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WAGNER'S VIOLENCE AND SACRIFICE

Adam J. Sacks | 15 June 2022

Violence is often a theme in Richard Wagner's work, as is the sacrifice of women in the name of the "rebirth" of male protagonists. Based on the exhibition "Richard Wagner and the Nationalization of Feeling," historian Adam Sacks looks at this.

Walter Benjamin's epochal claim of 1940: "there is never a document of culture without also being, at the same time, a document of barbarism," may certainly also apply to Wagner. Rendered in more contemporary terms of decolonializing thought, one might update the Benjamin to read: cognitive, aesthetic and technological revolutions took place not just at the same time as imperialism, invasion and enslavement, but as a result of these. So very many masterworks of 19th Century European high art are

shot through with the violence of the Age of Imperialism (e.g. Verdi and the Suez Canal, Delacroix's Algeria, Vereeshchagin's Turkestan, Austen's "Persuasion" and "Mansfield Park" etc.) Wagner's oeuvre though counts among the precious few that actually enact and affirm violence in programmatic pronouncement and aesthetic output.

Even if one brackets out Wagner's explicit promotions of virulent nationalism or racism, which are not few in number, his dramatic methods and aesthetic forms alone enfold a certain violence in their vehemence. Is there another major European artist who used the word annihilation five times on one page of one essay and wrote of an "enormous desire to commit acts of violent artistic terrorism"? Arguably, even the aural redundancy of the musical structure of the leitmotiv carries also forth relentless pounding into the listener. Wagner embodies what Isaiah Berlin once called an "exaggerated violence of style and opinion".

Violence in Wagner is congruent with 19th Century nation and empire building, uniquely condensed and synchronous in the German case. Given German belatedness, the soldering of imperializing violence was first internal and applied to the national self, a project for which Wagner made clear he was ever over eager. Wagner's own theater with accompanying residential villa at Bayreuth both participated in the "Gründerzeit" industrializing building boom, while resembling a frontier fort between Catholic and Protestant Germanies: the plantation house of a musical settler colony forging an audible empire. On stage in the "Ring", this performance of fortress building, under the mantle of expanded property rights, is doubled and dramatized in "Valhalla". Labor forces that make this construction possible explicitly marked as foreign, whether "giants" or "dwarfs", are repeatedly wracked by violent turmoil.

Wagner often used the terms power (*Gewalt*) and theater as a matching pair. Variations on a heroicizing of the knight-warrior-conqueror are a constant in almost every operatic work. His 1868 essay "German Art and German Politics" was written explicitly in response to a perceived market deficit in German cultural power compared with that of the French. His comments and criticisms of colleagues and mentors therein (especially if paired with his non-written record of behavior) can scarcely be described as anything less than thuggish. It is therefore hardly surprising that for an

explanatory metaphor for the theater industry in this text, Wagner claims the state sanctioned slave market system, which sustained the empire-nation building of his day.

To more fully gauge Wagner's place in a cultural history of violence, one must consider violence not only in tone and procedure but also inside his chosen narratives. Of course murder as an archetypical form of violence runs throughout the operatic repertory; it is as commonplace as it is impassioned. Singular to Wagner, though, is the prominence of place given to that most primal form of human violence, the hunt by human males to kill other living creatures in nature. Man as hunter is all pervasive in his output: the hunting parties in "Tannhäuser" and "Tristan", while the heroes Siegmund and Parsifal, are, respectively, raised to be a hunter and first introduced mid-hunt. As a genre of violence, the hunt is anterior to forms of interpersonal attack and murder that result from social conflict seen elsewhere on the European stage, rather Wagner's all pervasive hunt naturalizes violence as instinctual and inevitable.

Far more unsettling however is Wagner's continued reliance on a form of violence far more ritualized and stylized which becomes the keystone of his dramas, namely, sacrifice.

While the violence of the hunt is suffused with a passionate natural energy into the unknown and against the stranger, sacrifice is intimate and methodical; a proxy form of violence enacted precisely to wrench and foreshorten a passage from "lower" nature to "higher" culture. In short, sacrifice is transformational violence that breaks away forms of previous disorder to mark out new orders. Paradoxically, sacrifice at first appears as a violence meant to reduce violence, as in the ancient world it was often employed to accompany treaties or mark out weak geographic points in social boundaries.

Yet again, unlike in the hunt, violence is wrought not on the nameless and faceless but on the monstrous double, one that may come from outside the in-group, but that has coexisted closely enough to have features that may be perceived as that of a threatening rival. Most crucially, the victim of sacrifice is divested of that fundamental layer of protection accorded to animals facing a hunt in the wild, the theoretical capacity for self-defense

and even revenge. In the cultural codes of Wagner's day, this meant the sacrifice was most often the female, at times amplified by the "oriental" or "Semitic"; after all, his most monumental work culminates in the literal burning of a woman upon an altar. (In a symptomatic and striking reveal from one of his earliest creations, "Die Feen", a hunted doe pursued by male protagonists turns out to be a female in disguise.) "Parsifal" and "The Ring" culminate in sacrificial violence executed upon on ambivalent female counterheroes, Kundry and Brünnhilde. In each case, their forced disappearance forms the critical signal that the perceived upheaval in social norms has been calmed. So crucial is the function of these female sacrificial roles, that each of these works could and arguably should have been named after them, yet not a single work by Wagner carries the name of a woman in the title. There is also violence in this erasure. And in another case of the doubling of art and life, Wagner's relentless pursuit of the baptism of his Jewish "Parsifal" conductor Hermann Levi may also be read as a hunger for the sacrificial act.

The removal of Brünnhilde and Kundry via sacrifice eliminates indeterminacy, the Rheingold is returned as a precious metal embedded in nature and the Grail ritual resumes in the Temple as the province of an exclusive male fraternity. The stakes in "Parsifal" are particularly fraught as Kundry's ultimate sacrifice is rivaled by an attempted male self-sacrifice, Klingsor's auto-desecration (it is left ambiguous whether what transpired on the body of this knight errant was circumcision or castration; in either case it is framed as an aberrant breaking of the natural order). In his final work, Wagner makes it thus abundantly clear that there can be no substitute for that ultimate substitute of generalized violence, it cannot be inflicted by men on themselves but must transpire on the body of a woman. With such sacrifice the wandering that was the subject and content of the drama comes to a still-stand and reverts to an eternal present. The master term for Wagner's overall project for German Art and German politics let us recall, was "Wiedergeburt" or rebirth, how devastatingly ironic that the uniquely violent passages of this rebirth transpire on the bodies of women, not via their singular natural endowment for childbirth but rather in their removal via sacrificial death.

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