

*Which of the five endings that Wagner considered for *Götterdämmerung* do you think he ought to have selected? Defend your answer.*

The Ending of *The Ring*

Richard Wagner set the whole German intellectual and philosophical tradition of the 19th century on stage with his production of *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Behind an apparent world of gods, dwarfs, and heroes emerges a world of Fichte, Feuerbach, and Schopenhauer. Because Wagner wished to write his own librettos, besides composing the music he also had to make decisions about the plots of his operas, and these decisions were not always straightforward. As it is widely recognized in the Wagnerian literature, there is one essential aspect of the story of *The Ring* with which Wagner struggled for many years: the ending of the *Götterdämmerung*. Brünnhilde ends the tetralogy with her peroration, and between 1848 and 1872 Wagner wrote five different speeches for her.

The first ending is remarkably distinct to the other four, for it is the only one in which the realm of the Gods is not destroyed – on the contrary, it is exalted and praised by Brünnhilde: “One alone shall rule: All-Father! Glorious god!”. However, this acclamation of the triumph of the Gods is not consistent with the bargaining and egoistic attitude that they present throughout the opera. The image of the Gods that is depicted in *The Ring* is by no means an acclaimed one: they are all consumed amid an obscure entanglement of trades and corruption. The Gods cannot go unpunished – they must take responsibility for the grief that they have brought to the world.

It is then in this second ending where Wagner decides to end *The Ring* with the destruction of the Gods, as Brünnhilde makes clear in her peroration: “fade away in bliss

before man's deed. [...] I proclaim to you blessed redemption in death". Nevertheless, this ending acquires a much more religious tone, as it is conveyed with Brünnhilde's use of words such as "blessed atonement" and "holy, sacredly". Also, the idea of the redemption of sins excessively resonates with Christ's crucifixion. Firstly, this is not coherent with the mythological origin of *The Ring*, which is pagan as it traces back to German and Scandinavian sources. Secondly, this ending portrays Siegfried as *the* redeemer figure, when Brünnhilde is closer to the figure of the (loving) redeemer. Even in a plain analysis, Siegfried is stabbed in the back whereas Brünnhilde *consciously* decides to immolate herself. We could go further and argue that since Wagner conceives love as a union between a man and a woman transcending the physical world (similar to Tristan and Isolde), Siegfried and Brünnhilde redeem the Gods and the world together as a couple¹.

These considerations of love bring us to the third ending: the Feuerbachian one, which dates from 1852. Scholars gave it this name in contrast to the fourth so-called Schopenhauerian ending since it shows Ludwig Feuerbach's influence on Wagner's ideas². This third ending praises the power of love and explicitly places love at the very core of the tetralogy. Brünnhilde sentences that "love alone can be" – more importantly, this ending sees possible the rise of a reborn and hopeful world that humans *alone* will build. Therefore, the Feuerbachian ending characterizes love as the redeeming

¹ As Wagner wrote in a letter to August Röckel in 1854, "Not even Siegfried (man alone) is the complete 'human being': he is merely the half, only with Brünnhilde does he become the redeemer". This union is emphasized in the dialogue between Brünnhilde and Siegfried in the Prologue of *Götterdämmerung*, where Siegfried claims that "No more do I think of myself as Siegfried, I am Brünnhilde's arm alone! [...] Wherever I am, both will be safe" (Grey, 145). This unity in love is also exemplified through the physical resemblance between twins Sigmund and Sieglinde. As Sigmund tells Sieglinde during the Spring dialogue in Act I of *Die Walküre*, "You are the likeness I hid within me".

² For example, Wagner's manifesto *The Artwork of the Future* takes its title and some of the ideas from Feuerbach's book *Principles of Philosophy of the Future*. He acknowledged his influence and even dedicated the manifesto to the philosopher: "To no one but yourself, honored Sir, can I dedicate this book; for, in offering it you, I restore to you your own property" (Wagner, 7).

force that will allow humanity to reshape itself in an optimistic world that rises from the ashes of the fallen Gods – the *Love Panacea* of Bernard Shaw. As we shall now develop, this is the most coherent ending of the five since love is the underlying element of *The Ring* and the driving force of the entire plot.

The tetralogy starts precisely because Alberich decides to renounce love for the Rhinegold. If it is the renunciation of love what starts the story, it must be the exaltation of love what concludes it. *Die Walküre* focuses on the love that flourishes between Sieglinde and Sigmund: Siegfried is born *because* of their love, and Brünnhilde ends up surrounded by a circle of fire because she is heartbroken at the sight of Sigmund being capable of killing himself and Sieglinde in Act II. Brünnhilde could have ended *The Ring* in Act I of *Götterdämmerung* when her sister Waltraute urges her to give the ring back to the Rhinemaidens, but she decides not to because she does not want to relinquish Siegfried's "pledge of love".

The immense power of love in the story line of *The Ring* is thus what invalidates the Schopenhauerian ending. This is the fourth ending that Wagner wrote after being captivated by Arthur Schopenhauer's book *The World as Will and Representation*. Very concisely put, Schopenhauer believes that the world is full of suffering because of the uncontrollable force of the Will. Influenced by Eastern religions, Schopenhauer considers that the only way to escape this suffering is through the denial of the Will, which ultimately leads to Nirvana and the ideal state of oblivion. Supposedly, this is the state that Brünnhilde wishes to reach through her immolation in this fourth ending: "I depart from the home of desire [...] redeemed from reincarnation [...] grieving love's profoundest suffering". Nevertheless, the Schopenhauerian ending is the least coherent of all five when put in the context of the whole *Ring*. Firstly, Brünnhilde's immolation is not motivated by her desire to deny the Will; it is her love for Siegfried what lies behind

her actions. Her motivation to immolate herself is not an *end in itself*; it is based purely on her desire to meet Siegfried again in her death. This is even more unequivocal in the final love duet in Act III of *Siegfried* between Brünnhilde and Siegfried, where she sings: “laughing let us perish [...] light-bringing love and laughing death!”. This ecstatic idea of death through love has nothing Schopenhauerian in it.

Furthermore, Wagner’s idea of love, as portrayed through the entire *Ring*, is completely opposite to Schopenhauer’s idea of it. The philosopher considers love to be just another form of suffering and only contemplates its sexual aspect. This clearly contrasts with Wagner’s (very Feuerbachian) opinion that “the highest satisfaction and expression of the individual is [...] only possible through love” (Shaw, 105). Love is always praised in *The Ring*, and therefore Brünnhilde’s sorrowing view on love in the end is not consistent. Moreover, Schopenhauer makes it very clear in his book that suicide does not allow one to escape the Will and reach Nirvana. But isn’t Brünnhilde’s immolation a poetic way of committing suicide, after all? The only character in *The Ring* that acquires a true Schopenhauerian attitude is Wotan. As explained by Waltraute in Act I of *Götterdämmerung*, since Siegfried breaks his spear in the third opera, Wotan simply “sits, says not a word, silent and grave. [...] Holda’s apple he does not touch”, while waiting and *wishing* the ending³. During the entire *Götterdämmerung* Wotan is denying the Will and just embracing the end. It is Wotan who could deliver a Schopenhauerian speech, but not Brünnhilde.

The final published ending that Wagner chose in 1872 is nothing more than a Feuerbachian ending disguised. Instead of having to explicitly decide between a Feuerbachian or a Schopenhauerian ending – that is, between a world that can be

³ As Wotan tells Erda in Act III of *Siegfried*, “Fear of the end of the gods no longer consumes me now that my wish so wills it!”.

redeemed through love or a hopeless world of endless suffering – he decided to make Brünnhilde’s speech allegedly open-ended⁴. However, even if the power of love is not strictly mentioned in the final Brünnhilde’s peroration, we know it is behind her words given its importance throughout the entire *Ring*. This is why a Feuerbachian ending would have been more appropriate – why try to masquerade in the end what is apparent throughout the four operas?

To conclude the analysis of the five endings that Wagner wrote for *Götterdämmerung*, we should lastly consider the extent to which this whole philosophical discussion matters. If there is one thing that Feuerbach and Schopenhauer agreed upon, it is the uniqueness and power of music. Intellectual analysis of a work of art should never deprive the artwork of its essence. Perhaps the “redemption through love” leitmotif that culminates Brünnhilde’s peroration⁵ has a Feuerbachian meaning, or perhaps it has a Schopenhauerian meaning, or perhaps it does not have any philosophical meaning at all.

What matters above these concerns is that it is beautiful.

4 As noted by Lee in her dissertation *Ending the Ring* and as seen in the picture of Wagner’s very own drafts in the Appendix, Wagner “created the definitive ending not by revising, expanding, or rewriting either of the two major alternative endings [Feuerbach and Schopenhauer], but by cutting the key passages in them” (Lee, 133).

5 It is not clear why Wagner decided to use this leitmotif only twice in the entire tetralogy (during Sieglinde’s and Brünnhilde’s dialogue in Act III of *Die Walküre* and in Brünnhilde’s immolation at the end of *Götterdämmerung*), when he could have used it in other places (such as when Brünnhilde tells Siegfried the story of his birth during their love duet in Act III of *Siegfried*). Scholars have repeatedly debated over whether this leitmotif is Feuerbachian or Schopenhauerian. Although we now call it “redemption through love”, it was the editor Hans von Wolzogen who named it *Liebeserlösung* in the first “thematic guide” to Wagner’s leitmotifs, which could also be translated to “redemption of love” (which drastically changes the meaning of the leitmotif). In a letter of 1875, Cosima Wagner wrote that the composer referred to this leitmotif as the “glorification of Brünnhilde” (Darcy, 8). More interestingly, Wagner did not include this leitmotif in Brünnhilde’s immolation when he played *Götterdämmerung* for king Ludwig II, even if at that time he was using the Feuerbachian ending (Lee, 183).

Appendix

1. The first ending (November 1848)

You overweening hero,
how you held me in thrall!
All my wisdom I had to forgo,
for all my knowledge I gave to you:
what you took you did not use, –
in your bold defiance you trusted alone!
Now that, appeased you gave it me freely,
my knowledge returns once more
and I read the runes of the ring.
The Norn's ancient lore I can also hear
and understand all they say:
the bravest of men's most might deed
must now be blessed by my knowledge. –
You Nibelungs, heed my words!
Your thralldom now I end:
he who forged the ring and enthralled
you restless spirits, –
he shall not regain it. –
But let him be free, like you!
For I give this gold unto you,
wise sisters of the watery deep!
Let the fire that now consumes me
cleanse the ring of its curse:
you will melt it down and safely guard
the glistening gold of the Rhine,
that was stolen to your undoing! –
[One alone shall rule:
All-Father! Glorious god!
Rejoice in the freest of heroes!
Siegfried I bring to you now:
grant him a loving greeting
the bondsman of boundless might!]
Rejoice, Grane: soon we'll be free!

2. The second ending (December 1848)

Blessed atonement
I saw for the holy,
sacredly ageless
and only gods!
Rejoice
in the freest of heroes!
To the greeting of his brotherly gods
his bride is bringing him now!
Depart without power
whom guilt now shuns.
From your guilt has sprung the
blithest of heroes
whose unwilled deed has expunged it:
you're spared the anxious struggle
to save your waning power:
fade away in bliss before man's deed,
before the hero whom, alas, you created!
In the midst of your anxious fear
I proclaim to you blessed redemption in death!

3. The third and Feuerbachian ending (1852)

You, blossoming life's
enduring race:
heed well
what I tell you now! –
For when you've seen Siegfried and Brünnhild'
consumed by the kindling blaze;
and when you've seen the Rhine's daughters
return the ring to its depths,
to the north then
look through the night:
when a sacred glow
starts to gleam in the sky,
then shall you know
that you've witnessed Valhalla's end! –
Though the race of gods
passed away like a breath,
though I leave behind me
a world without rulers,
I now bequeath to that world
my most sacred wisdom's hoard. –

Not wealth, not gold,
not godly pomp;
not house, not garth,
nor lordly splendor;
not troubled treaties'
treacherous bonds,
not smooth-tongued custom's
stern decree:
blessed in joy and sorrow
love alone can be. –

4. The forth and Schopenhauerian ending (1856)

Were I no more to fare
tom Valhalla's fortress
do you know whither I fare?
I depart from the home of desire,
I flee forever the home of delusion;
the open gates
of eternal becoming
I close behind me now:
to the holiest chosen land,
free from desire and delusion,
the goal of the world's migration,
redeemed from reincarnation,
the enlightened woman now goes.
The blessed end
of all things eternal,
do you know how I attained it?
Grieving love's
profoundest suffering
opened my eyes for me:
I saw the world end. –

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