Wagner and Literature: New Directions

Introduction

Many readers of this Special Issue will be aware of the plethora of events last year marking the 200\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the birth of Richard Wagner (1813-83). In addition to several international conferences and symposia at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, the Freud Museum in London, and the universities of Alcalá, Leeds, Leipzig, Melbourne and Toronto (plus the multi-year ‘WagnerWorldWide’ programme organised by the University of Bayreuth), there have been Ring cycles in Berlin, Copenhagen, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Longborough, Mannheim, Melbourne, Milan, Munich, New York, Paris, Seattle, Sofia and Vienna, along with the more populist ‘Rhinegold on the Rhine’ (involving a floating musical theatre) and Gregor Seyffert’s colourful Leipzig dance spectacular ‘Wagner Reloaded’. The range of concerts, films and symposia associated with the ‘Wagner 200’ Festival in London alone suggests how fascinating and relevant Wagner remains for contemporary audiences and scholars. Unsurprisingly, 2013 has also produced significant additions to an already vast Wagner literature: whether the wide-ranging The Cambridge Wagner Encyclopedia, monographs with a biographical, philosophical or cultural focus, or collected essays, book chapters and journal articles on topics such as the reception history of Wagner in France and Eastern Europe, a revisiting of Wagner’s racial theories, cultural, aesthetic, gender and performance issues, and analytical and contextual studies of specific compositions.\textsuperscript{1}
As part of the interdisciplinary potential that Wagner studies offers, a literary perspective provides a particularly rich and meaningful mode of enquiry. Concerning Wagner’s own literary output, inevitably it is the subject matter of some of these writings rather than their form or style that has received the greatest attention – whether the concept of the ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’, or several attempts to contextualise ‘problematic’ essays such as ‘Das Judenthum in der Musik’ (‘Judaism in Music’). However, despite the ‘tacit consensus [. . .] that these texts be seen as marginalia, ancillary documents’ used primarily to offer ‘authoritative pronouncements about the operas’, James Treadwell, for example, has focused on the ‘preoccupations, strategies and attitudes’ in Wagner’s literary writings from 1848-52 – including Die Kunst und die Revolution, Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft and Oper und Drama (Art and Revolution; The Art-Work of the Future; Opera and Drama). He highlights several literary strategies in these works such as ‘the constant creation of retrospective narratives [. . .] endowing the past with purpose and direction’, a ‘rhetorical fervour’ belying an ‘apparent faith in deterministic inevitability’, and a language of ‘erotic desire [. . .] fixat[ed] on the unattainable’, all part of a narrative that, whilst apparently aimed at a future audience, was intended to influence Wagner’s contemporary readership:

Narration does provide a prefigurement, a model of the interpretative context in which the latency of the present will turn into the fulfilment of the future, the hermeneutic utopia [. . .] by voicing itself to its audience, a text can appeal for reciprocity and so offer itself as a kind of hermeneutic prompt. In the absence of the real interpreters [. . .] narration can conjure up a virtual audience, as it were. The 2013 British Library symposium on ‘Wagner the writer’, along with Emma Warner’s new translation of Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft, suggests that this body of literature continues
Wagner’s libretti also offer potential for close analysis, including (as Solomon Guhl-Miller’s article in this issue highlights) an issue rarely discussed – consideration of writers who may have influenced Wagner; although Fredric Jameson has dismissed the words of the music dramas as ‘embarrassing as poetry, save for their singability’, the ‘Wagner 200’ Festival included a reading of the entire Ring cycle, allowing audiences to experience this work purely in poetic terms.

Writings about Wagner represent another important area of Wagnerian literature, and 2013 has encouraged publishers to reissue several key out-of-print texts. Some of these allow us to reflect critically on the genre of biography – Carl Friedrich Glasenapp’s Life of Richard Wagner (1900-1908) or William James Henderson’s Richard Wagner: His Life and his Dramas (1902) – whilst others remind us of the various approaches taken to Wagner in nineteenth-century musical criticism, such as Joseph Bennett’s Letters from Bayreuth (1877) or Albert Ross Parsons’ Parsifal, the Finding of Christ Through Art (1890). In terms of the potential for future projects, the highlighting of specific modes or genres in writings on Wagner could be particularly fruitful; a detailed consideration of the Wagner obituary, for example, would allow some fascinating comparisons to be made – not only of the relative significance of biographical and compositional detail, but also of literary styles. Compare, for example, the starkly dramatic tone in The Academy –

‘Richard Wagner died at four o’clock yesterday afternoon at Venice.’ Such was the brief telegram which appeared in the daily papers of February 14.

with Bertha Thomas’s more flowery prose in London Society:
‘I mourn for one dead, I greet an immortal’. Victor Hugo’s grandiloquent words, that sounded out of tune over the grave of George Sand, the least self-glorifying of great persons, occurred to us at once, on hearing of the sudden death of Richard Wagner, as a fit and proper dirge for one who, by his own proclamation, was nothing if not sublime; the most notorious musician, perhaps, that ever lived.\textsuperscript{12}

However, by far the most familiar aspect of the interdisciplinary focus that Wagner studies offer is the rich topic of Wagner’s influence on literature.\textsuperscript{13} In his overview of this vast subject, Ulrich Müller distinguishes between three basic areas: ‘descriptions of Wagner as a historical personage in literary works dealing with his life either in whole or in part’, ‘the borrowing and adaptation of episodes, characters, and themes from Wagner’s works’, and ‘the borrowing and adaptation of specifically Wagnerian devices’.\textsuperscript{14} Representative examples of each might include, for example, in the first group, Jean-Paul Sartre’s unpublished novel Une défaite (1927) and Zdenko von Kraft’s World and Folly (1954); in the second, Jules Laforgue’s ‘Lohengrin, le fils de Parsifal’ from Moralités légendaires (1887), George Moore’s Evelyn Innes (1898), or Hermann Hesse’s \textit{Klingsor’s Last Summer} (1919); and in the third category, Édouard Dujardin’s use of the leit motif in his 1888 novel Les lauriers sont coupés – a major influence on the stream-of-consciousness technique of James Joyce, or Wagner’s influence on the literary structures and soundworlds of Baudelaire, Proust and Tennessee Williams.\textsuperscript{15}

Influence is not always so clearly delineated, however, and just as concerns over structure, patterning and sound as well as subject matter often form only a part of wider-ranging considerations of intermediality in general,\textsuperscript{16} those basic categories above are often combined in the work of single literary figures, as Stoddard Martin’s series of single-author foci in his pioneering 1982 study of Wagner and English literature suggests.\textsuperscript{17} Elsewhere,
scholars have attempted to understand Wagnerian influence via geographical groupings (the approach subsequently taken by Müller in the remainder of his Wagner Handbook chapter) or cultural movements. The identification of Baudelaire’s 1861 essay *Wagner et ‘Tannhäuser’ à Paris* and Mallarmé’s ‘Richard Wagner: rêverie d’un poète français’ (1885) as ‘signal texts in the aesthetic foundation of French symbolism’, for example, can only be properly understood in terms of the multi-faceted nature of nineteenth-century French Wagnerism more generally – whether the founding of La Revue wagnérienne by Dujardin in 1885, the contemporary writings of Laforgue, Verlaine, Huysmans, Charles Morice, René Ghil and Émile Zola, French translations of Wagner’s libretti (by Victor Wilder, Alfred Ernst, Charles Nuitter) or traditions of musical analysis and criticism of Wagner in France in the late nineteenth century.

Alternatively, the English decadents of the late nineteenth century – Swinburne, Beardsley, Symons, Wilde – offer a rich and familiar focus for detailed study (including the ‘discourse against decadence’ identified in the writings of Vernon Lee), along with Shaw, Forster, Lawrence, Conrad, Moore and Yeats, American writers such as Walt Whitman, Kate Chopin, William Gaddis and John Barth, and literary modernists of the early twentieth century such as Eliot, Woolf and Pound, even the near-meeting of Wagner and Henry James has been used to explore aesthetic parallels. Stefan Zweig, Frederic Nietzsche and Thomas Mann studies have formed the primary focus of Wagner’s influence on German literature, whilst other scholars have explored figures from Eastern Europe such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Vyacheslaw Ivanov, Aleksey Losev, Aleksandr Blok, or Stanislaw Wyspiański. Given the sheer extent of Wagner’s impact, it is difficult to predict how Wagner and literature studies might develop in the future. There is certainly scope for further exploration of the relatively neglected area of Wagner and world literature, or perhaps a greater focus on literary modes such as the parodic in Thomas Mann’s Wälsungenblut (The
Blood of the Wälsungs), Aleister Crowley’s ‘The Old Man of the Peepul Tree’, and Laforgue’s ‘Lohengrin, fils de Parsifal’ – examples of a ‘deflation of the heroic’ that serves to ‘challenge contemporary haute bourgeois civilization for its conservatism, complacency and philistinism’. Or as the web of thematic connections inevitably increases, this might encourage us to consider additional literary ‘texts’ and their contribution to intertextual meaning – whether the concluding script from the Inspector Morse television series, where the use of music from Wagner’s final music drama, Parsifal, encourages viewers to explore the poignant parallels with Morse’s last case, or the 70-minute chamber opera performed last year in Sydney, Climbing Towards Midnight, where selected text from the same music drama is juxtaposed with the poetry of the Austrian Expressionist Georg Trakl, set to new music by Jack Symonds.

The articles in this Special Issue (two of which represent developed versions of papers given at the June 2013 conference at the University of Leeds, ‘Richard Wagner’s Impact on His World and Ours’) represent a significant and diverse addition to the topic of Wagner and literature. The occultist, magician, mountaineer, dramatist, essayist, novelist and poet Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), for example, remains a controversial figure, and inevitably, details of his colourful biography and the nature of his occult practices have represented the main focus of Crowley studies. However, given that from c.1900 onwards, Crowley wrote a series of poems, prose works and a drama that made overt reference to the music of Richard Wagner (including Tannhäuser, Parsifal, and Der Ring des Nibelungen), his contribution to literary Wagnerism deserves to be reassessed. My own article suggests one possible catalyst for this burst of activity – the American soprano Susan Strong (1870-1946), to whom Crowley was briefly ‘engaged’ (according to his autohagiography) following a whirlwind romance in 1899. Although Crowley’s texts might be contextualised via the works of his literary contemporaries (Swinburne in particular), the intensity of the Crowley-Strong relationship
and the potential impact of Strong’s dramatic musical interpretations suggests the potential for more autobiographical readings of Crowley’s Wagnerian works.

Both Tannhäuser and musical performance reappear in the second article by Joseph Murphy. Focusing on the 1904 short story ‘A Wagner Matinée’ by the American author Willa Cather (1873-1947), where a procession of Wagner’s works (including the Tannhäuser overture, the Tristan und Isolde prelude, several numbers from Der fliegende Holländer, and the Prieslied from Die Meistersinger, culminating in Siegfried’s funeral march from Götterdämmerung) affects the central character Aunt Georgiana, Murphy situates its content in relation to issues of Wagner biography and aesthetics (androgyne, anti-Semitism, Schopenhauerian philosophy), American Wagner reception, and Cather’s own experiences as a music critic. Murphy’s close reading helps us to understand not only Cather’s narrative strategies, the subsequent revisions made to the story, and her ‘sustained relationship’ with Wagner (perhaps most familiar via the 1915 novel The Song of the Lark), but encourages us to reassess the complexities of American literary Wagnerism at the turn of the twentieth century.

Wagnerian connections in the early twentieth-century novel are also explored in Rebekah Lockyer’s article, but in contrast to Cather’s focus on a Wagner concert in Boston, Lockyer highlights alternative soundscapes in Ford Madox Ford’s tetralogy Parade’s End (published 1924-28). After reminding us of Ford’s literary, artistic and musicological heritage, and his technical knowledge of music (Ford studied musical composition in the 1890s), Lockyer interrogates Ford’s championing of Wagner through detailed analyses of specific passages in the tetralogy. Whilst one female character hums the Venusberg music from Tannhäuser to drown out popular music on the gramophone (the ‘mind’s ear’ therefore offering an escape from reality), underscored by her increasing association with imagery from Wagner’s opera, elsewhere Lockyer points to specific features of Wagner’s Tristan und
Isolde to explicate Ford’s use of operatic metaphor during a battle scene in wartime France. Combined with parallels between Ford’s prose structure and musical cadences, instrumental polyphony and resolution of protracted dissonance, Lockyer suggests how readers might become more attuned to Ford’s ‘musical aesthetic’ in *Parade’s End*.

It is the rich concept of the ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ that forms the focus of Peter Dayan’s article. Despite assumptions that the Zurich Dada soirées of 1916-19 (with their combination of visual art, music, poetry and dance) might somehow embody this concept as an obvious site of Wagnerian inheritance, Dayan explores the lectures and writings of artist Hugo Ball (a significant source of Kandinsky reception), Hans Arp’s reminiscences *Unsern täglichen Traum . . .* (1955), the letters of Tristan Tzara, and the specific nature of the soirées themselves – in terms of content and aesthetic experience – to challenge such perceptions. In contrasting Wagnerian and Dadaist aesthetics via notions of expression and abstraction, the controlled and the unsettled, and the presence or absence of a named artistic creator, not only does Dayan encourage us to distinguish between artistic union and artistic juxtaposition, but his study highlights how scholarship can offer a more focused understanding in redefining our intermedial expectations.

Whereas Dayan invokes a range of ‘texts’ (lectures, diary entries, autobiography, letters, the manifesto, and the multifaceted nature of specific performance sites), Tsung-Han Tsai reminds us of the rich potential that one specific type of text might offer in terms of Wagner and literature studies – in this case the radio talk. As part of E. M. Forster’s familiar Wagnerian connections (including the ‘multivalent appropriation of Wagnerism’ in his 1907 novel *The Longest Journey*, where, in addition to the leitmotivic structure, ‘in complicity with the Wagner-savvy narrator’ the characters ‘interpret and misinterpret their world in Wagnerian terms, to ironic or visionary effect’), Tsai focuses on Forster’s 1954 broadcast ‘Revolution at Bayreuth’. Contextualising Forster’s talk via the status of Third Programme
broadcasting on the BBC and Forster’s awareness of his potential audience, Tsai highlights both the soundworld of this radio performance and the cultural, political and autobiographical significance of its content. In particular, Forster’s criticisms of Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner’s Bayreuth productions in comparison to his preferred experiences in Dresden in 1905 reveal not only a relatively conservative view of how to stage Wagner, but invite us to consider how such views might contribute to the complex issue of concepts of national identity as part of Wagner reception.

Solomon Guhl-Miller’s final article takes a different approach, inverting the music-literature relationship explored by the previous writers by exploring literary influences upon Wagner. This is another area of rich potential, as shown by studies of Wagner’s mythological sources, the ‘interlace structure’ of mediaeval narrative, and his use of Stabreim;\(^{31}\) in terms of more specific literary figures, scholars have also interrogated Wagner’s potential debt to E. T. A. Hoffmann and contextualised Wagner’s ‘isolated heroes’ in Die fliegende Holländer and Tannhäuser via the poetry of Byron and the libretti of Eugène Scribe.\(^{32}\) Through careful reference to Wagner’s early Siegfried dramas, plus sketches, prose drafts and verse forms of Das Rheingold and Die Walküre, Guhl-Miller traces the fascinating development of Wotan’s character. Highlighting the central idea of ‘forgetfulness’, he argues that poetic models from the works of Shelley and Byron were instrumental in transforming a selfish Wotan into a selfless figure, and that Goethe’s Faust may also have been an important catalyst for the figure who sacrifices himself ‘for the betterment of the world’.

Inevitably, as David Trippett points out in a recent review article, given Franz Liszt’s triumphant claim to have contributed to a ‘Wagner literature’ as early as 1854, the perception that current Wagner scholarship may have reached a ‘saturation point’ might give any writer on this subject pause for thought.\(^{33}\) However, a greater awareness of the range of Wagnerian texts, the potential for new readings of familiar literature, the reassessment of
relatively neglected figures, and the exploration of new contexts and methodologies as part of Wagner and literature studies suggests that this area will continue to be a rich source of activity for some time to come.

Notes


5 Ibid., pp. 219-22.
6 Ibid., p. 223.
13 Writings in the related fields of Wagner and theatre studies or cinema include: Hilda Meldrum Brown, Leitmotiv and Drama: Wagner, Brecht, and the Limits of ‘Epic’ Theatre (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Martin Puchner, Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-
Theatricality and Drama (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 31-55;


16 See, for example, Werner Wolf, The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediaity (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), and Erik Alder and Dietmar Hauck, Music and Literature: Music in the Works of Anthony Burgess and E. M. Forster; An Interdisciplinary Study (Tübingen: Francke, 2005).


18 Raymond Furness, Wagner and Literature (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), for example, divides his study via ‘Symbolism and modernism’, ‘Wagner and decadence’, ‘Wagner and myth’, and ‘Parody and persiflage’.


Manifest”: Stanisław Wyspiański in Search of the Polish Bayreuth’, in Muir and Belina-Johnson, Wagner in Russia, Poland and the Czech Lands, pp. 71-92 and 137-58.


29 Martin, p. 13.

30 Fillion, Difficult Rhythm, p. 40.


33 David Trippett, ‘Wagner Studies and the “parallactic drift”’, Cambridge Opera Journal, 22.2 (July 2010), 235-55 (pp. 235-6).