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Adorno and Badiou on “the case of Wagner:” A new experience of time?

Philosophers’s debates about music are a rather rare phenomenon. Yet the “case of Wagner”, the name Wagner, the signifier Wagner ignites a series of fervent philosophical debates about music and by doing so it inaugurates a new situation with respect to the relationship between music and philosophy. Nietzsche’s verdict on Wagner, the invention of a certain Nietzsche by the Nazi regime which makes him an accomplice of Wagner, Heidegger’s, Lacoue-Labarthe’s, Adorno’s aphorisms along with those by Baudelaire and Mallarme vividly demonstrate –to say the least- the significant role music plays in contemporary ideological formations.

The present paper aims at shedding light on Adorno’s interpretation of Wagner taking place in his early text, *Versuch über Wagner* and more specifically on his stricture according to which Wagner is unable to create a new concept of time. The paper will also attempt to elucidate the refutation of the Adornian approach by Alain Badiou. However, a more careful reading of the Adornian text will reveal not only the inconsistencies that penetrate it but also that its approach to Wagner is not as incompatible with that of Badiou as it might appear at first glance.

1. *Versuch über Wagner*.

Adorno’s early text *Versuch über Wagner* is literally a “Versuch” in the sense of an exercise on the method, the development and articulation of which will reach its apex in his *Negative Dialectics*: the method of immanent critique which aims at deciphering the truth content or falsity of the individual work of art. Adorno’s immanent critique undertakes to disclose how the inconsistencies and ambiguities, the antagonisms inherent in the technical-compositional characteristics of Wagner’s music are symptomatic of the

contradictions of society. Nevertheless, and this is the point made by György Markus, Adorno's immanent critique in his *Versuch*, constitutes itself mainly as the fierce polemic against the project of ideology critique which focuses solely upon the impact of society on the artwork. The exemplar of the method of ideology critique is, for Adorno, Krakauer's book on Offenbach.¹ What the opening chapter of Adorno's monograph on Wagner as a social character vividly demonstrates, however, is that ideology critique is not dismissed out of hand. Its pillars are retained instead and redeemed. Indeed, all the main features "of Wagner's presumed 'social personality', his pompous self-heroization and simultaneous self-abasement, the demonic mixture of sentimental bonding and humiliating sadism, and (above all) the motives of the beggar and betrayal –will not simply return in the analyses of music dramas, but it is only through these latter that their genuine meaning will be disclosed."²

Adorno's interpretation of Wagner via the method of immanent critique could only make sense paradoxically if one looks into the text from which Wagner is completely missing, that is, *Negative Dialectics*. The latter, as Alain Badiou pointedly argues, is "a work of philosophy in the strongest sense of the term, if it can be agreed that every work of philosophy reconstitutes or proposes philosophy's place anew. In this case, it consists of proposing a new direction for philosophy."³ From the beginning to the end the text is marked by the distrust *vis-à-vis* the concept, since the concept always imprints and reproduces Western rationalism's identity compulsion which, in Adorno's own words, "is the primal form of ideology."⁴ If identity is the arch-enemy, then the aim of the book is to bring forth and reveal the means of articulating difference. *Negative Dialectics* is nothing but the venture to think what is different from thought. The question which arises however, at this point concerns the very experience that makes it possible to think what is non-identical to thought. For Adorno, the non-identical can never present itself as thought. It presents itself instead, as affect, as the unmediated, unconditional suffering inscribed in the body. This is precisely why Auschwitz as something which can be no way prefigured in thought is the rupture in history which urgently requires a new type of thinking. According to that, since Auschwitz is the very synonym of the absolute disdain of the value of human life and since justice is impossible to be done to the dead of Auschwitz since they died in the total absence of meaning, it follows that new thinking

can only start in the context of guilt. As Adorno writes in a rather anti-Nietzschean vein: “Existence at large has become a universal guilt context.”⁵ Negative dialectics as the venture to think paradoxically what is radically different from thought, the non-identical or the different, is born from Auschwitz as the signifier of the perennial suffering unable to be expressed by a concept. The second question however, which immediately arises concerns the relation between music and the appearance of difference as the theoretical re-inscription of suffering. Can music depict that desertion, that universal guilt?

Taking his cue from Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Adorno claims that since justice has never been done and will not probably be done, since there is absolutely no guarantee that the absolute will come or that there will be a salvation or a final reconciliation, then waiting in vain becomes the imperative of the Negative Dialectics. Looked at from this angle, every work of art possessing resolution, closure, culmination or finality must be avoided. Music should not sublimate its own negativity but deal with its otherness.

It is precisely at this point that Adorno plays off Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* against Wagner’s operas and claims that while waiting in vain is the modern waiting *par excellence*, waiting in Wagner as waiting for the final result is the metaphysical waiting *par excellence*. Insofar as the finale of the Wagnerian compositions is the reconciliation of all differences and contradictions, Wagner re-translates the Hegelian dialectic into music. Moreover, Wagner’s creations could be seen as the aesthetic analogue of the ideology of progress so dominant in the 19th century or even more so of a political eschatology. If high art and its product, i.e. the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) presupposes totality and is identified with the aestheticization of the latter, then Wagner’s music plays the ideological role of the servant of the unified political vision of the nation in general and of the German nation in particular. Wagner becomes the exemplar of what Walter Benjamin called the “aestheticization of politics” and seems to do justice to Heidegger’s claim that Wagner is “the archetypical metaphysician, since metaphysics, as he defines it, is the supremacy of the One, the capturing of Being by the One.”⁶ As Alain Badiou pointedly remarks: “Wagner stands at the big mausoleum of in the graveyard of impossible grandeur.”⁷

Nevertheless, Adorno's *Versuch über Wagner* as the exercise of immanent critique is simultaneously an exercise in *Rettung*, in saving Wagner's music from its transformation into a Nazi artistic icon. As Adorno himself writes in 1964: *Versuch über Wagner* "rather belongs to the literary genre of "rescues" (*Rettungen*) that attempts to wrest its truth from the dark side of an object."⁸ Adorno is arguing that irrespectively of the artistic fiasco it leads to, Wagner's effort to construct the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is governed by the fierce claim of a "genuine humanism."⁹ In the end, the obsession with totality stems from the renunciation of the alienation and fragmentation of the modern bourgeois individual which is the side effect of modernity's division of labor.

2. Badiou on Wagner: A new concept of time?

To return to the question of time in Wagner: Adorno insists that Wagner was unable to create the possibility of a genuine waiting not relying on what comes after the waiting. Wagner's latent Hegelianism and his endorsement of teleology rule out the possibility of a new concept of time. Contrasting Wagner to Beckett, Adorno accuses Wagner of creating a rigged sort of waiting entirely dictated by its ultimate resolution. Though Tristan's waiting in the Act III of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is the lengthiest waiting in the entire history of art, yet it might be argued that it signals nothing other than the postponement of the finale. Closure is all the more conclusive since it has been awaited for such a long time. Throughout the three quarters of the Act the wounded Tristan is waiting until Isolde does finally appear. Tristan dies as soon as she arrives there and then Isolde dies of love. In opposition to Adorno, Alain Badiou argues at this point that the very occurrence of a final resolution of redemption in no way disproves the fact of waiting. In Badiou's own words:

Even though Isolde does arrive, her arrival is in a certain sense beyond all the waiting since the only thing Tristan can do then is die. All he says is 'Isolde' and he dies. It is a little like a supplement to the waiting, rather than its resolution; it is by no means the beginning of something else but merely the fact that beyond the waiting and as though in excess of it, there is effectively this ultimate figure of Tristan's death in Isolde's arms.¹⁰

Badiou resorts to Heiner Müller's production of *Tristan und Isolde* as this took place in Bayreuth to reinforce his argument. Being fully aware of Adorno's juxtaposition of Wagner's account of waiting to that of Beckett, Müller directs the third act of the opera as if he were directing Beckett. The set is dust-ridden and the characters are genuinely Beckettian. Even the shepherd who plays a sad song on his flute, writes Badiou, "is an utterly Beckettian character –blind, wearing dark glasses, sitting on the ground."¹¹

Before examining in detail, however, Alain Badiou's refutation of Adorno's interpretation of Wagner's time, it would be significant at this point to underline one of the inconsistencies of Adorno's analysis.

While Adorno emphasizes the Hegelian moment of Wagner's time claiming that the latter is in the service of a final resolution or pregnant with futurity, in the same text, Adorno indicates the static character of Wagner's music, the spatialization of time marked by the lack of any real harmonic-thematic progression in it. The preponderance of the a-temporal Being over becoming, the phantasmagoric instant of eternal origin which liquidates history, the atemporal surreality of eternal nature are all defining features of the Wagnerian music dramas *in toto*. The new masks itself as the ever present archaic.¹² According to Adorno's analysis, Wagner does not simply employ mythical subjects, he mythologizes music itself for the legitimation of the existing.¹³ His music dramas reproduce the disarming function of metaphysics: they invoke an eternal and immutable realm behind the meaninglessness of the world of appearances and the actual existence. Nevertheless, the charges of the eternalization of the instant and the specialization of time Adorno attributes to Wagner not only contradict his previous characterization of Wagner as the Hegel of music but paradoxically appear in the first part of the *Philosophy of Modern Music* written in 1940-1 when Adorno characterizes Schonberg's mature dodecaphony. There he refers to the transformation of dynamics into statics, transposition of quasi-spatial relations into time, etc.¹⁴

In opposition to Adorno's thesis that Wagner was unable to create a new concept of time, Alain Badiou claimed that Wagner can be credited with creating not just an original

concept of time but three distinct concepts of time. These are the following: First, the time of disparate worlds, second, the time of the period of uncertainty and third, the time of tragic paradox. Badiou explicates the first via an extensive reference to the interlude in Act I of *Parsifal*. Here Badiou emphasizes the transition from a march in the beginning to a holy pealing of bells at the end which in fact anticipates another march, that of the knights which comes shortly thereafter. That march stands for the transition from one world to another.¹⁵ The second type of time, which had been called by Badiou the in-between time or the time of uncertainty is essentially the time of possibilities that have not yet come about, “the time when the creation of something possible is still in abeyance, when it is on the agenda but has not yet been put into effect.”¹⁶ Badiou exemplifies that by means of the Prelude to Act III of *Tannhäuser*. According to Badiou:

In Act II, *Tannhäuser* has gone off to see the Pope, and in Act III he returns devastated. Between the two acts though, we do not have a very clear idea of what has happened because the opera does not provide us with any news of him. Elizabeth is praying constantly; she doesn't know whether *Tannhäuser* has finally been reconciled or not. Thus, as far as *Tannhäuser's* fate is concerned, we are in an in-between time, suspended between his departure and his return. This state is what the Prelude to Act III describes, and that is why it is ambiguous, even as it prepares us for a lengthy monologue, Elisabeth's great prayer.¹⁷

The passage Badiou is referring is purely orchestral. It seems to imply a figure of waiting, albeit a waiting denuded from any metaphysics of waiting delineated before. It is rather a figure of uncertainty about what has happened. The third type of time in Wagner, for Badiou, is that of the tragic paradox, where by the term tragic Badiou refers to the conflict between the appearance of things and something far more extensive, disclosed “in a gap in this appearance and which has been secretly influencing its fate for a long time.”¹⁸ Badiou exemplifies that type of time via the first Act of *Gotterdammerung*, in particular via the monologue of Hagen, Alberich's son. In the Ring Cycle, as is well known, Gods are fighting each other through their sons. One of the Gods produces Siegfried and the other, Hagen. The last act of *Gotterdammerung* relates to the confrontation between these two sons. Hagen, the ugly and despised, the pallid and gloomy son draws sinister plans to get hold of the ring Siegfried has given to Brunnhilde after wresting it from Fafner the dragon. The tragic paradox of the story is that at the very

same time Siegfried's bright future seems assured, it is Hagen who will ultimately get hold of the ring and triumph. According to Badiou,

at the end of Hagen's monologue, when he has finished singing, we hear both the Sword motif associated with Siegfried and the motive of Wotan's power, but this time around they are entirely submerged in the orchestration that is imposed, so to speak, by the fateful character of Hagen. The leitmotifs thus no longer serve to identify the characters with whom they are usually associated but rather to express the fate being engineered by Hagen now.¹⁹

3. Concluding

The antinomies of his works which are sometimes constitutive of the antinomies of his own life render the identity of Wagner unclear if not impossible. Adorno's *Versuch über Wagner* is both a project of salvaging Wagner from its degeneration into the artistic icon of Nazism, a project of exorcism in the sense of saving his soul but at the same time it is a project of bringing forth Wagner's betrayal, his 'Verrat'. Wagner's retreat from the radical Enlightenment of Feuerbach to Schopenhauer is symptomatic not only of his disillusionment with the humanistic belief in the possibility of the revolutionary transformation of the existent to the more gloomy insight that reality *per se* is miserable and that true redemption lies in withdrawing from it into the abyss of the "night of the world;"²⁰ It is also indicative of the attitude of the apostate rebel who goes over to the sight of power and searches for courtly patronage. Who was finally Wagner? The advocate of the Romantic utopia of aestheticism or the pseudo-metaphysician of fatalism which negates the very idea of transcendence and raises facticity to the status of an immutable fate? Was he supporting human collectivity or the vague idea of Volk? The revolutionary intoxication or the quietist resignation? Was he the first great artist of the kitsch of waning Empires and a proto-fascist in this sense? Finally and with respect to the concept of time: Was Wagner the artistic equivalent of Hegel insofar as he brought to an end the project of high art or did he deconstruct the traditional account of time and created a new one? Badiou's reading seems to be transcending the above dilemmas. Though he does not explicate it in depth, Badiou is suggesting that Wagner still

represents a music for the future.²¹ In what sense? What Badiou points out is that a resolution might not necessarily be neither a solution nor a sublation of the differences. This amounts to accepting that “resolutions may be non-dialectical without necessarily being, or having to be instances of arbitrary stopping.” That idea refers to the notion of transformation without any finality. What bears witness to that is the idea of suffering or the split of the subject in the Wagnerian dramas. The subject in Wagner is identified neither with a structure that becomes actualized nor with a narrative or a plot. On the contrary, the subject takes on his identity from his own split. The split in the subject is the essence of the subject in the present which for Wagner includes suffering. The most characteristic figures are those of Tannhäuser and Wotan, the great God of the Ring Circle. Tannhäuser is deeply divided about love. He is torn between carnal, pagan love, symbolized by his relation to Venus on the one hand, and the courtly, quasi-religious love of the world of medieval knights, on the other. He is torn between the pagan and Christian conceptions of love. Tannhäuser is torn because he has experienced both types of love to the extreme. Tannhäuser is nothing other than this split, the consequence of which is his utter inability to remain in any one place. Similarly, Wotan ends up as “the Wanderer.” With his big hat on his head, he is wandering all over the world watching what’s going on. He is the spectator of the complex unfolding of his ultimate downfall. Wagner seems then to be moving to the direction of a “totality-free greatness”²² or a “heroism without heroizing.”²³

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See the excellent paper by Gyorgy Markus, "Adorno's Wagner," *Thesis Eleven*, 56/25, 1999, 27. See also S. Krakauer, *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit*, Amsterdam, De Lange, 1937. For Adorno's review of Krakauer's book, see T.W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1970, vol. 19, 363-5.

² Gyorgy Markus, "Adorno's Wagner", 27.

³ Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, London, Verso, 2010, 28.

⁴ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton, London, Routledge 1990, 148.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 372.

⁶ Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, 57.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸ T.W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16, 667.

⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 13, 97, 105.

¹⁰ Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, 120.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

¹² Adorno, *Versuch*, 92.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁴ Markus, "Adorno's Wagner," 39.

¹⁵ Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, 124-5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁰ Slavoj Zizek, "Wagner, Anti-Semitism and 'German Ideology,'" afterword to Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, 192.

²¹ Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, 133.

²² *Ibid.*, 133.

²³ *Ibid.*, 83.