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Wagner as a Shavian Evolutionist : Shaw's Allegorical Reading of *Das Rheingold*

Nobuya Takahashi

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was active, mainly in his thirties, as music critic in several London magazines. He was brought up in a musical atmosphere ; his father played the trombone, his mother was an amateur singer appearing on the local stage in Dublin, and he had a singing teacher named George John Vandeleur Lee who was attached to the Shaws and exerted immense influence on young Shaw's sensibility. It was thus natural for him to get involved in activities which were related to music.

His love for music, however, expressed itself in literary domain. After moving to London in 1876, he ghosted for Lee music reviews for *The Hornet* for ten months, Shaw's first ever journalistic output. His early attempts at novel included some musical episodes and personages, such as a Beethovenian composer Owen Jack in *Love Among the Artists* (written 1881 ; published 1900).

Shaw was attracted particularly by opera, and his favourite composers were Mozart, Verdi, and most ardently, Richard Wagner. During the period when he was a music critic to *The Star* (January 1888 -May 1890, from February 1889 under the pseudonym 'Corno di Bassetto') and *The World* (May 1890-August 1894), he championed Wagner assiduously and endeavoured to convey the importance of his work to general readers.

Shaw's activity in the cause of Wagner culminated in *The Perfect*

Wagnerite (1898), a commentary on the music-drama, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*, first performed 1876 ; hereafter referred to as *The Ring*). This is a unique exegesis of Wagner's massive tetralogy rather than an ordinary 'guide book.' What makes it characteristic is that Shaw consistently interprets the work from the socialist standpoint. It is well-known that Shaw was an eager member of the Fabian Society since 1884, and an enthusiasm for the reform of society had permeated his reading of *The Ring* even before *The Perfect Wagnerite* ; his first dramatic work, *Widowers' Houses* (first performed 1892), the first act of which is set on the bank of the Rhine, was provisionally entitled *Rhinegold*.

Wagner's *Ring* consists of four parts: *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhinegold*), *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*), *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*). *Das Rheingold* is the preliminary section, in which the gods, the dwarfs, and the giants fight over the golden ring the owner of which would gain the power to rule the world. In the ensuing three parts a hero is born of semi-divine parents to save the world from the ill use of the ring but is eventually killed, and the race of the gods collapses.

The way Shaw treats the work is quite peculiar. Ignoring the generally accepted aspects of the work, that is, the idea of redemption through love, he concentrates on the reassessment of the plot as a reflection of the predicament of the contemporary European society.⁽¹⁾ For Shaw *The Ring* is not a mere operatic entertainment ; it deals with the system of human society and its evolution to a higher state. There is no denying that his assimilation of *Das Kapital* (in French translation) as well as his enthusiastic activity as a Fabian led to a radical reading of the drama.⁽²⁾

In *The Perfect Wagnerite*, great stress is laid upon the first part,

Das Rheingold. This work is placed within the tetralogy as ‘the preliminary night,’ in other words, a ‘preface’ to the ensuing main story. It is interesting to note that Shaw devotes a good deal of argument to this ‘preface,’ because Shaw himself is famous for providing often long prefaces to his own dramatic works. Shaw is indeed ‘a prefatory sort of person,’ as G. K. Chesterton ingeniously put it.⁽³⁾

Just as a copious preface expounds what Shaw has to say in his play, Shaw discusses the ‘preliminary night,’ eliciting an inner meaning out of the narrative structure. The critical stance he adopts is to read the whole tetralogy in terms of class conflict. In this reading, the work depicts allegorically the nineteenth century capitalist system of society.⁽⁴⁾

The gold on the bed of the Rhine is guarded by the Rhinedaughters. A dwarf of the Nibelungs, Alberich, arrives to make advances to them, but upon being told that one who forswears love alone can forge the ring out of the gold, the magical ring which will make him the ruler of the world, he renounces love and steals the gold away.

Shaw compares the gold-embedded Rhine to Klondyke (Klondike) in Canada, the city which became famous in 1896 for the discovery of gold. A gold rush began in 1897 and swelled in 1898, as miners and adventurers poured in, exactly when *The Perfect Wagnerite* was in the course of preparation. This topicality is deliberately brought in by the author at the outset of the book to make the readers aware that, in spite of unreal characters such as siren, dwarf, god, and giant, this is not some fairy tale set in a mythical world but a down-to-earth description of the contemporary society.

Gold, Shaw reveals, is the symbol of the ‘Plutonic power.’ This is the basis for the modern society, a typical system of plutocracy. In such

a society, noble feelings are easily suffocated in the face of the desire for the Plutonic power. Alberich is obviously a modern man driven by such desire. Besides, he is humiliated by the Rhinedaughters. His courtship is cruelly derided. He ponders : 'The world's wealth might I win through you? Though love can't be gained by force, through cunning might I entorce its delights ?'⁽⁵⁾ Shaw brilliantly reveals the connection of desire and humiliation :

It is just as if some poor, rough, vulgar, coarse fellow were to offer to take his part in aristocratic society, and snubbed into knowledge that only as a millionaire could he ever hope to bring that society to his feet and buy himself a beautiful and refined wife. His choice is forced upon him. He forswears love as thousands of us forswear it every day. . . .⁽⁶⁾

In *Das Rheingold*, Shaw finds a threefold division. Dwarfs, giants, and gods are 'dramatizations of the three main orders of men : . . . the instinctive, predatory, lustful, greedy people ; the patient, toiling, stupid, respectful, money-worshipping people; and the intellectual, moral, talented people who devise and administer States and Churches.'⁽⁷⁾ For the moment the world is duly ruled by the gods and Wotan, 'the god of gods,' and the dwarfs and the giants are obedient and awe-struck under their reign. But the dwarf Alberich has now obtained the gold and made the mighty ring. Knowing that he schemes to assault the gods, Wotan must defend them against the attack.

According to Shaw's famous view of the world, there exists something that, prevalent among all creatures, prompts the world to evolve. This power he calls 'Life Force' ; everything living on earth is

dominated and driven by this energy, either consciously or unconsciously :

The mysterious thing we call life organizes itself into all living shapes, bird, beast, beetle and fish, rising to the human marvel in cunning dwarfs and in laborious muscular giants, capable, these last, of enduring toil, willing to buy love and life, not with suicidal curses and renunciations, but with patient manual drudgery in the service of higher powers.⁽⁸⁾

In this ladder of evolution, gods are 'higher' than dwarfs and giants. Therefore it is the role of the gods to govern the world.

The Godhead, which is the ruling class of the modern society, had to establish the mechanical system of law and commandments to make the giants obey, because these creatures are incapable of appreciating the nobility and gracefulness of the gods. But the mechanical system is destined to become out of date day by day, because 'Life Force' makes the world evolve ceaselessly.

Here, in Shaw's view, is the deadlock the higher class has come to. He relentlessly denounces the stiffened legislation of the government and the not-so-benevolent Church which belongs to the Establishment. The social science of Marxism and the highly individual idea of 'Life Force' are thus combined together to clarify the inner meaning of *Das Rheingold*.

The scene of the capitalist brutally exploiting the labourers is vividly depicted in the third scene, in which Alberich wields the whip and the ring to drive the fellow dwarfs to the mine. This mine is the underground domain of the Nibelungs, but Shaw argues that '[t]his

gloomy place need not be a mine: it might just as well be a match-factory, with yellow phosphorus, phossy jaw, a large dividend, and plenty of clergymen shareholders. . . or any other of the places where human life and welfare are daily sacrificed in order that some greedy foolish creature may be able to hymn exultantly to his Plutonic idol'⁽⁹⁾ Alberich has become an arch-capitalist, complete with the magic helmet which makes him invisible. To Shaw, this is not mysterious. 'This helmet is a very common article in our streets, where it generally takes the form of a tall hat. It makes a man invisible as a shareholder. . . .'⁽¹⁰⁾

Shaw's allegorical interpretation of *The Ring* is particularly apt in this underworld scene. When Wagner was in London (which he visited three times in his life), he himself was impressed by the atmosphere of the world's biggest capital city. We find an eloquent witness in his wife Cosima, who states in 1877, '[In London] . . . I drive with R[ichard] in a hansom cab; the fog gives everything a ghostly appearance and it is precisely here, in this centre of the utmost activity, that I feel most closely aware of the identity of things and dreamlike quality of life. . . . If I had to choose a large city, it would be London.'⁽¹¹⁾ Arguably, Wagner put some of his impressions of London into the setting of the smouldering mine. Looking back from the level of present-day Wagner criticism, we cannot but admire Shaw's insight in identifying the source of Wagner's inspired rendition of the Nibelungs' mine.⁽¹²⁾

Alberich forces the dwarfs to pile up wealth for him, menacing them with the power of the ring. Soon Wotan comes down to the mine accompanied by Loge, the god of fire, trickster, and Wotan's brain. Loge is perceived as the embodiment of lie, who has no morality or passion (Shaw quotes here Ferdinand Lassalle's definition of lie as 'a

European Power'⁽¹³⁾). That is why Wotan keeps him ; he can let him do dirty things without getting his own hands dirty. And now that Alberich is ready to go up to the sphere of the gods and usurp the power, Wotan does not hesitate. 'On the loftiest moral grounds, he lets Loki [*sic.*] do his worst.'⁽¹⁴⁾ Through the cunning of Loge, Wotan manages to capture Alberich, and they take him prisoner to the castle.

In the last scene of *Das Rheingold*, the most dramatic moment is the curse of Alberich over the bearer of the ring. He is deprived of the hoards of treasure, the magic helmet, and the ring. From the depth of grief he puts a curse on the ring : 'Just as it came to me through a curse, so shall this ring be accursed in turn!'⁽¹⁵⁾ Then he flies away.

This is the episode which casts a dark shadow over the whole cycle of *The Ring* ; the musical motif of the curse keeps reminding the audience of the effect of Alberich's malediction. Therefore it is of particular interest that Shaw almost disregards this episode in the commentary. He recounts how Alberich is robbed of the ring, but all he does is simply declare, 'This is the way of the world,'⁽¹⁶⁾ and then goes on to expound the allegorical meaning of the episode, without stopping over the curse-scene.

Clearly Shaw's interest does not lie in the theatrical effect of the dreadful malediction. He is concerned with the problem of the ruling class, especially the corruption of the Church :

When the forces of lovelessness and greed had built up our own sordid capitalist systems, . . . then religion and law and intellect . . . nevertheless did not scruple to seize by fraud and force these powers of evil on pretence of using them for good. . . . [T]he Church is far more vitally harmed by that unfaithfulness to

itself than its more mechanical confederates. . . .⁽¹⁷⁾

Of the aforementioned three elements, religion, law, and intellect, the first two correspond to Wotan and his wife Fricka (the god of matrimony), and the last one to Loge. Shaw pursues his argument in terms of 'Church and State,' combining the spiritual and the secular power as a set. Alberich the capitalist was dangerous because he attempted to topple down the mastery of the godhead. But, in deceiving and defeating him, the gods may be said to confess to the fact that the social system with the tandem of 'Church and State' no longer functions properly, as the gods are now degenerate enough to use the political craft maliciously.

This is exactly the situation of the contemporary society, as Shaw observes it. The conflict between Wotan and Alberich is temporarily settled; Wotan is in possession of the power to consolidate his position as the master of the world ; Alberich is cast away, defeated and dejected, but eagerly waits for a chance to take his revenge. To use the words of Robert Donington, 'Wotan as an Ibsenite pillar of society and Alberich as a top-hatted capitalist'⁽¹⁸⁾ are two extremes aiming for the same Plutonic power.

This situation, however, cannot remain stable, for the ever-evolving 'Life Force' is always at work. Evolution has produced various creatures, and the race of gods is at the top of the ladder only for the time being :

From toad and serpent to dwarf, from bear and elephant to giant, from dwarf and giant to a god with thought, with comprehension of the world, with ideals. Why should it stop there? Why should it not rise from

the god to the Hero?⁽¹⁹⁾

The race of the heroes is awaited in the hope of breaking up the stiffened system of 'Church and State,' and deliver the world from the ruinous result brought about by the rage of the capitalists.

The hero will be borne in due course by 'Life Force.' It comes as no surprise to us that Shaw believes that this 'Life Force' is personified in *The Ring* as Erda, 'the First Mother of life.' Erda is the goddess of the earth, and the source of life and wisdom. When Wotan tries to retain the ring in spite of the promise he made with the giants, she appears out of the depth of the earth to warn him, because the ring could prove to be an obstacle to the evolution. Wotan admits it and yields the ring to giants.

With the entrance of Erda, Shaw's allegorical reading of *Das Rheingold* is almost complete. Following the Shavian idea of 'Life Force,' Erda will breed the race which will supersede the highest class and 'cut the tangles and alliances and compromises'⁽²⁰⁾ that have afflicted even the head of the race of the gods. Shaw maintains that men come after the gods, and therefore men are superior to the gods. 'In the modern humanitarian order as adopted by Wagner, Man is the highest. . . . [T]he world is waiting for Man to redeem it from the lame and cramped government of the gods.'⁽²¹⁾

Interpreting *Das Rheingold* as allegory can be stimulating precisely because the work, while being abundant with fairy tale motifs and characters, deals with such fundamentally abstract ideas as power and wealth. As Peter Conrad points out, '[T]he interpreter's task, in expounding its allegory, is to rescue it from its own puerility.'⁽²²⁾ This seems to be exactly what Shaw does here; in the chapter 'Preliminary Encouragements,' he states, 'First, *The Ring*, with all its gods and

giants and dwarfs, . . . is a drama of today, and not of a remote and fabulous antiquity. It could not have been written before the second half of the nineteenth century. . . .'⁽²³⁾

Shaw's effort is powerfully directed towards the radical reading of his own idea on the modern society into *The Ring*. In the process, the elements which do not fit his method are contemptuously rejected. Such elements are often ones which general spectators find easy to grasp and sympathize with. The episode of Alberich's curse is a typical one in that it appears to set the course of the whole of the following story. But in Shaw's eyes it is simply 'a piece of stage sensationalism.' From the standpoint of the evolution of 'Life Force,' it is utterly unnecessary to bring in such a 'superfluous and confusing' episode.⁽²⁴⁾ Another significant idea which is so dear to Wagner and yet is discarded by Shaw is that of redemption through love. It is curious and yet typical of Shaw that, as his idea becomes incongruous to the proceedings of the cycle, he goes so far as to dismiss the third act of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* altogether.

This is, admittedly, a limitation of Shaw's critical analysis. Nevertheless, we ought to recognize the significance of the fact that we have here the three big names of the late nineteenth century combined together: Marx, Darwin, and Wagner.⁽²⁵⁾ Shaw is unique in showing that Marx's theory of capital and Darwin's theory of evolution (on which Shaw plays his own variations in the theory of 'Life Force') can be combined to reveal the allegorical reflection of the nineteenth century European society inherent in Wagner's drama.⁽²⁶⁾ It is well known that Wagner himself was influential enough to create 'Wagnerism' towards the end of the century rather like Marxism and Darwinism.⁽²⁷⁾ It is to Shaw's credit that he brought these ideologies together to assert that *The Ring* is not another operatic showpiece but that it is, as his own

plays are, an impassioned drama of ideas.

That Shaw's interpretation is not a useless or eccentric daydream of a nineteenth century leftist but has contemporary relevance to the twentieth century was proved by Patrice Chéreau, the French theatre director whose 1976-1980 production of *The Ring* in Bayreuth was a huge success. Chéreau is known to have been inspired by Shaw's essay on *The Ring*, though few people who had read Shaw could have predicted such a convincing fruition of Shaw's ideas.

We do not have to be a 'Marxist' to appreciate the significant contribution Shaw made to the study of Wagner's masterpiece. The weakness, the limitation, of Shaw's 'commentary', which we are painfully aware of, may perhaps be a cost that has to be paid to produce the strength of its radical insights.

NOTES

- (1) Janice Henson notes in *Shaw Review* (1961), 'It is curious that the very point at which Shaw boggles is the one most typical of Wagner's operas as a whole, and the one which his interpreters generally find easiest to accept, . . . the search for redemption through love.' See Stanley Weintraub, *Bernard Shaw : A Guide to Research* (Pennsylvania : The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 58.
- (2) As to Shaw's exposure to Marx, see Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw*, I (London : Chatto & Windus, 1988), pp. 129 - 31.
- (3) G. K. Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw* (1909), in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, XI (San Francisco : Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 363.
- (4) Shaw was discovered by the critic William Archer at the British Library in 1883 reading *Das Kapital* and a full orchestral score of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* alternately. 'Here you have the whole of Shaw,' Thomas Mann remarks later in the obituary to Shaw (1951). See *Shaw : The Critical Heritage*, ed. T. F. Evans (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 398.

- (5) *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung : A Companion*, the full German text with a new translation by Stewart Spencer (London :Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 68.
- (6) George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite : A Commentary on the Niblung's Ring* (1898 ; 4th ed. 1923 ; rpt. London : Dover, 1967), p. 10.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- (11) *Cosima Wagner's Diaries : An Abridgement*, abridged and trans. by Geoffrey Skelton (1994 ; rpt. New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1997), p. 280.
- (12) See Nagaharu Sankô, *Wâgunâ [Wagner]* (Tokyo : Shinchosha, 1990), pp. 40-2.
- (13) *The Perfect Wagnerite*, p. 14.
- (14) *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- (15) *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung : A Companion*, p. 105.
- (16) *The Perfect Wagnerite*, p. 20.
- (17) *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- (18) Robert Donington, *Opera and its Symbols : The Unity of Words, Music, and Staging* (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1990), p. 101.
- (19) *The Perfect Wagnerite*, p. 23.
- (20) *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- (21) *Ibid.*, p. 29. Later Shaw is to call these kinds of people as 'superman'.
- (22) Peter Conrad, *Romantic Opera and Literary Form* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1977), p. 78.
- (23) *The Perfect Wagnerite*, p. 1.
- (24) *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- (25) In a comprehensive study of these three thinkers, Jacques Barzun says, 'The text, carefully picked over by Shaw, will justify its interpretation as evolutionary socialism, but it will also justify a revolutionary, catastrophic, and fatalist overturn which in its very ambiguity reminds us also of Marx.' Jacques Barzun, *Darwin Marx Wagner : Critique of a Heritage*, 2nd ed. with a new Preface (1958 ; Chicago and London : The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 264.

- (26) For the literary impact of the theory of evolution, see Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots : Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London : Routledge, 1983).
- (27) For the overview of the influence of Wagner to the later generations of the literary field including a reference to Shaw, see Lucy Beckett, 'Wagner and His Critic' in *The Wagner Companion*, ed. Peter Burbidge and Richard Sutton (London : Faber, 1979), pp. 365-88.