



**THE WORK THAT DOES NOT EXIST: RICHARD WAGNER AND THE
LEGENDARY BLACKSMITH**

**L'OPERA CHE NON ESISTE : RICHARD WAGNER E IL FABBRO
LEGGENDARIO**

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Abstract: In 1850 Richard Wagner wrote a libretto for an opera that should have been called *Wieland der Schmied*. The music for this text was never composed. The legendary figure of the blacksmith will remain a character without music or stage even though Wagner attached to this matter considerable importance as it can be argued by reading his *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*. *Wieland der Schmied*, however, represents a meaningful text to define the relationship between Wagner and the myth. In rereading the subject of the Old Norse *Vnlundarqviða* and the *Þiðreks saga* Wagner does not simply outline the character of the blacksmith only as *homo faber*, as example of demiurgic cleverness: fusion becomes the symbol of an aesthetic creation and the forging of the wings is the material evidence of a genius' possibility of elevating above everything material. The blacksmith becomes the symbol of the artist, aware of his creative genius and claiming full and absolute freedom. Through this shift of perspective the German composer expresses, using the mythic element, the irreconcilable conflict between the artist and his time. In this paper I'll analyse Wagner's draft drama and the Old Norse sources in order to highlight the problematic relationship between *Wieland der Schmied* and the ancient Germanic mythology

Keywords: Richard Wagner, *Wieland*, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Poetic Edda.

Riassunto: Nel 1850 Richard Wagner scrisse un libretto per un'opera che avrebbe dovuto chiamarsi *Wieland der Schmied*. La musica per questo testo non fu mai composta. Il fabbro leggendario rimarrà un personaggio senza musica o palcoscenico anche se Wagner attribuì a questa figura una notevole importanza, come si può rilevare leggendo il suo *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*. *Wieland der Schmied*, tuttavia, rappresenta un testo significativo per definire la relazione tra Wagner e il mito. Nel rileggere il tema presente nelle fonti norrene come il carme di Vnlundr (*Vnlundarqviða*) e la *Þiðreks saga*, Wagner non delinea semplicemente il carattere del fabbro come *homo faber*, esempio di intelligenza demiurgica: la fusione diventa il simbolo di una creazione estetica e la forgiatura delle ali è il prova materiale della possibilità di un genio di elevarsi al di sopra della realtà materiale. Il fabbro diventa il simbolo dell'artista,

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consapevole del suo genio creativo, che rivendica la piena e assoluta libertà. Attraverso questo cambiamento di prospettiva il compositore tedesco esprime, usando l'elemento mitico, l'inconciliabile conflitto tra l'artista e il suo tempo. In questo articolo analizzerò la bozza del dramma di Wagner e le fonti norrene al fine di evidenziare la problematica relazione tra *Wieland der Schmied* e l'antica mitologia germanica.

Parole chiave: Richard Wagner, *Wieland*, *L'anello del Nibelungo*, *Edda Poetica*.

1. Introduction: The (Re)discovery of Old Norse culture in Germany between *Sturm und Drang* and Romanticism

The reception of Old Norse myths in Germany is part of a cultural process that began in the second half of the 18th century. This process is characterised by the progressive rediscovery of the medieval period and its literature, both intended to symbolise constituent elements of the German national consciousness.

One of the most important ideological developments that took place alongside the recovery of the early medieval poetic traditions of Europe was the identification of this supposedly ancient poetry as the true national literature of the respective language groups. People came to identify with medieval literature as the primitive expression of their own culture in its earlier phases. In this context, partly because of the wealth of extant Old Norse poetry and myth of pre-Christian character, and partly because its modern Icelandic and Scandinavian interpreters and editors had made the texts more accessible to the reading public than was yet the case with medieval Celtic and Romance texts. Old Norse poetry took on a special ethnic significance, not only for Scandinavians, but also, vicariously, for the other Germanic-speaking nations of Europe, in Britain, the Netherlands, and Germany (Clunies Ross; Lönnroth, 1999, p. 18; see also Bödl, 2000).

Germany, after the Congress of Vienna, was a confederation of sovereign states under the influence of Austria and Prussia. In this context the need for the formation of a unitary state had, first of all, economic reasons: technical progress had led to a sharp increase in the production of goods and services in both agriculture and industry.

The existence of a large number of sovereign states, each of which required its duties to be paid, made movement of goods in the German area extremely difficult and expensive. This lack of uniformity constituted the main obstacle to economic growth.

The formation of a unitary state was also a cultural problem, especially after the Napoleonic wars; it was linked to the discovery of the national identity, considered an essential value to promote the redemption of the German people.

In this sense, the references to the Holy Roman Empire and the figure of Frederick I were an attempt, through idealization of the past, to build a reference model and to pursue the ideal of a united and independent Germany

These elements are well summarised in Fichte's work *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1808), but they were already present in Herder's idea of *Volkgeist* as expressed in the language and literature of a nation.

In 1784 Herder published *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, in which he maintained that every nation has its own particular feature. In Herder's opinion the people (*Volk*) are the source of the national culture and art and literature achieve their purpose only if they express the special nature of the nation embodied in the people (*Volkgeist*).

Herder had read Old Norse poetry as "folk literature" and thus as something fundamentally different from the poetry created by educated intellectual of his own time. Folk literature was, in Herder's view, an expression of each nation's quintessential "folk spirit" (Volkgeist) and also of its earliest history, but his original interest in the literary manifestations of the folk spirit had been aesthetic and anthropological rather than political. When his ideas were given a political twist, however, which happened in many countries of northern Europe during the Napoleonic wars, the early Sturm und Drang romanticism was transformed into national romanticism, and the Eddas again became a concern for Germanic, and Scandinavian, nationalists. The mythical and heroic poems of the Edda were now not only considered sublime from an aesthetic point of view but were also thought of as a political heritage, expressive of the early nation's noblest aspirations and dreams (Clunies Ross; Lönnroth, 1999, p. 18).

Scholars and writers in Germany knew Old Norse literature through Latin translations. The first Latin translation of Snorri's *Edda*, together with two poems from the poetic *Edda* (*Vnluspá* and *Hávamál*) was published in Copenhagen in 1665 by Peder Hansen Resen.

In Germany Snorri's *Edda* was first published in 1777 in Stettin by Jakob Schimmelmann a Lutheran pastor. Heinrich von Gerstenberg in 1766 published his translations of two poems by Egill Skallagrímsson, *Sonatorrek* and *Hnfnuðlausn*. Gerstenberg also wrote *Gedichte eines Skalden* a poem in five parts, in which he imagines the rebirth of a *skáld* named Thorlaugr. In 1789 David Friedrich Gräter published *Nordische Blumen* containing poems from the poetic *Edda* translated into German.

But it is mainly through the work of Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen that the study of Old Norse literature received a significant boost. Between 1812 and 1815 von der Hagen published *Die Lieder-Edda von den Nibelungen, Altnordische Sagen und Lieder, Nordische Heldenromane, Lieder der älteren oder Sämundischen Edda*.

Around the same time the brothers Grimm publish *Lieder der alten Edda* (1815).

The brothers Grimm [...] may be regarded, more than any others, as the inventors of pan-Germanism. According to this theory, all Nordic people and Norse culture could be counted as parts of the Germanic cultural heritage. Wilhelm Grimm [...] favoured the view that in essence all the heroic tales of the Edda were German (Deutsche Heldensage, 1829,4,436). The title of his brother Jakob's book Deutsche Mythologie (German Mythology 1835) clearly follows the same principle, since it largely comprises, of course, mythological material from the Prose and Poetic Edda (Árni Björnsson, 2003, p. 90).

No less important than the translations is German writers' retelling of the literary and legendary material. In 1810, for example, Friderich de La Motte Fouqué, published the trilogy *Held des Nordens* (*Sigurd der Schlangentöchter, Sigurds Rache, Aslauga*). Fouqué's sources were *Völsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. He also knew the *Historia rerum Norvegarum* written by Thormodus Torfæus and published in 1711.

Fouqué's work was dedicated to J.G. Fichte and was a great success *not only among the public, but also among respected writers such as Richter (Jean Paul) and E.T.A.Hoffmann* (Árni Björnsson, 2003, p. 92). In 1826 Fouqué published a translation of the *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*.

2. Richard Wagner and the magical blacksmith: myth and social rebellion

In this context Richard Wagner's work appears the most complete synthesis of a specific historical and cultural background. The composer was aware of the myths and the heroic legends from his early youth. In the library of his uncle Adolf he had the opportunity to read Fouqué's works and Friedrich von der Hagen's translations of *Völsunga saga*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Þiðreks saga*.

Very significant was the friendship with Ludwig Ettmüller, who in 1837 published a translation including most of the heroic poems of the Poetic *Edda*.

In his autobiography Wagner points out very clearly that knowledge of medieval German literature was inadequate for his purposes. He considered it necessary to extend his investigations to the study of Norse mythology, especially after reading Franz Joseph Mone's *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der deutschen Heldensage*:

I became especially attracted to the unusually rich pages of Mone's investigation of these heroic legends, even though stricter scholars have criticized them as overly audacious. This drew me irresistibly to the nordic sources of these myths, and to the extent that it was possible without fluent knowledge of the Scandinavian languages. I now tried to get to know the Eddas, as well as the prose fragments comprising the basis for large parts of these legends. Viewed in the light of Mone's comments, the Wälsunga saga exerted a decisive influence on the manner in which I began to form this material to my own purposes. The consciousness of the close primeval kinship of these old myths, which had been shaping within me for some time, this gradually gained the power to create the dramatic forms which governed my subsequent works (Árni Björnsson, 2003, p. 99; see also Buschinger, 2003).

By the time Richard Wagner wrote *Wieland der Schmied*, he had already acquired a considerable knowledge of the literary sources, which were also to be the basis for the final draft of the *Ring*.²

Richard Wagner wrote the draft drama *Wieland der Schmied* in 1850.³ Later, in his autobiography, *Mein Leben*, he would maintain that he came to know the story through Karl Simrock's retelling of the legend.⁴ The period during which he wrote the drama was one of the most troubled in the life of the German composer. In 1849 he had taken part in the uprising in Dresden but managed, with the help of Franz Liszt, to escape to Zurich in order to avoid both capture and possible execution. Two years before he had finished the composition of *Lohengrin* and, with the drama *Siegfrieds Tod*, he laid the groundwork for what would become *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

² *Der Ring des Nibelungen* consists of four music-dramas: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*. The creative process that will lead to the final drafting of the Wagnerian tetralogy is described by the composer in a letter to Franz Liszt of November 1851: *In the autumn of 1848 I sketched for the first time the complete myth of the Nibelungen [...] My next attempt at dramatising the chief catastrophe of that great action for our theatre was Siegfried's Death [...] I found that I should have to prepare it by another drama, and therefore took up the long-cherished idea of making the young Siegfried the subject of a poem [...] That plan extends to three dramas : (1) The Valkyrie ;(2) Young Siegfried ; (3) Siegfried's Death. In order to give everything completely, these three dramas must be preceded by a grand introductory play : The Rape of the Rhinegold* (Hueffer, 1889, pp. 169-173).

³ The booklet was written between January and March (Müller-Wapnewski, 1986, p. 270).

⁴ Simrock translated and reworked important documents of the Germanic literary heritage, particularly *Das Nibelungenlied* (1827), Hartmann von Aue's *Der arme Heinrich* (1830) Walther von der Vogelweide's poems (1833) Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and *Titarel* (1842), *Das Heldenbuch* (1843-1849; Bd. 1: *Gudrun* Bd. 2: *Das Nibelungenlied*; Bd. 3: *Das kleine Heldenbuch*; Bd. 4: *Das Amelungenlied erster Theil*; Bd. 5: *Das Amelungenlied zweiter Theil*; Bd. 6: *Das Amelungenlied dritter Theil*), *The Poetic Edda* and *The Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson (1851), Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan und Isolde* (1855), *Beowulf* (1859). In the *Amelungenlied* Simrock wrote: *Hieraus entsprang mir schon 1828 der Gedanke des Amelungenliedes, welches die gesamte deutsche Heldensage, soweit sie in den Nibelungen und in der Gudrun nicht erhalten ist in einem einzigen großen Gedichte darstellen sollte* (Simrock 1849, p. 399); "Already in 1828 arose in me the idea of the *Amelungenlied*, which should depict the entire German heroic legend, insofar as it is not preserved in the *Nibelungen* and the *Gudrun*, in one large poem" (my translation). The *Amelungenlied* comprises volumes 4-6 of Simrock's *Heldenbuch*. Here the main source is *Thidreks saga*, concerning Dietrich von Bern: *Simrock's main source for the Amelungenlied was the conglomeration of sagas which form the Thidreks saga. Into this he worked existing 'Heldenlieder', fragments of Norse mythology, some folk saga and fairy-tale and a sprinkling of folk wit. Simrock's determination to include everything leads to a certain amount of awkwardness, and at points the Amelungenlied becomes quite tangled, but is nevertheless a real tour de force by the scholar whose works as 'saga reviver' Wagner so esteemed* (Magee 1990, p. 31). Richard Wagner adopted and developed Simrock's approach of linking legends and myths, and also his technique of the mythical presentation of characters pivotal for the plot, owes inspiration to the *Amelungenlied* (Müller-Wapnewski, 1986, p. 34).



These biographical events, along with his research into the mythology, provided much of the inspiration for his future work. The draft drama *Wieland der Schmied* also anticipates the themes and motifs that would be found in his future literary and musical productions. However, Wagner never composed music for this text.

The work was originally addressed to the opera theatre of Paris, as Wagner wrote to Theodor Uhlig in 1849:

So on January 16th, 1850, I go to Paris; a couple of overtures will at once be put into practice ; and I shall take my completed opera scheme : it is Wiland der Schmied. First of all I attack the five-act opera form, then the statute according to which in every great opera there must be a special ballet (Wagner, 1888, p. 20; trans. Shedlock, 1890, p. 18).

The project is not carried out and the draft drama is sent to Franz Liszt who expresses his refusal to set the text to music:

Dearest Friend, I really do not know how to thank you ; for the only equivalent I could offer you would evidently be to send you a masterpiece in exchange ; and this kind of return is difficult to make even with the best intention in the world. Allow me to look upon your manuscript of Wiland as a sacred trust, which I shall hold at your disposal till the time you reclaim it. My very numerous engagements will prevent me from occupying myself with it for a year or eighteen months ; and if after that time you still think that I am capable of undertaking the composition, we can easily arrange the matter either verbally or by letter (Wagner, 1887, p. 102; trans. Hueffer, 1889, p. 119).

The legendary figure of the blacksmith had no future on the stage, even though Wagner attached considerable importance to the story.

In his book *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, while summarizing the contents of the draft drama, Wagner gives *Wieland* a double symbolic meaning. The first meaning is that of the blacksmith as symbol of the artist, who is able to overcome the limits of his own humanity. He is driven solely by the desire that rules his creativity:

Aus Noth, aus furchtbar allgewaltiger Noth, lernte der geknechtete Künstler erfinden, was noch keines Menschen Geist begriffen hat. Wieland fand es, wie er sich Flügel schmiedete! Flügel, um kühn sich zu erheben zur Rache an seinem Peiniger, Flügel um weit hin sich zu schwingen zu dem seligen Gelände seines Weibes! Er that es, er

vollbrachte es was die höchste Noth ihm eingegeben. Getragen von dem Werke seiner Kunst flog er auf zu der Höhe (Wagner, 1872, p. 177).⁵

Secondly, the blacksmith becomes a symbol of political redemption. In this sense the final words of *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* perfectly summarize the spirit of rebellion that inspired the German composer during this period. Wieland represents the folk who regain their freedom: *O einziges herrliches Volk! Das hast Du gedichtet und Du selbst bist dieser Wieland! Schmiede deine Flügel und schwinge Dich auf!* (Wagner, 1872, p. 177).⁶

These quotations acquire a particular importance because they are taken from a work outlining the Wagnerian theory of music-drama. This is a form of art that merges all aspects of dramatic performance in an indissoluble unity consisting of text, music, and stage presentation.⁷ By uniting these artistic forms, the music-drama aims to provide a symbolic and universal interpretation of myth and history.

In this context *Wieland der Schmied* seems to be an important text for defining the relationship between the German composer and the myth. In fact, the figure of the blacksmith embodies a demiurgic function comprising the four basic elements of the universe: the earth in which metals are found, the fire forging them, the air cooling them and the water hardening them.⁸

In the Nordic tradition, the gods themselves were creators of objects. In the *Vnluspá*, which describes the creative activity of the gods, it is said that they were lords of time, who

⁵ *From want, from terrible, all-powerful want, the fettered artist learnt to invent what no man's mind had yet conceived. Wieland found it: found how to forge his wings. Wings with which he could rise aloft to wreak revenge on his tormentor, wings, to soar to the blessed land of his wife. He did it: he fulfilled the task that utmost want had set him. Borne on the work of his own art, he flew aloft* (trans. Ellis, 1895, p. 88).

⁶ *O sole and glorious Folk! This is it, that you, yourself have sung. You, yourself, are this Wieland! Weld your wings, and soar on high!* (trans. Ellis, 1895, p. 89).

⁷ On the Wagnerian theatre and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* see Borchmeyer, 1982; Bordini, 1985; Bortolotto, 2003; Bruse, 1984; Cresti, 2012; Dahlhaus, 1971 and 1990; Fornoff, 2004; Kwon, 2003; Lichtenfeld, 1965; Merlin, 2001; Principe, 2004.

⁸ For the various issues and interpretations of Wieland's legendary complex see Burson, 1983; Dronke, 1997, p. 239-328; Ellis-Davidson, 1969; Fromm, 1999; Grimstad, 1983; Hatto, 1961; Marold, 1973; McKinnell, 1990; Motz, 1983 and 1986; Nedoma, 1988; von See, La Farge, Picard and Schulz, 2000; de Vries, 1952; Zernack-Schulz 2019.



gave names to the night and the phases of the moon and to the parts of the day. They also built shrines and temples, set up fires and forged ore, wrought tongs and fashioned tools.⁹

In Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* the activity of the gods is denoted by the verb *smíða*, whose primary meaning is *to work in wood or metals* (Cleasby-Vigfusson, 1874, p. 572). Of Óðinn is it said that *hann smíðaði himin ok jnrð ok loptin ok alla eign fleira* (Faulkes, 2005, p. 8).¹⁰ The noun *smíð*¹¹ highlights the result of this activity: *furðu mikil smíð* (Faulkes, 2005, p. 12)¹² is the vault of heaven, created by the skull of the giant Ymir. Bifröst, the bridge that joins earth to heaven, is described as follows: *Hana muntu sét hafa, kann vera at þat kallir þú regnboga. Hon er með þrim litum ok mjnk sterk ok ger með list ok kunnáttu meiri en aðrar smíðir* (Faulkes, 2005, p. 15).¹³

The *Ynglinga Saga*, the first saga of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, lists the virtues and powers of Óðinn and calls the gods *galdrasmiðir* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson I, 2002, p. 19), that is 'blacksmiths of magic songs', an expression that highlights the creative function of the voice, the element transmitting Óðinn's primordial wisdom. In fact, thanks to these magical songs, Óðinn can teach his extraordinary virtues. The creative power of poetry is described with compounds in which the noun *smíð* appears as a determinant: Bragi, god of poetry, is defined in the Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál frumsmíð bragar* (Faulkes, 1998, p. 19)¹⁴ and the poetic work *hróðrsmíð* (Faulkes, 1998, p. 14).¹⁵ In the verses of Bragi the Old Boddason, two compounds are used along with *smíð* to describe the figure of the poet: *Sknlð kalla mik: skipsmið Viðurs, Gauts gjafrentuð, grepp óhneppan, Yggs nlbera, óðs skap-Móða, hagsmið bragar. Hva't skald nema þat?* (Finnur Jónsson, 1912, p. 5).¹⁶

⁹ *Þá gengo regin nll á rncstóla, / ginnheillog goð, oc um þat gættuz: / nótt oc niðiom nfn um gáfo, / morgin héto oc miðian dag, / undorn oc aptan árom at telia. / Hittuz æsir á Iðavelli, / þeir er hnrg oc hof há timbroðo; / afla lngðo, auð smíðoðo, / tangir scópo oc tól gorðo* (Kuhn, 1983, p. 2); *Then all the Powers went to the thrones of fate, the sacrosanct gods, and considered this: to night and her children they gave names, morning they named and midday, afternoon and evening, to reckon up the years. The Æsir met on Idavoll Plain, they built altars and high temples; they set up their forges, smithed precious things, shaped tongs and made tools* (Larrington, 1996, p. 4-5).

¹⁰ *He made heaven and earth and the skies and everything in them* (Faulkes, 1995, p. 9).

¹¹ *Craft, smith's work, work of skill or art* (Cleasby-Vigfusson, 1874, p. 572).

¹² *An amazingly large construction and skilfully made* (Faulkes, 1995, p. 12).

¹³ *You must have seen it, maybe it is what you call the rainbow. It has three colours and great strength and is built with art and skill to a greater extent than other constructions* (Faulkes, 1995, p. 13).

¹⁴ *Inventor of poetry* (Faulkes, 1995, p. 76).

¹⁵ *Praise-making* (Cleasby-Vigfusson, 1874, p. 287).

¹⁶ *Poets call me Vidur's [Odin's] thought-smith, getter of Gaut's [Odin's] gift, lack-nought hero, server of Ygg's [Odin's] ale, song-making Modi, skilled smith of rhyme; what is a poet other than that?* (Faulkes, 1995, p. 132).



The figure of the blacksmith belongs thus to a non-human dimension. This feature also exists in Wagner's sources, which are the *Vnlundarqviða* and the *Þiðreks saga*.¹⁷ In the eddic poem *Vnlundr*, the blacksmith is called *álfa lióði* (Kuhn, 1983, p. 118) 'elves' mate' and *vísi álfa* (Kuhn, 1983, p. 119 and p. 122) 'elves' lord'. The elves are supernatural entities that often are associated with the supreme deities, as we read in the poetic *Edda* where they are mentioned along with the *Æsir*: *Mart var þar ása oc álfa* (Kuhn, 1983, p. 96)¹⁸ In the *Þiðreks saga* Velent, the blacksmith, is presented as the son of Wade, a giant being born from the union of King Vilkinus and a mermaid.¹⁹

Wagner combines these sources: Wieland is the son of a king, as mentioned in the eddic poem where he is said son of the king of the Finns. The mythological element of his being the son of a mermaid from the Norwegian saga is, however, maintained because Wieland's father is said to be the son of a sea nymph.

Nevertheless, Wieland is primarily a human being, aware of his creative genius and claiming full and absolute freedom: *Kein König darf mich heißen was ich nur gerne thue* (Wagner, 1872, p. 179)²⁰ says the blacksmith at the beginning of the drama and, later, repeats: *Frei wohne ich mit meinen Brüdern hier, keinem Könige sind wir unterthan* (Wagner, 1872, p. 181)²¹ When the swan maiden offers him a magical ring providing love and victory to his owner, the blacksmith hangs it to a tree behind his home, saying that neither he nor his wife need it: *Hier hänge du, weder ich noch mein Weib bedürfen dein!* (Wagner, 1872, p. 183).²²

3. *The Harmonious Blacksmith*:²³ *Wieland der Schmied* and Richard Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*

¹⁷ For the *Þiðreks saga* see Kramarz-Bein, 1993 and 2002.

¹⁸ "Many were there, *Æsir* and elves" (my translation).

¹⁹ See Bertelsen, 1905-11; Kramarz-Bein, 2002; Marold, 1993.

²⁰ "No King can order me what I do willingly" (adapted from Ellis, 1895, p. 218).

²¹ "I live here freely with my brothers and we are not subject of any king" (adapted from Ellis, 1895, p. 221).

²² "Stay here, hanging, neither I nor my wife need you" (adapted from Ellis, 1895, p. 222).

²³ *The Harmonious Blacksmith* is the popular name of the final movement, Air and variations, of Georg Friederich Händel's Suite No. 5 in E major, HWV 430, for harpsichord (Hogwood, 2007, p. 75).

The whole tragedy of Wieland's story is linked precisely to the polarity between human art (*Menschenkunst*) and sorcery (*Zauberkraft*). This contrast is pivotal. The *Ring des Nibelungen*, in contrast, represents the blacksmith as a person using his art to gain power. This is the case of Alberich in the *Rheingold*: *Alberich zauderte nicht. Zaglos gewann er des Zaubers Macht: geraten ist ihm der Ring!*²⁴ says Loge, the god of fire. The ring embodies the power as Donner, corresponding in Wagner's work to the god Þórr, says: *Zwang uns allen schüfe der Zwerg, würd'ihm der Reif nicht entrissen.*²⁵ Similarly, in the *Siegfried*, the blacksmith Mime, who corresponds to the figure of Reginn in the eddic tradition, puts his art at the service of his greed, as witnessed by the words he says turning towards Siegfried: *aus Liebe erzog ich dich Lästigen nicht: dem Horte in Fafners Hut, dem Golde galt meine Müh.*²⁶ Wieland, however, uses his creative ability not only to take revenge but also to gain freedom, as both Vnlundr and Velent do in the *Vnlundarqviða* and in the *Þiðreks saga* respectively.

The plot of the Wagnerian text partly follows the story-line of the eddic poem: the blacksmith Wieland sees three swan maidens. One of them falls into the sea. Inflamed by sudden love, Wieland rushes into the deepest waters and rescues the girl, whose name is Schwanhilde. She gives him a ring with magical powers. King Neiding and his daughter Bathilde destroy Wieland's home. The king wants the blacksmith to become his servant, while Bathilde wants to put her hands on the ring to guarantee victory and love. Wieland thinks Schwanhilde is dead and Neiding mutilates the blacksmith in order to prevent him from escaping. After Schwanhilde's reappearance, Wieland takes cruel revenge on the king and flies away with the swan maiden. This very last element is the most important innovation in Wagner's text. A number of other important structural changes were also made by Wagner, in order to give a new interpretation of the myth, which is consistent with the requirements of Wagnerian drama.

In the eddic poem, the blacksmith Vnlundr and his brothers lived for seven winters with three Valkyries who were swan maidens, as mentioned above. In this respect it must be stressed that the Rhine maidens, appearing at the beginning of the *Rheingold*, in the first draft

²⁴ *Alberich did not hesitate; fearless, he gained the magic power and managed to make the ring* (Text and translation: Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 82).

²⁵ *The dwarf would enslave us all were the ring not wrested from him* (Ibid.).

²⁶ *It was not out for love that I brought you up, you burdensome child: my efforts were aimed at the gold, at the hoard in Fafner's safekeeping* (Text and translation: Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 248).

of the *Ring*, *Die Nibelungensage* (*Mythus*) were said to have swans' wings ('*Drei Meerfrauen mit Schwanenfliägeln*'; Strobel, 1930, p. 26) [...] This element is very likely derived from the eddic poem *Vnlundarkviða* (Árni Björnsson, 2003, p. 131-132).

When the Valkyries run away, Vnlundr is the only one not looking for them, but is simply waiting. As the text says: *svá beið hann sinnar lióssar / qvánar, ef hanom koma gerði* (Kuhn, 1983, p. 118).²⁷ This element of light, which in the eddic poem is expressed by the adjective *ljóss*, is also present in the *Wieland der Schmied*.

Here Schwanhilde, the swan-maiden, is called the daughter of the king of the light-elves. In the mythical universe described in the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, the *ljósálfar* 'light-elves', are opposed to the *dökkálfar*, the 'black elves':

Sá er einn staðr þar er kallaðr er Álfheimr. Þar byggvir fólk þat er ljósálfar heita, en dökkálfar búa niðri í jnrðu, ok eru þeir ólíkir þeim sýnum en myklu ólíkari reyndum. Ljósálfar eru fegri en sól sýnum, en dökkálfar eru soartari en bik (Faulkes, 2005, p. 19).²⁸

In the Wagnerian interpretation, this polarity between light and darkness stands for the conflict between the purest love and the wicked worship of the gold.²⁹

In the *Rheingold*, Alberich will be able to forge the ring only when he renounces love, an act corresponding to the absence of light as Woglinde the Rhine maiden says: *Nur wer der*

²⁷ "He waited if the fair wife might come back home" (my translation).

²⁸ *There is one place that is called Alfheim. There live the folk called light-elves, but dark-elves live down in the ground, and they are unlike them in appearance, and even more unlike them in nature. Light-elves are fairer than sun to look at, but dark elves are blacker than pitch* (Faulkes, 1995, p. 19).

²⁹ The light will be a pivotal element in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: *It is worth highlighting how Wagner, who was his own librettist, presents Siegfried as an archetypal mythical hero surrounded by light, as if were some god of light or the sun and the dragon he slays were the incarnation of the underworld and chaos* (Ortiz-de-Urbina, 2020, p. 24). When Brunhild awakens from her sleep, she calls Siegfried *Seliger Held! Du Wecker des Lebens, siegendes Licht; Thrice-blessed hero! You waker of life, all-conquering light*. It's the hero who leads the valkyrie from sleep and darkness to love and, above all, light: *Tauch' aus dem Dunkel und sieh: sonnenhell leuchte der Tag! Rise from the darkness and see – bright as the sun shines the day!*. Brunhild, looking at the lifeless face of the hero, will still see in it a source of light: *Wie Sonne lauter strahlt mir sein Licht; Purer than sunlight streams the light from his eyes* (Text and translation: Spencer-Millington, 1993, pp. 268, 272, 348). Siegfried's portrayal as expression of a primary and creative power, leading to salvation and belonging to the mythical-religious dimension, is consistent with the Wagnerian theory, according to which myth and religion are regarded as sources of the heroic saga.



*Minne Macht versagt, nur wer der Liebe Lust verjagt, nur der erzielt sich den Zauber, zum Reif zu zwingen das Gold.*³⁰

Alberich himself, seizing the gold, cries: *Das Licht lösch'ich euch aus, entreisse dem Riff das Gold, schmiede den rächenden Ring, denn hör' es die Flut: so verflucht'ich die Liebe!*³¹

Alberich's sphere of action is darkness. The same is true for those he has enslaved. As Mime says:

*mit arger List schuf sich Alberich aus Rheines Gold einen gelben Reif: seinem starken Zauber zittern wir staunend; mit ihm zwingt er uns alle der Nibelungen nächt'ges Heer. Sorglose Schmiede schufen wir sonst wohl Schmuck unsern Weibern, wonnig Geschmeid', niedlichen Nibelungentand; wir lachten lustig der Müh'. Nun zwingt uns der Schlimme, in Klüfte zu schlüpfen, für ihn allein uns immer zu müh'n.*³²

For this reason, Alberich is called *Albe*, 'elf'.

In the *Wieland der Schmied*, the blacksmith's union with the swan-maiden, the daughter of the light, constitutes a rejection of the underworld of possession, and at the same time represents the sacrifice necessary to gain access to the presence of the divine.

The same issue is dealt with in the *Lohengrin*, although the perspective is reversed because in the *Wieland* it is the man who tries to rise into the sky: *Oh, könnt'ich fliegen! In den Lüften freit'ich ein Weib!* (Wagner, 1872, p. 180)³³ says the blacksmith. In contrast, in the *Lohengrin* it is the swan knight who descends to the earthly dimension.

In the story of *Schwanhilde* the swan-maiden we find another important reference to the *Lohengrin*: *Schwanhilde's* father escapes taking the form of a swan after his wife has violated the prohibition of enquiring after his identity, exactly as Elsa and Lohengrin do:

Schwanhilde [...] erzählt Wieland, der sich neben sie gesetzt hat, wer sie sei. König Isung im Nordland war der Vater ihrer Mutter; der Fürst der

³⁰ *Only the man who forswears love's way, only he who disdains love's delights, can master the magic spell that forges a ring from the gold* (Text and translation: Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 68).

³¹ *Your light I'll put out, wrench the gold from the rock and forge the avenging ring, so hear me you waters! Thus I lay a curse on love!* (Text and translation: Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 69).

³² *With cunning artifice Alberich crafted a yellow ring of gold from the Rhine: at its powerful spell we tremble in awe; for with it he bends us all to his will, the Nibelungs' army of night. Carefree smiths, we used to fashion trinkets for our womenfolk, delightful gems and delicate Nibelung toys: we cheerfully laughed at our pains. Now the criminal makes us crawl into crevices, ever toiling for him alone* (Text and translation: Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 91).

³³ "Oh, if I could fly, In the air I would find a bride!" (adapted from Ellis, 1895, p. 219).

Lichtalben entbrannte in Liebe zu dieser: als Schwan nahte er sich ihr und entführte sie weit über das Meer, nach den "heimlichen Geländen". In Liebe vereint, wohnten sie dort drei Jahre, bis die Mutter, in törichtem Eifer zu wissen beehrte, wer ihr Gatte sei, wonach zu fragen er ihr verboten hatte. Da schwamm der Albenfürst als Schwan durch die Fluhten davon (Wagner, 1872, p. 182).³⁴

The *Wieland* and the *Lohengrin* also have similar structural elements. In both works we find two opposing pairs (Wieland/Schwanhilde and Gram/Bathilde in the *Wieland*, Lohengrin/Elsa and Telramund/Ortrud in the *Lohengrin*) while the maker of evil deeds is a female character. Ortrud is a woman capable of sorcery and Bathilde is skilled in magic, as we see when she enters into Wieland's dwelling to steal Schwanhilde's ring:

Fürwahr, das kunstreichste Schloß, das je geschmiedet ward! Doch was ist Menschenkunst gegen Zauberkraft? – Sie berührt das Schloß mit einer kleinem Springwurzel; die Thüre nach außen gehend, öffnet sich von selbst; an der Rückwand der Thüre gewahrt Bathilde sogleich den, von Wieland am Baste aufgehängten, Ring Schwanhilde's. Sie erkennt ihn, löst ihn vom Baste und schließt die Thüre wieder fest, wie zuvor (Wagner, 1872, p. 184).³⁵

With regard to both the common elements and divergences between the *Wieland* and the *Ring des Nibelungen*, the most important topic is the longing towards a dimension different from the earthly one. In *Wieland* the tragic impulse is triggered by the ring given to the blacksmith by the swan-maiden Schwanhilde. This element constitutes a meaningful anticipation of the *Ring des Nibelungen*, even though in this case the function of the object, and thus also its symbolic meaning, are different. In his reworking of the story in the *Rheingold*, Wagner interprets the myth narrated in the *Reginismál* and in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*: Óðinn, Loki and Hœnir come to a waterfall where Loki kills Ótr ('otter'). Ótr's father, Heiðmarr, seizes

³⁴ "Schwanhilde tells Wieland, sitting close by her, who she really is. Isung, the king of the North-land was her mother's father. The light elves' prince fell in love with her. He came in the shape of a swan and drove her away, far over the sea to the 'secret islands'. They dwelt there for three years, in love with each other, until her mother, in foolish curiosity, wanted to know who her husband was, which he had forbidden her to ask. Then the elves' prince went away like a swan swimming in the waves" (adapted from Ellis, 1895, p. 221).

³⁵ "This is the most ingenious lock that was ever manufactured. But what is human art against sorcery? - She touches the lock with a small mandrake's root. Moving outwards, the door opens by itself. Bathilde sees immediately, on the rear wall, the ring that Wieland had hung on the bark. She recognizes it, detaches it from the bark and closes the door again, as it had been before" (adapted from Ellis, 1895, p. 223).



the gods and he imposes the condition for their release that the hide of Ótr be filled with gold. Óðinn sends Loki to *Svartalfheimr* ('the land of the dark elves'). Here he meets the dwarf Andvari, captures him and forces him to hand over all the gold he has. The dwarf tries to hide a ring, but Loki takes it, and at this point Andvari pronounces his curse: *Pat scal gull, er Gustr átti, / bræðrom tveim at bana verða, / oc nðlingom átta at rógi; / mun míns fíar mangi nióta* (Kuhn, 1983, p. 174).³⁶

In the *Rheingold* Alberich utters similar words:

*Wie durch Fluch er mir gerieth, verflucht sei dieser Ring! Gab sein Gold mir Macht ohne Maaß, nun zeug' sein Zauber Tod dem, der ihn trägt! Kein Froher soll seiner sich freu'n, keinem Glücklichen lache sein lichter Glanz! Wer ihn besitzt, den sehre die Sorge, und wer ihn nicht hat, den nage der Neid! Jeder giere nach seinem Gut, doch keiner genieße mit Nutzen sein! Ohne Wucher hüt'ihn sein Herr; doch den Würger zieh'er ihm zu! Dem Tode verfallen, fess'le den Feigen die Furcht: so lang' er lebt, sterb' er lechzend dahin, des Ringes Herr als des Ringes Knecht.*³⁷

At the end of the *Götterdämmerung*, the power and the wealth symbolized by the ring causes a cosmic catastrophe. In *Wieland* the ring will also be a source of ruin, but only for those who seek to use it to satisfy their greed: *Gewinne ich den Ring des Schwänenweibes, dann bin ich des mächtigsten Kleinodes Herrin, und selbst mein Vater verdanke einzig mir seine Macht* (Wagner, 1872, p. 184)³⁸ says Bathilde, king Neiding's daughter.

In the hands of the blacksmith, the object takes on a different function as the introduction to the third scene of the third act explains. The blades of the swords which Wieland has forged for the king become wings and the ring will become the clasp of the axis, says Wagner, imbued with magical power by which the pair of wings will move.³⁹ Thus the instrument of the curse is, in this way, transformed into an instrument of elevation.

³⁶ *That gold which Gust owned shall cause the death of two brothers and for eight rulers will be cause of strife; from my wealth no one shall benefit* (Árni Björnsson, 2003, p. 146).

³⁷ *Just as it came to me through a curse, so shall this ring accursed in turn! Just as its gold once endowed me with might beyond measure, so shall its spell now deal death to whoever shall wear it! No joyful man shall ever have joy of it; no happy man shall its bright gleam smile; may he who owns it be wracked by care, and he who does not be ravaged by greed! Each man shall cover its acquisition, but none shall enjoy it to lasting gain; its lord shall guard it without any profit, and yet it shall draw down his bane upon him. Doomed to die, may the coward be fettered by fear; as long as he lives, let him pine away, languishing, lord of the ring as the slave of the ring* (Text and translation: Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 105-106).

³⁸ "If I win the ring belonging to the swan maiden, I'll be the owner of the most powerful gem, and even my father will be indebted of his power to me" (adapted from Ellis, 1895, p. 223).

³⁹ *Als zauberkräftige Axe an der das Flügelpaar sich bewege* (Wagner, 1872, p. 202).



Besides the ring there is in *Wieland der Schmied* a second reference to a theme that can be found in Wagner's tetralogy. In the *Rheingold*, Freyja is the guardian of the fruits ensuring eternal youth. She is held as a hostage by Fasolt and Fafner, the giants who have built the home of the gods. In this way, the divine race is doomed to disappear as Loge points out: *Ohne die Äpfel alt und grau greis und grämlich welkend zum Spott aller Welt erstirbt der Götter Stamm.*⁴⁰

Freyja will then be redeemed by the cursed gold. In this story there is a retelling of the two different myths that we find in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, the first of which concerns the construction of the gods' stronghold:

*Þat var snimma í nndverða bygð goðanna, þá er goðin hnfdú sett Miðgarð ok gert Valhnl, þá kom þar smiðr nokkorr ok bauð at gera þeim borg á þrim misserum soá góða at trú ok ørugg væri fyrir bergrisum ok hrímþursum þótt þeir komi inn um Miðgarð. En hann mælir sér þat til kaups at hann skyldi eignask Freyju, ok hafa vildi hann sól ok mána (Faulkes, 2005, p. 34).*⁴¹

The second is the myth of Idunn's abduction:

*Bragi heitir einn [...] Kona hans er Iðunn. Hon varðveitir í eski sínu epli þau er goðin skulu á bita þá er þau eldask, ok verða þá allir ungir, ok soá mun vera allt til ragnarøkrs [...] En at ákveðinni stundu teygir Loki Iðunni út um Ásgarð i skóg nokkvorn ok segir at hann hefir fundit epli þau er henni munu gripir í þykkja, ok bað at hon skal hafa með sér sin epli ok bera saman ok hin. Þá kemr þar Þjazi jntunn í arnarham ok tekr Iðunni ok flýgr braut með ok í Þrymheim til bús síns. En Asir urðu illa við hvarf Iðunnar ok gerðusk þeir bratt hárir ok gamlir (Faulkes, 2005, p. 25; Faulkes, 1998, p. 2).*⁴²

⁴⁰ Without the apples, old and grey, grizzled and grim, withered and scorned by the whole of the world the race of gods will perish (Text and translation: Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 86).

⁴¹ It was right at the beginning of the gods' settlement. When the gods had established Midgard and built Val-hall, there came there a certain builder and offered to build them a fortification in three seasons so good that it would be reliable and secure against the mountain-giants and frost-giants, even though they should come in over Midgard. And he stipulated as his payment that he should get Freyja as his wife, and he wished to have the sun and the moon (Faulkes, 1995, p. 35).

⁴² There is one called Bragi [...] Idunn is his wife. She keeps in her casket apples which the gods have to feed on when they age, and then they all become young, and so it will go on right up to Ragnarok [...] But at the agreed time Loki lured Idunn out through Asgard into a certain forest, saying that he had found some apples that she would think worth having, and told her she should bring her apples with her and compare them with these. Then giant Thiassi arrived in eagle shape and snatched Idunn and flew away with her to his home in Thrymheim. But the Æsir were badly affected by Idunn's disappearance and soon became grey and old (Faulkes, 1995, p. 25 and p. 60).

In the *Wieland* the reworking is presented differently. Only Freyja, the goddess of love and fertility has not regained her youth. She has been abandoned by her husband Óðr and now weeps tears of gold, which the blacksmith collects to use in his forge. As we read in Snorri, Freyja was married to someone called Odr. Their daughter was named Hnoss. She was so beautiful that whatever is beautiful and precious is called *hnossir* after her name. Odr went off on long journeys while Freyja stayed behind weeping tears of red gold.⁴³

In Wagner's drama this becomes a parting which has a specific, symbolic function. Love as vital force belongs no longer to the lineage of the gods. Only Wieland, the human, allows it to come to life once again by his union with the swan maiden, exactly as Siegfried in the *Ring* will arouse in Brünnhilde the feeling that will make her leave the world of gods by predicting its end: *Fahr' hin, Walhall's leuchtende Welt! Zerfall in Staub deine stolze Burg! Leb' wohl, prangende Götterpracht! End' in Wonne, du ewig Geschlecht! Zerreisst, ihr Nornen, das Runenseil! Götterdämm' rung, dunkle herauf!*⁴⁴

Siegfried is called *wonniges Kind*⁴⁵ by Brünnhilde. This adjective, *wonnig*, has different meanings in *Siegfried: wonnige* (Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 276) that is 'blissful' is Brünnhilde in Siegfried's words. But he speaks of a *wonnig warmes Gedüft*⁴⁶ in referring to Brünnhilde's breath. He uses the expression *wonnig* 'lovely' for her mouth⁴⁷ and calls her song *wie Wunder tönt*, 'wondrous'.⁴⁸

The adjective *wonnig* is used repeatedly in the *Wieland der Schmied*, not only to refer to Schwanhilde, to her birthplace and to her flight but also to praise the work of the blacksmith. In *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* Wagner says that Wieland and Schwanhilde are *wonnig vereint* (Wagner, 1872, p. 175), 'in blissful union'. This is a linguistic *Leitmotiv* which further confirms

⁴³ *Freyja er tignust með Frigg. Hon giptisk þeim manni er Óðr heitir. Dóttir fleira heitir Hnoss. Hon er svá fngur at af hennar nafni eru hnossir kallaðar þat er fagrt er ok gersemlikt. Óðr fór í braut langar leiðir, en Freyja grætr eptir, en tár hennar er gull rautt* (Faulkes, 2005, p. 29). *Freyja is highest in rank next to Frigg. She was married to someone, called Od. Hnoss is the name of their daughter. She is so beautiful that from her name whatever is beautiful and precious is called hnossir (treasures). Od went off on long travels, and Freyia stayed behind weeping, and her tears are red gold* (Faulkes, 1995, p. 29-30).

⁴⁴ *Be gone, Walhalla's light-bringing world! May your proud-standing stronghold moulder to dust! Fare well, resplendent pomp of the gods! End in rapture, you endless race! Rend, you Norns, the rope of runes! Dusk of the gods let your darkness arise!* (Text and translation: Spencer-Millington, 1983, p. 275).

⁴⁵ *Blithesome child* (Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 268).

⁴⁶ *The blissfully warming fragrance* (Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 267).

⁴⁷ Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 270.

⁴⁸ Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 269.



the close connection between the *Wieland* and the *Ring*. It is important to note that the meaning of the adjective in the *Siegfried* shifts from a state of physical pleasure to a blissful, solely spiritual, condition. In this respect the *Wieland*, which is chronologically earlier than the final version of the *Siegfried*, represents a further stage of this semantic evolution. The attribute *wonnig* is here free from any material connotation and fully recovers a religious-mystical sense of elevation, already outlining the message of the Parsifal.

The mutilation itself becomes a means of elevation: a body part is sacrificed to achieve something higher. In the myth, Óðinn is blind in one eye, which has been left at the spring of Mimir. It is the pledge paid to the source of knowledge (Kuhn, 1983, p. 7; Faulkes, 2005, p. 17).⁴⁹ The god Tyr has given one hand in order to have the wolf Fenrir, a threat to the cosmic order, imprisoned (Faulkes, 2005, p. 27-29). The blacksmith's maiming is central to both the eddic poem and in the legend inserted in the *Piðreks saga*. In the *Vnlundarqviða* the mutilation constitutes a precondition for the enslavement of the smith, while in the Norwegian saga this is performed when Velent is already working for the king, who is called Niðungr. The king promises to marry his daughter to whoever can bring him the stone which will ensure victory for its possessor. Velent succeeds in doing that and kills the king's bailiff, an event that allows Niðungr to break his promise and send him away. Velent then tries to poison the king's daughter but is discovered and mutilated.

Once again, the Wagnerian text mixes different sources by adapting the plot to the requirements of the dramatic form. By describing the blacksmith's revenge, Wagner softens the hardness of the mythical narrative, by omitting any reference to the rape of the king's daughter by the blacksmith; an event that we find both in the eddic poem and in the Norwegian saga.

The reference to the ritual killing of the king's children, whose limbs are used by the blacksmith to make objects and jewelry is, in the poetic Edda, also present in the poem *Atlamálar*: Högni and Gunnarr, Guðrun's brothers, are invited to Atli who wants to take possession of their treasure. The brothers fall into the trap and are killed. Guðrun, Atli's wife, in turn, kills Erpr and Eitill, their sons. The unsuspecting Atli uses their heads as drinking vessels and eats their roasted hearts (Kuhn, 1983, p. 258-259). This story has echoes in classical mythology. Ovid

⁴⁹ Wagner rereads this motif in the *Rheingold*. Here Wotan has to sacrifice an eye in order to have Fricka. (Spencer-Millington, 1993, p. 72).



in the *Metamorphoses* relates the story of Procne, who kills Itys, her son, and offers his limbs as a meal to her husband Tereus after he has raped her sister, Philomela. Tantalus, as reported in several sources, defies the gods by offering them the flesh of his son Pelops. Atreus and Thyestes, the sons of Pelops, perpetuate the ritual. As we read in Aeschylus and Seneca, to avenge his wife's unfaithfulness Atreus kills his brother Thyestes's children, invites Thyestes to a banquet, and feeds them to him.

It is significant that this theme, which we find both in the Germanic and in Greek epic, is connected with the work of an artist who regarded Greek tragedy, especially Aeschylus, as the highest form of expression. In his book *Die Kunst und die Revolution*, which was written around the same time as the *Wieland der Schmied*, Wagner says that the perfect work of art, the Drama, was the abstract of all that was expressible in the Greek nature:

Bei den Griechen war das vollendete, das dramatische Kunstwerk, der Inbegriff alles aus dem griechischen Wesen Darstellbaren; es war, im innigen Zusammenhange mit ihrer Geschichte, die Nation selbst, die sich bei der Aufführung des Kunstwerkes gegenüber stand (Wagner, 1872, p. 28).⁵⁰

In the *Wieland* there is a further reference to the Greek universe: the blacksmith's physical appearance reminds us of the god Hephaestus. The corresponding Roman god, Vulcan, shares with Vnlundr the ability to fly. We read in Servius's commentary on Virgil's *Aeneid* that *Ignipotens Vulcanus, ut diximus, ignis est, et dictus Vulcanus quasi Volcanus, quod per aerem volat* (Servius VIII, 414 in Nedoma, 1988, p. 137).

In a similar way to the mythical Daedalus, Vnlundr escapes from prison by flying.⁵¹ However, the blacksmith *Wieland* is actually much closer in Wagner's text, in his instinct for rebellion and his yearning for freedom, to the figure of Prometheus. This is not the Prometheus who is so unsuccessful in Aeschylus' tragedy but rather the proud victor portrayed in Goethe's hymn of 1773 (Ebl-Jannidis-Willems, 1998, p. 192-194). Here the artist as creator denies the omnipotence of the gods and then leads a complete rebellion against their power.

⁵⁰ *With the Greeks the perfect work of art, the Drama, was the abstract and epitome of all that was expressible in the Grecian nature. It was the nation itself – in intimate connection with its own history – that stood mirrored in its artwork* (Ellis, 1895, p. 52); see also Foster, 2010.

⁵¹ In modern Icelandic language *völundarhús* means "maze".

In the same way, Wieland rebels against the king who had forced him to put his creativity at the service of regal power. In Wagner's drama the yearning of the blacksmith is fulfilled. This is the most distinctive feature of the text in comparison to its sources. In both the eddic poem and the Norwegian saga the blacksmith regains its freedom by flying alone. In the *Wieland der Schmied* we see the ultimate union between the protagonist and the swan-maiden, which is a reunion between earth and sky. The fusion is a symbol of aesthetic creation and the forging of the wings is tangible proof of the skill of genius to rise above all that belongs to the material world. This achievement is simply an expression of the necessary law governing his creativity. Bathilde, the daughter of the king, says *Der Götter Einer steht vor mir*. The blacksmith answers *Ein Mensch! Ein Mensch in höchster Noth! [...] Ich fand's was noch kein Mensch erdacht!* (Wagner, 1872, p. 201).⁵²

The elements that, in the *Lohengrin*, were irrevocably precluded, are brought to fruition in *Wieland*. In the course of this process, the problematic nature of the relationship between the author and the archaic philosophy of destiny, which is imbued with the bleak pessimism typical of Germanic mythology, is revealed. In Wagner's reading of the myth we find a rebellion against history which remains suspended between the Nietzschean theory of the *Übermensch* and the continued presence of the need for a mystical love, which finds his ultimate fulfillment only in the *Parsifal*.

4. Wieland: Human (not) All Too Human

Wieland der Schmied is a very significant text, not only for the presence of many themes that will later be developed in the text of the *Ring* and for the references to other Wagnerian works such as *Lohengrin*. The prose draft is truly a milestone in Richard Wagner's spiritual evolution, above all because this text already outlines the key principles underlying the composer's reworking of the myth. The first element, in the Wagnerian rereading of the myth, is the absence of any nationalistic purpose, a feature which, as we have seen previously, was predominant in the Germany of the time. Wagner, on the contrary, in *Eine Mitteilung an Meine Freunde* sketches his feelings towards Germany as follows: *I have said that my yearning for home*

⁵² "A god is in front of me [...] A man! A man in highest want! [...] I found what no man ever conceived!" (adapted from Ellis, 1895, p. 242).

had nothing of the character of political patriotism in it; yet I should be untruthful, did I not admit that a political interpretation of the German Home was among the objects of my indefinite longing. This I naturally could not find in the Present, and any justification of the wish for such a rendering I – like our whole historical school – could only seek-out in the Past (Ellis, 1985 p. 313). In *Wieland der Schmied* the Germanic literary heritage does not constitute the cultural and, above all, spiritual foundation of the German national consciousness, but the Germanic myth becomes a literary tool to criticize society: like Siegfried, *Wieland embodies Wagner's revolutionary aspirations* (Ortiz-de-Urbina, 2020, p. 24). The uppermost element in the Wagnerian approach, is expressed in *Wieland der Schmied* by the inspiration to the redemption, symbolized by the final flight of the blacksmith: the mythical character becomes the constitutive element of a dramatic action that represents the man freed from all the conventions and conditionings of history. The myth becomes a universal value *which ennobled man and set him over and above individual traits and vulgar or selfish interest* (Ortiz-de-Urbina, 2020, p. 20) It's an idea that Wagner brings to light in *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde: I drove step by step into the deeper regions of antiquity, where at last to my delight, and truly in the utmost reaches of old time, I was to light upon the fair young form of Man, in all the freshness of his force My studies thus bore me, through the legends of the Middle Ages, right down to their foundation in the old-Germanic Mythos; one swathing after another, which the later legendary lore had bound around it, I was able to unloose, and thus at last to gaze upon it in its chastest beauty. What here I saw, was no longer the Figure of conventional history, whose garment claims our interest more than does the actual shape inside; but the real naked Man, in whom I might spy each throbbing of his pulses, each stir within his mighty muscles, in uncramped, freest motion: the type of the true human being.* (Ellis, 1895, pp. 357-358). This passage effectively highlights that the composer's research is not aimed at creating historical or mythological works but is rather focused on achieving a more ambitious goal: the dramatic representation of a universal-human ideal, whose completed expression will be gained only through the direct comparison with the original sources of the myth.

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