
MYTH AND MYTHOLOGY IN *THE RING* by A P Riemer

I would like to speak about the genesis of *The Ring* and of the very important role *Die Walküre*, that part of the cycle which we are to see this year, plays in Wagner's design. As you are all aware, in 1848, Wagner wrote the text of a projected music-drama entitled *Siegfried's Tod*, based ostensibly on the late twelfth or early 13th century south German - strictly speaking Austrian - chivalric epic known in English rather oddly as *The Nibelungenlied*.¹⁷ As Wagner's project expanded into the vast tetralogy which was performed in its entirety for the first time at the inaugural Bayreuth Festival of 1876, *Siegfried's Tod* became what we now know as *Götterdämmerung*, the mighty culmination of the cycle.

In the late 1840s Wagner made some attempts to set the text of *Siegfried's Tod* - fragments of the Norns' scenes in the Prologue have survived. But the project was soon abandoned, much to Wagner's distress but greatly to our gain. He realised, he said, that the subject-matter, the circumstances surrounding the slaying of the hero Siegfried - could not be satisfactorily contained within a single theatrical representation. In order, therefore, to avoid excessive, static narration of events that occurred before the action of *Siegfried's Tod* begins, he wrote a prologue entitled *Der junge Siegfried*, which became, of course, the third part or second day of the cycle. Thereupon followed the momentous decision which converted an essentially heroic subject - no matter how much mythological material it contained - into the cosmic and in a sense theological edifice of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, a characteristically nineteenth century meditation on world-history with fascinating, albeit disturbing mythic, social, political and psychological overtones. The text of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* were sketched in 1851 and completed the following year.

In a most important and significant way, *Die Walküre*, with its necessary prologue, *Das Rheingold*, represents the essence of Wagner's conception of *The Ring*. These were not of course the last texts to be set - many years were to pass before the full score of *Götterdämmerung* was completed. But no-one, I think, is naive enough to imagine that literary creation and musical composition formed separate compartments in Wagner's imagination. That would, in any case, totally contradict the principles behind *Gesamtkunstwerk*. I am convinced that as he wrote the texts of the first two parts of the cycle in 1851 and 1852, many of the musical ideas must have been already present, even if in embryo. These works, and most particularly *Die Walküre*, form the climax of

¹⁷ A T Hatto's prose translation (Penguin Books, 1965), contains an excellent 100 page essay on the genesis and literary significance of the poem. Hatto finds it distressing that readers coming to *The Nibelungenlied* from Wagner should find the poem inadequate. Of course, as this paper seeks to make clear, *Volsunga Saga* exerted far greater influence on Wagner than *The Nibelungenlied*.

Chapter Two

Wagner's massive project, even though from the point-of-view of the narrative they represent the first half of the cycle and from the point-of-view of composition (that is, the setting down of musical images in the minutiae of musical notation) many years were to elapse before the great orchestral peroration that brings *Götterdämmerung* to a close was to be committed to paper. It is in *Die Walküre* that we may note a significant departure from the concerns and emphases of the subsequent members of the cycle.

Before I consider these matters I must return to *Siegfried's Tod*. As I have said, it is ostensibly based on the great heroic epic *The Nibelungenlied*, which was set down in its surviving form in or near the year 1200, probably in Passau in Austria. Like other mediaeval narratives Wagner had used, or was later to use - Wolfram's *Parzival*, Gottfried's *Tristan*, the anonymous *Lohengrin* - *The Nibelungenlied* is a disconcerting mixture of Christian, courtly, pagan and historical elements. Its historical element consists of a dim memory of the defeat of the Burgundian tribe, whose centre was the city of Worms, by the invading Huns. Though Attila, the best-known of the various leaders of that fierce nation, had played no part in the defeat of the Burgundians, by the time the poem came to assume the form in which it has survived, he had become a central character in the latter part of the action in the guise of the noble and chivalrous Etzel, King of Hungary. This incidentally, is consistent with Central European origins of *The Nibelungenlied*. In the North and the West, Attila was usually depicted as a treacherous, barbaric figure and he appears thus in *Volsunga Saga* (in many ways Wagner's chief source for *The Ring*) in the figure of Atli, brother of the tragic Brynhild.

The plot of *The Nibelungenlied* may be summarised as follows. Siegfried, son of King Siegmund and Queen Sieglinde of the Netherlands, travels to Worms, seat of Gunther, principal King of the Burgundians, to woo Gunther's sister, the fair Kriemhild. Before he gives consent to their betrothal, Gunther insists that Siegfried must accompany him, his brothers and his liegeman Hagan to Iceland in his attempt to woo Queen Brunhild. When the party reaches Iceland, Brunhild rejects Gunther's suit. After much intrigue Siegfried tricks Brunhild into submission and into a consummation of the marriage by donning the tarnkappe which enables him to assume Gunther's shape or to be rendered invisible.

As a reward, Siegfried is married to Kriemhild. Trouble breaks out when the two Queens, Brunhild and Kriemhild, fall out and quarrel. Brunhild, unaware of Siegfried's royal descent, accuses Kriemhild of, so to speak, having ideas above her station since she considers her as no more than the wife of a mere liegeman whereas she, Brunhild, is the consort of a high king. Stung to the quick, Kriemhild reveals Siegfried's true status and his part in the wooing of Brunhild.

Thus begins Brunhild's fury and revenge. She enlists the aid of Hagen, Gunther's kinsman and vassal, who lusts after the Nibelung's treasure which Siegfried had in the

past captured from a fierce dragon. Hagen tricks Kriemhild into revealing to him the one vulnerable spot on Siegfried's body. He uses this knowledge to inflict a mortal wound on the hero during a hunt in the royal forest. The remainder of the poem is concerned with Kriemhild's grief and revenge - Brunhild disappears from the poem for all intents and purposes. Kriemhild mourns Siegfried and attempts to recover the Nibelung's treasure but to no avail - Hagen causes it to be cast into the depths of the Rhine at a spot known only to himself.

Time passes; eventually, Kriemhild allows herself to be persuaded to marry Etzel, the noble King of Hungary. After many years of married life she begs her husband to invite her brothers and Hagen to visit their remote kingdom. The Burgundians, now called rather confusingly the Nibelungs, set out for Hungary, even though they suspect the fate that awaits them. And so it turns out - in the poem's violent and bloody climax all succumb to Kriemhild's revenge, while she, too, loses her life.

Scholars have long recognised that the poem contains startling puzzles and inconsistencies. For instance, as I have already intimated, the name "Nibelung" is applied to various groups at various points in the poem, coming eventually to identify the Burgundians who, earlier in the poem, are quite distinct from the race of dwarves, elves and mortals that Siegfried is supposed to have vanquished. Much more worrying for our purposes, though, is the enigmatic role of Brunhild and her relationship with Siegfried. Nothing in the poem accounts for the intimacy that seems to have existed between these two, yet such a relationship must obviously have existed, for otherwise there would be no point to the insistence throughout these episodes of *The Nibelungenlied* on Siegfried's privileged familiarity with the Icelandic Queen and her realm. Moreover, Brunhild's fury when she learns of the deception that had been practised on her is, we are made to feel, motivated by something even stronger than her natural outrage at the way in which she had been tricked into accepting Gunther as her husband. The reason for such ambiguous episodes in the poem is to be found in its hybrid nature. *The Nibelungenlied* is basically a chivalric, courtly narrative, therefore stressing the virtues of valour and courtesy, and necessarily excluding elements that would have been unacceptable to the refined audience before which it was recited.

But the basis of the story is much older than the Christian and chivalric world of the Austrian bard's audience. It comes from Nordic mythology, and a version which retains much more of that mythological material is preserved in an Icelandic text, the so-called *Volsunga Saga*¹⁸, almost contemporary in time of composition with *The Nibelungenlied*, yet incorporating many more elements of those pagan myths from which these narratives

¹⁸ William Morris' excellent translation is available in an edition by Robert W Gutman (Collier-MacMillan, 1962).

Chapter Two

all derive. *Volsunga Saga* solves, as it were, the puzzles of *The Nibelungenlied*, especially where the matter of Brunhild's rage and fury is concerned. In *Volsunga Saga* we find much of the material of the second half of *The Ring*, that is, of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, despite the fact that in the saga the hero's name is Sigurd, not Siegfried, and despite the fact that some of the episodes in *Götterdämmerung* are obviously derived from *The Nibelungenlied*, finding no parallel in the saga. But one matter must be mentioned before I turn to those details of the *Volsunga Saga* which Wagner borrowed for his tetralogy.

The Nibelungenlied would have made a perfectly acceptable subject for operatic treatment. Of course, any close adaptation of the poem would have to have at its centre the tragic and suffering figure of Kriemhild, with the vengeful Brunhild remaining more or less a shadowy menace - as she is, it seems to me, for much of ACT II of *Götterdämmerung*. What I am pointing to is this: as far back as 1848, when Wagner was sketching out a single music-drama to be known as *Siegfried's Tod*, he was already intending to incorporate in his scheme material which *Volsunga Saga* alone could furnish - the reason for Brünnhilde's anguish, the transformation of the tragic Kriemhild into the much less important figure of Guttrune (a mere victim of her brother's intrigues) and such things as the Norns in the Prologue.

Volsunga Saga tells of the race of the Volsungs, descendants of the great god Odin. Volsung, grandson of Sigi, King of the Huns, and therefore great-grandson of Odin, builds a splendid hall the centre of which is occupied by the great oak Branstock. His daughter Signy is betrothed to Siggeir, King of the Goths. At the height of the festivities a stranger (in reality the disguised Odin) enters the hall and drives a sword into the trunk of Branstock, the great oak, declaring that it will belong to whomever is able to draw it out. Many try, but only Siegmund, Volsung's son and Signy's brother succeeds. Siggeir covets the sword and offers to buy it; when Siegmund refuses his offer he grows offended. Fearing for her safety, Signy begs her father to dissolve her betrothal, but Volsung is bound by his oath - the reluctant Signy is forced to depart with the vengeful Siggeir.

Later, Volsung and his sons are lured to Siggeir's kingdom. They are all slain except for Siegmund who is saved by Signy's cunning. She decides that only a full-blooded Volsung may avenge this outrage to her family. She therefore changes appearance with a witch and thus contrives to conceive a son by her brother Siegmund. This is Sinfjotli, whom Siegmund believes to be Siggeir's son. Nevertheless, he brings up the youth in his forest lair, and the two perform many notable feats, sometimes disguised as werewolves. Many years later Siegmund and Sinfjotli destroy Siggeir and his vassals, setting fire to their hall. Signy then tells Siegmund that Sinfjotli is his own son. Her revenge complete, she rushes into the burning hall.

Late in life, Siegmund woos the Lady Hjordis. His rival is King Lyngi, whose son Hunding had been slain by Helgi, a son of Siegmund from his earlier marriage to the Lady Borghild. Hjordis accepts the ageing Siegmund as her husband. The rejected Lyngi raises an army; Odin returns to revoke the power of the sword he had once planted in the trunk of Branstock, the great oak in King Volsung's hall. When Siegmund confronts Lyngi in battle, the sword shatters allowing Lyngi to vanquish his elderly rival. Hjordis, now pregnant, learns from the dying Siegmund that the fragments of the sword will be reforged, and that the son she will bear him will win great honour with it.

This son, Sigurd, is born in Denmark, where Hjordis has found refuge. He is nurtured and educated by Regin, master-smith of the King of Denmark. Odin keeps watch over the youth, helping him to choose a miraculously agile horse, Grani. Regin tells Sigurd about the great treasure hoard guarded by Fafnir, the dragon or great worm. Fafner and Otter were Regin's elder brothers. Otter was a fisherman who transformed himself into an otter when fishing in the great river. In a nearby waterfall the dwarf Andvari lived and fished in the guise of a pike. From time to time Otter poached Andvari's catch.

One day, Otter was killed by the god Loki; two other gods, Odin and Hoenir, skinned his corpse. Otter's father demanded weregild, that is restitution, insisting that the otter-skin should be filled with and covered by the purest gold. Loki tricked the dwarf Andvari out of the hoard of gold he guarded near his waterfall, but it was not sufficient to fill and cover all of the otter-skin; one whisker remained exposed. The gods therefore took from Andvari the last remaining part of his treasure; a gold ring of fabulous potency. The dwarf cursed the treasure, particularly *The Ring*; whoever shall possess it will know nothing but sorry and grief. The curse was immediately fulfilled; Fafnir slew his father, and turned himself into a dragon to guard the hoard. Having heard Regin's tale, Sigurd undertakes to kill the dragon. Regin attempts to forge a sword for the young hero, but none will satisfy him. Queen Hjordis then gives Sigurd the fragments of his father's sword, which Regin forges into a splendid weapon.

First, Sigurd slays his father's murderers; he then sets off to find Fafnir's lair. Regin attempts to betray Sigurd, but the disguised Odin appears once more warning the young hero of his mentor's treachery. Sigurd kills Fafnir. Regin asks him to roast the dragon's heart. When Sigurd touches the roasting organ to see whether it is cooked, he burns his finger. Sucking it to ease the pain he finds he is able to understand the language of the birds. They tell him of Regin's treachery and about Brynhild, the sleeping Valkyrie. Sigurd kills Regin and sets out on his horse Grani, bearing Fafnir's treasure with him, in search of the slumbering warrior-maiden.

He finds her on Hindfell, a fire-ringed mountain in the land of the Franks. She had been confined there by Odin for her disobedience when she had saved a king whom she had been ordered to allow to die in battle. Odin's sentence was that she was to remain on

Chapter Two

Hindfell until a man without fear should penetrate the flames and take her in marriage. This Sigurd achieves; and in return Brynhild teaches him much wisdom.

At this point *Volsunga Saga* itself becomes rather confusing and contradictory. Sigurd leaves Brynhild and voyages to Hlymdael, the seat of Heimir, Brynhild's foster father and brother-in-law. Brynhild follows him some time later, and their courtship takes place once more, as though nothing had happened on the fire-ringed Hindfell. Brynhild has terrible premonitions, nevertheless the two plight their troth, and Sigurd gives her Andvari's fated ring as a token of their love. He then leaves Hlymdael with his treasure and travels to the land of King Giuki. Meanwhile, Gudrun, King Giuki's daughter, travels to Hlymdael to consult Brynhild about the meaning of certain ominous dreams. Brynhild foresees their eventual rivalry.

Queen Grimhild, Gudrun's mother, spices Sigurd's cup with a philtre that causes her guest to forget the past. He therefore considers himself free to marry Gudrun and lives in great happiness with her. Grimhild also persuades Gunnar, her eldest son, to woo Brynhild for his wife. But he is of insufficient valour to brave the terrible fire that surrounds Hindfell where Brynhild seems to have returned - such puzzles, as I have said beset all of these old tales, the *Volsunga Saga* as much as *The Nibelungenlied*. Sigurd agrees to undertake the task for his brother-in-law. Grimhild uses her magic to make the young hero assume Gunnar's shape. In this guise he penetrates the flames once more. Brynhild is surprised to see the arrival of someone other than Sigurd, yet she is bound by her oath to take for a husband anyone who penetrates the flames. She therefore accepts the man she thinks to be Gunnar and gives him Andvari's ring as a token of her submission. Sigurd returns to Gunnar, assumes his proper shape, but retains *The Ring*. Brynhild follows him to Giuki's court to honour her pledge, having entrusted her daughter by Sigurd to the care of her foster father. When Brynhild's marriage to Gunnar is celebrated, Sigurd's memory returns but he realises that he must keep silent.

One day, the Queens, Brynhild and Gudrun, quarrel over which has precedence over the other. Brynhild claims that Sigurd is merely a liegeman of her husband King Gunnar. Enraged, Gudrun reveals to her how she had been deceived by the disguised Sigurd, and flaunts Andvari's ring, which Sigurd had given to her, as proof. Brynhild confronts Sigurd; he offers her Fafnir's treasure if she will keep her peace. He later tells her that he loves her and offers to leave Gudrun, but Brynhild's resolve cannot be shaken. She persuades Gunnar and his brother Hogni that Sigurd must die, but since these two are bound to the hero by a blood-oath, their younger brother Guttorm is entrusted with the task. Sigurd is killed. Brynhild upbraids her husband and his brothers; she plunges a knife in her breast. Her body is ceremonially cremated beside Sigurd's.

The rest of *Volsunga Saga* is concerned in the main with Gudrun's marriage to the barbarous Atli - the northern image of Attila the Hun who, because of different social and

political circumstances, appears as the benevolent and noble Etzel in *The Nibelungenlied*. The devious plot of her revenge follows in the main the account of Kriemhild's revenge in the Austrian poem.

It is obvious therefore that *The Ring* is much closer in many respects to the Icelandic saga than to the Austrian epic. The saga, together with some lays in the so-called Elder Edda, and some snippets of Germanic mythology, provides the necessary information about two elements on which *The Nibelungenlied* is silent or about which it is confused: the nature of the relationship between Siegfried and Brunhild and the provenance of the mysterious treasure. The reason behind such puzzles and inconsistencies is that myth is never static; in each telling it is transformed, adapted to the needs and desires of each audience. The Christianised Austrian or South German audience that relished *The Nibelungenlied* was very different from those Icelanders for whom *Volsunga Saga* was fashioned at about the same time - for these the old gods and their affairs had not faded from memory as they had for the courtiers of Passau. The puzzles and inconsistencies in *The Nibelungenlied* mark the fact that the old mythology had almost completely but not entirely disappeared from the world of medieval Central Europe.

Coming to these stories six and a half centuries later, Wagner was a part of this process of transformation to which all myths are subject. He altered, he adapted, he combined, he added. The ethos of *The Ring* is modelled deliberately on the world of the saga, so that almost nothing remains of the chivalric and courtly atmosphere of *The Nibelungenlied* except for some remnants in ACT II of *Götterdämmerung*, allowing us a glimpse of what *Siegfried's Tod* would have been like had Wagner completed the project - something akin, I think, to *Lohengrin*. But the Austrian epic gave him the names of several of the chief characters, the particular circumstances of Siegfried's death, and the marvellously malevolent figure of Hagen - which is barely hinted at in the pallid Hogni of the saga.

I must say a few words about Wagner's treatment of this material. As I have said, myth is never static. Often when a retelling is relevant to the ideals or preoccupations of a society, it becomes a mythology - that is, something more than a collection of tales, a commentary - no matter how confused or incoherent - on frequently abstract, always large-scale issues; an explanation, in short, of the world in which we live. In *The Ring*, Wagner constructed several often contradictory mythologies for the nineteenth century, all of which have influenced profoundly the culture of the modern world.

I would like first to say something about the most obvious and the most shameful of the mythologies in *The Ring*, the one most difficult to speak about in our world. I am referring, of course, to the attempt to elaborate a national and racial mythology, particularly evident in the naive and trusting strength and openness of the young Siegfried - as in the business with the bear in ACT I of *Siegfried* - and in Mime's plots against this trusting hero, and also in Siegfried's destruction by those decadent sophisticates, the

Gibichungs. I must remind you of the notoriously "Jewish" character of Mime's music in *Siegfried*, even though Wagner the artist responded to Mime in a much more subtle and complex manner than Wagner the myth-maker and polemicist intended.

This uncomfortable mythology in *The Ring* is inextricably linked with another level of mythological organisation, even though it seems at first blush to contradict Wagner's racial and nationalistic ambitions. This is an aspect of the work which is now commonplace in European stagings of the cycle. George Bernard Shaw was the first to draw attention to the possibility that Wagner, the one-time revolutionary and acquaintance of Bakunin, was creating the great mythology of the nineteenth century, paralleling the theories of Marx and Engels in many ways. Those of you who have seen the notorious Chéreau Ring will know what I mean: he presented the cycle as an account of the great economic and political conflicts of the industrial capitalist world - the relationship between the producers of wealth (the Nibelungs) and the exploiters of wealth (both the ancien regime of the gods and the new-rich of the Gibichungs); the relationship, furthermore, between law and expediency and the conflict between various ethical and moral systems.

But *The Ring* is a great work of art that transcends the mythologies it contains, and it seems clear to me that its greatness is a product of the manner in which it leaves behind, at key points, such mythologies and returns to the world of myth - that is, to something not so firmly locked into precise meanings and preoccupations as the matters I have been discussing in the last few minutes. And here, it seems to me, *Die Walküre*, despite its relative immaturity of musical language when compared with *Götterdämmerung*, is in many ways the culmination of *The Ring*, looking forward, as it does, to *Tristan und Isolde*, that supreme masterpiece.

Though it is necessary for the narrative unfolding of the last two segments of the cycle, *Die Walküre* represents something altogether different, in many ways unique and self-contained. This is where Wagner's design scales the heights of tragedy. I must explain what I mean by this, for I may be using the term in a way unfamiliar to some of you. The other parts of *The Ring* are epic - the characters are driven by fate, by necessity or by their own unalterable natures. They rarely experience the need to exercise a choice and, even when they do so, as Wotan must in *Das Rheingold*, the difficulty or agony of the choice is not much stressed. In *Götterdämmerung*, unlike in the case of Sigurd in *Volsunga Saga*, Siegfried does not regain his memory until shortly before his death, thus ruling out any possibility of his having to choose between silence and reparation of Brünnhilde's injuries.

It is not so in *Die Walküre*: Wotan and Brünnhilde are not merely obliged to choose, to exercise, as it were, their free-will, but each recognises painfully the consequences of such choice. This is the stuff of tragedy. Wagner no doubt knew Hegel's view of the

Antigone of Sophocles as the perfect tragic predicament. Antigone must choose between the will of the gods demanding that she must bury her slain brothers and the edict of King Creon, her uncle, who forbids the burial in order to make an example of those involved in civil war and insurrection. Antigone faces the terrible tragic dilemma: either choice is disastrous; she chooses the nobler course of action, even though she knows that it will lead to her destruction, because it honours the gods rather than obeying the edicts of temporal power.

This is precisely Brünnhilde's predicament: should she obey Wotan's command that Siegmund must fall victim to the odious Hunding, or should she follow the promptings of her own moral sense, which she knows to be identical with the deepest desires of the god, her father. She exercises the correct choice, and she is as a consequence destroyed - destroyed because she must lose her divinity and destroyed because she must be sequestered from her father. The sleeping Valkyrie on the fire-girt mountain is as much a triumphant tragic victim as is Antigone when she is entombed alive at the end of Sophocles' tragedy.

You will have noticed, of course, how Wagner telescopes in the figure of Wotan the separate institutions that make their irreconcilable claims on the figure of Antigone: he is both god and king. This telescoping is characteristic of that abstract myth Wagner began to elaborate in *Die Walküre* and brought to a triumphant culmination in *Tristan*, with *Parsifal* as a very problematic appendage. It is not easy to identify this myth by name or title, for it is fundamentally symbolic in nature, resisting explication in the way that the great poets of symbolism - Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, all of whom were strongly attracted to Wagner - resist explication.

One may nevertheless characterise it as the world of dreams, of extreme states, of situations where the unnameable but nevertheless profound truths of human experience are displayed. Such art is often the art of excess, of frequently vivid psychological and sexual fantasies, of the longing for death and the desire for the annihilation of the personality - in short, the art of the Romantic Agony. Wagner's telescoping, as I have called it, within the figure of Wotan and the predicament of Brünnhilde is an instance of this - as is the way in which Wotan mirrors the terrible fate of another great figure of tragedy, Agamemnon, who must obey the gods and sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, being at the same time a suffering father and an inexorable god.

I would like to mention here briefly a topic that is best discussed, I think, in connection with *Tristan und Isolde*, but one that is of some importance in any consideration of *The Ring*, especially of *Die Walküre*. For it is in *Die Walküre* that the most private and personal of the mythologies in *The Ring* rises, as it were, to the surface. Like many other nineteenth century artists, Wagner used, of course, the work of art as a means of creating a spiritual autobiography, so that his adaptation and transformation of Nordic

Chapter Two

mythology came to be adjusted to displaying the personal, sexual and professional predicament of the artist, the privileged visionary, living in a hostile world. Wotan, the awesome but deeply flawed god is, as always, an idealised and agonised self-portrait, just as Wotan's predicament in this part of the cycle reflects the predicament of Wagner, the man and the artist.

This aspect of *Die Walküre* reaches its culmination in the curiously erotic ambivalence of the music for Wotan and Brünnhilde in ACT III - a type of displaced love-duet, but even more importantly in the love of Siegmund and Sieglinde in ACT I. This is surely the earliest acknowledgment in music of the power, the fury and the transport of sexuality, and of its intimate connection with death and annihilation - surpassed only by ACT II of *Tristan und Isolde*. Brother and sister are caught up in a tide of eroticism which, we are made to feel, is irresistible, but which also wells up out of their intrinsic natures, out of their specialness or, if you like, out of their being set apart, unique, the fruit of the same womb. This high-romantic celebration of incest is, of course, paralleled by the obsession of the age with extraordinary states of being. Siegmund and Sieglinde are transported beyond the world - that is the complex intrigues of gods, giants and dwarfs - into the pure world of the symbol, counterbalancing, therefore, the dilemma of the God and of the Valkyrie who must live in the tragic world of choices.

I would like to suggest therefore, that *Die Walküre*, together with *Tristan*, is the epitome of the late nineteenth century's desire to escape from the world of mythology into the pure world of myth and symbol - a tendency that was to be followed by the poetry of Yeats and T S Eliot. This may be one of the reasons why *Die Walküre* is so often performed in isolation - it contains something lacking in the rest of *The Ring*, no matter what splendours it reveals.

Of course the achievement is tentative and problematical. To many, *Die Walküre* seems bombastic, self-indulgent and decadent. It is dangerous art, as Thomas Mann recognised in that splendid short story *The Blood of the Volsungs*.¹⁹ There Siegmund and Sieglinde, the spoilt, indulged twin-children of a bourgeois family - which seems to carry the terrible taint of Jewish ancestry, that is, of otherness - go to the opera on the eve of Sieglinde's wedding to a highly respectable civil servant. Surrounded by every luxury, they observe with ironic and sophisticated detachment the fleshy soprano and fat tenor as they act out the tragic tale of their namesakes. Afterwards, while having supper at the family's sumptuous town residence, this Siegmund and this Sieglinde also succumb: they commit the unpardonable act. Such are the dangers of Wagner's heady world. But, as Mann clearly saw, Wagner achieved an uneasy but nevertheless true poise which makes *Die Walküre*, despite the arm-waving of its portly tenor and plump soprano, the high

¹⁹ Included in *Little Herr Friedemann and Other Stories* (Penguin Books 1972)

point of his transformation of Nordic myth.

A P RIEMER