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Review of Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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[1] Near the beginning of the tenth chapter of *Wagner Androgyne* Jean-Jacques Nattiez introduces a quotation that he identifies as coming from an obscure, unpublished lecture of Claude Levi-Strauss—a lecture given in Brazil, and made available to Nattiez by a Brazilian friend. The passage is vintage Levi-Strauss: structuralist to a fault, and using the paradigmatic method to identify an underlying similarity of structure in two myths that seem, on the surface anyway, to have nothing to do with one another. What attracts Nattiez is that the myths addressed by Levi-Strauss are in fact Wagnerian myths—those of Siegfried and Tristan: My studies revealed the extensive connections between all genuine myths and opened my eyes to the marvelous variations that can be found within this rediscovered corpus. It was with a delightful sense of unmistakability that I encountered one such variant in the relationship between Tristan and Isolde as compared with that of Siegfried and Brunnhilde. Just as in languages, a sound shift often produces two apparently different words from one and the same original, so two apparently differing relationships had evolved from this single mythic relationship as a result of a similar shift or transmutation (p. 237). The paragraph proceeds to detail the deep structural parallels between the two myths, and Nattiez picks up the thread to adduce two comparable cases: one that Levi-Strauss posits between *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal* ("In both cases an elderly and experienced man . . . retires in favor of another, younger man, who is exceptionally gifted and whom he enthrones. . . . "), and Nattiez's own cherished parallel between the "androgyny" in Wagner's theoretical writings and that in his operas—the topic of the book. These seductive structural parallels serve to launch the main body of the chapter, in which Nattiez 1) reviews the topic of androgyny in Levi-Strauss's work, focusing especially on his provocative theory that, since the late sixteenth century, music replaces myth in Western culture, and that it functions on a sexual principle whereby [male] music fills up the internal spaces of the [female] listener; 2) critiques Levi-Strauss's structural analysis, in *The Naked Man,* of the *Ring*; and 3) allies Levi-Strauss with Freud as twentieth-century theorists who purvey a structuralist, totalizing hermeneutics. Such a hermeneutics, according to Nattiez, "reduce[s] the world's diversity to an endless series of binary opposites," in the process obliterating the human subject, denying time and historical process, and—most perniciously of all—"bolster[ing] up the liberty and laxity of interpretation" (p. 253), such that the binary opposites are reversed, male becomes female, night becomes day, and (a leitmotif heard continually in the long third part of the book) all meaning is lost in a "total freedom of interpretation" (p. 263).

[2] Chapter Ten encapsulates in a nutshell the strengths and weaknesses of Nattiez's book. Nattiez's intellectual roots, of

course, are in French structuralism, and he shares with the best of his models—of whom Levi-Strauss is certainly one—an imaginative and wide-ranging mind, a polymathic command of sources in a dizzying spectrum of disciplines, a penchant for close reading of texts, and a flair for the "paradigmatic method" of discovering deep parallels that are hidden beneath textual surfaces. So it comes as no surprise that in this chapter Nattiez navigates his way breezily among many of Levi-Strauss's works, Wagner's writings, Wagner's operas, Ravel's *Bolero* (as analyzed by Levi-Strauss), Freud and Jung, with passing references to Paul Ricoeur, Roman Jakobson, Umberto Eco, a few contemporaries of Freud, and a number of French critics thrown in for good measure. Nor does it come as a surprise that Nattiez has discovered a structural parallel that really is worth knowing and thinking about: that just as Wagner invented a powerful sexual metaphor for the relation of text and music in opera (the text as male, fertilizing with content and meaning the womb of music, which is female), so did Levi-Strauss create a striking metaphor for the communication of musical meaning, which resembles Wagner's in intriguing ways. But in the same way that structuralists (as pointed out by Nattiez himself in this very chapter) often succumbed to the temptation of collapsing the wildest differences into the flatness of simple binary oppositions, which amass their great power in part because they are sometimes defined so broadly as to be able to swallow up everything in their path, so does Nattiez succeed in his task of discovering "androgyny" to underlie both Wagner's prose writings and his operas in part because he subsumes so much under the term that it becomes virtually meaningless. And Nattiez's attack on structuralist interpretation, while perhaps justifiable in its own right, is just one part of a gratuitous and curious polemic that weighs down the entire last part of the book.

[3] Previous reviewers of Nattiez's study[(1)] have taken him to task on his use of the concept "androgyny," and they are right: it is incumbent upon the author of a book entitled *Wagner Androgyne* to let us know concisely what androgyny means. Nattiez does not. We can read along happily for pages, thinking that we know, only to be jolted out of our complacency by a new and unexplained usage just when we have begun to congratulate ourselves on having finally figured it out. Sadly, neither conventional usage nor logic is a major player in Nattiez's formulation of the idea of androgyny. Most of us probably go into reading the book with the concept that androgyny involves something that simultaneously bears characteristics of both sexes. This intuition seems to be confirmed when Nattiez provides (in a footnote of Chapter Five, however, not in the actual text) the crucial distinction that he has "reserved the term *androgyny* for the *symbolic* representation of the union of the two sexes," while "the term *hermaphrodite* is used to describe a real *biological* being with attributes of both sexes" (footnote 13 on p. 328). Fine: androgyny is symbolic, but hermaphrodites are real. But then, even if we accept that the term refers to the world of symbol, not the real one, Nattiez engenders utter confusion by employing *androgyny,* contrary to conventional usage, to refer not only to the notion of a single being that combines attributes of both sexes (like a hermaphrodite, or like the Wagnerian or Jungian individual who incorporates psychic aspects of both sexes), but to that of the union of *two* separate and sexually differentiated individuals (like Adam and Eve). Thus, the sexual unions of Siegmund and Sieglinde, Siegfried and Brunnhilde, and Tristan and Isolde all represent instances of "androgyny." But if that's androgyny, one may well ask what symbolic relation or union of the two sexes is *not* androgyny, and to that question I was unable to find a convincing answer in Nattiez's book.

[4] Compounding the confusion is a serious logical problem. In the light of the above description of androgyny as the "symbolic representation of the union of the two sexes," what do we do with a statement that appears elsewhere in the book, to the effect that the "metaphor of androgyny" "seems to be based on a simple, universal formula: X is to Y as man is to woman" (p. 288)? This formulation is not about the union of characteristics into a single entity at all, but about a relationship of characteristics themselves. Neither in the symbolic world nor the real one should we have to deal with a word that means *both* the combination of two contrasting terms into one, *and* the relationship of the two terms to each other. (If $x/y = x + y$, the only solutions are everything and nothing.)

[5] Central though this terminological morass is to the book and its argument, and irritating though it be, it is not fatal. My advice to the reader: go with whatever definition of "androgyny" seems to work at the time, and don't worry about it. Once one grants wide berth to androgyny, and in fact begins to realize that the real point is that sexual metaphors dominate Wagner's stage and prose works, and that there are powerful and intriguing connections between the two, one finds much of worth to ponder. To be sure, there are frustrations: Nattiez often ranges far from the topic at hand, he obscures his argument with unnecessary detail, and in the third and final part of the book he appropriates his notion of Wagnerian androgyny in the service of a political polemic that in my view detracts from rather than contributes to the effectiveness of

his study. But he does provide a detailed and well-researched overview of Wagner's changing use of sexualized metaphors in his conceptualization of his own art and that of his predecessors, and his linking of these metaphors in the prose works to the stage works does offer a new and valuable critical perspective.

[6] The question that motivates the book is, "What is the significance of androgyny in Wagner's works and theoretical writings when seen in the context of the texts, the composer's life, and the age in which he lived?" (Preface, xiv–xv).[(2)] This question leads to two theses, which it is the task of the book to prove. The first is "that the myth around which the *Ring* revolves may be read as a metaphorical reenactment of Wagner's conception of the history of music" (Preface, xv)—a history in which the sexualized metaphor of male text and female music plays a central role. The second is "that throughout his life, Wagner's theory of the relationship between poetry and music is reflected, in his music dramas, in the relations between man and woman" (Preface, xv). It is these two theses that generate the first two parts of the book: "Androgyny and the *Ring*: From Theory to Practice," and "Music and Poetry: The Metamorphoses of Wagnerian Androgyny."

[7] Part One (Chapters 1–5) posits androgyny as a theme that links Wagner's writings from 1848 to 1851—that is, those from around the time of the early gestation of the text of *Ring*—to the *Ring* itself. Nattiez's argument here, in brief, is as follows. For the Wagner of *Opera and Drama,* the history of musical drama, from the time of the ancient Greeks to his own time, proceeds from 1) an original (androgynous) unity of poetry and music, to 2) a division of the two, either into spoken drama and absolute music, or—what is worse—a mismatch of drama and music in Italian opera and the detestable "modern opera" of Meyerbeer, and 3) a yet-to-be-realized creative union, in the perfect musico-dramatic work of the future, of (male) poetry and (female) music, with the poetic or dramatic element dominating the musical one. Similarly, in the *Ring* there is a progression from 1) an original (androgynous) state of nature—represented by the three Rheindaughters, who, though all female, embody the unity of the sister arts of music, poetry, and dance (a natural state of affairs that, according to Wagner, prevailed in Greek tragedy; to 2) a period of rupture ("unity" is destroyed by Alberich's theft of the gold, and later Siegfried must forge the shards of the sword together), in which Nattiez is quick to find parallels between the mythic Alberich and Mime, on the one hand, and the historical Meyerbeer, on the other; to 3) the triumphant union of Siegfried and Brunnhilde at the end of Act III of *Siegfried*. Since, in the final scene of that act, Siegfried and Brunnhilde merge into one, each taking on characteristics of the opposite sex ("the true human being is both male and female," Wagner wrote to August Rockel in 1852), Nattiez interprets their union as embodying symbolically the bringing together the male poet and the female musician—but with the poet, or Siegfried with his sword, dominant—into an artistic whole that transcends "modern opera" and that restores the androgynous unity of the beginning of the cycle—and, one presumes, of the beginning of history as well.[(3)] The tragic *Gotterdammerung* then demonstrates the inherent instability of such an androgynous union. Siegfried is seduced by Gutrune, who in his view represents the corrupt modern French comic opera; he betrays Brunnhilde and thus the unity of music and poetry achieved at the end of *Siegfried,* and the cycle ends in catastrophe.

[8] Part Two (Chapters 6–7) of the book turns on the same imagery, but carries the story to the end of Wagner's life by drawing similar parallels between the composer's writings between 1851 and 1873 (especially "Zukunftsmusik" of 1860, and "Beethoven" of 1870) and *Tristan,* and between his latest essays (between 1878 and 1883) and *Parsifal.* In his discussion of the middle period (Chapter 6, 1851–1873), Nattiez admits that the sexual imagery of *Opera and Drama* disappears. Yet the power relations inscribed in the earlier works remain, although they are now inverted so that it is the musician, not the poet, who calls the shots—perhaps, according to Nattiez, because Wagner's experience in composing the music of the *Ring* (through Act II of *Siegfried*) in the 1850's might have taught him how much his text was conditioned by music from the start, regardless of what he had claimed in theory. In *Tristan* this shift is incarnated not only in the way the music dominates the text, but also in the fact that it is Isolde, representing music, who takes the lead in the drama: it is she who insists on meeting with Tristan, who invites him to her quarters, who orders the potion to be prepared, who arranges the tryst in Act II, and so forth. Finally, in the essays written in the years of working on *Parsifal* (discussed in Nattiez's Chapter 7), Wagner returns to his earlier sexual metaphor: ". . . as I have explained in figurative terms elsewhere, the poet's task can be described as the male principle, while the music, by contrast, is the female principle in a union that aims to create the greatest synthesis of the arts. . . ."[(4)] Yet, as in the *Tristan* period, it is the musician who is in charge: "It was no longer the poet who was left to structure the tragedy but the lyric musician."[(5)] But here Nattiez seems to be at a loss as to how to explain this turn in the theoretical writings to the opera *Parsifal.* The sexual metaphor is only weakly present in the late essays. Furthermore, there is no question of a one-to-one mapping of Wagner's history of music and the events of the drama, as there was in the *Ring*; nor is there an obvious dramatic

parallel between the relation of drama and music and the relation of male and female characters, as there was in *Tristan* —Kundry is hardly the dominant figure in the opera in comparison to Parsifal. So Nattiez ends up abandoning the analogy (between Wagner's theories and his works) that has guided the book thus far (though he does not explicitly say that he is doing so), and sees in *Parsifal* what amounts to an *Aufhebung* of androgyny to the level of culture itself. For what Nattiez sees in *Parsifal* is a Wagnerian androgyny that leaves poetry and music behind, and instead implants itself in the content of the opera: an androgyny that does not represent a union of the two sexes, as in the *Ring* and *Tristan,* but, in the spirit of Wagner's late misogynist and racist writings, "proclaims the advent of a raceless, sexless society" (p. 172), in which racial and sexual differences are transcended, once and for all.

[9] Nattiez deserves high praise for his careful reading of Wagner's writings, especially those of the 1848–51 period, and for his imaginative reading of the *Ring* in the light of both the sexualized metaphors of the theoretical works and of Wagner's own life experience. To cite a single example: Nattiez devotes a short chapter to the 1850 scenario, *Wieland der Schmied,* briefly intended for the Paris Opera, but never set to music. He draws convincing parallels, on the one hand, between the dramatic situation in *Wieland* and Wagner and his writings, and on the other, between *Wieland* and *Siegfried*. The male artisan-poet (Wieland), crippled and tormented by a greedy oppressor (Neiding), but driven on by his Need (Noth) and inspired by the swan-maiden who is to be his wife, invents something utterly new (wings) and thus flies aloft to be with his bride, after which he exacts deadly vengeance on Neiding and his court. As Nattiez suggests, it is difficult not to see here a confluence of the real Wagner, oppressed in Paris (in his own view) by Meyerbeer, and his theoretical musings about the male poet and the female musician, all wrapped into a single (and, it must be admitted, crudely autobiographical) dramatic scenario. The same formula is imported into *Siegfried,* where Siegfried, Mime, Brunnhilde, "Noth," and the sword play the same roles as Wieland, Neiding, Schwanhilde, "Noth," and the wings. Nattiez's thesis that the *Ring* is a metaphorical reenactment of the history of music (a la Wagner) thus makes certain aspects of *Siegfried* begin to make more sense, although their autobiographical resonance now makes them seem—to me, at least—even more odious than before: the thinly veiled anti-Semitic caricature of Mime, the violence of Siegfried's forging of the sword, and his murder of Mime.[(6)]

[10] At the same time, there are aspects of Nattiez's interpretation of the *Ring* that simply do not compute. To understand the Rhinedaughters as metaphorical depictions of poetry, music, and dance; the original state of the world as involving the unity of these three arts; Alberich, Mime and Hagen as embodiments of all that was to Wagner reprehensible in 1830's and 1840's opera; Siegfried's forging of the sword as a triumphant act of creativity; his vanquishing of Mime as the victory of his brand of opera over that of Meyerbeer; and his union with Brunnhilde as the establishment of the new artistic order—all this is plausible, and deftly argued. But such an interpretation leaves out enormous chunks of the *Ring,* and leaves us with many nagging questions. What do we do with Wotan, who is hardly even mentioned, or with Siegmund and Sieglinde? What do we do with the central dramatic motif of Wotan's renunciation of power? If Siegfried represents poetry and Brunnhilde music, why is Siegfried so stupid and inarticulate, and why does Brunnhilde have to take years to teach him her runic wisdom (which, one presumes, is in "male" spoken language, not the "female" language of "pure feeling," or music)? And does it make sense to turn Gutrune, who supposedly seduces Siegfried with the wiles of vapid French comic opera, into perhaps the central character of Gotterdammerung, rather than seeing her as a pathetic dupe whose worst sin is merely passive collusion in an evil plot? These are serious questions that I have as yet been unable to answer to my own satisfaction. At the same time, much of Nattiez's virtuosic tying together of Wagner's theories and the drama seems intuitively right. His interpretation is already deeply embedded in my own reception history of the *Ring,* and it has woven a rich new strand into my experience of the cycle.

[11] Nattiez is unable to bring together theory and drama quite so closely in Part Two of the book, simply because Wagner retreated from his sexualized metaphor after the writings of the early 1850's. But there is nevertheless much of value here. Chapter Five, "Wagnerian Androgyny and Its Romantic Counterpart," is one of the strongest chapters in the book. Always the scholar, Nattiez reconstructs a whole literature on androgyny from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from works on art history, medicine, philosophy and theology, as well as fiction and poetry. Much of this literature envisions a new social order based on either the equality of the sexes or the transcendence of sexual difference: for example, Schlegel's comment in the essay "Uber die diotima" of 1795 that "The goal to which the human race should aspire is the progressive reintegration of the sexes" (quoted on p. 114), or the well-known love-and-death imagery of Novalis (p. 116). A sampling of such writing places Wagner's sexualized language in a broader cultural context, and it strengthens Nattiez's argument that the

notion of overcoming sexual difference, if not actual androgyny, is central to the *Ring, Tristan,* and *Parsifal.* And if his readings of *Tristan* and *Parsifal* seem somewhat contrived, since their relation to theory is murkier, they nevertheless round out his narrative of the relation of Wagner's theory and art by offering many new insights.

[12] By the end of Part Two, Nattiez has pursued the theme of "androgyny" in Wagner's writings and operas from 1848 to his death, and he has argued his two principal theses in detail. So the book should be over, should it not? Yet such is hardly the case: its longest and most substantial part—fully 40 percent of the total length—still remains. Why? The purpose of this extended Part Three, "Wagner and Androgynous Hermeneutics," which includes five chapters and an Epilogue, is not clear in the Preface, and it only gradually makes itself apparent as one reads it. At first it seems as though the final, longish section is borne of a certain defensiveness on Nattiez's part that his "historico-genetic approach" in Parts I and II might be deemed insufficient; indeed, he indicates as much at the end of Part II (p. 178): suppose that "factual evidence and explicit statements" are not enough? Suppose that, dealing as he does with androgyny and myth, someone demands that he take into account the workings of the unconscious?

[13] Ostensibly to head off such criticism, he launches into a full-blown Freudian analysis of Wagner and his family—an analysis that, it must be admitted, creates a yawning chasm between Parts Two and Three, and leaves the reader to his or her own devices as to figuring out how this discussion and the chapters that follow will relate to what has been said so far. But what gradually emerges in these chapters is not merely a methodological defensiveness. It is in fact a full-fledged claim on the part of Nattiez of an objective validity, and demonstrable truth value for his "philological, historico-genetic method" of interpretation. Against the factual security of his own method he sees the interpretive systems that he examines in successive chapters of Part Three—Freudian psychology in Chapter Eight, Jungian psychology in Chapter Nine, Levi-Straussian structuralism in Chapter Ten, Marxist theory in Chapter Eleven, and post-structuralism and deconstruction in Chapter Twelve—as denying the possibility of such objective validity. The baleful refrain that underlies all these chapters is—and here I cite Nattiez's condemnation of Roland Barthes, although he says essentially the same thing about most of the writers that he evaluates: "there is no longer a hierarchy of value or validity between the commentaries on a text: *one can say whatever one wants*" (p. 264; emphasis mine). Or compare his dismissal of Freud: "Freudian exegesis provided the paradigm for later hermeneutics, all of which maintains that they can 'establish' that what is said is what is not said, and that I say the opposite of what I say. When I love my mother, I hate my father, but at the same time as hating him, I love him because, being a man, I am also a woman" (pp. 217–18).

[14] And what is the ultimate foundation of all this "freedom of interpretation"? Who would have guessed? It is nothing other than *androgyny* itself. It is "sexual ambivalence": "There is femininity in masculinity, and masculinity in femininity. When I say 'white,' I mean 'black'" (p. 217). It is an "ideological grounding in androgyny" (p. 217) that leads Nattiez to consign not only Freud, but also Jung, Levi-Strauss, contemporary Marxists, Barthes, and Derrida, structuralists and post-structuralists, totalizers and anti-totalizers alike, all to the trash-heap of interpreters who claim that "One can certainly say what one wants" (p. 266).

[15] At this point the reader cannot help but feeling betrayed. ("Verrat!" shrieks Brunnhilde upon seeing Siegfried in Gunther's form.) Throughout Parts One and Two, we are encouraged to believe in androgyny, to see it as the glue that ties together the theoretical and artistic halves of the Wagnerian oeuvre, to understand it as a social and philosophical, even theological symbol that has deep roots in Western culture. Certainly Wagner himself was invested in the nineteenth-century philosophy that found the highest ethical value in transcending sexual difference. Then without warning, without even a hint of what is to come, as we cross the threshhold of the twentieth century, we gradually discover that androgyny is the great villain of our time, the root of all interpretive evil.

[16] The ploy has the same effect as Nattiez's use of the Levi-Strauss quotation cited at the beginning of this review. For we as readers learn, at the very end of the chapter on Levi-Strauss, that this quotation is not by the anthropologist at all, but by Wagner! The reason for this deception, according to Nattiez, is that it was the most eloquent possible way "of showing that Wagner was not a precursor of structuralism but that Levi-Strauss is a late Romantic" (p. 253). For subjecting us to this clever ruse Nattiez asks our forgiveness, and I, for one, happily grant it. But I am more concerned when I experience a similar ploy—and one that is surely not intentional on the part of the author—on the global scale of the book: the voice that I

thought I was reading transforms into another voice entirely. The voice that stakes its claim for meaning, value and validity in Parts One and Two does so by demonstrating androgyny in the works of Wagner. But this voice turns, without ever saying so, into a voice that condemns androgyny by positing it as the intellectual foundation of all interpretive strategies that putatively destroy meaning, value, and validity altogether. Nattiez thus calls his own voice into question and leaves the reader wondering which voice to trust. All would be well if he were to address this *volte face* straight on, and suggest explicitly that what was a powerful symbol in the nineteenth century has been subverted and turned to what he sees as destructive ends in the twentieth century. But his failure to do so forces us as readers to make the switch ourselves, and it ultimately leaves us without a stable authorial voice upon which we can rely. In the process, we wonder also whether Nattiez's dogged defense of the "objective truth" that he has revealed, as well as his endless attacks on freedom of interpretation, might in fact undermine his whole ongoing semiotic project, which has always relied on a certain fluidity of signifier and signified to make its way in the world.

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Footnotes

1. See especially the reviews by Brian Hyer in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 47 (1994): 531–40; and Paul Robinson in the *Cambridge Opera Review* 7 (1995): 81–85.
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2. I will continue to use the word "androgyny" in direct quotations and in situations where Nattiez himself would use it, despite the reservations noted above. If both here and in the book one substitutes "the symbolic relationship of, and/or union of the sexes" for "androgyny," one will come close to his meaning.
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3. Paul Robinson rightly questions whether such a state of affairs in any sense represents androgyny and the transcendence of sexual difference, or whether it in fact perpetuates male domination in its most virulent form. See his review, pp. 81–82.
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4. Quoted by Nattiez (p. 164) from Wagner's 1879 essay, "On Opera Poetry and Composition in Particular."
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5. Quoted by Nattiez (p. 164) from Wagner's 1879 essay, "On Poetry and Composition."
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6. Nattiez's book can be read profitably in conjunction with Marc A. Weiner's *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). Both books tie Wagner's writings (letters as well as theoretical essays) convincingly to his dramatic works, and both make much of the anti-Semitic caricatures of Alberich and Mime (though Weiner does so in far greater detail). But whereas Nattiez shies away from the ethical implications of such connections, Weiner foregrounds them.
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