

Badiou pro Wagner¹

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This essay will be concerned with Badiou's account of Wagner.² In the first instance, it will pursue or track its thought, trace its structure, follow its development. Of course, it is only fairly recently that we have become aware that Wagner might have a place in Badiou's canon. Badiou's major philosophical works pay no attention to the composer. The exact significance of Wagner within a philosophical configuration of art and artists established by an 'aesthetics of distinctions' (2010a: 15) and ascribing a specific and distinct weight and meaning to any given element is consequently not finally clear. At a certain point, the essay will therefore try to place Badiou's account of Wagner a little more precisely within the intricate architecture of his thought, to ground it more fully than Badiou himself has up to this point. Having done so, I shall ask how far one might want to swerve from the course of Badiou's argument. This will not exactly involve a critique of Badiou's version of Wagner, still less a 'critical account' of it, but rather an attempt, having presented its structure and confirmed it in place, also to amplify it, to nuance it differently at specific points. This will additionally mean nuancing its relation to the architecture of Badiou's philosophy itself, tilting certain joints in that architecture at particular angles. The rationale for this procedure lies in certain differences I have with Badiou's thought, and that I have been expressing for some time.³ These differences are in large measure connected with Badiou's understanding of the aesthetic domain, but also with how my own different but not unrelated understanding might inflect certain elements of his thought as a larger construction, even redeploy them. Whilst I shall spend little time referring back to what Badiou calls the 'genre' of 'debates with Wagner' from Nietzsche onwards, as he himself does, I nonetheless recognize that, as he says, it is a rare and special one. Where else does one find a series of philosophers and intellectuals addressing a composer or musician, meditating on

¹ All translations are my own except where otherwise specified. I mean to return to the theme of this essay again, more learnedly, specifically with reference to Badiou's excision of Schopenhauer from his Wagnerian problematic.

² This discussion refers only to the French text of 2010, *Cinq leçons sur le 'cas' Wagner*. This may seem perverse, given that English is my first language and the English-language text *Five Lessons on Wagner* in fact came first. But for reasons of implication, association, reference and nuance, Badiou in French must always have priority over Badiou in English, as the difference between the French and English titles to the Wagner book sufficiently show. I did not want enter into questions of the differences between the two texts, still less questions of their composition history, all of which are quite distant from the present project.

³ See for instance Gibson 2006, 2012.

his or her theoretical significance, so seriously? I hope to follow Badiou in contributing to the debate, whilst also adding a 'supplementary variation' to it, as he says he does himself (2010: 73), bearing in mind that, as Badiou notes, the construction of Wagner as a 'case' has often not derived directly from his works, to which it is as well to refer.

I will briefly add a few biographical details, since Badiou himself does so in this context, and my own are germane here. From a background quite similar to Badiou's in certain respects, like him, I derived a young love of Wagner and his operas from an extremely musical mother. However, for what for them were political reasons, my parents never went to see a single performance of opera. This was a question of class. They were both of very modest means and educated but thoroughly provincial extraction. They prided themselves on their culture, but it was an English culture not altogether remote from that of George Eliot's Caleb Garth or Felix Holt, if suitably modernized (via Shaw, Wells, Galsworthy, J.B. Priestley, faint prospective touches of Eliot and Lawrence; this culture is defunct today). Opera in performance was an affair for a social elite who could afford it on the one hand, but were trivial enough to associate great art with dressing up and light conversation in the theatre bar on the other. Everything my parents knew of the operatic art came from records and the radio and, in my mother's case, scores. By the time I had ceased to share my parents' social allergies (at least in any uncomplicated sense), the habit of not seeing opera (especially when one could always see films) had become ingrained. Therefore, whilst some of its key points of reference (Boulez, Syberberg) are by no means unfamiliar to me, I share little of Badiou's knowledge of production history, and have never got at all close to making the trip to Bayreuth, as he has. This will give the essay a certain perspective on its theme, one heavily weighted towards music and text rather than stage and performance — though if, as he admits, Badiou's knowledge of the relevant technical musical terms is limited, mine is even more so — but also mediated, here and there, through another of my passions from youth, literature. This is above all the case with the work of Thomas Mann. Badiou hardly mentions Mann's Wagner — the Wagner of a literary genius, rather than a philosopher's Wagner — which is all the more reason for introducing him here, particularly the Wagner of the essays collected in *Pro and Contra Wagner*. It is in Mann that we will finally discover a significant supplement to Badiou's Wagner.

The central rivet in Badiou's book is clear, strong and easily supported: it is time we finished with the 'theoretical violence' of postwar anti-Wagnerianism, particularly in its major phase from the late 1970s onwards (2010: 21). Postwar anti-Wagnerianism now seems as eminently available to historical bracketing as, say, the long historical indifference to the English metaphysical poets. It may have been, in some degree, at least comprehensible in the decades immediately after 1945. But to continue to persist with it is by now to commit oneself to a way of thinking cultural

history that, in its cruder manifestations, is both trivial and false: Hitler adored Wagner and Bayreuth, Wagner's works were duly incorporated into the fascist culture machine, *ergo* Wagner was, if not a proto-fascist, the harbinger of fascism or the fascist mindset, his operas at the root or part of the genesis of fascist ideology. This kind of retrospective construction is just poor thought. That Wagner the man could be foully anti-Semitic is certain and ungainsayable, and we should not only excoriate his anti-Semitism but analyse, understand and attack the relationship between it and a certain language. But one cannot extrapolate from the man's specific expressions of anti-Semitism to the supposed anti-Semitism, let alone the implicit fascism of his art, save through a series of more or less explicit operations that are intrinsically suspect.

Firstly, and crucially, one must erase the historical gap that separates Wagner's anti-Semitism and its determining conditions, and Nazi genocide and its'. But this is only possible if one introduces a concept of Germanic traits or 'Teutonism', assuming the ahistorical character of a race or people and its traditions and institutions, and thus reverting to precisely the mode of historical imagination so deplorable in Nazism and anti-Semitism themselves. This even aids and abets the thought that may ultimately lead to genocide, in so far as it neglects the historicity, the specific political determinations which made the Nazi genocide possible. The Shoah did not have to happen, and to track it back to its alleged 'sources' in German philosophy and culture — in any case, what 'Germany'? — is to obfuscate or retreat from the crucial and necessary focus on the (exactly) relevant historical conditions, not least the weaknesses of the Treaty of Versailles and the postwar settlement, the foundering of the Weimar Republic and the failure of European diplomacies and the policy of appeasement, none of which are thinkable in terms exclusive to Germany. This is to say no more than Badiou says when, in the *Ethics*, he writes of the hopeless inadequacy of thinking Nazism and the Shoah through any 'religious absolutization of Evil', rather than recognizing that they form a precise 'political sequence' (Badiou 2001: 64-5). Indeed, one might add that the former mode of 'thought' implies a kind of reverse exceptionalism, common at the present time, which threatens to ensure the return of evil by making it exceptional, rather than understanding it as always conditional, a question of relations, and therefore also always imminent, but avoidable. At this point, countering the kind of ahistoricism that crudely conflates Wagner's art with a historical evil not material for him as such becomes virtually an imperative.

Secondly, the ahistoricism that takes the connection the Nazis established between Wagner and fascist ideology to be massively important also prisms him apart from the historical points of comparison that are more appropriate and revealing and would radically fissure the concept of a uniquely noxious Teutonism — say, Victorian English anti-Semitism. Carlyle's anti-Semitism, for example, is as ferocious as Wagner's. There is more overt anti-Semitism in Dickens's work (and,

incidentally, T.S. Eliot's) than there is in the German composer's. This is not to say that one might not want to problematize and even, in a certain context, to denounce all of them, and many of their contemporary European writers, thinkers and artists with them. But that is a separate question from any supposedly singular, national bond uniting Wagnerian and fascist evil. Thirdly, there is the retrospective interpretation of the operas themselves as proto-fascist. Once again, the intellectual manoeuvre at stake, here — extrapolation from Wagner's huge emotional investment in Teutonic and Nordic mythology to Aryanism — is intellectually feeble. It ignores some of the most blatant features of the work, most obviously, perhaps, that *Der Ring* in particular is everywhere concerned with a catastrophic logic that ensures the demise of a mythological Teutonic world and is the inexorable consequence of its structural flaws *as a mythological system*. If after all one sets historical determinations in abeyance in approaching *Der Ring*, then it is surely more convincingly and compellingly understood as a prophetic forecast of the German disaster and an account of some of its sources than a grandly mystificatory version of a German *Geist*. When Badiou writes of a Germany he saw in 1952 — '*vaincue, grisâtre, encore en ruines*' ('conquered, grey, still in ruins') — as evoking '*les désastres du Ring ou les derelictions de Tannhäuser*' ('the disasters of *The Ring* or the derelictions of *Tannhäuser*', 2010: 7), he grasps exactly this. Indeed, one might wonder — it is a question implicit in my later argument — whether the postwar world has not so often slighted Wagner for reasons that have been the opposite of those it took to be legitimately its own, and have been rooted in a reconstructionist fear or dismissal of catastrophic logic in general, from 1945 to 1990 and well beyond, 1990 only doubling the drive. This is the more plausible in that anti-Wagnerians sometimes turn out to be enthusiasts for Nietzsche and (above all) Heidegger as luminaries for our era.⁴ At all events, from an admittedly insufficient ahistorical vantage-point, *Der Ring* might seem to belong less with the cinema of Leni Riefenstahl than with Rossellini's great film of Berlin in 1946, *Germania Anno Zero*.

Badiou's pro-Wagnerian case is not exactly of the kind I have just outlined, but vitally depends on a similar insistence on processes of differentiation (rather than homogenization) and, more specifically, on a need to draw certain lines of historical distinction, to separate distinct historical phases, chiefly, perhaps, as it manifests itself as a will to 'have done with' a recent past.⁵ Badiou too stresses the cardinal value of differentiation as necessary to any adequate thought about Wagner, in contradistinction to the totalizing indifference to difference, to specification, that

⁴ For a major case relative to Heidegger and Fascism, see Farías 1987.

⁵ Though there is a sense in which the anti-Wagnerians also aimed to do precisely this. I have analysed elsewhere the (problematic) extent to which Badiou's 'affirmationism' seems to me to resemble postwar and contemporary positivities. See Badiou 2005a, and Gibson 2012: 278-9.

fascism and anti-Wagnerianism hold in common. Indeed, he is much concerned to produce a defence of Wagner himself against the charges of totalization and the erasure of differences, a defence which has interesting consequences, not only for an interpretation of Wagner, but for the progress of Badiou's own aesthetics. But Badiou is not much interested in the historicist case in itself. Nor is the anti-Wagnerianism which preoccupies him principally of the unsophisticated kind that I have just addressed, though the sophisticated version includes some of the same emphases, notably on a proto-fascist Wagner or the 'dangers' of Wagnerianism (2010: 21). What concerns him above all are the implications a certain postwar thought has had for aesthetics, in a manner that has emphatically been to the detriment of Wagner. He disputes this thought and its estimation of Wagner together, chiefly as they emerge in the work of Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe. I shall consider the contours of this dispute as a whole, rather than separating Badiou's critiques of the two philosophers, as he does himself.⁶

Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe both insist on the imperative of an art adequate to modern horror, above all, to the decisive historical rupture that goes by the name of Auschwitz; perhaps one should say, adequately responsive to it, since what is at issue here has nothing to do with adequation. By such a criterion, Wagner stands condemned, and can offer no model or orientation to the contemporary scene. Wagner — particularly for Lacoue-Labarthe — is the very paradigm of the 'aestheticization of politics' (2010: 22), an aestheticization 'absolutely manifested in the effects he produces' (2010: 23). Wagner confuses politics and a religion of art, the more perniciously, in that his is the first modern art for the masses. The Wagnerian obsession with techniques and technology, a music of technological power calculated to manipulate others to grandiose but specious ends, anticipates the contemporary aestheticization of politics in mass culture, whereby the political force of the work of art disappears or is travestied in proportion to its vulgar spectacularization.

We should note that, according to Badiou, it is specifically the Wagnerian pursuit of a 'great art' that both philosophers anathematize. For the anti-Wagnerians, it is a 'modest art' that is above all necessary today (2010: 22). If significant art is in the slightest possible after Auschwitz, the relevant aesthetics will be one of humility, impoverishment, fragmentation, experiment which will be de-totalizing, resist totalization at all costs, and thereby also any totalitarianism (2010: 36). Only

⁶ Whilst Badiou refers extensively to *Negative Dialectics*, however, Wagner scarcely appears in it himself. Badiou has therefore to extrapolate an anti-Wagnerian thought from it as a supplement to Adorno's *Versuch über Wagner*, which he does not quote or consider in detail. For Badiou, Wagner is an 'absent cause' of *Negative Dialectics*, a condition of a philosophy absent from the philosophy itself (2010: 41). The concept of truth-domains (including art) as 'conditions' for philosophy is familiar in Badiou's thought. See in particular Badiou 1992. So far as I know, however, the concept of an *absent* condition, though fascinating, appears nowhere else in his work. If, Beckett, Mallarmé, Hölderlin, Wagner and others are among the 'conditions' of Badiou's own philosophy, what might its absent conditions include? I have recently discussed Badiou's thought in relation to one possible example, Flaubert. See Gibson 2012: 54-64.

thus, in a state of extreme diffidence, uncertainty, self-interrogation and self-deprecation, can a serious postwar art survive at all; only, that is, in a condition of extreme misgiving as to its own existence or right to existence, extreme caution about any purposes or goals it might set for itself, given the long shadows that recent history casts across the aesthetic domain. Thus Adorno turns to Beckett, Lacoue-Labarthe to Celan. Wagnerian grandiosity is the antithesis of such art. The Wagnerian sublime, the refusal of all prosiness beloved of the contemporary scene, the passion for rather than the renunciation of effects, all make for an art whose distinguishing features are the very opposite of contemporary self-reflexivity. So, too, Wagner refuses the contemporary imperative of interrogating the border between art and non-art, the reluctance to confer any distinction at all on art. One might wonder whether the same might not be alleged of, say, Beethoven. But Wagnerian opera is finally not only the epitome of kitsch, petit-bourgeois grandiloquence; its excess is the very measure of a historical failure as Beethovenian grandeur is not and could not be, of a historical disenchantment already broodingly imminent, but that Wagnerian excess everywhere displaces, veils. At all events, Wagnerian opulence is profoundly opposed to the Hölderlinian sobriety which is in fact Lacoue-Labarthe's 'pre-existing ideal', one which may continue to serve as a guiding light for contemporary art.

The anti-Wagnerians arraign five principal features of Wagnerian art, or goals to which it aspires: totality, unity, schematics, identity and dialectics. Wagner's is an art of great, massive, monolithic constructions. The imperative behind or within this massiveness is the subsumption of difference. Indeed, Wagnerian opera 'can perhaps be considered as the last great model' of such subsumption (2010: 53), not least in Wagner's dream of a synthesis of the arts in the total work. This makes it an art of totalization comparable to Hegelian philosophy (we shall happen on this analogy again). The Wagnerian *leitmotif* itself works in this way, overdetermining distinct elements in Wagner's opera in the interests of mythological coherence. By contrast, art produced according to Adorno's principles — the new, humble, experimental art — will be 'de-totalizing', resist totalization at all costs, and thereby also any totalitarianism (2010: 36). Adorno puts forward a model of 'dispersive fragmentation' for art, the work of art as a 'constellation', that is, a dispersed aggregation of units that do not form a whole. Wagner's by contrast is an art of 'configuration'; that is, it 'configures the system of its immanent multiplicity and absolutely forbids it to disperse' (2010: 53).

By the same token, Wagner's is an art of closure and essence, not openness and appearance. As all the great philosophical engagements with Wagner have insisted, his music 'imposes a unity on a variegated [*panachée*] mass' (2010: 75). This goes back as far as Nietzsche, who took Wagner to be a 'sorcerer', enchanting multiplicity into unity, thereby proving 'the enemy of Dionysian

clarity', and subsequently Heidegger, who saw Wagner as 'the archetype of the metaphysician', capturing being in the name of the One (2010: 76; the sense of Wagner's as a magic power, and precisely suspect because of it, is often close to the surface among the anti-Wagnerians, not surprisingly, perhaps, given how often the theme of and the German word for magic, *Zauber*, appear in his work). What the 'magic' of producing unity means, in material terms, is musical 'saturation' (2010: 31). Wagner's is a music that absorbs all multiplicities and smothers all complexities. This is notably the case with the play between music and libretto so characteristic of opera, which Wagner eliminates.⁷ Because the Wagnerian drive is always towards totality and unity, there is equally always a Wagnerian schematics. For all Wagner's 'grandiloquent sensuality' and the mobility of his music, the imperative of a (non-musical) 'rational structure' and a 'narrative scheme' invariably asserts itself (2010: 77). In this respect, Wagner's is even a duplicitous music, since it presents itself as given over to an endless indeterminacy whilst always in fact keeping its feet planted firmly and reassuringly on the ground.

Wagner, then, pervasively relies on a scheme which is both origin and end, together, which *contains* difference, boxes it in, determines it as a finite or limited play. Like the drive to totality and unity, this reliance on the scheme is inseparable from the postulation of identity. Wagner's music is a striking example of a musical articulation of 'the principle of identity', the 'identitarian assertion' that, for Adorno, has dominated occidental rationality, sealing antagonism in place by suppressing contradiction, and that, after Auschwitz, we must leave behind (2010: 45-7). The negative dialectics that Adorno urges upon us aims to release us from the principle of identity, establishing difference, not as its own principle but rather as its *telos*, since we do not as yet know what difference is. Difference has yet to begin. Where music is concerned, this imposes an ethics of differentiation, the unlimited production of difference. Wagner's work presents us with the very antithesis of such an ethics; he is 'the enemy of any programmatic elaboration [*programmation*] of difference' (2010: 49). At this point, we see how, for an Adorno or Lacoue-Labarthe, far from being graspable as a historically specific formation, Wagner's anti-Semitism is indissolubly bound to a fundamental intellectual and ethical dereliction profoundly evident throughout his oeuvre.

Fascinatingly, this dereliction is supposedly also inseparable from Wagner's Hegelianism;⁸ indeed we might think of it as a Hegelian dereliction. For Adorno, Wagner belongs with Kant, but above all Hegel, to a by now untenable intellectual world that is still ungainsayably lodged within Enlightenment horizons. Like Hegel, he must everywhere convert the negative into the positive; understand the negation of the negation as eventuating in positivity, as is obvious enough in the

⁷ As Badiou asserts, if one pays attention to the operas themselves, this is a quite untenable position.

⁸ This argument is all the more remarkable given Wagner's profound devotion to Schopenhauer, great Hegel-hater.

finales of the operas, which are invariably classical resolutions. In this respect, Wagner even represents the culmination of Hegelianism in music. But we can no longer share this Hegelianism or immerse ourselves without scruple in Wagner's Hegelian worlds. The only dialectics that it is possible for us is one of negativity with no absolute affirmation, a negative dialectics which announces an end to the Enlightenment. This alone can be adequate to modern horror, to the decisive historical rupture that goes by the name of Auschwitz. But for Lacoue-Labarthe and Adorno, Wagner's music is still profoundly infused by Hegelian dialectics, above all, as a monster that swallows all differences, destroys respect for alterity. Indeed, Wagner's music is profoundly dialectical in itself. Its version of musical difference (and change) is always inauthentic, because ineluctably, dialectically heading towards a finale.

The principles of totality, unity and identity, the practice of schematics and dialectics: these all have various consequences in Wagner's art that are problematic for post-Auschwitz culture. Firstly, in Adorno's terms in particular, Wagner's cannot be an art of 'vain waiting'. For Adorno, as supremely exemplified in Beckett's work, 'vain waiting' is 'opposed to all notion of reconciliation or salvation' (2010: 67). We may wait for justice to be rendered but cannot expect it; the imperative can only be negative. In effect, this makes of the present an impasse in which justice is impossible. Beckett knows that the absolute will not produce itself, that there is only a vain waiting for justice. This is the lesson of modern horror, to which significant art cannot but respond. By contrast, in Adorno's terms, waiting in Wagner is 'metaphysical', 'waiting for a final result' (2010: 101), rather than 'waiting as pure waiting' (2010: 150), most notably, perhaps — and with *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser* and *Parsifal* in mind, one can at least understand the case without too much trouble — insofar as it is waiting within a teleology of redemption, even if redemption is not forthcoming. Or, to put the point differently: waiting in Wagner finds a *telos* in the *Aufhebung*, this being a function of his latent Hegelianism.

By the same token, Wagner's is an art of the sublimation of suffering. Adorno's insistence on difference promotes a conception of philosophy, negative dialectics, as a thought that thinks what is different to thought. That which is different to thought declares itself, above all, as and in suffering. This commits Adorno to an ethics of the victim: it is only by thinking from the position of the victim that thought can prove adequate to that which resists it, as it must do after Auschwitz. Subjectivity now begins in culpability; the subject begins in grief. This finally justifies itself in terms of a *telos* of the negation, the elimination of the least suffering. The trouble with Wagner is that, again, he always links suffering to the possibility of redemption, thereby cancelling its radical alterity, derogating it in reducing it to the secondary order of sameness. But this kind of prioritization of an affirmative work, with its assertion of 'the positivity of existence', has by now

become 'obscene' (2010: 57). We rather start out from the concentration camp, which is everywhere. Once more, Adorno's major example of scrupulous adherence to this principle is Beckett. Wagner instrumentalizes suffering, insisting on a passageway to 'a pardon or a salvation that, in reality, is impossible' (2010: 59). Alternatively, he recuperates suffering in dissolving it into a rhetoric of mere compassion. The 'insupportable' is 'subordinated to becoming' (2010: 98).

If, for Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe, we start out from the thought of the concentration camp and there is no evident, ready escape from it, and if contemporary art can only state that, that does not mean that art does not continue to insist on, even to generate an openness to possible futures. For Adorno, critical theory itself is exactly concerned to open up spaces for the expression of alternative prospects. Contemporary art now inhabits a threshold where there are always ambiguities, velleities, indeterminacies, transformations, not in the revolutionary sense, but in that forms are provisional and unstable, always prey to mutation. But the five major features of Wagner's art as listed above spell system and closure, making of it, again, 'the musical equivalent of the Hegelian system'. This kills off any thought of ambiguity, provisionality, an open future, not least for art itself, to which Wagner bequeaths the 'impossible task' of 'pursuing that which has already been achieved' (2010: 30). Not surprisingly, therefore, there is no new experience of time in Wagner, no creation of an original experience of time, only a time expressed as blockage — Wagner's characteristic, invidious longueurs — eventuating in final resolution.

Badiou has no truck with the indictment of Wagner on the ground that he aestheticizes politics. Firstly, we can hardly feel assured that we know exactly what the politics of the great operas might be. Even if we could, what licenses the identification of Wagner's music with the kind of 'gross gestures', for example, that are 'secretly in league with German militarism'? Wagner's art scintillates with endless detail, is 'an extremely subtle complex of musical cells' (2010: 79; an argument hard to contest, that, for anyone who has listened to the works studiously and at length). Certainly, Wagner was much concerned with technical and 'technological' complexity and virtuosity. But to identify this with vulgar spectacularization or the aestheticization of politics in present mass culture is to pass over or at least reduce the question of what the specific effects of the techniques and their manifold implications might be.

But in itself, the appeal to detail, subtlety, complexity, variegation is unlikely to prevail against the anti-Wagnerians. For of course, to the anti-Wagnerian, all such features are not intrinsic to the operas, but rather in some degree incidental to them. They are sealed in by the unifying drive, boxed in by the will to totality, and in that sense prevented from registering in themselves. But to Badiou, the assumption that unity and totality are Wagnerian imperatives is a prejudice, one whose provenance is Nietzsche, and the ruse whereby Nietzsche accuses Wagner of a betrayal of modern

paganism in order the better to further his own claims on the same score. But Wagner is indeed the first great modern pagan of music, wilfully stripping it of any homogeneity, any supposedly natural purity. Wagner's music has its own singular and profound tensions, and these are a function of extraordinarily rich and dense relations between dissonances and their connections with harmonies. One aspect of this, clearly, is the clash in Wagner between purity and redemption — for there undoubtedly was a Wagner who was gripped by the thought of certain kinds of purity; one could hardly think otherwise of the creator of *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal* — and the great new Wagnerian power of musical seduction. This conflict finds no determinate resolution. Conflicts of its kind can only accommodate a thought of unity and totality if we assume that there is a Wagnerian *Aufhebung*, of which more shortly. Otherwise, one is left with a 'molecular' music 'in a permanent state of change' within which continuity, for example, will turn out to be paradoxical, since it is inseparable from and thrives off discontinuity (2010: 19, 34, 79). Nor is the *leitmotif* a unifying device. *Leitmotifs* do not impose a unity from outside but are frequently instruments of uncertainty — as when the sword motif appears when neither Siegfried nor the sword is concerned — not least when they are fused with others. In general, Wagner introduced a new treatment of difference in music which pushed chromatism to its tonal limits, to a point of radical tonal incertitude, a point at which all forms of totality blur and fall back.

Badiou equally calls into question the supposed privilege Wagner affords to identity and to a rational, narrative scheme which, insofar as the question of identity is also one of characters, he tends to think together. If the concept of a narrative scheme is based on a prioritization of action, then it will hardly do for Wagner's operas. In Wagner, action is sporadic and, most of the time, very brief. What rather takes the place of action is discourse or discourses prolonged at great length, with actions a brief interlude between them. It is not actions that are of interest, but what characters say, and this, the discourse of the character, is specifically Wagnerian in so far as it involves 'a creation of subjective possibilities, in the sense of a new subjectivity'. The Wagnerian subject has a 'declarative essence' which always consists in a radical proposition concerning the 'generic meaning' of existence (2010: 145). The proposition has to do with what a character takes to be him- or herself in the general situation of the world, the signification that the world can have for him or her and for others. It is never self-expression, but rather a hypothesis, a proposition about the meaning of the situation, the character's intentions and the possibility of their succeeding or being thwarted. That is why stories are told and retold and take different forms in Wagner. The reiteration of the story within the story is the way in which the character declares itself, and the role it intends to play in the story. Wagner understood that this weighed heavily on his operas, but persisted with it, for it was the only way in which his characters could clarify and continue to clarify their

positions as subjects. This reflects the fact that history repeatedly appears both as an impasse for the subject and open to transformation on the basis of being (re-)narrated, and makes of Wagnerian opera 'a music of metamorphosis' (2010: 146), rather than a confirmation of given identities and a schematized presentation of unfolding actions.

As far as a Wagnerian dialectics is concerned, Badiou is clear and emphatic, though this may not please all his commentators:⁹ Wagner's task is the 'creation of possibility' (2010: 161), but as such 'has nothing to do with Hegelian or dialectical strategy' (2010: 162). Badiou everywhere asserts that Wagner's art is not dialectical. He resists the notion that Wagner's music is inhabited by the dynamic, generative, progressive movement of the dialectic. The Wagnerian artwork can sustain a multiplicity of different hypotheses, so far so that there may be a radical hesitation as to how one could choose between them, and this hesitation is strikingly alien to a dialectical thought. One might even think of Badiou's book on Wagner as experimenting with or further developing non-dialectical models of a positive thought of division, or exploring how far the master-composer might supply them to the philosopher. This is evident in two of the book's more notable themes, ambiguity and the split subject. Lacoue-Labarthe says that there is, certainly, such a thing as Wagnerian ambiguity, but it is always finally reduced to one-dimensionality in the interests, once again, of totality and unity. Badiou, however, flatly denies this. In fact, ambiguity appears in all the features of Wagner's operas, musical, scenic, narrative, even poetic, and their relations, in a systematic dualism 'which manifestly exceeds every interpretative schema' (2010: 36) and explodes any notion of a Wagnerian One or whole. Badiou is exactly right, here; but he means something rather more precise by ambiguity than does the routine hermeneutics that declares that words or phrases 'mean more than one thing'.

Badiou does indeed think the Wagnerian split or division as pervasive but non-dialectical. This is sufficiently evident in the question of the subject in Wagner as we have just described it. The Wagnerian subject is not an actualisable structure nor a peripeteia, but is split or heterogeneous, that is its form. It is not available to dialectical resolution; its development is a work of transformation without finality. This is typical of Badiou's critique of the idea that there is an end-driven, Hegelian structure to Wagner's operas. Resolutions in Wagner are non-dialectical, and the argument that Wagner finally produces an inauthentic version of musical difference because it is one ineluctably heading towards a finale is obviously not convincing. Indeed, one might push further than this, though very much along Badiou's lines, and wonder about the character of the 'finales' themselves. What *is* a Wagnerian 'ending'? If there is a finale to *Lohengrin*, for example, whose is it? Elsa's, Lohengrin's, Brabant's, Germany's, Montsalvat's, even Ortrud's? What exactly

⁹ In particular, Bruno Bosteels, long a defender of a Hegelian conception of Badiou. See Bosteels 2004, 2009.

is at stake, at the end of the opera? If one follows through the implications of the radical openness of this question, few procedures will better demonstrate the impoverishment of the anti-Wagnerian case. Even in the case of *Parsifal*, one can at least ask whether, in contrast to the great, protracted evocations of the stricken *Gralshalle*, the ending is not strangely brusque and peremptory, a means of wrapping up the issues, rather than standing in an intricate dialectical relation to them. It is certainly possible, not only to stage it thus, but also to play the closing music this way, as in some degree sober and even sombre in tone; for the sweet and beautifully toned promise of redemption at the beginning of Act Three, in natural surroundings, has necessarily become considerably more complicated once brought to the Castle of the Grail and the human world at large. Certainly, as the continuation of the mad agony of Amfortas right up to the closing sequence and the silent (if adoring) death of Kundry suggest, the thought of redemption is haunted throughout Act Three by a sense of the absolute need for repentance, suffering, self-interrogation, the consciousness of error.

Badiou also disputes the belief that Wagner is never concerned with 'vain waiting', that waiting in Wagner's operas always slots into a more or less crude teleology. Here, again, there appears to be an extraordinary reluctance among anti-Wagnerians to look straight at what is there in the works themselves. The longest episode of waiting in the whole history of opera surely involves Tristan in Act III of *Tristan und Isolde*. Of course, one may object that Isolde actually arrives. But this does not in the slightest affect the presentation of waiting, which appears as a 'waiting in itself', not least since all that is left Tristan is to die; the excitement with which he returns to life is altogether futile. In a sense, Isolde finally arrives precisely to confirm that futility, no more. Vain waiting, says Badiou, is a crucial theme of Wagner's, and he draws from it 'an unprecedented poetics, a stupefying musical system which constantly defers resolutions and creates a state of harmonic incertitude' (2010: 60). At the very least, he presents waiting as a structure that 'has its own end in itself' (2010: 151). This would be very much the case (I would assume) with the first act of *Parsifal*, for example, which is all about a world without Parsifal, that is waiting for its Parsifal — '*Durch Mitleid wissend,/der reine Tor/harren sein*' ('The pure fool is awaited, with his knowledge born of compassion', 1938: 447)¹⁰ — and that is not sure that it has found him when he arrives, for good reason, for his arrival is unpromising. This is surely the point about Gurnemanz's prolonged hesitation over whether Parsifal is really the *reine Tor* or not. The music dominant in Act One exactly captures this sense, not so much of irresolution, perhaps, as of incompleteness, a condition of suspension from which no progress is possible (without the *reine Tor*), because, without intervention, like the world of *Der Ring*, as I suggested earlier, this is a world that is irremediably, structurally flawed. Of course, one cannot claim for *Parsifal*, as one can for the end of

¹⁰ All translations from the Wagner librettos are mine, not those alongside the German text in the *Authentic Librettos*.

Tristan, that there is nothing beyond vain waiting. But one might argue all the same that the intensity with which waiting is conveyed in Act One is present precisely to enhance the Wagnerian persuasion, according to Badiou, which is — Elsa knows it, too — that there are always exceptions to vain waiting, that there may be a vanity of waiting, that waiting need not be all.

Of all the weapons in the anti-Wagnerian armoury, the argument that he sublimates, recuperates or instrumentalizes suffering, that suffering is always a means to an end or a stage in a progress, seems peculiarly feeble, not to say cloth-eared. Suffering firmly lodged in a context of redemption, in *Tristan und Isolde*, *Der Ring*? Why should one particularly write off Wagner in this respect, and not, say, much of Beethoven or Mahler? What anti-Wagnerians slight as Wagnerian longueurs are often protracted if not unremitting struggles with more or less obscure forms of pain from which there is no immediate or obvious issue. If indeed the possibility of redemption is not beyond thought or realization, Wagner's are not worlds in which, at more or less length, pain must duly dissolve or yield to transcendence, and is therefore secondary. Wagner's music is, as much as anything else, infused with an astonishing intimacy with, not only pain, but its nuances and vacillations, the struggles with which it is always tied up. The sheer subtlety of Wagner's feeling for pain, its complexities and contradictions, supremely in the case of women (Brünnhilde, Kundry, Elsa), definitively frees the operas from all charge of sentimentalizing, spectacularizing or crassly theatricalising it.

Badiou's case, however, is more sophisticated than this. Wagner creates a new and modern understanding of suffering, one close to the new musical subjectivity, nocturnal, inextricable from sensual intensity, that he created for and in modern music. Suffering in Wagner is an irreducible 'tear [*déchirement*]' in the world and experience (2010: 81). Wagner invented the music of and for this 'tear' (2010: 115). 'Torn' as he is between Christianity and Venusberg (and indeed one might add between Venusberg and the career of a Thuringian court poet, career and arrogant waywardness, etc.), Tannhäuser is the obvious example, but only the most obvious (2010: 116-17). As is patent in *Tannhäuser*, Wagner immerses us in a suffering that is drastically of the present and cannot be otherwise, because inseparable from the subjective cleavage everywhere operating within the music. That Wotan should become Der Wanderer in *Siegfried* is precisely symptomatic of the restlessness of the torn subject in Wagner. Belonging as their conflicts make them do to more than one context, Wagner's people cannot stay still, are compelled to shift their ground. The suffering Wagnerian subject is neither dialectizable nor curable. Another compelling example of this, one might add, would be in Act One of *Tristan und Isolde* prior to the drinking of the potion, where two riven subjectivities — Tristan's, with his brief collapses from distance into passion, Isolde's, with her savage self-wrenchings from passion to distance — soar and plunge with the movement of both

the music and the *Seeschiff*. Here and repeatedly, in Badiou's terms, the Wagnerian subject endures a real internal heterogeneity which can never be surmounted (2010: 115). It is precisely not held at bay by a rhetoric of compassion or 'dissolved into a future' (2010: 121).

So, too, time in Wagner is not exactly a blocked time, nor a time determined by the conclusion towards which it is inexorably leading. It is rather a time of two aspects, a time that, contrary to the anti-Wagnerians, is deeply and inherently unresolved. Wagner creates three new forms of experience of this time: firstly, '*the time of disparate worlds*', of transition from one world to another. This involves a kind of overlap in which the traces of the prior world remain perceptible in the emergence of its successor, so that the exact relation between the two remains in some degree undecidable: for instance, the interlude in Act One of *Parsifal*, which dramatizes a transition from exterior to interior, narrative to ceremony, potential life to imminent death (2010: 153-4). Secondly, there is '*the time of the period of incertitude*', a time when the creation of a new possibility has not yet occurred, whether *via* a peripetia, a new turn of the intrigue, a new development in a subjectivity or a decision, a time of possibilities suspended or as yet unrealized, of a world grown impracticable and another as yet unrealized. As Wagner's contemporary Matthew Arnold put it, in to quote '*Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse*', this is a time "Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born". An appropriate example here would be the Prelude to Act III of *Tannhäuser*, between Tannhäuser's departure for Rome, and his return from it (2010: 153, 155-7). Thirdly, there is '*the time of tragic paradox*', a time in which a flaw appears in the appearance of things as a 'much more extensive temporality', a 'vast, hidden temporality which governs appearances'. Badiou cites Hagen's monologue in Act One of *Götterdämmerung*, in which he sings of 'his own victorious destiny', which is the destiny he is weaving for Siegfried, as Siegfried makes his voyage along the Rhine and 'the glorious future of the hero seems assured' (2010: 153, 157-60).

This, then, is the substance of Badiou's dispute with the anti-Wagnerians. If, however, we now try to place it in relation to his larger philosophy, one aspect of it should be quickly evident. Comparatively little of what we have grown familiar with as Badiou's theoretical apparatus actually appears here. The void, events, truths and truth-procedures, rarities, fidelities, forcings, restricted actions, worlds, inexistents, sites, situations, topological spaces, bodies (of truth)....one could go on: these terms are scarcely if ever apparent in the Wagner book. As we have seen, a concept of the Wagnerian subject is indeed there. But it is not evident that this is either the 'classic' subject in Badiou's philosophy, the subject of a truth, or the 'reactive' or 'obscure' subject that the later Badiou distinguishes from the 'faithful' one (2006: 24). But here we should proceed carefully. For if the Wagnerian subject has a 'declarative essence', 'declaring' a truth has long been a feature of subjectivity in Badiou's model of it. Truths appear in and as *énoncés* (see for instance Badiou 1988:

441-2). Furthermore, the concept of Wagner's subjects as producing hypotheses or propositions on the meaning of situations seems close to the much earlier assertion that the subject of a truth 'avails itself of names to make hypotheses about the truth...to make hypotheses about itself' (1988: 437). Finally, if the subject of an event is a split subject, as Badiou says the Wagnerian subject is, is that not consistent with Badiou's familiar conception of the subject? 'Subjectification takes the form of the Two', he writes. 'It is turned towards intervention in the domain [*aux parages*] of the eventmental site [*site événementiel*]. But it is also turned towards the situation' (1988:430). That, we might think, is why stories are narrated and re-narrated in Wagner, taking different forms. They are oriented towards the situation, but also intervene in it.

Yet Badiou at no point discusses Wagner's characters as subjects of events. When one looks closely at the three aspects of Badiou's version of the Wagnerian subject just noted, all of them only seem at length to underline the point: here, the event is not what is at stake or, even more provocatively, is not what most matters. Firstly, in Badiou's account of Wagner, the *énoncé* takes its bearings, gets its measure from what I have just called the general situation of the world in which the character finds him- or herself, rather than the 'positive connection with the event' which forces it to be 'veridical' in a 'new situation' (1988: 441). Secondly, the Wagnerian subject's hypotheses are not anticipations of a final presentation of what remains indiscernible to him or her. Given what Badiou calls 'the hazardous historicity of truth' (1988: 445), the progress of the truths to which subjects commit themselves is chancy and at the mercy of historical circumstance. The primary tense of the subject's hypothesis (which is his or her wager on the event) must therefore necessarily be future anterior. But this cannot be the case with the Wagnerian subject, according to Badiou's account of it, because that subject's hypothesis primarily addresses what the current situation can be taken to mean ('this is what is at stake here'); less crucially, what his or her intervention in the situation might be ('this is what I may do here') and only finally what may come of such an intervention ('this is what I may achieve here'). All three progressively shade towards the subjective declaration of a truth in the future anterior ('this is what I will have done'). But none of them coincides with it. This tells us much.

Thirdly: pain was always a possible consequence of subjectification, in Badiou's terms. The event radically subtracts the subject from the world of opinion or established knowledge (a concept of subjectification that, for Badiou, does not appear to be Wagnerian, though one can self-evidently think of it as such, Tannhäuser's intervention in the *Sängerhalle* in Act Two being one obvious example). In doing so, it burdens him or her with the 'anguish' of the void (1988: 110). But the split Wagnerian subject's suffering is not of this kind: Tannhäuser's *déchirement* is not such an anguish; he rather suffers over divided commitments. Indeed, one might claim that he suffers because he is

not the subject of an event which would decisively clarify his ambivalences. His intervention in the *Sängerhalle* does not do so, because it is finally more a function of nostalgia for Venusberg than a consequence of intimacy with the void; which means that no artistic truth-procedure follows from it. For Badiou, whatever the anguish involved, the faithful subject remains an enthusiast for the new and its intimacy with the void. By contrast, in his turn to penitence and the (Catholic) church, Tannhäuser becomes a 'reactive' subject, but without experiencing reaction as offering what Badiou associates with it, the 'tranquil power' of 'conservation' (2009: 106), therefore reacting against his own reaction. More than anything else, he begins to look like the desperate, vacillating subject who is a 'servant of the atonia [*l'atonie*] of the world' (2006: 446), having renounced the truth-procedure that might have begun with his defiance of the noble *Kreis* at the Wartburg.

There is, however, a different stake in the 'omission' I have noted, one, I would suggest, that makes the Wagner book the more powerful and important, and the more significant as a bolt-on to Badiou's thought as a whole. It also shows how consistent Badiou's thought is and has continued to be, how coherent his architectonics, for all its extraordinary elaboration, and how much further he continues to take the practice of elaboration itself. Badiou seems to me to be very right when he claims that Wagner is integrally concerned with a 'creation of possibility' which 'has nothing to do with Hegelian or dialectical strategy' (2010: 161-2; indeed, that has been very much what, philosophically, Badiou himself has offered as his legacy to a post-Hegelian age). At this point, one might obviously fear that the objection Lecerle notes with regard to Badiou's writings on literature — that he 'seems to find something in the text only because he sought it, and what he finds is always philosophical propositions, and always the propositions of his own philosophy' (Lecerle 2010: 138) — will also hold good for his account of Wagner. But if Lecerle insists on his reservation, his understanding of Badiou does not hinge on it. If Badiou imposes himself on literature, Lecerle asserts, this is not in the mode of 'subjective interpretation', but rather in a practice of 'strong reading' which extracts a problem from the literary work, constructs a concept which grasps it, acknowledges and addresses the protracted insistence of both problem and concept and constitutes 'an intervention rather than an interpretation' (Lecerle 2010: 114-16). This is what Badiou does with Wagner. His book on Wagner is such an intervention, the problem in question being: clearly there was a Wagner event, in that nothing like Wagnerian opera had ever happened before. Once we set the anti-Wagnerian case aside, what is the truth of the Wagner event; and what is that truth, given that it is above all a truth *in music*, and therefore requiring a particular set of terms? If what Badiou finds in Wagner is finally 'the propositions of his own philosophy', then, as I will argue, he does so in a very specific and distinctive way, to which I shall finally give a specific turn of my own.

If anything binds together the separate aspects of Badiou's defence of Wagner, it is the principle, cardinal for him from the beginning, that 'one ineluctably divides into two' (1976: 117). Wagner's music is above all fissile. It is this, perhaps above all, its drive to homogenize Wagner, its deafness to the countless nuances which make the operas indefinitely shear away from themselves that leaves the anti-Wagnerian case so open to question. So ineluctably does one divide into two that Wagner's work might seem to offer a dramatization of that principle — of what Badiou later calls his 'materialist dialectics' (2006: 91-7 and *passim*) — in its broadest scope. The Badiou of the early or mid-70s grasps the world as an immense and interminable hubbub of contradictions which know neither resolution nor the peace of synthesis. The contradictions latent in 'concrete forces' are everywhere split and fissured (1975: 34). Subjects, consciousnesses, paradigms, histories, classes, systems of thought: all are inhabited by ramifying processes of division and splinter incessantly. In effect, for the Badiou of the 70s, the law of Being is pure fission, 'affirmative scission' (1978: 38), dialectics in its 'Heraclitean affiliation' (1976: 51). From *L'Être et l'événement* to *Logiques des mondes*, by contrast, the moment in which truths split the existent with the assertion "there is that which there is not" ["*il y a ce qu'il n'y a pas*"] is an 'exception', sporadic and occasional (2006: 13). If Badiou's book on Wagner in some measure appears to constitute a return to his earlier conception of 'fission', then we need to examine that impression, and understand what is at stake in it.

We can capture what I mean by Wagnerian fission — one repeatedly dividing into two — with reference to one of the great Wagnerian passages, Tristan's 'Wo ich erwacht...' in Act Three, Scene One of *Tristan und Isolde*. It will also serve as a convenient paradigm at once of many of the features — manifold and intricate 'tensions', ambiguity and tonal incertitude, systematic dualism exceeding every interpretative frame and, above all, perhaps, the split subject suffering because irremediably heterogeneous — that Badiou associates with Wagner. Here, if anywhere, we find what Badiou takes to be the 'paradoxical continuity' of Wagnerian opera in miniature, and find it demonstrating the absence of a Wagnerian will to totality, unity and identity and the non-dialectical treatment of contradiction. In this it is typical. In a sense, Tristan sums up the aria in its first two lines: 'Wo ich erwacht,/ weilt' ich nicht' ('Where I awoke, there I was not', 1938: 339). The location of the subject is not its location, it is always dragging behind or already moving on elsewhere. To Tristan's immersion 'im weiten Reich/der Weltennacht' ('In the wide kingdom of the world's night', *ibid.*) and *Urvergessen*, original forgetting, in the void that precedes life and to which it returns, in utter indifference (by now) to the values of the State formation (Mark's Cornwall), he can counterpose one value alone: his *heiss-inbrünstig Liebe* (*ibid.*), his warm and ardent love, and the *Sehnsucht*, the unending longing it generates.

But if longing and love drive him from the terror of death, as he says, they drive him towards the light, to which, in Act Two, he and Isolde responded only with *‘Hass und Klage* [hatred and grievance]’ (1938: 328), the light whose *‘falschem Prangen* [false glitter]’ (1938: 331) was intrinsic to a world well lost and its deceitful lures (honour, renown, glory, reception into the fold). The *‘sight of the world* [*Blick der Welt*]’ had to be *‘dimmed* [*erblödet*]’ for their passion to luxuriate (1938: 325). In effect, love and longing impel Tristan towards an impossible composition with the world. Thus, in the aria, even in turning to the light, Tristan evokes death in paradoxical terms, is drawn back to the beginning of the aria even as it progresses, and he progresses with it, *‘aus Todesgewonne-Grauen*’, out of *‘death’s delight-terror*’ (1938: 339), German here making possible a certain intimacy in the fusion of contradictions impossible in English or French. Thus the bursting open of death’s door that Tristan goes on to evoke means emergence from night, but into a world of light which is at once convicted of madness, error, deceit, folly, which in turn push him back to something resembling the point from which he began by struggling: *‘Das Licht — wann löscht es aus?/Wann wird es Nacht im Haus?’* (*‘The light — when will it die? When will it be night in the house?’*, *ibid.*). Wagner does not intend this ironically (there is a profound Wagnerian irony in the operas, but it is not of the kind that diminishes his characters). The process can begin all over again, and in effect does so under more or less different auspices. The point is paradox, involution, an argument that is not an argument because it cannot possibly go anywhere or arrive at any end.

The music is exactly fitted to this sense of an irreducible predicament. For all Wagner’s deep love of Schopenhauer, the Wagnerian subject cannot be the ideal Schopenhauerian subject. Tristan is beset by the relevant trials: *‘inner conflict*’, a confrontation with *‘essential vanity*’, intimacy with *‘the suffering of all that lives*’. But he cannot — will not — develop and complete the advance of this knowledge, which therefore cannot grant him the Schopenhauerian consciousness that is a *‘quieter of the will*’ (Schopenhauer 1969 [1859]: 397). This, of course, is because he cannot renounce his love. But the music confirms him in his continuing attachment, not least because Wagner surely recognized that full Schopenhauerian consciousness would exclude (Wagnerian) drama itself. The aria gives this understanding mimetic form. It begins in dreadful stillness, with almost no instrumentation. As Tristan sings of *Sehnsucht* and light, however, the orchestration begins, winding up, if never unanxiously, through crescendos, to the moment when Tristan evokes death’s door open to the sun’s beams. There is no musical resolution at this point, however, no triumph, but rather hesitation, ambivalence, and therefore a continuation. But as the aria continues and Tristan further pleads the case for escaping night, so his voice repeatedly refuses to harmonize or coincide with orchestra. Ironically, it comes close to doing so only when he curses the light again, before his voice gradually dies back into the muted condition in which it began, though there

is no sense in which this condition can be called final. We might say of the passage that, both discursively and musically, in Badiou's terms, any given synthesis is merely, momentarily the localized point at which a 'new scission is engendered' (1975: 65).

But that this last quotation is from one of Badiou's earliest and most radical texts will seem odd, all the more so, given that, in my account of it, the passage from *Tristan und Isolde* is subject to an intense fluctuation, but within a movement that is circular, and therefore points to a Wagnerian concept of fatality. In fact, that is not where my case is pointing, at least, if one gives the word fate anything like its usual sense, as we will shortly see. The Badiou quotation is precisely if paradoxically apposite in the context in which I have placed it. The constant 'engendering of scission' is what makes it possible for Badiou to think of Wagner's art in terms of the 'creation of possibility'. In fact, the condition of Wagnerian opera, with all its various dualisms, is a particular version what Badiou has called *événementialité* or 'the event of the event' (1988: 218). *Événementialité* is the principle of play in being. *Événementialité* testifies to the void that underlies any situation whatsoever, and renders it precarious. It is the trace within the situation of that which means that it does not have to be as it is. *Événementialité* is precisely a token of possibility, the possibility of change. But *événementialité* needs to be clearly distinguished from the event itself. The event is a sporadic revelation, breaking with, indeed, annihilating the terms of the situation. *Événementialité* is the condition of the arrival of the event. *Événementialité* itself does not fracture any situation or initiate a truth-procedure. It rather testifies to what is always the instability of any given situation. It should also be distinguished from what Badiou calls 'micro-events' (1985: 10) or 'simulacra of the event' (1991: 12), the 'dislocations' of a situation which inaugurate no truth. By the time of *Logiques des mondes*, these have become the three forms of change which are categorically of a different order to an event. An event is a *strong singularity* irreducible to the worldly context in which it appears and not thinkable in that context's terms.¹¹ By contrast, *modifications* form a network in which 'the law of a world' persists in its becoming (2006: 393), and do not at all disrupt or call into question the organization of that world (2006: 379). *Facts* are low-level events that are barely perceptible, leave no trace; and *weak singularities* exist with maximal intensity but have no significant consequences. *Événementialité*, however, is the condition of all four. It is the event in its absolute form, the 'il y a' — Badiou is clearly contesting the meaning Levinas gives that term¹² — whose context is a seemingly absolute, 'eternal' hesitation (1988: 215).

¹¹ The 'forms' are not arbitrary. As Peter Hallward says, the later Badiou has acquired 'logical operators' for distinguishing between them. For a detailed account, see Badiou 2006: 383-401; and Hallward 2008: 106.

¹² For that meaning, see the fourth and fifth chapters of Levinas 1986.

The young (Maoist) Badiou who wrote of a constant `engendering of scission' sought `materialistically' to excavate a core concept from what he took to be Hegel's `reactionary' and `idealist' system, that of a universe whose principle is one of incessant movement, transformation and development.¹³ On this basis, he produced an expanded as opposed to a restricted theory of contradiction.¹⁴ By the time of *L'Être et l'événement*, a sadder and more sober Badiou who had lived through the death of Maoism had recast this vision, more temperately and in minor mode, as one of *événementialité*. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it was chiefly in art that he found the concept: it was art that bore witness to *événementialité*. For Badiou, at least before the Wagner book, it was evident above all in Mallarmé, particularly according to Badiou's account of him in *L'Être et l'événement* (1988: 213-20). In Mallarmé's poetry, the event attained to a reflexive status: Mallarmé is repeatedly concerned with an art in which the event is *événementialité itself* (1988: 215).

For quite a long time after that, however, the theme appeared to have little or no purchase in Badiou's thought. With Wagner, however, he has returned to it, if not explicitly as such. The world of the operas evokes `a sort of interior ocean whose existence one did not suspect', but which we grasp as a `groundswell 'insistently surging up from musical depths (2010: 158, 162). As such, it tells us of a condition in which, `the supernatural' being at an end, `all human enterprise' from now on exists `in a state of suspense and anguish' (2010: 176). This condition of fundamental instability, in which the `local cells' (2010: 164) are everywhere mutable, transformable, equivocal, reversible — as we have already seen in a variety of different kinds of instance — is the condition of *événementialité*. One might add, here, as Badiou does not, that a different kind of music also exists in Wagner, one which does not admit the condition of *événementialité* but nonetheless repeatedly turns out to be captive to it, what I would call the music of the State formation: Cornwall, the Wartburg, Brabant, Heinrich's Germany, in some degree Valhalla. This music has various aspects: formal, ceremonial, celebratory, even jaunty etc. Interestingly, it is not without echoes of Mozart. Only in one opera, *Parsifal*, do we not hear it (or rather, we hear a cruelly damaged version of it). But equally, only in one opera does it unambiguously triumph: *Die Meistersinger*, hence its omission from this discussion.¹⁵ Wagner clearly relishes the music of the State formation but, by

¹³ For Badiou's early account of Hegelian idealism as reactionary, see for example 1978: 23.

¹⁴ See Badiou 1975: 36-48 on the two ways of thinking contradiction, with Mao and (to some extent) Lenin on one side, Engels and Stalin on the other.

¹⁵ My most marked disagreement with Badiou's view of Wagner is over his account of *Die Meistersinger*. Badiou understands the opera as vitally affirming a synthesis of innovation and tradition, rupture and rule, the refounding of identity within itself, which alone can underwrite the thought of a people and nation. Hans Sachs is the supreme master, here, in that it is he who understands the need for this synthesis and sacrifices himself to it. But Rancière's sharper and more disabused reading is I think more persuasive, and, above all, closer to the music of *Die Meistersinger*, seductive though it may sometimes be: after 1849, *Die Meistersinger* signals above all that `the game is over', even if it gives

and large, it is not the music that burns at the heart of the operas, if often tragically, and which, as Badiou abundantly recognizes, is open-ended, provisional, forever shifting its ground. The Wagnerian problematic is truly at stake in this second music.

It is unsurprising to find that, with the return to a thought of *événementialité*, Badiou has also returned to a closely associated theme, waiting. Alongside his better-known concept of the subject, the subject of the event, Badiou has long had a second concept of what *Le Siècle* calls a '*subjectivité de l'attente*', a 'subjectivity of waiting' (2005: 39). In *L'Être et l'événement*, he even asserted that the political subject is not 'a warrior [*guerrier*] under the battlements of the State, but a patient observer [*guetteur*] of the void that instructs the event' (*EE*, p. 127; to be precise, a *guetteur* is concerned with observation in the sense the word has in 'observation post', espial, watching out). The *guetteur* watches out for the event when it seems to be recalcitrant or unforthcoming. His or her subjectivity is that of the interim, the threshold, the *temps atone*, dead time, a time without events, when patience, vigilance and discipline are of the essence. The *guetteur* is not the same figure as Badiou's militant subject, though s/he shares its fidelity of purpose. In retrospect, however, the concept of the political *guetteur* seemed very specific to the historical period during which it emerged in Badiou's thought (though he was surely mistaken not to continue with it). But in any case, from the start, the 'subject in waiting' is not in fact chiefly political, but aesthetic or a subject of and in art. The figure 'of the observer [*guetteur*]', writes Badiou, is one of the great artistic figures of the [last] century' (2005: 41). In fact, it is the poet, above all, who watches out for and awaits the event when it seems recalcitrant or unforthcoming. In modern poetry, as contrasted with politics, we find a new *subjectivité de l'attente*. Modern poets commit themselves to 'a poetics of waiting', a poetics of the threshold (2005: 39). This is notably the case with Mallarmé, but also with Breton and his 'poétique du veilleur', his 'poetics of the lookout' amidst the horrors of 1937 (2005: 40), or Mandelstam, who creates a 'subjectivity of waiting' under Stalin (2005: 39). But it is equally the case with Celan, whose poetry explores the possibility of a fragile, aleatory break with stasis,¹⁶ and thereby works towards the possibility of freedom. Understanding as he does that Being is fundamentally unstable or inconsistent — understanding the condition of *événementialité* — Celan seeks to mimic it, breaking up the consistencies of his world in the hope of an event. The modern poet is the supreme instance of a subject who knows the world in terms of events, but is also intimate with what Badiou everywhere insists on, their rarity, and therefore commits him- or herself

defeat a positive spin. 'The insurrection of the shoemakers is finished': Wagner both grants the profound significance of the popular genius (Hans's) and immediately cedes it back to power, alienating it from itself in a simulation. For Rancière's full case, see 2004: 57-63. For my own extrapolation from it, see Gibson 2012: 217-19.

¹⁶ See Badiou 1998: 56.

to a discipline and an arduous practice in what may be the protracted periods of seemingly total eclipse.

Bruno Bosteels and others have suggested that the emphasis on waiting seems to have disappeared from Badiou's most recent work (after *Le Siècle*).¹⁷ This argument is of a piece with a positive, often North American, politics-centred, progressivist reading of Badiou that is admirable in its buoyancy and optimism, but unpersuasive, particularly in its lack of historical depth and its 'theoreticism'.¹⁸ With its large investment in a concept of waiting, the Wagner book makes clear that what Badiou has done since *Le Siècle* is rather further to separate out his concept of the waiting subject from politics and make it more integrally an aesthetic one, one deeply bound up with modern art. That the historical and aesthetic connections between Wagner and Mallarmé are so intricate is surely no accident. Part of what seems to be at stake in the Wagner book, if inexplicitly, is a meditation on what for Badiou are the major, post-romantic beginnings of modernity in art which drive it on to a trajectory distinct from the trajectory of modern politics but also capable both of fleetingly coinciding with it, and of cutting across it at a radical and interrogative angle.

It is however remarkable to note that, with Wagner, Badiou has not only returned to his concepts of *événementialité* and waiting but also combined them with a thought of suffering. This is an unusual but by no means unlikely theme for Badiou. Commenting on Breton's *Arcane 17*, for example, he writes very strikingly of a negativity in modern love whereby 'the weight of suffering endured seems bound to engulf everything' (LS: 197-207).¹⁹ It would certainly be trivial to suppose that Badiou knows nothing of suffering, that he had not factored it (in some sense) into his great philosophical equation. He hears in Wagner the beginning of a great sway of modern suffering which in effect keeps saying: there is no final reason in nature that the world should be as it is, why Elsa should not keep Lohengrin, why Tristan and Isolde should not delight in their love until the end, why Tannhäuser should not resolve his dilemmas. How is it, then, that all are tormented by such disastrous cross-purposes? This is the great Wagnerian question on which we linger, the modern question. If suffering in Wagner is a 'tear in the world and in experience', it is because the

¹⁷ See Bosteels 209: 101.

¹⁸ The age of the commentators in question is important, because they have been chiefly formed by the post-1990 dispensation, which makes certain understandings of history possible and occludes others. I use the term 'theoreticism' here in Christian Jambet's sense (2000: 109) to designate the post-Althusserian conflation of theoretical with political work, above all, perhaps, as it has been pervasive in the Anglo-American academy since the late 60s. From that point onwards, one could conceive of one's theoretical work as political without ever seriously testing it beyond the academy. Judith Balso, like Badiou a proponent of the strict separation of theoretical from political practice (and practically a model of the second herself) has subjected this orthodoxy to brilliant critique. See Balso 2010. Cf. Rancière, who quite rightly indicts it as involving an excessive valuation of theoretical revolution (see 1974: 239).

¹⁹ Cf. Breton 1971: 115.

sufferer knows its necessity and inessentiality, together. This is why Wagner's creatures writhe and agonize haplessly, yet are not without an obstinate if obscure belief that all may somehow turn out for the good. I shall address this paradox more completely in the final section of this essay.

We have noticed two related conceptions of the subject at stake in Badiou's work on Wagner, the split subject and the waiting subject. If we now turn to the operas ourselves, however, it is surely abundantly clear that, though Badiou more or less ignores them or does not treat them as such, there are indeed both events in Wagner, and subjects of them. In one of the great climaxes of *Der Ring*, for example, the end of the first act of *Die Walküre*, Siegmund and Sieglinde declare their passion for one another. There are two aspects of this declaration that require emphasis. The first is the impression of sheer amazement, shock, as captured, perhaps above all, in Sieglinde's stunned interrogation of a setting in which nothing can be taken for granted any longer: *'Ha, wer gin? Wer cam herein?'* ('Ha! Who went out? Who came in?', 1938: 152). This is a subtler version of the more prosaic question she initially asked when, in the very first scene of *Die Walküre*, she initially saw Siegmund: *'Wer kam ins Haus und liegt da am Herd?'* ('Who has come into my house and is lying there on my hearth?', 1938: 144), the echo only enhancing the impression of a radical estrangement from the world, and the need to reconfigure it. The imperative at stake, here, is of the kind sometimes associated with visions or visitations. But of course, for all its plethora of divinities and semi-divinities, its magical aspects and exchanges between separate spheres (divine/human etc.), in the world of *Der Ring*, there is no possibility of any visitation properly so-called, just as there is no possibility of any theology (indeed the mythological dimension of *Der Ring* to some extent exists to *debar* all theology). Here a visitation precisely involves happenstance, a chance encounter with a transformative power, a stray, unexpected, mortal visitor. By virtue of the encounter, in Badiou's terms, Siegmund and Sieglinde are captured by *'[l]e trajet d'une vérité'*, 'the trajectory of a truth', a truth of love. Furthermore, like St. Paul's truth, that of the lovers induces a subject apart from the State (*'induit son sujet comme détaché des lois étatiques de la situation'*, Badiou 1997: 92). That may not be immediately self-evident. But it is clearly the point to Wagner's blatant and indifferent stress on the lovers' utterly heedless defiance of the ban on incest. Indeed, a peremptory self-separation from 'State law' is repeatedly a cardinal feature of Wagnerian love, as in *Tristan und Isolde*. It is on the basis of their defiance that, in the name of decency and respectability, Fricka will upbraid Wotan for aiding and abetting the lovers. By way of reply, Wotan accuses her of conventionality, where his concern is with *'was von selbst sich fügt'*, 'what adds itself of itself', the spontaneous or unprecedented occurrence, the event and its consequences:

Stets Gewohntes nur magst du verstehn:

*doch was noch nie sich traf,
danach trachtet mein Sinn.*

You always only understand the customary:

But what has never happened before,

That is what occupies my mind.

(1938: 158)

If, like Paul's, the truth at stake might seem only recuperable in theological terms or with reference to a theological dimension, in fact, the intensity with which the couple brusquely set the law at naught is precisely an indication of this truth's human or worldly character.

Thus Siegmund and Sieglinde find themselves 'interior to [love as a] truth-procedure' and 'decentred' by it (Badiou 2010a: 60-1). Here love both is a participation in 'the birth of the world' and quickly comes to have extensive and complicated ramifications of its consequences for the two involved, as in Badiou's terms it will necessarily do (2010a: 54; 2009a: 29). But there is another aspect to *Die Walküre* Act 1 worth stressing, one which allows us to see just how close the event of love may conceivably be to the political event, notably perhaps as Badiou has recently been presenting it (from *Logiques des mondes* onwards). As a truth-procedure, says Badiou, love imposes a norm on 'my primordial narcissism', my 'irreducible singularity'. This lends it a 'finality' that drives it counter to the seemingly hard, durable, self-sealed, impermeable Spinozan *conatus essendi*, as defined above all in the sixth proposition in the third book of Spinoza's *Ethics*: 'Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours [*conatur*] to persevere in its being' (Spinoza 2000: 171).²⁰ But Siegmund and Sieglinde allow us to imagine the event of love in relation to a quite different description involving the concept of inexistence. Inexistence is a theme that has become increasingly significant and explicit in Badiou's more recent work, though it was certainly much adumbrated before that. In Badiou's logic, above all as elaborated in *Logiques des mondes*, objects appear in worlds to a greater or lesser degree, exist in worlds with greater or lesser degrees of intensity or vividness. Worlds contain an element of 'minimal existential value' (Badiou 2006: 339), or an element that appears only in the least degree. Mathematics demonstrates this: the appearance of any multiplicity entails the non-appearance of one of its elements, like the square root

²⁰ For Badiou on the *conatus*, see for instance 2001: 46, 53.

of a negative real number.²¹ This is what Badiou means by an inexistent. Inexistents belong to worlds only in not belonging. The least degree is solely the mark of an absence.

For Badiou, the obvious political example of this is the proletariat as Marx describes it under bourgeois capitalism, which has being, but no 'political existence' (PU: 122). It is the blindspot of a particular political world, does not appear in it. The theory of inexistence, of minimal appearance, is crucial to Badiou's later theoretical apparatus. If worlds always include an element that belongs to them only in not belonging, an object that is not distinguishable from a thing, then that element is the flaw in the glass. It ensures that worlds are contingent and that their contingency is always readable in them. In the terms of Badiou's logic — the terms of the later Badiou — the inexistent is what makes it possible for events to happen, for local disturbances of the relation between the multiples in a given world and what he calls the transcendental that regulates it. Inexistence is the very guarantee of intermittency, of the intermittent foundering of worlds, their rupture by events. Badiou repeatedly cites the voice of the excluded people in the *Internationale*: 'We are nothing [inexistent], let us be everything' (e.g. 2009: 95). But in effect, this is what Siegmund and Sieglinde declare, above all Siegmund, in his dismal evocation of his *Unheiligkeit* (unholiness), his pariah status, his constant misfortune, the irony whereby his own drive to happiness incurs only misery and his social presence becomes a ceaseless invitation to violence, his certainty that his judgments are always the reverse of the established ones:

*ob ich um Freund, um Frauen warb,
immer doch war ich geächtet:
Unheil lag auf mir.
Was rechtes je ich rieth,
Andern dünktes es arg,
was schlimm immer mir schien,
andere gaben ihm Gunst.
In Fehde fiel ich,
Wo ich mich fand...
Gehrt' ich nach Wonne,
Weckt' ich nur Weh....*

whether I sought friends or wooed women,

²¹ For more details of this and the Italian algebraists responsible for the mathematical development in question, see Badiou 2009: 73-4.

I was always ostracized:
 Calamity stalked me.
 What I thought right seemed evil to others.
 What seemed only wicked to me
 won others' favour.
 Wherever I found myself, I fell into feuds....
 If I longed for delight, I awoke only misery....
 (1938: 148)

Sieglinde adds her own, briefer account of the death of the spirit in a disastrous personal history and a loveless marriage. 'We are nothing', indeed: Wagner appears to have deliberately cast the lovers' circumstances in terms of the very deathliness or absence that the event above all must redeem. Furthermore, though, as we have seen, he is no more truly Hegelian than Badiou, he nonetheless seems at least fleetingly to have the drama specifically of the dialectical *Umschlag* in mind, here, the reversal from pole to pole which Badiou associates with the event. The inexistent, the Spring that seemed far-off in a wintry world (*der Lenz, nach dem [sie verlangten]/in frostigen Winters Frist*', 1938: 158), abruptly becomes supremely existent.

The Wagnerian *Umschlag* is a recurrent feature of the operas, as the fragment to which dialectic is reduced. In *Tristan und Isolde* this is perhaps most obviously the case with an event that does not happen onstage, and about which we only know because Isolde recounts it, but is in some degree the source of all we witness: immobilized by Tristan's gaze, Isolde lets the sword fall, rather than avenge Morold by killing his killer. Yet there is also an aspect of Tristan and Isolde's passion that pushes them closer to Siegmund and Sieglinde. However clearly Tristan's initial 'wretchedness' is the effect of his wounds, when Isolde exclaims that '*Seines Elendes/jammerte mich*', 'His misery makes me pity him' (1938: 315), the *Elend* at stake is more than material, far more than Tristan himself properly knows, is only graspable by Isolde in a to some extent obscure intuition. It is the condition of the '*traur'ge Mann*' ('sad man') concealed beneath '*Sein Lob*', 'his praise' — "*Hei! unser Held Tristan*"', 'Hail! Our hero Tristan!' (ibid.) — indeed, inseparable from it, from what we might call Tristan's State function, State positivity as trumpeted throughout by the boisterously conventional voices of sailors, soldiers, knights, squires, huntsmen, courtiers etc., but most literally in the *Hörnerschall*, to which Isolde is so indifferent that she cannot actually hear it. Tristan at the start of the opera has in effect been stifled by '*Zucht und Fug*', 'propriety and custom'; hence his stillness and inconspicuousness. His *Elend* is a token of an inexistence, but an inexistence abruptly reversed with the magic draft. As the potion takes effect, Wagner not only

plunges Tristan into *Verirrung*, the bewilderment with which his creator will endow Sieglinde with the arrival of the event, the loss of all relations of familiarity evident in his response to the approach of the King (*Welche König?*, *What king?*, 1938: 324). With deft irony, the composer also neatly counterposes two manifestations of joy now brusquely pointing in different directions, that of the waving crowds on the Cornish shore and that of the lovers. The *Umschlag*, of course, is subsequently consummated in Act 2 Scene 2, as is emphasized in the lovers' initial strings of questions: their new situation is *Ungeahnte, / nie gekannte*, they know nothing of it (1938: 327). They must start to construct it. They do this above all via metaphor, the rejection of daylight, again, and the position of the *Tagesknecht* (thrall of day), and the choice of *Nachtsichtigkeit*, night vision. The progress in and through obscurity denoted here is part of what Badiou takes to be involved in a truth-procedure and is *welterlösung*, 'world-redeeming'. Accordingly, a previously inexistent music sounds out, a music that is *Welten entronnen*, 'broken free of the world' (1938: 323).

But Siegmund's *Elend* is finally not Tristan's, above all, perhaps, in the structural position it occupies in *The Ring*; or, it might be better to say, in the clarity and exactness of that position within what, from the beginning of *Das Rheingold*, has been an unfolding logic. In *Tristan und Isolde*, the general sense of a convulsion preceding the lovers' narrative, the mayhem of the Cornish-Irish war, looms large over events. But though one might wonder about the consequences had Wagner chosen to build out of the Tristan and Isolde story as he did out of the Siegfried narrative, in the opera we have, any logic leading from the war to the tale of the lovers is unelaborated, lent few if any particulars. In *Die Walküre*, by contrast, that things should have gone badly for Siegmund and Sieglinde as individuals and that they should go badly for them together seems of a piece with a world which has been going badly from the start. The 'start' in question seems most obviously to consist in Alberich's theft of the gold, though one might object that the initial error actually resides, not in the Rheinmaidens' rejection of Alberich, but the (to him, malicious) levity with which they treat him, since from it springs his repudiation of love, which in turn leads to plundering, devastation, the violent conflict of interests, the emergence of a catastrophic logic. It is nonetheless clear that, from the moment in Act 1, Scene 1 in *Das Rheingold* when the music dramatically shifts from fluent serenity to sinister foreboding — with Alberich's *Erzwäng' ich nicht Liebe, / doch listig erzwäng' ich mir Lust?* ('If I cannot compel love, can I get my pleasure by cunning?', 1938: 105)— the world of *The Ring* is going awry. At once, with the beginning of Scene 2, events are casting a long ironic shadow over Wotan's bourgeois pride in his new property, putatively an *ewige Werk*, an 'eternal work' (1938: 106), Valhalla. The shadow lengthens even as Wotan demonstrates his casual indifference to the giants. As with the Rhinemaidens, the problem would seem to be *Leichtsinnigkeit*. No one appears to be taking matters

seriously enough, especially given what we have already seen of the course on which Alberich is embarked. When the gods suddenly age as Freia is taken from them and Wotan begins to compound his error, Alberich delivers his curse, Fafner and Fasolt violently fall out, and so on. The world of *Der Ring* is now lurching like a pilotless vessel. Fricka's rebukes to Wotan's vainglory and his facile masculine ethic of 'Wandel und Wechsel' ('wandering and change', 1938: 107) — 'das Spiel drum kann ich nicht sparen' ('I can't give up on the game', *ibid.*) — will eventuate in Erda's great, dark, brass-heralded address to him, her injunction to a fear and a dread without which the ring spells vast destruction, and her warning of 'Ein düst'rer Tag', a 'dark day' for the Gods (1938: 137). But imposing though this may be, in a sense, it matters little, since Wagner has already made it clear that Wotan and the gods can have no hope of transcending the web of relations in which they find themselves caught, which means that, even for Wotan, fear is always close at hand. Siegmund and Sieglinde will duly find themselves haplessly caught up in the same web. By the end of *Das Rheingold*, the voices of the Rhinemaidens will sound faded and distant, almost lost.

The obvious objection to this argument is that fate makes itself felt in *Der Ring*. But exactly what does this fate consist in? It is certainly not a concept: there is no idea, here, of a fate which steamrollers over contingency. That the Norns supposedly weave the strands of fate is of practically no significance, other than as a superstitious alibi which very occasionally flickers in the background. What matters is the drama, at the beginning of *Götterdämmerung*, of seeing the rope finally break, which is itself an absolute confirmation of the illusory character of fate. The world in which a concept of fate was sustainable, which *The Ring* has always known to be in fact ephemeral, is finally dying; fate is fated, and this knowledge was more or less written into the cycle from the start. Fate is fated by history, by the dawning of unending historicity: this is what is so crucial in the inversion of the Rhine motif and of the beginning of *Das Rheingold* at the beginning of *Götterdämmerung*. The stark truth, however, is that there is no necessary and incontrovertible reason for uplift in the logic according to which this happens. This knowledge — of the only certainty, groundlessness, but a groundlessness that does not of itself automatically spell promise — is one of Wagner's great inspirations. The operas invariably proceed from it.

This is a modern knowledge, and there is no doubt that *Der Ring* is gripped by a kind of modern portent or augury. George Bernard Shaw asserted that, 'under the reign of Alberich', Nibelheim 'is a poetic vision of unregulated industrial capitalism as it was made known in Germany in the middle of the nineteenth century by Engels's *Condition of the Labouring Classes in England*' (Shaw 2004: 11). One need only recall the *sound* of Nibelheim: the clinking, the hammering, the screeches of pain. *Der Ring* begins in a frenzy of uprooting, demonic exploitation of resources, accumulation run wild, a maniacal struggle for power that is a consequence of deregulation and the

violation of the natural order. The trouble is, of course, that Wagner subsequently pursues the catastrophic logic that emerges in relation to a set of mythological gods and mediaeval heroes and heroines. It is possible to read this Schopenhauerianly: it was the rare genius of the artist, or so Schopenhauer thought, to be able to lift the objects of thought out of their customary relations, and thus contemplate them beyond their embedded absorption in the world of will.²² This is what Wagner does with both the new capitalism and the old mythology, together. But one might equally suggest that the mythological structure of *The Ring* generalizes and abstracts from the historical moment to which Shaw alludes, whilst not making itself available to a simple reading as an allegory of it. To say that it generalizes the historical moment, however, is not to say that it grants the moment an eternal or inescapable hold. Wagner rather generalizes the principle of historicity itself. This, *Der Ring* tells us, is a unique moment, a unique story. But alas, its uniqueness may be infinitely repeatable, for nothing like fate promises any longer to root or endstop the endless, aimless, disoriginated production of historical singularities (which, we might add, is precisely what capital feeds off). Quite clearly, in this respect, on one level, *Der Ring* is about *événementialité*. But it is about *événementialité* as what Walter Benjamin called modern 'catastrophe in permanence' (Benjamin 2002: 164). We might understand that idea within the frame of an ecological critique of capital: the rude violation of the cornucopia of the earth leaves disaster ever more imminent. But the sheer grandiosity of the *Ring* cycle, its immense ambition, will not allow us to rest there. The special combination of mythological and modern features in *Der Ring* allows Wagner to express an intuition which is not just the Nietzschean premonition that, with modernity (and capitalism), that uncanniest of guests, nihilism, arrives at the door. Wagner's is a fear beyond the consciousness of the onset of modernity, a fear that catastrophe in permanence unveils nihilism as what in any case was always lurking within the mythical worlds that preceded modernity, and now stands exposed as the absolute rule of which modernity has become at length the manifest expression.

If any supposedly significant effects of the Norns' weaving seem purely notional, however, this is most certainly not the case with their powers of prophecy, above all, in the case of the third Norn's correct forecast of the end of the opera, the end of the Gods. In fact, in *Der Ring*, a prophetic vision of the world prevails as the destinal vision collapses. But 'prophetic vision' in my sense does not involve the bleak, fatalistic announcement 'This will happen....'. The prophet rather wagers against power, against the dominant formation, the historical logic binding whose trajectory he can only perceive as catastrophic. His or her declaration is, 'This will happen, *unless*....' In that respect, as Walter Brueggemann has emphasized (2001, *passim*), the prophetic vision is irreducibly historical and social. One of the great achievements of modernity has been how far, above all in its

²² See *The World as Will and Representation*, §39. Schopenhauer 1969: 200-7.

art, it has produced a kind of counter-prophetic tradition, a predominantly secular, prophetic tradition *for* modernity, running from Blake to Hölderlin to Rimbaud to Woolf to Soutine....one could continue, expand (and vary) the list for some time. Wagner is a master-eminence within this tradition. The event in Wagner is the statement of an 'unless' within a catastrophic logic that, in the context of the operas, enfolds events, is everywhere apparent — but not inexorable, for its condition is always *événementialité*, the fundamental instability of Being, which is also the condition of the event itself.

Why does Badiou so largely neglect the Wagnerian event? Might he not just mean us to take it for granted, though the logic of doing so would seem obscure, even contradictory? Is the concept of the event losing its status for him? Has he even perhaps wearied of the increasing currency of his terms, and of the habit of circulating them himself, and chosen to cast his case in more oblique ones? None of these explanations will do, and obliquity, certainly, is not Badiou's way. The Wagner book is, I would suggest, the most sustained instance yet of a version of Badiou's philosophical universe that thinks it from the vantage-point of the rarity of its redemption. Badiou has unfalteringly insisted on the rarity of the event,²³ but has seldom invested much time and labour in elaborating a thought of the world itself on that basis, a world so largely benighted. If he countenances such a thought anywhere, it is chiefly in modern art: Mallarmé, Beckett, Celan. Wagner, however, impels him again in that direction. Given the features of Wagnerian opera that he himself understands so well and makes explicit — immensely protracted struggles, extraordinarily powerful evocations of suffering, the wait for a resolution that will almost certainly not take place — anything else would hardly be possible. In other words, I would argue that the fundamental structure of Badiou's conception of Wagner is the one I have identified, a structure cohering around three points of reference above all, in my terms, catastrophe in permanence, *événementialité* and the event. But it is nuanced so that the first looms very large and the last extremely small, with the second as the guarantee that the concept of catastrophe 'in permanence' is always an estimation of the odds, a provocation, a prophetic gauntlet thrown down — surely the resonance it had for Benjamin, prophet *de nos jours* — rather than a complete or final description.

So events appear as parentheses within a catastrophic logic, but as tokens that history in its groundlessness need not point in a catastrophic direction. If there is a lacuna in Badiou's account of Wagner, it is the absence of any reference to Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer was Wagner's great,

²³ An emphasis of which his commentators quite often want to make little. The most obvious example is Ed Pluth, who thinks truths in Badiou are not rare at all, but 'already factors for every situation' (2010: 84). This is to surrender Badiou to contemporary, postmodern, liberal (if 'progressive') democracy and its fantasy of plenitude. Everything is already there for us, even if in some degree occluded at present; there is no lack, there are no gaps. This, of course, is not remotely Wagnerian. Pluth's book is otherwise quite a good introduction to Badiou.

abiding, philosophical love and, in a certain way and up to a certain point, it is Schopenhauerianism that underpins some of the features that Badiou distinguishes in Wagnerian opera (though Badiou himself does not note this). But if, as I said earlier, it is impossible to conceive of Wagner's operas as properly Schopenhauerian, that is because for Wagner there is always a flaw in the Schopenhauerian system and its insistence on endless and ubiquitous suffering, a flaw notably represented by Siegmund and Sieglinde, by the idea of the event. In the end, Badiou does not quite get to the core Wagnerian paradox, in that Wagner was that weird and implausible phenomenon, a Schopenhauerian and a revolutionary together. Badiou insists that Wagner's 'revolutionary attitude did not change' (2010: 125), that the revolutionary Wagner of Dresden in 1849 never died. I would put the point rather differently: there is no doubt that Wagner withdrew massively from revolutionary ardour into Schopenhauer's philosophy after 1849, and derived immense consolation from it; *and yet* the revolutionary Wagner never quite dies.

It is Thomas Mann above all, so very close to the Schopenhauerian seduction, the Wagnerian seduction, the Schopenhauerian seduction within the Wagnerian seduction, who finally grasps this. Mann's writings on Wagner were very various, and his conflicting attitudes to Wagner shifted and swayed, combined and recombined according to changing historical, political and personal imperatives. But it seems to me that the later, passionately anti-Nazi Mann arrives at a profound conception of Wagner which, if never fully articulated as such, is nonetheless the right and indeed the necessary one. It is a conception which does not renounce all feeling for German romantic pessimism — Mann could hardly do that; it was far too deeply and pervasively written into him and his work — but that nonetheless does not and must not surrender to it, as Zeitblom must counter Leverkühn in *Doktor Faustus* (though I am not about brusquely to reduce either Badiou or Wagner to Zeitblom's kind of humanism; that would be absurd). As Mann's admirable 'Leiden und Grösse Richard Wagners' has it — that it is written in exceptional circumstances in 1933, with a ferocious *parti pris*, in no way diminishes its importance, how could it — certainly, Wagner was melancholic, attached to night and death, 'the most illustrious confrère and comrade of all these symbolists for whom life was an affliction' (1985: 146). Certainly, he found in Schopenhauer his great support. But his art itself was 'revolutionary in character', and that could not but propel him towards 'the overthrow of the existing order', requiring that he 'set his face resolutely' against class, 'power, money, violence and war' (1985: 134, 148). This other Wagner directed his 'artistic enterprise' wholly 'towards renewal, change and emancipation' (1985: 147-8). In recognizing both Wagners together, Mann grasps a paradoxical disposition repeatedly perceptible in modern art but unthinkable to modern philosophy — to Schopenhauer much more markedly than to Badiou — and, with very rare exceptions (Benjamin, again) almost equally unthinkable within

modern politics, to its detriment. It is a paradox, however, that must be at least dimly available to many of those who find themselves repeatedly gripped by Wagner's music.²⁴

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²⁴ It will be objected that I have not considered Badiou's major purpose in the Wagner book, which is to challenge and overturn Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of 'great art', and Wagner's place within it. But for all Badiou's (sporadic) claims to the contrary, no argument of this kind seems central to the book, and the term consequently lacks definition. *Grand art*? If so, then Badiou's cultural history is open to question. He thinks that grandeur died after 1945, when it surely rather migrated elsewhere, above all, to the serious cinema — Rossellini, Visconti, Coppola, Herzog, others — only, from the early 80s onwards, to mutate again into a travesty of itself, as it 'went pop-cultural': rock mega-concerts, increasingly reactionary Hollywood schlock blockbusters, etc. etc. It is surely at this juncture that major art withdrew into modesty and smallness (Coetzee, Sebald). If, however, Badiou means great art in the sense that he himself is usually concerned with it, a select canon in his own definition that is systematized as a structure of thought, then Wagner clearly fits under the rubric alongside Beckett, Mallarmé, Celan etc. His art is even not essentially dissimilar to theirs; indeed, it is possible to articulate part at least what is most important in Beckett and in Wagner in very much the same kind of framework. The terms of my Wagner analysis here are frequently close to the terms of my Beckett analysis (for which see Gibson 2006).

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