

A Review of William H. Pastor's *Three Pillars of Modern Western Culture: Richard Wagner's Impact on James Joyce's Ulysses and Marcel Proust's In Search of Lost Time: Leitmotifs, Endless Melody, and Gesamtkunstwerk*, Second Edition. Washington, DC: Opus Self-Publishing, 2021.

Much has been written about Richard Wagner's influence on poets, painters, and novelists of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Wagner Society member William H. (Bill) Pastor has taken a unique approach to the topic in *Three Pillars of Modern Western Culture: Richard Wagner's Impact on James Joyce's Ulysses and Marcel Proust's In Search of Lost Time: Leitmotifs, Endless Melody, and Gesamtkunstwerk*. He illustrates how Joyce and Proust used these three techniques that are central to Wagner's work as key structural elements in *Ulysses* and *In Search of Lost Time* (which he abbreviates as *In Search of*). His goal in doing so is to stimulate interest in the two novels among devotees of Wagner, and interest in Wagner among fans of Joyce and Proust. For those in both camps, Pastor hopes to provide a deeper understanding of the links among these three giants of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western culture.

Pastor begins by describing how *leitmotifs*, endless melody, and *Gesamtkunstwerk* function in the work of Wagner, particularly in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Borrowing a metaphor from Proust, he explains that each *leitmotif* acts as both a telescope and a microscope. By virtue of being repeated, it calls up memories of the past and anticipates the future. At the same time, it provides insight into the characters' thoughts and emotions in each episode where it appears. Using the Sword motif as an example, Pastor shows how a *leitmotif* carries out these two functions in the *Ring*.

Pastor then reviews Wagner's theories of endless melody and *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The concept of endless melody grew out of his rejection of traditional operatic conventions, such as arias and recitative. In a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, multiple arts such as music, poetry, acting, conducting, and stage design would work in harmony, providing viewers and

listeners with an enhanced experience of reality. Wagner inspired the Symbolists, and other poets, painters, dramatists and filmmakers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to embody the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and achieve the unique impact of music in their creations. Their modernist successors, reeling from the impact of World War I, used Wagner's techniques of *leitmotif*, endless melody, and *Gesamtkunstwerk* to express the isolation of the individual in a senseless world. Pastor briefly explains how these artistic movements provide a bridge from Wagner to Joyce and Proust.

The heart of the book comprises the chapters on Wagnerism in *Ulysses* and *In Search of Lost Time*, with charts and appendices that offer additional detail and perspective. I focused on the chapters on Proust, because I am reading *In Search of* for the first time, and was looking for guideposts to help me through it.

Pastor discusses a variety of *leitmotifs* in *In Search of*, including some that only a very alert or experienced reader would notice. One is a set of references to the *Figaro*, which reflect the Narrator's progress, from early frustration with his ambition to become a writer, to later success. Another is the parish priest of Combray, which invests the names of people and places with increased meaning over time. Others are more obvious to a first-time reader who is familiar with Wagner – particularly the “little phrase” by the composer Vinteuil which accompanies the story of Swann's love for Odette. As Jeffrey Swann has pointed out<sup>1</sup>, Vinteuil implicitly resembles Wagner in many ways.

The novel is replete with explicit references to Wagner, which Pastor catalogues on pp. 85-90. He uses a scheme developed by French critic Jean-Jacques Nattiez that divides them into three categories, and creates a fourth of his own.<sup>2</sup> In many cases, they are small details, almost like

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Swann, “Wagner and Proust,” *The Wagner Journal* 12, no. 2, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Nattiez' three categories are snob (name dropping), cultivated amateur (an analysis of Wagner's music), and

slight touches of a painter's brush, that provide a much greater insight into a character or situation than their presence in the text suggests at first glance. I had not appreciated this aspect of Proust's skill before Pastor pointed it out to me.

Pastor also points out that Wagner is the only artist Proust mentions who actually lived. All the others are fictitious: Elistir the painter, Bergotte the writer, Vinteuil the composer, and Berma the actress. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, this highlights the unique regard that Proust had for Wagner, and suggests that he wanted readers to experience his novel in the same way that his Narrator experienced Wagner's music: "I could hear him exult, invite me to share his joy."<sup>3</sup>

Wagner fans who are reading *Ulysses* for the first time – which I have not done – will find valuable guidance in Pastor's catalogue of Wagner references, and his explanation of key *leitmotifs*. Pastor also shows readers how to identify the endless melody in the novel. He explains that Joyce created the effect by connecting strings of thought that appear disjointed but are constructed from familiar elements. His chapter on Joyce then focuses on passages that illustrate the use of this technique. In contrast, his discussion of endless melody in Proust is somewhat confusing. He explains in the Introduction that Proust used long sentences and paragraphs to create the effect. However, his chapter on Proust lists a "multitude of literary techniques," without fully clarifying how long sentences and paragraphs embody each one.

The least helpful sections of the book are the discussions of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in both Joyce and Proust. Pastor sets these up in the Introduction, where he describes Wagner's concept of opera as a synthesis of music, poetry, and the arts involved in designing and producing a work on stage.<sup>4</sup> The chapter on *Ulysses*, however, focuses primarily on Joyce's literary

forbears – particularly Homer, but also Dante, Shakespeare and contemporary Irish writers. Readers will appreciate that it is a monumental work that synthesizes centuries of myth and literature, while questioning whether it meets Wagner's criteria for *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The chapter on *In Search of* errs in the other direction. It incorporates a long list of human endeavors into Proustian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, including some as far afield of art as hydrodynamics. Some readers will wonder whether Wagner's theories actually illuminate such a broad conception.

On balance, however, the originality of Pastor's approach to these cultural giants outweighs any flaws in its execution. By juxtaposing Wagner with Joyce and Proust, he provides fresh perspectives on each one, and enriches his readers' understanding of all three.

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elite (authentic understanding). Pastor's creates a fourth category, literary reference, to encompass references that don't fit the other three, and provides a table on pp. 85-90 that places each reference in one of the four.

<sup>3</sup> p. 94.

<sup>4</sup> pp. 11-12.