



TRANSLATING ANXIETIES: MORRIS, WAGNER, AND THE CRISIS OF LATE ROMANTICISM

JOHN M. LEWIS

In the history of cultural exchange between Iceland and Europe, 1876 was an epochal year, one that saw both the first performance of Wagner's completed tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the Bayreuth Festival Theater over the nights of August 13-17 and the publication of Morris's *Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* in November.¹ Wagner's operas were the object of international attention, while Morris's epic was indifferently received even by the British public that had responded warmly to his *Earthly Paradise*. Enclosing both these premieres, however, there occurred another cultural manifestation, one serving to define the milieu in which Morris's and Wagner's labors of love may be read as symptoms of cultural crisis. I refer to the Centennial Exhibition, which took place in Philadelphia, USA between May and November of that year.²

As engine and index of cultural (ex)change, a trade fair is itself a machine of considerable power, and both in the architecture of its exhibition halls (whose eclectic historicism earned the scorn of many contemporary visitors), and in the profusion of agricultural products, mass-produced goods, and one-of-a-kind works of art that strove for public attention with the immensely popular exhibits of industrial machinery, this first American world's fair reflected the anxious pursuit of self-definition by the host nation (and by many of the guest nations as well), underscoring the destabilizing effect of capitalism on the construction of national identities. The host nation's major buildings evoked a splendid, plural past (Gothic, Renaissance, even Moorish) which was not, strictly speaking, part of its history, though it might be said to nourish a Romantic figuring of the nation as a young hero in the wilderness, a child of nature (or natural child) dreaming of royal birth-parents afar off. Surely ideology counted for more than history in New York State's decision to build its exhibition hall in the shape of a Swiss chalet:³ a tribute from a New World state to an Old World republic deemed by many to be a precursor of American democracy.

That the Exhibition's view of the world centered on the host nation can be inferred from the full title of a contemporary picture book: *Gems of the Centennial Exhibition: consisting of*



*illustrated descriptions of objects of an artistic character in the exhibits of the United States, Great Britain, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Hungary, Russia, Japan, China, Egypt, Turkey, India, etc., etc., at the International Exhibition in Philadelphia of 1876.*⁴ The order of nations here suggests not so much a linearly-ordered table of precedence as a series of widening horizons. The first horizon takes in the Anglo-American nexus, formed through two centuries of colonial history and re-formed by a complex interdependence during the century marked by the Exhibition itself.

The next horizon traced by the picture book's title includes more of Europe in its sweep: a rapid counterclockwise tour of the Mediterranean nations from America's first ally (France) to the most recently formed nation-state (Italy), then a spiral through five North European countries, including Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, next a brief visit to the exotic Eastern "fringe" of Europe, represented by the Kingdom of Hungary, verbally and notionally severed from the Austrian Empire, and Russia, whose own continental empire had until recently shared the Northwest coast of North America with the United States and Canada. The next and last explicit horizon sketches out an Afro-Asiatic chaos of the exotic, the ancient, and the despotic, followed by an "etc., etc." that evokes a long procession of presumably less significant Others. Given its penchant for architectural *allegoresis* and its positioning of exhibiting nations within expanding and indefinitely receding horizons, it's not surprising that critics accused the Centennial Exhibition of seeing the world neither steadily nor whole.

For many visitors, the effect of the Exhibition was overwhelming; there was simply too much to take in, they complained. Everywhere bigness thrust itself in their faces: the bigness of the two Krupp's guns in the German exhibition, or the two-story-high Corliss Steam Engine that supplied power to the other exhibits in the Hall of Machinery.⁵ Confronted with the unutterable, the more literary among the Exhibition's visitors fell back on tropes in their readings of the phantasmagoric display in Philadelphia. If they could not say what it was, at least they could say what it was *like*. Herman Melville, for example, compared the Exhibition to Vanity Fair in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.⁶ That its grandiose spectacle seemed unreal to such perceptive commentators might be taken as evidence of how well the Exhibition's architecture and exhibits reflected the Circean nature of the industrial age, in which, as the first sentence of Marx's *Kapital* suggests, the new world opened to us by capitalism is a world of phenomena, of appearances, in which social wealth "presents itself [*erscheint*]" as



something it is not: “an immense accumulation of commodities.” (Marx 1) This accumulation was metonymically present for Melville in the exhibits at Philadelphia, provoking his trope of the Exhibition as Vanity Fair. In keeping with the linguistic turn of more recent thought, what Melville and Marx saw in the economic order of their time was a world of signs in which tangible objects challenged the observer to discover their hidden (or indefinitely deferred) meaning. Carlyle put his finger on the riddling character of contemporary reality in *Past and Present*, noting that “Gold” had bewitched Midas into answering the Sphinx’s question wrongly, ironically condemning himself to perpetual dissatisfaction by seeking nourishment in transient and outer appearances: “unhappy men, and unhappy nations, have become enchanted; stagger spell-bound, reeling on the brink of huge peril, because they were not wise enough.” (Carlyle 8) Social critics like Carlyle, Morris, and Marx saw the crisis in perception brought about by capitalism as superimposing on the ancient (and worsening) divisions of class a new partitioning of humanity into those who could interpret the signs of the times – the revolutionary vanguard of consciousness, as it were – and those who could not.

Among the social types laying claim to the role of interpretive vanguard, one is of particular interest to us in the present study: the artist. Since the onset of the “long nineteenth century,” practitioners of the several fine arts had gradually distanced themselves from the artisans with whom they had been associated in earlier times. The advance of their claim to a new and higher status may be traced in English-speaking countries through the word-history of “artist,”⁷ whose meaning became superordinate to names for practitioners of particular arts such as “architect,” “sculptor,” “painter,” and “composer” as it drew into its connotative sphere the words of power dear to the Romantic vanguard: “genius,” “imagination,” “inspiration,” “creativity,” and the like. By mid-century “artist” was becoming more than a convenient cover term for the practitioners of various arts; it had taken on the qualities of an honorific job description. Already for Shelley the poets had been “the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” (Shelley 297) As discoverer or revealer of what Carlyle called “the eternal inner Facts of this Universe,” (Carlyle 8) including the reality behind the economic phenomena anatomized by Marx in the first chapters of *Capital*, the artist could claim to be a master in the kingdom of signs, speaking with authority on the inner facts of human experience, piercing the veil of proliferating appearances to find the truth within, much as Wagner’s Parsifal was to expose the hollowness of the delights proffered him in Klingsor’s magic castle.



Morris and Wagner both cashed in on the new status available to them as artists, and they were prolific in their pronouncements on the political and social questions of the day. At the same time, as artists habituated to a larger world and to the long prospect of times after their own, they worried, more than, say, J. S. Bach appears to have done, about the longevity of the works they created. Writing with the confidence of an early Romantic, Blake proclaimed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that “Eternity [was] in love with the productions of time,” (Blake 1:81) but well before that plate was engraved, Alexander Pope had noted that linguistic change dooms even the greatest poet’s work to fade, darken, and slip irrevocably towards unintelligibility: “Our sons their fathers’ failing language see, / And such as CHAUCER is, shall DRYDEN be!” (Pope 32: ll.482f.) Extending this thought in a memorable simile, Pope compared the fate of poems to that of oil paintings:

So when the faithful pencil has designed
Some bright idea of the master’s mind,
Where a new world leaps out at his command,
And ready Nature waits upon his hand;
When the ripe colors soften and unite,
And sweetly melt into just shade and light;
When mellowing years their full perfection give,
And each bold figure just begins to live,
The treacherous colors the fair art betray,
And all the bright creation fades away! (Pope 32: ll. 484-493)

Pope’s metaphor of Time the betrayer can be seen as an anticipation of the Romantic rediscovery of a recurrent commonplace: devouring Time. The Romantic artists’ situation is rife with irony, for the same trajectory of thought that lifts them above the here and now, investing them with insight into the omnipresent and eternal, calls attention to the time-bound nature of what they create, infecting their productions with the poison of transience. Confronting his own mortality in the sonnet “When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be,” Keats is forced into silence by his obsessive thought:



...on the shore

Of the wide world I stand alone, and think,

Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink. (Keats 166: ll. 12-14)

In the final line of this sonnet the dissolution of the (lightly) personified Love and Fame metonymically represents the undoing of all tropes, an abandonment of the poet's attempt to clothe the ineffable in a garment of words, so that Keats's poem enacts with its closing gesture the death of the author, indeed of authorship itself.

A similar shadow of oblivion falls across Morris's *Story of Sigurd* at the very outset, in a verse paragraph ostensibly celebrating the robust fatalism of King Volsung and his court:

There was a dwelling of Kings ere the world was waxen old;

Dukes were the door-wards there, & the roofs were thatched with gold;

Earls were the wrights that wrought it, and silver nailed its doors;

Earls' wives were the weaving-women, queens' daughters strewed its floors,

And the masters of its song-craft were the mightiest men that cast

The sails of the storm of battle adown the bickering blast.

There dwelt men merry-hearted, and in hope exceeding great

Met the good days and the evil as they went the way of fate:

There the Gods were unforgotten, yea whiles they walked with men,

Though e'en in the world's beginning rose a murmur now and again

Of the midward time and the fading and the last of the latter days,

And the entering in of the terror, and the death of the People's Praise.

(Morris, *Story 1*: ll. 1-12)

Morris's ingenious lines – should we scan them as loose Alexandrines with caesurae in their midst? – are quite unlike Pope's heroic couplets yet not without suppleness, capable of a leisurely narrative amble or of contracting to a fierce epigrammatic point, and the poetry of them sustains and complicates the movement of thought. Ominously, the first couplet rhymes “gold” with “old,” sounding a note of transience in the midst of a celebration of the heroic age. The description of King Volsung's palace and its pleasures has much in it to delight men of property as well as socialists – the earls and countesses carpentering and spinning might pass for a hyperbolic praise of King Volsung's wealth or lead Morris's audience toward what might



be called his imaginary economy, in which non-alienated labor restores weight and meaning to words and deeds.

This vision of the golden age, however, is fleeting: the suite of couplets moves inexorably from the gold and silver dawn of the world to the “fading” of “the last of the latter days.” It seems most natural to read the paratactic penultimate line of the passage in this way, as an image of gathering twilight, but it is just possible to hear “fading” independently, as an aural image of returning chaos. What starts as an intermittent murmur amid the songs that testify to the craft of King Volsung’s poet-warriors gets amplified by a chain of alliterations, assonances, and consonances to become the dominant aural texture of the closing lines: “murmur...midward,” “last...latter,” (many of Morris’s assonances and alliterations are generated by polyptoton in this way) “entering in of the terror, and the death,” “People’s Praise.” The last phrase here names what no longer sounds in the ear: the praise of a now vanished generation of heroes. In any case, “fade” was Pope’s very word for the apocalyptic dissolution of creation; here it betokens a Nordic twilight to match Yeats’s Celtic one as unspecified shapes of terror and death, like the rough beast of “The Second Coming,” expand to fill Morris’s lines.

“All that has been regarded as solid, crumbles into fragments.” (Marx and Engels 29) The terrifying essence of the capitalist commodity is that it has no essence; it is a trace of the alienated labor that produced it, a perishable arrangement of mere matter, an emblem of transience, a (mere) token of a sign in a hierarchy of signs whose final meaning is perpetually deferred. The objects on display at the Centennial Exhibition, objects that were to be disposed of as trash if unclaimed at the Exhibition’s close, were (mere) tokens of what various manufacturers and industries could produce, that is, material signs of a capacity to fill the new desires emerging in and from the ever-expanding “world market,” which, as Marx and Engels noted in the *Communist Manifesto*, not only satisfied old desires but even more importantly implanted “new wants...which [could] only be satisfied by the products of distant lands and unfamiliar climes.” (Marx and Engels 30) The logic of the marketplace dictates the construction, and consumption, of the exotic.

It is here, then, in the context of satisfying demands for the exotic, that Marx and Engels speak of the rise of a “world literature” embracing “manifold national and local literatures.” One thinks first, perhaps, of the burgeoning of Orientalism, “the discourse of the West about the



East (Cuddon 660),” in the heyday of imperialism (interestingly, our watershed year of 1876 was also the year in which “Empress of India” was added to Queen Victoria’s royal style and titles), but we should recall that in step with Orientalism the West was busy elaborating another discourse that we might call Septentrionalism: a discourse of the West about the North embracing such exotics as Siberian shamans, Odinic berserkers, and Celtic bards (the latter notoriously including Ossian, who barely exists outside of Septentrionalism’s textual universe). The Septentrionalist reading of exotic Iceland crops up in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, in a passage in which the count explains to Jonathan Harker his own national character:

We Szekelys have a right to be proud, for in our veins flows the blood of many brave races who fought as the lion fights, for lordship. Here, in the whirlpool of European races, the Ugric tribe bore down from Iceland the fighting spirit which Thor and Wodin gave them, which their Berserkers displayed to such fell intent on the seaboard of Europe, ay, and of Asia and Africa too, till the peoples thought that the were-wolves themselves had come. (52-53)

Stoker’s ethnography here is a little hard to make out – after all, an ambiguity is present whenever Dracula speaks of the origins of the blood flowing through his veins – but this passage alludes to shared Ugric-Nordic traits however these are to be explained historically, and it is clear that the wildness represented by wolves, those “children of the night” whose music is dear to Dracula, is a specifically Nordic wildness.

To most of Europe and America in 1876, then, the *Völsunga saga* (hereafter VS) was an exotic artifact, the ancient product of a remote, unfamiliar land whose overseas visitors could still think of themselves as explorers rather than tourists (although with the publication of the first guide books to Iceland this perception had begun to change).⁸ As a travel destination and perhaps even more as a construct of the imagination, Iceland in the nineteenth century lent itself to the fulfillment of two contrary desires conditioned by an expanding consciousness of the world: first, the (largely North European) desire for roots equal in depth to those of the classical circummediterranean civilizations and secondly the desire for a redemptive wildness associated with the ever-widening horizon of “primitive” cultures that lay mostly beyond but also, and tantalizingly, within Europe.

For William Morris, the Iceland where VS was composed was “a waste land” whose habitable area lay “betwixt the ice-hills and the cold grey sea,” as the “Prologue in Verse” to his and Eiríkr Magnússon’s translation of VS has it. (xix) “Grey” recurs in the poem, however, not as



a sign of privation but as the color of dawn, connoting the earliest epoch of what Morris calls “our race.” Enclosing the two references to “grey” are lines in which Morris calls on “English Folk,” on “[those] who speak the English Tongue,” to attend to his translation of the saga that he calls in his Preface “the most complete and dramatic form of the Epic of the North,” (Magnússon and Morris v) and which he notes is only now, ”strange to say,” being translated into English for the first time. In fact, preface and prologue read like (partial) translations of each other, each explicating in its own terms what Morris sees as the relation between the Icelandic creator(s) of VS and the English audience he hopes to gain for the Saga through his translation.

One concern of Morris’s in the preface and prologue alike is the nature of “the Sagaman”’s own work in creating VS. “Our race” (presumably a greater Northern race embracing Icelanders, English, and others) was in its dawn when “the Sagaman” fashioned VS, reworking the story after “long brooding” over pre-existent material: “floating traditions no doubt; ...songs which, now lost, were then known...to [him]; and finally...songs, which, written down about his time, are still existing..” (Magnússon and Morris vi) VS as we have it is thus not an original work but (in the broadest sense) a translation from verse to prose, and by 1876 Morris’s own engagement with VS will have engendered a further, double translation, from Icelandic to English prose and later from English prose to English verse. In this account of VS there is no “original” form of the Saga available to Morris, or to us: instead, Morris figures prose and verse translations succeeding one another in a fragile chain of transmission whose end(s) are out of sight. According to the prologue, something in the “ruth-crowned tangle” that is the story of VS had the power to make itself heard through the “morning” of our race, whose length and fruitfulness were not sufficient to snap that chain – hence the Saga’s survival. At the conclusion of his Preface, Morris commends VS to contemporary readers in these terms:

[T]his is the great story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks – to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been – a story too – then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us. (Magnússon and Morris xi).

Morris’s “should” points to a cultural dislocation not fully acknowledged in this text: with VS untranslated into English before the “afternoon” of the Northern race, he and his countrymen



have had to supplement their sense of identity with the “borrowed” story of Troy – and here for a moment we may widen our gaze to take in generations of English schoolboys translating Homer and Vergil in preparation for their roles in the governing class of an empire – a noble, even a beloved story, for Morris⁹ as for countless readers worldwide, but nevertheless a literary “other” in need of perpetual translation. Had VS been available through those long ages (figured in the prologue as a comparatively short and barren morning!), it might have been to us what Homer’s poems had been to the Greeks. It may be such now, Morris all but hints, not quite putting into words the possibility that VS will inspire a new, Northern Renaissance, but in the future when “our race” shall have dwindled into a mere concatenation of signs, “a story too,” it should be for other races the bearer of a supplemental identity, serving them as Homer served us, an epic needing translation into a language more remote from Old Icelandic than Morris’s decorously archaizing nineteenth-century English had been.

Reading Morris we are acutely aware of a pervasive melancholy in his retellings of Sigurd’s “unspeakable woes” – the shadow of unspoken desire that may have given the English poet a sense of kinship with the Nordic hero. Wagner’s indulgent muse notoriously reverses this relation: his characters, and even more his orchestra, trace in music what William Blake in two of his unpublished poems called “the lineaments of gratified desire,” (Blake 2: 974, 978) and it was this expressiveness that gave his music what we might call its commodity value. Of contemporary commentators, one spoke most lucidly, because most transgressively, of this aspect of Wagner’s music: the poet Charles Baudelaire.¹⁰

In an article that appeared in the *Revue européenne* of April 1, 1861, Baudelaire analyzed the raptures he had felt on first hearing the prelude to *Lohengrin*. Prefacing his own commentary with generous extracts from the program notes by Wagner and Liszt’s 1851 study *Lohengrin et Tannhäuser*, Baudelaire comments on the sensations aroused in him by the music, sensations of weightlessness, of elevation to a great height, and of solitude within a vast space that is permeated by a diffuse light. (Baudelaire 1213) Wagner’s program notes speak of angels bringing the Grail to a “devout hermit” (*pieux solitaire*), (1211) Liszt’s of the particolored architecture of a sanctuary with gates of gold and columns of opal, (1212) but Baudelaire himself says of Wagner’s music that



[i]t possesses the art of translating, by means of subtle gradations, all that is excessive, measureless, and ambitious in the spiritual and the natural man. Sometimes, as one listens to this ardent, domineering music, one seems to encounter, painted on a shadowy background rent by reverie, the giddy conceits of opium.¹¹

The inmost secret of Wagner's music is revealed, not to the composer-impresario, bound to a realistic aesthetic, nor to the pianist-philosopher, for whom the music evokes a gorgeously paradoxical theophany, but to the transgressive opium-eater. Wisdom in this instance is born of outlawry: a covert assertion, so to speak, of the artist as revolutionary vanguard. In the same way, and perhaps with the same intent, Wagner's libretto for *Die Walküre* rewrites VS to make Siegfried the offspring of Siegmund and Sieglinde's incest.¹²

What Baudelaire calls the three "translations" of the Prelude to *Lohengrin*, the commentaries by Wagner, Liszt, and himself, are adduced in support of the qualified affirmative he gives to the frequently-asked question whether music can convey definite meanings (1210) – whether music is a language, properly speaking – but it colonizes his article in other passages, for example when Baudelaire addresses the question of what subjects are most suited to serve as material for "a vast drama with traits of universality"¹³: "Plainly it would be courting great danger to translate into fresco (*traduire en fresque*) a delectable and truly perfect genre painting ." (1220) Given the fecundity of the concept of translation in Baudelaire's article, it is tempting to regard its plural translations of Wagner's music not as a symptom of the impotence of language but as an enactment of the Baudelairean *volupté*, or of Barthes's *jouissance*, or even perhaps of Wagner's own *höchste Lust*.¹⁴ Set free from the notion of fidelity to an original by the discovery that there is no original, only a succession of translations, the act of (further) translation becomes a playful one in which the alienated labors of the artist are returned to their human subject with their value intact.

The price of such freedom, however, is the surrender of community. The Socialist Morris took a dim view of Anarchism, calling it

a social disease caused by the evil conditions of society....I regard the Anarchists – that is, those who believe in Anarchism pure and simple – as being diametrically opposed to us.... Anarchism, as a theory, negatives society, and puts man outside it. (qtd. in Henderson 350)

Morris's condemnation contains a significant hedge: "pure and simple" Anarchism is to be shunned, but Anarchism tinged with some other beliefs might be palatable to him, and indeed



his own, allegedly Socialist, *Utopia News from Nowhere* has frequently been described in terms that bring out its Anarchist tendencies.¹⁵ The gap between pleasure and community remains unclosed, at least on this side of a social revolution that is at present barely imaginable.

Baudelaire's experience of *volupté* while listening to Wagner, and Morris's double retelling of VS as an antidote to what he identified with grand vagueness as "life's dull pain," (Magnússon and Morris xx) may both be said to offer clues as to what desires were satisfied by the *Ring* cycle and *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung* at least for a handful of highly privileged individuals, themselves artists of the first rank. Two further horizons open out before us – first, the reception of these works by their widest audiences (and on this horizon it is tempting to invoke again the notion of the work of art as commodity) and second, the further translations of VS in European and American popular culture, particularly as filtered through Wagner's *Ring* as staged, as filmed, and even as rendered in graphic novels or comic books.¹⁶

It has not been possible here to do more than sketch out the fate of VS as it entered, through Wagner and Morris, the choppy seas of European and American cultural life on the brink of Modernism. The full story is worth telling, for while Morris saw VS as a solace for griefs so intimate as to be "unspeakable,"¹⁷ and Baudelaire and others found ecstasy in Wagner's musical translation of the saga, the historical circumstances in Iceland in the saga-writing age bore a striking resemblance to the conflicted cultural situation in which pre-modernist Europe found itself. In both cases, a traditional belief system had been challenged, if not driven from the field, by a new ideology, and new forms of social power had called into question the values and authority of traditional elites. Perhaps this parallel in circumstances accounts for the strong attraction exerted by the prose sagas on many of those navigating the choppy seas of modernity.



NOTES

¹ Morris's daughter May noted that *Sigurd* "was finished and out by November 1876" in her introduction to the poem (Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, xi).

² Materials on the Exhibition will be found in the *Centennial Exhibition Digital Collection*, an online database maintained by the Free Library of Philadelphia; in subsequent notes I have included the apposite URLs for citations from this collection.

³ Oliver W. Larkin, *Art and Life in America* (1949) quoted in the *Centennial Exhibition Digital Collection* at [<http://libwww.library.phila.gov/CenCol/exh-testimony.htm>], 15 Sep 2003.

⁴ I have not been able to examine a copy of this 1877 work, published in New York by Appleton. The title may be found in the "Checklist" of holdings relevant to the Exhibition in *The Centennial Exhibition Digital collection*. [<http://libwww.library.phila.gov/CenCol/exh-further.htm>], 15 Sep 2003.

⁵ Images of the guns and the engine may be found by following the links on the "Machinery Hall" page of the "Tours" section of the *Centennial Exhibition Digital collection* at [<http://libwww.library.phila.gov/CenCol/tours-machineryhall.htm>], 15 Sep 2003.

⁶ Melville's comment, quoted from *The Melville Log* (1951), may be found at [<http://libwww.library.phila.gov/CenCol/exh-testimony.htm>], 15 Sep 2003.

⁷ For valuable discussions of this development see Hough xv and compare Einstein 15f.

⁸ The flavor of travel to Iceland in Morris's time can be gleaned from the website *Travels in 19th Century Iceland* compiled by Edgar L. Jackson, hosted by the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, University of Alberta, and featuring extracts from travel books, maps, drawings, paintings, and Jackson's own photographs of sites visited by his travelers. The URL for the homepage of this site is [<http://www.eas.ualberta.ca/elj/19thciceland/intro.htm>], 17 Feb 2003.

⁹ In fact, a trace of Homer appears in a beautiful simile in the "Passing Away of Brynhild" section of *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*: "[T]he sound of their bitter mourning was as if red-handed wrack / Ran wild in the Burg of the Niblungs, and the fire were master of all." (243: ll. 158-159) The kenning "red-handed wrack" for fire might be seen as a baleful



intensification of Homer's "rosy-fingered Dawn," but the whole simile is surely intended to recall, for readers of the Greek poet, the great proleptic simile which reports the cry that went up from the Trojan wall when those who stood there saw Hector's body defiled by Achilles: "and throughout the city the people fell to weeping and wailing. It was as though the whole of frowning Ilius was being smirched with fire." (*Il.* 22.408-411, tr. Butler 362)

¹⁰ I am indebted to Chris Grooms for calling my attention to Baudelaire's writings on Wagner at a critical juncture in the planning of this essay.

¹¹ Il possède l'art de traduire, par des gradations subtiles, tout ce qu'il y a d'excessif, d'immense, d'ambitieux, dans l'homme spirituel et naturel. Il semble parfois, en écoutant cette musique ardente et despotique, qu'on retrouve peintes sur le fond des ténèbres, déchiré par la rêverie, les vertigineuses conceptions de l'opium. (Baudelaire 1214, my translation here and throughout).

¹² In Wagner's *Ring* the wolf-references have dwindled to an alias assumed by Wotan, but other elements of the (were)wolf complex in VS, in particular the motifs of outlawry, of transformation, and of compulsive behavior, pervade the music-dramas, and Siegfried's monologue of recollection in the penultimate scene of *Götterdämmerung* can be read as an instance before Freud of self-analysis. It was in every sense a deep motive, then, that turned Wagner from the courtly *Nibelungenlied* to the wilder psychic landscape of VS as he fashioned his libretto.

¹³ 1220: "une vaste drame doué d'un caractère d'universalité."

¹⁴ The phrase appears as the last line of the *Liebestod* in Act III of *Tristan und Isolde*; the full libretto of this opera may be found online at the Wagner Web [<http://www.richard-wagner-web.de/>] 15 Sep 2003.

¹⁵ See, for example, the characterization of this novel by Henderson (328).

¹⁶ The graphic translations range in style from the idealized version of Craig Russell, with its allusions to Art Nouveau, to the more physical (and overtly eroticized) retelling by Gil Kane; taken together they speak compellingly to Baudelaire's chimerical "spiritual and natural man."

¹⁷ The word comes from the confessedly unmusical Morris's comment on Wagner's treatment of VS in a letter to H. Buxton Forman, Nov, 12, 1873: "I look upon it as nothing short of



desecration to bring such a tremendous and world-wide subject under the gaslights of an opera: the most rococo and degraded of all forms of art—the idea of a sandy-haired German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd, which even the simplest words are not typical enough to express!”

WORKS CITED

- Baudelaire, Charles. “*Richard Wagner et «Tannhäuser» à Paris.*” *Oeuvres complètes*. Ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec and Claude Pichois. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1963. 1208-1244.
- Butler, Samuel. *The Iliad of Homer Rendered into English Prose*. 1896. London: Jonathan Cape, 1925.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *Past and Present*. Intro. Douglas Jerrold. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1960.
- “The Centennial Exhibition Digital Collection.” *Free Library of Philadelphia* 17 February 2003. [<http://libwww.library.phila.gov/CenCol/index.htm>].
- Cuddon, John Anthony. *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Cambridge (USA): Blackwell Reference, 1991.
- Einstein, Alfred. *Music in the Romantic Era: a History of Musical Thought in the 19th Century*. New York: W. W. Norton, Inc., 1947.
- Eiríkr Magnússon, and William Morris. *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs*. 1870. London: George Prior, 1980.
- Henderson, Philip. *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1967.
- Hough, Graham. *The Last Romantics*. 1947. New York: University Paperbacks, 1961.
- Keats, John. “When I have fears that I may cease to be.” *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982. 166.



Marx, Karl. *Capital. A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*. Ed. Frederick Engels. London: Swann Sonnenschein & Co., Ltd., 1903.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Ed. D. Ryazanoff. 1930. New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1963.

Morris, William. *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*. Vol. XII of *The Collected Works of William Morris with Introductions by his Daughter May Morris*. London: Longmans Green and Company, 1911.

Pope, Alexander. *An Essay on Criticism. Alexander Pope*. Ed. Pat Rogers. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. 17-39.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "A Defence of Poetry." *Shelley's Prose*. Ed. David Lee Clark. 1953. New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1988. 275-297.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. 1897. Ed. John Paul Riquelme. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002.

Wagner, Richard. *Tristan and Isolde*. Libretto. 1857. 15 Sep. 2003. [<http://home.arcor.de/rww2002/rww2002/tristan/tristantext3.htm#c3>]