach, references and argument are anything to go by, much of WP could have been written several decades ago. Scruton's final book presents itself to us almost as a relic, a remnant of a bygone age, as if offering a path to redemption – if only from Scruton himself.<sup>16</sup> He believed that Wagner was not such an outlier in the Western cultural canon but really belonged at the heart of it, and that his masterworks contain ethical 'wisdom' that needs only to be passed on and received in a spirit of humble submission. And pass it on he did, with a sincerity of purpose, a love of the musical works themselves and a genuine desire to communicate – without in the least patronising his reader – a life's insights into them. Whether that 'wisdom' was really Wagner's or Scruton's remains an open question, and his readings of *Tristan und Isolde*, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and *Parsifal* will surely continue to entice and provoke readers of various persuasions for years to come. What he has left behind is a thoughtful, personal interpretation of Wagner's major works which, for all its critical blind spots, demands to be confronted by anyone interested in Wagner and philosophy and everything in between. For that, at least, we can be more than grateful.

Roger Scruton, *Wagner's 'Parsifal': The Music of Redemption* (Allen Lane: London, 2020). 208 pp. £20. ISBN: 978-0-241-41969-4



<sup>15</sup> Richard Wagner, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, tr. and ed. with an introduction by John Deathridge (London, 2018), xxxiii.

<sup>16</sup> In the very first paragraph of the Preface to WP, Scruton quotes Nietzsche's ironic account (in the first postscript to *The Case of Wagner*) of the Munich Wagner Society members who, when laying a wreath on Wagner's grave, revised the inscription which had adopted the final words of *Parsifal*: 'Redemption to the Redeemer' was tacitly corrected to 'Redemption from the Redeemer' (WP vii). Also quoted in RT 299.