Renouncing Divinity: *The Philadelphia Story* in a Wagnerian Mirror

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I.

If one were to compile a list of the most ingenious endings in the history of cinema, an easy case could be made for including the last minutes of George Cukor's classic remarriage comedy from 1940, *The Philadelphia Story*. Central to the effectiveness of this finale is a musical citation, which offers a quick approach to the constellation I want to explore in this essay. The importance of this musical citation is underscored by its timing. Barely has socialite Tracy Lord broken up with her stolid bridegroom George on the morning of their planned wedding when the strains of "Here Comes the Bride" can be heard from the adjacent room. Endless iterations of the tune give the aural backdrop to the protagonists' frantic bid to avert scandal, which leads to Tracy's agreement to remarry her first husband Dexter and to her pathos-filled reconciliation with her father. The tune plays on as the couple walks down the aisle and ceases only when the two expectantly face the pastor. At this moment silence falls, only to be punctured by the click of a camera held by tabloid editor Sidney Kidd. His intervention freezes the flow of images to a photographic still and redefines the moviegoer's viewpoint: we find ourselves browsing through a simulated wedding album that interlaces photos of the couple with the closing credits. These visual effects are accompanied by a musical medley juxtaposing Mendelssohn's Wedding March with a swing tune, which finally gives way to the Gershwinesque main theme of the movie.

If the concluding potpourri bears witness to Hollywood's powers of cultural integration, much the same applies, though in a different sense, to the preceding diegetic citation of "Here Comes the Bride." In citing this mainstay of modern Western weddings the movie indirectly refers to the original version of that tune, the bridal chorus "Treulich geführt" from Richard Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*. This gesture seems as conventional as the practice that it cites.[1] In their essay on film music, Theodor W. Adorno and Hans Eisler identify the *Lohengrin* Bridal Chorus, along with the Wedding March from Mendelssohn's incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as the most clichéd cases of "stock music."[2] Predictably, Adorno and Eisler condemn such illustrative borrowings as "barbaric nonsense," though not without a nod to the redemptive energies evident in moviemakers' faith in the eternal expressiveness of certain musical works.

It seems to me that neither the critical point made by Adorno and Eisler nor their dialectical concession applies to the citation of the Bridal Chorus in *The Philadelphia Story*. There is nothing conventional, or for that matter redemptive, about this citation. To appreciate this, however, we need to take seriously the Wagnerian allusion hidden in

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[1] A recently published list of films that use the Bridal Chorus features twenty-five titles, not including *The Philadelphia Story*, among others. See Jeongwon Joe et al., "Filmography," in Jeongwon Joe and Sander L. Gilman, *Wagner & Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 441-452.

[2] Theodor W. Adorno and Hans Eisler, "Vorurteile und schlechte Gewohnheiten," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 15 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 25.

plain sight. The decision to do so constitutes the point of departure for my argument, which I shall develop further by highlighting parallels and correspondences to Wagner's elaboration in the *Ring* cycle of issues first broached in *Lohengrin*. In both contexts, Wagner takes up the question of how a divine being might become human; but whereas the earlier opera explores this issue with reference to marriage, the mature cycle gives it a richer inflection in terms of filial love. In considering *The Philadelphia Story* with a view both to its intertextual link to *Lohengrin* and its correspondences to the *Ring*, I will try to understand how entanglements between filial and marital love inform the movie's perspective on class politics and on the vestiges of theology in a predominantly secular world. The itinerary of my argument follows from this approach. After laying out the central themes, I shall examine in the second and the third part of the essay how these themes are elaborated in the *Ring* cycle and in *The Philadelphia Story*, respectively. The correspondences and contrasts established in this way will enable me to return in the fourth part to the *Lohengrin* citation with a view to assessing the aesthetic and political significance of the movie's final gesture.

The juxtaposition of Bayreuth and Hollywood is not without initial plausibility, given the frequently noted indebtedness of cinema to Wagner's vision of a *Gesamtkunstwerk.* Common to Wagnerian music drama and Hollywood romantic comedy is a seductive appeal that critical judgment cannot fully dispel and may indeed, paradoxically, enhance. Common to both art forms, also, is the uneasy compromise they strike between confronting and evading the problems of their times. To be sure, the historical contexts from which they emerged are markedly different. Wagner embarked on the *Ring* project in 1848 under the influence of Feuerbach's anthropocentric Left-Hegelianism and Bakunin's anarchism. As Wagner worked his way back from the tragic-heroic conclusion to its mythic pre-history, all the while trying to come to terms with the failure of the revolutions of 1848, his optimism about the prospects of a humanity emancipated from gods gave way to a much bleaker outlook.[3] His encounter with Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy in 1854, the friendship struck up in 1868 with the young Nietzsche, and the founding of the German Empire in 1871 are among the key events whose importance for the cycle completed in 1874 seems as indisputable as it is hard to pin down. Sixty-five years later, *The Philadelphia Story* was produced in a historical situation defined by the New Deal and the impending entry of the United States into the Second World War. At this critical moment, the movie submits the East Coast roots of American democracy to the recently perfected visual style of Hollywood cinema, deployed here by a team of virtuoso moviemakers with Central European affiliations.

It is not my intention here to conflate the cultural contexts sketched out in the above, or to underplay differences between Wagner's ponderous idiom and the crackling wit of Hollywood romantic comedy. The wager of this essay is, rather, that a joint reading of the these works can throw into sharp relief aspects of each that do not stand out with the same salience when the works are considered in isolation. The juxtaposition of Hollywood romantic comedy and Wagnerian opera can bring out resonances between

[3] On the notoriously complicated composition history of the *Ring* see Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 80-109, pp. 138-141. See also Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 16-23, and Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices*: *Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 157-165.

the ambitions, anxieties, and aporias underlying Wagner's resurrection of myth in a nineteenth-century Central European context and the predominantly American high modernity of the mid-twentieth century—or so I hope to show in what follows.

Something beyond an interpretive hunch is needed for initial orientation, and so it is best to begin with a few straightforward facts about *The Philadelphia Story*. Directed by George Cukor and produced by Joseph Mankiewicz under the aegis of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the movie was based on a hugely successful Broadway play written by Philip Barry specifically for Katharine Hepburn. In its very last scene, the Barry play features the laconic stage instruction: "Music: Wedding March."[4] Since Barry's text keeps playing variations on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is natural to assume that he is calling for the famous excerpt from Mendelssohn's incidental music.[5] This, however, is one of the key matters of detail in which the movie deviates from the play. Although the concluding potpourri does commence with a citation of Mendelssohn's Wedding March, the movie accords far more weight to the Bridal Chorus.[6] Its citation in the last scene lasts for nearly five minutes, which is almost exactly the time it takes in most performances of Wagner's opera.

There is a certain temptation to disregard this citation on the grounds that the Bridal Chorus has long become a commonplace and, as Carolyn Abbate puts it, "effectively no longer signifies 'Wagner.'"[7] However, the question of whether or not this general point warrants a deflationary reading of this particular citation cannot be reduced to that of intention. In attributing meaning to a given feature of a work wherever such attribution promises a richer interpretation, we are merely taking seriously the status of the work of art as an object participating in a web of associations and parallels that elude the author's control. Yet even if we do not try to reduce *The Philadelphia Story* to a readily formulable "message," there is room for conjecture regarding the meanings that the moviemakers might have associated with a musical citation, and such surmises may actually enhance the cogency as well as the interest of our interpretation.

In the end, whether we take the citation to signify "Lohengrin" or merely festive joy comes down to the question of which cultural context we deem most pertinent to the movie. Most American viewers of *The Philadelphia Story* would have found the citation unremarkable, since the Bridal Chorus had served as a conventional prop since the much-publicized 1858 wedding between Princess Victoria and Prince Frederick William of Prussia.[8] Yet this convention remained limited for the most part to the Anglo-Saxon world; and even in America, Catholic, Lutheran and Jewish ceremonies have tended to do without the Bridal Chorus on account of its secular origins, its ominous dramatic context, and the controversial reputation of its composer. The *Lohengrin* reference begins to

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[4] Philip Barry, *The Philadelphia Story: A Comedy in Three Acts* (New York: Samuel French, 1969), p. 120. In subsequent references to the play I use bracketed page numbers to identify the passage being cited.

[5] Cavell notes that Philip Barry and screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart, who adapted Barry's play for the screen, studied together in Shakespeare scholar George Pierce Baker's "legendary" playwriting class at Harvard and moved with Baker to Yale. See *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters On a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 45.

[6] The precise significance of this juxtaposition of Wagner with Mendelssohn, in a film made in 1940 by an Jewish American director working with a German-Jewish cinematic composer, is next to impossible to pin down. It is, at any rate, too obviously overdetermined to be unthinking.

[7] Carolyn Abbate, "Wagner, Cinema, and Redemptive Glee," *The Opera Quarterly* (2005: 21/4), p. 599.

[8] John Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 37.

sound highly charged as soon as we own up to an unembarrassed interest in how *The Philadelphia Story* might have been understood by its makers. It is important to recall here that director George Cukor, producer Joseph Mankiewicz, and film music composer Franz Waxman all hailed from Central European Jewish backgrounds in which the Wagnerian provenance of the tune was never completely erased.[9] Moreover, questions of background aside, it is unlikely that these meticulous and erudite craftsmen were not acquainted with the operatic scene from which the tune derives.[10] Unless we are prepared to take at face value their rehearsal of the "vulgar" convention of decontextualizing the Bridal Chorus, we do well to remain attentive to the original operatic context—however esoteric the latter might have appeared to most viewers of a box office hit in 1940.

The consequences of this interpretive choice can be made clear by considering a point raised by musicologist Carl Dahlhaus. Insisting that the bridal chorus "ought never to be torn from its context," Dahlhaus noted that the piece "sounds different when the listener hears it against the shadow cast over the scene by the hopelessness of the situation. The innocuousness of the music, which has helped the piece to a misconceived popularity, is oppressive when it is heard in context."[11] It is precisely to this oppressive context that we must attend when we speculate about the filmmakers' intentions. We are thus compelled to recall that the bridal chorus does not in any sense provide a conclusion, being a transitional number linking the jubilant prelude to Act III with the domestic drama at the centre of that act. The role of the chorus in advancing the plot is made clear by its banal text: it accompanies Lohengrin's and Elsa's retreat following their festive wedding into the intimacy of the bridal chamber, where their conjugal bliss soon gives way to irremediable alienation. In the diegetic context of *Lohengrin*, the bridal chorus has the function of mediating the precarious transition from a festive political space to a private intimacy that turns out to be fraught with intractable tensions. Its citation in *The Philadelphia Story* may be taken to underscore the role of the marriage ceremony in enabling their passage to a kind of intimacy Tracy and Dexter had failed to attain in their first marriage. If in *Lohengrin* that rite of passage leads to an impasse plotted by Ortrud, in *The Philadelphia Story* it is the click of a cynical journalist's camera at the key moment that arrests the transition from public to private, actually freezing the flow of cinematic time to a photographic still.

The superimposition of the Wagnerian plot upon the movie brings out far too many suggestive correspondences for the deflationary reading of the Lohengrin reference to remain plausible. In particular, it draws attention to the surprising convergence of the opera and the movie on a common problematic. Two quotes should suffice to outline this

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[9] Cukor was the son of Hungarian-Jewish and Mankiewicz of German-Jewish immigrants. Waxman, born Wachsmann, was a noted and highly erudite German-Jewish composer who had emigrated from Germany in 1933. Marcia J. Citron notes that Waxman had a subtle way of using recognizable Wagnerian themes in his non-diegetic film scores. (Citron, "'Soll ich lauschen?': Love-Death in *Humoresque*," in Jeongwon Joe and Sander L. Gilman, *Wagner & Cinema* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010], p. 170. See also Scott D. Paulin's essay in the same volume, "Piercing Wagner: The Ring in *Golden Earrings*," p. 231).

[10] The initial temptation to do so confirms Cavell's hunch that "intention is dismissed, or resisted, less in response to the traditional arts than in response to film." (*Cities of Words*, p. 45).

[11] Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*. Trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 40. John Deathridge describes the Bridal March as "an intimate masterpiece of sweet foreboding and a prelude to marital disaster" that has become a "musical symbol of eternal faith in the institution of marriage" (Deathridge, p. 37).

affinity. The first is Tracy's exclamation to George, who is about to become her second husband: "I don't want to be worshipped, I want to be loved…I mean really loved." The second comes from Wagner's 1851 remarks on the protagonist of *Lohengrin*: "[Lohengrin's] longing was *not* for worship nor for adoration, but for the only thing sufficient to redeem him from his loneliness, to still his deep desire,—for *Love,* for *being loved,* for *being understood through Love*."[12] The parallel, I want to suggest, goes beyond the ethical problem of the tension between worshipping and love. If in Cukor's film marriage becomes possible through the protagonist's renunciation of divinity, in *Lohengrin* it founders on the insurmountable divide between an ordinary woman and a knight of the Grail dedicated to a divine vocation. Whereas the happy ending of Cukor's film depends on the heroine's acceptance of uncertainty (Tracy's admission "I don't know anything anymore" elicits Dexter's reply "That sounds very hopeful, Red"), Wagner's opera takes a tragic turn precisely because of the loss of certainty suffered by the heroine in the face of her husband's secret.

Significantly, Wagner himself did not fully grasp the central problematic of *Lohengrin* until he looked back at the finished work in his 1851 text "A Communication to My Friends," written a year after the first performance of the opera.[13] Wagner now came to see his opera as a modern, and specifically Christian, variant of the tragedy of Semele: Zeus assumed the guise of a human to make love to this mortal woman and beget Dionysus, yet Semele, manipulated by Zeus' cunning wife Hera (whom Wagner resurrects first as Ortrud and then as Fricka), pressed Zeus to reveal his divinity, thereby causing her own death.[14] Through the theological lens of Wagner's reflection on his recent work, the tragedy of *Lohengrin* stages a superhuman being's failed attempt at descending from the "blissful, barren solitude" of his divine vocation to the shared warmth of human love. The opera thus dramatizes a breakdown of Christian incarnation, the failure of a divine emissary to make his descent into human history permanent.

Wagner's retrospective interpretation of *Lohengrin* was very much in line with the concerns that drove his contemporaneous work on the libretto of the *Ring* cycle. *Die Walküre,* the second part of the cycle whose libretto was written in 1852, unfolds the problematic of renouncing divinity on a far greater scale than was possible in *Lohengrin*. With Wotan's farewell from Brünnhilde ("Leb wohl, du kühnes, herrliches Kind"), Wagner achieves a less despairing and more forward-looking response to the impasse previously recognized in Lohengrin's farewell from Elsa ("Leb wohl, mein süsses

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[12] Richard Wagner, "A Communication To My Friends," *Prose Works* vol. 1, trans. William Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895), p. 341. The complete passage in the original reads: "Er mußte deshalb seine höhere Natur verbergen, denn gerade in der Nichtaufdeckung, in der Nichtofferbarung dieses höheren—oder richtiger gesagt: *erhöhten*—Wesens konnte ihm die einzige Gewähr liegen, daß er nicht um dieses Wesens willen nur bewundert und angestaunt, oder ihm—als einem Unverstandenen—andeutungsvoll demüthig gehuldigt würde, wo es ihn eben nicht nach Bewunderung und Anbetung, sondern nach dem Einzigen, was ihn aus seiner Einsamkeit erlösen, seine Sehnsucht stillen konnte, — nach *Liebe*, nach *Geliebtsein*, nach *Verstandensein durch die Liebe*, verlangte." ("Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde," *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen,* vol. 4 [Leipzig: C. F. W. Siegel's Musikalienhandlung, 1871], pp. 295-96, emphasis in the original).

[13] The constructive character of this retrospective self-interpretation, i.e. the fact that it goes beyond reiterating what the opera is "about," is stressed by Michael Tanner in *The Faber Pocket Guide to Wagner* (London: Faber, 2010), p. 145.

[14] Richard Wagner, "A Communication To My Friends," p. 334 ff; "Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde," p. 289.

Weib!").[15] This connection suggests a promising avenue for pursuing further the ramifications of the Wagnerian reference at the end of *The Philadelphia Story.* Accordingly, the central argument of this essay will be concerned with correspondences between *Die Walküre* and *The Philadelphia Story*, and in particular with the contrasting ways in which these two works dramatize tensions accumulating around the father-daughter relationship.

There is a particularly disconcerting scene in *The Philadelphia Story* that all but cries out for such a juxtaposition. The scene in question occurs about halfway through the movie. Headstrong and proud Tracy Lord, played by Katharine Hepburn, has banned her patrician father from her approaching wedding on account of his philandering with a young dancer. Defying her ban, the disowned father has returned to the family mansion, outside which Tracy now spots him and her mother taking a walk in affectionate embrace. Vexed by this picture-perfect illustration of marital harmony, Tracy goes on the offensive and brings the full force of her sarcasm to bear upon her father. He, however, seems unfazed by her barbed remarks and retaliates with an accusation that is all the more crushing for being delivered in a coldly deliberate fashion. What made him seek solace from the dancer, he now declares, was not marital but paternal disappointment. The lack for which he sought to make up stemmed from Tracy's coldness, her lack of filial devotion.

This rather unorthodox attempt at deflecting blame for adultery recalls the accusations made earlier by another uninvited guest whose arrival left Tracy profoundly unsettled. In that earlier scene, her ex-husband Dexter claimed that he had taken to the bottle because her lack of "regard for human frailty" and her "sense of inner divinity" made him feel relegated to the role of "a high priest to a virgin goddess." When the father now hurls a similar accusation at Tracy, it takes the less overtly emotional form of a laundry list with an item missing:

> Mr. Lord: […] I think a devoted young girl gives a man the illusion that youth is still his.
> Tracy: Very important, I suppose.
> Mr. Lord: Oh, very, very. Because without her, he might be inclined to go out in search of his youth. And that's just as important to him as it is to any woman. But with a girl of his own full of warmth for him, full of foolish, unquestioning, uncritical affection—
> Tracy: None of which I've got—
> Mr. Lord: None. You have a good mind, a pretty face, a disciplined body that does what you tell it to. You have everything it takes to make a lovely woman except the one essential—an understanding heart. And without that, you might just as well be made of bronze.
> Tracy: (in stunned silence, then tearing up and turning away) That's an awful thing to say to anyone.
> Mr. Lord: Yes, it is indeed.
> Tracy: So, I'm to blame for Tina Mara, am I?

[15] For such a response to be possible, however, Wagner must turn away from the world of medieval Christianity to Nordic-Germanic mythology and abandon opera for the sake of music drama. Something like a synthesis between these two scenes of farewell occurs in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* when Hans Sachs rejects Eva's offer to be both daughter and wife to him ("Da dacht' ich aus: ihr nähmt mich für Weib und Kind ins Haus?," Act II, Scene 4). Considered against the background of *Lohengrin* and *Die Walküre*, this scene, one of the most musically beguiling in all of Wagner's works, invites the surmise that it is in some sense Wagner himself who is here renouncing the fantasy of a woman in whom Brünnhilde's (pagan-Teutonic) rebellious loyalty might be united with the (Christian) virginal devotion of Elsa.

> Mr. Lord: To a certain extent, I expect you are.
> Tracy: You coward.
> Mr. Lord: No. But better that than a prig or a perennial spinster, however many marriages.
> Mrs. Lord: Seth, that's too much.
> Mr. Lord: I'm afraid it's not enough, Margaret. I'm afraid nothing is.
> Tracy: What, what did you say I was?
> Mr. Lord: Do you want me to repeat it?
> Tracy: 'A prig and a ...' You mean, you think I think I'm some kind of a goddess or something?
> Mr. Lord: If your ego wants it that way, yes. Also, you've been talking like a jealous woman.

We should note a fact sarcastically underscored by the father, namely, that it is Tracy herself who chooses to interpret the father's statements as imputing to her a pretense to divinity. Yet the real source of that interpretation is not Tracy's "ego"; it is Dexter, whose earlier remarks presumably still reverberate in her ears as she tries to make sense of her father's rebukes. Given the father's admission that his young concubine is merely a surrogate daughter of sorts, it is particularly telling that the daughter should understand her father as a mere placeholder for her former husband. What this appears to suggest is that she is less deeply dependent on her father than he on her. And if that is the case, then her outrage at her father's selfishness is also a displaced expression of a lingering resentment toward Dexter.

All the more striking, then, is the father's ostentatious poise throughout the altercation. There is indeed a disturbing incongruity between the father's accusation of lack of feeling and his own lack of affect as he barely interrupts his evening cocktail to crush his daughter's spirit. He clearly knows how hurtful his words are and maximizes their impact by defiantly avowing his injurious intent in uttering them. And when his wife implores that "that's too much," he insist that "it is not enough" and perhaps "nothing is," evoking a sheer infinity of well-deserved filial torment. Where the pedagogical calculations of tough love end and vengeful sadism begins in this father's mind is difficult to tell, especially because the former may appear to require unleashing the latter. Small wonder that our adamantine heroine is left stuttering and in tears.

Neither the script nor Cukor's cinematography does in any overt way question the authority of this father. Introducing a whole series of embarrassments to be suffered by Tracy in the course of the film, the father's rebuke puts her on a path toward a resolution that seems happy enough, though it is likely to unsettle the attentive viewer. In the closing scene, a humbled Tracy gives up her divine aloofness and espouses her humanity by exuberantly declaring love to her father and remarrying her first husband. But can an ending co-authored by such a father be called happy in any sense of the word?

The vague suspicion that we hit something like a nerve by zeroing in on this scene is confirmed by biographical facts about Philip Barry, the author of the successful Broadway play faithfully followed (at least for the most part, as we shall see) by Donald Ogden Stewart's screenplay. Following the death of his infant daughter in 1933, Barry became obsessed with the father-daughter relationship and worked for eleven years on a project with the working title "Stern Daughter," which he would never complete.[16] As it

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[16] An early note by Barry delineates the basic idea as follows: "Daughter. The man of 42 at the end of his soul's rope, recovering from attempt at suicide...Emphasis to go on the father-daughter relationship...Two

happens, Barry's personal preoccupation put him in an ideal position to resolve Hepburn's career crisis. Film historians routinely note that audiences had soured on Hepburn by the 1930s, to the point that studios labeled her "box office poison." Her brittle poise elicited aversion and even a kind of sadistic impulse, epitomized in a remark by a magazine writer who likened Hepburn to a wooden doll that bobs up as soon as one has slapped it.[17] In writing *The Philadelphia Story*, Barry carefully tailored the character of Tracy to Hepburn with a view to her career crisis. The resultant comedy about the humbling of an icy goddess saved her as well as his career (his also needed saving) by allowing audiences to love her unique combination of aloofness and allure. The humanization of Hepburn was clearly intended as a didactic parable about an American type, though it is not immediately clear which one: for Mike she epitomizes "the young, rich, rapacious American female," whereas to Dexter's mind she stands for "a special class of the American female: the married maidens."

Given the above facts about Barry and Hepburn, and given the representative role that the former conferred on the latter, we are especially apt to wonder about the significance of the father-daughter relationship in *The Philadelphia Story*. In one of his recurrent reflections on the movie, Stanley Cavell calls the father's speech to Tracy an "aria," a term that captures the histrionic verve of the performance.[18] Although Cukor's wish to remain faithful to the Broadway play led him to keep the film mostly unencumbered by musical accompaniment, the strikingly fluent dialogues of the play itself often verge on music. This affinity is openly acknowledged in a breathless exchange between Tracy and Mike, one of the few scenes in the movie for which Franz Waxman composed an orchestral score:

> *Tracy:* We're out of our minds.
> *Mike:* Right into our hearts.
> *Tracy:* That ought to have music.
> *Mike:* It has, hasn't it?

Not by chance, the next time Hollywood turned to Barry's play, in the 1956 film *High Society*, the genre chosen was musical.

Yet the most illuminating counterpart to the exchange between Tracy and her father can be found neither in opera nor in musical but in Wagnerian music drama. I am thinking of the two crucial confrontations between Wotan and his daughter Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*, culminations of a fraught relationship between father and daughter that requires to be described in familial, psychosexual, ethical, theological, as well as political terms. Something like a mirroring relation emerges between the two works when we observe that Wagner's heroine is disowned by her father, whereas in *The Philadelphia Story*, in a telling reversal of roles, it is the daughter who initially all but expels the father

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people whom life has treated badly. Maybe she has been jilted by a married man. Companions in adversity. The perfect combination: mature wisdom with youthful freshness...Love without the complications..." in *Georgetown University—Philip Barry Papers: Collection Description* [web page] (http://www.library.georgetown. edu/dept/speccoll/cl128.htm), accessed December 20, 2009.

[17] Quoted in Wes D. Gehring, *Romantic Vs. Screwball Comedy: Charting the Difference* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002), p. 126.

[18] Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 137.

from the family and takes over the duties of the head of the household. In both cases the daughter's rebellion responds to something unresolved about the father's status as a married man and to a misstep resulting from his "reluctance to grow old." These are, then, notably vulnerable figures of paternal authority. Furthermore, in both cases, the hard-won reconciliation verges on an incestuous conflation of filial and marital roles, and this family romance seems crucial to the heroines' awakening to their femininity and their acceptance of humanity. Completion of this passage requires punishment at the hands of the father, followed by the daughter's lapse into and re-emergence from a death-like, dormant state.

These psychological premises allow for wide–ranging explorations of the tension between law and compassion, of the meaning of forgiveness and fidelity. A theological dimension is broached, moreover, in both stagings of divinity renounced and humanity accepted, although in neither case can the sense of divinity at play be conflated with that familiar from the Judeo–Christian tradition.[19] And finally, each scene plays a pivotal role within an allegory about the foundations of sociopolitical order that hinges on the distinction between base and noble forms of existence, or between egalitarian and aristocratic visions of society. These are highly general suggestions; I shall spell them out with respect to Wagner's cycle first and then in the context of *The Philadelphia Story.*

II.

The central juncture of *Die Walküre* is so ripe with significance that its consideration, even for the limited purposes of this essay, requires a headlong plunge into the welter of myth, psychology, and philosophy that makes up the *Ring* cycle. The scenes in question involve the supreme god Wotan, somewhat paradoxically the most human of the diverse figures populating the world of the *Ring*, and his daughter Brünnhilde, the only character in the cycle who is portrayed in consistently positive light.[20] By dramatizing their relationship Wagner develops his most searching exploration of the relation between divine and human existence.

The nature of this relation comes to a head in Wotan's long monologue in the second scene of Act Two. We learn here that Brünnhilde was born of Wotan's will to understand the admonition of the omniscient Earth goddess Erda, to the effect that the end of the gods' rule is at hand. Why this end should be inevitable is a question that has troubled commentators almost as much as it troubles Wotan. One answer can be inferred from the Norns' narrative in *Götterdämmerung* about the origin of Wotan's power: Wotan had cut a branch from the World Ash Tree to make a spear, upon which he inscribed the contracts safeguarding his rule. By establishing moral-political order through an act reminiscent of the original contract postulated by Hobbes and Rousseau, Wotan let historical time emerge out of timeless nature. The fatal wound thereby inflicted upon the

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[19] While there is no need to stress the role of religion for Wagner, it is worth mentioning that Barry was an Irish-American educated in a Catholic school and his works include a play about John the Baptist as well as the novel *War in Heaven*, a "study of good and evil in the universe." ("Georgetown University—Philip Barry Papers: Collection Description").

[20] As noted by Peter Wapnewski, *Der traurige Gott: Richard Wagner in seinen Helden* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 2001), p. 21.

Ash Tree suggests, however, that the very origin of moral-political order disrupts its natural foundation and therefore plants the cause of its eventual demise. Indeed, the destructive consequences of this act redound upon the sovereign ruler himself, for Wotan is said to have lost an eye in making his spear. Corresponding to this defect is an inherent limitation of Wotan's rule: in founding an order of contracts and laws, he himself must submit to the constraints they impose upon his own will. This interpretation needs to be qualified in view of a frequently noted inconsistency in the text, which proves revealing upon closer scrutiny: in *Das Rheingold* Wotan claimed that he had lost an eye in wooing Fricka. This equivocation suggests that moral-political order and marriage originate in the same violent act, which has the double significance of being both self-binding and self-blinding.[21]

This foray into the obscure depths of mythic pre-history should help us specify what distinguishes Wagner's Wotan from the God of Judeo-Christian monotheism: his authority is merely constructive, not creative, since it presupposes a realm of elemental forces. This is why again and again he finds himself having to rely on primordial beings that embody masculine and feminine aspects of nature. Most importantly, the fact that Wotan's rule had a beginning means that it is also fated to end. The reason why this rule is threatened by the power of Alberich, who has renounced love in order to forge the Rhinemaidens' glittering plaything into an all-powerful Ring, is that it had to be constructed in a violent fashion upon a natural foundation that eludes complete control. As long as this intractable foundation persists, every rational order it subtends remains prone to rival forms of domination that harness natural powers with a violence more brutal and effective, untempered by either contractual rationality or love. Alberich's forging of the ring is just such a dark counterpart to Wotan's founding act, and several commentators have noted its secondary status relative to the latter.[22]

It is this root problem that appears to elude Wotan's defective vision, primarily defined as he is by an imperious will. Insight into this limitation of his power must come from an outside source, the wisdom of the earth goddess Erda. It is her cryptic announcement in *Das Rheingold* about the end of divine rule that has awakened in Wotan an urge to understand his fate. As he himself recounts in *Die Walküre*, he raped Erda to obtain knowledge about his adversary Alberich. The most momentous outcome of this

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[21] Deryck Cooke proposes that we think of Fricka as "enshrining" the ideal of "world-domination-through-law" (*I Saw the World End*, p. 153). Dieter Borchmeyer, who also notes the connection to social contract theory, explains this discrepancy between the two versions by interpreting Wotan's marriage to Fricka as the microcosmic equivalent of the world order established through Wotan's contracts. I note the agreement of this interpretation with Stanley Cavell's claim that Hollywood comedies of remarriage present marriage as an "emblem of society." See *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, trans. Daphne Ellis (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 227; and Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 117.

[22] The Wotan/Alberich parallel is invoked by Michael Tanner to refute interpretations of the figure of Alberich in terms of anti-Semitic stereotypes (*Wagner*, p. 28). Whereas Borchmeyer claims that temporal precedence here does not imply causal origination (*Drama and the Word of Richard Wagner*, 226), Abbate plausibly argues that "Wotan's sin lies deeper" and "first brought violence into the world." (*Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Twentieth Century*, p. 175). Similarly, Slavoj Žižek relativizes Alberich's crime to a "secondary repetition, externalization, of an absolutely immanent inconsistency/antagonism." ("Foreword: Why Is Wagner Worth Saving?" in Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* [London: Verso, 2005], p. xviii).

visitation is, however, not some piece of factual knowledge elicited from Erda but something exceeding Wotan's will, something he describes as a "deposit" ("Pfand") left to Erda: their child Brünnhilde, in whose compassionate insight the violent union of Wotan's will with Erda's knowledge shall come to fruition ("Kühn ist sie und weise auch," as Erda describes her in Act 3, Scene 1 of *Siegfried*).

Wotan himself, to be sure, remains short-sightedly obsessed with the factual knowledge gained from Erda, and he responds to it with a cunning plan to regain the Ring that he had forfeited in fulfillment of a contract. Since he cannot forcibly take the Ring without undermining the entire contractual order that underpins his rule, he decides to outsource the task to a proxy. His bastard son Siegmund shall achieve for him what Wotan himself is contractually prevented from doing. The futility of this plan has to be pointed out by Wotan's wife Fricka, the goddess protecting the marital bond. With relentless logic Fricka compels Wotan to admit that, far from being a free hero unconstrained by his contracts, Siegmund is merely a pawn in Wotan's hands. His incestuous union with his sister Sieglinde only makes his continued dependence on his father manifest, as well as constituting an outrage against the law of marriage that Wotan himself had endorsed in wedding Fricka.

When Wotan finally agrees to let Siegmund die, it is because he has understood that he is no longer the "master" of contracts but rather their "slave." To preserve his sovereignty he would need to create a free being who is independent of him, yet he is condemned to finding himself in every product of his agency. In this respect Wotan, though not portrayed as a creator god, embodies a conundrum familiar from Christianity. Its most famous variant is the omnipotence paradox of scholasticism: if God is omnipotent, then he cannot create a stone so heavy that he himself could not lift it, which means that He is not omnipotent after all. The intellectualist solution proposed by Thomas Aquinas hinges on the argument that the purely logical constraint imposed by the law of non-contradiction cannot be understood as a genuine limitation upon God's omnipotence. Contrary to this position, voluntarists such as William of Ockham took divine omnipotence to mean that even the laws of logic are up to God's will and hence, in the hypothetical case that God wanted these laws to be otherwise, he could in fact create a stone so heavy that he could not lift it and then proceed, if he so wanted, to lift that stone.[23] It seems that Wotan would need omnipotence construed along voluntaristic lines to create a free hero. Such a solution is not available to him, however, for he only has the power to rule through contracts but not the power to create out of nothingness or to transcend logic. One might say that he is not really a god in the radical sense stipulated by theological voluntarism, and this is in fact the crux of the charge leveled at him by Erda in the first scene of Act Three of *Siegfried*: "Du bist—nicht, was du dich nennst!" ("You are not what you call yourself!")[24]

Yet this very recognition becomes the key to the solution that Wotan announces in the same scene. If Wotan cannot avert the implosion of his rule, then the only way for him to preserve the dignity of his will is by affirming the necessity rooted in his internally

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[23] On the conflict between intellectualist and voluntarist notions of God, see J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), pp. 23 ff.

[24] Instead of relying on one of the available translations of Wagner's libretto, I chose to translate the passages I quote with a view to conveying relevant nuances of meaning.

conflicted being: "Was in des Zwiespalts wildem Schmerze verzweifelnd einst ich beschloss, froh und freudig führe ich nun aus." ("What I once desperately resolved in the savage pain of self-division happily and joyously I shall now carry out.") Wotan realizes this resolution, clearly anticipating Nietzsche's Spinozistic idea of *amor fati,* by abdicating in favor of his grandson Siegfried, whom he no longer seeks to control in the way he still controlled Siegmund. The measure of Siegfried's freedom will, however, turn out to be his fallibility, and the consequent failure of Wotan's last hope finally results in an outcome closer to what Schopenhauer envisioned as the will's highest act of freedom, namely, its self-abnegation.[25] Bringing about this redemptive end is precisely the task of the daughter whose free agency finally reconciles Wotan's will to Erda's insight.

By lending psychological texture to an old theological problem, Wagner manages to shed unexpected light upon characteristically modern questions pertaining to human freedom. Key to this feat is the externalization of Wotan's self-estrangement to a conflict with Brünnhilde. The significance of this conflict becomes clear in what Wagner himself called "the most important scene for the progress *[Gang]* of the entire four-part drama."[26] The scene in question is the second one in Act II of *Die Walküre*, where Wotan charges his obedient daughter with carrying out Siegmund's death sentence and attempts to justify this verdict to her.

Everything turns here on Wotan's decision to talk to Brünnhilde instead of simply issuing a command to her. Significantly, he hesitates before doing so. And given the account of her genealogy that Wotan is about to outline, it is understandable that he prefaces his long narration to her with an anxious misgiving: "Lass ich's verlauten, lös ich dann nicht meines Willens haltenden Haft?" ("If I utter this to you, do I not thereby release the controlling grip of my will?") This question actualizes on a performative level the possibility that it entertains, for its very ambiguity shows Wotan powerless to control the meaning of his words. Because of the polyvalence of the Middle High German word "der Haft," the phrase "meines Willens haltender Haft" may refer to that which binds my will together and stabilizes it, the bond or pledge that confers upon my volitional acts the status of treaties entered, the very pivot of my willing; or alternatively, it may refer to that which hinders or blocks my will and holds it captive.[27] Wotan's utterance thus equivocates between undoing of the executive power of his will and release from the contracts constraining his will. Once uttered, these ambiguous words escape Wotan's

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[25] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Zürcher Ausgabe: Werke in zehn Bändern*, vol. 2. *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung I/2*, §70-71 (Zürich: Diogenes, 2007), pp. 497-508.

[26] Letter to Franz Liszt, October 3, 1855, *Richard Wagner Briefe: Ausgewählt, eingeleitet und kommentiert von Hanjo Kesting* (München: R. Piper & Co., 1983), p. 329.

[27] *Grimms Deutsches Wörterbuch* lists the following meanings associated with the masculine variant of the noun: "band, halter, etwas was zusammen faszt und verbindet"; "haft, was bindet und zusammen hält, fessel, band"; "man sagte *heften einen haft*, an etwas eine fessel legen, damit es sich nicht weiter entwickele"; "in der rechtssprache steht *haft* neben haftpfennig in dem sinne des draufgeldes, dieses ist das band, durch welches ein eingegangener vertrag fest wird"; "das halten, festhalten"; "diese bedeutung wendet sich zu der des schwerpunkts, angelpunkts, vornehmsten einer sache"; "aber andererseits kann die vorige bedeutung auch in die des zurückhaltens, hindernisses verlaufen"; "daher heiszt endlich auch *der haft* gefängliche verwahrung." (*Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, vol. 10 [Leipzig: S. Hirzel 1854-1960]).

controlling intention, and this escape will eventually have the double effect of dissolving Wotan's authority and solving his predicament.[28]

To be sure, Wotan is not entirely deluded or disingenuous in claiming that he is merely consulting with himself when he speaks to Brünnhilde ("mit mir nur rat ich red ich zu dir," "I only sit in counsel with myself when I speak to you"). After all, she was born of his own will to know, as Brünnhilde herself reassures him ("Zu Wotans Wille sprichst du, sagst du mir, was du willst," "You are speaking to Wotan's will when you tell me what you want"). Yet this is not the whole truth. For Brünnhilde also has something Wotan lacks, namely insight inherited from Erda, something that will be most clearly in evidence in her concern for Siegmund's yet-to-be-born child. Because Brünnhilde's very existence stems from Wotan's quest for self-understanding, we are led to construe his hesitant decision to share his agony with her as a bid to be shown by her what he wants on the deepest level.[29]

It follows from the above that Brünnhilde's response to the double bind resulting from Wotan's internal conflict must be at odds with Wotan's own attempt at settling that conflict. She must remain mindful of both sides of Wotan's self-division, if indeed her distinguishing attribute consists in the type of insight he most needs and lacks. When Wotan takes leave of Brünnhilde towards the very end of *Die Walküre* and for one last time admires her "radiant pair of eyes" ("Der Äugen leuchtendes Paar," and a bit later "dieser Augen strahlendes Paar"), we may hear in these words an acknowledgment of the difference between her comprehensive vision and his own constitutively defective, one-eyed sight. This implication is underscored by Wagner's stage instructions, which specify that these words are to be uttered while Wotan gazes into Brünnhilde's eyes, in what we must imagine as an odd communion of three eyes. The symbolism of this scene should be clear from Brünnhilde's earlier attempt at justifying her insubordination:

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[28] Up to a point, this view of the scene agrees with Carolyn Abbate's characterization of Brünnhilde as a listener who "liberates the 'word' from its authorial source" and interprets Wotan's words as "schismatic and *contrapuntal,*" "zwiespältig." Abbate is concerned with recuperating from Wagner's cycle vocal traces of the "eternally laughing" Ur-Brünnhilde of the earliest Nordic sources, a tragic heroine primarily defined by "intoxication or madness" rather than erotic desire, whom later, Germanic, versions of the source material recast into a "romantic victim." In keeping with this critical angle, Abbate stresses the radicality of Brünnhilde's break from Wotan and underplays the moment of loyalty. By interpretating Wotan's monologue in Act II of *Die Walküre* as a ballad-like performance of musical narration, she relegates Wotan to the status of an unreliable narrator who solipsistically imposes the same fatefully calamitous cycle on all events and thereby "creates rather than describes the *Ring's* doomed world," whereas Brünnhilde is said to further an alternative "female eschatology" also associated with Erda, Sieglinde and Waltraute. While Abbate's reading sheds light on numerous musical details, such illumination comes at a cost: it requires sidestepping the familial nexus involving Brünnhilde, Wotan and Erda, which is precisely what is of interest here. See Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 156-249.

[29] As Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht put it, "[Wotan's] relationship with Brünnhilde betokens his commitment to absorbing the wisdom Erda has to offer." (*Finding an Ending: Reflections On Wagner's Ring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 94.

Nicht weise bin ich,
doch wußt' ich das eine,
daß den Wälsung du liebtest.
Ich wußte den Zwiespalt,
der dich zwang,
dies eine ganz zu vergessen.
Das andre mußtest
einzig du sehn,
was zu schaun so herb
schmerzte dein Herz:
daß Siegmund Schutz du versagtest.
[…] Weil für dich im Auge
das eine ich hielt,
dem, im Zwange des andren
schmerzlich entzweit,
ratlos den Rücken du wandtest!
Die im Kampfe Wotan
den Rücken bewacht,
die sah nun das nur,
was du nicht sahst:
Siegmund mußt' ich sehn.

I am not wise,
but I knew one thing,
that you loved the Wälsung.
I knew of the division
that forced you
to forget this completely.
The other thing
was all you could see,
the sight of which so bitterly
pained your heart:
that you denied protection to Siegmund.
[…] Because I kept my eyes on
the one thing
from which, compelled by the other,
you were painfully estranged,
and on which you cluelessly turned your back!
She who in battle
used to guard Wotan's back,
this time she only saw
what you did not see:
Siegmund I had to see.

Brünnhilde's distinguishing insight thus stems from her ability to see two apparently irreconcilable things at one and the same time and indeed as essentially *one*. What this means in more specific terms is that she can grasp her compassion for Siegmund as an affect rooted in her fidelity to Wotan's deepest motives.

At the pivotal moment these dictates cease to be in conflict. The "announcement of death" scene, in which Brünnhilde tells Siegmund that he must die and leave Sieglinde behind, reaches its climactic turning point when Siegmund threatens to kill Sieglinde in order to leave earthly life together with her. The fact that Brünnhilde does not waver in her obedience to Wotan until Siegmund threatens to kill Sieglinde suggests that her sudden reversal is not a repudiation of her divine father for the sake of human love, nor even a repudiation of her father's clinging to power in the name of the latter's own repressed love for Siegmund. As the dramaturgy of this conversion scene shows, Brünnhilde's reversal is due as much to sympathy for a human being in the throes of unconditional love as to her continued concern for the unborn child inside Sieglinde's womb, whom Brünnhilde knows to be the free hero needed by Wotan. Observing the claims of human compassion and redeeming Wotan thus require the same deed.[30]

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[30] My construal of this scene suggests an alternative to Dahlhaus' claim that there is no real dramatic connection between the heroic drama of the Wälsungs and the mythic tragedy of Wotan (Dahlhaus, p. 119 ff.). Against this thesis, the tight linkage between the two strands has been demonstrated in great detail, on the level both of dramatic plot and musical material, by Hungarian musicologist György Kroó in "Brünnhilde tanulóévei: Istenmítosz és hősdráma kapcsolata a Walkür tükrében," *Heilawâc, avagy délutáni álom a kanapén: négy tanulmány a Nibelung gyűrűjéről* (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1983), pp. 267-311. Dahlhaus' "disconnect" thesis is in keeping with his view that Wagner abandoned the nihilistic Schopenhauerian ending of 1856 and reverted to the spirit of the 1852 version celebrating the supersession of divine law by human love (Dahlhaus, p. 103 ff.). According to Dahlhaus, Wagner's music for the ending reaffirms the Feuerbachian optimism of the 1848 sketch: "Brünnhilde's love for Siegfried features as the alternative to Wotan's resignation and renunciation of the world and looks forward in hope to reconciliation in the future" (p. 141). It is, however, hard to see love consummated in self-immolation as a hopeful alternative to renunciation of the world. Dahlhaus argues that the bond between Siegfried and Brünnhilde is

This convergence is made possible by Siegmund's first and only genuinely free act, an act of defiance in the face of the destiny chosen for him by Wotan. But that act would amount to little more than a futile threat—were it not for Brünnhilde's subsequent act of freedom, that is, her sudden decision to protect Siegmund in defiance of Wotan's command. We have seen that Wotan's sole option in the face of his inner conflict was to repress one of the two conflicting claims. Brünnhilde, by contrast, attempts to do justice to both sides by adopting the external position of a free agent who is not bound by the contracts that bind Wotan. In this manner the self-contradiction vitiating Wotan's will compels his daughter, previously just a tool of that will, to assume free agency.

Beside having to intervene to ensure his son's demise, Wotan must now find an appropriate response to his daughter's rebellious fidelity. One might expect him to kill Brünnhilde, given the ruthlessness he has just displayed in letting Siegmund die. But the wound that he has thus inflicted on himself, combined with the shock of Brünnhilde's rebellion, have brought Wotan to the point where he can no longer muster the authority required for a genuine act of retribution. Hence his claim that no act of retribution is necessary because Brünnhilde's act of insubordination implies its own punishment: her penalty for having acted against the god out of compassion for a human is that she is now condemned actually to be a human being. In a sense, Brünnhilde's rebellion has placed her beyond the reach of divine retribution, which is why her plea for an easing of the penalty strikes Wotan as senseless ("erwarte dein Los, wie sich's dir wirft; nicht kiesen kann ich es dir," "await your lot, however it turns out; I cannot choose it for you"). To be sure, Wotan has not retreated yet to the role of a mere spectator. In deciding to put his daughter to sleep and leave her exposed on a rock, to be taken by the first man who comes her way, he hovers on the threshold between active exercise of divine power and a passivity acknowledging the limits of this power. Part of her punishment, at any rate, is the passivity with which Wotan abandons her to a stranger.

A corresponding ambiguity informs Wotan's notion of what this punishment is to entail for Brünnhilde. In the second scene of Act III, he describes her fall from grace as an ascent to freedom: "Was sonst du warst, sagte dir Wotan: was jetzt du bist das sage dir

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undone by outside agency (p. 104), yet *Götterdämmerung* suggests that human love is intrinsically prone to deception. In support of his view, Dahlhaus claims that the orchestral theme at the end of *Götterdämmerung* (recalling Sieglinde's exclamation "O hehrstes Wunder! Herrliches Maid!" after Brünnhilde's prophecy in *Die Walküre* about the heroic calling of her yet-to-be-born son) "expresses the 'rapturous love' celebrated in the 1852 ending" (p. 140). It is true that Sieglinde's gratitude is fuelled by her love for Siegmund and for their unborn son ("Für ihn, den wir liebten, rett ich das Liebste") and that she consigns the latter to Brünnhilde ("meines Dankes Lohn lache dir einst!"); for Sieglinde, to be sure, what matters is love in the sense of the 1852 ending. Yet Brünnhilde herself construes her compassionate love for the Wälsungs as a feeling rooted in her fidelity to her father, for the sake of whose redemption Siegfried must come into being and inherit Nothung. Whatever we make of the much-discussed final recurrence of the "Brünnhilde's glorification" theme, its significance should not be limited to the meaning Sieglinde attached to it nine hours earlier in the cycle. In the finale of *Götterdämmerung*, after commanding Wotan's ravens to call Loge to Walhall from the rock on which he guarded her sleep, Brünnhilde declares that by throwing a torch unto Siegfried's funeral pyre she is also setting Walhall on fire ("So—werf ich den Brand in Walhalls prangende Burg"). She thus asserts the ultimate identity between the fire demon destroying the gods and the physical fire about to consume her and Siegfried's body. Tellingly, it is in Brünnhilde's invocation of this dual-natured, terrestrial-celestial fire that the glorification theme first recurs ("Im Feuer leuchtend"), adopted by Brünnhilde from Sieglinde not unlike Siegfried was adopted by her, in a manner of speaking, in the Oedipal drama played out in the finale of *Siegfried*. In Brünnhilde's final peroration, then, her love for Siegfried is shown to be inseparable from the intention to redeem Wotan.

selbst!" ("What you were previously Wotan used to tell you: what you are now you shall tell yourself!") No mention is made of mortality as a salient fact of human existence, but then again in this world it is a truism that even divine rule must come to an end. Rather than mortality, what makes humanity so horrific is the fate of having to live without divine guidance. There is no room in Wagner's world for construing this absence as freedom in the Kantian sense of autonomy or in the more radical Fichtean-Schellingian sense of self-grounding. This becomes clear when Brünnhilde's punishment is reformulated in the third scene: "Du folgtest selig der Liebe Macht: folge nun dem, den du lieben musst!" At least for a woman, or so Wotan's words suggest, to live without divine guidance is to be abandoned to the vagaries of feeling.

In a plea for her father's forgivenness, Brünnhilde reveals to him that the compassion that prompted her rebellion was not primarily for Siegmund but for Wotan himself. That is, she disobeyed him out of fidelity to the paternal love he had suppressed in the interest of his rule. Once again trapped by the law on which his remaining authority rests, Wotan cannot evade the obligation to disown his daughter. Yet he is eventually moved to something both less and more than forgivenness when he hears Brünnhilde's last request. In order not to fall prey to any common man, she asks her father to imprison her within a circle of fire that deters everyone but the one hero deserving of her, and he grants her request in a final outpouring of affection, praise and sorrow.

This final *peripeteia* occurs with a slight but important delay, which parallels the dramaturgy of persuasion in the "announcement of death" scene in Act II. There, Brünnhilde first remained unmoved by Siegmund's clinging to earthly life, and her reversal only occurred when he threatened to kill Sieglinde together with their unborn child, thereby imperiling the redemptive vision she had conceived for Wotan's sake. Likewise in Act III, when Brünnhilde invokes "her sacred anxiety" of losing her honor, Wotan is initially unmoved by her plea. Yet he undergoes a dramatic reversal after she describes "with wild enthusiasm" how the mighty fire conjured by Wotan shall devour the "craven one […] who dares to approach the rock." If this evocation proves effective, it is not only because it appeals to the murderous fantasies of a father who has just discovered jealousy toward his daughter. A more far-reaching explanation has been suggested by Deryck Cooke, who speculates that Brünnhilde's idea of encirclement by fire evokes the figure of Loge, the cunning and truth-telling god of fire. This "sudden demonic inspiration which comes to her, and then immediately to him," writes Cooke, "makes Wotan realize how the power-dominated world he has created can be redeemed," namely, through the purging flames that shall consume the gods.[31] Wotan grants Brünnhilde's request because it kindles a new hope in his mind.

Before clarifying the content of that hope, we should pause to note a pun that seems central to Wotan's farewell, turning on the ambiguity of the German "Freier" for "wooer": "Denn einer nur freie die Braut, der freier als ich, der Gott!" ("One man alone may free/wed the bride, one who is freer than I, the god!") Wotan's concluding acknowledgment of the unfreedom that required him to recast his vision in such a radical manner thus takes the form of a married man's concession of the beloved woman to a rival. What this indicates is that not only Brünnhilde but Wotan too has taken on human characteristics. Through her rebellion, Brünnhilde has become precisely that which Wotan could not contrive to make of Siegmund: a genuinely free "other." In response to

[31] Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study On Wagner's Ring* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 353.

this, a previously unfamiliar sense of her separateness develops in Wotan, with the full range of affects that this entails: anger, love, jealousy, gratitude, and sympathetic concern. Whereas the realization that he must let Siegmund die tormented Wotan merely because it sealed the failure of his plan, in the farewell from Brünnhilde for the first time he undergoes the pain of losing someone whom he has come to love for her own sake. Already in Act II, Wotan cursed the order he had created; his discovery of love in its human form now completes his abdication. When he reappears in the incognito of the Wanderer in *Siegfried*, he is no longer a sovereign agent but a haunted and haunting spectator, an ironist whose participation in the course of things is limited to confronting others with riddles and unmasking their ignorance in the manner of a Nordic Socrates.

Yet the lesson taught by his rebellious daughter enables Wotan to overcome the despair he reached in Act II of *Die Walküre,* where he cynically consigned the world to Alberich. Wotan's new-found hope, declared in his final confrontation with Erda in *Siegfried*, is for his own succession by noble humans. He envisions a world over which he no longer presides but which is nevertheless ruled by his descendants, the noble-minded, heroic and compassionate Wälsungs Siegfried and Brünnhilde. Having prevailed over the base Nibelung lineage originating in Alberich's loveless union with Grimhilde, the Wälsungs are to inaugurate a world founded on love and not on divinely sanctioned laws.

This is what we might term Wotan's aristocratic vision for humanity, and the obvious sympathy with which Wagner evokes it signals one of his abiding concerns. As Michael Tanner succinctly puts it, "[t]he staple of Wagnerian drama, the whole idiom, is one of nobility."[32] Even in his youth, when he stood under the influence of Bakunin's anarchism, Wagner's political writings betrayed an anti-egalitarian penchant, as shown by his demand in 1848 that "the first and most authentic of republicans" should be—the monarch.[33] Accordingly, Wagner's earliest preoccupation with the Nibelung material was animated by the idea that all monarchic rule, presumably including its republican variant, derived its legitimacy from the myth of a progenitor "sprung from the gods."[34]

In the *Ring* cycle, however, Wagner's aristocratic ethos is tinged with profound pessimism about its viability. Similarly to Wotan's previous design to use Siegmund as a proxy to regain the Ring, the aristocratic vision too fails in a necessary fashion. For Wotan's attempt at arranging his own succession turns out to be fraught with self-contradiction. Unguided by Wotan, Siegfried is just a reckless fool. Since, moreover, Wotan is also limited in his insight, he erroneously trusts the devious Loge's assistance in guarding his slumbering daughter; and the circle of fire that allowed only the boldest hero to pass through to Brünnhilde fails to deter that hero when he returns as Hagen's deluded pawn. With her link to Wotan severed, Brünnhilde in her turn becomes blind to the role of the Ring within the larger scheme of things and only regains insight after she has been betrayed into complicity in Siegfried's murder.[35]

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[32] Michael Tanner, *Wagner,* p. 18.

[33] "All that we can ask is that the king should be the first and most authentic of republicans. Is there anyone with a better calling to be the truest, loyalest republican than the prince himself?" (Quoted in Dahlhaus, p. 94).

[34] Borchmeyer, p. 216.

[35] Here I simplify matters, for in the finale Brünnhilde herself attributes her insight both to her betrayal by Siegfried and to an enigmatic offstage encounter with the Rhinemaidens. Against the critical tradition that reduces Brünnhilde to a "romantic victim" by stressing the decisive role of her betrayal by Siegfried,

Once Wotan's aristocratic vision founders, it remains for Brünnhilde to avert the worst scenario by letting the Ring melt to innocent gold in the flames about to consume her and Siegfried's body. With the gold restored to the Rhinemaidens, the key to unlimited power is removed from the arena of history and reverts back to nature. Surviving humans must get on with their humdrum lives in a world in which neither the noble rule of the Wälsungs nor total domination by the base Nibelungs is possible any more. Dahlhaus is thus right to note that if Wagner conjures up the gods "it is not to glorify them but to render them up to self-destruction."[36] Yet it seems important that the world emerging from this conflagration has no place for Brünnhilde either. The necessity of her demise suggests that the type of nobility embodied by her can only exist in relation to a god who needs redeeming.

III.

The account just proposed immediately suggests an interpretive angle from which to approach the confrontation between father and daughter in *The Philadelphia Story*. For Wagner, that confrontation functions as a turning point in an epic account of the birth of human freedom out of the self-undoing of divine power. Humanity is something chosen by Brünnhilde out of fidelity to an internally conflicted father-god as well as the inevitable punishment for that choice. In the Philadelphia of the 1930s, by contrast, humanity tends to be taken for granted. Here divinity can only have the status of a hubristic pretense, which the father exhorts his daughter to abandon in favor of human compassion. If the heroine's compassion causes her to rebel against her father in *Die Walküre*, it is the lack of compassion displayed by her cinematic counterpart that becomes an outrage in her father's eyes.

These broad contrasts between a work that moves in the mythic register and one that squarely observes conventions inherited from the comedy of manners should not obscure certain affinities that lie under the surface. Although Seth Lord is certainly no god, his family name underscores the Biblical resonance of his first name, Seth being the name of the son God gave Adam as a substitute for the murdered Abel; and more than a trace of divinity is evident in the demeanor of his daughter Tracy. These oblique allusions to the Judeo-Christian tradition are intertwined, however, with a characteristically modern problematic that recalls Wotan's plight. Seth Lord is the beneficiary of a splendid and time-honored order of things, a member of the old upper crust of Philadelphia. If Wotan's aversion for the stasis of marriage coexists with a fear of the unforeseeable ways in which time may undo the tenuous foundations of his power, similarly the "reluctance to grow old" that drives Seth Lord's philandering with a low-class dancer only adds to the precariousness of the family's life. Secluded in a leafy suburb that seems frozen in an earlier century, Seth Lord and his family exhibit a muted awareness that their refined way

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Carolyn Abbate argues for the centrality of the Rhinemaidens episode, whose relegation out of sight she considers the *Ring's* most radical opening unto epistemological uncertainty (Abbate, p. 241). The drawback of this powerful interpretation is that it trivializes much of the plot of *Götterdämmerung* to a relapse into operatic intrigue, as though it was just a contingent fact, dictated by dramaturgical exigency, that the Rhinemaidens do not bring Brünnhilde to her senses before Siegfried is murdered.

[36] Dahlhaus, p. 114.

of life is being increasingly encroached upon by the egalitarian mass society of the New Deal era, by the intrusive voyeurism of the media, and even by slang. And yet their conservativism is not of the stuffy, ossified variety; they do their best to maintain a certain broad-mindedness and good humor.

While religion seems to play a vestigial role in the life of this family, its residues are all the more laden with significance. When Mrs. Lord resolves to put a good face on her humiliating situation, Dexter cheers her with the words "That's the old Quaker spirit, Mother Lord. Now keep swinging." This allusion to the mother's Quaker roots, in a movie whose very title names a city founded by a Quaker leader, establishes a context in which Dexter's imputation of a "sense of inner divinity" to Tracy gains considerable cultural resonance. In view of Tracy's strong identification with her mother, her alleged pretense to divinity may be understood as a dedication to the higher self that descends from the particular Christian tradition constituting this family's heritage.[37]

How are we to interpret, then, Tracy's dismay at her father's philandering? The opening scenes quickly establish that she is an exemplary member of her class, impeccably bred and pampered, impossibly demanding toward others as well as herself. At the same time, she is beset by vague discontent with the world of privilege into which she was born and yearns to be "useful in this world." This unease goes some way toward explaining the failure of Tracy's first marriage to her childhood sweetheart Dexter, whose pedigree is comparable to hers, and her subsequent engagement to a graceless and obtuse man who literally rose from the bottom (of a coal mine, that is) to become general manager of Quaker State Coals, owned by Tracy's father. Generally regarded as "presidential timber," George Kittredge now harbors political ambitions and intends his marriage to Tracy to "represent something" of "national importance." Barry's play goes into considerable detail on the topic of Kittredge's politics (38). He is portrayed as a charismatic labor leader whose fame as a New Deal "national hero" is attributed to the feat of securing miners' wages with a move anticipating the Guffey Coal Act, a controversial piece of pro-labor legislation passed in 1935 that opponents decried as a lapse into "communism, pure and simple."[38] While the only answer the film offers to the question of how Tracy and Kittredge first met is Dexter's sardonic comment "Heaven brought them together, I suppose," the play locates the site of their first encounter as far from heaven as one could imagine:

> Tracy: Never in my life will I forget that first night I saw you all those wonderful faces, and the torchlights, and the way his voice boomed—
> George: You see, I'm really a spellbinder.—That's the way I got her.
> Tracy: *(Crossing up to George)* Except it was me who got you! (39)

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[37] The Quaker roots of the family are foregrounded in the Philip Barry play. When Tracy asks her brother why Sidney Kidd did not choose another venerable family to showcase "fashionable Philadelphia," he replies: "We go even further back: It's those Quakers."

[38] That characterization came from Arkansas Congressman Claude Fuller and is quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval: 1935-1936, The Age of Roosevelt*, vol. 3 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003 [originally 1960]), p. 335. Pennsylvania Senator Joseph F. Guffey's "Bitumenous Coal Conservation Act" provided for a commission regulating minimum prices, wages, and hours in the coal mining industry and gave workers the right to bargain collectively. In 1936, the Supreme Court declared the Guffey bill unconstitutional on the grounds that it allowed for too much interference by the federal government. See Joseph McKenna, *Franklin Roosevelt and the Great Constitutional War: The Court-Packing Crisis of 1937* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), pp. 197-209.

A spellbinding agitator risen from the darkest pits, Kittredge is shown here as a socialist Nibelung of sorts. His bid for power, like Alberich's, depends on a ring, namely, on the wedding ring that holds the promise of entry into the highest echelons of society.[39] To obtain the latter, however, he does not need the alliance of a deceived Siegfried, for this Philadelphia Brünnhilde is eager to marry beneath her station. Given that the engagement between Tracy and Kittredge originated in the hellish world of a coal mine, it is telling that in Barry's play her eventual re-marriage to the man named C. K. Dexter Haven prompts the rapturous last words "Oh, Father, it's Heaven!" (120).

The pretense to divinity to which both Dexter and her father object in Tracy appears to be a spiritually anchored egalitarianism that refuses to heed the difference between the depths of vulgar coarseness and the heights of nobility. In other words, these male characters are attributing to her an exalted, quasi-religious brand of individualism that disregards distinctions of class. Indeed, Dexter's claim that George is "beneath her" leaves her outraged that anyone "in this day and age" could speak in such elitist terms; and to Mike's accusation of class arrogance she replies: "What have classes to do with it? What do they matter except for the people in them?" The gist of the charge leveled at her by her first husband and her father is that such uncompromising rejection of the contingencies of provenance in the name of spiritual self-sufficiency stifles compassion no less than sexual passion (the link between the two being a crucial Wagnerian theme).

Tracy's instruction is facilitated by the arrival of the two penniless journalists whom the family is blackmailed into hosting for the duration of the wedding festivities, namely Mike and his photographer friend Liz. Although Tracy initially treats them with supercilious mocking, she cannot tame her curiosity about these ambassadors from an exotic world in which people's most urgent concerns have to do with "food and a roof" above their head. Condescending curiosity gives way to outright admiration once she learns that Mike has published a volume of stories. His sense of calling and hard-won pride fill her with a sense of her inferiority, for she is all too aware of the reasons for his contempt for the upper classes. A reversal of social hierarchy occurs first when Mike proudly rejects Tracy's offer to patronize his art, and later, on the eve of her wedding, when she lashes out at him for being an "intellectual snob," a "mass of prejudices," "so much thought and so little feeling."

But this charge and her insinuations that he lacks experience with women should be understood against the background of a kinship between them that she has already noticed in reading his stories: both of them "put the toughness on" to save their skin. And conversely, Mike senses the humanity underneath Tracy's icy exterior and objects when Dexter proposes the appellation "goddess" for her. In the most overtly emotional scene of the film, Mike has this to say to Tracy:

> Mike: You're wonderful. There's a magnificence in you, Tracy. […] A magnificence that comes out of your eyes and your voice... in the way you stand there, in the way you walk. You're lit from within, Tracy. You've got fires banked down in you... hearth fires and holocausts!
> Tracy: I don't seem to you made of bronze?

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[39] See the father's sarcastic comment on Kittredge's ambition: "That fiancé of yours roared out of here on two wheels. Does he, by any chance, ever walk anywhere? […] I have a feeling he'll take that ring tomorrow and go right through center with it."

Mike: No. You're made out of flesh and blood. That's the blank, unholy surprise of it. You're the golden girl, Tracy... full of life and warmth and delight.

Even in 1940, the juxtaposition of "hearth fires and holocausts" must have had a jarringly dissonant ring to it—as though it was merely a matter of insignificant detail whether Tracy would turn into a humble servant of the goddess of marriage or a Wagnerian heroine unleashing world-conflagration. For the moment, since Tracy proves susceptible to Mike's confession, the stage is set for a happy ending that unites Mike and Tracy by overcoming the class divide. A neat counterpart to this utopian couple is suggested, moreover, by the comraderie that develops between Dexter and Liz. There are moments in the movie when everything points in the direction of a swap dictated by elective affinities, which would result in two couples of differing experiential maturity (as in Goethe's novel), both of them straddling the class divide.

Yet the film ends up frustrating the utopian anticipation it has provoked. Although Tracy becomes drunk, Mike remains a gentleman and nothing of consequence happens between the two. At the decisive moment, Tracy declines Mike's touchingly naïve marriage offer with a curious explanation: "Because I don't think Liz would like it. And I'm not sure you would. And I'm even a little doubtful about myself." To be sure, Tracy herself would seem to have reason to be more than a little doubtful as to whether C. K. Dexter Haven is the man to offer her a safe haven. She ends up remarrying him all the same, presumably because she has come to see that a safe haven is not what she needs.

We are thus asked to re-interpret the previous night's over-the-top romantic dream in an ironic light, as a mirage engendered by Tracy's narcissistic fantasy of overcoming class. The ending of the film suggests that Tracy was closer to the truth when she accused Mike of snobbery on account of his contempt for Kittredge. This feeling of contempt surprises Mike himself, inasmuch as his class resentment toward his debonair rival would seem to make him a natural ally of Kittredge. Resentment toward Dexter, however, gives place to a surprising solidarity. If Mike finds himself concurring with Dexter that Tracy "can't marry that guy" and dismisses Kittridge as a "fake man of the people" who is "not even smart," conversely Dexter's affinity with Mike is signaled by the presence in his room of Mike's book. It is this surprising affinity that makes possible Mike's participation as best man at Dexter's and Tracy's impromptu wedding.

In view of the rapprochement between Dexter and Mike, Tracy's mistake would seem to consist in being overly concerned with transcendence of the divide between the rich and the poor and losing sight of a supposedly more important distinction between discerning people who care about nobility of spirit and egalitarian boors who don't. If the former group comprises poor writers such as Mike as well as rich readers such as Dexter, the latter comprises the corrupt media mogul Sidney Kidd as well as the upstanding and upwardly mobile Kittridge. The former's cynical self-description as "protector of American democracy" and the latter's reputation for being "political timber" indicate their shared investment in an egalitarian type of democracy. Mike recognizes as much when he dismisses Kittredge as a "five-cent edition of Sidney Kidd," a characterization whose aptness is intimated by the very similarity between the two names.

The brief against the leveling egalitarianism embodied by Kidd and Kittredge is summarized by Dexter when he rebuts Tracy's accusation of elitism: "I'm talking about the difference in mind and spirit. You could marry Mac, the night watchman. I'd cheer for you. Kittredge is not for you." This suggests that the main fault-line is not the one

separating socio-economic classes. Rather, the distinction that matters is between conflicting ethical stances: a generous ethos that makes allowances for "human frailty" and values spontaneous responsiveness is pitted against a sterile, narrow-minded, and more often than not hypocritical moralism that insists on bloodless laws and ideals (as Kittredge does) or invokes them for purposes of political or financial gain (as Kidd does).

The political stakes involved in this conflict are even clearer in Barry's play than in the movie, which downplays them to some extent. At a crucial point in the play, the characters half-jokingly adopt the language of Plato's "myth of the metals," the politically expeditious fiction that humans were formed inside the earth's womb from metals of differing value.[40] According to Socrates in *The Republic*, philosophers must propagate this myth to protect the purity of the ruling elite from the corrupting effects of democracy. Such commingling of base and noble is precisely the danger averted through the re-marriage between Tracy and Dexter.

This way of thinking about the shifting alignments among the characters of *The Philadelphia Story* converges with Stanley Cavell's meditations on the movie, though it also leads me to take issue with some of his remarks. Given Cavell's rejection of the commonplace view that Hollywood comedies of remarriage tell "fairytales for the Depression,"[41] it is remarkable that his most extensive discussion of *The Philadelphia Story*, in the 1981 book *Pursuits of Happiness*, issues in the following "daydream":

> My dream of the story about Philadelphia is a story about people convening for a covenant in or near Philadelphia and debating the nature and the relation of the classes from which they come. It is not certain who will end up as signatories of the covenant, a principal issue being whether the upper class, call it the aristocracy, is to survive and if so what role it may play in a constitution committed to liberty. The significance of the relation of *The Philadelphia Story* to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would on this point be the interpretation of aristocrats living in woods on the outskirts of a capital city, as beings inhabiting another realm, a medium of magic, or call it money, which has some mysterious connection with our ordinary lives: we cannot be at peace and clear if they are in conflict and confusion, but it is hard to say whether their turmoil causes ours or ours theirs.[42]

On Cavell's reading, the movie participates in a "conversation or fantasy" about "natural aristocracy" as old as American democracy. Underlying this notion is what Cavell describes as the impulse to believe "that one human being may be better than another and yet to deny (on pain of espousing some repudiated mode of aristocracy) that there is any particular way in which one is better, anything one is better at." This dangerous-sounding idea, he perceptively notes, is "bound to haunt a society whose idea of itself requires that it repudiate the hierarchies and enforcements of the European past and make a new beginning."[43]

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[40] Plato, *Republic*, 412c-418e. In Barry's play, Liz asks Sandy: "Is Mr. Kittredge pure gold, Lord?" Sandy replies: "We must never doubt that, Missy." In reply to his question about Mike, Liz says: "Percentage of base metal. Alloy […] which imparts a certain shape and firmness."

[41] Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 103.

[42] *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 153 ff.

[43] Ibid., p. 155-156.

Despite the misleading connotations of the attribute "natural," it is crucial for Cavell to establish that the aristocracy thus described is not definable in terms of either natural endowment or historically inherited privilege. Rather, it is a matter of aspiring to realize one's "genius" or "best self," an aspiration whose goal Cavell attempts to clarify in terms borrowed from Matthew Arnold. Relying on Arnold's dichotomy between a "Hebraism" stipulating "strictness of conscience" and a "Hellenism" celebrating readiness to act spontaneously on one's desires, Cavell outlines a basic conflict between a universalistic morality conceived along Kantian lines and the sort of individualist ethics envisioned by Emerson and Nietzsche. The application of this dichotomy to *The Philadelphia Story* yields the thesis that "Dexter Hellenizes" while "Tracy Hebraizes." Accordingly, and this is the upshot of Cavell's fantasy, the ending of the movie intimates "a proposed marriage or balance between Western culture's two forces of authority, so that American mankind can refind its object, its dedication to a more perfect union, toward the perfected human community, its right to the pursuit of happiness."[44]

Significantly, Cavell stops short of declaring in unequivocal terms his "waking relation" to this daydream. The strongest claim he hazards is that the movie adumbrates the ideal of a natural aristocracy by presenting Hepburn and Grant as paragons of freedom raised to clear visibility.[45] Cavell admits that this way of considering the two stars comes close to adopting the same position of sterile worship toward Hepburn and Grant in which Kittredge finds himself vis-à-vis Tracy, and he confesses to being unsure whether we can escape this position.[46] We can, however, gather some clues as to how such idolatry might be avoided from lines of thought developed by Cavell in other, related, contexts. I am thinking in particular of his claim that movie stars represent "types" of individuality, that is, peculiar ways of inhabiting social roles that cannot be reduced to those generic roles themselves;[47] or the claim that Emersonian perfectionism requires privileged members of a flawed democracy to live "in an illustrious monarchy," as "examples of human partiality" that remain "open to the further self, in oneself and in others, which means holding oneself in knowledge of the need for change; which means, being one who lives in promise, as a sign […]"[48]

In view of these remarks it is not surprising that Cavell's 1981 chapter on *The Philadelphia Story* should end on a note of uncertainty and openness by acknowledging the ambiguity of the concluding picture of the married couple. In a later reflection on remarriage comedy, Cavell strikes an even more tentative note vis-à-vis such aphoristic final images when he suggests that the self-reflexive gesture typically ending remarriage comedies has the effect of reminding us of our responsibilities as witnesses, thereby recalling us to our "unfinished business." "So we are challenged," writes Cavell, "either

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[44] Ibid., pp. 158-159. To complicate matters, the Arnoldian dichotomy overlaps with a split which has been seen as internal to Greek culture, a theme that surfaces not only in the young Nietzsche's contrast between the tragic and the Socratic worldview, but also in his insistence that the noble poetry of Plato cannot be reduced to the vulgar rationalism of Socrates. See also Robert Pippin's remarks on "the old Platonic contrast between justice and eros" in "Truth and Lies in the Early Nietzsche," *Idealism and Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 329.

[45] *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 157.

[46] Ibid., p. 160.

[47] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film. Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 33.

[48] *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 125.

to dismiss the pair's partiality with one another—these pursuits of happiness—as illusion or in some other way irrelevant to everyday life or else to let their foundings of partiality challenge us to find our own."[49]

Such allowances to uncertainty notwithstanding, I do not think that Cavell manages to preempt the charge of Utopian naivité by suggesting (as he does at the end of his chapter on *The Philadelphia Story*) that anyone raising such a crude objection would be playing resentful George to Cavell's nobly sophisticated Dexter. Cavell's daydream remains problematic inasmuch as it raises doubts whether the marriage between Tracy and Dexter can bear the burden of an allegorical reading and whether we have grounds for confidence in the mutually transformative power of the bond between them. With regard to the latter question, it is worth noting that no concession is made in the movie to the Hebraic-Kantian position, which takes a heavy beating from the Hellenic-Nietzschean one. Indeed the former becomes a butt of jokes with George's parting words, which reveal his egalitarianism to be a guise for class resentment. In the resolution of the movie's plot, the poor aristocrats of the mind and the moneyed ones of the world join in their shared contempt for egalitarians and stop suspecting one another of snobbery and arrogance; their rivalry becomes a matter of chivalrous sportsmanship and their improvised alliance enables them to defeat both Kittredge and Kidd. It is thus hard to see how *The Philadelphia Story* might point the way towards a synthesis between the two outlooks. The privileging of the "Hellenic" side in Cavell's daydream of reconciliation—very much in keeping with its Arnoldian precursor—is even more conspicuous in his latest book on film, in which the revival of Emersonian perfectionism turns on a reclaiming of the rights of inclination in the face of Kantian rigorism and a defense of Nietzsche's Emersonianism against Kantian objections raised by Rawls.[50]

To be sure, Cavell can scarcely be faulted for insensitivity to the claims of Hebraic-Kantian universalism or for papering over the dubious class politics of Romantic comedy. After all, he goes to great lengths to argue that the orientation he terms "Emersonian Perfectionism" is not an elitist alternative to democracy but a criticism of democracy from within that actually presupposes and fosters participation in democratic politics.[51] Moreover, Cavell has repeatedly grappled with the problem of "consent from above" facing relatively advantaged citizens in a society whose compliance with the principles of justice is "good enough" at best but far from perfect.[52] Since an imperfectly just state of society cannot but compromise even its morally "unimpeachable" citizens, the question facing such individuals is how to avoid cynically excusing injustice, quietistically withdrawing into apolitical self-cultivation, or bitterly repudiating democracy. In fact, Cavell's wish to accommodate an individualist ethics of authenticity within the moral framework of democratic justice is very much in evidence in his most recent discussion of *The Philadelphia Story*, where he concedes the rightness of George's gleeful prophecy about the demise of the upper crust and notes that Dexter's ideal of a "first-class human being" puts him on "dangerous moral ground."[53]

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[49] Ibid., p. 126.
[50] Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters On a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 119ff, 182.
[51] *Conditions Handsome* and *Unhandsome,* p. 3.
[52] Ibid., pp. 18, 27-31, 106-107, 124-125; *Cities of Words*, pp. 179-189.
[53] *Cities of Words*, p. 47.

Missing, however, from Cavell's meditations on *The Philadelphia Story* is a clear recognition of the extent to which the movie flies in the face of the very concern with social justice whose claims on Emersonian Perfectionism he himself has repeatedly stressed. For not only does the movie refrain from sententiously preaching about the need to transcend socio-economic class, it effectively dismisses any concern with class as *ressentiment*-driven and counterproductive. It would have us believe that the only way to make the class divide irrelevant is by giving due recognition to "class" in a sense that has nothing to do with socio-economic stratification and everything to do with "quality of mind." Thus Mike renounces Tracy in favor of Dexter, having recognized his nobility of mind; and thus Tracy renounces Mike in favor of Liz, thereby earning the latter's gratitude for her noble-mindedness. In this manner *The Philadelphia Story* concludes with the triumph of an aristocratic ethos transcending socio-economic differences over the base egalitarianism of mass democracy.

The father's rebuke and his reconciliation with Tracy should be understood against the background of this agenda, and conversely, those scenes cast their shadow over the latter. Remarking on the marginalization of the mother in the movie, Cavell cites Freud's claim that the pivotal point in female psychosexual development occurs with the transition from an original, pre-Oedipal, "attachment" to the mother to Oedipal "dependence" on the father.[54] For women, unlike for men, the Oedipal stage is not something to be overcome but, according to Freud, the proper end of "normal" development. In considering the relevance of this theory to *The Philadelphia Story,* Cavell recalls Freud's claim that entry into the Oedipal stage often coincides with the transition in a woman's life from a libidinally over-charged first marriage to a more balanced second one.[55] Yet if it is true that *The Philadelphia Story* charts this very development, then what Cavell (in 1981) calls a "daydream" begins to sound positively nightmarish. For, apart from the by now widely recognized implausibility of the notion of penis envy at the center of Freud's theory, the normative thrust of that theory is notoriously hard to reconcile with any idea of gender equality.

Indeed in a later work of his Cavell himself arrives at a tacit criticism of the Freudian account and a correspondingly more somber view of *The Philadelphia Story*. *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* from 1990 includes a chapter on Kleist's *The Marquise of O…* and its cinematic adaptation by Eric Rohmer that begins by noting the striking affinity between Kleist's story and Hollywood remarriage comedy. Crucial to Cavell's reflections in this chapter is the claim that these works portray marriage as a "miniature" "emblem" or "allegory" of the political community, thereby positing a structural connection between unjust class relations and asymmetrical gender relations.[56] Viewed in such a light, the famously lustful reconciliation between the marquise and her father in Kleist's story signals not just a failure to overcome the state of nature (i.e. incest) within the family but also, by implication, a failure to achieve the kind of social contract

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[54] Sigmund Freund, "Über weibliche Sexualität," *Studienausgabe* vol. 5 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1972). Up until this late essay, Freud expressed bafflement and hesitation in the face of the female variant of the Oedipal complex. See "Der Untergang des Ödipuskomplexes," *Studienausgab*e vol. 5, p. 249 ff.
[55] "Über weibliche Sexualität," p. 280, 284.
[56] *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 103, 105, 117, 122.

on the basis of which humans might negotiate their separateness from one another without excessive violence or indifference.[57]

What Cavell describes here in terms of a persistence of the family romance and the "absence of society" suggests an important emendation to his earlier take on *The Philadelphia Story*. The brutal lesson administered by her father prompts Tracy to embark on the precarious process of renouncing her so-called divinity and becoming human. She grows impatient with the persona she has developed inside her "ivory tower" of wealth and discipline, and it dawns upon her that the worshipping tribute paid to her by George is not what she wants. In an act of atonement for her former impatience with Dexter's alcoholism, she dutifully drinks herself to oblivion on the eve of her wedding and by such artificial means attains to spontaneity of feeling. As a result, she first catches herself repeating verbatim to Mike the same admonition to have regard for human weakness that was earlier addressed to her by Dexter; and the next morning, she cannot recall what transpired between Mike and her and mistakenly infers that they must have had sex. Born of an intoxication she has inflicted on herself in response to the joint demands of her father and her ex-husband, these lapses from self-mastery compel Tracy—not unlike the Marquise of O…—to accept her fallibility as well as theirs.

What this acceptance entails follows neatly from the didactic premises of the movie. It entails acceptance of the father's weakness and appreciation of his need for his daughter's unconditional devotion. It entails abandonment of the fantasy that marriage might serve as a means of escaping one's class. And, of course, it entails re-marrying Dexter in acknowledgment both of the inescapability of class and of the contingency of every marital bond. In the concluding scene, when Tracy agrees to the idea of re-marrying Dexter, she obeys his idea in dazed disbelief, as if under hypnotic influence. Having just resolved to take responsibility for the situation—with the equivocal words "Whatever it is, I'll say it. I won't be gotten out of anything anymore"—she ends up repeating in her announcement to the stunned guests the cues given by Dexter. Autonomy is here reduced to saying yes to "whatever" Dexter dictates.

The sinister resonances of this scene are owing in part to an undercurrent of violence in the movie's portrayal of Dexter, which lends further substance to Cavell's suggestion about the affinities between Kleist's story and remarriage comedy. We are barely a minute into the movie and no one has said a word yet when, in jarring disconnect with the jaunty musical score, Dexter grabs Tracy by the face and shoves her in through the entrance door. Later on he taunts Tracy by letting on that he used to envy heavy-drinking, wife-beating writers. The lesson he goes on to administer to Tracy is similar to the father's inasmuch as it, too, combines self-incrimination with a sadism that is half impulsive and half calculated. If the father chalks up his adulterous liaison to his frustrated need for filial devotion, Dexter suggests that his infatuation with Tracy was a matter of male vanity provoked by an icy fortress of strength. Nothing could be further from Cary Grant, to be sure, than the projection of brute aggression. With his unique combination of poise and awkwardness, elegance and obnoxiousness, he conveys the sense of someone who has set out methodically to give Tracy trouble, and to do so as much for her as for his own sake—once again in a way reminiscent of the father's calculated cruelty. The only moment of intimacy between Dexter and Tracy occurs when he finds her in drunken slumber inside a car and huddles next to her. Shot in close-up,

[57] Ibid., p. 122.

this moment is undoubtedly poignant, yet it does not quite give us enough for imagining how these two people might live together on a day-to-day basis. This very lack of determinacy may be taken, of course, to bode well for the durability of their marriage—at least if, as Cavell suggests, marriage without religious ratification can only be an ongoing conversation to which the parties must over and over again affirm their commitment.

If the particular marriage between Tracy and Dexter has a better prospect of enduring the second time around, it is presumably also because in improvising their wedding Dexter has hit upon the idea of borrowing for Tracy the wedding ring of her mother. The repetition involved in Tracy re-marrying the man she previously divorced thus turns out to depend on the fact that this re-marriage repeats, with a change, the matrimonial ritual that joined her parents in the first place. The borrowing of the ring draws attention to the figure of the mother. One of the first things we find out about her is that the humiliation inflicted on her through her husband's affair establishes a powerful basis for identification between Tracy and her. Although it would be natural enough for Mrs. Lord to displace her resentment toward her husband upon Dexter, several scenes in the movie highlight her affection for him, which he clearly reciprocates (calling Mrs. Lord "darling" and embracing her with the tenderness of a lover). Considered against this background, the borrowing of the mother's ring creates the impression that in re-marrying Tracy, Dexter also, in a manner of speaking, marries her mother. But since, as Cavell notes, the mother is increasingly sidelined as the plot progresses, the stronger implication seems to be that the object intended to symbolize Tracy's commitment to Dexter can fulfill that function only insofar as it seals Tracy's symbolic usurpation of the humbled mother's role and the father's rejuvenating second marriage to his daughter.[58]

In the familial world governed by the aristocratic ethos, the daughter remains a pawn in her father's hands, unable to attain the degree of freedom she would require in order to redeem his failings. Whereas Wotan's grandson Siegfried must first break Wotan's spear before he can awaken Brünnhilde from the death-like slumber imposed by Wotan, Tracy's recovery from her amnesia-inducing drunkenness sends her on the morning after straight back into the arms of Dexter, a man who needs to brave no ring of fire, whose outlook is barely distinguishable from the father's, and who actually ends up protecting, rather than challenging, the father's authority. Indeed, as the borrowing of the wedding ring shows, the re-marriage between Tracy and Dexter can also be construed as

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[58] The significance of this borrowing can be brought out with the help of a contrast drawn to the novella "Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder" embedded in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. Unlike the protagonists of the novel, the young lovers of the novella must first become estranged from one another and leave behind their parents' world, exposing themselves to violent passion and elemental peril before they can be reunited in a way that compels their parents' blessing. "For it is certain," writes Walter Benjamin, "that the lovers step out maturely from the ties with their parental home, and no less certain that they transform its inner power"; which is why "for both of them [*für einander*] not only the abyss of sex but even that of family has closed." ("Goethe's Elective Affinities," *Selected Writings* vol. 1, trans. Stanley Corngold [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004], p. 331; *Gesammelte Schriften* I, 1, p. 169 ff.). When the protagonists return to their stunned parents in wedding clothes borrowed from the anonymous young couple that gave them shelter in the utopian seclusion of the island, these borrowed clothes are said to fit them perfectly and dress them "from the inside out" ("von innen heraus"). The same cannot be said of the wedding ring in *The Philadelphia Story*, which rather appears emblematic of a stultifying order that short-circuits and domesticates the transformative energies unleashed in Goethe's novella.

a double marriage joining the young couple to the wife's parents. This unsettling logic represents the underside of the humanity into which Tracy is initiated.[59]

In sum, we can agree with Cavell's suggestion that the the family romance staged in *The Philadelphia Story* roughly corresponds to the Oedipal matrix as envisioned by Freud. The same cannot be said about the relationship between Brünnhilde and Wotan. Suffice to recall here Freud's controversial claims about the centrality of castration to the child's psychic development. Strikingly, in Wagner's cycle it is Wotan, the paradigmatic father figure, whose rule begins with an event analogous to castration (the sacrifice of an eye for the sake of marriage and contractual order) that prefigures the castration-like event marking its end (the breaking of Wotan's spear by his grandson Siegfried). The pivotal event interposed between these two instances of symbolic castration is Wotan's farewell from his daughter, whose deeper meaning as an act of renunciation can be grasped only against the background of a paternal love that represents the obverse of the daughter's Oedipal love for the father.

The subsequent unfolding of Wagnerian family romance is at odds with Freud's developmental account in equally crucial ways. Through his confrontation with the incomprehensible otherness of woman in the person of Brünnhilde, Siegfried learns for the first time "what fear is," and the fear that grips him makes him call out to the unknown mother who died in giving birth to him. Brünnhilde responds to him by assuming the role of a surrogate mother and declaring her love for Siegfried to be the emotionally comprehended legacy of Wotan's "thought" (i.e., of his plan to arrange his own succession). Yet this understanding of her own feeling awakens in her a wounded sense of loss, and she now mourns the lost protection of her father, expressing shame over the loss of her identity as her father's daughter. It is to protect Siegfried from a similar self-loss that she begs him not to touch her, so that she might preserve the intactness of a clear brook reflecting his image back to him. If, then, Siegfried's fear of Brünnhilde made him seek refuge in the idea of a fantasmatic mother, Brünnhilde's wish to remain a mother to him is bound up with her reluctance to give up her attachment to her father. Importantly, however, the latter attachment is not Oedipally defined, at least not in the strictly Freudian sense: the reason for her attachment to her father is not that she takes herself to be a castrated child needing compensation from the father, but that she knows her father to be castrated in a certain sense, in need of redemption.[60] The

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[59] The streak of "mean-spirited comedy" is noted by Maria DiBattista, who suggests that "the film means to chasten Tracy precisely where Tocqueville might have commended her—for having cultivated the habits of self-command." DiBattista also notes the troubling class politics of the film. (*Fast-Talking Dames* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001], p. 343).

[60] Here is the place to note a point of apparent convergence with the Freudian account: the absence of any recognition on Brünnhilde's part of her ties to Erda seems consistent with Freud's claim that the persistence of a woman's "normal" dependence on the father results in "a particularly implacable repression" affecting the archaic dimension ("Vorzeit") of attachment to the mother ("Über die weibliche Sexualität," p. 276). Yet whereas Freud explains this repression by recourse to the daughter's idea that she was castrated by her mother, in the Wagnerian version of family romance the daughter must remain silent about her mother because, already prior to her conception, the father was already "castrated" through his marriage to another woman whom the bastard daughter must also respect—this marriage being a paradigmatic case of the sort of self-binding whose deleterious effects Wotan seeks to preempt by begetting Brünnhilde with Erda in the first place. A deeper reason for Brünnhilde's obliviousness to her mother may be found in the fact that she was conceived in an act of rape, making Erda's motherhood involuntary and, from the daughter's point of view, incomplete.

paradox is that the path to the father's eventual redemption is not cleared until Siegfried's and Brünnhilde's passion for each other overpowers the fantasmatic attachment of each to the parent of the opposite sex.

The point of this comparison between the two father-daughter relationships cannot be to applaud Wagner's avoidance of a misogynistic construal of family romance, in contrast to the broadly Freudian version presented in *The Philadelphia Story*. If Wotan depends on Brünnhilde for his redemption, her nobility would be inconceivable without him. Slavoj Žižek is right to describe Wagner's idealization of "the eternal feminine" as the "fantasmatic support of the actual subordination of women."[61] Yet if Erda's rape by Wotan may be viewed as the primordial scene of such subordination, it is surely one of the remarkable paradoxes of the *Ring* that this violent act of mastery engenders a being whose free agency defies his will and in so doing brings about his redemption.

The above comparison between the two variants of family romance helps explain a broader difference between the status of paternal authority in the *Ring* and in *The Philadelphia Story*. In Wagner's version of the father-daughter conflict both protagonists undergo profound transformation. By contrast, the educational process charted in *The Philadelphia Story* affects the daughter alone, whose rebellion gives way to meek submission, and the father's position remains inert. To be sure, the resolution of the plot does not vindicate any specific value or view associated with the father, other than the platitude about the importance of "an understanding heart." Yet the conclusion of the movie reinstates the father as an indispensable authority figure in the background (literally there in the closing shot). This quasi-ritual validation of a static and ultimately empty paternal authority should be seen in marked contrast to the deepening of insight undergone by Wotan as his authority collapses.

We may infer the political significance of the father's triumph in the movie from the scene of reconciliation between father and daughter that precedes the wedding:

> Tracy: I love you, Father.
> Mr. Lord: I love you too.
> Tracy: Never in my life have I been so full of love before.
> Mr. Lord: Come along. Come along.
> Tracy: Wait. How do I look?
> Mr. Lord: Like a queen. Like a goddess.
> Tracy: And you know how I feel?
> Mr. Lord: How?
> Tracy: Like a human. Like a human being.
> Mr. Lord: Do you know how I feel?
> Tracy: How?
> Mr. Lord: Proud.

Like a queen: this is how Mike described Tracy to Dexter earlier in the movie, contradicting the latter's characterization of her as a goddess. The father's casual equivocation between "queen" and "goddess" in this closing exchange is hard to reconcile with his and Dexter's earlier condemnation of Tracy's "sense of inner divinity." Yet we should understand his remark in view of a contrast implied by Tracy between appearance and inner truth: she "looks" like a goddess but "feels" like a human being, and somebody

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[61] Slavoj Žižek, "There is no Sexual Relationship: Wagner as Lacanian," *New German Critique* (Autumn 1996), p. 24.

who looks like a goddess but feels like a human is just what royalty is supposed to be. The father's blurring of the distinction between queen and goddess agrees with the fact that the wedding ceremony is supposed to be administered by a certain tautologically named "parson Parsons" in the parlor of the Lords' mansion, in a ritual which thus conjoins religious authority with the quasi-dynastic continuity of the family.

Let me attempt to summarize my argument thus far. The *Ring* and *The Philadelphia Story* suggest basic alternatives for paternal authority in the wake of the collapse of a theistic universe. Wagner's cycle bursts the confines of the Oedipal framework in its staging of the breakdown of an aristocratic vision. *The Philadelphia Story* vindicates a vestigial aristocracy that maintains the upper hand by perpetuating the Oedipal nexus and suppressing an allegedly narcissistic impulse to transcend the human.

IV.

With this contrast in mind, I now want to return to the Wagnerian citation at the end of *The Philadelphia Story*. Evoking as it does the succession crisis into which a Christian dynasty has been plunged by adherents of pagan faith, the reference to *Lohengrin* may be taken to suggest that the aristocratic ethos whose triumph we are witnessing may not, in the end, have the resources required for closing the chasm separating the all-too-human mess from divine purity. Seth Lord's casual equivocation notwithstanding, "queen" and "goddess" are not, in the end, compatible roles. Their incompatibility is, at any rate, one of the lessons suggested by the unraveling of the bond between Elsa and Lohengrin. To fulfill the role of the Duke (or, as he would prefer, "leader") of Brabant, Lohengrin would need to surrender his divine vocation. Significantly, although the "prohibition to ask" that Lohengrin imposes on Elsa concerns his provenance, name, and "kind" ("Art"), it is the third feature that proves crucial. In a political complement to Elsa's psychological manipulation by Ortrud, Telramund's intrigues are specifically meant to cast doubt upon Lohengrin's social pedigree; and when Elsa finally succumbs to the compulsion to break Lohengrin's three-fold prohibition, the crescendo-like sequence of her questions reaches its dramatic and musical climax in the query concerning his kind ("Wie ist deine Art?"). The key secret about Lohengrin is neither his name nor his provenance but the fact that he is neither a noble man nor a commoner but an altogether different kind of being.

The relevance of this issue at the heart of *Lohengrin* is confirmed by the repetition, with a difference, of the *Lohengrin* citation in the movie launched two years later as a sequel to *The Philadelphia Story*.[62] Directed by George Stevens, *The Woman of the Year* (1942) paired Hepburn with Spencer Tracy, the actor she had originally wanted MGM to recruit for the role of Dexter and whose last name—improbably enough—coincided with the first name of the heroine who had rescued Hepburn's career. Hepburn and Tracy actually became a couple during the shooting and remained together until Tracy's death. Similarly to its precursor, *The Woman of the Year* was also produced by Joseph Mankiewicz under the aegis of MGM, and once again, Franz Waxman composed the musical score.

More important, however, are the thematic connections. Here too, marriage is threatened by the gap between a dauntingly strong heroine played by Hepburn and a male

[62] The theatrical trailer explicitly announces *The Woman of the Year* as a sequel to *The Philadelphia Story*.

protagonist who embodies ordinary vulnerable humanity. In this sequel, however, the former type is represented by a celebrated and hyper-sophisticated journalist involved in the international drama of the Second World War, while the latter type recurs in the figure of a down-to-earth baseball journalist apparently unconcerned with the world outside America. Tensions between the two come to a head when their wedding night is ruined by the sudden arrival of the Hepburn character's protegé, a resistance leader from Europe who is on the run from Gestapo agents, and his colorful retinue of exiled followers. As Dr. Lubbeck perches himself on Tracy's bedside and the two switch to German to discuss developments, the Tracy character is reduced to an awkward, and livid, intruder. In this wildly comic scene, as in the tragic climax of *Lohengrin*, a breakdown occurs in the precarious transition from the public world of politics to the intimacy of marriage, and here too the transition fails, at least initially, because the protagonist cannot abandon a lofty calling for the sake of an ordinariness that might be shared in matrimony.[63]

In *Woman of the Year*, the heroine is finally converted to ordinary humanity after witnessing the marriage vows between her widowed father and the sister of her late mother. And, crucially, the importance of this conversion is marked by the Hepburn character's sudden flight of inspiration: as her father and her aunt proceed to the private chapel in which a priest awaits them, she sits down in front of the harmonium and begins to play—what else?—the bridal march from *Lohengrin*. It is not by chance that this citation occurs on the brink of tragedy, during a period of estrangement between the two protagonists. In this (later) Hepburn vehicle, the intimation of tragedy through the *Lohengrin* citation serves as a cathartic admonition, which finally prompts the Hepburn character's definitive espousal of humanity. In *The Philadelphia Story*, by contrast, the evocation of Lohengrin's tragedy can play no such pedagogical role in the plot, since it coincides with the protagonists' wedding at the end of the movie. Here the Wagner reference casts an ominous shadow upon the seemingly joyous ending of the movie, evoking a bleak alternative or perhaps a dark sequel to the plot. The citation thus becomes an ironic counterpoint to the apparent triumphalism of the ending.

This leads me, finally, to an evaluative question that properly belongs to the critical register. Apart from the delight we take in *The Philadelphia Story*, is the ironic gesture with which it ends one that we can endorse without reservation? By drawing attention to the movie's unsettling subtext I hope to have shown why it is so hard to avoid this question, however banal it sounds. That raising such questions need not diminish the enchanting aesthetic effect of a work is one of the important lessons we can learn from Wagner, epitomized by the obsessive *Hassliebe* for Wagner at the heart of Nietzsche's work and most incisively expressed by Thomas Mann. In 1918 Mann noted that his passion for Wagner's art was in no way diminished by the alertness of his critical reflection. On the contrary, Mann wrote,

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[63] I leave aside the questions raised by the seemingly paradoxical association of the Hepburn character's psychological aloofness with her internationalist commitment on the one hand, and, on the other, of the Tracy character's longing for connection with his isolationist temper. Using a variety of subtle means to foreground the ominousness of the global situation in 1942 (e.g., a Greek refugee child, a prominently placed map of Nazi-occupied Europe), the movie clearly has the didactic purpose of reconciling "Americanness" with international involvement.

> […] preoccupation with [Wagner's music] almost becomes a vice, it becomes *moral*, it becomes a kind of unsparing, ethical abandonment to something harmful and consuming precisely when such a preoccupation is not enthusiastically faithful but amalgamated with analysis—an analysis even the most malicious insights of which turn out in the end to be nothing but a form of glorification and an expression of passion.[64]

To bring the proper blend of analysis and enchantment to the *Lohengrin* reference at the end of *The Philadelphia Story*, we need to consider a further dimension of Wagner's notoriously problematic transitional work. Not surprisingly, Wagner's concern with the fraught relationship between the human and the divine was closely bound up with his all-consuming ambition to devise a radically new form of art. In a striking passage in his 1851 reflections on *Lohengrin*, Wagner casually conflates the predicament of a god longing for human warmth with his own artistic problem. "With the highest powers of his senses, with his fullest fill of consciousness, he would fain become and be none other than a warmly-feeling, warmth-inspiring Man; in a word, a Man and not a God—i.e., no 'absolute artist.'"[65] This passage has prompted Carl Dahlhaus' lapidary statement that "*Lohengrin* is the tragedy of the absolute artist."[66]

To make sense of this view of the opera, we need to recall the specific meaning Wagner attaches to the term "absolute artist" in the text under consideration. His characterization of this figure blends two, seemingly incompatible, elements. The first is a discourse on cultural decadence that can be traced back to the young Schlegel's diagnosis of the hyper-stimulation of taste in modernity, and which is soon to resurface in Nietzsche's renegade attacks on Wagner.[67] The second is the Hegelian critique of Romantic irony as practiced by Schlegel.[68] Combining these two strands, Wagner describes the absolute artist as an emasculated figure whose responsiveness to life has been so fully deadened by over-exposure to art that he has become literally "ab-solute" or detached from life, indulging in a self-referential art that makes no claims on reality and only "plays with itself."[69] For Wagner, the inadequacy of purely instrumental music to the challenges of modernity stems precisely from the fact that it is absolute in the double sense of being both transcendent and irrelevant. Against art that is absolute in this

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[64] "Aber die Beschäftigung mit ihr wird beinahe zum Laster, sie wird *moralisch*, wird zur rücksichtslos ethischen Hingabe an das Schädliche und Verzehrende, wenn sie nicht gläubig-enthusiastisch, sondern mit Analyse verquickt ist, deren gehässigste Erkenntnisse zuletzt eine Form der Verherrlichung und wiederum nur Ausdruck der Leidenschaft sind." (Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* [Frankfurt: Fischer, 2001], 92). See also the narrator's comments in Chap. 7 of *Der Zauberberg*: „Der müβte nun freilich von Liebesdingen rein gar nichts verstehen, der meinte, durch solche Zweifel geschähe der Liebe Abtrag. Sie bilden im Gegenteil ihre Würze. Sie sind es erst, die der Liebe den Stachel der Leidenschaft verleihen, so daβ man schlechthin die Leidenschaft als zweifelnde Liebe bestimmen könnte." In a similar vein, Bernard Williams urges that "[w]e need to understand […] how far what moves us in [Wagner's] work may be connected with what frightens and repels us in his attitudes" ("Wagner and the Transcendence of Politics," *On Opera* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006], p. 76).

[65] "A Communication To My Friends," p. 341; "Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde," p. 296.

[66] Dahlhaus, p. 40.

[67] Friedrich Schlegel, "Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie," ed. Ernst Behler and Hans Eichner, *Studienausgabe Band 1: Kritische Schriften und Fragmente [1794-1797]* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1988), p. 85 ff. See also section 5 of Nietzsche's *Der Fall Wagner* (*Kritische Studienausgabe* vol. 6, p. 23).

[68] G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*, Werke vo. 13 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970). p. 93 ff.

[69] "A Communication To My Friends," p. 287; "Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde," p. 247.

pejorative sense, Wagner proclaims the need for a "manly" artistic practice that ventures to change the shape of reality. His own attempt at fusing music with visible reality and verbal meaning is meant to achieve just this.

How difficult it is for the absolute artist to participate in the world of history is a dominant theme in Wagner's remarks on the reception of *Lohengrin*. Critics and audiences complained, and Wagner himself was troubled by the suspicion, that Lohengrin was a "cold, forbidding figure, more prone to rouse dislike than sympathy."[70] But, Wagner notes, that reproach "only enters when the impression of the artwork itself has faded, and given place to cold, reflective criticism." Of course the point of Wagner's claim is not to play out the former against the latter in a simplistic dichotomy. Similarly to Hegel, Wagner understands that in modernity the conceptually mediated activity of critical reflection can no longer take second seat to the immediacy of sensuous response. That is why our intellectual reflection on *Lohengrin* as a dramatic work can be at variance with the often rapturous effect of hearing the opera performed.

Yet the disconcerting width of that gap in the case of this particular work is a measure of the artistic crisis Wagner was undergoing at the time of its composition, symptomatic though the latter may have been of a broader cultural malaise. As Michael Tanner observes, there is a disconnect between isolated passages of "otherworldly" beauty in *Lohengrin* and the less inspired musical realization of long stretches of the libretto.[71] Wagner came to an impasse, then, because his "dangerous gift" for absolute music (Tanner's apt phrase) and his ambition to become a dramatist capable of world-historical impact threatened to grow apart. The daring claim of Wagner's 1851 self-interpretation is that this artistic predicament is analogous to Lohengrin's problem, namely, the problem of how the purity of the absolute can find incarnation in the realm of human relationships and politics. Wagner thus attempts to convert a weakness of his transitional work into a virtue by asking us to consider that work as an aesthetically compelling allegory of the artistic problem he faced in composing it.[72]

If, then, *Lohengrin* is the anguished self-reflection of an artist who struggles to escape the self-enclosure of absolute art by developing an artistic practice with real-world effects, does the Hollywood Romantic comedy that ends by citing *Lohengrin* gesture towards a comparable politics of art? In considering this question, we do well to turn our attention to the humble pair of characters that the movie juxtaposes with the glamorous duo of Grant and Hepburn: the journalist Mike, played by Jimmy Stewart, and the photographer Liz, played by Ruth Hussey. Most interpretations of the film give them short shrift, yet it is via these two figures that the central stakes of the film acquire formal significance.

Mike and Liz are defined by two lacks: they are penniless and, as far as we can tell, parentless. We are never allowed to forget their poverty and lack of pedigree. Again and again, their being out of place in the Lord mansion serves as a vehicle of the social satire embedded in the film, evident in hilarious missteps and mordant remarks about the

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[70] "A Communication To My Friends," p. 341; "Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde," p. 296.

[71] Michael Tanner, *Wagner*, p. 89 ff.

[72] Dahlhaus seems to find this claim convincing, since he interprets Elsa's and Lohengrin's narrations as moments in which music, taking over as the plot is suspended by recollection, becomes a dramatically effective motivating factor. "Drawn down into an earthly environment by Elsa's narration of her dream, Lohengrin is carried off from it again by his own narration about the Grail kingdom" (Dahlhaus, p. 41).

rich. What remains murky throughout is their politics. Much as Donald Ogden Stewart's script drops overt political references from Barry's characterization of Kittredge, it omits a politically charged exchange between Mike and Tracy's brother (a character in Barry's play that Donald Ogden Stewart omitted from his script):

> Mike: I have to tell you, in all honesty, that I'm opposed to everything you represent.
> Sandy: *Destiny* is hardly a radical sheet: what is it you're doing—boring from within?
> Mike: And I'm not a communist, not by a long shot.
> Liz: Just a small pin-feather in the Left Wing. (Mike looks at her)—Sorry.
> Sandy: Jeffersonian Democrat?
> Mike: (Looks at him) That's more like it.
> Sandy: Have you ever seen his house at Monticello? It's quite a place too.
> Liz: Home Team One; Visitors Nothing […]" (28)

This exchange is followed in the play, though not in the film, by the surprising revelation that, contrary to Mike's expectations, the Lords are not opposed to Roosevelt's New Deal administration but consider themselves "loyalists" (39). Both exchanges show the lower middle-class Mike to be considerably more vulnerable to ideological criticism than the moneyed but generous-minded Lords.

It is hardly by chance that Donald Ogden Stewart, known for his leftist convictions, omits these tendentious passages from Barry's play. While Stewart was known for his leftist sympathies, he was also constrained by studio boss Louis B. Mayer, a conservative Republican. The most Stewart could do, therefore, was to de-emphasize the conservative agenda of Barry's play.[73] He dropped explicit references to the odious Kittredge character's leftist politics and deprived the tension between the Lords and the journalistic interlopers of its political edge. While Mike does not exactly become a convert to the aristocratic ethos and Liz's stance towards it remains downright sardonic, no positive agenda is associated with these thoroughly likeable figures; for all we know, they may be Rooseveltian or Jeffersonian democrats, socialists, or communists. In effect,

[73] It was only upon the insistence of Hepburn, who owned the film rights to the play, that Mayer agreed to bring in Donald Ogden Stewart to adopt Barry's play. Stewart's leftist and Louis B. Mayer's conservative Republican leanings are noted by Daniel M. Kimmel in *I'll Have What She's Having: Behind the Scenes of the Great Romantic Comedies* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008), p. 72. It is not hard to imagine why Stewart might have been reluctant to advance a leftist agenda a year after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, when the film was made. Similarly, Stewart's omission of the reference in Barry's play to Mike's Jeffersonian sympathies makes sense in view of what Jeffersonian isolationism meant in 1940. Stewart was member of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League founded in 1937, which the FBI subjected to a "full, discreet and complete investigation" on account of its Communist affiliations. FBI documents declassified in 1999 suggest that the question of how to react to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact became critical for the League: "In Dec. 1939, shortly after the Russian-German agreement," notes the FBI synopsis, "Hollywood Anti-Nazi League changed name to Hollywood League For Democratic Action, a clear reflection of the change in Communist party line." Until Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, the latter, short-lived organization and its various successors remained outspoken in their opposition to the impending US entry into the war. However, even the none-too-charitable FBI report could not establish whether all 3,000 members of the original League joined its new, pacifist incarnation; given that the former was primarily intended to mobilize movie industry figures of Jewish origin who were opposed to Nazism, this seems rather unlikely. In any case, the League "lapsed into obscurity" in the second half of 1940. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, "File No. 100-6633: Hollywood Anti Nazi League," <http://foia.fbi.gov/hollywood_anti_naz_league/hollywood_anti_nazi_part01.pdf> and <http://foia.fbi.gov/filelink.html?file=/hollywood_anti_naz_league/hollywood_anti_nazi_part02.pdf>, accessed December 22, 2009).

Donald Ogden Stewart saved the film from becoming a piece of arch-conservative propaganda by depoliticizing it.

The happy ending of the film brings the triumph, if not exactly the vindication, of an upper crust that perpetuates itself through an Oedipal logic of dynastic succession. Purged of any disruptive aspiration for transcendence (the threat from "above") and restored to its former immunity to snoops and climbers (the threat from "below"), the life of this all-too-human nobility can finally be transfigured into a cinematic myth enchanting the popular imagination. Never mind the likelihood that, since the political potential of the blackmail scheme must remain unrealized for the sake of the Lords' privacy, Sidney Kidd will continue to run his corrupt media empire.

We should not conclude, however, that the movie veers into self-serving cynicism. It avoids this by foregrounding, in its most conspicuous departure from the play, the relationship between Mike and Liz. This effect is achieved through the insertion of telling details absent from the play, such as the poignant symmetry established by the camera between Dexter's and Liz's devastation upon hearing Mike's marriage offer to Tracy. The film leaves the story of Mike and Liz so tantalizingly open that with each repeated viewing they make a stronger claim on our penchant for conjecture about possible futures beyond the ending. While the nature of their relationship never becomes entirely clear, it is clear enough that Liz loves Mike. Were he and she to marry eventually, this would be a second marriage for her, since she is already the divorced ex-wife of one Joe Smith—and so, as she points out before the wedding, not the maid of honor but the "matron of honor." This emphasis on her previous marriage appears important precisely to the extent that she attaches little importance to it: it shows her exemption from the closed logic of aristocratic re-marriage and her acceptance of the contingency of marriage.

While the film's pathos-laden portrayal of Tracy's espousal of humanity often verges on a glorification of weakness, this edifying effect is offset by Liz's level-headedness and deadpan sarcasm. When Dexter asks Liz why she doesn't marry Mike, she replies with a wistful smile that Mike still has a lot to learn and she doesn't want to get in his way. As it becomes clear from the ensuing exchange, Liz knows that an affair might develop between Tracy and Mike and doesn't mind it as long as it remains fleeting. She also knows that her strategy is risky but accepts this risk. Should the strategy work, Mike's brief infatuation with Tracy would turn out to facilitate marriage between Mike and Liz, just as Tracy's attraction to Mike functioned as a catalyst for her re-marriage to Dexter. The confused night on which Tracy and Mike were briefly taken in by the midsummer night's dream of overcoming class difference would thus end up merely reinforcing the latter. By averting a swap and restoring the original pair of couples, the film actually consolidates the social fault-line it pretends to overstep in the name of a vague aristocratic ethos: the divide between the haves and the have-nots.[74]

It is thus significant that Liz, one of the have-nots, ends up being the most authoritative character in the film, the one who is not taken in by either tub-thumping egalitarianism or the seductions of the aristocratic ethos. Her self-assured lucidity,

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[74] Christopher Beach draws the same conclusion: "the remarriage of Tracy and Dexter, whatever other statements it hopes to make, reinforces established class divisions and reinstates the class-based ideology that both George and Mike are attempting in their own ways to challenge." (*Class, Language, and American Film Comedy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], p. 123).

unclouded by projection, leaves little doubt that she will eventually get Mike. Throughout the convolutions of the plot, Liz maintains an effortless poise that eludes others, and perhaps nowhere more strikingly so than in the scene where she catches sight of Mike and Tracy passing by the window of the beauty parlor in which she is getting a manicure:

> Manicurist: What's the matter? A little too rough?
> Liz: A little… but I'm used to it.

In the nuanced acting of Ruth Hussey, this reply is accompanied by a smile that expresses bemusement and forgiveness verging on dismissal.

What is the significance, then, of the fact that the camera whose intervention freezes the last scene belongs to Spy Magazine editor Sidney Kidd, and not to Liz, whose camera was smashed by Tracy early on in the film? Is he, of all people, to be credited with the last pictures we get to see?[75] In what may be construed either as a cynical admission of complicity with mass media or as a self-reflexive gesture by which film draws attention to its own medium, the implied vantage point of the cinematic apparatus suddenly becomes absorbed in a diegetic object, which happens to be Kidd's photographic camera. Whatever one makes of this ending, it denies Liz a kind of narrative authority that was originally meant to be her prerogative. Except, of course, Liz and Mike do retain narrative authority over "the Philadelphia story" in a different sense. Instead of submitting the illustrated article they were originally recruited to produce, they conspire with Dexter to blackmail Sidney Kidd and thereby prevent unsavory press coverage of the Lords' antics. When Dexter says that he still wants Kidd to come to Philadelphia as "a sort of wedding present," this cryptic remark leaves open at least two interpretations. Dexter may think of the flattering press coverage of his and Tracy's wedding as a wedding present for the two of them. On a more unsettling interpretation intimated by Dexter's borrowing of the mother's ring, however, the ploy by which Dexter

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[75] At least he does not have the last word, which is reserved for the siblings: for Tracy's little sister Dinah, who also has the first words in the film, and Uncle Willie. "I did it. I did it all," says Dinah, in response to which Uncle Willie says, "I feel as though I've lived through all this before in another life"—a hint, perhaps, at the circular, incestuous logic of dynastic matrimony. These words force us to ask what drove Dinah's scheming to bring about her sister's remarriage to Dexter. In a telling detail, we learn that she is called Diana but Tracy changed her name to Dinah. If we construe this gesture as a punning expression of Tracy's wish that Dinah, and not she, carry the burden of dynastic succession, then Dinah's eagerness to re-marry Tracy to a man of "their" kind may be read as a sign of the opposite intent. And if Tracy denied her sister the name Diana, inherited from the goddess associated with the moon, then this agrees with Dexter's recollection of the way Tracy once "got drunk on champagne and climbed out on the roof...and stood there, naked, with [her] arms out to the moon...wailing like a banshee," an episode Dexter finds "enormously revealing" because "the moon is also a goddess, chaste and virginal." In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, on which the film keeps playing variations, Hermia's only option if she refuses to marry the man her father has chosen for her is to become a nun consecrated to Diana ("To live a barren sister all your life, / Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon"). Barry's play highlights the childlessness of Tracy and Dexter's first marriage (12, 73), and the fact that they eloped to Maryland for their first wedding suggests that their espousal of "marry-land" somehow remained virginal. As for the relationship between Tracy and Dinah, we do well to remember that the Quaker leader William Penn intended "Philadelphia" to mean "city of brotherly love," but the name could just as well mean "love between sisters." A third meaning of "Philadelphia," love between a brother and a sister, emerges when we consider that Tracy and Dexter are said to have grown up together and that their provenance from an exclusive class makes them siblings of sorts. One may also speculate what the film intimates about sibling relations by leaving it unclear whether Uncle Willie is Seth Lord's or Margaret Lord's brother.

salvages the father's honor serves as a gift commemorating the Oedipal reconciliation between Tracy and her father which also permits a public transfiguration of that event.[76]

Whatever this wedding present may mean, the only glimpses we are afforded into the version of the Philadelphia story that eventually sees print are the two photos taken by Kidd that the film concludes by showing. We are also given to understand, however, that writing such reports and making such photographs for the likes of Sidney Kidd may not be next on the agenda for Mike and Liz. Despite their lowly occupation in the tabloid press, both of them harbor artistic ambitions. Liz is, in Mike's words, a "born painter" who would not think of photographing high society weddings if it were not for financial necessity; and it is the same kind of pressure that compels Mike, an ambitious writer committed to a lofty idea of literature, to snoop on the rich for *Spy Magazine*, an assignment for which his loathing becomes abundantly clear in the opening scene. The double nature of their position is brought to the fore when Dexter and Tracy interrupt their venomous exchange to insist that Mike must continue to bear literary witness to their jousting, which thus takes on a representative, histrionic importance:

> Dexter: Do stay, Mr. Connor. As a writer this ought to be right up your street.
> Tracy: Don't miss a word!

For Liz, who has a strong claim to be called the secret protagonist of the movie, the aim of the blackmailing scheme is precisely to induce Mike's transition from journalistic to literary spectatorship: Mike's "only chance to ever become a really fine writer is to get fired" from Spy Magazine. It is safe to guess that Mike is now going to get that chance from Sidney Kidd, and so will, presumably, Liz. Whether the end of their subjection to the media machinery will free them to pursue their higher artistic aims is one of the key questions left open by the movie. Whether, having failed to win Tracy's hand, Mike will eventually "settle" for the woman who has been waiting for him all along, is another.

Here, once again, the citation of *Lohengrin* comes to our aid, suggesting that the two questions admit of joint resolution. For at least the outlines of such a joint resolution are intimated by the manner in which the freezing of the scene captured by Kidd's camera sets into relief the distinctness of cinema as an artistic medium. If Wagner came to see *Lohengrin* as a tragedy about absolute art, we may likewise interpret the arrested image at the end of *The Philadelphia Story* as a gesture implicating the hybrid medium of film in the plot of this particular movie. Were the union of Mike's and Liz's respective artistic media to produce an offspring, it would be a visually rendered short story that attains a subtlety previously reserved for high art within the more lucrative sphere of mass culture; in other words, it would be a movie like *The Philadelphia Story*. To that extent, the banal wedding photos shown at the end of the movie may be said to serve as a foil against which the product of that other marriage—namely, the movie that ends by skillfully integrating these photos—appears all the more subtle and effective. Not unlike the failed

[76] A third interpretation of Kidd's presence at the wedding is proposed by Cavell, who sees it as "a signal that it is after all *this* wedding, this remarriage, that is of national importance" (*Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 148). Here, it seems to me, the utopian "dream" (p. 153) that Cavell weaves around the film becomes a tad far-fetched, removed not just from reality but also from the film itself. Would anyone want to entrust someone as corrupt as Sidney Kidd with the task of mediating "the culture's comprehension of itself" (p. 160)? If anything, the central couple's implied acceptance of Kidd's presence at the wedding would seem to underscore the spuriousness of the way of life they are espousing.

marriage between Lohengrin and Elsa, then, the implied marriage between Mike and Liz may be understood as the allegory of a hybrid artistic medium that reconciles the esoteric claims of art with the requirements of popular impact.

At least on the level where the allegorical meets the formal, then, the very existence of this film suggests an answer to the questions hovering around the edges of its last picture. By closing files on Dexter and Tracy but keeping our sympathies for Mike and Liz alive beyond the happy ending, the movie turns away from the quaint perversions of Philadelphia and tacitly endorses the Hollywood optic of its makers. Yet however humane, the movie's irony is made inconclusive by the evasion of politics, all the more noticeable for its staging of a situation ripe with social tension. For nothing is affirmed in the end by this enchanting but deeply problematic movie beside its artistic medium. As we turn from Wagner to Cukor, from mid 19th-century Germany to mid 20th-century America—or more precisely, to the latter's Philadelphia roots examined through the Hollywood lens of a first-generation American director—the tragic variant of nihilism gives way to an ironic one.

What this means can be further clarified in view of Bernard Williams' remarks on the Funeral March in *Götterdämmerung*.[77] As Williams observes, the grandeur with which this piece of instrumental music commemorates the slain hero is at odds with Siegfried's fallible and one-dimensional personality. Whereas the plot of the *Ring* belies every trust in mere innocence unsupported by institutions, the wordless music of the Funeral March glorifies the politics of innocence embodied by Siegfried. To explain how the music can bring about this apotheosis, unsettling because without any basis in either character or plot, Williams proposes that the Funeral March is "the celebration not of a man but of a process, of all that has gone before in the *Ring*." As leitmotifs retrieved from earlier parts of the cycle are woven into an overpowering musical statement, the *Ring* ends by conveying "a cumulative sense of its own complexity and power." "In celebrating its own fulfillment," writes Williams, "the work can make us feel that the whole disaster-laden history has been worthwhile."[78] To borrow Nietzsche's famous term, the Funeral March achieves an aesthetic justification of existence, and more specifically, of a mode of existence that has little to be said in its favor.[79]

The allegorically charged implied marriage between Mike and Liz in *The Philadelphia Story* may be said to give aesthetic justification a generic twist. If, that is, the *Ring* concludes by celebrating its own integrative power, *The Philadelphia Story* ends with a celebration, not of itself, but of its artistic medium. The effect of the film is not, as in the Nietzschean-Wagnerian version of aesthetic justification, to spread a redeeming veil of illusion over reality, letting a terrible truth shine through with a subdued light that no longer threatens to blind us. Rather, the familial and class structures that maintain the upper hand in the movie are transfigured, however spuriously, by the origination of

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[77] Bernard Williams, "Wagner and the Transcendence of Politics," *On Opera* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 86.

[78] Several commentators have criticized the other, "real," finale of *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde's self-immolation, in even harsher terms as an empty gesture of self-celebration that glosses over an impasse. See Žižek, "Foreword: Why Is Wagner Worth Saving?," p. xviii.

[79] With one important difference. Commenting on the the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*, Nietzsche claims that the truth manifested in the dissonance of Wagner's music is made bearable by the veiling effect of the Apolline illusion unfolding on the stage. Williams' interpretation of Siegfried's Funeral March reverses this relation. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 1, pp. 47, 136 ff.

cinematic illusion in their midst. What permits us to say yes to the repressive ethos prevailing in the marriage between Tracy and Dexter is that its triumph clears the way for another marriage, between Mike and Liz, allegorizing the artistic medium in which that triumph has been recounted. How could we possibly fail, then, to cheer the reunion between Tracy and Dexter? If, heaven forbid, elective affinities joined either of them with one of the penniless journalist-artists, the very genesis of cinema would be vitiated.[80]

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