

A Review of Paul Brian Heise's *The Wound That Will Never Heal: An Allegorical Interpretation of Richard Wagner's The Ring of The Nibelung*. Washington: Academica Press, 2021

by Bill Pastor

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As we embark on our analysis of the last of the *Ring* music-dramas, it should have become apparent that it's a hybrid masterwork which can't be grasped under one category, such as drama, poetry, music, or philosophy. It's, put simply, a dramatic, theoretical, poetic, musical, and philosophic meditation on the great questions which have confronted us humans since our emergence as conscious beings among animals. (p. 355)

Paul Heise's 500+ page book, *The Wound That Will Never Heal: An Allegorical Interpretation of Richard Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung* (hereafter *The Wound*) is a "big think" book, a challenging book. *The Wound* is not another retelling of *The Ring* in terms of who did what, when, and to whom, with a little why thrown into the mix. It is a book that takes very seriously Wagner's claim that art is redemptive, that art is transcendent, that art is the replacement for religion.

The heart of Mr. Heise's interpretation of *The Ring* is the conflict within human consciousness between our desire for objective knowledge (consciousness - science) and our need for transcendence (unconscious - the illusions of religious belief and immortality). Without any source of transcendence, we would find ourselves before the gates of Dante's *Inferno* having "Abandoned All Hope." Heise asserts that, because humans have attained consciousness, it is no longer an option for us to slip back to our animal preconsciousness/pre-reflective condition. Wagner's *Ring* posits another option: transcendence, not in religion, but in unconsciously-inspired secular art. (Spoiler alert: Siegfried is our secular artist and Brünnhilde is his muse.) The devil is in the details of Heise's analysis; Alberich, Wotan, Siegfried, and Brünnhilde are the details. Per Heise, these details are complex and provocative.

To appreciate Mr. Heise's analysis of *The Ring*, the reader must have a sensitivity to diverse fields of exploration including: depth psychology (e.g., Alberich is a metaphor for the dawn of human consciousness and our drive for objective truth (p. 13) and Wotan is a symbol for collective man's dying religious faith (p. 150)); comparative religion; mythology; the clash between the world views of objective science and transcendent religion; aesthetics; and philosophy, primarily that of Feuerbach.

Appreciating *The Wound* demands that the reader conceptually synthesize Wagner's libretti, leitmotifs (primarily identified and analyzed by Deryck Cooke and Allen Dunning), and theoretical works and letters, in ways in which we generally are not accustomed in our linear way of conducting analysis. *The Wound* tells two stories. The first is the literal retelling of Wagner's *Ring*. The second is *The Ring's* allegorical or metaphorical meaning. As the allegorical

interpretation diverges further and further from the literal meaning, readers must decide whether they are entering a realm of profundity or nonsense; this quandary is the unavoidable nature of allegory.

If you are looking for a mere rehashing of the love vs power and the redemption through love Wagnerian themes, then Mr. Heise's *The Wound* is not for you. However, if you enjoy books that look behind the text, such as Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite* or Robert Donington's *Wagner's 'Ring' and its Symbols*, and explore concepts like Carl Jung's collective unconscious, then you might enjoy *The Wound*. If you enjoy immersing yourself in provocative and expansive theory, whether or not you agree with the author's framework and analysis, then Heise's book is a candy store of stimulating and often very insightful analysis.

For example, in *The Wound*, Siegfried does not simply kill Fafner, but rather, he kills Wotan's fear, which is incarnated in Fafner: "He [Siegfried] has to kill Wotan's fear, incarnate in Fafner's prohibiting access to Alberich's power, to emancipate art from religious faith's control so Siegfried can win his muse of secular art, Brünnhilde, and take aesthetic possession of Alberich's Ring, Tarnhelm, and Hoard. In this way Siegfried can transform religion's Wonder (belief in miracles), trapped in the past, into artistic Wonder, "the artwork of the future" (p. 260). Not light stuff.

Mr. Heise builds his case over 500+ pages. Using abundant citations to Wagner's works, Heise argues that his unpacking *The Ring* in terms of his particular allegories is what Wagner explicitly intended as the central meaning to *The Ring*.

The Wound begins with a reasonable premise: human beings and human consciousness evolved from nature. Mr. Heise argues that human beings lived within nature and behaved in accordance with our natural instincts before evolving a developed level of consciousness and self-consciousness. As consciousness evolved, we began to see ourselves as separate from nature, and as a result we developed methods to control nature (represented by Alberich-science) and created religious institutions to express our unconscious sentiments for the transcendent (represented by the gods of Valhalla). Now Heise jumps to Wagner's *Ring*: *The Ring* is an allegory for the unfolding conflict within human consciousness; this conflict is between objective and materialistic (non-transcendent) science and transcendent religious beliefs.

The breadth of Mr. Heise's tome can pose problem for readers. To be honest, at times I felt I needed a mind-altering drug to feel at home seeing the connections Heise makes between the characters and events in *The Ring*. For example, Heise argues that Alberich represents the dawn of consciousness: "Alberich has made one of the *Ring*'s crucial distinctions between human thought under the sway of feelings and play, which produces religious mythology and art, and objective human thought, through which we obtain the knowledge to draw power from our world" (p. 35). Heise's analysis continues:

The whole purpose of Alberich's Ring Curse is to punish those whose happiness depends on the self-deceptions of religion, altruistic morality, and art, i.e., those (like Wotan) who can't bear to sacrifice love (feeling) for power. As Alberich says, the Ring's (objective consciousness') owner will be wracked by care. This existential angst isn't only the price we humans pay for our gift of self-consciousness in being able to foresee our death, a price religious faith, ethics, and art are meant to ameliorate. It's also the price those pay who are dedicated to affirming our transcendent value, who, having over-reached the bounds of the possible, are fated to be humiliated by truth (p. 97).

Mr. Heise argues that *The Ring* is an allegory for the battle between humanities' domination by science (Alberich's consciousness and his desire to control nature) and our illusion in a supernatural world (Wotan's Valhalla and our religious sentiment). Heise further argues that Wagner's position is that humanity requires a third option from materialism and illusory idealism. This third alternative, and Wagner's answer to the sterility of science and the illusion of religion, is secular art. "According to Wagner, where religion can't survive its conflict with science, art can live on eternally freed from that threat because it stakes no claim to truth, and therefore can never be guilty of falsehood: as feeling it's freed from the conflict between truth and falsehood which sustains the war between science and religion, Nibelheim and Valhalla" (p. 304). Siegfried and Brünnhilde represent this new stage in human development.

This is heady stuff. The challenge to the reader is in details of Mr. Heise's allegorical analysis of the particulars. For example, the standard understanding of Siegfried's experience of fear when seeing Brünnhilde is the "teenager's fear and awe at his first sexual experience." Heise makes child's play of this first level explanation (see pp. 319ff). One of Heise's assertions is that Siegfried's fear is his unconscious and intuitive knowledge of his place in Wotan's guilt and scheme to redeem himself. Whether or not we accept Heise's assertions, they are interesting ideas and worthy of contemplation.

The Wound contains many straight-forward, i.e., non-allegorical observations found in *The Ring*. For example, we learn something about Loge that, I for one, never noticed: "Loge immediately contradicts what he just said (that no living being will renounce love) when he adds that he found only one man who forswears love for gold's sake, Alberich. The Giants will also forswear love for gold's sake..." (p. 62). Another tidbit is his explanation for why Siegfried, while he is wooing Gutrune, asks Gunther if he is already married. Mr. Heise explains that it was "an old Teutonic custom that a brother had to be married before any of his sisters could be" (p. 396). Oddly, this is one of the few statements for which Heise does not provide documentation.

Mr. Heise shows connections between events that many of us may not have noticed. For example, he connects Mime's failed attempt to get Siegfried to drink the poisoned potion Mime prepared for Siegfried with Hagen's success in getting Siegfried to drink the "poisoned" potion that Hagen prepared for Siegfried (p. 243). While not exceedingly profound, it is an interesting connection that illustrates the weakness of Mime (Alberich's brother) and the strength of Hagen (Alberich's son).

Mr. Heise masterly displays the irony in the Waltraute scene (pp. 406ff) as Brünnhilde foolishly thinks that the love she shares with Siegfried (as represented in the ring on her finger) has transcended Alberich's curse. The irony in this scene is rich, since the ring was forged by renouncing love for power's sake (p. 416). This is good stuff, even at the surface level of analysis.

Mr. Heise does not shy away from tackling thorny questions, such as why we hear the *Renunciation of Love* motif in the scene in which Siegmund extracts the Sword (Nothung) from Hunding's tree. Heise provides an allegorical explanation that the ring represents the existential curse of consciousness which leads to the loveless world of objective knowledge. He begins with the non-controversial claim that Wotan created the sword so that his Wälzung children can retrieve Alberich's ring from Fafner. This sword represents Wotan's need for love in a loveless world (p. 130). The two concepts of love and lovelessness are intimately connected, "...it is because of Alberich's renunciation of love that Siegmund and Sieglinde have the highest need (Noth) of love, love that's been lost" (p.133). Thus the *Renunciation of Love* motif during this scene "dramatizes Alberich's renunciation of love for power and Siegmund's renunciation of power for the sake of love."

The last section of *The Wound* is a lexicon of leitmotifs that Mr. Heise uses to support many of his associations and claims. I confess the visual display of leitmotifs and their association is beyond my abilities to "see." For example, Heise argues that Erda is the mother of all the Valkyries, and not just Brünnhilde, by analyzing the connection between the last three notes of Erda's motif and the Valkyries' motif. Impressive, if true, but this type of musical analysis is beyond me.

For those interested in following Mr. Heise's arguments in terms of leitmotif justification, you will not be wanting. Heise provides an extensive guide of *The Ring's* leitmotifs including musical notation, and this guide is organized numerically. A few random examples should suffice. The scene is Mime's cave in act 1 of *Siegfried*:

Wotan the Wanderer recounts for Mime the history of his Spear of divine authority, describing how he cut it from the holiest branch of the World-Ash Tree, whose new motif (H122) Dunning describes as the compound H2/H52, and Cooke describes as a rhythmic variant, in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, of H52. However, H122 is only the first of two wholly distinct motifs associated with the World-Ash. The second, H157, is introduced in T.P.A as the Norns narrate their version of world-history, repeating some of the things Wotan is now telling Mime. The orchestra also introduces here the definitive version of Motif H123 (Power of the Gods)(p. 228).

And a few pages later:

H129, "Siegfried's Smelting Motif," which follows the general contours of H18 (Siegfried's Mission), logically fits in with that musically related set of motifs which include H112, H118, and H135, the first being Mime's Starling Song concerning all that

Siegfried owes to him, the second, H118, representing Siegfried's quest to emancipate himself from that debt, and H135 reminding us of Wotan's proclamation to Alberich in S.2.1 of Siegfried's ability to stand on his own feet (p. 241).

As a last example:

As Gutrune offers Siegfried her drugged drink of alleged welcome we hear for the first time her definitive Gutrune Motif H168ab. Cooke states that H168a is in the same family of Gibichung motifs as H162 (Hagen), H167 (Gunther's false friendship for Siegfried), and H183 (the Gibichung Horncall). H168b seems to be in the family of motifs which include H20 (associated in R.2 with Fricka's hope that in Valhalla she could entice Wotan to sustain his fidelity to her), H74, H104, and H113. H168's liquid, sensuous, poignant nature strongly suggests Gutrune possesses a sublime beauty and feminine mystique (p. 394).

On a few occasions I looked for the link between the event and the leitmotif. For example, Mr. Heise speculates that the Woodbird may be telling Siegfried about his mother and that "Wagner mentioned on several occasions that the presence of H65 here represents Siegfried's dead mother Sieglinde's effort to warn her son, through the Woodbird's tune..." (p. 265) (Heise refers to a letter to King Ludwig II as evidence.). However, when I looked at H65 in the "Guide to Motifs," there is no mention of this.

The title of Heise's book clearly is a reference to *Parsifal*. Mr. Heise makes this connection explicit and spells out its relation to *The Ring* (p. 411): "Amfortas abhors immortality, refrains from serving the Holy Grail any longer, and lives only for his own death, so he can finally be relieved from suffering from *his wound that will never heal* (my italics), the equivalent in *Parsifal* of Alberich's Ring Curse." (Aside: Heise makes a further connection of the un-healing wound to the Prometheus Myth where "the price we humans pay for consciousness, and particularly for our ability to foresee our inevitable end (which produces existential fear)" (p. 421)). Heise spells out the connection between *The Ring* and *Parsifal* by extrapolating from Wotan's farewell scene in act 3, scene iii of *Valkyrie*: "...Wotan's confession that the real world now belongs to Alberich, that egoism is the basis for society and human history, so that his [Wotan] longing for restoration of lost innocence can now only be expressed subliminally in art, not in open challenge to the bitter truth, a fight Alberich will inevitably win. It's not that she [Brünnhilde] defied Wotan that angered him, but rather, that her defiance was "knowing," i.e., conscious." (pp. 196-7)

According to Mr. Heise, since the end of *Das Rheingold*, Wotan has been seeking a hero "whose defiance of Wotan's law will be subliminal, an expression solely of feeling, not open, public, conscious activity. He's seeking an artist-hero in whose art, a profound form of play, the terrible world can be redeemed aesthetically without actively asserting power in the real world" (p. 197). This hope is dashed when Siegfried, disguised as Gunther, rips the ring from Brünnhilde. Allegorically, Siegfried's source of artistic inspiration is Brünnhilde, his unconscious. By violating

Brünnhilde, his unconscious source of artistic inspiration, Siegfried becomes conscious, and thereby he becomes like the unloving Alberich. Siegfried's art has become too self-conscious to be redemptive. The end of the gods (illusory religion) and genuinely inspired art is now upon us. It appears that the secular artist-hero has succumbed to the ring's curse of consciousness thereby losing the transcendent tool of unconscious inspiration.

There are two remaining acts in *Götterdämmerung* and in Mr. Heise's story. Both move with lightning speed: one literal, one allegorical. We have all read enough synopses of *The Ring* to know what's going to happen; however, a new allegorical reading can be refreshing. After acclimating myself to Heise's analysis, like learning a new language, I came to enjoy his rendition. Paraphrasing Hans Sachs's response to Walter in *Die Meistersinger*: make up your own rules and then follow them.

The Wound is a well thought out and scholarly book. It is richly documented with sources from Wagner's published books and essays, his personal letters, and his private thoughts as recorded in Cosima's diaries. In addition, Mr. Heise's references to Wagner's leitmotifs are extensive. Whether you agree with Heise's interpretation of *The Ring* is almost beside the point. Heise has created a parallel universe, an entry into another dimension. Determining whether this dimension is real or science fiction is the reader's choice; a choice that should not be made *a priori* on the grounds that Heise's analysis is allegorical because that rationale would lead to discarding nearly all interesting analyses.

In conclusion, I have two modest recommendations for Mr. Heise. First, a more extensive index would be helpful. Four pages simply is not sufficient for a 500+ page book. Second, a glossary of characters and objects and what they symbolize would be very helpful. Many of the characters carry multiple symbols, e.g., Fafner represents our fundamental animal instinct of self-preservation (p. 49) and religious faith's fear of truth (p. 279). It is perfectly fine for objects to have multifaceted meanings, but they should be cataloged in one place as an aide to the reader.