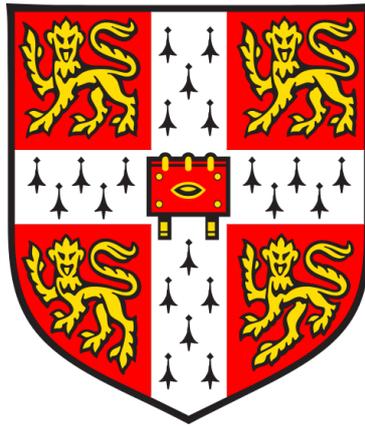


‘Sie rief mich aus der Nacht’

The Birth Complex in Nietzsche and Wagner



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Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

The dissertation does not exceed the prescribed word limit as set by the Degree Committee in the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages.

Preface

The first section of the present thesis, on Nietzsche, partly uses arguments that I drafted in my thesis submitted at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich for the *Master Erasmus Mundus EuroPhilosophie*. In Chapter Seven, I expand on arguments made in my thesis submitted at the Université Paris-Sorbonne for the *Master de littératures comparées*. In both cases, while ideas may be similar, they are here formulated and discussed in new ways.

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Finally, I thank my Lion for having shown me the way to love and helped me to bear this symbolic child.

Introduction

In Genesis, God first creates a dark watery whole and then progressively introduces separation to it. The first separation occurs when God creates light, dividing it from the darkness (1.4). In the human experience, this corresponds to the process of birth. Leaving the dark watery womb, the baby is brought to the light. Its mother no longer constitutes the totality of its world. In the light, baby and mother are distinguished from each other and from the world. Light is thus associated with the first separations experienced by any human being, those between the baby's and its mother's flesh, and between them and the world.

To punish Eve for having desired to acquire knowledge, God announces that woman will give birth in pain, and that man will rule over her (Genesis 3.16). The two punishments do not seem to be related. Yet, emphasising in *Das Trauma der Geburt* that birth is not only painful for the mother but also traumatic for the child, Otto Rank argues that this traumatic dimension is the ultimate cause of the oppression of woman (1924). In the present thesis, I build on Rank's theory to explore how birth can be overcome and women liberated from the shadow of their association with birth.

In Rank's argument, the child who has just left the womb wishes to return to it, but is also afraid of experiencing a similar trauma again if its wish were to be fulfilled. Any situation that recalls the uterine stage, such as darkness or confinement, can potentially create anxiety in the child, and conversely anxiety is an indication that the desire to return is activated. This interconnection of desire and anxiety is seen to determine the whole of psychic life. Babies, and later adults, attach themselves to objects that can stand for symbolic wombs and transfer onto them their desire to return, while an excessive fulfilment of this desire, as well as any event that enters into resonance with the primal trauma, will awaken anxiety. Birth not only marks the beginning of life, but continues to exert an influence throughout, shaping intellectual and artistic creativity as well as interpersonal relationships.

To Rank's dialectical relation between desire and anxiety, I propose to add another dialectical relation also issuing from birth, that between light and the flesh. By 'flesh' I mean the interiority of the mother's body and, by extension, the human body insofar as it is conceived through its relation to the maternal body. What I am calling the 'birth complex' is the combination of these two dialectical relations, and my principal concern is to study how it

is elaborated by Friedrich Nietzsche in his philosophy and Richard Wagner in his music-dramas.¹

Rank

Once Freud's favourite disciple, Rank lost this position following the publication of *Das Trauma*, and finally left Freud's circle to engage in a new career in the United States (Lieberman 1985: 210–60). He had dared to propose a model not primarily articulated around castration anxiety and the Oedipus complex, but around the nexus of desires and anxieties ensuing from birth. *Das Trauma* is certainly controversial, and not only for a dogmatic Freudian. Rank uses one factor to explain the entire development of humanity, including such diverse realms as religion, politics or architecture. This factor is not a social but a biological one: like any mammal, human beings are born alive from the womb of their mother. Rank does not always found his arguments on orthodox analytic work and he had not been analysed himself, which led Freud to suspect that his disregard of the father for the benefit of the mother in his theory was an expression of his unresolved ambivalence towards Freud himself as a paternal figure (Falzeder 2014). Nevertheless, Rank's overreaching ambition does not discredit the usefulness of his intuitions.

Indeed, I believe that it would be beneficial for psychoanalytic and feminist studies if Rank's writings were rescued from their ostracisation. Although a few authors have tried to rehabilitate his work (Becker 1973, Menaker 1982, Rudnytsky 1991, Wadlington 2012), he is still mostly absent from psychoanalytic and feminist debates. And yet, he proposed convincing hypotheses on the reasons why women have been excluded from the symbolic realm, on creativity and on the origins of violence. Although he was the first psychoanalyst to focus his attention on the child's pre-Oedipal relation to the mother, the psychoanalysts of the maternal current, such as Klein, Winnicott, Bion or Kristeva, hardly counted Rank amongst their references. Those feminist thinkers who use psychoanalysis continue to neglect Rank even when they seek to take distance from Freud (see Jacobs 2007). This might not only be due to Rank's excommunication from Freud's circle and therefore from the classical corpus of psychoanalysis. Rank's work was perhaps bound to fall victim to the repression that touches any reminder of the birth trauma. Even the authors who worked at his rehabilitation

¹ I will refer to them as operas in the present thesis.

tended to favour Rank's later will therapy over his birth theory, and the latter is ripe for further attention.

Nietzsche and Wagner

Starting with its incipit, *Das Trauma* is infused with references to Nietzsche, and in particular to *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Rank celebrates Nietzsche as the paradigmatic case of 'intellektuelle[n] Heros' (1924: 106) and clearly sees a precursor in him, although he does not make explicit the link between the theory he develops and Nietzsche's philosophy. I will show in the first section of this thesis that many aspects of Rank's theory are already to be found in Nietzsche's writings.

In his first essay, *Der Künstler*, Rank concludes his exposé of the different artistic forms on a reference to Wagner: 'In den Werken Wagners ist die Kunst auf ihre äußerste Höhe gebracht' (1907: 54). Just as Nietzsche is for him the most remarkable intellectual, Wagner is the most remarkable artist. In *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden* (1909), Rank describes the birth narrative concerning the heroes – Tristan, Lohengrin, Siegfried – of medieval legends upon which Wagner drew in his operas. He wrote his doctoral thesis on Lohengrin, taking as point of departure Wagner's opera to investigate the multiple versions of the legend with a special interest for images of birth, although his argument remains framed by Freud's understanding of the Oedipus complex (1911). In *Das Inzest-Motiv in Dichtung und Sage* (1912), Rank highlights the triangular structure in many of Wagner's operas and dedicates a chapter to Wagner himself, building on the composer's life as well as on his works to argue that 'die Phantasie von der Rivalität mit dem Vater in der Wunschform, daß der Dichterheld in wechselnder Identifizierung mit verschiedenen sagenhaften Gestalten dazu gelangt, seinem Nebenbuhler die Geliebte zu entreißen' dominates Wagner's operas (640).

In these early studies, Rank's birth theory was not yet developed, and he maintains a Freudian perspective even when studying narratives of birth. When tackling the theme of heroism in *Das Trauma*, he notes that he was close to the intuition of birth trauma in *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden*, but fell victim to 'die menschliche Neigung, auf jede zu deutliche Annäherung an die Erkenntnis des Urtraumas mit Verdrängung zu reagieren' (1924: 102). *Das Trauma* develops a new theoretical frame that Rank could have used to expand on his analysis of Wagner's operas, but he hardly mentions them, except once: 'Nicht ohne Grund hat man daher den Zustand der Verliebtheit, der bis zur Identifizierung der ganzen

Außenwelt mit dem Objekt gehen kann (Wagners “Tristan und Isolde”), als eine neurotische Introversion [...] bezeichnet’ (45). Building on a note to the Schreber case, this argument remains in the Freudian frame; it also shows that Rank does not make a strong case for love.

However, in my argument, the birth complex pervades Wagner’s operas, to the point that the striking absence of Wagner in Rank’s study may be a way for Rank to deny Wagner’s influence. In his article ‘*The Birth of Tragedy and The Trauma of Birth*’, Wadlington builds on Harold Bloom to argue that both Nietzsche and Rank liberated themselves from the paternal hold of, respectively, Wagner and Freud (2005), but he does not examine Rank’s anxiety of influence towards Wagner or towards Nietzsche.

I argue that Rank conceptualised in psychoanalytic terms the latent structure he found in Wagner’s operas and in Nietzsche’s philosophy. Moreover, in my argument, Nietzsche’s relation to Wagner and thus to the birth complex is central in his philosophy. Nietzsche’s first philosophical book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, is an attempt to formulate the birth complex he had sensed in Wagner’s operas. He presents the dialectic between flesh and light through the relation between Dionysus and Apollo. Dionysus stimulates the desire for antenatal return in his followers, which ultimately calls forth anxiety. I show that the same process also caused Nietzsche’s break from Wagner. Even after the break, Nietzsche continued to confront himself with the birth complex and to explore the ways in which we overcome birth.

Methodology

Given this direct filiation from the composer Wagner to the philosopher Nietzsche to the psychoanalyst Rank, I contend that to read Nietzsche and Wagner in light of Rank’s theory does not mean to reduce them to a psychoanalytic framing. Rather, I intend to shed back upon their work the light that has issued from them but been dimmed in much of their reception. My conviction is that to say anything new on Nietzsche and on Wagner, it is necessary to study them in great detail. Therefore, I propose a close reading, analysing the images that they use in their texts in order to show that Nietzsche’s philosophical and Wagner’s dramatic writings represent elaborations of the birth complex. Though hard and fast proofs do not occur in this field, I hope that the accumulation of indications will convince the reader that there is a constitutive logic at work here.

The thesis does not present a standard philosophical enquiry into Nietzsche. However, Nietzsche himself provided the means for this enquiry: I take over his favourite methods of investigation, genealogy and psychology, in order to explore the path he opened. Michèle Le

Doeuff has shown that even the most rationalist philosophers rely on imagination and that their conceptual thinking coexists with a ‘pensée en images’ (1980). In his philosophy, Nietzsche generally builds on images, even in his most conceptual developments. I focus on a core set of these images in my argument that birth drives his philosophy.

As I intend to assess the works of Nietzsche and of Wagner against the same yardstick, I do not propose a musicological approach, but confine myself almost entirely to Wagner’s choice of words. Of course, Wagner wrote dramatic texts in order to put them to music, and he did not intend them to stand on their own. Yet, since he is the author of both texts and music, his texts can be used to reveal unconscious contents that may be conveyed as well by the music. Here I therefore focus on Wagner’s librettos and study what this level of representation brings out in itself. Whenever appropriate, I also study the aesthetic response that the opera is likely to induce in its audience, using the pronoun ‘we’ to emphasise my own position as an audience member.

My reading being psychoanalytically informed, I do not study what Nietzsche and Wagner intended to say, but what their texts suggest. Furthermore, I adopt a feminist perspective throughout the thesis, and therefore also examine what particular consequences Nietzsche’s and Wagner’s positions have for women. The combination of close, psychoanalytically informed analysis with feminism characterises the work of the philosopher Luce Irigaray, whose mode of reading provides a model for my approach.

My research is thus at the crossroads between philosophy, literature, psychoanalysis, feminism and performance studies.

Corpus

In the section on Nietzsche, I build primarily on *Die Geburt der Tragödie, Also sprach Zarathustra* and the last essays against Wagner, with occasional reference to other writings of Nietzsche whenever appropriate. As regards Wagner, I focus on *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tristan und Isolde* and the first scene of *Das Rheingold*, leaving aside other key operas, such as *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, *Parsifal*, and the rest of the tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. I have chosen *Der fliegende Holländer* as an appropriate case study to juxtapose Rank’s theory with Freud’s concept of the death drive, *Tristan und Isolde* for the place given to night and to love, and the first scene of *Das Rheingold* for its position as the establishing sequence of the

tetralogy. Despite the fact that the birth complex also pervades them,² I do not refer directly to Wagner's theoretical writings as this would exceed the scope of the present thesis, and only address them through the mediation of Nietzsche, who built on these writings to write *Die Geburt*.

I conclude with a chapter in which I address a psycho-cultural descendant of Nietzsche and Wagner, Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, a play that served as a libretto for Richard Strauss's opera. I focus on the play insofar as it is text, scenography and lighting rather than musical treatment that are at the centre of my analysis, but I would suggest that it was not by chance that Strauss chose this play as a foundation on which to compose his post-Wagnerian opera. In fact, Hofmannsthal drew upon Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, and therefore, indirectly, upon Wagner to write his revision of Sophocles's *Electra*; like Hofmannsthal, Strauss was an admirer of Nietzsche whose philosophy played a key role in his artistic development (Youmans 2004), and he also composed an orchestral poem inspired by *Also sprach Zarathustra*. In my argument, Hofmannsthal in *Elektra* condenses all the dimensions of the birth complex by also incorporating the fantasy of matricide, on which the patriarchal system established by Orestes's murder is built.

Theoretical frame

Since Rank's theory is little-known and controversial, it is necessary to establish its significance. To that end, I refer heavily to it, showing the usefulness of his insights on the status of woman, on creativity, and on the origin of violence. My interest goes in particular to his presentation of the identification with heroes, which he associates with birth and in which he sees the basis for the identification with political and religious figures. This is for me of central importance to explore the psychic structures that can potentially sustain the identification with female figures, with ramifications for the broader political and cultural order.

One of the main appeals of Rank's work is that he proposed a model in which men and women are broadly equal, since the process of birth is the same for female and male babies. By contrast, the Oedipal model is tailored to fit men and also supposes a specific

² Nattiez presents these writings as a process by which the original unity is lost and found again (1990: 33-65), which corresponds to the fantasy that the original unity with the mother, lost at birth, is retrieved; and Grey has analysed the metaphors of gender and birth in *Oper und Drama* (1995).

familial structure that even in the Western world is not any longer the norm, whereas birth is a universal human experience (albeit with different environmental conditions). Rank attracted the attention on the pre-Oedipal stage and on the relation to the mother at a time when Freud was still merely preoccupied with the Oedipal stage and the father. However, in the pre-Oedipal stage as described by Rank, the toddler – and the neurotic who has regressed to that stage – aims to return entirely to the womb, and experiences an overwhelming anxiety. In this, Rank overlooks the process thanks to which the toddler recognises the mother as a distinct subjectivity. I will build on other psychoanalysts such as Winnicott and Jessica Benjamin to study this process. Neither intersubjectivity nor love plays any decisive role in Rank's theory, which mainly describes intrapsychic forces of desire and anxiety. I suggest that intersubjective loving provides a space in which birth can be overcome.

The dialectic of light and flesh

Throughout the thesis, I expand on Rank's theory of birth trauma by focussing also on the dimension of light in its dialectical relation with the flesh. The first human contact with light is established at birth, and light retains this association with birth. At the same time as the child is 'brought to light', it is also separated from the mother's flesh. I show that the relation between light and flesh polarises the tension between desire and anxiety in the works of Nietzsche, Wagner, and Hofmannsthal. In particular, I analyse the fantasy of erasing the separation between light and flesh as a manifestation of the desire to return beyond birth. The relations between these four terms – desire, anxiety, light and flesh – thus form a *complex* in the psychoanalytic sense of the term, which can be defined as 'a core or pattern of emotions, memories, perceptions, and wishes organized around a common theme' (Schultz & Schultz 2009: 108).

I agree with Rank that the relation between desire and anxiety structures the human psyche, but argue that the dialectic between light and flesh is also structural in human experience and symbolic productions. My hypothesis is that the child, in order to overcome the experience of birth and to live as an entity separate from the mother and from the world, recreates a unity with itself that takes characteristics of both light and flesh. The child also associates some elements or persons in the world with light, and others with flesh. This sorting process continues in adulthood. The subject attempts to maintain a unity with itself as a living organism. However, the unity between flesh and light supposes an erasing of the separation that occurred at birth, which awakens both the desire for antenatal return and the

associated anxiety. Psychic life being constituted by the repression of this desire and anxiety, the subject will tend to maintain a separation between light and flesh. Therefore, the two fields of light and flesh tend to exclude each other: an element associated with flesh will not easily be given properties of light, and conversely.

The dialectic of light and flesh thus corresponds to a double series. On the side of light: vision, intellect, spirit, technique, subject, father, and phallus. On the side of the flesh: darkness, body, matter, nature, object, mother, and womb. These series have been described as the ideological substrate of the Western world that systematically privileged elements classified in the first series to the detriment of those classified in the second. In *Positions*, Derrida characterises such binary oppositions as typical of the metaphysical discourse he intends to deconstruct, and he argues that it is not enough to value the second series instead of the first, but that we should rather look for non-binary ways of thinking (1972). Similarly, Irigaray argues that the valorisation of the visible and the binary opposition of subject and object correspond to the male perspective. Women's genitalia are not fully visible, and the vaginal lips touch each other, which does not correlate with the opposition between subject and object (1977, 1980, 1984).

My point is that the two series correspond to the experience of birth, and, therefore, that they cannot be dismissed easily nor necessarily issue from a distinctively male perspective. I am aware that men have built on these series to devalue women. To some extent, the first series represents everything men have identified with, and the second series everything they have rejected. However, insofar as these two series originate in birth, which – in itself – is a gender-neutral experience, I contend that they structure the experience of both women and men in a similar way. Whether male or female, a subject apprehends itself and the world as a combination of the two series. I believe that it is important to revalue the second series, and argue that this supposes an overcoming of the anxiety associated with the flesh since birth. Yet, since the child, in order to overcome its desire to antenatal return, must privilege the light over the flesh, I believe that the domain of light is likely to retain a high value, if not the higher of the two. Therefore, it is important to open an access to the first series for women, who, as Rank argues, have been confused with the mother, and who therefore have tended to be confined within the second series. Ultimately, I believe that a balance between the series, with neither of them being privileged, is beneficial for both women and men, as is a smooth passage between the series. This supposes a good resolution of the birth complex.

I use the term of 'subject' to avoid a gendered pronoun, and, implicitly, to include women in the first series. However, my aim is to explore the basis for a relation between subjects, not to reinforce the subject/object dichotomy. Although I study the binary series cited above as such, I rather consider their opposition as a polarity, insofar as light and flesh represent two opposite fields in tension with each other and that tend to exclude each other. And I use the term 'dialectic' to emphasise that the relation between the two terms thus designated is unstable and productive. In Hegel's system, a dialectic always supposes three terms: the opposition between the two first terms resolves into a third term. I suggest that the third term of the dialectic between light and flesh is life. While it may be paradoxical to study these dialectics through the work of Nietzsche, who decisively opposed dialectical metaphysics, I argue that Nietzsche, in his anti-dialectical philosophy, disclosed the source of any dialectic, which lies in the birth complex.

A short history of light

The dialectic between light and flesh is central in human symbolic productions. Zoroaster founded a religion based on the opposition between light, seen as the equivalent of good, and darkness. Plato glorifies light and the realm of Ideas in his philosophy, and he describes the body (*soma*) as a grave (*sema*). In *Speculum*, Irigaray analyses the myth of the cave to show that the cave represents the womb, and that Plato's description of the birth process by which the souls leave the uterine cave to reach the sun sustains the exclusion of women (1974). Plotinus expands on Plato's philosophy by describing the One, or ultimate principle, through metaphors of light, and opposing it to matter, described negatively. As I will show in Chapter Five, Plotinus uses numerous images that point towards birth. And in his reading of Plato's *Symposium* influenced by Neo-Platonism, Marsilio Ficino pursues the philosophical valorisation of light by distinguishing two goddesses of love, the celestial Venus, associated with light, and the vulgar Venus, associated with the flesh.

I have referred above to the opening of the Genesis, in which the first words attributed to God are 'let there be light'. The Prologue of John's gospel opens on a further account of the beginning, in which there was the Word (1.1). The Word was at the same time with God and identical with God, which points to a unity of several persons into one. In this divine unity was a life that was also a light (1.4). John presents the birth of Christ as a process by which light comes into darkness. This reverses the usual process of birth, in which the baby comes from the dark womb into the light. Since the darkness – that is, the human world

– did not comprehend the light of Christ, the opposition between light and darkness was maintained. However, to those who did believe in him, Christ gave the right to become children of God: they have not established a separation between themselves and him, and therefore he creates a union between them and God. John concludes this passage by claiming that the Word became flesh (1.14). In Christ, light and flesh are reunified: he is at the same time Word and flesh, life and light. The prologue of John thus represents a remarkably condensed formulation of the birth complex. Given the role of the gospels in the history of the Western world, this passage had a huge impact. Pseudo-Dionysius draws upon it in his *Mystical Theology* to celebrate light, but also the divine darkness, a theme developed by Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa and John of the Cross, as I show in Chapter Five.

As its name indicates, the Enlightenment built on metaphors of light in its fight for the triumph of rationality over obscurantism, thus emphasising the polarity between light and darkness. By contrast, Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht* are typical of German romanticism in their glorification of night and in their formulation of the desire to establish again a lost unity. In *Die Wissenschaftslehre* (1804), Fichte seeks to formulate truth as the absolute unity beyond the dissociation of subject and object, and he describes thinking as a process by which a light continuously engenders itself. This enables him to conceive of a unity in which both the flesh and the separation between light and flesh are erased, light taking on the features of the flesh to constitute a unity with itself. In contrast to Fichte's subjective idealism, Schelling develops an objective idealism in which nature plays a central role as the place where the unity between subject and object is achieved. In his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel associates light with subjectivity and argues that the development of art represents a process of spiritualisation, the different forms of art progressively leaving the matter with which they were first associated to use more spiritual means, such as light. This supposes a polarity between spirit and matter, that is, ultimately, between light and flesh.

Nietzsche opposed Platonism, Christianity, and Romanticism. Yet I argue that the dialectic between light and flesh is also central in his work, in forms that are often similar to those I have indicated in this brief overview. Nonetheless, my central interest in Nietzsche and in Wagner is due to the fact that they have gone further than any of the authors mentioned here in the comprehensive formulation of the birth complex, and that they both explore concrete ways to overcome birth.

Literature

A significant amount of scholarship has been produced on Nietzsche and on Wagner. I will start the first section with an attempt to provide a general overview of the studies on Nietzsche and on his relation to Wagner, to set the stage for my own argument. As regards the Wagner studies, a book would not suffice to cover them. At the start of his ‘Grundzüge der Wagner-Forschung’, Deathridge states that it is impossible to write such an outline, since ‘die wissenschaftliche Beschäftigung mit Wagner (oder dem, was dafür gehalten wird) in dem Maße einer systematischen Untersuchung entzieht, in dem sie eine verwirrende Vielfalt von Interessen und Maßstäben widerspiegelt’ (1986: 803). The task would be even less possible now, after three more decades of continuous publications on Wagner.

While I engage with some of the main currents in the Wagner chapters of this thesis, I would simply emphasise here a recent trend in the Wagner studies, with books such as Artin’s *The Wagner Complex* (2012), Oberhoff’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen: Eine musikpsychoanalytische Studie* (2012) and Schneider’s *Wissende des Unbewussten* (2013), offering psychoanalytically informed readings of Wagner that do not align with Freudian orthodoxy. By contrast, Rank has not been the object of many studies. To those already mentioned, I would add a fascinating article, ‘The Mother of All Things’, in which Ramazani argues that war ‘is the male way of giving birth’ (2003: 26), and rehabilitates Rank’s theory of birth trauma (53) as a means to understand the origin of violence. By comparison, Jantzen argues that violence is sustained by a fascination for death and proposes to counteract it by an emphasis on birth (2004), but she presents birth as a purely positive experience, and therefore misses the link between violence and birth.

The volume *Die seelischen Wurzeln der Musik* regroups contributions that trace the origins of music back to foetal and early postnatal experiences (2005). This strengthens my argument that opera builds on such experiences, although – for reasons stated above – I do not address music as such here. Neither does Slavoj Žižek, when, in *Opera’s Second Death*, he builds on Lacan to claim that opera manifests the desire for death (2001). I show on the contrary that opera, even when seemingly concerned with death, actually addresses birth. In his own Lacanian reading of opera, Michel Poizat argues that the audience’s experience of the operatic voice echoes with the infant’s sense of oneness with its mother (1986). In the present thesis I leave aside the performative dimension of the voice to focus on the characters as developed in Wagner’s librettos. I thus build on the text to propose a feminist approach of opera, such as is undertaken by Catherine Clément in her seminal study *L’Opéra ou la Défaite des femmes* (1979). In *Unsung Voices*, Carolyn Abbate challenges Clément’s thesis

that opera feasts on the suffering and death of women by arguing that opera also highlights the power of the female voice (1991). Nila Parly builds on Abbate to offer a feminist account of Wagner's operas based on the music (2011). However, Clément's point is precisely that the splendour of the music sung by female characters makes their tragic fate pleasurable. In the present thesis, I do not investigate whether Wagner's treatment of women was favourable or not, but rather show that his operas disclose the complex that has sustained the undoing of women.

I thus draw from psychoanalysis in a feminist perspective. Since the beginnings of psychoanalysis, the question of its usefulness for feminists has been much discussed. Freud certainly contributed to liberating women from the taboo on sexuality. Yet eminent critics have shown that his writings on femininity are pervaded by misogynistic prejudices (Horney 1926; Beauvoir 1949; Irigaray 1974; Kofman 1980; Brennan 1992). According to Juliet Mitchell, this does not prevent them from being useful for feminists: insofar as they display the structure of patriarchal culture, studying them enables women to understand the functioning of patriarchy and to liberate themselves from it (1974). I have the same purpose when studying Rank. Counterbalancing Freud's insistence on the role of the father in the Oedipal stage, psychoanalysts such as Klein, Winnicott and Kristeva have highlighted the role of the mother in the pre-Oedipal stages. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges criticise this maternal current for establishing prescriptions regarding the behaviour women should have towards their children, and for ignoring the mother's subjectivity (1992). Rank is not prescriptive, since he does not evaluate different birthing techniques, but simply observes that birth is traumatic in any case; and although he does not address the mother's subjectivity, his theory enables us to understand why the mother's subjectivity is denied at all.

My research crosses several paths explored by Elisabeth Bronfen. In *Over her Dead Body* (1992), she analyses the cultural association between woman and death, while I work on the association between woman and birth. I refer to *Liebestod und Femme fatale* (2004) in Chapter Five: here Bronfen pursues her analysis of the link between woman and death by studying the uses of Isolde's 'Liebestod' in film noir. In *The Knotted Subject* (1998), she proposes to use the image of the navel to counterbalance the hegemony of the phallic symbol. This 'knotted scar marks a moment of castration not only in the sense that it commemorates the loss of the mother but also in the sense that it marks our mortality, the vulnerability of our bodies, and thus radically protests against any phantasies of omnipotence and immortality' (xiii). I build on Rank to show that it is rather the fear of castration that retains a fear of being cut again from the maternal body as it happened at birth, when the navel was constituted.

Finally, in *Tiefer als der Tag gedacht* (2008), a study whose title is borrowed from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, Bronfen undertakes a comprehensive history of the theme of night in the Western philosophy, literature, and film.

Plan

My own title, 'Sie rief mich aus der Nacht', is borrowed from *Tristan und Isolde* (TI: 86). Tristan attributes to Isolde the fact that he has returned from the uterine realm of death to find her in the illuminated world. Since Tristan wishes to die, he is not grateful to her for having thus given him back his life. Rather, he holds her responsible for this new process of birth. Bringing him from darkness into the world, she has taken over the position of the mother. Thus, Tristan at once acknowledges the female power over life, describes the passage from flesh to light, and reproaches the maternal figure for having given birth to her child. Yet, Isolde's calling also suggests the intersubjective dimension of the space in which the lovers communicate with each other.

In the first main section, I propose a theoretical understanding of the birth complex through an analysis of Nietzsche's philosophy. Starting with his essays pro and contra Wagner, I show that Nietzsche's ambivalence towards Wagner is a manifestation of the birth complex that he recognises in Wagner's works and also formulates himself. In Chapter Two, my focus shifts from the pre-genital regressions described in Chapter One to the genital stage, which Rank sees as the space in which birth trauma can be overcome. I compare this perspective with other accounts, mainly from the fields of feminism and French philosophy, to study Nietzsche's glorification of *Carmen* as an erotic artwork and his arguments on identification and on truth, thus tackling the foundations of his relation to womanhood. In Chapter Three, I show that his philosophy is pervaded with the desire to be a mother and with the fantasy of giving birth to himself in light.

The second main section is dedicated to Wagner. In each of the chapters, I address three key points. Firstly, I explore the extent to which Wagner stimulates the desire to return, as Nietzsche reproaches him, by reading one of his operas through the lens of Rank's theory. Secondly, I explore the extent to which Wagner fosters a way of overcoming birth that neither Nietzsche nor Rank takes into consideration: intersubjective love. Thirdly, I explore how Wagner conceives the relation between light and flesh.

In the first chapter, I tackle Nietzsche's claim that Wagner favours death by showing that although *Der fliegende Holländer* apparently corresponds to Freud's account of the death

drive, death here is a mask for birth. The following chapter on *Tristan und Isolde*, Nietzsche's favourite opera by Wagner, represents the theoretical keystone of the section. I take the death drive as a starting point before building on Winnicott and Jessica Benjamin to distinguish between three forms of love, and I study how each of these forms relates to birth, arguing that intersubjective love provides a space in which birth can be overcome. In the last chapter of this section, I show that the tension between different forms of love and the dialectic of light and flesh structures the first scene of *Das Rheingold*, in a way which establishes the disposition of the tetralogy as a whole.

These two main sections thus have similar, dialectical structures. In the first chapter of each section, I mostly remain in a Rankian perspective in order to study pre-genital regressions. The second chapter introduces otherness: on the theoretical level, I expand the Rankian model by building also on other theorists, and on the content level, I study eroticism and love, that is, respectively, Nietzsche's and Wagner's overture to woman. The third chapter provides an *Aufhebung* of what has preceded.

In the last chapter, I show that, in his *Elektra*, Hofmannsthal goes even further than either Nietzsche or Wagner in the formulation of the birth complex. Yet, while the cases of Nietzsche and Wagner indicate the potential for positive ways of overcoming birth, the solution envisaged in *Elektra* is matricide. I build on this play to argue that matricide is the fantasy upon which the patriarchal symbolic order draws in order to exclude women and prevent a positive overcoming of birth.

Section 1: Nietzsche

Contextual Framework

Nietzsche's considerable impact on the philosophical, literary and musical production of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be divided into two broad phases: from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the Second World War, 'Nietzsche's extraordinary dominance in European intellectual life was primarily literary and owed much to his poetic imagination' (Behler 1996: 282). Writers who confronted themselves with Nietzsche include Gabriele d'Annunzio, Strindberg, Yeats, André Gide, the French and Russian Symbolists, Stefan George, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Robert Musil, and Thomas Mann. Nietzsche's reception in that period also extended to the musical field: Gustav Mahler, Frederick Delius and Richard Strauss composed pieces of music based on *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's most literary work. In the years when Hitler was rising in Germany, a philosophical approach to Nietzsche developed with Karl Löwith's essay on Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence (1934) and Karl Jaspers's study of Nietzsche's philosophical activity (1935). In 1936, Heidegger started the lectures on Nietzsche that he gave until 1945.

This shift from the literary to the philosophical field continued after the Second World War with Walter Kaufmann, whose book on Nietzsche (1950) and translations awakened the interest of the Anglo-Saxon world. Since the publication of Heidegger's lectures in 1961, Nietzsche has been discussed and eventually appropriated by key theorists of the most diverse currents, so that a panorama of Nietzsche studies also reveals the intellectual landscape of the last half-century. The debate was launched in France when the philosophers who contributed to shaping the contemporary approaches on literature and gender politics took Nietzsche as their precursor. As a reaction to Heidegger's interpretation, Deleuze undertook his own systematisation of Nietzsche's doctrine in *Nietzsche et la Philosophie* (1962), turning on the concept of difference. Derrida focused further on this concept in *L'écriture et la différence*, referring to the Nietzschean figures of Apollo and Dionysus (1967: 28-29). In 1964, Foucault presented a paper entitled "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx" at an international colloquium in Royaumont, praising the three masters for encouraging suspicions about language and for opening the way to new techniques of interpretation. Pierre Klossowski further linked Nietzsche with Freud in *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux* (1969). In *Versions du soleil*, Bernard Pautrat developed such a reading of Nietzsche through Freud by referring to Freud's theories of the pleasure principle and of fetishism as well as to the Oedipal schema, alongside his discussion of Nietzsche's system of metaphors and in particular of the solar metaphor (1971).

In 1972, Sarah Kofman published *Nietzsche et la métaphore*, a revision of her PhD thesis that had been supervised by Deleuze. And Derrida built on these works in his paper 'La question du style' presented at the 1972 colloquium on Nietzsche in Cerisy-la-Salle and later revised for publication under the title *Éperons* (1978), famously tackling Nietzsche's positions on woman.

Responding to Nietzsche's but also, implicitly, to Derrida's treatments of the feminine, Irigaray's *Amante marine* aims to give women their voice back, thanks to the figure of Nietzsche's fictional sea lover (1980). Nietzsche has been the object of much discussion within feminist philosophy. Although he was responsible for sharp comments on women, his equally sharp criticism of objectivity and his argument that any truth comes from a specific perspective can be used to challenge masculinist ideologies. Nietzsche specifically targets feminism, which he equates with 'moralischen Versüsslichung und Falschheit' (GM: 386). Yet his anti-dualism and anti-essentialism prefigure the feminist endeavours to think gender in non-binary terms. Singer claims that, as regards women, Nietzsche remains in a conventional sexist dualism (1998), while Higgins argues that his apparently sexist views disrupt essential conceptions of gender (1998). The question as to whether reference to Nietzsche can be useful for feminist perspectives despite his misogynistic comments echoes with the debate around the usefulness of psychoanalysis despite Freud's (and Lacan's) phallocentrism. These two concerns have been articulated together to various degrees, since the scholars who investigated Nietzsche's preoccupation with womanhood have often built on psychoanalysis. Kofman, who attacks Freud's writings on femininity (1980), uses other aspects of his work, especially his understanding of fetishism, in her essay on the figure of Baubô, and ultimately argues that Nietzsche's views may not be as misogynistic as they seem (1979), a view shared by other critics (Clark 1998, Higgins 1998). Parodying the Freudian terminology, Clayton Koelb suggests that Nietzsche's underlying valorisation of women results from his 'castration envy' (1994), while Jean Graybeal and Kelly Oliver build on Kristeva rather than on Freud in their works on the feminine in Nietzsche (Graybeal 1990, Oliver 1995).

Neo-rationalism

These French philosophers and feminist authors see Nietzsche as the philosopher who valued body over mind, interpretation over truth, subjectivity over objectivity. As such, Nietzsche

assumed a position that traditional philosophy had reserved for women (Oliver 1995). However, many scholars in recent decades have challenged this approach. Taking issue with Lacoue-Labarthe's and Paul de Man's 'deconstructionist' account of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Henry Staten aimed to reconstruct Nietzsche's book (1990). While Éric Blondel participated to the French rediscovery of Nietzsche and put emphasis on the role of the body and of metaphors in Nietzsche's philosophy (1971, 1986), he distanced himself from his fellow French scholars by inscribing Nietzsche within a Kantian frame (1989), that is, within classical metaphysics. Going further on that path, Keith Ansell-Pearson edited a volume whose topic is Nietzsche's relation to Kant and the post-Kantian tradition, in a snub of the Heideggerian and 'postmodernist' readings (1991). The volume features twelve contributions by twelve men who hardly quote any woman, except Hannah Arendt. This seems to confirm Le Doeuff's insight that the more philosophical study is oriented towards rationality and metaphysics, the less likely it is to be open to women (1980).

One would expect that readings of Nietzsche that came from the field of analytic philosophy with its far-stretching attachment to rationalist logic would be even more closed to women. However, it must be noted that the landmark study bringing together Nietzsche with analytical philosophy through a description of his concept of truth was written by a woman, Maudemarie Clark (1990). In his own account of Nietzsche's relation to truth, Sadler (who mentions Clark in one footnote) targets the subjectivism of the postmodernist commentators as well as their political correctness, and advocates a return to the 'Sache' of Nietzsche's thought (1995: 209); but his Heideggerian and Christian perspective does not seem objective either, nor disengaged from a political agenda.

Such critiques of 'postmodernism' in the name of objectivity are still topical. Jovanovski starts his study on Nietzsche's *Aesthetic Transformations* with a violent attack against the postmodernists, namely, the 'Foucauldian genealogists, neo-Marxists, pragmatists, and radical feminists' (2008: xiv). His watchword is 'Back to the written word!' (xvi). Here again, the claim to objectivity serves to sugar-coat a conservative and antifeminist approach. Attacking in turn the 'postmodern deconstructionist' who develops his or her reading of Nietzsche without taking into consideration Nietzsche's conceptual system, Boredal argues that their reading is temporal since it plays with language which 'advances along a temporal line', while his own 'neo-rational reconstructive thinking' is spatial insofar as it tackles a conceptual structure (2010: 3). The recourse to psychoanalysis is reduced in this critique to a playful use of the associative technique that makes the postmodern commentators consider

anything that comes to their mind as worth publishing. Bornedal joins instead the camp of the ‘contemporary theories of mind, cognition, and neurology’ (11). There is no place for a ‘pensée en images’ (Le Doeuff 1980) here, nor for the fact that Nietzsche did not aim at building a metaphysical system but at sustaining the valorisation of life. As Daniel Came puts it, ‘attempts to make Nietzsche speak to the concerns of contemporary metaphysicians, epistemologists, and ethicists can lead to neglect or distortion of Nietzsche’s deeper interests’ (2014: 2). Nietzsche’s philosophy is, Came insists, ‘practical-existential’ (1), in that he is not interested in art or in truth as such, but rather insofar as they can favour or disfavour life. His criterion when it comes to art, culture, or ‘truths’ is their usefulness for life.

Rationale

Against the contradictory canvas of these responses to Nietzsche, my motivation to study his writings is that I share his interest in the optimal conditions of life, and that I see in his philosophy a way of coming to terms with the birth complex that he presented as the main obstacle to an affirmative life. To that extent, my own perspective is ‘practical-existential’. Through this work on Nietzsche I hope to gain for others as well as for myself a better understanding of the means we can use to overcome birth in our lives. My intention is to bring out the complex that, in my view, constitutes the core of Nietzsche’s philosophy. This goes against the postmodernist view according to which there is no core or centre in Nietzsche’s philosophy, but an endless playing with differences. By contrast, Bornedal argues that Nietzsche had a general plan, ‘a “plan” not necessarily followed consciously, but rather emerging from a deeply internalized core’ (2010: 6). Bornedal characterises this core as a ‘theorem’ or ‘diagram’, thus borrowing from mathematics to emphasise the rationality of his approach. My purpose is not to oppose Bornedal with another theorem on which to base Nietzsche’s philosophy of mind. Indeed, although I concede that Nietzsche proposed a philosophical account of concepts such as the mind, truth or knowledge, this is not the dimension of his work I address here. I rather challenge the idea that Nietzsche’s ‘deeply internalized core’ could be subsumable into a rationalising account. This does not mean that my approach is irrational, but that I am opening the critical framework to wider forms of rationality than conceptual philosophy.

On this note, I acknowledge that my own image of a core is impregnated with the theoretical content to which it refers. I posit that the birth complex is at the core of

Nietzsche's philosophy, and that I would like to bring it out; the logic of these images makes of Nietzsche's philosophy a container for something that lies at its deepest level and that will eventually reach the light of the day, so that I use myself a birth imagery while exploring the birth imagery in Nietzsche. To use another metaphorical network, this time closer to the spatial images of structure and construction privileged by Bornedal, my purpose is not to study the conceptual superstructure of Nietzsche's philosophy, but its practical-existential foundation. While I am interested in the role of birth in his philosophy, I would not say that my approach is conditioned as temporal. Of course, birth is an event that happens at a specific time; but the point of Rank's theory of birth trauma is that the birth experience is constantly actualised in our psyche and our works. Birth thus becomes a structuring principle and not just an event. While I will show the variations in Nietzsche's approach to the birth complex, my contention is that this complex remains the structuring principle or core of his work from his first to his last writings.

In this, I seem to fall for the same transgression that Bornedal condemns in the postmodernist approach: 'one focused on a single image, an allegory, or a metaphor, which was supposed to "generate" Nietzsche's discourse but so far had gone undetected' (1). Although the birth complex as I understand it is wider than a single image, I do consider that it conditions Nietzsche's writings. Bornedal claims that 'the nodal point, which is chosen as the first link to the chain of associations, is often selected randomly ('random', relative to the text as system, but hardly 'random' relative to the interpretive desire of the commentator)' (2-3). That Nietzsche was the 'penseur de la grosseesse' (Derrida 1979: 64) is not my discovery, and that his texts are replete with metaphors of birth is easy to show, starting from the title of his first published book. I am fully ready to admit interpretative desires on my side, or more precisely, that my own psychic idiosyncrasy leads me to read Nietzsche in a specific way, but I would contend that this is the case with any reading, including the most 'rational' ones (why this obsession with pure logic at the expense of embodiment and femininity?). Furthermore, whereas I may have an idiosyncratic relation to birth, we all share the birth experience as such, so that my idiosyncrasy as a reader may be less determining in this case than if I were, say, reading Nietzsche through the Oedipus complex which is already a construction (there is evidence that any human being was born, but not necessarily that we all underwent an Oedipal stage) determined by many components, not least the child's sex and the kind of familial structure the child was raised in (Mitchell 1974). While I aim to accumulate enough hints to convince the reader that I am not simply projecting my own psyche on Nietzsche, I also accept the fact that my reading is subjectively conditioned, which does not seem

inappropriate seen my topic. Nietzsche was the first philosopher to insist on the subjectivity of one's perspective, claiming that any truth is ultimately 'my' truth and that we have reasons for judging and thinking as we do, even if we might not want to admit these.

My reasons for studying the birth complex in general and Nietzsche in particular include a feminist agenda that I intend to follow throughout this study. I agree with Irigaray in her claim that Nietzsche's work displays the matricidal wishes on which patriarchal systems are built (1980, 1981). Nietzsche's philosophy is thus the place where not only the Western 'Seinsvergessenheit', to echo Heidegger, but also 'Muttersvergessenheit', the oblivion of the maternal, reached its full manifestation. I also agree with Kelly Oliver in her suggestion that both Derrida and Nietzsche negated the possibility of a female subject at the very moment when they were occupying with their philosophy the place reserved until then for women (1995). Like Irigaray, Oliver and other feminist authors, I have a critical distance to Freudian orthodoxy although I do build on psychoanalytic theories.

Nietzsche and his parents

Psychoanalysis was developed as a therapeutic method. It is tempting to apply its theory also to dead authors who could no longer lie on a couch to talk their unconscious through. In my reading of Nietzsche, I do not pretend to address his individual psyche as such, but to explore the latent complex that can be found in his writings. I will not draw on biographical aspects in my own argument. Nevertheless, I agree with Kjaer that a pronounced refusal to use biographical elements is suspect in the case of a philosopher who so closely associated life with philosophy. This refusal is at its strongest with Heidegger and neo-rational philosophers. Could they be afraid of the dangerous women that an evocation of Nietzsche's life might call forth, namely, his mother and sister? Kjaer shows that in biographical accounts of Nietzsche, the reference to his mother is often the occasion of misogynist comments, quoting Hultberg, Althaus, Kreis, Ross by way of illustration (1990). Ross reoffends in his 1994 book, writing 'Der junge und früh zum Tod bestimmte Vater [...] tat, was in diesem Frauenhaushalt das klügste war: Er zog sich zurück' (15). Such one-sided comments echo Nietzsche's own negative comments on his mother, but fail to do justice to Nietzsche's ambivalence towards the mother figure.

The contrast between commentators who address Nietzsche's various ambivalences and those who do not want to question his claims date from the very first landmark studies of

Nietzsche by two women who had known him well: his friend Lou Andreas-Salomé (1894) and his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche (1895-7). The latter precipitated the end of her brother's friendship with the former. Their books are just as opposed: Salomé takes into account Nietzsche's loneliness, his physical suffering, and the split in him between health and pathology. Reacting to this halftone portrait, Förster-Nietzsche published a unilaterally positive image of her brother as a healthy hero and advocate of life. The owner of the rights to her brother's writings, Förster-Nietzsche played a decisive role in the reception of Nietzsche for the following decades (Behler 1996): in her edition of the many unpublished notes and manuscripts, she systematically oriented them towards her own proto-Nazi ideology while censoring Nietzsche's negative comments against their mother or herself. The most notable of these comments can be found in an addition to Nietzsche's autobiography *Ecce Homo* which Nietzsche sent his editor shortly before his breakdown. After having claimed aristocratic Polish descentance on the side of his father, Nietzsche calls his mother and sister 'giftiges Gewürm' and sees himself as a victim of their 'Höllmaschine' (EH: 268). Kofman notes the differences between this 'fantastical genealogy' and the Freudian family romance, in which the boy has hostile feelings against his father rather than against his mother. Nevertheless, Kofman remains here in a Freudian frame in that she sees Nietzsche's horror in the face of his mother and sister as the flipside of a forbidden incestuous love and the sign of castration anxiety (1994).

Going further in the analysis of Nietzsche's relation to his actual mother, Kjaer reads his philosophy as an expression of the 'Leiden eines Sohnes an einer leidenden Mutter' (1990: 14), a problem that is for him typical of patriarchal capitalist society. The nineteenth century enclosed women in social isolation and repressive mechanisms that created much pain for them, but also, consequently, for the sons they were raising. The oppression of women still leads many of them to a maternal parasitism and needy narcissism that is damaging for their sons. Women thus unconsciously take revenge on their sons for the oppression that males submit them to (18). This is the frame in which Kjaer sees the relation between Nietzsche and his mother. Through an extensive analysis of Nietzsche's letters and poems, addressed from an early age to his mother, Kjaer shows the boy's love for her, his empathy with her suffering and the pathogenic elements of their relation, which Kjaer eventually attributes to her. The portrait he draws of Nietzsche's mother is much more nuanced than the misogynist biographers he denounces, but Kjaer also goes much further than them in making her personally answerable for the troubles Nietzsche expresses in his philosophy, even if ultimately the blame falls on patriarchal capitalist societies for oppressing women.

In my account I leave Franziska Nietzsche resting in peace. When exploring the place of the mother in Nietzsche's writings, I do not refer to his actual mother, but to the figure of mother that he constructed in his texts. My concern is to study how his writings process primal experiences. Because my interest is in birth, I will expand more on the mother than on the father figure; but I do not deny the importance of the paternal for Nietzsche. Most of the accounts that have emphasised the role of Nietzsche's father in his philosophy have done so on the basis of the Oedipus complex, even where this served to show that Nietzsche's case does not seem to fall within the Oedipal schema. Klossowski argues that Nietzsche inverted this schema, since Nietzsche's comments on his parents in *Ecce Homo* suggest a desire to take the position of his mother alongside his father, and not the reverse (1969: 258). And according to Schulte, Nietzsche's father died too early for his son to develop a proper Oedipal complex (1982: 35); Nietzsche's is a philosophy of the repressed femininity in a male, that is, of repressed homosexuality (8), an hypothesis already formulated by Spielrein (1912). However, it should be noted that Nietzsche was four when his father died, which does not seem too young to have reached the Oedipal stage.

Nietzsche and Wagner: landmarks

If there is any field of Nietzsche's work in which life and philosophy can hardly be dissociated, it is his relation to Wagner. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche claims that he had been a Wagnerian ever since playing *Tristan* through (EH: 289). Thanks to a detailed account of Nietzsche's youth, his early compositions, his friendship with Krug, their playing *Tristan* through in 1861, and the lack of interest that Nietzsche displayed for Wagner in the subsequent six years, Love shows that Nietzsche cannot always be taken at his word in such matters. Nietzsche's early exposure to Wagner's music was not enough to convert him: only his personal acquaintance with Wagner made Nietzsche into a Wagnerian (Love 1963). Nietzsche visited the Wagner family twenty-three times in three years, and he was there for intimate events such as the birth of their son Siegfried or family birthdays (Storr 1994), finding in his visits to Tribschen a welcome pretext to move away from Classics (Silk & Stern 1981). He discussed many ideas with Wagner, thus preparing *Die Geburt*, but also contributing to the shaping of the figure of Siegfried in Wagner's *Ring* (Ruprecht 1938). Wagner's reputation at the time was not yet firmly established: he saw in this young professor a means of promoting his own work (Zabel 1990). Nietzsche helped Wagner towards the

constitution of Bayreuth, even proposing that he should abandon his chair in Basel and fund an academy in Bayreuth, and writing a vibrant homage to Wagner for the opening of the first festival (Eger 1998). Yet his preparatory notes for *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* display the criticism that Nietzsche erased in the published version (Goldschmit-Jentner 1939). In particular, Nietzsche reported the reactionary elements in Wagner, such as ‘das Mittelalterlich-christliche’ or German nationalism (KSA 8: 190) and Wagner’s dangerous inclinations, including ‘das Maaßlose’, ‘das Eifersüchtige’ and ‘die Religion der Musik’ that he sees Wagner as organising around himself (191-92).³ Wagner’s music also favours pathos over ethos (196). In these notes, Nietzsche’s tone is fairly neutral; and from what we know of Wagner, his critique does not necessarily seem untruthful, especially as a complement to his own acknowledgement of Wagner’s grandeur. Yet his tone will progressively change, up to the violence of his last writings against the composer.

Nietzsche’s precipitate departure from the first festival in 1876 is often presented as a turning point in his relation to Wagner. Nietzsche had placed many hopes in Bayreuth as a place of cultural regeneration (Grießer 1923). Once at the festival, he saw the triumph of the Philistinism that he had believed Wagner would oppose; he found himself thrown together with a sensation-seeking audience instead of the new Athens he had dreamt of (Hollinrake 1990). On a personal level, Nietzsche may have resented Wagner for showing him so little gratitude despite all that he had invested in promoting him; but his suffering was physical as well, since Nietzsche complained of terrible headaches and of the heat in Bayreuth (Eger 1998). Bauer also quotes a letter truncated by Nietzsche’s sister, in which he mentions money issues that prevent him from staying longer in Bayreuth (1999). Still, in the wake of the 1876 festival, Nietzsche published *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, where he implicitly criticises Wagner, who understood the book in these terms, even if his name was not mentioned. Here again, all too human reasons have been invoked to explain this new step in the termination of their friendship. In 1877, Wagner had written to Nietzsche’s general practitioner that in his view Nietzsche’s nervous condition was the result of an excess of masturbation. Nietzsche learnt of Wagner’s initiative but in ambiguous terms that made him suppose that Wagner had accused him of homosexuality (Gilman 2007). A very private person, Nietzsche must have been offended by Wagner’s open discussion of his intimacy (Babich 2008). This episode does shed light on Nietzsche’s *Der Fall Wagner* (1888), where in turn he attempts to diagnose

³ Emphasis is taken from the original unless otherwise indicated.

Wagner's neurosis. Both that essay and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1889) display virulent attacks on Wagner's personality, his music and his role as an artist. The tone there is no longer neutral, but reveals Nietzsche's intense emotional involvement.

Pure spirits

Montinari has contended that such speculations as to Nietzsche's feelings have a petty dimension that does not do justice to him (1978). Although I do not disagree, there are some politics at work here, since biographical details have been used notably by admirers of Wagner such as his biographer Ernst Newman to dismiss Nietzsche's critique, whereas Montinari, one of the two editors of the ground-breaking complete edition of Nietzsche's work, is decisively on Nietzsche's side. Many critics have stayed away from any reference to bibliographical elements in their account of the Nietzsche-Wagner relationship, focusing instead on the theoretical and artistic reasons for their dissent. Positioning himself against Newman, Hollinrake argues that precisely because Nietzsche was a musician as well as a theorist, he was in the best position to address the work of Wagner, who was a theorist as well as a musician (1960). While Nietzsche failed as a musician, Wagner failed as a theorist (249). Nietzsche had first believed in Wagner's aesthetic programme of creating a drama; but he then saw the negative side of this programme, claiming that Wagner's operas were more histrionic than musical. This, for Hollinrake, also explains Nietzsche's famous rejection of *Parsifal*, which is often considered as the critical juncture in the break. In Hollinrake's view, Nietzsche was not primarily disturbed by the Christian content of the opera, but by Wagner's renunciation of his own cynical views towards religion, in a gesture typical of an actor bidding for acclaim (251). Nietzsche attached too much importance to art and to the artist's responsibility to be able to forgive Wagner for this (252). Zabel argues that both Wagner and Nietzsche shaped the avant-garde currents of the early twentieth century through their 'common emphasis on the prefigurative capacities of art' (1990: 407). Both were convinced that art could call forth a radically new future, but they developed this conception in opposite ways. Wagner in his first writings had claimed that art could reunify the individuals whom a money-driven society has separated; but he became especially interested in the reunification of the German people, a nationalist and occasionally anti-Semitic turn that Nietzsche virulently condemns. While Wagner saw in German and Christian myths an emancipatory way of expressing human aspirations, Nietzsche saw them as illusions (Ridley 1980) and

constantly deflated ‘the myths of others as well as his own’ (Winchester 1999: 87). Nietzsche had first seen in Wagner an embodiment of modernity in the positive sense, but he comes to associate modernity in general and Wagner’s art, in particular, with decadence, seeming ultimately to doubt what modernity is (Deathridge 2008a).

Pro or contra Oedipus

The challenge in a reading of Nietzsche lies in the multi-dimensional aspect of his work. Nietzsche was a philosopher; in his last writings on Wagner, he takes on the role of a psychologist; but the emotional involvement that appears through these writings itself calls for a psychological interpretation. A reading that only tackles the philosophical or theoretical elements cannot explain Nietzsche’s impassioned defence of Wagner in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* or his relentless essays. Conversely, a reading that only takes biographical elements into account fails to do justice to Nietzsche’s undertaking. Psychoanalysis can offer a path that runs productively between the two.

Nietzsche’s relation to Wagner has mainly been read in the Oedipal frame. Wagner was born the same year as Nietzsche’s father. In 1874, Nietzsche wrote in his birthday letter to Wagner: ‘...weshalb ich Sie gar nicht anders als einen Vater verehren darf’ (BVN-1874,365). Love suggests that Schopenhauer filled the role of a spiritual father in Nietzsche’s formative years up to the point when Nietzsche had made Schopenhauer’s philosophy his own: ‘Metaphorically, the father had been devoured by the son’ (1963: 59). Nietzsche then replaced Schopenhauer with Wagner in the position of spiritual father. The description of Nietzsche’s appropriation of Schopenhauer and Wagner as a devoration is appealing. Many commentators have read Nietzsche’s break with Wagner within the Oedipal scheme: the young author symbolically murders the paternal figure in order to access self-realisation (Kaufmann 1950, Zabel 1990) In this Oedipal triangle, Cosima Wagner is the longed-for mother (Kofman 1994).

Such projective Oedipal triangles may partly explain the conflictual aspects of Nietzsche’s relation to Wagner: the boy wants to kill his father. But how are we to understand his veneration for Wagner in the first stages of their relation? Nietzsche himself characterised his first feelings for Wagner as love, noting in 1885: ‘Ich habe ihn geliebt und Niemanden sonst’ (KSA 11: 506). In 1882, he writes to Salomé: ‘Ich habe so viel in Bezug auf diesen Mann und seine Kunst *erlebt* – es war eine ganze lange Passion’ (BVN-1882,269). These are

strong words, and an analysis of Nietzsche's writings on Wagner must take into consideration his emotional involvement: in this case, certainly, he was not solely using his rationality. Borchmeyer reads Nietzsche's entire relation to Wagner as a 'doppelgesichtige Passion' in which critique and admiration were intertwined from the beginning to the end (1994). Yet how are we to understand this ambivalence?

Attacking the Freudian perspective, René Girard sees Nietzsche's obsession with Wagner as a paradigmatic case for his own theory of mimetic desire. In the first stage of their relationship, Wagner is 'le modèle explicitement avoué' (1995: 6) who plays for Nietzsche the role of a mediator thanks to whom Nietzsche can access his own desire. In the mimetic paradigm, a subject desires what the mediator desires. Since they desire the same object, they become rivals: the mediator prevents the subject from accessing the object. One of the many aspects of Freudian theory that Girard scorns is the fact that 'Freud postule une essence intrinsèque du désir pour la mère'. In his own account, 'la mère n'a aucune valeur intrinsèque et n'est pas désirée' (11). I find this denial of a desire for the mother and, above all, this claim that she does not have any value, highly problematic. Whatever my own reservations regarding Freud may be, I build on the Freudian premise that both boys and girls love their mother first and that she has for them the highest value as a person who satisfies their physical and emotional needs.

In a perspective closer to Freud, but still taking into account the specificities of a relation between two creators, Harold Bloom analysed the different strategies used by poets to overcome their 'anxiety of influence' towards a strong precursor (1973). Bauer finds this theory of poetry useful to assert Nietzsche's misreading of Wagner and his compulsive affirmation of a discontinuity between his own work and Wagner's (1999: 306). In her understanding, Nietzsche 'pathologizes, disqualifies, and constructs a negative image of Wagner in order to advance his own interests and his own philosophy' (307). The stakes for Nietzsche are ultimately the construction of a self: building on Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*, Bauer suggests that Wagner functions as the Other in Nietzsche's writings and that Nietzsche's rejection of Wagner is a rejection of the aspects of his own psyche that he does not want to admit as belonging to the self (304). In developing this position, Bauer uses Kristeva's analysis of the Other, but not of the mother.

Nietzsche and birth

Following Irigaray (1980), there are interpretations of Nietzsche that have addressed the maternal dimension (Kjaer 1990, Graybeal 1990, Oliver 1995), although they focus on Nietzsche's properly philosophical corpus rather than on his writings on Wagner. Amongst these authors, I find Oliver especially convincing in her comprehensive analysis of Nietzsche's relation to femininity. Yet she does not take full account of the importance of birth throughout Nietzsche's philosophy. Thorgeirsdottir does specifically study the different meanings of birth in Nietzsche's work and explores the relevance of his philosophy for an understanding of intersubjectivity in 'Nietzsche's philosophy of birth' (2010). However, her research stays at the level of Nietzsche's metaphors and does not tackle the psychic structure that motivates these metaphors. In an article whose title plays with the parallel between Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and Rank's *Trauma of Birth*, Wadlington uses Bloom's theory of the influence anxiety to analyse the case of both Nietzsche and Rank, although he primarily insists on Nietzsche's ambivalence towards Schopenhauer in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Nietzsche was himself an explicit precursor for Rank, together with Freud and Schopenhauer. Wadlington also suggests that Nietzsche's and Rank's writings have been widely misread due to their followers' own anxiety of influence (2005). Similarly, Kainer & Kainer (1984) use Bloom's theory to explain the distortions of Rank's work by later authors like Fromm, who compared his thought to fascism, and Farber who misread Rank's conception of the Will, both authors then developing ideas that are actually Rankian. Wadlington as well as Kainer & Kainer privilege the later Rank in these articles. Wadlington explicitly says that *Das Trauma der Geburt* 'is far from Rank's best work' (2005: 182) and dismisses its conceptual content. Therefore, he deprives himself of the possibility of analysing Nietzsche's writings through Rank's theory, as I intend to do.

Chapter 1

The Tragedy of Birth

A. Die Geburt der Tragödie

To understand Nietzsche's philosophy and his relation to Wagner, we need to start with an exploration of Nietzsche's initial position as exposed in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. The references to Ancient Greece and to Schopenhauer are the most obvious layers of Nietzsche's book and the most often discussed matters in the scholarship. In my view, it also contains a third layer common to Nietzsche and to Wagner: that of the birth complex.

In *Die Geburt*, Nietzsche speculates on the origin of Greek tragedy as fruit of the union between two principles personified in the gods Apollo and Dionysus. Wilamowitz's pamphlet 'Zukunftsphilologie!' denounced Nietzsche's lack of philological rigour (1872), thereby contributing to the ruin of his academic career. In the wake of this, musicologist Martin Vogel dedicates his book *Apollinisch und Dionysisch* to the thesis that Nietzsche's treatment of the two gods is a 'genialer Irrtum' (1966). Unsurprisingly, in his *Nietzsche and Wagner*, Vogel admits his preference for the latter (1984). Silk & Stern also maintain that Nietzsche's presentation of Apollo and Dionysus is a 'uniquely productive distortion' that corresponds to a 'common error' (1981: 166) and that Nietzsche reinterprets or even reinvents many aspects he attributes to them in an effort to emphasise their opposition. In particular, Nietzsche seems to forget that Apollo is the god of music, not Dionysus (175).

Schopenhauer

Beyond this philological debate, many scholars have discussed the extent to which the Nietzschean duality of Apollo and Dionysus is influenced by Schopenhauer. In *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Schopenhauer presents the world as a manifestation of a principle that he calls the Will. This is an elaboration of Kant's distinction between 'Ding an sich' and 'Erscheinungen': the appearances are what we perceive in the world, whereas the thing-in-itself refers to the reality as it exists beyond any experience. For Kant, human beings cannot access the thing-in-itself since their knowledge of the world is always mediated through experience. By contrast, Schopenhauer's Will is the underlying principle not only of reality but also of life; through the intuition of their own life and especially of their bodies, human beings have access to the Will. He introduces a psychological tone to the debate in his

suggestion that life is essentially a state of suffering. Indeed, the Will, by embodying itself in various individuals, favours an eternal battle between all and an unabated desire that torments the subjects. We should aim at liberating ourselves from it. Art is for Schopenhauer a privileged way to transcend individuation and overcome the Will.

In the Schopenhauerian perspective that Nietzsche seems to embrace, Apollo represents individuation and appearance, while Dionysus stands with the primordial unity and the Will (Young 1992). However, Nietzsche in his treatment of this duality moves away from Schopenhauer, ‘borrowing the surface of his language to subvert the core of this thought’ (Nussbaum 1999: 345). Apollo does not passively issue representations or favour contemplation, he actively protects us against the horrors of existence, and Dionysus has a cognitive activity, in contrast to Schopenhauer’s brutish Will; both art and cognitive activity are connected to practical human needs, a constant throughout Nietzsche’s writings (Nussbaum 1999). In Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, the opposition between Will and representations is a static model to depict reality as a whole, while the relation between Apollo and Dionysus is dynamic and specifically concerns art; Schopenhauer makes art into a means to reach the contemplation of Platonic Ideas, whereas Nietzsche draws us into the perspective of pre-Socratic artists by building on intuition rather than concepts (Daniels 2013). Schopenhauer associates beauty with Ideas, while Nietzsche associates it with Apollonian ‘Schein’ (Rethy 1991). ‘The images produced by Apollinian art are [...] superior to their originals’ since in them ‘a higher truth comes to shine through and beyond the everyday’ (Sallis 1991: 36). They are therefore more than Schopenhauer’s illusory representations but are still images and not Platonic Ideas.

Beyond these divergences, the central point of departure between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche is situated in the perspective that they have on life. Schopenhauer associates willing with suffering, which leads him to pessimism. Nietzsche decisively opposes this conception in his later philosophy of life, advocating for an affirmation of life in all its dimensions and calling decadent those who, like Schopenhauer, speak against life or shift away from it. However, *Die Geburt* does not yet contain an explicit critique of Schopenhauer, and scholars have held contrasting positions in regard to where the book can be situated in Nietzsche’s transition from Schopenhauer’s pessimism to his own philosophy of life. Nietzsche claims that ‘nur als *aesthetisches* Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig *gerechtfertigt*’ (GT: 47), taking over Schopenhauer’s pessimistic idea that life needs a justification (Rethy 1991) and ultimately remaining in a Christian dialectic of justification, redemption and conciliation (Deleuze 1962: 13). Yet this claim of Nietzsche’s can also be read as an injunction to see in

our lives our own creation and thus to regard them as works of art, which is consistent with his later philosophy (Nussbaum 1999: 365).

For Schopenhauer, tragedy turns the audience away from life: ‘Im Augenblick der tragischen Katastrophe wird uns, deutlicher als jemals, die Ueberzeugung, daß das Leben ein schwerer Traum sei, aus dem wir zu erwachen haben’ (2009 [1859]: 815). By contrast, Nietzsche makes of it the offspring not just of Dionysus but also of Apollo, who helps the audience in coming to terms with the horror of existence. In his argument that ‘Self-deception is at the heart of the Apollonian solution to pessimism’ (1992: 44), art being but a ‘fragile prophylactic against pessimism’ (45), Young shares Schopenhauer’s pessimism, since he relies on the idea that life is a place of suffering and that it is either self-deceptive or vain to try and overcome this suffering. As Daniels shows, Young focuses in this on Dionysus and ‘downplays the Apolline half’ (2013: 97). Furthermore, Nietzsche does associate a pessimistic vocabulary with Dionysus who confronts us to the horror of existence, but ‘the description of pessimism is separate from our attitude towards that description, and this difference is precisely where Nietzsche is asserting that art can intervene’. The purpose of art is not to negate the negative sides of life, but to change our attitude towards them, orienting us towards an affirmation of life (98). Optimism is thus already present in the early Nietzsche, while, conversely, pessimism ‘continues to flourish, at least as a pose, in the later Nietzsche’ (Porter 2000: 24). In a close reading of Schopenhauer, Denham argues that contrary to the standard interpretation, Nietzsche’s conception of art ‘is essentially continuous with Schopenhauer’s own’ (2014: 164). Schopenhauer had already regarded art from the perspective of life, forerunning Nietzsche’s idea ‘that aesthetic transfiguration can invest human experience with positive value’ (Denham 2014: 166). Nietzsche also takes over from Schopenhauer the emphasis on unconscious drives (Blondel 1999) and the overlying role given to music as revelation of the deepest reality (Blondel 2001).

Birth

While these two questions of the unconscious and of music will appear in my own reading, I shall leave the debates around Nietzsche’s fidelity to Ancient Greece and to Schopenhauer aside to focus on the role of birth. A number of studies have taken this aspect into consideration. Kohlenbach notes the very frequent occurrences of the semantic domain of birth both in Nietzsche’s first book and in his correspondence and notes about the book (1994), arguing that the metaphor of pregnancy is not uncommon to describe the process of

creating intellectual or artistic works (352), but without examining why this is the case. His suggestion that Nietzsche's extensive use of birth images in and about *Die Geburt* can be illuminated by the fact that it was written during an intense and fertile exchange with Wagner is nonetheless interesting. To expand on this: there might be an unconscious wish on Nietzsche's part to give Wagner a child in the context of a homoerotic relationship. This idea could also be developed on the basis of Ross's report that, when printing his book, Nietzsche deliberately used the same paper that Wagner had made him choose when entrusting him with the printing of his own book. In a letter to Rohde, Nietzsche compares his sumptuously wrapped new book to a princely child at its christening (Ross 1994: 9). Nietzsche's book is thus the younger brother of Wagner's book, Wagner fathering both.

I will not develop these hypotheses further as this would involve an investigation of Nietzsche's psyche in his real life confrontation with Wagner, while my aim is to focus on the psychic structure that can be unearthed from within the writings Nietzsche intended for publication. Irigaray adopts a similar approach in her fascinating study on Nietzsche, *Amante marine*. And the fact that she does write at length on birth through her account of the masculine fantasy of procreating that leads to symbolic matricide places her study closer to my own in its perspective. I will refer to it in more detail in what follows. What Irigaray does not take into consideration is the role of birth trauma in the constitution of feminine as well as masculine relations to birth, to the mother figure and ultimately to women. To fill this gap in her reading, I propose to use Otto Rank's theory.

There has been doubt in the scholarship on *Die Geburt* as to whether the book succeeds or not: Young suggests that it promotes a life that is not worth living (1992), which for Daniels means that the book would be considered a failure (2013). In my view, the book succeeds in supporting life insofar as it explores ways for us to overcome birth in our lives, and Rank can help us to identify this potential.

Rank sees in the trauma of birth the core of the unconscious (1924: 3). When leaving the womb, babies go through a narrow passage which puts pressure on their body, before they arrive in the world. They lose the fully protective environment that they had inside the womb and the fusion with their mother (179). From that point on, they desire to return into the womb, but the memory of the trauma, felt as anxiety, diverts them from that goal since returning to the womb would mean taking the risk of going through a similar trauma again. Both the excessive suffering experienced during birth and the desire to return must be repressed so that the baby can deal with the exigencies of life (180).

These hypotheses reproduce to some extent the argumentative structure of Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. At first sight, Ancient Greece is Apollonian, with its statues, temples and amphitheatres displaying an ideal of classical beauty. But Nietzsche reveals the Dionysian basis on which this society is built: 'Um dies zu begreifen, müssen wir jenes kunstvolle Gebäude der apollinischen Cultur gleichsam Stein um Stein abtragen, bis wir die Fundamente erblicken, auf die es begründet ist' (GT: 34). Such a demolition reiterates on the theoretical level the Dionysian gesture – undertaking destruction of the existing structures in order to look back at the origin. Nietzsche suggests that Wagner's operas issue from a similar union between the Dionysian and the Apollonian principles: beneath the Apollonian representation of characters on stage, a Dionysian music is to be found. My view is that the dialectic between these principles prefigures the birth complex. Dionysus condenses the desire to return to the womb and the anxiety associated with that desire, while Apollo represents the powers of repression that protect against anxiety by sublimating the desire.

The Dionysian desire

When describing the Dionysian characteristics, Nietzsche uses numerous images that point towards intrauterine return. Music is a Dionysian art in so far as it gives access to 'den innersten aller Gestaltung vorhergängigen Kern, oder das Herz der Dinge' (GT: 106). On the philosophical level, this conception takes over Schopenhauer's thought: music is the expression of the will (Staten 1990). Yet the metaphor of a 'Kern' that lies at the innermost site of reality reproduces the spatial position of the womb inside the mother's body, so that to desire to reach this core through music can be read as a formulation of the desire to reach the womb, for which the heart does metonymic service. This interpretation is reinforced by other passages in *Die Geburt*. Dionysus makes his followers experience life at the highest intensity when 'unter dem mystischen Jubelruf des Dionysus der Bann der Individuation zersprengt wird und der Weg zu den Müttern des Sein's, zu dem innersten Kern der Dinge offen liegt' (GT: 103). Nietzsche here establishes an equivalence between the 'mothers' of a vague 'being' and the 'innermost core' of vague 'things'. This double vagueness barely veils the real sense of the sentence: the path is open to the innermost core of the mother, that is, to the womb. Dionysus undoes the separation between human beings, especially the separation between mother and children that occurred at birth. The appearance of the mother under a plural form suggests the cosmic dimensions to be taken by this reunification.

What is indeed at stake is to be reintegrated into a totality such as the mother was for the foetus. Birth did not only mean a separation between mother and child, it also announced for the child a differentiation between mother and world. Being back into the mother would not be enough to recreate the initial conditions as long as her womb does not adopt the dimensions of the world. Any individuality left aside would foreclose the constitution of a totality. This sheds light on the above quotation in which music is supposed to give access to the core of 'die Dinge', a word that refers to the unified totality of the world and can therefore be taken as a name for the primal mother. We can also understand why, in the Dionysian fantasy, all human beings merge into one: now everybody feels 'mit seinem Nächsten nicht nur vereinigt, versöhnt, verschmolzen, sondern eins, als ob der Schleier der Maja zerrissen wäre und nur noch in Fetzen vor dem geheimnisvollen Ur-Einen herumflattere' (GT: 29-30). Maia's veil, an image Nietzsche borrows from Schopenhauer, can here be seen as the cloth that hides the maternal body as well as her skin that hides the site of primal unity. As Decher notes, Nietzsche does not justify his introduction of the concept of 'Ur-Einen', nor explain it (1985: 117), although he departs there from Schopenhauer's theory of the will (Staten 1990: 19). In my view, Nietzsche builds on a structure present in all his readers: since we were all once in the womb, we implicitly know what the return to a primal unity refers to, and thus understand that the 'Ur-Einen' is a metaphor of the womb. A synonym for 'Kern' in the text, the 'Ur-Einen' is characterised by its 'geheimnisvollen' dimension that awakens a curiosity similar to the infantile curiosity surrounding birth (Rank 1924: 31).

Nietzsche's description of the Dionysian delight seems situated 'in einem omnipotenten und omnifertilen Milieu' (Kohlenbach 1994: 352), reminiscent of the baby's sense of omnipotence and of its proximity to the procreating mother. While Schopenhauer advocated for a liberation of the individual from the metaphysical reality understood as Will, Nietzsche's Dionysus binds the individual to the 'sphere from which he had been expelled' and implies 'a submerging of the consciously thinking being in the primitive life-giving chaos' (Love 1963: 57). The images Frederick Love employs here to describe Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian remain aligned with the birth model: one has been expelled from the maternal 'sphere' through the chaotic process of birth; the baby first experiences a confusion of affects linked to the maternal body, in a phase that is anterior to conscious thinking. Like many other commentators of Nietzsche, Love thus shows in the images he uses that he has sensed the birth model that underlies Nietzsche's text, but does not move beyond the metaphorical level to address the psychic complex underneath. Other commentators reformulate Nietzsche's text in conceptual terms in order to comprehend its birth complex,

like Friedlander who interprets the figure of birth in *Die Geburt* as one ‘of ecstatic renewal’ (2005: 631); while others seem impermeable to any implications of the birth model: Giancarla Sola studies the semantic domain of the origin in *Die Geburt* without linking it to either birth or the maternal (2013: 269).

Yet Nietzsche’s text is fairly transparent. In his account, the end of individuation causes not a calm joy, as in Schopenhauer, but a cheerful rapture (Decher 1985: 115) consecutive to the fulfilment of desire. The human species has become a single child, or rather a single foetus, with nature taking on the part of the mother: ‘auch die entfremdete, feindliche oder unterjochte Natur feiert wieder ihr Versöhnungsfest mit ihrem verlorenen Sohne, dem Menschen’ (GT: 29). So while the son fulfils his desire to return, his mother (nature), who during the birth process had become estranged from her child (‘entfremdet[e]’) and potentially malevolent (‘feindlich[e]’), becomes a good mother again, one who lets her child come back into her womb.

Sallis describes as ‘gentle’ the aspect of the Dionysian associated with the joyful reunification of man with nature (1991: 51), which is somewhat euphemistic in regard to the intensity of Nietzsche’s description. Both nature and humans experience ‘die wonnevolle Verzückung [...], die bei demselben Zerbrechen des principii individuationis aus dem innersten Grunde des Menschen, ja der Natur emporsteigt’ (GT: 28). Here, the image of birth is reversed, since what comes from the innermost site of nature is not a baby but the child’s joyful rapture at having reached the womb. That rapture at the same time comes from the innermost site of the unified human who thus fully identifies with Mother Nature. Only the expectation of it shines ‘einen Strahl von Freude auf dem Antlitze der zerrissenen, in Individuen zertrümmerten Welt: wie es der Mythos durch die in ewige Trauer versenkte Demeter verbildlicht, welche zum ersten Male wieder sich *freut*, als man ihr sagt, sie könne den Dionysus *noch einmal* gebären’ (GT: 72). This statement of Nietzsche’s makes clear the link between abolition of the individuation principle and return to the womb. Interestingly enough, the mother here becomes the subject of desire: she is the one who most wants to have her baby back into her womb. Yet this does not mean that Nietzsche would give her voice back to the mother against the oblivion of the mother as subject that characterises patriarchy; on the contrary, as Irigaray (1980) has suggested. The perspective remains that of the child who avoids the anxiety that a proclamation of his own desire would awaken in him, while gaining assurance that his unspoken desire is shared and that it may be fulfilled. This child is specifically masculine: Nietzsche uses the form ‘der Bacchant’ to denote a follower of

Dionysius, neglecting the fact that the Dionysian cult was predominantly feminine (Silk & Stern 1981: 181) and that girls are subjected to the birth complex just as much as boys.

The Dionysian anxiety

Birth is traumatic in two ways: as separating the child from an all-satisfying totality, which will have psychical implications, and as compressing the child's body into a narrow passage. According to Nietzsche, the first tragic hero was

der leidende Dionysus der Mysterien [...] von dem wundervolle Mythen erzählen, wie er als Knabe von den Titanen zerstückelt worden sei und nur in diesem Zustande als Zagreus verehrt werde: wobei angedeutet wird, dass diese Zerstückelung, das eigentlich dionysische *Leiden*, gleich einer Umwandlung in Luft, Wasser, Erde und Feuer sei, dass wir also den Zustand der Individuation als den Quell und Urgrund alles Leidens, als etwas an sich Verwerfliches, zu betrachten hätten. (GT: 619-620)

In her comments on this passage, Baracchi notes the 'essential connection between generation, or individuation, and suffering', and refers explicitly to birth: 'birth occurs accompanied by, almost indiscernible from, the inaudible cry of pain of the one undergoing the horror of disruption' (2005: 224). Indeed, the myth situates this dismemberment during Dionysus's childhood, which points towards a far distant past. Rank suggests that dismemberment echoes with the traumatic experience when the different limbs were individualised for the first time through the pain they felt while the child was losing its unity with the maternal body, and bases his analysis of the crucifixion theme in Christianity following this assumption (1924: 131-132). If we apply this to Nietzsche's description, then it seems that Dionysus in the Mysteries is honoured as the foetus being born. The giants who torture him symbolise the parents. Individuation, that is, the separation trauma, serves as the origin of all pain. Nietzsche's insistence on the idea of origin through the terms 'Quell', the primal water, and 'Urgrund', the primal site, points implicitly towards the womb, while his characterisation of the separation trauma as 'verwerflich' makes the readers sense an evocation of the trauma of birth during which indeed we have been 'verworfen' – projected out of – the primal watery site.

This correlation between the foetal state and birth trauma also structures Nietzsche's account of music:

Der Weltsymbolik der Musik ist eben deshalb mit der Sprache auf keine Weise erschöpfend beizukommen, weil sie sich auf den Urwiderspruch und Urschmerz im Herzen des Ur-Einen symbolisch bezieht, somit eine Sphäre symbolisiert, die über aller Erscheinung und vor aller Erscheinung ist. (GT: 51)

Music favours a return beyond language, to the maternal totality that we experienced from inside the womb, but it also expresses the pain of separation. Birth has introduced an “Urschmerz” into the primal unity that can no longer be approached without the spectre of a new trauma. Nietzsche does not explain his association of the ‘Urschmerz’ with the ‘Ur-Einen’. Although he seems to merely take it over from Schopenhauer (Decher 1985: 117), he actually follows here the logic of the birth complex: in the Rankian model, desire and anxiety are correlated. The mother cannot be recalled as primal unity (‘Ur-Eine’) without awakening the memory of the trauma (‘Urschmerz’) that signified the loss of this unity.

The more Dionysus awakens desire in his followers, the more he confronts them with anxiety. The Bacchant is excited by ‘jenes sichere Vorgefühl einer höchsten Lust, zu der der Weg durch Untergang und Verneinung führt, so dass er zu hören meint, als ob der innerste Abgrund der Dinge zu ihm vernehmlich spräche’ (GT: 135). His desire is soon to be fulfilled, he hears the beloved voice coming from the abyss, in a reversal of the foetal situation in which he heard the maternal voice from the womb. Yet to join such a siren in her abyss, he must break down the very structures that protect him against anxiety. At the moment of fulfilling his desire, he is overwhelmed by anxiety:

Die wahre Erkenntnis, der Einblick in die grauenhafte Wahrheit überwiegt jedes zum Handeln antreibende Motiv [...]. Jetzt verfängt kein Trost mehr, die Sehnsucht geht über eine Welt nach dem Tode [...]. In der Bewusstheit der einmal geschauten Wahrheit sieht jetzt der Mensch überall nur das Entsetzliche oder Absurde des Seins, jetzt versteht er das Symbolische im Schicksal der Ophelia, jetzt erkennt er die Weisheit des Waldgottes Silen: es ekelt ihn. (GT: 57)

The Bacchant has come too close to the womb. Anxiety mars his object, making it look ‘grauenhaft’. He cannot find in the world any consolatory object that would stand for the womb. The only one he finds is death, although the death drive here can be seen as a secondary elaboration of the birth complex. His desire therefore appears to be a yearning for death that threatens his existence. Anxiety cancels any desire he might have, cutting him off

also from the enjoyment of life. He then identifies with the drowned Ophelia, thus fantasising being back in the primal water. And he agrees with Silenus, of whom Nietzsche has narrated the legend a few pages earlier. Silenus, a companion of Dionysus, when asked by King Midas what was the very best for man, answered:

Elendes Eintagsgeschlecht, des Zufalls Kinder und der Mühsal, was zwingst du mich dir zu sagen, was nicht zu hören für dich das Ersprößlichste ist? Das Allerbeste ist für dich gänzlich unerreichbar: nicht geboren zu sein, nicht zu *sein*, *nichts* zu sein. Das Zweitbeste aber ist für dich – bald zu sterben. (GT: 35)

The best is to not to have been born, which might seem to signify ‘not to have been conceived’, but might rather be understood as ‘to still be a foetus’. Rank was so much in favour of such an interpretation that he used this passage from *Die Geburt der Tragödie* as an exergue to *Das Trauma der Geburt*. Dying comes as second best because death is unconsciously associated with a return to the womb, as Freud had suggested in a note added in 1909 to *Die Traumdeutung* (1899|1900: 406). Trying to repel us from a goal that both echoes with the primal trauma and threatens our life, anxiety fills us with disgust instead of desire. We turn back not so much from death as from birth.

Apollo Salvator

Anxiety has stopped the Bacchant in his way backwards. Yet, in order for the life instincts to be fully reinstated, anxiety itself must decrease, as well as desire. Under the influence of anxiety, the Bacchant has turned away from his primal object of desire, but also from life. At that very moment, Apollo steps in to restore the possibility of life under the female features of Art: ‘Hier, in dieser höchsten Gefahr des Willens, naht sich, als rettende, heilkundige Zauberin, die *Kunst*; sie allein vermag jene Ekelgedanken über das Entsetzliche oder Absurde des Daseins in Vorstellungen umzubiegen, mit denen sich leben lässt’ (GT: 57). Beauty and measure hide the abyss; and dreams stand in for real fulfilment. Thanks to Apollo, the Greeks were able to reverse Silenus’s wisdom and to affirm life, which Nietzsche praises, whereas Schopenhauer saw in this reversal a flaw (Cartwright 1991).

In Nietzsche’s account, Apollo represents the individuation principle and the art that produces images, in contrast with the Dionysian art of music, which is ‘unindividuated and non-representational’ (Klein 1996: 19). His world of predilection is that of dreams.

Responding to philological critics who claim that this does not correspond to the Greek Apollo, Sallis argues that Nietzsche does not associate Apollo with dreams in the same sense as the Greeks would say that Arès was the god of war (1991: 23), but rather that he attributes to Apollo the semantic domain of *Schein*, which covers a wide range of senses: ‘shine, look, appearance, semblance, illusion’ (25). And in his analysis of Nietzsche’s use of the terms *Erscheinung* and *Schein*, Rethy insists on the ‘aesthetically pleasurable aspect’ of the ‘*schöne Schein*’, and recalls Apollo’s Greek name, Phoebus, that comes etymologically from *phôs*, meaning light (1991: 62).

As the god of the sun, Apollo delineates the borders that were erased in the Dionysian night. In daylight, bodies are clearly outlined, which reaffirms the individuation principle. The presence of light means that we are not anymore in the womb. Being born, the baby passes from a dark body into the illuminated world. Several expressions in European languages associate birth with light, either from the child’s or the mother’s point of view: ‘das Licht der Welt erblicken’, ‘donner|voir le jour’, ‘dar a luz|ver la luz’ or ‘dare alla luce’. The moment when the baby first sees light marks the end of a traumatic process, which might contribute to the positive value usually given to light. Yet that first encounter with light was arguably traumatic as well, babies being dazzled while air entering their lungs for the first time made them cry out in pain. So the benign connotations of light and air must be retrospective. The memory of the primal trauma gives negative connotations to the attributes of the womb, such as darkness and humidity, whereas the attributes of the world, light and dry air, gain positive value. In the unconscious however, a yearning for darkness and humidity can still be found, as well as a rejection of light and air. Birth thus opens not only the Rankian dialectic between anxiety and desire to return, but also a dialectic between light and body which in my view intertwines with the Rankian one to form the birth complex.

This second dialectic underlies to some extent the duality of the maternal and paternal figures. The father shares properties with light. He is an emanation of the world, in the perspective of the newly born baby. Like light welcoming the baby, he was to be found at the end of the birth trauma. Like light outlining bodies, he separates mother and child. Both father and light thus protect the child against the anxiety that a too close proximity with the maternal darkness would awaken. Yet the father can also be held responsible for the trauma. His law forbids children to fulfil their desire, pursuing in this the laws of the world according to which no child can stay for more than nine months in the womb and no child can ever return there. The desire to transgress the father’s law and to reunite with the mother can be seen as a form

of the pre-oedipal desire to move away from the illuminated world, back into corporeal darkness.

This more archaic desire is manifest in the Oedipus myth itself. Oedipus is first moved by a relentless curiosity to know the origin. In Rank's account, such a curiosity reiterates that of children to know how they have been conceived, in the hope that this knowledge would allow them to return to the womb (1924: 31-32). But then Oedipus discovers that he has already found the route back since he sexually knows his mother; immediately after this discovery, he sees the way blocked again through her suicide. At that point, he blinds himself, which can be seen as a manifestation of guilt in the Freudian perspective, or a reaction of anxiety consecutive to the excessive liberation of desire in the Rankian perspective. However, in falling back into the primitive night, Oedipus also finds an alternative way to fulfil his desire to return that he cannot any longer fulfil in his incestuous marriage. The myth of Oedipus thus presents successively the desire to see, in which light serves for a phallic penetration of the maternal darkness, and the desire to not see, in which darkness opens the space of a reunion with the mother.

Pautrat suggests that the structure of *Die Geburt* is the reverse of the Oedipus myth, since in the latter, blindness cures an excess of light, whereas in Nietzsche's book, light cures an excess of darkness; but he maintains that this opposition is only superficial since remedy and poison are the two faces of a same reality, called '*pharmakon*' by the Greeks (1971: 145). Apollo inseminates luminous images and individuated heroes in the frightful womb of nature, thus playing the role of a procreating father while his light detaches and cures the gaze from a dangerous attraction towards maternal darkness.

Light has been a privileged metaphor throughout Western philosophy to characterise the thinking process as liberation from physical needs, enslaving affects, childish ignorance and ultimately from anything that recalls the link to the mother's body. Not only light but also its derivatives such as intellectual knowledge and wisdom are thus typically associated with the father or male figures, and refused to women. Nietzsche builds on this, and so does Pautrat when, in his commentary on Nietzsche, he writes of Apollo:

dans le savoir de son oeil et de sa « théorie », dans la sagesse de son oracle, se dessine une figure paternelle, d'un père qui sait, qui console et qui protège contre une mère toujours prête, comme dans le mythe dionysiaque, à dévorer celui qu'elle vient d'enfanter et d'allaiter avec tendresse. (1971: 142).

Pautrat thus makes explicit the fact that Nietzsche's images of pleasurable reunion with Mother Nature conceal a representation of the maternal marred by anxiety. The child wishes that his mother would take him back to her womb, but this desire calls forth anxiety: the child is now afraid that his mother would devour him, although that would actually fulfil his desire.

The polarity of light and flesh

There is thus a polarity between light, intellectual knowledge, the father, on one side, and darkness, the body, the mother, on the other side. For the sake of simplification, I call it the polarity between light and flesh, although many more combinations of terms belonging to each of these domains could work and have indeed been used. My point is that these two domains are structured by the experience of birth. In Nietzsche's book, Apollo is on the side of the father and of light, whereas Dionysus is on the side of the mother and of the body. Spector differentiates two senses of the body in Nietzsche: as the pendant to mind, and as the fundamental ground of life. He argues that Nietzsche moves away from the first sense that is predominant in the Platonic and Judeo-Christian traditions to elaborate the second sense through the figures of Dionysus and of the Übermensch (1998). I agree with this, but would say that the opposite of the body taken in the second sense, as ground of life, is the illuminated world, which is of course different from the mind but belongs to the same domain. Dionysus leads us regressively beyond language and the intellectual apprehension of the world, and then beyond the world itself into the womb. He thus favours a liberation of desire that awakens anxiety, while Apollo represents the powers of sublimation that allow us to live.

The Dionysian calls forth that which needs to be repressed for the sake of life. Sallis remarks that, strictly speaking, the Dionysian cannot be represented since it stands for a metaphysical principle beyond representation (1991: 42). And yet Nietzsche gives it a very precise image, that of the Greek god Dionysus which prevents us from a direct confrontation with the unbearable desire to return. In a way, Nietzsche is already Apollonian when creating Dionysus. Furthermore, his choice of these two gods and his presentation of the couple they form muddy the waters. Dionysus traditionally bears phallic attributes, while the gracious Apollo playing with a veil can be seen as feminine (Pautrat 1971: 142). This couple thus disrupt 'the heterosexual binary division that applies a set of gendered traits to the feminine (and by extension to biological females) and an opposing set to the masculine' (Oppel 2005: 79). Schulte argues that Nietzsche, in identifying with Dionysus in the encounter with Apollo,

satisfies a repressed homosexuality (1982: 22). Whatever Nietzsche's disposition was, his divine Greek couple certainly displays a 'homoeroticism' (Baracchi 2005: 242) that excludes actual women from the symbolic procreation of tragedy. The description of Apollo as feminine and Dionysus as masculine situates them in the genital stage that will be mainly the object of my second chapter. In the present chapter, my interest is primarily in the elements directly linked with birth. At this stage, Nietzsche associates Dionysus fairly consistently with the complex of desire and anxiety issuing from birth, and Apollo with the paternal light that casts away this dark area. What creates the ambivalence of these two gods is the superposition of the pre-genital and genital phase, since in each they occupy different and indeed, in terms of gender, opposite positions.

In his analysis of the Apollo-Dionysus interplay, Daniels insists that it is based on 'symbiotic *need*': Apollo and Dionysus could not exist without each other (2013: 68). In fact, they open a space for symbiotic desire. I would suggest that the merging of the Apollonian and Dionysian principles into tragedy does not only mirror the union of the parents in and with their child. At the unconscious level, it also means an annihilation of the polarity opened by birth, thus cancelling birth itself. If body and light merge, there is no longer any differentiation between the womb and the world. The separation trauma is denied, promising a fulfilment of the desire to return. The birth of tragedy is therefore a reversed birth.

B. Nietzsche against Wagner

This free expression given to a dangerous desire was bound to awaken anxiety. In his later texts, Nietzsche turns away from Wagner and from his own dialectic of Dionysus and Apollo. This evolution itself occurs like a birth that separates the subject from the womb to project him into the world. Nietzsche states that ‘ich nicht mehr leicht athme, wenn diese Musik erst auf mich wirkt’ – Wagner’s music acts like the maternal body oppressing the child during birth; and that ‘alsbald mein *Fuss* gegen sie böse wird und revoltirt: er hat das Bedürfniss nach Takt, Tanz, Marsch’ (NW: 418). Nietzsche rebels against the regressive immobility in which Wagner’s music tends to put him, claiming his wish to move like an adult. Music should not shut him up in a gravid body; on the contrary: ‘Was *will* eigentlich mein ganzer Leib von der Musik überhaupt? [...] Ich glaube, seine *Erleichterung*’ (NW: 419). Therefore, he will privilege Bizet’s Mediterranean music that welcomes in the luminous air of the world over Wagner’s that sticks in uterine water: whoever listens to the latter goes ‘in’s Meer’ and loses ‘allmählich den sicheren Schritt auf dem Grunde’ (NW: 421), leaving the world in a reversed birth. By contrast, Mediterranean music is a smooth sea in which one does not sink, but on which one slides, staying at the surface outside of the maternal body; it is a dance thanks to which ‘alle animalischen Funktionen durch leichte, kühne, ausgelassne, selbstgewisse Rhythmen beschleunigt werden’ (NW: 419).

According to Rank, dance as a fluid movement through free space is a denegation of the difficult course through a narrow passage during birth (1924: 158). Here this denegation works for the life instincts, helping the subject to move away from birth, and favouring in him the rhythms most appropriate to life.⁴ Nietzsche opposes the bad weather reigning in Wagner’s operas to ‘die leichten Füße; Witz, Feuer, Anmuth; die grosse Logik; den Tanz der Sterne; die übermüthige Geistigkeit; die Lichtschauer des Südens; das glatte Meer – Vollkommenheit...’ of the Mediterranean music exemplified in Bizet (FWA: 37). Thanks to Bizet, ‘nimmt man Abschied vom *feuchten* Norden, von allem Wasserdampf des Wagnerischen Ideals’. Wagner’s world is too dark and humid, it looks too much like a womb; while Bizet’s music has ‘was zur heißen Zone gehört, die Trockenheit der Luft, die *limpidezza* in der Luft’ (FWA: 15). This music shares the two main attributes, light and air, associated from birth with the world, in so far as the world is the opposite pole to the womb.

⁴ On the key role of rhythm in Nietzsche’s reception of Wagner, see Fry 2013 and Ridley’s response (2013).

Dry and sunny, Bizet's world contrasts with the humid maternal darkness. The limpidity of its air allows for a clear distinction between the bodies. Such an Apollonian music favours the repression of the desire to return and helps its listeners to live, whereas Wagner's Dionysian music pushes them to death.

Wagner is a neurosis

Nietzsche's critique of Wagner in his last texts is thus not based on an evaluation of the composer's music as such, but rather on psychological insights that address the reception of Wagner's music and its influence on the listener (Love 1979). Nietzsche takes on the role of a psychologist, as indicated by the subtitle of his *Nietzsche contra Wagner: Aktenstücke eines Psychologen*. In *Der Fall Wagner*, Nietzsche makes a devastating diagnosis:

Wagner's [sic] Kunst ist krank. Die Probleme, die er auf die Bühne bringt – lauter Hysteriker-Probleme –, das Konvulsivische seines Affekts, seine überreizte Sensibilität [...]: alles zusammen stellt ein Krankheitsbild dar, das keinen Zweifel lässt. *Wagner est une névrose*. (FWA: 22)

The original French in the quotation points towards the neurologist Charcot who was at the time famous for his medical performances featuring women in hysterical contortions (Hyer 2006). Thus associated with histrionics, hysteria was seen as the typical illness of modernity and especially of modern art at the end of the nineteenth century (Moore 2001). In his suggestion that the specific form of neurosis that Wagner suffers from is hysteria, Nietzsche participates in this association between hysteria, histrionics and modern art. But he also draws upon a tradition dating back to Ancient Greece. The term 'hysteria' is etymologically connected to the womb: hysteria supposedly concerns women only, so that the Greeks assumed that it was caused by some uterine disorder. By suggesting that Wagner, although not a woman, is a hysteric, Nietzsche opens a new understanding of the relation between hysteria and womb.

In *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Nietzsche draws a portrait of Wagner sitting 'am liebsten still in den Winkeln zusammengestürzter Häuser' (FWI: 445). This metaphor is less explicitly connected to birth than the ones we found in *Die Geburt*, but can still be read in the frame of the birth complex. The decaying houses may stand for the maternal body marred by primal anxiety, so that Wagner sitting silent at their most hidden site is back in the womb. What makes this metaphor into a condemnation of Wagner is the fact that anxiety here is at the

surface, awakening the reader's own anxiety through representations of decay and danger which ultimately recall the birth trauma. Yet, beneath anxiety, the desire to return still finds an expression in Nietzsche's image: Wagner, being back in the womb, occupies an enviable position, so that the readers, and arguably Nietzsche himself, unconsciously identify with him. Here we therefore find a dialectic between desire and anxiety similar to that in *Die Geburt*, except that the desire to return which Nietzsche patently expressed in his descriptions of the Dionysian drive is now kept beneath the surface, while the anxiety that had partially emerged through the evocation of the disgust provoked by Dionysian excesses now colours the entire picture of Wagner.

Conflating Wagner with his music, Nietzsche does not only say that Wagner is neurotic, but that he is a personified neurosis (Hyer 2006: 312). Not only does Wagner yield to the primal desire, but he makes the audience yield to it as well. 'Es gibt nichts Müdes, nichts Abgelebtes, nichts Lebensgefährliches und Weltverleumderisches in Dingen des Geistes, das von seiner Kunst nicht heimlich in Schutz genommen würde' (FWA: 42-43): Wagner's art favours for the audience a shortcut to the term of life by awakening in us the desire to return to the origin. The whole organism is weakened by this liberation of a desire that will use death to reach its ultimate goal, the womb. In *Ecce homo*, Nietzsche writes: 'ich suche heute noch nach einem Werke von gleich gefährlicher Fascination, von einer gleich schauerlichen und süßen Unendlichkeit, wie der Tristan ist' (EH: 289). Wagner has gone further than any other artist on the regressive track towards primary fusion with the mother, who for the foetus represented totality. His art fascinates because it builds on the deepest desire that each of us has and represses. Nietzsche himself acknowledges being subject to it: 'Meine Schwermut will in den Verstecken und Abgründen der *Vollkommenheit* ausruhen: dazu brauchte ich Musik. Aber Wagner macht krank' (NW: 419). Here the metaphor makes 'perfection' into a maternal body hiding a desirable abyss towards which Nietzsche's desire to return leads him. But this desire is dangerous, and by awakening it, Wagner threatens our lives.

Nietzsche refuses to let himself be contaminated by the Wagnerian illness. 'Man wehrte sich gegen [Wagner] wie gegen eine Krankheit, – *nicht* mit Gründen – man widerlegt keine Krankheit –, sondern mit Hemmung, Misstrauen, Verdrossenheit, Ekel, mit einem finsternen Ernste, als ob in ihm eine große Gefahr herumschliche' (FWA: 40). The reaction to Wagner's operas cannot be rational, using arguments, but is emotional and builds on anxiety, of which embarrassment, mistrust and disgust are faces, in order to counteract the influence of desire. Nietzsche will not mingle with the youthful acolytes described as 'erstarrt, blass, athemlos' (29), these motionless, bloodless and not yet breathing foetuses who, when they have to leave

the maternal Bayreuth, write the characteristic telegram 'bereits bereut' (44), expressing their desire to return. Yet Nietzsche has been amongst these Wagnerites: he knows the symptoms all the better for the fact that he has experienced the sickness himself.

Dionysus is therefore the positive side of what Nietzsche will later call neurosis. Nietzsche first praised the very exaltation of desire that he would later condemn. Wagner is Dionysian, and he is a neurosis for the same reason: he excites in his followers the desire to return to the womb, a desire that is the most powerful drive that we experience in life, and at the same time exposes us to the risk of dying. If there is a reversal in Nietzsche's position, it is that from his yielding to desire to his reaction of anxiety. Given the correlation of desire and anxiety in the birth complex, this reversal was to be foreseen right from *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Furthermore, *Die Geburt* already elaborates on such a reversal by describing the disgust finally awoken in the Bacchant after Dionysian excesses.

C. A Philosophy of Life

Following Dionysus, we can undo the separation that occurred at birth; however, this form of life is unsustainable and the Bacchant is soon overwhelmed by anxiety. Thanks to Apollo's luminous art, we can overcome the complex of desire and anxiety linked with birth, and orient ourselves towards life. The union of Dionysus and Apollo enables the spectators of tragedy to alternate between satisfaction and repression of the desire for antenatal return. However, this equilibrium breaks in Nietzsche's later philosophy: in effect, he takes sides with Apollo, seeing the desire to return as a danger for life. This Apollonian turn does not only cause his reversal against Wagner. Nietzsche's pamphlets against Wagner are part of a wider philosophy of life in which Nietzsche supports the agencies that work for life over those that favour a deadly return. The main criterion he adopts in his judgements is that of health (Scruton 2014), by opposition to a sickness that Nietzsche in the last years of his writing characterises as decadence (Müller-Lauter 1998). This term is ambivalent in Nietzsche's writings (Bauer 1999: 301), vested at once with positive and negative connotations (Borchmeyer 1984: 210).

In my understanding, Nietzsche calls decadent those who yield to a deadly desire to return, the ambiguity in his account of decadence being sustained by his own ambiguous disposition with regard to that desire. Positioning himself against decadence, Nietzsche advocates instead for a strengthening of the will to power that in his view grounds life. He writes in *Der Antichrist*: 'Das Leben selbst gilt mir als Instinkt für Wachstum, für Dauer, für Häufung von Kräften, für Macht: wo der Wille zur Macht fehlt, giebt es Niedergang' (AC: 172). The will to power is thus the highest expression of the life instincts, while a diminution of the life instincts entails decadence. 'Ein Thier, eine Gattung, ein Individuum (ist) verdorben, wenn es seine Instinkte verliert, wenn es wählt, wenn es vorzieht, was ihm nachtheilig ist' (AC: 172). Instead of obeying the logic of life, which goes forwards, decadence regresses, driven by what seems to be death but is actually birth. 'Der Instinkt ist geschwächt. Was man zu scheuen hätte, das zieht an. Man setzt an die Lippen, was noch schneller in den Abgrund treibt' (FWA: 22). Here, being driven towards the abyss is no longer as positive as it was in *Die Geburt* when Dionysus was leading the way. Marred by anxiety, the womb now fully appears as a deadly place.

At the time of *Die Geburt*, Nietzsche argues that the end of tragedy was due to the triumph of Socrates's rationalism. Socrates was bold enough 'das griechische Wesen zu verneinen' (GT: 90), whereas the instinct of creators usually is an affirmative force. In the

chapter Nietzsche devotes to him in *Götzendämmerung*, Socrates becomes the paradigm of decadence: he does not only negate Hellenism, but life itself. Foreshadowing other so-called sages, Socrates only talks of life with a ‘Klang voll Zweifel, voll Schwermuth, voll Müdigkeit am Leben, voll Widerstand gegen das Leben’ (GD: 67). However, in Nietzsche’s account, Socrates does not only aim for death but also uses rationality to master his drives, which points towards a repression of desire. Socrates is ‘eine Höhle aller schlimmen Begierden’ who must ‘gegen die dunklen Begehungen ein *Tageslicht* in Permanenz herstellen – das Tageslicht der Vernunft’ (GD: 72). In *Götzendämmerung* Nietzsche thus still understands Socrates within the dialectic of Apollo and Dionysus: Socrates protects himself against the excess of his desires by recourse to an intellectual light that separates him from the dangerous darkness of the flesh. Rank insists on that Apollonian dimension, arguing that Socrates succeeded ‘das Geburtstrauma als Erster intellektuell zu überwinden und damit zum unmittelbaren Vorläufer der psychoanalytischen Therapie zu werden’ (1924: 174). However, in his classification of Socrates as a decadent, Nietzsche is more sensitive to Socrates’s dangerous desires and to his negating instinct than to his intellectual repression and illuminating reason. Thus drawing a negative portrait of Socrates, Nietzsche by contrast advocates for an ethic that has ‘umgekehrt ihre Wurzel in einem triumphirenden Ja-sagen zu sich, – sie ist Selbstbejahung, Selbstverherrlichung des Lebens’ (FWA: 52). Such an ethic reverses the desire to return into an exaltation of life.

Unable to praise life, the decadent aims for a refuge beyond the world. Every philosophy is decadent ‘welche den Frieden höher stellt als den Krieg, jede Ethik mit einer negativen Fassung des Begriffs Glück, jede Metaphysik und Physik, welche ein Finale kennt, einen Endzustand irgend welcher Art, jedes vorwiegend aesthetische oder religiöse Verlangen nach einem Abseits, Jenseits, Ausserhalb, Oberhalb’ (FWI: 348). Although Nietzsche does not refer explicitly to the womb, these faces of decadence can all be aligned with the birth complex. Philosophy preferring peace over war aims for a rest similar to the one supposedly experienced by the foetus. Having as ideal the foetal rest is a typically negative way of understanding happiness: the final goal is for ever inaccessible, and even if it were not, the sought-after happiness would be a regression beyond life rather than a happiness found in life. Aiming for a final stage is a hidden way to aim for origin. Finally, fantasied places beyond the world stand for the womb, since the womb was the only place beyond the world that we have ever experienced, so that any yearning towards a ‘Hinterwelt’ is a masked desire to return.

Beyond the philosophical field, Nietzsche also describes Christianity through the category of decadence. In his view, Christianity undermines life-affirming virtues and

promotes a life-denying concept of redemption (Scruton 2014). Characteristics of Christianity are ‘Der Hass auf die ‚Welt‘, [...] ein Jenseits, erfunden, um das Diesseits besser zu verleumden, im Grunde ein Verlangen in’s Nichts, an’s Ende, in’s Ausruhen’ (GT: 18). In Christianity, the attempt to undermine the individuation principle takes the form of self-hatred. Being finished means for the individual being separated from the mother. So Christians wish to abolish themselves, following Christ who ‘will von sich *loskommen*’ (FWA: 52), arguably in the hope of recuperating the lost fusion with totality. God himself appears as a bad foetus: ‘er blieb der Gott der Winkel, der Gott aller dunklen Ecken und Stellen, aller ungesunden Quartiere der ganzen Welt!... Sein Weltreich ist nach wie vor ein Unterwelts-Reich, ein Hospital, ein Souterrain-Reich, ein Ghetto-Reich... Und er selbst, so blass, so schwach, so *décadent*...’ (AC: 184). These metaphors obey the same logic as the evocation of Wagner sitting at the deepest site of maternal houses and the description of pale Wagnerites returning from Bayreuth. Building on a representation marred by anxiety of the womb, Nietzsche uses images of darkness, narrowness and enclosure while he introduces the inhabitants of this womb-like space as pale and unhealthy foetuses.

Falling for the desire to return, the decadent regresses beyond the genital stage. According to Rank:

Beide Geschlechter werden also neurotisch, wenn sie die Urlibido der Rückkehr zur Mutter, welche das Trauma der Geburt gutmachen soll, nicht auf dem ihnen vorgezeichneten Wege der Sexualbefriedigung, sondern in der ursprünglichen Form der Infantilbefriedigung stillen wollen, wobei sie natürlich wieder auf die Angstgrenze des Geburtstraumas stoßen müssen, die eben auf dem Wege der Sexualbefriedigung am besten vermieden wird. (1924: 42)

Typically neurotic, the decadent seeks union with his mother but avoids a partial satisfaction of this desire through sexuality, which confronts him with anxiety. Desire itself is, then, seen as dangerous. Under the influence of anxiety, the decadent does not differentiate between objects directly and indirectly standing for the mother, between the desire to return and sexual desire: he tries to suppress any form of desire within himself, thus moving away from the source that could have healed him. Nietzsche calls such an attitude ‘*Castratismus*’ (GD: 82-83), and associates it with decadence: ‘Die Gottheit der *décadence*, beschnitten an ihren *männlichsten Tugenden* und Trieben, wird nunmehr nothwendig zum Gott der physiologisch-Zurückgegangenen’ (AC: 183). Castration does not suppress the desire to return, and

therefore fails to solve anything. On the contrary, it suppresses the most efficient way to gain partial satisfaction.

Wagner in *Parsifal* did condemn castration since that is the way chosen by the villain, Klingsor. Yet in Nietzsche's perspective, this opera advocates a higher form of castration, the complete annihilation of any sexual desire: in Kundry's arms, Parsifal can think only of his mother, and his chastity is what saves him. This repression of sexuality makes Parsifal into a hysteric (Hyer 2006). Full of Christian references, the opera also presents a king, Amfortas, who longs for death. *Parsifal* thus embodied everything Nietzsche was set against: Christianity, the yearning towards death, and a neurotic disavowal of sexuality. What unites these aspects is that in all three cases, the desire to return wins over life instincts. We can therefore understand why Nietzsche reacted so intensely to Wagner's *Parsifal*, a rejection that he presented as a key moment in his reversal against Wagner (Ridley 2014: 229).

In *Die Geburt*, Nietzsche describes how Apollonian art protects us against the excess of Dionysian desire and brings us back onto the path of life. He later sees in Bizet's Mediterranean music a remedy against the Wagnerian illness. His attacks against decadence are led for the sake of an affirmation of life. In these different moments of his work, Nietzsche systematically takes into consideration the impact of birth on our lives. To me, the question that drives him is to understand how we are to overcome birth. In *Die Geburt*, the answer to this question is radiant: Apollo triumphs over the monsters awakened by Dionysus. In the contest that opposes Bizet and Wagner, the issue is already less clear: despite Nietzsche's celebration, Bizet may not appear as a challenger able to contain the power of Wagnerism. In his relentless fight against decadence, Nietzsche reveals the extension of the field that has been conquered by the enemy and no longer refers directly to Apollo, praising instead the will to power as the principle sustaining life. Having analysed these different themes in their relation to birth and pre-genital regression, I shall now explore the extent to which Nietzsche's account of the genital stage gives answers to the question of how we are to overcome birth.

Chapter 2

Erotic Art and the Question of Woman

According to Rank, sex provides adults with ‘einer teilweisen Befriedigung des Urwunsches, jedenfalls zur weitestgehenden, die überhaupt möglich ist’ (1924: 41-42). Insofar as it is only partial, this satisfaction conforms to the exigencies of life, while the full return for which neurotics aim would mean their death. In his valorisation of life, Nietzsche borrows heavily from the sexual field to describe the forms of art and of philosophy that he promotes. Both Rank and Nietzsche develop positions on woman which result from their answers to a question that I would formulate thus: is woman only the object by which the male subject satisfies his desire to return, or is she also a subject able to satisfy her own desire and to overcome birth?

A. Love: The War of Man against Woman

In Rank’s argument, the anxiety attached to the maternal body for the male child is transferred onto the father during the Oedipal stage, while the pleasurable aspect of the womb is transferred onto the exit of the female genitalia that had been a source of anxiety until then (1924: 44). This prepares the boy for sexual intercourse with women. If the Oedipus complex is not well resolved, the binding to the mother is not cut. Anxiety remains attached to the female body and man moves away from it, choosing either homosexuality or a pre-genital regression, that is, neurosis. In the case of a good resolution of the Oedipus complex, man enjoys a partial satisfaction of his desire to return through identifying his penis with himself as a baby, and a woman’s vagina with his mother’s womb (39).

This potentially backfires against Rank’s theory, since one could easily argue that the idea of a structural desire to return to the womb is a generalization of the heterosexual male standpoint on sexuality. Although Rank highlights the fact that psychoanalysts tend to privilege the male perspective, he does the same here. Women are supposed to identify with their partner’s penis while taking on the maternal position and enabling the man to fulfill his desire to return through them (39). They therefore have a less direct satisfaction of their own desire to return, which in Rank’s view explains penis envy (38) and potential complications in women’s access to sexual pleasure (40).

Rank builds here on the work of his collaborator Sándor Ferenczi, who, in the same year as *Das Trauma*, published a theory of sexuality based on their common idea of a desire for antenatal return. Ferenczi claims that woman is the loser in heterosexual intercourse, which he understands as a repetition on the individual level of the battle between the sexes (1924: 36). He describes sexual seduction as a confrontation that determines ‘welcher von den Kämpfenden das geschlechtliche Eindringen in den Körper des Partners als Mutterleibersatz erzwingt’ (42). This supposes that the adult woman desires to penetrate her male partner just as he desires to penetrate her. Having thus attributed to woman a male desire, it is easy for Ferenczi to conclude that she fails to satisfy it. Coherently, Ferenczi qualifies the desire for antenatal return as male (34), even as his description of sexuality supposes that both sexes share the desire to return. If sex is a battle that woman is guaranteed to lose, and if desire itself is a male property, one wonders why woman would ever want to have sex. Building on examples taken in the animal field, Ferenczi suggests that ‘das Weibchen bei der Werbearbeit durch eine hypnotische Mutterleibregression betört und durch diese phantastische Glückssituation für das an sich unlustvolle Erdulden des Sexualaktes entschädigt wird’ (44). If this is true, then woman does enjoy a satisfaction of her desire to return as long as the hypnotic trance, in which she sinks thanks to sex, lasts. But then, sex is no longer a battle in which man forces woman to renounce the satisfaction of her own desire, which rather evokes a rape than a normal sexual encounter. Males in Ferenczi’s account choose between two strategies to have sex: either ‘das Weibchen mit direkter Gewalt gefügig zu machen oder mit Hilfe hypnotischer Faszinierung zu lähmen’ (42). In the first case, woman is the victim of a rape. In the second case, she reaches the satisfaction of her desire thanks to hypnotic trance; however, in his suggestion that man paralyses woman, Ferenczi remains in a rape model, since the victims of a rape are typically unable to move or to shout, as if paralysed. The hypothesis of a link between hypnosis and female sexuality is nevertheless interesting. Rank does not adopt it in his much shorter exposé on sex, but he also avoids Ferenczi’s sexist formulations and, despite his male perspective, strives for a fair treatment of woman, arguing that her satisfaction is ‘ganz ähnlich’ to that of man and potentially ‘noch weitergehend[e]’ (Rank 1924: 39).

Carmen

In his defence of Bizet over Wagner, Nietzsche refers specifically to one opera: *Carmen*. This choice reveals that Nietzsche was not only sensitive to Bizet's Mediterranean music, but also to a sexually liberated heroine. Nietzsche reproaches Wagner for having abandoned his initial plan for the end of the *Ring*, in which Brünnhilde was to glorify free love, and for having replaced it with a Schopenhauerian discourse. By comparison, Bizet's *Carmen* glorifies free love in her entrance piece, expresses her desires as she pleases and satisfies them throughout the opera. This also contrasts with the schema exposed by Ferenczi in which man is a predator subject of his desire, and woman his passive victim. In fact, traditionalist readings of the opera make *Carmen* into a predator and José into her victim, since he loses his social position for her. However, if we read the opera as the story of *Carmen*'s struggle for freedom, then she appears as the victim of José's possessiveness (Furman 1988: 171). *Carmen* and José thus 'occupy in turn the position of bullfighter and bull', both roles being presented in the libretto as interchangeable (172). Nietzsche describes the form of love that he finds in the opera as true to nature, in contrast with Wagner's 'Senta-Sentimentalität' (FWA: 15). In Furman's comment,

The ideal of complementarity of the sexes played out in Wagner's opera has been replaced in Bizet's by a concept of equality. For in *Carmen* the dramatic tension is created by the necessity for each of the two lovers to satisfy his or her essential need—even though it may be opposed to the other's. (1988: 170)

It thus seems that Nietzsche casts his vote for an opera that promotes gender equality and liberated sexuality. If both lovers satisfy their needs equally, then sex is not mainly a victory of man over woman, as Ferenczi puts it. The main female character in Bizet's opera is *Carmen* and not Micaëla, the conventional figure of chaste femininity (McClary 1992a: 36), who lives with José's mother, speaks for his mother, and kisses him for her. José resists the incestuous wish of marrying a woman who thus appears as an emanation of his mother and who occupies the position of a sister for him. He chooses instead a woman who is decisively not a mothering figure, which might explain Nietzsche's preference: Bizet's opera favours genital sexuality over a regressive desire to return.

However, the fact that José's mother indicates Micaëla as an appropriate love object for him puts the maid outside of the Oedipal triangle, whereas *Carmen* is a forbidden object, which recalls the position of the mother at the Oedipal stage. *Carmen*'s sexual availability

corresponds to the child's fantasy that his mother would be available to anyone, including to himself (Rank 1912: 102). Successively loving a 'virgin' and a 'whore', José alternates between archetypal visions of femininity that both take on maternal features. When Carmen leaves José for Escamillo, the Oedipal triangle becomes fully apparent: José has to see his love object with another man. But if we were only at the Oedipal stage here, why would he kill her, and not him?

In his presentation of the opera, Nietzsche does not focus on the character of Carmen, but on her murder by José:

Die Liebe, die in ihren Mitteln der Krieg, in ihrem Grunde der *Todhass* der Geschlechter ist! – Ich weiss keinen Fall, wo der tragische Witz, der das Wesen der Liebe macht, so streng sich ausdrückte, so schrecklich zur Formel würde, wie im letzten Schrei Don José's, mit dem das Werk schliesst:

„Ja! Ich habe sie getödtet,

ich – meine angebetete Carmen!“

– Eine solche Auffassung der Liebe (die einzige, die des Philosophen würdig ist –) ist selten: sie hebt ein Kunstwerk unter Tausenden heraus. (FWA: 15)

Instead of gender equality and liberated sexuality, we thus fall back into a conception of love as war between the sexes. Woman is the loser of that war. In fact, she must die: for Nietzsche, the essence of love lies in the murder of a woman by a man. Nietzsche sees nothing neurotic in this; on the contrary, he values this conception of love as the only one that is worthy of the (male) philosopher.

The will to power

The link between philosophy and love here can be tracked back to Nietzsche's understanding of the will to power as the essence of life: 'Vor Allem will etwas Lebendiges seine Kraft *auslassen* – Leben selbst ist Wille zur Macht –: die Selbsterhaltung ist nur eine der indirekten und häufigsten *Folgen* davon' (JGB: 27). Living beings need to exert their strength against their environment. Kindness will not pay: the condition of a life with upward trajectory is 'alles Starke, Tapfere, Herrische, Stolze' (AC: 184). Nietzsche links this aggressive behaviour

with manhood and its absence with castration, thus modelling his conception of life on male sexuality. Life is a phallic self-affirmation that is ready to destroy what it touches, especially women. Continuing the line of these equivalences between manhood, life and the will to power, Nietzsche claims that philosophy is another equivalent of the will to power, its intellectual arm: 'Philosophie ist dieser tyrannische Trieb selbst, der geistigste Wille zur Macht' (JGB: 22). His definition of love belongs to the same logic: love is also an extension of the will to power, that is, of life, philosophy and manhood. Therefore, characterizing love as a war of men against women is properly philosophical.

In his account of the will to power, Nietzsche emphasises 'die entzückenden ardeurs des Siegs und der Vernichtung' (AC: 182), thus characterising victory and destruction not only through their usefulness for life, but also through the pleasure that they give. This calls forth Rank's account of sadism. The typical sadist, the murderer of children or of women, acts out of the curiosity to know what is inside the body, and embodies

den unauslöschlichen Hass des Ausgestoßenen, der mit seinem voll erwachsenen Körper wirklich versucht, dort wieder hineinzukommen, wo er als Kind herausgekommen war, ohne Rücksicht darauf, dass er dabei auch sein Opfer zerfleischt, was keineswegs die Hauptsache ist. (1924: 35-36)

Nietzsche's will to power draws upon the sadistic desire to penetrate and destroy any object in the world that can stand for the mother: first of all, women. Their annihilation does not really matter, as long as a way to the womb is open. Any such victory gives pleasure insofar as it satisfies the desire to return. We are again in the field of neurosis here, since the sadist goes beyond the Oedipal stage in an attempt to fully and not only partially satisfy his infantile wish. By promoting the sadistic will to power over hysterical decadence, Nietzsche does not offer healing for neurosis: he only changes from one form to another.

Although Don José is not a sadist, his murder of Carmen takes on some aspects of this neurosis. The separation that Carmen imposes upon him resonates with birth trauma. Confronting her in the last act, José first asks her to return with him, which would enable him to reach a partial satisfaction of his desire; but she refuses. In so doing, she maintains her position as subject of desire, and does not submit to the 'jouis masculins' (Clément 1979: 95) that would make her into an object at the disposition of man. This 'gesture of self-affirmation acquires the dimensions of a political act' (Furman 1988: 171): Carmen knows that José will kill her if she continues to say no, and she challenges him with a revolutionary proclamation,

choosing ‘de mourir avant qu’un homme n’en décide à sa place’ (Clément 1979: 103). José is not prepared to admit that she is a subject or to renounce his desire. Stabbing her is a way to transform her into an object, and to force her body open to him. His murder reveals a regression beyond the genital stage.

This neurotic aspect of José is suggested throughout the opera. He first seems to be the only man indifferent to Carmen’s charms, which recalls Parsifal’s indifference to Kundry. His duet with Micaëla then reveals some mysterious culpability towards his mother. Anxiety grows in the third act up to the announcement of his mother’s impending death. In Act Four, we hear nothing further about José’s mother, whom we never see on stage, but he kills Carmen. This superposition is another hint that Carmen actually plays the part of the mother in the opera. Moreover, José kills her at the same time as Escamillo kills a bull in the arena just behind them, which suggests that José is not the only man in the opera to have sadistic fantasies. In their first encounter, Escamillo asks of Carmen her name and adds that he will pronounce it the next time that he kills a bull, which gives Carmen’s identity to the bull he kills: the ‘corrida’ then serves as a substitute for the murdering of woman. On the musical level, the ‘scene is informed by the necessity of tonal closure’ to which the listener is sensitive, whether aware of it or not. This means that the listener ‘longs for this flood of chromaticism to be stopped, for stability to be reestablished – even though we know that the triumph of tonal closure means the violent murder of Carmen’. The listener is thus brought ‘not only to accept Carmen’s death as “inevitable,” but actually to *desire* it’ (McClary 1991: 62). The opera accordingly not only represents sadism but also awakens it in the audience, in a way that is similar to Wagner’s operas awakening decadence in Nietzsche’s analysis.

Clément notes an opposition between light and night in the opera. In the darkness of Pastia’s tavern or of the mountains, ‘Carmen est reine, ne risque rien’; but ‘[a]u grand jour, elle est menacée’, arrested in the first act, killed in the last. Light represents ‘la pression sociale’ and the realm of men (1979: 101); Carmen’s realms are night and the flesh. Nietzsche’s solar picture of the opera corresponds to the first and last acts, those in which Carmen is threatened. Arguably, Nietzsche does not insist on this dimension but rather on Carmen’s triumphant music. When describing Bizet’s dancing rhythms, Nietzsche must have Carmen’s principal numbers in mind, which are referred to ‘by their dance-type designations’. ‘Her rhythms indicate that she is very much aware of her body’; they ‘are so contagious that they make José – and the listener – aware both of her body and also (worse yet) of their own bodies’ (McClary 1991: 57). This is a positive aspect for Nietzsche, who thus indirectly praises woman and the body. Yet, in his opposition of Bizet to Wagner, he does not take into

consideration José's 'long impassioned melodies that avoid regular phrasing and cadences for the sake of postponed gratification' and that were perceived as Wagnerian by contemporaries of Bizet (McClary 1992b: 10). In a typically Wagnerian way, José 'continually wants to make their encounter into an endless melody of yearning, unquenchable desire' instead of contenting himself 'with the body, sensuality, pleasure' that Carmen represents (11). And Bizet takes his side, since 'the background music that tells the listener how to feel' conveys his subjectivity (12). This puts the listener, including Nietzsche, in the skin of José: fascinated by Carmen, Nietzsche does not notice that the position Bizet makes him occupy is that of a neurotic and Wagnerian-like hero. When promoting Bizet over Wagner, Nietzsche thus falls again into the neurotic trap that he was trying to escape.

Opera builds on the audience's identification with the heroes to awaken and satisfy specific desires as well as discharging anxiety. This is the process that Nietzsche points out when analysing the kind of desires and anxieties that different operas awaken in him. In the Rankian model, sexuality is another case of identification. Man partially satisfies his desire to return by identifying the woman's vagina with her womb and his own penis with himself as a child; and woman identifies with her lover, enjoying his penetration and thus sharing his progress towards return. This secondary identification, by which a woman identifies with a man who himself uses identification to satisfy his desire, is very similar to the identification with heroes in a Rankian perspective. Whether in the sexual or in the mythical field, the partial satisfaction of the desire to return requires on one hand the identification with a figure supposedly able to fulfil the return, and on the other, the choice of a maternal substitute. This structure can be found in the most diverse variations, as I show throughout this thesis.

B. Male heroes

Rank was the first psychoanalyst to extensively study myth (Armstrong 2013: 59), publishing studies on *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden* (1909) and on *Das Inzest-Motiv in Dichtung und Sage* (1912). In *Das Trauma*, he establishes the link between birth trauma and myth in a chapter on ‘heroische Kompensation’ (1924: 102-112). His argument is that heroes typically aim for a return to the womb. In this, Rank remains at the level of the mythical content, without studying the reception of myth by the readers as such: he analyses typical structures present in myth, but not the mechanisms of identification with heroes. Yet his analysis opens perspectives on this question that I will now explore.

In its different forms, myth builds on the identification of the readers or audience members with a hero who fulfils their desire to a greater extent than they are able to do, while preventing them from the resulting anxiety. They will not have to confront for themselves the frightening object of desire, instead following the story of someone else who does it for them. Thus, the desire to return not only changes its object under the influence of anxiety, it also changes its subject. For Rank, the goal that any hero tries to reach is the womb, and we identify with him insofar as he is able to partially satisfy our desire to return. Since men are supposedly in a better position to satisfy their desire to return thanks to heterosexual intercourse, the hero is usually a male. In the phallogocentric conception of sexuality, according to which woman fulfills her desire to return only indirectly through identification with her partner, she occupies a position similar to that of the spectator identifying with the hero. According to this logic, the male appropriation of the heroic field would be reinforced by the fact that women have a tendency not to fulfill the heroic position themselves and instead to identify with a male hero.

Yet the model that Rank proposes for the identification with a hero is not based on sexuality, but on the relation to a younger sibling. Typically, the hero is the youngest child in his family:

(Der Jüngste) bleibt sozusagen auch rein körperlich immer mit (der Mutter) verbunden, da nach ihm kein anderer den Platz in der Mutter eingenommen hat [...], er also wirklich der einzige ist, für den die Rückkehr in den Mutterleib und das Verbleiben dort möglich wäre, für den es sich sozusagen lohnt. [...] Seine Überlegenheit besteht eigentlich darin, dass er als

Letzter kommt, der die anderen sozusagen vertreibt, darin wieder dem Vater ähnlich, mit dem er allein sich aus dem gleichen Motiv schließlich zu identifizieren vermag. (1924: 108)

His older siblings envy him already when he is in their mother's womb occupying the place that they wish to have and blocking their return. Once born, he takes up all her attention. They wish his death, that is, they wish him to be back where he comes from (26), acknowledging therefore that he is in the best position to fulfil the return and unconsciously identifying with him. In real life, there is a 50 per cent probability that the youngest child will be a girl, which could form the basis for an identification with heroines, although Rank does not take this into consideration. Still, Rank's suggestions are useful for exploring how male fantasies are acted out in the imaginary around heroism and in the symbolic field.

The hero of a narrative must face various obstacles that resonate with the trauma of birth (107). Each time we fear for him, yet with a secret enjoyment awakened by the proximity of the womb. The very destruction of the hero would mean his return to origin, fulfilling the primal desire. But if he were to be defeated by an obstacle standing for birth, he would make us face the dreadful trauma we have ever tried to repress: anxiety would be overwhelming. On the contrary, by virtue of his victories over such obstacles, he discharges our anxiety as well as fulfilling our desire.

Apollonian lighting

Rank's perspectives on the hero echo with suggestions of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, two authors to whom he frequently refers in *Das Trauma*. Addressing not only mythical heroism but also its real forms, Schopenhauer claims: 'Wenn nun die Allmutter so sorglos ihre Kinder tausend drohenden Gefahren, ohne Obhut, entgegengesendet; so kann es nur seyn, weil sie weiß, daß wenn sie fallen, sie in ihren Schooß zurückfallen, wo sie geborgen sind' (2009: 846). This reveals that the 'unconscious equation of death and womb has a long tradition' (Bergmann 1980: 62). In *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, heroic identification is Apollo's main strategy to protect us, the audience members, against an excess of Dionysian music:

Hier drängt sich zwischen unsre höchste Musikerregung und jene Musik der tragische Mythos und der tragische Held [...]. Hier bricht jedoch die *apollinische* Kraft, auf Wiederherstellung

des fast zersprengten Individuums gerichtet, mit dem Heilbalsam einer wonnevollen Täuschung hervor. (GT: 136)

Nietzsche takes the example of Wagner's *Tristan*. At the point when the music threatens to overwhelm us with its liberation of the desire to return, the singer on stage focuses our attention. His words channel what we feel, helping us to discharge desire and anxiety. Our individuality had been weakened by the desire to return that tends to abolish the ego structures in order to re-establish the foetal state. Arguably, the identification process also erases the boundaries between us and the person with whom we identify. Yet, in Nietzsche's account, the identification with a hero rather helps us to restore our own individuation. We identify with the hero Tristan embodied in this specific singer, but still clearly see the borders of the singer's body on stage. Thanks to this image and to the sung words, we avoid sinking into Dionysian music.

Through the figure of Apollo, Nietzsche associates heroic identification with dream, another Apollonian field. Nietzsche underlies the 'heilende[n] und helfende[n] Natur' of dream (GT: 27), anticipating Freud's understanding of dream as a space where desire and anxiety can be discharged. Both identification and dream build on appearance: an image masks the primal object of desire to move the subject towards a less dangerous aspect. In both, the laws of individuation are at the same time transgressed and reaffirmed. The beloved woman in the play or dream is not a maternal totality, she has a specific face, which sustains individuation; however, her face might be blurred in the dream and is understood as an illusion on stage, the audience knowing that this singer is not really Isolde but only plays the part.

Through dream and heroic identification, Apollo favours partial satisfactions of desire. He delimits the field in which desire can be expressed, liberating the subject from its hold. Apollo's use of appearance maintains an erotic desire to see:

Wir schauten das Drama an und drangen mit bohrendem Blick in seine innere bewegte Welt der Motive – und doch war uns, als ob nur ein Gleichnissbild an uns vorüberzöge, dessen tiefsten Sinn wir fast zu errathen glaubten und das wir, wie einen Vorhang, fortzuziehen wünschten, um hinter ihm das Urbild zu erblicken. Die hellste Deutlichkeit des Bildes genügte uns nicht: denn dieses schien eben sowohl Etwas zu offenbaren als zu verhüllen; und während es mit seiner gleichnissartigen Offenbarung zum Zerreißen des Schleiers, zur Enthüllung des

geheimnissvollen Hintergrundes aufzufordern schien, hielt wiederum gerade jene durchleuchtete Allsichtbarkeit das Auge gebannt und wehrte ihm, tiefer zu dringen. (GT: 150)

Apollo interposes between the subjects and their first object of desire the image of another object. He suggests the presence of what should not be seen, but hides it, and thus excites the desire to see, without letting the eye reach a source that could blind it. His veil maintains the formidable origin in shadow, defusing anxiety. It is therefore not the desire itself that is repressed, but its first object. Both excited and channelled, the desire can unburden itself without putting the subject in peril. The typical Apollonian veil is the image seen on stage by the audience members; and yet interestingly, Nietzsche describes this veil as a 'Vorhang', as if the stage on which the curtain opens was itself a curtain hiding another reality. This 'Vorhang' hides not by means of darkness, but by means of light: Apollo makes the audience see the brightly lit stage, and this is what hides the frightening maternal darkness. Bright and clear-cut, the stage image interpolated by Apollo shares the most distinctive properties of the world by opposition to the maternal flesh. Yet this surface betrays the Dionysian depth of which it is only the skin. Light prevents the audience members from sinking into the abyss and thus protects them, but also frustrates their desire. Not satisfied with the partial object that they are given, the spectators look again for origin:

[Der Zuschauer] schaut die verklärte Welt der Bühne und verneint sie doch. Er sieht den tragischen Helden vor sich in epischer Deutlichkeit und Schönheit und erfreut sich doch an seiner Vernichtung. Er begreift bis in's Innerste den Vorgang der Scene und flüchtet sich gern in's Unbegreifliche. Er fühlt die Handlungen des Helden als gerechtfertigt und ist doch noch mehr erhoben, wenn diese Handlungen den Urheber vernichten. Er schaudert vor den Leiden, die den Helden treffen werden und ahnt doch bei ihnen eine höhere, viel übermächtigere Lust. Er schaut mehr und tiefer als je und wünscht sich doch erblindet. Woher werden wir diese wunderbare Selbstentzweiung, dies Umbrechen der apollinischen Spitze, abzuleiten haben, wenn nicht aus dem dionysischen Zauber, der, zum Schein die apollinischen Regungen auf's Höchste reizend, doch noch diesen Ueberschwang der apollinischen Kraft in seinen Dienst zu zwingen vermag. (GT: 140-41)

Audience members see the illuminated world and negate it in their desire to return to the womb. Dissatisfied with the hero's individuation, they rejoice at his destruction as his death means that he will have reached the womb. They understand the clear-cut world but desire to

escape in the indistinct fusion. They see in the actions of the hero only ways for him to reach the womb, hoping that he will succeed in what would appear to be his destruction. They sense the promise of pleasure beyond apparent pain, of a happy return beyond formidable trauma. Apollo has not won over Dionysus, he can only maintain the desire to return within certain limits. His light is not enough to make the audience forget their attraction towards darkness. Like sexuality, erotic art and heroic identification are thus fragile constructions, holding back a desire that always threatens to overwhelm them.

In the frame of the birth complex, Dionysus leads to the mother while Apollo plays the role of the father. Seen from a genital perspective however, they exchange sexes: Dionysus appears as phallic while Apollo's use of the veil puts him on the feminine side (Pautrat 1971: 119). The association between woman and veil is a topos of the male Western as well as non-Western perspective. I will mainly focus on the former here and on the extent to which the veil is seen as creating eroticism.

Erotic veil

In his lecture on femininity, Freud suggests that weaving is the only technique ever invented by women and that they drew inspiration from pubic hair to find a way of hiding the flaw of their genitals (1932). Freud follows here his phallogocentric logic, according to which women lack a penis and have inferior genitals to those of men, who see them as castrated and may therefore feel anxiety towards them. In Rank's understanding, men's anxiety over becoming separated from their penis is based on the separation from the mother experienced at birth. The female genitalia evoke anxiety in both men and women in that they remind us of the mother's genitalia through which we experienced birth trauma, so that 'beide Geschlechter in gleicher Weise das weibliche Genitale geringschätzen und zu verleugnen suchen' (1924: 38). Rank argues that the repression of birth trauma expands from the female genitalia to women themselves (91), seeing in this the main reason for the inferior position that they are given by men in society (37) and too often accept themselves. Despite its interest, Rank's theory barely exerted any influence in the history of psychoanalysis, so that most of the accounts referred to here, including those by feminists, use the castration model and therefore remain within a strictly masculine perspective.

The function of the veil is to protect viewers against anxiety, while attracting their desire onto the female body. For a heterosexual male, the erotic seduction of the veil lies in

that play between anxiety and desire. In her detailed analysis of the role played by the veil in classical cinema, Mary Ann Doane shows that the veil ‘incarnates contradictory desires’ of the male towards the female: ‘the desire to bring her closer and the desire to distance her’ (1989: 118). The latter desire is an expression of anxiety: the male wants to remain protected against the potential danger incarnated by the female genitalia.

This necessity felt by the male to maintain distance from the attraction of the female recalls an aphorism from *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in which Nietzsche describes the joy of seeing a woman passing like an elegant ship when one is immersed in the tumult of life and the way in which the power of that apparition vanishes when one gets closer to the woman (FWI: 424-25). Derrida speculates on that aphorism in *Éperons*: woman’s seduction operates from a distance that protects against the fascination exerted by her, but also awakens that very fascination. Woman herself, as what cannot be determined, is for Derrida the distancing of distance (1979: 48). Man thus secures his own identity and stability by making of woman an unstable object without identity. This underlies both Nietzsche’s and Derrida’s account of the veil. In Doane’s words, ‘the veil functions to visualize (and hence stabilize) the instability, the precariousness of sexuality’ (1989: 107), so that the male projects onto the veiled woman his own anxiety regarding not just castration but also impotence.

The veil creates distance by establishing a barrier between the gaze and what the subject is afraid to see. Not seeing anything dangerous, the male feels encouraged to move closer. Yet the veil does not only hide, it also reveals: the veil takes folds and curves that suggest a female body, which attracts the male’s desire. An experienced seductress plays with her veil to favour this desire while hiding herself enough to not awaken in him an overwhelming anxiety. As Doane writes, the veil ‘both allows and disallows vision’ (110), establishing ‘what can and cannot be seen’ (107). The sexual encounter is thus prepared in the visual field by the encounter between a male subject who at once fears and desires to see and a female who makes herself into an object only partially visible.

Doane adheres to the castration model, suggesting that the veil conceals the fact that the woman has no penis to conceal: it hides an absence (110). I would argue that the veil does not only hide the female genitalia or the absence of male genitalia, but also suggests the presence of the maternal womb in that female body of which the veil erases the personal features. The more a woman is veiled, the more the man can fantasise that he sees his mother in her, especially if her face is itself veiled.

Doane proposes an interesting account of the dialectic of depth and surface opened by the veil: in metaphysical discourse, the veil reveals the ‘depth that lurks behind the surface of things’. But in the cinematographical representation of a veiled woman, the veil annihilates ‘that depth which hides behind the face’ (119), the depth of a woman’s interiority, and instead displays only her sexualised surface. I would say that in both cases, the veil erases what in the world or in a body can appear as individual features to give access towards the longed-for origin, the ‘Ur-Einen’ in Nietzsche’s coinage, that is, the womb. In Doane’s account, Nietzsche’s understanding of the veil is more cinematographical than metaphysical since he suggests that there is no depth to be searched for beneath the surface of life, while reducing woman to her veil and thus depriving her of subjectivity (Doane 1989: 119-123). The woman is construed as having no depth of interiority, not to mention desire of her own or any form of autonomy as subject.

Janet Lungstrum, in her defence of the Nietzschean veil against Doane’s critique, emphasises that Nietzsche ‘is keen to stress the veil’s creative function within his male|female dialectic’ (1994: 147), but she does not acknowledge the fact that this creativity mostly benefits men in Nietzsche’s account. In this, Nietzsche followed patriarchal orthodoxy, according to which women can only be creative in their modes of seducing the male, while men in Nietzsche’s account use the fecundity provided by the veil to create in the artistic and intellectual field. In Lungstrum’s view, the feminist readings that reject the Nietzschean veil ‘do so on the grounds of identity formation for woman, an approach which gets dangerously close to Socratism’ (147). Nietzsche values non-identity as such and therefore himself comes closer to the position traditionally given to women. The question is whether women can benefit from Nietzsche’s feminisation of philosophy. Nietzsche’s association of the veil with woman and truth has attracted the attention of many critics especially amongst French philosophers and Anglo-Saxon feminists. I will now enter this debate with the purpose of discussing the use of Nietzsche in a feminist perspective.

C. Truth and Castration

In his understanding of truth, Nietzsche refers to the trope of the veiled woman that has been deployed extensively by metaphysicians and theologians, following the path opened by Augustine when he compared the figurative language hiding and revealing the truth in the Bible to a veiled woman (Koelb 1994: 78). The trope suggests that we take what appears to us as a surface hiding a depth in which the truth would lie. Appearance, considered as mere illusion, is devalued to the profit of truth. This builds at once on the sexist prejudice that woman likes to hide the truth, and on the desire for woman. The veils of a woman hide her flesh, whether her face, her genitalia, or ultimately her womb. In the trope, truth is hidden under the veil, in the place of female flesh. Metaphysical accounts of truth since Plato have insisted on the light thanks to which the subject is to see the truth. Armed with the light of reason, a male subject tries to penetrate the female flesh where truth is hidden.

By contrast, Nietzsche claims that he will not try to unveil the truth. He will not behave as one of these young Egyptians who died for having dared to look under Isis's veil. Truth may have good reasons for hiding herself: Nietzsche suggests that her name is Baubô, the goddess who displayed her genitalia to Demeter (FWI: 353). He thus implicitly argues that the metaphysical desire to know the truth builds on a desire to unveil the female genitalia. The trope of the veiled woman gives males the position of subjects looking for truth – and therefore of producers in the symbolic field, when they publish the truths that they have found – while women are objects never actively looking for truth themselves, since the desire to know the truth is supposed to be an expression of the phallic desire to remove woman's veil. By contrast, in Rank's understanding, the desire to know the truth is based on the infantile curiosity to know where infants come from, a curiosity that is shared equally by boys and girls. Baubô arguably satisfies this curiosity in the goddess Demeter. Although Nietzsche inverts the trope, he still maintains that woman does not want the truth that she is seen to bear. And the possibility of being a subject looking for truth, or indeed a subject at all, is thus not opened for her. Woman constantly plays with her own indeterminacy, without being granted an identity of her own.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche gives a positive value to appearance and therefore to the position of the woman playing with her veils. The male subject, typically an artist, adores life in the multitude of its appearances. As he does with truth, Nietzsche introduces life as a woman, and implies that there is no other truth than life herself. He vows not to rape her, to

retain for her the veils that protect her and himself against his desire to reach the origin. Instead of forcefully undressing truth, he will adore the veil as such, the endless playing of appearances in which the truth of life resides: ‘Wir glauben nicht mehr daran, dass Wahrheit noch Wahrheit bleibt, wenn man ihr die Schleier abzieht’ (FWI: 352). Life has no depth, it does not hide a womb; those who see in her such a depth are only projecting onto life their own desire to return. Nietzsche’s attitude here is promising. At least towards truth as female, he shows an attentive love rather than violence. Furthermore, to adore life as such, without looking for the womb in it, reveals that the desire to return has been overcome.

Although Nietzsche moves away from the metaphysical paradigm in which man penetrates the female truth with the light of his reason, his account of the veiled truth still relies on the dialectic of light and flesh. In Pautrat’s words,

la vérité-femme [...] n’est rien [...] sans l’alternance de la lumière et de l’ombre, sans le jeu du voile et des plis qui le scandent, sans le désir de *voir* qu’un tel écran de gaze a fonction de produire. [...] Ainsi, de même que la lumière absolue et l’ombre absolue nous demeurent invisibles, inabordables, de même l’apparence (la « vérité ») se signale d’un pli qui indique, sur sa face offerte, l’au-delà de tout apparaître et de toute image, l’origine (1971: 81)

The veil thus complicates the opposition between maternal darkness and the illuminated world introduced above, in that both light and shadow play together in its folds. This enables me to refine the link between light and world. We only experience light as being pure at the moment when we emerge from darkness, for example when waking up or when finding the way out of a fully dark room. In the normal experience of the world, light intertwines with darkness, since any source of light casts shadows. Nietzsche’s description of life as a shining veil obeys the logic of daylight by opposition to the logic of night, and to that of the flesh. Indeed, he refuses to have a sexual encounter with truth.

We recall that for Nietzsche, the Apollonian veil is light itself and, more precisely, stage lighting. To protect the audience members against the excess of Dionysian music, Apollo makes them see characters on stage. The ‘durchleuchtete Allsichtbarkeit’ prevents the spectator’s eye ‘tiefer zu dringen’ (GT: 150). And yet, the spectator ‘schaut die verklärte Welt der Bühne und verneint sie doch’ (140), like metaphysicians tearing the veil from truth. If his position in the auditorium was not providing a surplus of distance and thus reinforcing the role played by stage lighting, the spectator might be in danger of losing his sight, if not his

life, like those who looked directly at the body of Isis. All the elements on stage, including the actors, are light: ‘die ganze Auffassung des Dichters nichts ist als eben jenes Lichtbild, welches uns, nach einem Blick in den Abgrund, die heilende Natur vorhält’ (GT: 66). The flesh of the actors is thus transfigured by light, to heal the spectator from an excessive exposure to uterine darkness. Thus ‘sind jene Lichtbilderscheinungen des sophokleischen Helden, kurz das Apollinische der Maske, nothwendige Erzeugungen eines Blickes in’s Innere und Schreckliche der Natur, gleichsam leuchtende Flecken zur Heilung des von grausiger Nacht versehrten Blickes’ (65). The specific play Nietzsche refers to here is Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, in which the hero loses his sight after having discovered that he has slept with his mother. Pautrat comments on this passage by writing that

[I]a fascination pour les Mères – pour Dionysos, voix des Mères –, où le regard entraîné vers le plus obscur de la matrice originelle dans un désir violent, non maîtrisé, s’aveugle de ce noir et va chercher son salut dans la forme harmonieuse et superficielle du dieu solaire, est directement liée au mythe *oedipien*. (1971: 145)

But Pautrat remains in a Freudian frame, according to which the reason why maternal nudity is unbearable is that the son looking at his mother’s body discovers that she is castrated and fears that his father would castrate himself if he were to pursue his sexual desire for her. This does not explain the girl’s awe for her mother’s body, nor account for the female spectator’s experience. Nevertheless, it is through the Oedipal model that Nietzsche’s philosophy has been studied by those who have used psychoanalysis to read it, and this provides us with an alternative model to that of Rank. The link between the theme of castration and the question of woman in Nietzsche accordingly warrants further exploration.

The castration effect

Derrida famously distinguished between three typically Nietzschean positions on woman (1979). In the first type of proposition, woman is condemned by the phallogocentric discourse of truth as a figure of deceit, and despised as being castrated. Derrida remarks that Nietzsche has written many texts displaying this reactionary position, although it could be argued that Nietzsche does not always himself adhere to that view of woman but rather attributes it to the metaphysicians and other decadents. In the second type of proposition, woman is scorned as a

figure of truth and is castrating. Here Nietzsche presents woman as an ally of the metaphysical conception of truth and of the ‘Castratismus’ of the Church. Although veiled truth does not always kill those who dare uncover her, she might at least threaten with castration. The third type concerns propositions in which Nietzsche acknowledges woman as ‘puissance affirmative, dissimulatrice, artiste, dionysiaque’ (Derrida 1979: 96). Nietzsche must have such a woman in mind when he adores appearance as such and says that life is a woman. According to Derrida, the woman introduced in that third type is beyond castration. He highlights the fact that woman does not believe in castration (58), but also that she does not believe in truth, since truth is linked to castration (‘vérité-castration’), with both supposed to be a male problem. The woman’s position here is seen as positive by Derrida, who, like Nietzsche, explores the veil as such, the multiplicity of differences rather than the phallogocentric truth. Still, Derrida himself remains to some extent within the reactionary perspective that he characterises, according to which woman does not believe in truth and does not need, or want to be provided with, access to it. Furthermore, praising in woman the absence of a stable identity, Derrida, like Nietzsche, continues to foreclose the possibility of a female subject at the very moment when he assumes a feminine position for himself (Oliver 1995).

Sarah Kofman pursued Derrida’s analysis of truth, castration and the affirmative woman in her elaborations on fetishism (1979). According to Freud, the fetishist focuses on partial objects, typically his beloved’s underwear, in a denial of his mother’s castration. Kofman argues that Nietzsche anticipated Freud by revealing the structure of fetishism through his reflection on truth, most notably when he writes that the name of truth may be Baubô. She recalls the version of the myth in which Baubô shows Demeter not only her genitalia but also her belly on which the face of a boy, arguably Dionysus, is drawn. Demeter, whom the loss of her daughter has sunk in sorrow, laughs and subsequently returns to her role as goddess of fertility. However, we should ask why this would confirm Freud’s understanding of fetishism as a denial of the mother’s castration. Nietzsche refers implicitly to the myth of Baubô in a passage quoted above, when he evokes ‘wie es der Mythus durch die in ewige Trauer versenkte Demeter verbildlicht, welche zum ersten Male wieder sich *freut*, als man ihr sagt, sie könne den Dionysus *noch einmal* gebären’ (GT: 72). If Demeter rejoices for the first time thanks to Baubô, and if she also rejoices for the first time when told that she can again be pregnant with Dionysus, then Baubô is the one who conveys this message to her: unveiling the figure of a boy on her belly, she acts as a mirror in which Demeter can see that the boy will soon be in her own belly. Therefore, what makes Demeter

laugh is more the boy's face on Baubô's belly, which reminds her of her own fertility as a woman, than to see female genitalia, and it is unlikely that she would be surprised not to see a penis there. Nietzsche's explicit and implicit use of the Baubô myth thus points again towards the fact that the female genitalia are primarily associated with birth and can to that extent awaken anxiety as well as a relieving laugh, before males in their genital phase start to associate them with castration.

In his own reading of Nietzsche through the concept of fetishism, Pautrat argues that this concept gives the key to the subject's relation to truth. The 'truth' on which metaphysicians hang serves them as a fetish against the proper truth, which lies in sexual difference and therefore awakens castration anxiety (1971: 238) in those who are looking for it, that is, in men. Nietzsche values the world of differences as such, but insofar as it is a veil: to that extent, Nietzsche seems to be a fetishist just as much as the metaphysicians, simply shifting the object by taking difference instead of truth as his fetish.

The very title of Derrida's essay on the woman question in Nietzsche refers to a fetish. Spurs are that by which the (phallic) style remains protected against the (female) truth: 'Le style peut donc *aussi* de son éperon protéger contre la menace terrifiante, aveuglante et mortelle (de ce) qui se *présente*' (1979: 38). Thanks to style, the (male) writer can 'attaquer cruellement ce à quoi la philosophie en appelle sous le nom de matière ou de matrice, pour y enfoncer une marque, y laisser une empreinte ou une forme, mais aussi pour y repousser une forme menaçante, la tenir à distance, la refouler, s'en garder'. Derrida's images still build on a phallic logic in which the philosopher targets the matrix and makes the woman pregnant but also keeps her at a distance, again in a play between desire and anxiety. Arguably, in this account, Derrida may only be transcribing Nietzsche's position. In his own critique of the phallogocentrism of Western thought, Derrida sought alternative models that would be closer to femininity, developing the metaphor of the hymen as a way of escaping the binary logic of castration in which one either has or has not. The hymen signifies the in-between, the condition of undecidability: it is neither outside nor inside. In choosing this image, Derrida values a part of the female body, in opposition to the Freudian and Lacanian emphasis on the phallus. However, of all parts of the female body, the hymen is what remains most closely associated with the phallus as well as being what any sexually active heterosexual woman has lost: the hymen is a male trophy. It is striking that Derrida would precisely choose this as his privileged metaphor, especially since, as Roberta Weston notes (1999), he does not acknowledge the very dark history of the hymen, on which much of the patriarchal oppression

of women has relied through the imperative of virginity. Furthermore, by making of his own writing the place of a hymen rather than of a phallus, Derrida appropriates the female body. He enjoys becoming female, but refuses women the enjoyment of the female position, since his valorisation of the hymen excludes women from sexuality. Gayatri Spivak calls Derrida's behaviour towards woman a 'double displacement': he highlights the woman's marginalised position and exclusion from subjectivity and identity, to then appropriate that place, thus displacing the woman from her own displacement (1983).

This does not mean that Derrida's critique of philosophical phallogocentrism or Nietzsche's critique of the metaphysical and Christian truth would not prove useful for women. But, as Kelly Oliver has argued (1995), the danger in both Nietzsche's and Derrida's use of the feminine position is that they foreclose even further feminine subjectivity. No woman is needed to write feminine philosophy, since they can do it while being men. No woman could write philosophy anyway, nor be looking for truth, since these activities build on a phallic desire. Accordingly, women should remain in the marginalised position, deprived of a stable identity and the access to subjectivity, since their own indeterminacy now has the highest value. In Nietzsche, woman is only herself when dedicating herself to seducing the male; and in Derrida, the only woman in a good position to become a writer is the virgin who still has her hymen. Seductress or virgin: those are two of the roles traditionally given to women, the third being mother.

Nietzsche's positions on women correspond to positions on art. Using a phallic style as 'spur', he fulfils the sadistic wish to pierce woman in the same way as José murdering Carmen; in this, Nietzsche shows a neurotic desire to return entirely into the womb. By contrast, when vowing not to unveil the truth of life, he models his philosophy on Apollo's erotic art. This opens the way for a partial satisfaction of the desire to return and thus for an overcoming of birth. In fact, Nietzsche praises erotic art insofar as it enables him to procreate in the symbolic field, himself giving birth. His solution to overcome birth is then to take the place not only of the woman, but of the mother.

Chapter 3

Symbolic Procreations

A. Male mothers

In the perspective that emphasises castration, Nietzsche dreads the absence of the penis on the female body and uses a fetish, the veil that covers the truth of life, to deny this absence. Yet, in contrast with a sufferer of castration anxiety who ‘fears the loss of power that accompanies the loss of the penis’, for Nietzsche, ‘the feminine body of nature is the most potent force imaginable’, so that he rather seems to suffer from castration envy (Koelb 1994: 79).

According to Oliver, Nietzsche ‘fetishizes the mother’s womb’ (1994: 60), which he sees as both repulsive and powerful (1995: 138). If the fetish serves to hide the mother’s castration, as Freud argues, then it is puzzling that the mother’s womb would be a fetish; yet the reverse may well be true: unable to bear the anxiety associated with the mother’s womb, the son displaces his anxiety onto what he fantasises as a castration. In a Rankian perspective, it is primarily the womb and not castration that a son dreads in his mother’s flesh. Nevertheless, the suggestion that Nietzsche perceives the womb as powerful introduces a new element into the dynamic between desire to return and anxiety.

We recall that in *Die Geburt*, Apollo interposes his veil between the spectators and the music of *Tristan*, at the same time suggesting and hiding the dangerous origin for which they long. In *Der Fall Wagner*, Nietzsche describes his reaction to Bizet’s music in similar terms:

Ich vergrabe meine Ohren noch *unter* diese Musik, ich höre deren Ursache. Es scheint mir, dass ich ihre Entstehung erlebe. (...) Hat man bemerkt, dass die Musik den Geist *frei macht*? dem Gedanken Flügel giebt? dass man um so mehr Philosoph wird, je mehr man Musiker wird? (...) unversehens fallen mir *Antworten* in den Schooss, ein kleiner Hagel von Eis und Weisheit, von *gelösten* Problemen... Wo bin ich? – Bizet macht mich fruchtbar. Alles Gute macht mich fruchtbar. Ich habe keine andre Dankbarkeit, ich habe auch keinen andern *Beweis* dafür, was gut ist. (FW: 14)

What fascinates Nietzsche here is the process of birth, not a return beyond birth. Bizet’s Apollonian music is itself a veil under which Nietzsche slips his ear in order to attend its birth. This gives to music both female features – a veil – and the position of the child being

born. Thanks to music, the spirit flies easily, in contrast with the difficult movements of the child in the birth canal: any trace of birth trauma is erased. Nietzsche attends a birth that is not his own. From this position of spectator, typically that of the father, he moves on to the position of the mother, while music, from the positions of the woman and of the child, takes on the role of a man fecundating Nietzsche's spirit with philosophical ideas. Wondering where he is, Nietzsche may first of all wonder which gender he has. When frisking under the veils of *Carmen*, he satisfies a virile desire. But when the thoughts engendered by music fall into his lap as a spermatic rain, he becomes pregnant, like Danae fertilised by Zeus. Tackling the question of the criterion by which one evaluates what good is, a central question in his work, Nietzsche claims that it is what fertilises him. This reveals that his priority is to be fertilised, making his pregnancy into his criterion of evaluation. Pregnancy here concerns the symbolic field: Nietzsche is to procreate a philosophical work.

Nietzsche compares the procreators in the symbolic field to male mothers. Women find in children the satisfaction of their desire to dominate, to possess and to communicate:

dies Alles zusammen ist Mutterliebe, – sie ist mit der Liebe des Künstlers zu seinem Werke zu vergleichen. Die Schwangerschaft hat die Weiber milder, abwartender, furchtsamer, unterwerfungslustiger gemacht; und ebenso erzeugt die geistige Schwangerschaft den Charakter der Contemplativen, welcher dem weiblichen Charakter verwandt ist: – es sind die männlichen Mütter. – Bei den Thieren gilt das männliche Geschlecht als das schöne. (FWI: 430)

Logically, Nietzsche's description of femininity here is the opposite to the idealised vision of manhood that he introduces in his account of the will to power. Nietzsche sees the will to power as the principle of life and therefore refers to it as his principal criterion: good is what has a strong will to power. In this perspective, the feminine characteristics that Nietzsche cites are negative. However, he attributes them also to the male procreators, to whom he belongs himself (Koelb 1994: 73). It is unusual that Nietzsche presents himself under a negative aspect. Here, he may show his awareness of the feminine dimension of his writings, a dimension to which Salomé drew attention (1894). Yet Nietzsche's predominant interest in this aphorism is arguably the maternal rather than the feminine. In fact, seen through the criterion of pregnancy, the procreators appear in a positive light. Since the will to power refers to manhood, while pregnancy is a feminine field, it may seem that in formulating these two criteria Nietzsche treats both sexes equally. However, he only praises pregnancy in men:

when addressing pregnancy in women here, he uses terms that belong to the field of the will to power. Nietzsche thus uses both the will to power and pregnancy to valorise men, to whom he also attributes the quality most commonly used by men to assess women: beauty.

Nietzsche's attitude here is as old as philosophy. Babich refers to his praise of the fertilising Bizet as a 'platonischen Lob' (2008: 335). In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates presents the art of fecundating the spirits of young men as the highest form of philosophy (276b–277a), implicitly casting himself in the father role and beautiful men in the role of women to be impregnated. In the *Symposium*, Diotima, a female character introduced by Socrates, defines love as procreation of beauty either in the flesh or in the soul (206b). To procreate in the flesh, men turn towards women (208e). Yet this does not satisfy those who are pregnant with symbolic works and want to procreate in the soul. They will love gifted young men for their beautiful bodies, and above all for the beauty of their souls (209). Like Nietzsche, Plato attributes the highest forms of beauty and of pregnancy to men. The products of a maternal birth are supposedly inferior to those that a father procreates: in Plato's myth of the cave, 'the mother-matter gives birth only to images, Father-Good only to the real' (Irigaray 1985 [1974]: 301).

In *Amante marine*, Irigaray diagnoses man's sickness: 'Veiling his nostalgia in contempt. And vomiting up that first nurse whose milk and blood he has drunk' (1991a [1980]: 26). Man thus abjects his mother to become himself (Kristeva 1980). The inversion of his nostalgic desire into disgust corresponds to Rank's description of the dialectic between desire and anxiety. Nietzsche not only represses birth trauma but, according to Irigaray, denies his birth as a whole, dreaming of not having been born (1991a: 26). Addressing a man who is implicitly presented as Nietzsche, his marine lover invented by Irigaray reproaches him for preaching 'forgetfulness of your birth' (12): 'you cut yourself off from that unique occasion when you received life' (57). Nietzsche wishes to not have received life from an other, that is, from his mother: 'that the other has given you what escapes your creation is the source of your highest resentment' (42). Nietzsche dreams of giving life, but only woman can be pregnant in the flesh: 'Never will you give birth to a solid body' (55). Nietzsche tries to appropriate the power of giving birth by procreating in the symbolic field, an illusory wish: 'wanting life to be engendered from a language-body alone?' (65). Irigaray, through his marine lover, warns him that his wish to give life will cause his death if he persists in erasing woman (61). Nietzsche refuses to acknowledge the otherness of woman, to 'the point of willing to become that female other' (187). Rather than admitting that he was born of a

female other, Nietzsche wishes to ‘annihilate the body that gave you life’ (26). This fantasy of matricide sustains the fantasy of a male birth, with man erasing the mother to appropriate her power.

In her paper ‘Corps-à-corps avec la mère’, Irigaray argues that patriarchal systems ‘function on the basis of a matricide’ (1991b [1981]: 36), by which the relation to the maternal flesh is forgotten. ‘The imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life and of the first bodily encounter with the mother... where are we to find them? In what darkness, what madness, have they been abandoned?’ (39). According to her, the repression of the relationship with the placenta favours the desire to return: ‘In the absence of any representation of it, there is always the danger of going back to the primal womb, seeking refuge in any open body, constantly living and nesting in the bodies of other women’ (40). Irigaray here is very close to Rank’s insights, although she does not take the birth trauma into consideration, which Rank sees as the reason why the foetal stage is repressed; in Rank’s perspective, the repression of the relationship to the placenta does not favour the desire to return, but on the contrary protects the subject against it.

Irigaray does not seem to be aware of Rank’s work, and argues that ‘[P]sychoanalysts take a dim view’ of intra-uterine life. ‘A taboo is in the air. If the father did not sever this over-intimate bond with the primal womb, there might be the danger of fusion, of death, of the sleep of death’ (39). When the role of separating the child from the mother is attributed to the father, then he appears as a protector against the dangerous desire to return, and his law seems to favour life, which justifies the father’s primacy in the symbolic field and hence, patriarchy. However, in Rank’s account, what separates the child from the mother is the anxiety consecutive to birth trauma: children are afraid of experiencing again a similar trauma if they were to return to the womb, which protects them from their own desire. The father of the Oedipal stage only builds on an anxiety already present in the child to further separate him from his mother.

By highlighting the role of the father and focussing on the male child, Freudian psychoanalysis sustains patriarchy. It makes the genital drive into ‘the drive thanks to which the phallic penis takes back from the mother the power to give birth, to nourish, to dwell, to centre’ (Irigaray 1991b: 38). Whereas this drive is partial, in the womb, ‘the child was *whole*, the mother *whole*’ (39). Rather than on the womb, Freudian psychoanalysis focuses on the phallus that man uses to appropriate female power. Irigaray reverses this perspective; however, by insisting on the wholeness of the intrauterine stage at the expense of an only

partial genital drive, she favours the desire to return, rather than the ways thanks to which one can overcome birth. Nevertheless, Irigaray's understanding of the phallic erection as 'a masculine version of the umbilical bond', thanks to which man can open to a 'reciprocity in the flesh' (42), is promising. If the phallus plays the role of the umbilical cord binding man and woman or, in the case of homosexual intercourse, both men, then it does not matter which position, the mother's or the child's, each partner occupies: they are equally bound to each other, and in that way equally experience a return to the foetal situation. However, in the patriarchal model, man 'has transformed his penis into an instrument of power so as to dominate maternal power' (42), destroying equality between the sexes. In so doing, man displays not only desire and anxiety, but also envy for the maternal womb and for the power of woman to give life.

According to Rank, the anxiety consecutive to birth trauma mars the maternal flesh and, by extension, women, since they have the same sex as the mother (1924: 22). This is one of the factors he sees for the inferior position of women in society. By bringing the birth trauma back into consciousness, Rank expresses the hope to liberate women from the curse attached to the female genitalia (37). In this, he adumbrates Irigaray's contention that the oblivion of the bodily encounter with the mother fosters the sexual and cultural oppression of women, and tackles the taboo attached to the maternal womb that she senses in psychoanalytic discourse.

Although Rank argues that men more than women are able to enjoy a partial return to the womb during sex, he adds that pregnant women experience again the primal situation in real form and thus that they reach 'die am weitesten gehende Annäherung an die Urbefriedigung' (181). Consequently, Rank introduces the idea that penis envy has a counterpart in man's desire to have a child (37–38), which Karen Horney recognizes as a male 'envy of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood' (1967: 60). In sex, woman identifies with her male partner; but with regard to procreation, man must create for himself 'Ersatz für diese Reproduktion in der Identifizierung mit der "Mutter" und der daraus folgenden Schöpfung kultureller und künstlerischer Produktionen' (Rank 1924: 181). This is another factor for the exclusion of women from the symbolic field: men tend to appropriate the symbolic form of procreation, whereas women are incited by the patriarchal order to content themselves with biological reproduction. In Rank's argument, patriarchy thus builds on the painful memory of the birth trauma to exclude women from society (91), and promotes male

gods in an attempt to deny the mother's primacy (118); women are chased away from the religious, political, and artistic fields because of their ability to give birth.

Controversially, Rank suggests that 'die ganze Kulturschöpfung nur aus der durch die Urverdrängung beseitigten libidinösen Überschätzung des mütterlichen Urobjektes durch den Mann erfolgt' (181), which seems to imply that symbolic procreation is a direct consequence of child envy and therefore has rightly been a prerogative of men, as if women were indeed satisfied with their power to give birth, and were not aiming for a creation in the symbolic field. On the same model, since men have a penis, they would not aim for a phallic power in society. However, women are not continuously pregnant, just as men are not continuously penetrating a vagina. Women may wish to procreate in the symbolic field and not only in the flesh, like men in Diotima's account. And if men access the female power of giving birth in the symbolic field, there is no reason why women could not access phallic power in that field. Rank may himself display child envy when he emphasises that pregnant women come the closest to 'Urbefriedigung' (181). Pregnancy also exposes women to the pains of childbirth, which may appear closest to the primal trauma. Furthermore, pregnant women do not satisfy their own desire to return, since they occupy the position of the mother but not that of the child. The creators in the symbolic field are in the position of the mother towards their work, but can also be in the child's position when their work takes on maternal features: for example, when the architect designs a house as an ersatz for the womb. Thus, there are many reasons, also embedded within Rank's theory, why women may not be satisfied with biological procreation and aim for symbolic procreation.

Despite occasional concessions to the male ideology of his time, Rank mostly strives for a fair treatment of the sexes. In fact, his understanding of the artist is gender neutral:

Das Ich [wird] in seinem Rückdrang von der Angstgrenze immer wieder aufs neue vorwärts getrieben, das Paradies statt in der Vergangenheit in der nach dem Ebenbild der Mutter gestalteten Welt zu suchen und soweit dies misslingt, in den großartigen Wunschkompensationen der Religion, Kunst und Philosophie. Denn diese ungeheure Anpassungsleistung gelingt in der Realität erstmalig nur einem Typus Mensch, den uns die Geistesgeschichte als Heros überliefert hat, soweit es sich um ein Gestalten realer Werte handelt, und den wir als „Künstler“ im weitesten Sinne des Wortes bezeichnen möchten, soweit es sich um ein Schaffen ideeller Werte, des phantastischen Überbaus handelt, der aus den in der Realschöpfung unbefriedigten Resten der Urlibido geschaffen wird. (1924: 182)

Anxiety prevents the subjects from a return to the womb; instead, they seek an ersatz for the mother in the world, and shape it in such a way as to give it maternal features. Here Rank does not mention the fact that the maternal features are often hidden under apparent phallic features: for example, a skyscraper encloses and protects like a womb, but its form recalls a phallus. This is arguably the result of both the anxiety attached to the maternal flesh, and the male desire to compete with female power and with other males regarding who has the biggest and most enduring phallus. In such cases, the maternal features are inverted: cold metal is favoured over warm smoothness, lines and angles over organic curves, dry light over humid darkness. Nevertheless, according to Rank, the heroes who transform the real world and the artists who create in the symbolic field use the 'Ur libido' that is equally shared by both sexes. To that extent, women have the same capacity to shape the world in its real and symbolic dimensions as men.

Far from confining women to the mothering role, Rank, both in his analytical and his theoretical work, enabled women to access the symbolic procreation that men appropriate, and to create their own lives. This is exactly what Irigaray exhorts women to do, but she does not take into consideration the traumatic aspect of birth. By insisting that women must find 'the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies' (1991b: 43), Irigaray aims to liberate women from the patriarchal symbolic field, and she releases birth from the repression into which women have been enticed as well. However, she also risks putting women precisely in the place that is subject to the most intense repression. This is potentially counterproductive for women, if it is not accompanied by an awareness of the birth trauma and its implications.

Insofar as he analyses the specific fantasies that are linked to the mother, Rank helps to dissociate femininity from motherhood. This lays the foundation for a conception of sexuality in which woman no longer occupies the maternal position. Irigaray develops such a conception, focusing on the specificities of the female sex and exploring the ways in which women can reach a properly female *jouissance* (1977). In *Amante marine*, she presents this process as a birth. The marine lover of Nietzsche no longer wants to play the role of a veiled woman that he attributed to her: 'I want to disentangle myself from your appearances [...] and find where I begin once more' (1991a: 31). By appropriating the role of the mother, Nietzsche has cut woman from her own birth. Nevertheless, insofar as he makes explicit his desire to be a male mother, Nietzsche foreshadows Rank's and Irigaray's disclosures of the repression mechanisms that sustain the oppression of women. Nietzsche glorifies the female power over

life as much as the phallic will to power; and his description of the ways by which creators overcome birth could arguably apply to women as well as men.

B. The second Dionysos

In Nietzsche's account, nature produces artists by putting them in a foetal situation: 'sie fängt es in einen Kerker ein und reizt seine Begierde, sich zu befreien, auf das äusserste' (MA: 194). Freighted with anxiety, the womb here appears as a prison, whereas birth appears as a liberation and not as trauma. Artists look for a way out of the womb; insofar as they are able to find it, they create a work. In this image, artists are at the same time in the position of children inside the womb, and of mothers giving birth. The expulsion from the womb gains value as the process thanks to which a new work, or a new child, is brought to the world. The anxiety primarily attached to birth is transferred onto antenatal return, and the desire becomes that of giving birth. Thanks to this inversion of the value given to birth, the subject qua artist can overcome it.

Nietzsche praises as a positive artist Goethe, who represents ascendant life in contrast with decadence (Müller-Lauter 1998: 290). In the portrait that he draws of this artist, Nietzsche does not mention Goethe's works but the fact that he 'nahm so viel als möglich auf sich, über sich, in sich. Was er wollte, das war *Totalität*; [...] er disciplinierte sich zur Ganzheit, er *schuf* sich' (GD: 151). In the womb, the foetus perceives the mother as a totality. Goethe recreated this totality by assimilating the world, and he ultimately created himself. In so doing, Goethe made himself into his own mother. Nietzsche compares him to Napoléon, who expanded his influence over as many parts of the world as possible. While Napoléon shapes the world in his own image, Goethe shapes himself in the image of the world. This completes Rank's account of the hero who creates in the real world and the artist who creates in the symbolic field. Whether absorbing themselves into the world or absorbing the world into themselves, heroes and artists achieve a fusion with the world that gives them back the primal fusion with the mother.

Nietzsche chose the position of the artist. In *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, he advocates for a life in which one gives 'Stil' to one's character, turning oneself into a work of art (FWI: 530). Came compares this imperative formulated by Nietzsche to Diotima's doctrine in Plato's *Symposium*: in both cases, the philosopher turns himself towards beauty in order to enhance the beauty of his own soul and to live the highest form of life (Came 2014: 130). Reading his writings on Wagner and Bizet in the light of Nietzsche's concept of self-overcoming, Leiner shows that Nietzsche criticises Wagner for the lack of style both in his

music and in his character (Leiner 1995: 136), while ‘Carmen is willing to take risks for the sake of creative self-overcoming’ (140). In the creation of himself, Nietzsche occupies the position of both the mother and the child, and erases his actual birth. ‘Much of his writing can be read as an attempt to escape his mother, his motherland, his mother tongue, and maternal security in order to give birth to himself’ (Oliver 1994: 62). In Irigaray’s perspective, Nietzsche should not thus forget his mother. However, his concept of self-creation refers to a process by which one masters regressive desires, decides for oneself and shapes one’s own life. It proposes an answer to the question of how we are to overcome birth. By creating oneself, one moves away from the mother to live one’s own life. This is not a regretful act as such: to some extent, it is necessary to forget the mother in order to become a creative adult.

Abjection

The main issue with Nietzsche’s escaping of his mother is that it also informs his writings on women. Referring to Kristeva’s concept of abjection, Graybeal argues that Nietzsche’s contradictory statements about his mother reveal his difficulty in expressing the abjection that he experienced towards her, and that this contradictory confrontation with ‘the feminine’ is determinant in his work (1990). Lungstrum asserts that ‘Graybeal’s reading of the feminine in Nietzsche as the Kristevan *mère qui jouit* tends to essentialize and asexualize woman’ (1994: n152). In fact, Graybeal focuses on Nietzsche’s relation to his mother and describes it as a confrontation with the ‘feminine’, which equates woman with the maternal. Oliver, on the other hand, insists on the ‘difference in Nietzsche’s writings between the feminine and the maternal’ (1994: 53), building on Kristeva’s concept of the maternal function, to which woman cannot be reduced, as well as on the concept of abjection. ‘To conflate the feminine, woman, and the mother is [...] to subject both woman and the feminine to an “abjection” that is appropriate only to the mother fulfilling the maternal function’ (Oliver 1994: 54). Nietzsche himself ‘reduces woman and the feminine to the maternal’ (60), suggesting that ‘Alles am Weibe ist ein Räthsel, und Alles am Weibe hat Eine Lösung: sie heisst Schwangerschaft’ (Z: 84), and displaying abjection in his misogynist comments.

Kristeva defines the abject as ‘l’”*objet*” *du refoulement originare*’ (1980: 20), which puts the abject in the same position as birth trauma in Rank’s theory. Indeed, she links the abject with birth: ‘de la violence immémoriale avec laquelle un corps se sépare d’un autre pour être, l’abject conserve cette nuit où se perd le contour de la chose signifiée’ (17). The

abject accordingly retains fusional darkness as a trace of the violence beyond memory that is birth. Kristeva's abject is thus the equivalent to Rank's anxiety, in which the memory of the repressed trauma is conserved. As anxiety is the necessary condition for the subject to move away from the mother, in Kristeva's account, the toddler must see the mother as abject in order to be able to differentiate itself from her. The term 'abject' refers to a process by which the 'sub-ject' is thrown away (ab-jected), the toddler jettisoning its mother as the mother jettisoned it at birth. Kristeva mainly elaborates on the case of the male child, arguing that he must abject his mother in order to gain his own identity as male. The issue with birth would then be that, born from a woman, the male child must become a man, and to that end, must abject his mother and her femininity. Since he must also become able to love women, Kristeva maintains that the mother is '*dédoublée*' (185), she has a sublime as well as an abject face. This balance enables the child to separate from his mother and to become an autonomous subject.

According to Oliver, Nietzsche displays an inability to separate from his mother. He is caught up in abjection, that is, in the stage of the in-between. 'He struggles with the boundaries between individuals, between categories, between opposites. His struggle often returns to the boundary between the child and the mother during birth' (1994: 58). This reveals once more the link between abjection and birth: abjection is the process thanks to which one overcomes birth. Nietzsche is trying to overcome birth, and therefore continuously returns to it.

Dionysian mysteries

In Nietzsche's own account, the fascination for birth does not necessarily mean anxious abjection or a deadly desire to return. Writing on the Dionysian mysteries, Nietzsche argues that their focus on birth and sex served the purpose of life:

Was verbürgte sich der Hellene mit diesen Mysterien? Das *ewige* Leben, die ewige Wiederkehr des Lebens; die Zukunft in der Vergangenheit verheissen und geweiht; das triumphierende Ja zum Leben über Tod und Wandel hinaus; das *wahre* Leben als das Gesamt-Fortleben durch die Zeugung, durch die Mysterien der Geschlechtlichkeit. Den Griechen war deshalb das *geschlechtliche* Symbol das ehrwürdige Symbol an sich, der eigentliche Tiefsinn innerhalb der ganzen antiken Frömmigkeit. Alles Einzelne im Akte der

Zeugung, der Schwangerschaft, der Geburt erweckte die höchsten und feierlichsten Gefühle.
(GD 159)

Birth, here, is celebrated as the process thanks to which new forms of life are created. Reconnecting with birth is not a way for the Greeks to achieve a reinsertion into the womb, but to overcome their own birth and to strengthen life instincts. Instead of a neurotic regression beyond the genital stage, they honour sexuality, not for the partial satisfaction of the desire to return that it provides, but for its role in the total continuation of life ('Gesamtt-Fortleben'). Nietzsche probably has the phallus in mind when referring to the 'geschlechtliche Symbol' venerated by the Greeks, but he chooses a gender-neutral formulation, and highlights the positive consideration of the Greeks for pregnancy and birth, thus keeping a balance between the sexes rather favourable to women.

In fact, the mysteries adopt the perspective of the mother rather than that of the child, in as far as they sanctify pain as the pain of the parturient: 'Damit es die ewige Lust des Schaffens giebt, damit der Wille zum Leben sich ewig selbst bejaht, *muss* es auch ewig die "Qual der Gebälerin" geben' (GD: 159). Identifying with the mother, the Greeks overcome birth trauma and the resentment against their own mother. The anxiety attached since birth to the maternal genitalia is reversed into a sanctification. Nietzsche concludes: 'Dies Alles bedeutet das Wort Dionysos: ich kenne keine höhere Symbolik als diese *griechische* Symbolik, die der Dionysien. In ihr ist der tiefste Instinkt des Lebens, der zur Zukunft des Lebens, zur Ewigkeit des Lebens, religiös empfunden' (GD: 159). Nietzsche thus associates Dionysus with the exaltation of life. Yet in *Die Geburt*, Dionysius brings his followers back to the origin, threatening their lives while fulfilling their primal desire. How can Dionysius be both a danger for life and its highest symbol?

One way of solving this paradox would be to say that the Dionysus in *Die Geburt* and in *Götterdämmerung* is not to be understood as the same figure, despite Nietzsche's claim that the first Dionysus was already a precursor of his later philosophy of life. This claim might, in fact, be a denial. Nietzsche arguably repressed the dangerous aspects of Dionysus in order to see in him the defender of life, thus keeping him as a positive figure. However, it could also be said that Nietzsche represses the dangerous aspects of birth itself, preferring to see in it the beginning of life rather than a trauma, and in the womb the place where new forms of life are generated. In this perspective, Dionysus, in leading his followers to the womb, favours their own fertility and not a deadly desire. This supposes that the Bacchant

identifies with the mother instead of occupying the child's position. In fact, in *Die Geburt*, Nietzsche rather fosters an identification with the child. Yet it is logical that, having himself shifted from the position of a child desiring antenatal return to that of a mother procreating artworks, Nietzsche also shifts his understanding of Dionysus in his retrospective reading of *Die Geburt*. The union between nature and human species to which Dionysus leads does not seem to induce the creation of new forms of life, which supposes a differentiation between mother and child. However, the life that Dionysus symbolises in *Götzendämmerung* does have similarities with that union, which justifies Nietzsche's reading of both iterations of Dionysus as the same figure. By procreating, human beings continue their species and reconnect with nature, showing themselves to be parts of a whole and not only individuals. Individual existence merges into the succession of generations. Thus birth at the same time signifies the opening and the erasing of individuation.

What the mysteries celebrate in life is the unceasing power of creation by which life continuously creates itself. With each new pregnancy, life gives birth to itself in an 'ewige Wiederkehr'. Life is thus for Nietzsche a model in his own attempt to give birth to himself. It is the place where the fusion between mother and child is fulfilled: life is both artist and artwork, matrix and fruit. Glorifying life as a process of self-creation, Nietzsche thus finds again in it the primal symbiosis between mother and child. He overcomes birth by orienting his desire to revive primal symbiosis towards life rather than towards the womb, making life itself into a pregnant mother whose child he can be. Life then plays the same role as nature in *Die Geburt*: 'Der Mensch ist nicht mehr Künstler, er ist Kunstwerk geworden: die Kunstgewalt der ganzen Natur, zur höchsten Wonnebefriedigung des Ur-Einen, offenbart sich hier unter den Schauern des Rausches' (GT: 30). However, the Bacchant becoming the artwork of nature is on his way towards the womb: 'er hat das Gehen und das Sprechen verlernt', drinks milk from the earth and, thanks to this regression, 'als Gott fühlt er sich', experiencing again what Flugel calls 'intrauterine "omnipotence"' (1953: 45). By contrast, in his philosophy of life, Nietzsche is both 'Künstler' and 'Kunstwerk', thus identifying with the mother as well as with the child. He does not only want to be the child of life, but wishes to give life himself. However, his wish to be a pregnant woman is not more realisable than that of returning to the womb, and, as Irigaray argues, Nietzsche attempts to fulfil it at the expense of woman. In the pregnancy model, man appropriates the female power of giving life to overcome his own birth, excluding woman from symbolic procreation; in the will to power model, man, unable to overcome birth, uses phallic power to destroy woman.

In Oliver's argument, Nietzsche being caught in abjection cannot recognise the other and, in particular, woman, as a subject. Intersubjectivity is prefigured by the exchanges that take place at the level of the placenta, Nietzsche's male mother lacking such a relation between two forms of flesh (1995). By contrast, Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir argues that Nietzsche's conception of birth has 'intersubjective features that go beyond the model of domination and submission that Oliver claims Nietzsche exclusively adheres to' (2010: 161). Nietzsche's 'conception of birth forecloses a simplistic interpretation of the will to power as mere domination' (160). Referring to Kristeva, Thorgeirsdottir argues that the metaphor of birth can be used to conceptualise intersubjectivity, which suggests that Nietzsche acknowledges intersubjectivity since he uses the metaphor of birth. Nevertheless, she admits that the metaphor of birth in Nietzsche primarily concerns his creation of himself (158). In my view, Nietzsche does not simply use birth as a philosophical metaphor, but rather uses his philosophy in an effort to overcome birth. I rather agree with Oliver: if anything in Nietzsche's philosophy announces intersubjectivity, it would be the conflict between different perspectives that characterises the will to power. However, in this model, the subjects try to dominate others and treat them as their objects: there may be several subjects, but a proper intersubjective relation is lacking. Baracchi remarks that in his notes on Empedocles, written at the time of *Die Geburt*, Nietzsche assigns to love the unifying power thanks to which the pain of individuation is overcome, a power that he attributes to Apollo's art in his published study (2005: 227). In this eclipse of love, the possibility to rely on intersubjectivity in the process of overcoming birth also disappears: Nietzsche's subjects either aim at creating themselves, or at destroying others; they do not recognise each other. After love and art, Nietzsche finally makes the will to power into his principle of unity.

A pregnant world

To the Dionysian mysteries and their sanctification of procreation, Nietzsche opposes Christianity: 'Erst das Christenthum, mit seinem Ressentiment *gegen* das Leben auf dem Grunde, hat aus der Geschlechtlichkeit etwas Unreines gemacht: es warf *Koth* auf den Anfang, auf die Voraussetzung unseres Lebens' (GD: 160). Under the influence of anxiety, Christianity moves away from sexuality in a typically neurotic way. Seeing sex as 'etwas Unreines', Christianity encompasses it within the same abjection as the mother. Against Christianity, Nietzsche honours a

Künstler-Gott, der im Bauen wie im Zerstören, im Guten wie im Schlimmen, seiner gleichen Lust und Selbstherrlichkeit inne werden will, der sich, Welten schaffend, von der Not der Fülle und Überfülle, vom Leiden der in ihm gedrängten Gegensätze löst. Die Welt, in jedem Augenblicke die erreichte Erlösung Gottes, als die ewig wechselnde, ewig neue Vision des Leidendsten, Gegensätzlichsten, Widerspruchreichsten, der nur im Scheine sich zu erlösen weiß.

The pain of being too full is that of a pregnant woman experiencing the contradiction between herself and the other being that exerts pressure from inside her body. God gives birth to the world in a delivery that Nietzsche describes as ‘Erlösung’, borrowing the Christian concept that Wagner used in *Parsifal*, to Nietzsche’s dismay. The child born here does not have a flesh, but is God’s vision and belongs to the realm of appearance. Together with the flesh, birth trauma is erased; instead, Nietzsche highlights the pain of pregnancy. Yet his god is not only a mother. He takes as much pleasure in destroying as in creating, and to that extent, he unites the two criteria of good identified by Nietzsche: pregnancy and the will to power. In fact, god’s delivery, a liberation from the internal contradictions that were pressuring him, takes on characteristics of the will to power:

Mit dem Willen zur Macht als Grundprinzip ist es Nietzsche möglich, sämtliche Gegensätzlichkeiten als dualistische Tendenzen aufzuheben und diese als Einheit zu betrachten. Es gelingt ihm auf diese Weise, die Trennung zwischen Innen und Außen zu beseitigen (Haberkamp 2000: 64).

The will to power enables Nietzsche to overcome the separation between flesh and world, erasing the separation that occurred at birth. It realises a unity of dualistic tendencies that reproduces the symbiosis between mother and child. To that extent, the will to power is a pregnant woman; and since the will to power corresponds for Nietzsche to the totality of the world, the world is a pregnant woman, as total as the mother is for the foetus inside her womb. Montebello describes the will to power as ‘l’ultime matrice’ of any affect or feeling, a metaphor that points towards pregnancy (2001: 19). In his account of the will to power, Nietzsche realises ‘la mise à découvert d’une intériorité du monde’ (15), that is, he satisfies the primary curiosity, that of knowing what is inside the womb. As seen above, this curiosity is what drives the sadistic desire for which Nietzsche accounts in his concept of the will the power. In making the other subject into his object, and ultimately forcing his way into the

other's flesh, the sadist seeks to reach a situation similar to the primal symbiosis. Nietzsche thus describes the principle of the world in terms that point at the same time towards sadistic desire, and its realisation.

Displaying features of sadism, the will to power is not a peaceful symbiosis. Nietzsche does not only highlight unity, but also the multiplicity of the forces that the will to power unifies, and their conflicts: '*Der Wille zur Macht ist die Vielheit von miteinander im Streite liegenden Kräften*' (Müller-Lauter 1999: 40). This multiplicity of similar forces suggests other models than pregnancy, which is a relation between two asymmetric terms. Nietzsche explicitly refers to the model of the organism, but his will to power also encompasses the inorganic and rather corresponds to an organisation of different forces (Abel 1984). Nietzsche thus moves away from the flesh in the shaping of his philosophical child, the will to power. This enables him to encompass the totality of the world in the principle that he formulates: his philosophical child is a total womb. In this symbolical procreation, Nietzsche gives birth to a mother of whom he can also be the child. Yet this is not yet enough to equate the female power on life. Since a man cannot give birth in the flesh, Nietzsche, as a last step in his process of overcoming birth, endeavours to procreate light.

C. Thus bore Zarathustra

In the preface to *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Nietzsche defines life as the process by which a male mother transforms flesh into light:

Wir müssen beständig unsre Gedanken aus unsrem Schmerz gebären und mütterlich ihnen Alles mitgeben, was wir von Blut, Herz, Feuer, Lust, Leidenschaft, Qual, Gewissen, Schicksal, Verhängnis in uns haben. Leben – das heißt für uns Alles, was wir sind, beständig in Licht und Flamme verwandeln. (FWI: 349-50)

Here pain gains value as the womb from which the philosopher's thoughts are born. He nourishes them with his own flesh, his primary affects and his destiny, that is, with that which has characterised his life since birth. Yet his thoughts are not flesh themselves. By transferring his life onto them, the philosopher recreates himself as light. Life is a name for this continual transformation of flesh into light by which the two poles separated at birth are reunified. Appropriating to himself the mother's position, the philosopher draws from the pain of birth to procreate light, and thus overcomes birth trauma as well as the separation between light and flesh.

Nietzsche applies this doctrine to his mothering of *Zarathustra*, a work for which he displays a particular affection. In the section that he dedicates to it in *Ecce Homo*, he associates it with a pregnancy and a death:

Die Schlusspartie [...] wurde genau in der heiligen Stunde fertig gemacht, in der Richard Wagner in Venedig starb – so ergeben sich achtzehn Monate für die Schwangerschaft. Diese Zahl gerade von achtzehn Monaten dürfte den Gedanken nahelegen, unter Buddhisten wenigstens, dass ich im Grunde ein *Elephanten*-Weibchen bin. (EH: 335-36)

In Nietzsche's account, *Zarathustra* was born at the same time as Wagner died, as if there could be a link between these two events, Wagner being killed by Nietzsche's book or reborn in it. Shapiro highlights Nietzsche's reference to the myth of the phoenix, reborn at the moment of its death (1991: 126). As another symbol, Nietzsche counts eighteen months for

his symbolic pregnancy, exactly twice the length of a human pregnancy. Embedded in the figure of the female elephant, there is at least a comparison with woman here, if not a rivalry.

The initial situation in the text is that Zarathustra has left the place of his birth to live for ten years in the mountains (Z: 11). Higgins sees this as a parody of Plato's myth of the cave, in which the souls fly from the cave into the sun; by contrast, Zarathustra flies 'from a valley illuminated by the sun to his own cave'. However, as she notes, 'Zarathustra's cave is high in the mountains, much closer to the sun', so that Zarathustra's home unites 'the dark, Dionysian powers of the earth' with the Apollonian sun (1987: 74). To that extent, Nietzsche does not reverse the myth of the cave, but rather reunites the two elements that Plato separates: the womb and light.

Similarly to Higgins, Krell argues that Nietzsche undertakes to overturn Platonism by inverting the 'images of ascension into light' that characterise Plato's work (1996: 77). 'Nietzsche's reflection is descensional' and, as such, represents a turn in the history of German philosophy 'from thought on *das Absolute* to thought on *der Abgrund*' (78). Challenging Bachelard, who argues that Zarathustra's element is air, and Irigaray, whose marine lover reproaches Zarathustra for turning away from the sea, Krell stresses 'the terrestrial and aquatic base – the point from which all flights depart and to which they return' (237). In that perspective, *Zarathustra* is not only the story of the hero's escaping from his origin, but also of his return to it. However, Irigaray is aware of Zarathustra's descensional attraction towards birth. His marine lover reproaches him for excluding woman in his attempts to give birth himself. The problem is not that Zarathustra, and behind him, Nietzsche, would escape any form of birth, but that his return to birth is at the expense of woman.

In her apostrophe to Nietzsche, Irigaray builds on the opposition between light and the womb. 'Before coming into the light, life is already living' (1991a: 61). Since Nietzsche forgets that foetal life, Irigaray reminds him of it in the figure of the sea, whose 'bed never comes to light' (52). Irigaray opposes the sea, which represents womanhood and the womb, to the sun that Zarathustra worships. In his first discourse, Zarathustra addressing the sun mentions his regular prayer to it and identifies with it: like the sun, Zarathustra wishes to descend 'in die Tiefe' (Z: 11). To that extent, Nietzsche's inversion of the 'ascension into light' here does not overturn Plato's valorisation of the sun, but rather pursues this valorisation further by taking into account the capacity of the sun to decline. According to Rank, the religions that worship the sun see 'die täglich auf- und niedergehende Sonne als das

neugeborene und nächtlicherweile zur Mutter rückkehrende Kind' (1924: 87). Irigaray goes one step further when she suggests to Nietzsche that his desire is 'to pull everything back inside you and to be and to have only one sun' (1991a: 34). Like Goethe, in the aphorism quoted above, Nietzsche thus endeavours to encompass the totality of the world, including the sun. His aim here is arguably to reunite flesh and light into a womb as total as the mother was, casting himself as that reunification by which the separation that occurred at birth is overcome. Irigaray reminds him that 'to be a father, you [...] have to engender suns, dawns, and twilights other than your own' (34). Nietzsche does not occupy the position of the father but those of the mother and of the child, giving birth to himself as a sun. This amounts to a transformation of flesh into light, the sun figuring a renewed symbiosis between mother and child.

Irigaray's character of the marine lover echoes with a passage in which Zarathustra describes the love between sun and sea. He compares the adepts of the 'unbefleckten Erkenntnis' to the male moon, which lies when it seems to be pregnant, and fades in the face of dawn:

Denn schon kommt sie, die Glühende, – *ihre* Liebe zur Erde kommt! Unschuld und Schöpfer-Begier ist alle Sonnen-Liebe! [...]

Am Meere will sie saugen und seine Tiefe zu sich in die Höhe trinken: da hebt sich die Begierde des Meeres mit tausend Brüsten.

Geküsst und gesaugt *will* es sein vom Durste der Sonne; Luft *will* es werden und Höhe und Fusspfad des Lichts und selber Licht!

Wahrlich, der Sonne gleich liebe ich das Leben und alle tiefen Meere.

Und diess heisst *mir* Erkenntniss: alles Tiefe soll hinauf – zu meiner Höhe!

(Z: 158-59)

Spielrein uses this passage to describe Nietzsche's conception of love. Knowledge here is 'nicht anderes als eine Begierde nach Liebe, nach Schöpfung', she writes, thus equating love with procreation in Nietzsche. The sun sucking at the sea behaves as a toddler towards its mother; identifying with the sun, Zarathustra displays that his nostalgia for knowledge is 'die Sehnsucht nach der in seiner Tiefe lebenden Mutter. Wie die Mutter seine eigene Tiefe ist, so ist die Vereinigung mit der Mutter zugleich autoerotisch aufzufassen, als eine Vereinigung mit sich selber' (Spielrein 1912: 482). Zarathustra wishes to drink the maternal figure and

thus to have her inside himself, becoming pregnant with her. The sun with whom he identifies is female in German. Moreover, the sun is first introduced as dawn: the scene takes place at the moment when the sun leaves the womb of night. In his first address to the sun, Zarathustra describes evening as the moment when the sun goes ‘hinter das Meer’ (Z: 11). At dawn, the sun leaves its uterine abode and undertakes to become the mother of its own mother, thereby immediately erasing the separation between water and light. Spielrein suggests that Nietzsche’s account of love has male ‘homosexuelle Komponente’: ‘Nietzsche wird zur Frau, indem er sich mit der Mutter identifiziert’ (1912: 483). Yet his description of a female sun that sucks the breasts of the sea rather points towards lesbian love. Nietzsche identifies with a lesbian woman who sucks her lover’s breast like a daughter before endeavouring to become pregnant with her. In this, Nietzsche rather confronts the sublime than the abject face of the maternal: he is unable to differentiate himself from her and to characterise himself as a man. Whether caught in the abject or in the sublime, Nietzsche bases his conception of love on the symbiosis between mother and child, and is not able to open a space for intersubjectivity.

In a revision of *Ecce Homo* sent to his editor shortly before his collapse, Nietzsche calls his mother and sister ‘giftiges Gewürm’ and confesses, ‘dass der tiefste Einwand gegen die “ewige Wiederkunft”, mein eigentlich abgründlicher Gedanke, immer Mutter und Schwester sind’ (EH: 268). The idea that they would also return is unbearable. Highlighting the contrast between this section and the previous version in which Nietzsche stops still just after having mentioned his mother and immediately changes subject, Graybeal builds on Kristeva’s concept of abjection to suggest that if Nietzsche had been able ‘to hold together [...] his contradictory feelings of piety towards his mother and his extreme horror and hatred of all that she represented to him, he might indeed have retained his sanity’ (164).

I would argue that in the first version, Nietzsche represses his relation to his mother as a whole and therefore does not express feelings towards her, of piety or otherwise, while in the second version, he articulates the anxiety that he experiences towards her. Both versions represent attempts to repress the desire for antenatal return, in a sense that goes beyond the biographical to a more general disposition. The thought of the eternal recurrence concerns the process of birth, and, described by Nietzsche as abysmal, points towards the dark cavity of the womb. It thus stimulates the desire to return, which calls forth anxiety. Nietzsche links his thought to his mother and sister, but denies the link at the same time by claiming that they are the principal objection to the eternal recurrence. The anxiety attached to his mother and sister expands on the eternal recurrence, preventing Nietzsche from any expression of the desire to

return, but also from a channelling of this desire into a valorisation of life. Throughout his work, Nietzsche alternates between desire and anxiety in an attempt to overcome birth. However, the Dionysian disgust of one who has looked too deeply into the maternal abyss finally overwhelms him, and no Apollonian art will save him from madness.

Oliver uses the concept of abjection to explain Nietzsche's misogyny: he abjects all women as he abjects his mother (1995). In my argument, abjection issues from the birth complex. I thus pursue Oliver's investigation of the ground on which Nietzsche's comments on women are based, rather than assessing the extent to which they are dualist or essentialist. In so doing, my aim has been to identify the causes of misogyny, and not only to denounce it. I agree with Rank that women are abjected when they are associated with birth trauma. Moreover, I see the birth complex as the source of binary thinking, with the first binary opposition occurring at birth between what I have called light and flesh. I would therefore suggest that the main reason why Nietzsche's writings can be useful for feminists is that they provide us with a formulation of the complex that structures women's and men's relation to femininity and fosters restrictive roles for women. The better we understand it, the more we can free women from the hold of birth.

Although Nietzsche displays much interest for the figure of Dionysus, he does not refer to the peculiar circumstances of Dionysus's birth in the most widespread version of the myth, and, building on the Dionysian mysteries, emphasises instead that Dionysus is Demeter's son. In the version notably presented by Euripides in *The Bacchae*, Dionysus is the son of Semele, a mortal lover of Zeus struck by lightning when, on her demand, he revealed himself in his glory. Zeus then takes the child that Semele was pregnant with from her womb and himself gives birth to him. This story contains many of the elements that Nietzsche elaborates on: the association between light and the father, the supposed foolishness of woman, and the male appropriation of the female power to give life. In the first birth of Dionysus, light annihilates the maternal flesh, and the traumatic dimension of birth for the child is displaced onto the mother, who has to die so that the father can satisfy the male fantasy to procreate alone. In what follows, I will explore the link between birth and death – and the gender political structure attached to this – in my argument that the primal scene performed on the Wagnerian stage is birth.

Section 2: Wagner

Chapter 4

Thinking the Death Drive beyond Death in *Der fliegende Holländer*

In his aforementioned definition of love as a war between sexes, Nietzsche contrasts Carmen to ‘Senta-Sentimentalität’ (FWA: 15). Senta ties down the Dutchman and is therefore a danger for him: a woman’s love is ‘ein feinerer Parasitismus, ein Sich-Einnisten in eine fremde Seele, mitunter selbst in ein fremdes Fleisch – ach! wie sehr immer auf “des Wirthes” Unkosten!’ (18). Yet the contrary could be argued as well: Senta is inhabited by the Dutchman to the point of having lost an identity of her own, as if the parasitic Dutchman had entirely devoured her soul and transformed her into ‘a kind of soulless nonidentity’ (Deathridge 2005: 468) similar to himself. Either way, love in the opera seems to concern a destruction of one partner by the other, if not a mutual destruction.

In her insightful book on the opera, Courtney W. Howland highlights that neither the Dutchman nor Senta expresses love for each other: Senta only expresses her *Treue*, and the Dutchman only hopes to find a faithful woman; he does not commit to *Treue* himself and neither asks for, nor proposes love (2014). The only one to express love is Erik, whom Howland characterises as a stalker (58-67). Taking the opera as a case study for the feminist interpretation of opera, Howland focuses on Senta, ‘a determined young woman with a definite cause that she is willing to fight for’ (81). As a Christian woman, Senta believes in the possibility of redemption, and estimates that the Dutchman’s fate is disproportionate to his crime. Therefore, she requests God ‘that *she* be endowed with the power to save the Dutchman from his damnation through her death – a power that Christianity has only previously recognized as having been given to Jesus’ (56). The fact that Senta receives this power and successfully redeems the Dutchman destabilizes the Christian narrative of hegemonic masculinity (99). After having thus developed a reading conditioned by a feminist gaze, Howland dedicates the second half of her book to a feminist-gaze critique of what she calls the *Dutchman* canon. Reviewing most of the studies to date, she shows that they generally conform to a few dogmatic points, deny the power of Senta, and either present her as being controlled by love, which erases the ethical dimension of her choices, or demonise her, as Nietzsche did.

This reading is feminist insofar as Howland emphasises a woman’s power and criticises the perspectives that disempower women. Her aim is to present a positive female model by seeing in Senta a ‘metaphor for ethical and moral integrity’ (103). ‘In a world that

so often values people for their acquisition of money and power, Senta stands as a moral and ethical inspiration to act courageously against cruelty, injustice, and suffering' (104). However, Howland does not question Senta's position as a religious figure, nor the imperatives that she should be unconditionally faithful and die, and overlooks the fact that Senta's actions in the opera are primarily beneficial to a man. She presents Wagner as a proto-feminist by virtue of the fact that he introduced a woman with Christ-like powers and denounced arranged marriages, but does not investigate the reasons why Wagner fantasises about salvation by women. Although I agree that Senta can be inspirational for women, I doubt that the success of the opera is due to its glorification of female power.

Therefore, I propose a reading of the opera complementary to that by Howland. While she mainly focuses on Senta's perspective, I shift the focus to that of the Dutchman in order to analyse what redemption and death mean to him and why he demands *Treue* from Senta.

A. The Death Drive

In her comprehensive account of the *Dutchman* canon, Howland does not refer to Žižek, according to whom Wagner's heroes have the death drive as their main characteristic, with the Flying Dutchman as their 'paradigmatic case'. For Žižek, in this opera, 'we encounter the fundamental matrix in its purest, and all Wagner's subsequent operas can be generated from it via a set of variations' (1993: 175). Žižek does not enter into details on *Der fliegende Holländer*, focusing instead on the *Ring*, *Parsifal* or *Tristan*, as if the case of the Dutchman were so obvious that it would not be worthy of study. In fact, among Wagner's operas, *Der fliegende Holländer* seems to emblemise the role of the death drive, as set out by Freud in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1921). Yet Žižek's use of the term 'matrix' to designate the death drive model might serve as an initial indication of how it is imbricated here with an attachment to the womb and the birth complex.

Freud famously argues that our instincts lead us to the reproduction of a primal state that we were forced to renounce: 'Das Ziel des Lebens [...] muß vielmehr ein alter, ein Ausgangszustand, sein, den das Lebende einmal verlassen hat, und zu dem es über alle Umwege der Entwicklung zurückstrebt' (1921: 36). That state is '[das] Anorganische' (36), characterised by the absence of tension, and for which death is a name. Every organism aims to get back in touch with the moment when it was inorganic material, that is, to die, and life consists in the detours it uses in order to die better. An external constraint forces the organism into more complicated detours, the more evolved it is, with 'maßgebende äußere Einflüsse'

leading ‘die noch überlebende Substanz zu immer größeren Ablenkungen vom ursprünglichen Lebensweg und zu immer komplizierteren Umwegen bis zur Erreichung des Todeszieles’ (37). Humans take the most winding detours of all organisms.

The external constraint in question here is symbolised in the opera as Satan’s curse. The Dutchman has been forced to live, against his will. All his actions have death as a final goal, so that everything he undertakes in the opera can be read as ‘Umwege zum Tode’ (37). Condemned by Satan to wander eternally on the seas, he cannot come back to his homeland, which exasperates his desire for a return to origin. Death would be a fulfilment of that desire. When he does find a woman faithful unto death, he is at least able to die, which provides for the happy resolution of the opera.

Freud defines the inorganic state of death by the absence of any tension. When life was breathed into inanimate matter, ‘die damals entstandene Spannung in dem vorhin unbelebten Stoff trachtete darnach, sich abzugleichen; es war der erste Trieb gegeben, der, zum Leblosen zurückzukehren’ (37). The organism yearns ‘nach Herabsetzung, Konstanterhaltung, Aufhebung der inneren Reizspannung’, a tendency called by Freud the ‘Nirvana principle’ after Barbara Low (55). In the opera, the Dutchman experiences life as an unbearable tension of which he cannot rid himself: ‘Wie ein Pfeil fliegt er hin, | ohne Ziel, ohne Rast, ohne Ruh!’ (FH: 25). When he finally succeeds in dying, his ship being immersed in the sea, we see Senta and the Dutchman ascending together in transfigured form towards heaven (56): they are beyond life, discharged of any organic tension. The couple thus seems to have reached a state similar to that which the death drive is aiming at: Nirvana. So, the core of human existence could be seen to be figured in the Dutchman, who, having been made unable to die, uses any possible way to reach his goal.

Freud reaches the concept of the death drive after a route that starts with a discussion of the pleasure principle through the economic perspective, continues with the analysis of the ‘fort’|‘da’ game and addresses the repetition tendency. These key steps of Freud’s reasoning also condition the structure of *Der fliegende Holländer*.

Towards an economic aesthetic

The first sentence of *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* defines the action of the pleasure principle on the psyche as follows:

wir glauben, daß [der Ablauf der seelischen Vorgänge] jedesmal durch eine unlustvolle

Spannung angeregt wird und dann eine solche Richtung einschlägt, daß sein Endergebnis mit einer Herabsetzung dieser Spannung, also mit einer Vermeidung von Unlust oder Erzeugung von Lust zusammenfällt' (1921: 3).

To take into consideration this aspect of psychic life means to adopt the 'economic' perspective. While the topical perspective describes a structure and the dynamic perspective explores the relations between elements of a structure, the economic perspective addresses the quantity of excitation within the psyche, that is, the balance between pleasure and unpleasure.

Playing is a good field for the economic perspective. Children's recreational playing and adults' artistic playing differ insofar as the latter is intended for an audience. Freud here refers to theatre, and in particular to tragedy, in which painful excitations are awakened only to be reverted into pleasure. The path is thus opened for a new way of conceiving art: 'Mag sich mit diesen, in endlichen Lustgewinn auslaufenden Fällen und Situationen eine ökonomisch gerichtete Ästhetik befassen' (14). In the essay, Freud does not expand on his suggestion that studying tragedy could lead to a better understanding of how pleasure arises from unpleasure, since his main interest is not the pleasure principle itself but rather what is to be found beyond it. Nevertheless, such an economic aesthetic could be usefully applied to *Der fliegende Holländer*. Although Wagner's drama is not exactly a tragedy, it builds on a painful exasperation for both the hero and the audience in order to create pleasure. Its hero has been living a life of pure torment. Through Senta, he hopes to find relief, but he loses his trust in her: in the last scene, he reaches a climax of despair, while in terms of aesthetic response, the audience is impatiently waiting for him to be disabused. At this highest point of excitation, Senta's proclamation of faithfulness causes a full discharge for the audience, that is, pleasure.

The main question for Freud is to understand why organisms choose to go through painful if not dangerous excitations. Is this a manifestation of the pleasure principle insofar as an exasperation of painful excitations will ultimately cause pleasure, or is it on the contrary a manifestation of the drive posited as beyond the pleasure principle, namely, the death drive? To address this question, Freud explores the repetition tendency especially in cases when an organism repeats a traumatic experience from which no pleasure can be assumed to be gained, and suggests that it is the death drive rather than the pleasure principle that leads the organism to such a repetition.

In fact, the Dutchman seems to provide a good exemplification of this structure. He has been made to repeat again and again the same traumatic scene: disembarking every seven

years, he courts a woman who turns out to be unfaithful. He ceaselessly wishes to die but repeatedly fails to realise his suicide. Nonetheless, he may well be seeking after pleasure, since pleasure is what he will get at the end, the pleasure in having found a faithful woman and reached the goal of his death drive, that is, Nirvana. As Freud acknowledges himself regarding most of his examples, the repetition tendency ultimately seems to work in the service of the pleasure principle rather than antagonistically to it.

'Fort' and 'da'

The most famous of these Freudian examples is the 'fort'|'da' game. Here, also, a parallel can be made with *Der fliegende Holländer*. Freud observed his grandson, Ernst, throwing a cotton reel out of sight with the sound o-o-o, taken to mean 'fort' (gone), and drawing it back with the sound a-a-a, for 'da' (there). The reel is supposed to stand for the mother: thanks to the game, the toddler goes through the pain awakened by the departures of his mother and the joy of her coming back. By reproducing these painful and joyful situations himself, he gains some mastery over them as a way of internalising what happens to him and ultimately overcoming his separation anxiety. Freud is puzzled by the fact that Ernst more often plays out the painful separation ('fort') than the joyful reunion ('da'), seeing in this a sign that the infant uses the game to excite again and again his pain until full discharge.

In *Der fliegende Holländer*, the spatial fantasy is organised around the opposition of 'fort', the sea, and 'da', the land. The paternal figure marks his possession of the place by his very name, 'Daland'. Pain comes from having been thrown 'fort': the first articulated sentence is Daland's 'Sieben Meilen fort | trieb uns der Sturm vom sichren Port' (FH: 7). 'Da', under the guise of the harbour (for which Wagner used the word 'Port'), rhymes with 'fort', introducing the polarity of 'fort' and 'da' into the opera. The first song, by the helmsman, is about having been 'fort' and being soon 'da', the subject anticipating the realisation of his desire to be back: 'mein Mädle, ich bin da!' (9). That polarity structures the opera, the women remaining in the territory of 'da', while men gravitate between the sea and the earth, between 'fort' and 'da', with the exception of Erik who stays on the earth and is therefore not a suitable suitor for Senta nor the main hero of the opera. 'Da' stands for the reunion with the beloved women (Daland's daughter, the helmsman's girlfriend, the Dutchman's faithful wife) who can ultimately be seen as a series of maternal figures, while 'fort' represents the painful separation from her.

In contrast with Freud's model, the women do not leave the land of 'da', so that the

seamen are not put again in the impotent situation of the son unable to prevent his mother from leaving. Erik is in that position throughout the opera. Yet he is introduced as an outsider in the society of seamen, which is built on a strict division between the sexes to ensure that only men are enabled to come and go. Even Erik temporarily succeeds in preventing Senta from joining her father at the port.

The seamen's ships take on the part of the reel being thrown 'fort' and then retrieved to 'da'. Thus, the men gain control over the pain of separation by replaying their own absence, a possibility that Freud suggested in his note about a variation of the game in which the toddler makes himself disappear from a mirror. The 'fort'|'da' fantasy underlies in particular the first scenes of the opera, as if the singing issued from it, in a similar way to the 'fort'|'da' game informing Ernst's first ventures in language. Indeed, the very first vocalisation in the opera, even before an expression of the 'fort'|'da' polarity, is the seamen's echolalia: 'Hohoje! Halloho! Ho!' (FH: 7), in which they play with alternations of pre-articulate vowels, much like baby Ernst, with his 'os' and 'as'.

There are thus striking similarities between *Der fliegende Holländer* and Freud's *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*. Both works display the desire to return to a primal state, and the link to the mother appears as a key in the Wagnerian 'fort'|'da' fantasy as well as in the Freudian explanation of the game. However, a closer look at Wagner's opera will show that the primal state here is not death, but birth.

B. A Rankian Reading

The first scene is ambivalent with regard to the birth complex. On one side, Daland and the seamen represent the very first steps of life. Just after the traumatic tempest of birth, Daland has reached the earth and stands on it in a situation similar to that of a new-born baby resting on his mother's body. The seamen's echolalia, and Daland's first words establishing the 'fort'|'da' polarity, reproduce the acquisition of language.

However, on another side, the birth process is not finished. The tempest still roars, and apart from Daland, the seamen have not left the ship. If the earth figures the surface of the maternal body on which the baby rests after birth, then only Daland has been born. Yet the surface of the ship on which the seamen are working is also in a position to figure the surface of the maternal body. This is to suggest that the primal union between mother and child appears throughout the scene, and indeed the opera as a whole, as a fantasy that takes various objects. In the logic of that fantasy, one object plays the role of the child, and another object the role of the mother. But the roles occasionally shift so that one object that had the role of the mother may take on the role of the child, and vice versa.

Daland and the seamen go inside the ship to rest, thus returning to a foetal position within the ship which then figures the internal maternal body. The pilot is left on his own on the surface of the ship to keep watch, sings his song articulated around the 'fort'|'da' polarity, concludes it with the same echolalia that opened the opera ('Hohoje!'), and finally falls asleep. So we go through the same steps as at the beginning of the scene, but in a regression backwards, from the 'fort'|'da' polarity to sleep, which for Rank is a substitute for the intra-uterine state (1924: 72). At the moment when the pilot joins the realm of sleep, the tempest swells again and gives birth to a dark twin of the seamen's ship in the form of the Flying Dutchman.

The hero's births

We twice attend the symbolic birth of the hero, as if through a mise-en-abyme. In the first birth process, the Dutchman's ship, which synecdochically also bears his name, emerges from the tempest. So here the ship plays the role of the baby in relation to the maternal ocean agitated by a traumatising tempest. Then the hero himself emerges from the ship, which in turn plays the role of the mother in relation to the hero occupying the position of the baby. Typically, the objects that bear maternal features have both a surface and a depth from which

the subject or object standing for the baby can emerge or to which they aspire. The ship, the earth and the ocean share this capability.

The hero who has just emerged is beyond the usual limits of life: dead enough to not be able to die when he throws himself into the ocean, and for his ship not to be damaged by the tempest. In Žižek's account, he is 'undead' (2002: 104). Yet, being in an ambivalent position between life and death is also the case of an 'unborn' foetus. The Dutchman has appeared at the moment when the pilot fell asleep, transgressing the boundaries between reality and dream. Here he crosses another limit, that between earth and sea. The fact that he needs divine permission to disembark shows that for him this limit is more than spatial. The sea figures the world of death, whereas by going on the earth the hero goes back into the domain of life, like a ghostly revenant who comes back to haunt the living. However, that limit can also be referred back to that between womb and world: the sea is then seen as the primal water, as in Ferenczi's account (1924), while the earth is the world of the living; every seven years, the Dutchman is allowed to be born again in order to overcome his first birth.

In his 'Bemerkungen zur Aufführung der Oper', Wagner builds on the gait of seamen when they first land 'nach langer Seefahrt' (2004 [1852]: 109) to highlight the Dutchman's hesitant gait once he has reached the earth. This realistic detail also points towards birth: the hero being barely able to walk seems to have regressed towards the state of a new-born baby who moves in the world for the first time. The Dutchman announces that 'Die Frist ist um' (10): the term is up and the point of delivery has been reached, except that this pregnancy took seven years instead of nine months.

Then the Dutchman evokes the birth process he has just gone through: 'Voll Überdruß wirft mich | das Meer ans Land' (10). Here the disgust associated with birth is attributed to the maternal figure. The sea has brought him to the world, but he has no doubt that it will take him back into its womb: 'In kurzer Frist sollst du mich wieder tragen!' (10). The verb 'tragen' can be used both in the sense of the sea carrying his boat and with it the hero, and in the more internal sense of a mother being pregnant, which is what the hero might really want to say. 'Sollst' can mean both a high probability, which in this case would be disappointing for the hero (Ocean, soon you will carry me again as I will not have found a faithful woman), and an injunction to satisfy the hero's desire (Ocean, you shall carry me back in your womb as this is my wish). Rocking him in its waves, the sea is a total world just as the mother was for the child inside her, which makes it appropriate for the maternal role. The Dutchman asserts 'Euch, des Weltmeers Fluten, | bleib' ich getreu' (10). Howland suggests that his usage of *Treue* here is ironic (2014: 46), as part of her argument that only Senta displays a voluntary

Treue. Yet the irony that pervades Heine's *Aus den Memoiren des Herrn von Schnabelewopski* (1833), Wagner's source, seems absent in the opera (Deathridge 2005: 453). I would argue that the Dutchman is unfortunately serious in his claim of faithfulness to the maternal sea. The reason why he cannot offer *Treue* or love to a woman is that he refuses to accept the separation from the mother. He has tried to find again the union with her by throwing himself into the sea: 'Wie oft in Meeres tiefsten Schlund | stürzt' ich voll Sehnsucht mich hinab' (FH: 10). Trying to reach the deepest site of the maternal ocean, the Dutchman has in effect attempted a reversed birth that would bring him back to the womb.

That attempt did not, however, succeed: 'doch ach! den Tod, ich fand ihn nicht!' (10). In a Rankian perspective, the hero's frustration concerns less a desire to die than a desire to return beyond birth. The negative connotation attached to death is a manifestation of the anxiety awoken by the proximity to the womb. Since the desire to return gets very close to full expression, anxiety reaches a similarly high level: 'Da, wo der Schiffe furchtbar Grab, | trieb mein Schiff ich zum Klippengrund' (10). Anxiety mars the object that the desire chose as a figure for the womb by presenting it as frightening tomb. But this is not enough to repress such a desire. On the contrary, giving anxiety a point of fixation by taking a frightening object allows the desire to continue expressing itself in this cautionary form.

The hero at first cannot fulfil his desire: 'doch ach! mein Grab, es schloß sich nicht' (10). He does not succeed in going back to a womb that would enclose him. Instead, he must content himself with wandering on the surface of the sea, like a baby creeping on the maternal body in a vain desire to get back inside. When, in the next scene, the Dutchman meets Daland, he introduces himself by saying 'irr' auf den Wassern ich umher' (14), driven by his desire to return with no other goal than the one he cannot reach. He has visited many places but 'das einz'ge nur, nach dem ich brenne, – | ich find' es nicht, mein Heimatland (14). The key word here is deferred to the end, so that during the whole sentence the listener's unconscious has time to formulate the real object of desire: the primal site of origin, that is, the maternal womb, for which the native land is a figure. The Dutchman primarily wishes to return to where he has come from. That desire is experienced as impossible to fulfil: 'Nie werd' ich die Heimat erreichen' (16), which in a Rankian perspective can be read as: no one is able to return to the womb. The proximity of the womb leads to an abolition of time: 'wie lange? weiß ich kaum zu sagen' (14). By not being conscious any more of time, the hero has attained one of the dimensions of uterine life, but only to suffer forever.

Anxiety finally seems to take over: instead of being able to fulfil his desire, the Dutchman is caught in an eternal process of birth. The tempest does not give him any rest:

‘Durch Sturm und bösen Wind verschlagen’ (14), he is perpetually subjected to shocks that reproduce the physical suffering of the baby while going through the neck of the uterus. Rank reminds us that the head usually coming first during birth suffers the most intense degree of trauma (1924: 53), deriving later symptoms such as blushing from that concentration on the head of the birth anxiety.⁵ The Dutchman indeed complains about a suffering focussed on his head: ‘Der Qualen, die mein Haupt umnachten’ (17). His head is compressed by a traumatising maternal body whose darkness [umnachten = literally, bring night around], is one of the main properties. Yet even this renewal of the birth trauma cannot repress the hero’s desire to return: ‘Wenn aus der Qualen Schreckgewalten | die Sehnsucht nach dem Heil mich treibt’ (17). Anxiety is not strong enough to deter the hero from his goal. He adheres to his desire while his anxiety is projected onto objects that make him suffer from outside, taking the form of the tempest or of a pressure on his head.

Paternal figures

The father is a challenger for the child who desires to return to the womb. In the Freudian perspective, the son fears that his father will take revenge upon his pretensions to the mother by exerting castration on him. Rank proposes that castration anxiety, and generally speaking, the Oedipus complex, build on the trauma of birth (1924: 22). Birth is the first separation trauma, with the child being split from a maternal body that had been experienced as belonging to the same totality, and weaning the second, with the child being separated from its first transitional object. Castration represents a third separation trauma, this time between the boy and that which in his own body concentrates desire. The anxiety emanating from the two first traumas is focussed on the castration threat even more easily, given that a genital organ is now at stake while the maternal genitals were the place of the primal trauma, and thus linked to the first emergence of anxiety. These assertions greatly contributed to the eventual rupture between Rank and Freud (Pizarro Obaid 2012). Yet they find an application in the case of *Der fliegende Holländer*.

Indeed, the father’s revenge here consists less in an act of castration than in making the son experience an eternal trauma of birth. Like the father in the Oedipal stage, Satan is held

⁵ Rank does not take into consideration the fact that many babies are born thanks to a Caesarean section. In fact, those babies also experience the loss of the initial bonding to the mother inside the womb, and thus are subject to birth trauma, even if their physical pain during the birth process may be less intense.

answerable for the process of birth suffered by the hero: 'ein schlagend Herz ließ, ach! mir Satans Tücke, | daß eingedenk ich meiner Qualen bleib' (37). The hero would not want to be born, but because of Satan he is now alive; he had succeeded in being enclosed again in a symbolic womb, but Satan transformed it into pure suffering. The bad father is a vector of the primal anxiety awakened by any fulfilment of the desire to return, and his law has the name anxiety: 'Dies der Verdammnis Schreck-Gebot' (11), the father condemning the son to an eternal birth trauma instead of the return to the womb which he was trying to achieve.

Having just landed and sung his aria, the first person that the Dutchman meets is actually a father. Daland does not seem to be a very threatening figure, accepting straight away to give his supposedly beloved daughter to the rich Dutchman. Still, the hero feels the need to win his full authorisation: 'Ach, ohne Weib, ohne Kind bin ich, | mich fesselt nichts an die Erde' (16), as if to defuse the castration threat by making the father take pity. A wife and children could create a new bond, thanks to which the initial attachment to the mother would be dissolved; the earth becoming a symbolic mother, the hero would overcome his desire to return to the primal water. Permission is required from the father to establish with it a bond that would replace the umbilical cord: 'Läßt du zu dem Bund dich erweichen' (16). But that attempt to meet the exigencies of both the father and primal anxiety represents only a change of object; the desire to be chained by an umbilical cord to the mother remains. The new bond established with a good maternal figure would dissolve ('*Er|lösung*' is etymologically connected to 'dissolving'), the anxiety emanating from the trauma of birth, and the hero would be able to die, that is, to return to a womb that he would never leave again.

The good mother

To be saved from an eternal renewal of the primal trauma, the Dutchman thus needs to find in the world a woman who would not be the mother and would thereby be agreeable to the father, although she would still take on maternal properties. She would play the part of a good mother, recreating with him the fusion that he lost as a son. Her faithfulness until death would be the token that this time she will not make the hero experience a new separation trauma, on the contrary, maintaining the bond with him until their final reunion in the symbolic womb of death. The woman's death here is what really counts since only the dissolution of her body opens the path to the womb for the hero. Such a woman would redeem the initial sin committed by the mother when she made her son be born. Only through her can the hero find

his salvation. He will find her in the father's daughter.

Daland is ready to give up his daughter, Senta, whom he describes as 'ein treues Kind' (15). The accent on her childish side hides her maternal aspect to which anxiety is attached, so that the way is clear for an expression of the desire to return through insistence on her faithfulness. She will not be a deceitful mother who betrays her child by imposing separation trauma upon him. Being a daughter is the best mask for playing the good mother since it hides the maternal aspects that awaken anxiety. Remarkably, no mention of Daland's wife, Senta's mother, is made in the opera: she does not seem to exist, even discursively, Senta actually functioning as the father's wife. Her official position of daughter enables the hero to deprive the paternal figure of her without undergoing the risk of castration.

The Dutchman's decision to marry her is immediate: 'Sie sei mein Weib!' (15), although he has never seen her: at stake is not her personality or her beauty, it is enough for her to be the father's daughter, childish and faithful. Howland distinguishes love, which is easy to find and demands reciprocity, from *Treue*, which is rare and does not demand reciprocity (2014: 34-39). Senta's sense of *Treue* 'is one of real loyalty given for religious salvation purposes, not one of obedience to a man' (50). In this, Howland blindly falls into the trap that Nietzsche consistently denounced: religion pretends to be an incommensurable field, but is actually a human product that serves all too human purposes, such as the subordination of women to men. Howland builds on a verse by Goethe to argue that *Treue* does not require reciprocity; yet I do not agree with this. *Treue* is what subjects afraid of experiencing separation anxiety request from the object of their love. Although the first separation is experienced in relation to the mother and therefore to a woman, both sexes experience it and therefore both wish that their love object will be *treu*, just as well as both sexes may occasionally break *Treue* to their partners. Only a patriarchal system heavily condemning women and lightly – if at all – condemning men for their breaks of *Treue* can assure men that the women they betray will not do the same. Otherwise, the common experience is that one asks for *Treue* and commits oneself to it in order to acquire it. The religious person who commits to *Treue* towards God hopes that God will be *treu* in return, and if they break their *Treue*, they may be pursued by other members of their religion who are afraid that God will withdraw his *Treue* towards the entire community. *Treue* is structurally reciprocal. Its difference from love is that *Treue* is an external request to which one obeys, while love originates from the inside and therefore cannot be requested.

Reunion of the mother and child

In the first scene of Act II, we encounter Senta sunk in the contemplation of a portrait by the Dutchman. As Howland notes, Senta never expresses love for anyone in the opera; but she sighs ‘Der arme Mann’ (22), which shows empathy with his suffering. Sans suggests that this corresponds to Schopenhauer’s understanding of true love as *caritas*, in contrast with the selfish *amor* (Sans 1969: 344). Like Wagner’s woman of the future, Senta does not show any interest in household chores (Bauer 1994: 44). She interrupts the song of the other maidens and their spinning to sing her favourite ballad about the Flying Dutchman. Parly argues that Senta here plays the role of a mother towards the maidens whom she thus instructs (2011: 26). She knows about the Dutchman’s condition: ‘Doch kann dem bleichen Manne Erlösung einstens noch werden, | fänd’ er ein Weib, das bis in den Tod getreu ihm auf Erden!’ (FH: 25), and, conveniently for him, declares herself ready to play that part. This creates separation anxiety for her suitor Erik, who asks in vain for reciprocation of his love and retells to her a dream containing essentially what we have seen in the first act. During that narration, Senta falls into a hypnotic trance (Schneider 2013: 266), which recalls Ferenczi’s hypothesis that men prepare women for sex through hypnotic fascination (1924). The seduction exerted by the Dutchman is powerful enough to put Senta into a trance even outside a sexual context and even in his own absence, only through the mediation of Erik’s dream or of the portrait. After Erik’s departure, Senta remains entranced, her eyes fixed on the portrait, when the Dutchman himself enters the room.

After having transgressed the limits between life and death, between reality and dream, and between earth and sea, the hero thus crosses the limit between image and embodiment. His picture is held at the deepest point of an interior space, as a foetus on the wall of the uterus; his figure is pale, as if he had never seen daylight, and his beard and clothes are dark like the interior of a body. Here, typically, death is used by Wagner as a mask for the uterine life. At the conscious level, the hero is pale and dressed in black because he is a ghost. But he actually is not fully a ghost; he is undead, caught somewhere between the realms of life and death, as a foetus is. Senta is also characterised by her paleness (Deathridge 2005: 456). In the Dutchman’s perspective, he enters a space where Senta already occupies a foetal position, as if joining his twin sister inside the womb. Yet, since we have followed Senta in the previous scene, the Dutchman’s arrival is rather set in Senta’s perspective: by suddenly leaving the uterine world of the picture to join her in her world, the Dutchman comes to life.

At first, they both remain far from each other, only looking at each other. The

beginning of their singing is not properly a duet, but rather a ‘double monologue’ (Dahlhaus 1979: 16) which corresponds to the ‘Versuch, diese rein unbewusste Anschauung ins Bewusstsein zu bringen, den Blick des anderen mit Worten zu deuten’ (Schneider 2013: 203-04). Thus not only Senta, but also the Dutchman, is sunk in a hypnotic trance and accesses his own unconscious.

As Max Graf has recognised (1911: 38), the Holländer’s first words reveal that he recognises in Senta his mother: ‘Wie aus der Ferne längst vergangner Zeiten | spricht dieses Mädchens Bild zu mir’ (37). She belongs to the far distant and repressed past of the union with the mother. This union was lost, leaving the son full of the desire to experience it again: ‘Wohl hub auch ich voll Sehnsucht meine Blicke | aus tiefer Nacht empor zu einem Weib’ (37). He had to raise his gaze since the mother was taller than him as child. This raising might also stand for the boyish erection of the son staking a claim to the mother. Being threatened with castration by the father, the son can only have his gaze raised and must find another woman in the world to desire sexually. Yet the metaphor of night points towards the womb. The uterine position occupied by the Dutchman is negatively connoted here, and the idealised woman is placed outside of it, in the realm of the day where he will be able to see her. In his entrance aria, the Dutchman similarly asks ‘Tag des Gerichtes! Jüngster Tag! | Wann brichst du an in meine Nacht?’ (11). Caught in a traumatising process of birth, he longs for the moment when he will at last see the end of the birth canal, that is, light. Yet insofar as he presents himself as a night into which light will break, the Dutchman also occupies the position of a male mother hoping that light will penetrate his womb, which would realise a fusion between light and the flesh. Senta also displays fantasies linked with birth. She wonders ‘Weilt’ ich bisher in trügerischen Räumen, | brach des Erwachens Tag heut an?’ (38). The Dutchman’s arrival has caused a positive birth process by which she leaves a uterine space struck by anxiety to reach the light.

Eventually talking to her, the Dutchman asks if she is ready to play the part of a good mother for him: ‘Soll finden ich nach qualenvollem Leben | in deiner Treu’ die lang ersehnte Ruh?’ (38). Life was marred by anxiety to such an extent that it appeared as an eternal renewal of the primal trauma, but through her faithfulness he could find again the foetal position of rest that he was looking for. When she expresses pity for him, he comments ‘Welch holder Klang im nächtigen Gewühl!’ (39), putting himself in the position of a foetus hearing his mother’s voice as the first ‘sound-object’ (Maiello 1995), and exclaims: ‘Du bist ein Engel!’ (FH: 39). No normal woman could be able or willing to be a good mother, so she must be an angel. Her love will wash away the primal trauma: ‘Eines Engels Liebe |

Verworfne selbst zu trösten weiß' (39). An Oedipal culpability underlies the term 'Verworfne' ('rejected one') which refers to the malediction by the bad father, Satan; yet beyond the Oedipal stage, the birth trauma is visible again: the child has been 'verworfen', thrown away, by the bad mother. Senta, in stepping in for the good mother, will erase both the primal trauma and the Oedipal culpability, triumphing over the bad mother and father. Howland highlights that 'redeeming the Dutchman is not within any Christian angel's known power; it requires a Christ'. The Dutchman is therefore incorrect in seeing an angel in Senta: 'Given his patriarchal biases, he is unable to perceive her as a Christ' (2014: 77).

In fact, seeing an angel in Senta is a convenient way of not seeing her as an embodied woman. The feminine body awakens the memory of the primal trauma. Unable to stand this anxiety, the Dutchman only considers woman as pure spirit: 'Wird sie mein Engel sein?' (FH: 17). The only real question is 'Will she be a good mother for me?', and what the Dutchman does not see in her is who she is: a woman, neither his mother nor an angel. In their first meeting, he brings her troubling presence back to a pure image, while she sees an image being embodied in him. Their only physical contact comes at the end of the scene when Senta gives her hand to the Dutchman as a token of marriage. There will not be any other contact between them, since they die before consummating a marriage. Dreyfus searches in vain for an erotic aspect in their relationship (2010: 74). The possibility of erotic love is briefly evoked by the Dutchman, only to be immediately rejected: 'Die düstre Glut, die hier ich fühle brennen, | sollt' ich Unseliger sie Liebe nennen? | Ach nein! Die Sehnsucht ist es nach dem Heil' (37). His point is not love, not even sexual desire; it is purely the desire to return. As Rieger puts it, the opera gives the impression that 'Wagner wanted to rise above and beyond love itself, to weave another, invisible, thread that binds woman to man for all eternity – even if he is not overly concerned for her' (2011: 35). That thread is a new version of the umbilical cord; it is created by Senta's *Treue* in the opera, and her death assures the man that it will never be cut.

Identification processes

In a Rankian perspective, Senta and the Dutchman, in bypassing sexuality, are typical neurotics. Senta has hysterical features (Bronfen 2006) and the Dutchman has repeatedly tried to return entirely into primal water instead of looking for partial satisfactions. Yet his status of hero gives him a cathartic role. In order to fulfil his desire to return, the Dutchman takes risks that our anxiety prevents us from taking, and we as audience therefore identify with him.

The opera also makes it possible to identify with Senta, as Howland does in her reading.

Senta masters the game: she is the only one to know ‘what is going on and what is going to happen’ (Howland 2014: 81): ‘Based on her assessment of the characters of Daland, Erik, and the Dutchman, she acts accordingly, protecting her position so that she cannot be stopped from doing what she has planned’ (75). Her commitment to help a stranger has more ethical value than the Dutchman’s selfishness and his ‘faltering, complaining, and self-pitying manner’ (80). Senta is a subject deciding her own life and recognises others as subjects, while the Dutchman is driven by fate, if not by unconscious desires, and uses others as objects to meet his needs. The audience may therefore see her as worthier of identification and privilege her on the conscious level.

Nevertheless, the Dutchman, not Senta, is in the position of the child who fulfils the desire to return, and she is put into the maternal position. This also explains the virulence against her in the masculine-gaze studies and productions that Howland reviews. Senta attracts the resentment directed against the mother. The male appropriation of the female power over life and death sustains monotheist religions, the power of God serving to counteract the maternal power. A female Christ concentrates far too much power to be bearable. Her power must be denied, her sanity questioned, her commitment ridiculed, and from a positive saviour, she is turned into a demon. This builds on the anxiety attached to the figure of the mother in order to foreclose the identification with Senta and to promote the Dutchman.

The identification with male heroes can itself be repressed when they venture too close to the womb. Thus, the Dutchman’s ghostly crew are blighted by an anxiety under which lies a secret pleasure for those who encounter them. They are silent like foetuses and do not leave their uterine ship. The living crew repeatedly try to establish communication with them, but in vain: they are in another world to which the desired access is denied. In fact, they are in the best position to fulfil the primal desire, and the audience does identify with them, but only in a hidden way that Wagner, by presenting them as bad heroes, favours: anxiety is focussed on their frightening aspect as ghosts so that desire is secretly expressed through them. In his stage directions, Wagner insists on the contrast between the two ships. We are in the night, and ‘das norwegische Schiff ist erleuchtet’ (FH: 42), light dismissing the anxiety for which night is propitious, as Rank argues (1924:15). Anxiety is focussed here on the ghostly ship, covered by ‘eine unnatürliche Finsternis’ (FH: 42) that points towards the other world – the womb – to which the ghostly ship belongs. The maidens propose torches to the Dutch crew, in vain. Finally, ‘eine düstere, bläuliche Flamme’ appears on their ship (48), a light that still retains features of darkness, just as the ghosts retain features of death even when they show

themselves.

Their frightening song contrasts with the jolly song in which the living crew deny anxiety ('Fürchten weder Wind, noch bösen Strand') and claim their intention to be 'heute mal recht lustig' (42). To repress any anxiety, the living crew dance, which corresponds to Rank's understanding of dance as a denial of the baby's difficult passage through the birth canal (1924: 158). The title of the opera itself, '*Der fliegende Holländer*', refers to the quick and easy passage of which the hero is supposed to be capable, denying any trauma of birth and allowing for a winged expression of the desire to return.

The defeat of love

The end of the opera presents the triumph of the desire to return, and the foreclosure of intersubjective love. Erik claims his love for Senta but does not recognise her subjectivity: he does not show any understanding of her situation and merely expresses his own distress. She rejects his perspective as well. Erik depicts a scene in which according to him, there has been mutual love, but since Senta neither confirms or denies his account, we do not know whether he is a stalker or an unfortunate lover, and in any case the possibility of mutual recognition and love is not realised. Despite the lack of evidence in either direction, the Dutchman believes Erik, thereby denying Senta's credibility (Howland 2014: 87). He does not recognise her for who she is, and even denies that she can recognise him. To Senta's claim 'Wohl kenn' ich dich' (54), he replies 'Du kennst mich nicht, – du ahnst nicht, wer ich bin!' (55).

Schneider distinguishes two models of recognition here: for Senta, 'die Anerkennung des anderen' is 'nur durch den Blick möglich. Anders der Holländer, der auf die begriffliche Fixierung dieser Anerkennung besteht' (2013: 204). This seems to imply that the Dutchman is more advanced than Senta, since in Schneider's thesis that Wagner's operas represent a process of 'Bewußtwerdung des Unbewussten' (4), words achieve what the gaze only prepares. Yet Senta is not unable to articulate her relation to the Dutchman: she does so already in the ballad; and the reason why she does not disclose the fact that she knows the Dutchman's identity may be that she finds it a better strategy to reach her goal, as Howland argues. Moreover, Senta is at least able to recognise the Dutchman's subjectivity and to pity his torment, while the Dutchman is only concerned about her recognition of him and does not recognise her for who she is. In their duet, he sees her as an angel, and in the last scene, he shows just enough interest in her to not want her eternal damnation.

Since his departure does not leave her any possibility to open an intersubjective space of recognition between them, she kills herself. The Dutchman's ship sinks into water, in a reversed birth, and both heroes then emerge from the water 'in verklärter Gestalt' (56), as if newly born in a world where all flesh is transformed into light.

According to Graf, *Der fliegende Holländer* is the first opera in which Wagner's 'persönlichste Leiden, Zweifel, Sorgen und Wünsche [...] in ihrem Kern ergriffen und ans Licht gestellt werden' (1911: 4). Although in his own analysis of the opera Graf rather emphasises its Oedipal structure, his image here, referring to a process where that which lies at the core is brought to light, unwittingly conveys the birth complex. Graf argues that the Dutchman is a prototype for all the subsequent operas by Wagner, an argument also made by Žižek when he writes that the opera incorporates Wagner's 'fundamental matrix' (1993: 175). In this, Žižek himself displays an awareness of the birth complex, even if he does not develop on it. The term matrix is indeed to be taken literally: *Der fliegende Holländer* deals in the first place with the womb, for which its hero aims. Since this aim cannot be expressed openly, due to anxiety, it chooses the mask of death.

Chapter 5

The Mystical Opera: *Tristan und Isolde*

A. Death and Birth

Tristan und Isolde features lovers set on dying together in a *Liebestod*. In Act One, Isolde offers Tristan what they believe to be a death draught and she drinks the second half, before realising that it is actually a love draught. In Act Two, they express their wish to leave the world together, and so they do in Act Three. Whereas in medieval accounts of the legend, the lovers are constantly devising strategies to avoid death (Rosenband 1973: 67), Wagner's heroes welcome it. In this, they mirror Wagner's own wish: in a letter to Liszt presenting his new project, Wagner states that he wants to elevate a 'Denkmal [...], in dem vom Anfang bis zum Ende diese Liebe sich einmal so recht sättigen soll: [...] die einfachste, aber vollblutigste musikalische Conzeption; mit der "schwarzen Flagge", die am Ende weht, will ich mich dann zudecken um – zu sterben. –' (1986 [1854]: 299). Although Wagner eventually removed the episode of the black flag, his opera repeatedly presents death as the consequence of a culmination of love (Magee 1984: 54). The underlying model here may well be sexual: what represents the 'vollblutigste' satisfaction of love in common experience is a 'petite mort', an orgasm. Indeed, contrary to the tendency for which Nietzsche will reproach him, with *Parsifal* in mind, Wagner in *Tristan und Isolde* is far from glorifying chastity. The opera does foster a negation of life, with both protagonists abundantly singing about their desire to die. However, as Chessick puts it, 'Wagner's religion of death was clearly a failure and nobody followed it' (1990: 471), to the extent that we might doubt that death was Wagner's real concern.

Beyond Oedipus

When seen through the lens of psychoanalysis, the most obvious characteristic of the opera is its Oedipal structure. Marke has played the role of a father for the orphan Tristan, his nephew. When Tristan forces the woman he desires to marry Marke, he casts her as his own mother (Poizat 1992: 168). Gediman contends that Tristan is predisposed to be an 'oedipal winner' by virtue of the fact that he never knew his parents and therefore 'was exempt from the usual

oedipal and incestuous prohibitions of childhood' (1981: 613). This singularity of Tristan gives Wagner the opportunity to devise an opera in which Oedipal wishes are triumphant. However, Bergstein highlights the fact that the focus on Oedipal dynamics makes the opera into Tristan's story, 'with the implicit assumption that Isolde's story is redundant'. This 'subjugates Isolde to the male narrative and social order' (Bergstein 2013: 754). Furthermore, to see only Oedipal dynamics in the character of Tristan himself is to miss more determinant aspects. For Chessick, the Oedipal interpretation of the opera is 'weak and contrived. The story is not primarily sexual or triadic, and sex here is manifestly just a vehicle of preoedipal union'. Beyond the triadic Oedipal model, Chessick emphasises the 'dyadic and symbiotic' aspects of the libretto which represent the 'preoedipal union with the mother' (1990: 476).

In her analysis of the medieval epics, Barteau goes one step further by suggesting that the three years spent by the lovers in the forest, an episode condensed by Wagner into one night in Act Two, represents a 'regressus ad uterum' (1972: 202) and that, during his exile, Tristan experiences 'un mode d'existence quasi foetal' (204). Most of the scholars who cite birth when analysing the opera do so in reference to one specific passage. At the end of their night of love in Act Two, Isolde and Tristan are discovered by Marke, and Tristan asks Isolde to die with him with the following words:

Wohin nun Tristan scheidet,
willst du, Isold', ihm folgen? [...]
es ist das dunkel
nächt'ge Land,
daraus die Mutter
einst mich sandt',
als, den im Tode
sie empfangen,
im Tod sie liess
zum Licht gelangen. (TI: 75)

To Wapnewski, this signifies 'Fortschreiten als Regression, Heimkehr in den mutternächtlichen Urschoß' (1978: 78). Poizat argues that Tristan's is 'a search for the obliteration of his coming into the world, his seeing the light of day, the abolition of the rupture and primordial lack that results from it' (1992: 166-67). Death thus refers to an

undoing of the trauma of birth and a return to the womb. The association between death and birth for Tristan is reinforced by the fact that his father died soon after his conception, while his mother died in giving birth to him. At the moment when their love has been disclosed to the paternal figure, and having nothing more to hide, Tristan explicitly expresses his wish: to return to the womb. In his fantasy, he would like Isolde to join him so that he might experience with his beloved a fusion similar to the primal union with the mother. She must die so that the path to the womb can be opened, and he must die to get there. Yet it is worth noting that Isolde is supposed to accompany Tristan into the womb-like space, thus returning herself to the womb. In her response, she considers the land of death as belonging to Tristan through transmission from his ancestors: ‘Nun führst du in dein Eigen, | dein Erbe mir zu zeigen’ (TI: 75). It is therefore not into her own womb that he will return. Instead, they will return together into a uterine space that belongs to Tristan’s lineage and can thus be attributed to his mother. By joining him there, Isolde will occupy the position of a twin sister rather than that of a mother. She is entitled to a satisfaction of the desire to return on her own part.

Repetitive behaviour

Throughout the opera, Isolde and Tristan repeat their wish to die. This repetition in itself makes them appear as typical representatives of the Freudian death drive (Hutcheon & Hutcheon 1999). Freud’s reflection in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* arises from the problem of repetition in the case of traumatic neuroses: the fact that neurotics keep remembering painful events contradicts the pleasure principle. And we find a similar repetition of traumatic events in Wagner’s opera. Isolde and Tristan already have a heavy past behind them when the opera starts. Isolde was betrothed to Morold, a giant who played a similar role for her parents to the role played by Tristan for King Marke: Morold reinforced their throne and guaranteed the primacy of Eire, subjecting Cornwall to a tribute. Tristan killed him and sent his head to Isolde. At that point she was arguably for him the daughter of the oppressors of Cornwall. Still, given that Tristan will later become Isolde’s lover instead of Morold, this decapitation may mean more than an act of war. Barteau suggests that Tristan’s castrating murder of Morold was in fact targeted against Marke (1972: 195) but her interpretation is based on the medieval epics in which Morold is Isolde’s uncle, not her fiancé, and Wagner does not insist on the fact that Morold was a giant and therefore potentially a parental figure. In any case, Tristan is left mortally wounded after his fight with Morold. Helpless like a baby, and half-

dead, so on the way towards the foetal state, he floats on a small boat that brings him to Isolde. He introduces himself as Tantris and she heals him like a mother caring for a newly born baby. However, she soon realises that there is a piece missing from his sword that matches exactly the piece of sword found in the head of Morold. Lifting the sword against him, she is stopped by Tristan's countenance as he looks at her. He leaves for Cornwall, but returns to Eire claiming Isolde as Marke's betrothed and thus encountering her for the second time on a treacherous basis. For Isolde, this succession of events represents a 'trauma narrative' which she narrates to Brangäne in Act One, of which she reminds Tristan at the end of the act, and which she again discusses with Tristan in the middle of their reunion in Act Two. Both in its content and its form, the libretto 'is a most obsessively repetitive text – as befits, Freud might have said, a music drama about death' (Hutcheon & Hutcheon 1999: 271). In a way that is typical of Wagner, characters narrate scenes that we have already witnessed on stage. Schneider understands this condition of retrospection not as compulsive destruction, but as a process of identity constitution: through their narration, the characters access what has been buried in their unconscious (2013). According to Rank, memory issues from the repression of the birth trauma: a detail is remembered 'weil es einerseits von der Urverdrängung angezogen wird, um andererseits späterhin als Ersatz des eigentlich Verdrängten, des Urtraumas, reproduziert zu werden' (1924: 12). Beyond a symptom of the death drive, the compulsion of repetition that characterises Wagner's heroes could thus be a consequence of their attempts to call the repressed trauma of birth back into consciousness.

Schopenhauer

In the letter to Liszt quoted above, Wagner writes that he has recently discovered Schopenhauer: 'Sein Hauptgedanke, die endliche Verneinung des Willens zum Leben, ist von furchtbarem Ernste, aber einzig erlösend' (1986: 298). Nietzsche thus seems to have been right in claiming that Wagner's intellectual encounter with Schopenhauer converted him to the negation of life. Freud himself remarks that his account of death as the goal of life and of the sexual instinct as the embodiment of the will to live lands 'in den Hafen der Philosophie Schopenhauers' (1921: 24). In fact, Schopenhauer suggests that death is a 'restitutio in integrum', and links this to the Buddhist faith in Nirvana (2009: 875). According to him, individuals must renounce their will to live, since it reinforces their individuation and brings them further apart from primal unity. Schopenhauer presents death as the ultimate step in the

process through which human beings can be liberated from individuation and join in primal unity.

Wagner's opera seems to follow exactly this programme. Isolde and Tristan reject the world as a domain of illusion and renounce life, choosing instead a dissolution of their individuation through death. Foreshadowing Nietzsche, who made of Apollo, god of daylight, the embodiment of representation, Isolde and Tristan call 'Tag' the force responsible for representation and announce their wish to become unified with the world beyond any illusion:

die mir der Tag
 trügend erhellt,
 zu täuschendem Wahn
 entgegenstellt,
 selbst – dann
 bin ich die Welt (TI: 61)

Leaving the world 'as Vorstellung', they have joined the world 'as Wille'. According to Magee, most of the libretto is 'poeticized Schopenhauer' (1983: 58). In Act Three, Tristan's complaint about the anguish of desire echoes Schopenhauer's understanding of love as a tyrannical enemy (Sans 1969: 335). Dorschel argues that *Tristan* follows the same steps as Schopenhauer in *Die Welt* I, 4: dissolution of the boundaries between individuals, deeper understanding that these boundaries were only illusions and finally ecstasy and reunification with God (1987: 16). However, Wagner replaces God with love. *Tristan* is the only opera by Wagner 'in dem das Wort "Gott" nicht vorkommt' (19).

In fact, Wagner displays strong disagreement with Schopenhauer as regards love. For Schopenhauer, real love is empathy, through which human beings reach a sense of unity, while sexual love is fundamentally egoistic and obeys the will to live that pushes lovers into reproducing their species (2009: 953). By contrast, Wagner depicts sexual love as a mean of reaching the absolute of the Will. Nietzsche himself remarks in an unpublished note: 'Die Liebe im Tristan ist nicht schopenhauerisch, sondern empedokleisch zu verstehen, es fehlt ganz das Sündliche, sie ist Anzeichen und Gewähr einer ewigen Einheit' (KSA 8: 191). In 'Metaphysik der Geschlechtsliebe', Schopenhauer wonders how lovers can ever wish to die together since they find their highest happiness in love and have to give this happiness away if they are to die (2009: 893). Wagner refers to this passage in a letter to Schopenhauer that he

never completed, nor sent, with the intention of proposing a solution he unfortunately did not write down. Sans suggests that Wagner's solution lies in the power of love to elevate human beings above the individual will and to help them be in touch with the universal Will (1969: 340). But love is not enough: it only fulfils its promise through death. Their love is what makes Isolde and Tristan desire death, hoping to reach in death the primal unity that love has allowed them to taste.

As Sans emphasises, the central theme in both Schopenhauer and Wagner is 'le retour à l'unité perdue' (1969: 12). In a Rankian perspective, both are concerned with the question that drives infantile as well as adult curiosity: how are we to return to the womb? In a typically neurotic way, Schopenhauer encompasses sexuality within his rejection of desire. By contrast, Wagner recognises that sexual love provides us with a partial satisfaction of desire. Nevertheless, insofar as Wagner's heroes want to go beyond sexuality and return entirely to the uterine realm of death, they also fall within Rank's definition of neurosis. Even if Nietzsche's diagnosis of decadence may thus be confirmed, Schopenhauer and Wagner did not simply shy away from life. They contributed to a disclosure of the birth complex from which issued the tendencies in their work that can be described as neurotic. Schopenhauer makes a dangerous desire into the core of the human experience of the world, in a vision of existence pervaded by anxiety. And Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* foreshadows many aspects of Rank's theory, as I will show now in relation to the first act.

In the beginning was the chord

Tristan opens with what is certainly the most famous chord in the history of music. Many arguments have been made to explain how it could fit within the laws of tonality. I will not enter into the detail of these controversies. What musicologists seem to agree on is that the chord is highly ambivalent; some describe it as a combination of two chords, one linked to desire and one linked to death (Hartmann 1989), or as belonging to two tonalities at the same time (Gut 1981). Because of its dissonance, the chord calls for a harmonic resolution that will come only at the very end of the opera, and it has therefore been seen as an equivalent to the characters' yearning (Reiman 1998). Wagner thus expands over an entire opera the musical device of suspension by which the resolution of a dissonance is delayed. Mentioning this device in a passage about music, Schopenhauer puts it in parallel with 'der durch Verzögerung erhöhten Befriedigung des Willens' (2009: 834). The first chord of the opera is

therefore associated with an ambivalent desire coloured by anxiety; it defies tonal laws and potentially represents a merging of two separate identities. I would suggest that it expresses the psychic constellation of desire and anxiety following the birth trauma, and to that extent, stands for birth. Just as the birth trauma constitutes the core of the human psyche according to Rank, the first chord of the opera determines the harmonic language throughout the piece and already contains the main psychic forces that will drive its heroes: a desire inseparable from anxiety, a disobedience towards paternal law and a fantasy of returning to the primal fusion between mother and child. Only the last chord of the opera dissolves what the first chord has initiated, just as death closes what birth has opened. This may also explain the fascination exerted by this opening chord on generations of scholars: beyond musicological interest, the chord is a paradigmatic object for the question regarding a return to the womb.

Tristan or the undoing of Isolde

Isolde and Tristan are on a boat that – ‘[a]ls Nicht-Ort, angesiedelt zwischen der Heimat der Braut und dem für sie vorgesehenen Orte ihres Exils’ – represents a space beyond social normativity (Bronfen 2004: 25). The organisation of the space manifests a clear separation between man and woman. In Wagner’s stage directions, Isolde and Brangäne are in a tent furnished with tapestries and cushions, having seemingly recreated a feminine space within the men’s boat. The tent is closed, and thus hides Tristan and the other men who are on deck. Still, an invisible male voice can be heard, that of a young sailor. This situation inverts the male perspective on foetal life: Isolde, a woman, is lying on a bed inside the closed space of the tent, in the situation of the foetus; an invisible voice resonates, like the voice of the mother perceived from within the womb, or rather of the father, since it is a male voice singing about separation. The sailor addresses his Irish girlfriend whom he left when boarding back to Cornwall, thus abandoning her after having presumably seduced her during Tristan’s ambassadorial visit to Eire. He calls her his ‘Kind’, much as Wagner calls Mathilde Wesendonck his; thanks to that infantilisation, the woman is dissociated from the anxiety attached to the mother. Further sustaining such dissociation, the route to the Irish maid runs in the opposite direction to the route leading ‘der Heimat zu’: ‘West-wärts | schweift der Blick: | ost-wärts | streicht das Schiff’ (TI: 7). The sailor desires to return to the place of his beloved, not of his mother. For the protagonists of the opera, both places are one, and they are embarked on a life that leads them away from this, so that the sentence of the sailor can also

apply to them. In any case, Isolde takes for herself the sailor's description of his 'wilde, minnige Maid' and his tale of forceful separation when the song awakens her.

She observes that Tristan has been avoiding her, presumably because he is afraid of her. This fear and his denial of his desire for her have led him to undermine her both socially and emotionally. Isolde considers Marke a vassal prince unworthy of the heir of the Irish throne and feels that she is bringing shame on her country through this marriage. In fact, far from honouring their future queen in her, Kurwenal and the sailors laugh at her like a captive enemy and remind her of Tristan's triumph over her country and herself, in a straight diatonic passage with 'Begleitung vor allem der Blechbläser, den klassischen Instrumenten männlicher Dominanz' (Rieger 2015: 208). This aggression 'forecloses any possibility of real discourse' (Groos 1988: 480), further excluding Isolde and her maid. Wagner thus highlights the destructive consequences that man's unresolved complex of anxiety and desire has for woman. It seems as if Tristan were punishing Isolde for having awakened desire in him, and the specific punishment he has chosen – forcing her to leave her homeland in order to marry a paternal figure – echoes with birth trauma. When mentioning his birth in the passage quoted above, Tristan says that his mother dispatched ('entsandt') him from a nocturnal country; now he is separating Isolde from her parents and her country, while putting her formally in the maternal position she already occupied when caring for him. On behalf of his mother, Isolde must pay for the birth trauma that Tristan experienced.

This treatment has wounded Isolde in every dimension of her existence. She is frustrated in her love, forced into a political marriage, humiliated by the enemies of her country, exiled from her homeland; and she must submit to male rulers despite being the heir to a throne and having the temperament of a leader. From her perspective, her situation is the result of her failure to kill Tristan when he was in her power, and of his betrayal of her. She exhorts herself to vengeance, with the internalised bosom in metonymic relation to the womb: 'Erwache mir wieder, | kühne Gewalt, | herauf aus dem Busen, wo du dich bargst!' (TI: 8-9), and projects herself into the sea, ordering the winds: 'Treibt aus dem Schlaf | dies träumende Meer, | weckt aus dem Grund | seine grollende Gier!' The structure of both images is the same: violence lies at the core of woman and of the sea, and only needs to be brought to light. In both quotations the first half concerns a general awakening of the subject, while the second concerns a specific process of emergence. This awakening from the depths of a woman's body or of the sea represents a birth process in which the foetus itself is violence and desire ('Gier'), embodying the maternal violence a son may feel himself to have suffered during his

birth, and the desire to return to uterine water. Wagner thus describes female violence as well as the violence of nature in a tempest through images linked to birth. Obeying the unconscious logic of these associations, Isolde then claims her intention to have Tristan's boat cast back upon the mercy of the voracious sea: 'Zeigt ihm die Beute, | die ich ihm biete! | Zerschlag' es dies trotzige Schiff, | des zerschellten Trümmer, verschling's!' The sea is one of those predators that awaken anxiety through the potential realisation of 'den Wunsch – durch Gefressenwerden – in den tierischen Leib der Mutter zurückzugelangen' (Rank 1924: 16). Like the 'zerstückelt(e)' Dionysus mentioned by Nietzsche, the boat is to be cast into separate pieces in a reversed birth process leading it to uterine waters. Tristan seems to share this fantasy, since Brangäne finds him '*sinnend in das Meer blickend*' (TI: 11). Petitjean comments that his gaze 's'y noie comme en une plaie béante' (1981: 157), an image in which the oceanic wound may figure the castrated vagina. Tristan thus appears as a new Dutchman who would like to fulfil his desire by sinking into the ocean, but cannot.

In her account of Isolde, Clément refers to Lévi-Strauss's study of Amazonian Indians (Clément 1979: 108). She explains the character of Isolde through 'l'impossibilité où se trouveront les hommes de contrôler les puissances qu'elle incarne' (112). Isolde may already be too civilised, since she fails to gain control over the sea. Still, Isolde refers to such a power as belonging to her female lineage: 'Wohin, Mutter, | vergabst du die Macht, | über Meer und Sturm zu gebieten?' Isolde here reproaches her mother for having lost the female control over nature, as if the transition from nature to culture and from matriarchy to patriarchy had happened just one generation before Isolde through her mother's renunciation. In the new male order to which, it seems, her mother submitted, women are powerless over nature and against men. Isolde storms about such decadence: 'Entartet Geschlecht!' (TI: 8). Yet those she thus tackles must be her mother, who initiated the submission of women, and herself, the last descendant, '[u]nwert der Ahnen'. Although 'Geschlecht' designates family in this context, Isolde's use of precisely this term to deprecate her mother and herself recalls Rank's suggestion that the origin of patriarchy and of the social undoing of women lies in the fact that the female genitalia remind both women and men of the site where they experienced birth trauma. This prepares women for self-deprecation while men tend to exclude them from the symbolic field.

Clément is close to this idea when she mentions the Indian myth according to which, when vaginas were created, 'le tatou prit grand soin de froter ces orifices nouveaux avec un bout de noix pourrie. Ainsi, les vagins sentiront ce qu'ils doivent sentir: mauvais.' For these

Indians, women stink, and female dirt is a poison that provokes desire as well as death. Clément concludes: ‘Les femmes sont des empoisonneuses’ (1979: 110). In fact, the only control over nature her mother has transmitted to Isolde is the art of potions. Isolde pours scorn on this: ‘O zahme Kunst | der Zauberin, | die nur Balsamtränke noch braut!’ (TI: 8), which reinforces Clément’s suggestion that these potions are related to female genitalia. After having used potions to heal Tristan, Isolde wants to cause his death with one of them, and it turns out to awaken their love. The potions thus retain the ambivalence of female genitalia as well as a reminder of the female control over nature. For Isolde and her mother, they represent the bastion of female resistance against a patriarchal society: as Brangäne says, Isolde’s mother would not have sent her daughter away without providing her with the means to face any difficulty, such as her husband’s potential lack of love or the necessity to kill an enemy. Potions do not require physical force and exert their power through secrecy and dupery, which makes them appropriate weapons for women in a sexist perspective. Isolde matches this image of femininity when she refuses the sword Tristan holds out so that she might kill him, and instead pretends that the potion she offers him is one of reconciliation.

Her incapacity to use his sword against him upon discovering his identity had been the first step in her fall: unable to kill her enemy like a man, she then had to submit to him. According to Rieger, ‘Dieser Topos der Frau, die einen Mann zu töten droht, es aber nicht fertig bringt, reicht bis in die Moderne und bezieht sich auf ein besonderes kulturelles Tabu’ (2015: 208). This taboo arguably originates from the fact that a woman who kills recalls the terrifying sides of the mother, able to give life but also, consequently, to take it away. The power to kill has been appropriated by men as a way to counterbalance this female power over life. A woman who kills accumulates too much power on her side to be bearable for the male psyche. At the same time, the myth of the *femme fatale* reveals that men expect women, and especially the ones they desire, to cause their death. Isolde is a typical *femme fatale* (Bronfen 2004, Rieger 2015: 201). She wants the death of the man she loves, and the potion she makes him drink will ultimately cause him to die, through love. In the symbolic roles the opera distributes between genders, woman is an outsider for whom man risks losing the social status he has gained. Woman’s existence is subsumed under love: despite her violence, Isolde therefore corresponds to Wagner’s ideal, in that ‘[s]ie wird völlig von der Liebe beherrscht’ (Rieger 2015: 208). By contrast, man, in Wagner’s time, was supposed to seek ‘seine Identität in anderen Bereichen’ (Rieger 2012: 127). However, Tristan’s attempts to do so are presented negatively in the opera: he was blinded by an illusory sense of honour when he so much as considered not placing love at the centre of his life.

A good witch

In this, it seems that Wagner does take Isolde's side: even while a *femme fatale*, the death to which she will lead Tristan is not his destruction but the highest state he can reach, and one she shares with him. Isolde is neither submissive nor passive (Rosenband 1973: 39), at least in Act One (Mungen 2015: 75). We enter the story through her viewpoint. Isolde explains the detail of her feelings to Brangäne, performing a kind of auto-analysis (Thomas 1981: 192) that draws the audience into her perspective. During most of her scene with Tristan, Isolde leads the dialogue, asking questions of a reserved Tristan, who refuses to open up. Wagner thus favours an identification of male as well as female audiences with Isolde for most of the first act. Only through his drinking of the potion does Tristan become a subject with whom the audience identifies, rather than the object of Isolde's anger.

As many scholars have argued, the potion frees Isolde and Tristan from the inhibitions that have thus far prevented them from admitting their love for each other (Rosenband 1973: 36; Bijvoet 1988: 207; Groos 1988: 468; Gueullette 1990: 165; Flinois 1990: 170; Pasquié 1990: 184). Bronfen emphasises the role of Brangäne who takes the decision to switch the potions: 'Brangäne, die wie ihre Herrin in die Zauberkünste der Mutter eingeweiht ist, jedoch deren schädlichen Aspekt gegen dessen schützenden ausspielt' (2008: 352). What comes from the mother is potentially dangerous. Yet do the potions of life and death really come from Isolde's mother? The libretto repeats this information to the extent that its insistence becomes suspicious. Isolde was able to heal Tristan alone; why would she now need her mother? This split between Isolde and her mother, Isolde by herself being only able to cure while her mother is answerable for love and death, prevents Isolde from being marred by too much anxiety in Tristan's male eyes, and accordingly preserves her as an object of desire. Brangäne thus primarily protects Tristan against the excess of Isolde. Anxiety remains attached to Isolde's mother while the potion undoes the repression of desire. Moving together in close proximity towards the uterine realm of death awakens in the lovers a search for fusion. Yet, instead of death, they fall in love. The question is, then: is their love reducible to the desires and anxieties associated with birth, or does it exceed them?

B. Love

In other operas of Wagner, we may doubt whether the man loves the woman at all. Lohengrin condemns Elsa's legitimate curiosity. Parsifal abjects Kundry. Siegmund does show proper love to Sieglinde, but she is his twin sister. Their son Siegfried hardly understands anything of what Brünnhilde tells him and leaves her at the first occasion; like in the case of Tristan, only a potion enables him to acknowledge Brünnhilde for who she is. But Siegfried dies immediately afterwards, whereas Tristan survives his discovery for one and a half acts. During that time, the potion creates miraculous conditions for the woman: Isolde is entitled to a sexual desire of her own and does not even have to pretend that she resists male advances, in contrast with the conditions applied to Brünnhilde. Upon seeing each other again, the lovers ask quick interchangeable questions: '(Tristan:) Du mir verloren? (Isolde:) Du mich verstossen?'; '(Isolde:) Bist du mein? (Tristan:) Hab ich dich wieder? (Isolde:) Darf ich dich fassen? (Tristan:) Kann ich mir trauen?'. There is no gender gap here, no division between activity and passivity or dominance and submission. Although the second to speak usually repeats the grammatical and thematic structure used by the first – if not the exact same words – and thus may appear to occupy a submissive position, Isolde and Tristan alternate in each position. They hear Brangäne's calls twice. The first time, Tristan resists and claims his wish to die; the second time, it is Isolde's turn. Chessick highlights the fact that '*both* Tristan and Isolde seek the union and *both* are transfigured by death' (1990: 476). This symmetry emphasises the heroes' equality in their love. Would love then represent a successful resolution of the birth complex, thanks to which woman, dissociated from the mother, gains the status of a subject and an equal? I will now explore this hypothesis through accounts of love with reference to Wagner's opera.

On narcissism

In his classic study, Rougemont sees in the Tristan legend the paradigm of passion, a form of love still predominant in the Western world and which he opposes to marriage (1972). Rougemont traces the origin of passion in the Cathar heresy that influenced the troubadours, who devised such epics as *Tristan*; European literature issues from the troubadours and therefore, indirectly, from the Cathars. Passion is love insofar as it creates suffering and leads to death; it is usually to be found in adulterous relationships. Quoting Bérout's medieval epic,

Rougemont highlights that the lovers claim not to love each other: ‘Tristan et Iseut ne s’aiment pas, ils l’ont dit et tout le confirme. *Ce qu’ils aiment, c’est l’amour, c’est le fait même d’aimer*’ (43). Tristan and Iseut seem to willingly multiply obstacles to the satisfaction of their desire, which reinforces their passion. Ultimately, passion means death (46) and what the lovers want is to die (48). Through death, they escape a world defined by the Cathar heretics as intrinsically bad (83).

What Rougemont calls passion can to some extent be explained through Rank’s theory: the world in which the lovers have landed through birth does not satisfy them. They seek obstacles to reach death, in a way typical for heroes, as shown above. Rougemont defines Eros as a desire ‘que plus rien ne peut satisfaire, qui repousse même et fuit la tentation de s’accomplir dans notre monde, parce qu’il ne veut embrasser que le Tout’ (1972: 62). By this desired totality, Rougemont means God, but it is easy to read it as the total mother of the intra-uterine stage, and to understand Eros as the desire to be back in the womb. Yet how should we make sense of Rougemont’s claim that the lovers are merely in love with love, and does this twin narcissism of the medieval heroes really apply to Wagner’s heroes?

In his critique of Rougemont, Updike argues for a more positive view of passion and narcissism than the Swiss theologian. Tristan and Iseult do not only aim at obstacles and death, but try to reach happiness through love. Deathridge suggests that Updike’s review stimulated psychoanalysts to explore the facets of narcissism tackled by Rougemont (1996: 113), so that Wagner was indirectly once again the vehicle for a psychoanalytic advance. In Gediman’s account, Rougemont is

talking, in Kohut’s terms, about the relations of the self to the libidinal object, whereas Updike is attempting to add the complementary point of view of narcissism and to deal with the relations of the self to the self-object, which is the basis of creativity as well as of romantic love. (1975: 410)

Kohut argues that narcissism is not simply a step in the psychic development, which is then replaced by object love, but that narcissistic libido coexists with object libido in the adult and sustains creativity. Artists idealise their work as lovers do their beloved, as a self-object (Kohut 1966: 261). Tristan and Iseult are each a self-object for the other (Gediman 1981: 614). Gediman calls this fusion of self and object ‘twin narcissism’ (1975: 411), taking up Rougemont’s term but without his negative judgement. Twin narcissism, she contends,

originates from the ‘developmental stage characterized by, among other things, attachment to the transitional object’ (411) studied by Winnicott (1953). This developmental stage is the precursor of the happy and creative love to which Updike refers (Gediman 1975: 411-12). Gediman also refers to Bak, who believes that the passionate state of being in love ‘tends to draw imagery and sensations from these very early ego phases’ of the union with the mother ‘and aims towards fusion of self and non-self’ (1973: 4); it is ‘based on undoing the separation of mother and child’ (6). Taking the example of a man who drowned himself after being rejected in love, Bak comments: ‘symbolically, birth was undone and in death he is united with “the infinite”’ (6). Suicide here leads the unhappy lover back to the water of a womb that has taken on the dimension of totality.

We thus have, on one side, a happy and creative love that issues from transitional space, and on the other side, a destructive love aiming at a return to the womb. Gediman and Bak do not see this difference between womb and transitional space, speaking in both cases of a return to the union with the preoedipal mother, as if all that happens before the Oedipal stage can be reduced to the same category. Similarly, Bergmann argues that love gives back ‘to the adults some of the feelings of bliss experienced in the symbiotic phase’ (1980: 74) and in the same paper cites Schopenhauer to claim that ‘The unconscious equation of death and womb has a long tradition’ (62), but does not differentiate either between the mother experienced as womb and the mother of the symbiotic phase after birth. Although both can be described as a union between mother and child, it seems to me that birth makes a significant difference. After birth, the mother sees her baby as a distinct subjectivity, which she cannot do when it is still in her body. Even if, in Winnicott’s account, the toddler believes the breast to be a part of itself (2005 [1971]: 16), it has already gone through a process of separation during birth and is no longer involved in a continuous symbiosis since the mother may come and go. Furthermore, after birth, the toddler is in contact with other persons who may care for it and participate in nourishing it just as much as the biological, that is, the uterine mother. As Winnicott suggests, the mother is then a generic name for the nourisher.

In his account of ‘being in love’, Bak, following Freud, states that ‘the libidinal investment of the self is transferred to the object’, which leaves the self unprotected and vulnerable (1973: 3). The subject aims at merging with the object and, if sexual gratification is refused, may find in death the undoing of birth. Expressed in Rankian terms, the subject, whose forces of repression have been weakened, indulges in the desire to return; the possibility of a satisfaction of this desire also recalls the trauma that interrupted the uterine

stay, awakening intense anxiety. The subject finds in death a substitute for the womb as well as a solution to the tension between desire and anxiety. What has put the subject in such a situation, according to Bak, is the excessive valorisation of the object at the expense of the self. In the alternative model of love that Gediman points out, the fusion of self and object into a 'self-object' does not impoverish the self but rather stimulates its creativity. It could be argued that this fusion recreates the exchanges intervening at the level of the placenta. However, insofar as love, in my understanding, involves intersubjectivity, I would rather agree with Gediman that this form of loving revives the transitional space (1975: 411), and not the intra-uterine union with an all-embracing mother. When 'in love', the subject ultimately aims at destroying the subjectivity of its object and its separate existence in order to recreate uterine conditions, since in the womb the mother was not perceived as a separate subject. By contrast, when 'loving', the subject loves the object as another subject with whom she or he can enter into an endless play of separation and reunion.

The path to intersubjectivity

Winnicott explores the process through which a toddler, who first perceives its mother as being part of its own self, progressively differentiates itself from her through the use of transitional objects. The 'good-enough' mother favours this process first by fully adapting to the child's needs, keeping it in the illusion that they are the same entity, and then gradually disillusioning it, in a process thanks to which the child learns to accept reality (2005).

Winnicott calls 'potential space' the space between the mother and the child and contrasts that space with both the inner and the external worlds (55). The child playing with transitional objects recreates with them the potential space, as does the adult when playing or exerting creativity. I use the expression 'transitional space' in a slightly broader sense than Winnicott's 'potential space', to also include elements belonging to the sphere of intersubjectivity such as the smiles and gazes exchanged between the toddler and its caregivers.

In her approach to intersubjectivity through psychoanalysis, philosophy and feminism, Benjamin builds on Winnicott's idea that destruction enables the transition from seeing the object as object to seeing it as a subject (Benjamin 1999 [1990]). Toddlers act out a fantasy of destruction against their mother: if she survives the attack without either being damaged or damaging them in return, they know that she exists outside their mind (192). This creates the possibility of love: 'To the extent that mother herself is placed outside, she can be loved;

separation is then truly the other side of connection to the other' (193). In this perspective, separation is not the painful loss of the fusion with the mother, nor only a step in the progress towards individuation and autonomy: it 'proceeds in tandem with, and enhances the felt connection with, the other' (189). In Winnicott's understanding of destruction, toddlers learn the difference between fantasy (of destruction) and reality (of survival) and start using objects rather than simply relating to them.

Benjamin describes this as a transition from the intrapsychic to the intersubjective. In her account, psychoanalysis has mostly focused on the intrapsychic dimension and addressed the relation of a subject to objects. Descriptions of infancy, in particular, present the mother as the object of the child, without taking into consideration the fact that she herself is a subject. Echoing feminist critics of psychoanalysis, Benjamin states that the denial of the mother's subjectivity is part of a cultural discourse in which man is the subject and woman the object. The woman is a maternal object and, I would insist, the male boy is the subject of psychoanalysis. By comparison, Benjamin aims to show that 'the capacity to recognize the mother as a subject is an important part of early development' (186) and studies this process. Discussing Stern, who identifies as intersubjectivity the stage babies reach at eight or nine months, Benjamin contends that 'the earlier interaction can be considered an antecedent, in the form of concrete affective sharing'. At least for the mother, this early stage already provides the ground for reciprocal recognition (188). The process that leads to the child's recognition of the mother's subjectivity thus starts during the first months of life, presumably just after birth.

If recognition of the mother's subjectivity is an essential part of the child's development, why, then, have mothers and women been regarded solely as the objects of male subjects? Benjamin cites difficulties encountered during the process of recognition, for example if the mother does not appear to have survived her child's aggression. She also refers to the paradox of intersubjectivity presented by Hegel in his dialectic of the Master and Slave: the self wants to be recognised as an independent subjectivity, but is dependent on an other for this recognition; erasing the other to proclaim independence also erases recognition. To this I would add that a man submitted to the desire and anxiety linked with birth will see any woman as a reflection of his mother and his mother as an object whose subjectivity is an obstacle to fusion. He will be in love, but not loving. By comparison, in the stage addressed by Winnicott and Benjamin, the mother's subjectivity is what enables the child to develop her or his own subjectivity, and the separation between them reinforces the possibility of love as

well as of individual autonomy. Their models describe the ways in which subjects can overcome birth trauma, develop a positive and creative relation with the world and recognise in others including the mother – and women at large – a subjectivity distinct from but similar to their own, which constitutes the basis for happy love and for equality between the sexes.

Simultaneous love

Are Isolde and Tristan destructively in love, or do they love each other in mutual recognition? In my understanding, these two forms of love coexist in them; depending on the moment in the opera, they aim at the womb or at transitional space. Tristan's first manifestation of love was to over-idealise Isolde, while impoverishing his own self to the point of renouncing her, since such a beautiful object is only worthy of a king: 'Was mir so rühmlich | schien und hehr, | das rühmt' ich hell | vor allem Heer: | vor allem Volke | pries ich laut | der Erde schönste | Königs-Braut' (TI : 55-56). Having thus lost his object through his own fault, Tristan in Act One is in a state that recalls Bak's assertion of the proximity between being in love and melancholia (1973: 1). His over-idealisation is destructive for both him and her. In Andreas-Salomé's account, the more the object is 'magnified, the more does the object behind its manifest symbolic form remain undernourished and devitalized' (1922: 12). This corresponds to Isolde, who feels herself reduced to an object in the male gaze (Borchmeyer 1982: 272), storms in a 'narcissistic rage' (Chessick 1990: 481) and returns what she perceives as an aggression against the disappointing object of her love through her decision to kill Tristan. Poizat argues that Isolde is typical of the 'woman-mirror' in which man sees his own image magnified (1992: 168), and gives as an example the passage in which Isolde's love first awakens: 'er sah mir in die Augen. | Seines Elendes | jammerte mich; – | das Schwert – das ließ ich fallen' (TI: 19). However, I disagree with Poizat's idea that the function of the gaze in this passage is the same as that in male narcissistic love. Isolde is the subject here, and does not see her own image magnified in Tristan's gaze. What she says is that she loved him through her pity for him. Her love was first empathy, which corresponds to Schopenhauer's definition of proper love. It is surely not incidental that the gaze happened precisely during a time when Isolde was healing Tristan, caring for him like a mother would for her helpless baby. Their gaze thus belongs to transitional space and to mutual recognition: Isolde realises that behind the object of her aggression lies a subject who is beholding her in his gaze.

In contrast with this view, Bergstein, who also refers to Benjamin, contends that the gaze represents for Isolde a collapsing of recognition: ‘In Tristan’s gaze, Isolde experiences both the affirmation of her own subjectivity and its dissolution: she merges with the other person rather than experience the tension of separateness’ (2013: 748). There are certainly many passages in the opera where Isolde seems to experience a merging with Tristan and a dissolution of her individuality, but I would not say that their initial gaze is one of them. Bergstein builds his argument on the fact that the gaze motif in the music ‘appears previously in various fragmented forms in association with other ideas, such as mocking and shame, Tristan as a hero, and Isolde’s parents’ (750), although this can be interpreted in different ways. Bergstein associates the gaze with Isolde’s humiliation upon receiving the severed head of Morold. Through his gaze, Tristan ‘now embodies a conjunction of a source of humiliation and non-recognition’ (757). I would say that Isolde’s humiliation and her sense of betrayal on discovering Tristan’s true identity lead her to wield his sword against him; but what stops her at that moment is precisely Tristan’s recognition of her. She says that he looked ‘nicht auf das Schwert, | nicht auf die Hand, – | er sah mir in die Augen’ (TI: 19). Had he looked at the sword or her hand, Tristan would have treated her as a danger, but not as a subject, and he would himself have embodied the object of her aggression. Instead, he established a space of intersubjectivity between them, silently acknowledging his own vulnerability while awakening her empathy. During the rest of Tristan’s stay in Eire, they both remained faithful to this mutual recognition, Isolde by not disclosing Tristan’s identity and Tristan, as she says, by swearing her ‘ew’gen Dank und Treue’ (TI: 19). But Tristan came back to claim her as Marke’s bride, which represented a collapsing of recognition from her perspective. While Bergstein puts Tristan’s gaze and his return on a similar plane, both meaning a collapse of recognition, I would argue that the gaze established the recognition which later collapsed when Tristan returned. Benjamin’s description of humiliation as a ‘narcissistic injury of refusal by the idealized beloved’ (1991: 296), to which Bergstein refers, corresponds exactly to the injury of Isolde’s feelings upon Tristan’s return; she tries again to reach reparation through Tristan’s death. However, just as their gaze once created mutual recognition, the potion brings them back to intersubjective space, in which they will remain for all of Act Two. Wagner’s opera thus describes a process of recognition in which – at least temporarily – failures are overcome, rather than a failure of this entire process, as Bergstein presents it (2013: 747).

Dialectic of love

I have so far described two models of love. The state of being in love originates from birth trauma: in that model, the other is an object whose subjectivity is an obstacle. Overwhelmed by a desire to return to the womb and by an anxiety resulting from this liberation of desire, subjects relate to their object in an intrapsychic way. They aim at annihilating the separation from their object, even if that means killing the object, or themselves. By contrast, the state of loving revives transitional space. The other is a subject whose subjectivity is recognised and welcomed. Both subjects create an intersubjective space between them, in which they play with separation and reunification in a sustained process. This model provides us with a solution to the question of how we are to overcome birth.

Thanks to the potion, Isolde and Tristan are back to transitional space. They name one another, praise each other and gaze at each other in mutual recognition. They repeat each other's words like children who are learning to speak, and through this mirroring give a vivid image of the twin narcissism that Gediman associates with happy and creative love. In Act Two, after this transitional playing, Isolde and Tristan start a dialogue in which they both listen to and understand the other's position, treating each other as equal subjects. Isolde asks Tristan questions, to which he responds, and his attitude towards her is consistently positive. She can criticise his past behaviour and Tristan gives explanation, acknowledging that he was over-idealising her as object instead of seeing her as a subject. Isolde's repetition of her traumatic experience here thus does not have to be a symptom of the death drive, nor even a way of discharging an anxiety linked to birth. Confronting Tristan with his past lack of recognition, she gains his recognition of this lack, which provides therapy for her trauma.

The main topic of their conversation at this point is the obstacles to their reunification that they have had to overcome. As shown above, in a Rankian perspective, the obstacles encountered by heroes figure birth trauma; overcoming these obstacles promises a realisation of the desire to return. In this way, obstacles serve to heighten the heroes' and the audience's pleasure, as Rougemont suggests. Deathridge argues that the 'coded language of separation between the sexes' is also written into the music (1996: 114), especially through Wagner's use of deceptive cadences that frustrate the audience of resolution (115). This effect has been seen as contributing to the eroticism of Wagner's music, which, in Act Two, mimics the sexual act (Dreyfus 2010). Gediman contrasts Rougemont's view of drastic obstacles leading to death with Freud's view that obstacles are normally required to heighten libido (Gediman

1981: 618) and, arguably, to favour orgasms, including musical ones. She argues that '[i]ntensifying passion by obstacles to its fulfilment may be viewed as a way of mastering separation anxiety, but more particularly, of mastering the anxiety of achieving individuation and separateness when they conflict with the desire for a sense of oneness' (620). The heroes' use of obstacles thus 'reflects an attempt at distance regulation' (619). In this, the heroes inhabit transitional space, working through separation anxiety and playing with the distance between themselves and the other, rather than meeting the obstacle as an occasion for death, although this is what Tristan will do at the end of Act Two.

Even during the course of Act Two, Tristan does display an attraction towards death to which Isolde eventually yields. However, their dialogue on death and love also reveals a third dimension, beyond birth and transitional space. Tristan claims that their love is an 'ewig lebende' and cannot die through their individual deaths. Isolde replies to this with her famous account of the word 'und' that binds their names together. Would Tristan's death not destroy the bond and therefore, their love? In this, Isolde refers to the intersubjective space of their love, which requires two subjects and therefore disappears if one dies. But in Tristan's conception, death destroys their separate bodies and thus cancels the separation between them, while creating the space of a life that would be pure love. Isolde wonders, 'Doch dieses Wörtlein: und, – | wär' es zerstört'; were they already one in life, then Tristan could only die through her death. They would live and die as one subject. Tristan assumes this cancellation of intersubjective space: 'So starben wir, | um ungetrennt, | ewig einig | ohne End', | ohn' Erwachen, | ohn' Erbangen, | namenlos' (TI: 64-65). Here he pursues the idea of a merging into one with a vocabulary that points towards birth: they will no longer be subjects (becoming 'namenlos') and will experience an eternal fusion without the risk of a traumatic separation similar to birth ('ohn' Erwachen') and without the anxiety originating from such a trauma ('ohn' Erbangen'). However, Tristan concludes this declaration again with the idea that this union will be a life of pure love: 'der Liebe nur zu leben' (65), which opens up a spiritual dimension. Isolde follows him in this direction, repeating his declaration and thus renouncing her first proposition of an intersubjective space.

We thus have three models of union: as return to the foetal symbiosis with the mother, as revival of the transitional space, and as access to a spiritual dimension. They correspond to three models of love: intrapsychic being in love, intersubjective loving, and spiritual love. In the second case, the subjects loving each other recognise themselves in the other, which Benjamin calls identification (1991). Bronfen describes this process in the opera by referring

to an earlier work of Rank, *Der Doppelgänger*. As Doppelgänger to each other, Isolde and Tristan enter

in eine Geselligkeit mit dem eigenen Ich ein, die unheimlich ist, weil sie im anderen ihre eigene verborgene Intimität wiedergespiegelt glauben. Im gegenseitigen Versinken stellen sie zugleich eine heimliche Zweisamkeit her, die sie nicht im Sinne eines Verlustes von Bewusstsein aus ihrer Welt herauslöst. (Bronfen 2008: 353)

Their union is between subjects who each merge into the other on an equal basis. The third stage of union into a life of pure love thus represents an *Aufhebung* of the first two. As in the first case, the union is total, with no separation between the flesh of the self and that of the other. And as in the second case, subjectivity is preserved, albeit under a different form. Whereas everything that had characterised the individual has perished with death, what remains is the subjective feeling of love, having assumed the dimension of the infinite.

From Act Two onwards, Isolde and Tristan explore these different models of love through a metaphorical nexus of light, which will now be my focus.

C. Light and Flesh

In Adorno's critical account, instead of a Schopenhauerian negation of the Will, the opera introduces 'jene Art von unio mystica, die in Wagners Werk billig feilgeboten wird' (1974 [1952]: 136). Whether cheaply or not, Wagner's opera does present similarities with themes present in Christian and Neoplatonist mysticism through the dialectical relation of light and flesh.

Like most of Act One, the first scene of Act Two focuses on Isolde, who is waiting for Tristan. Her desire is articulated around the question of light: she wants Brangäne to extinguish the torch that keeps her lover away. They use the torch as a signal. When lit, the torch signifies danger; when it is extinguished, Tristan may join Isolde, presumably for intercourse. Already on this concrete level, light thus represents what keeps the lovers apart, and what prevents them from union in the flesh. Light could expose the realisation of a forbidden desire, while night has a practical utility in that it hides intercourse. As I have suggested, light reveals the limits of the bodies and is therefore appropriate to figure separation. As soon as darkness invades the stage and blurs boundaries, the lovers are able to reunite.

In *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, elaborating on Wagner's operas and especially on *Tristan*, Nietzsche associates danger with Dionysus and protection with Apollo; here, light protects against danger by signifying it. In her wish to have the light extinguished, Isolde neglects danger and, in so doing, runs towards it. Because she believes that Marke has not gone far and may catch the adulterous lovers, Brangäne resists Isolde's wish. Both listen to the sounds of the forest, in which Brangäne hears the hunt organised by Marke. This diffuse threat, and the danger that the paternal figure might see what should not be seen, point towards the Oedipus complex. But Isolde does not enter this Oedipal model, in which she has no place as subject anyway since it makes of her the maternal object. In the forest, she hears the welcoming sound of a spring and not that of a hunt: 'Im Schweigen der Nacht | nur lacht mir der Quell' (TI: 45). The space Isolde longs for, characterised by darkness and by the presence of water, has uterine features. Her wish to open a space for love by extinguishing the light thus also reveals a wish to make of the world a womb. She wants to go from the illuminated world to humid darkness, from separation to reunion, in a reversion of birth. This affirmation of the desire to return is bound to awaken anxiety, but desire and anxiety are split between the two women. Isolde is all desire, while Brangäne, in this scene and throughout the

act, is the voice of anxiety, which prevents the lovers from having to feel anxiety themselves and lets them indulge in their desire. Furthermore, anxiety is focused on the paternal figure, which corresponds to Rank's account of the Oedipal stage as transference onto the father of the anxiety primarily attached to the mother. This opens up for the child a possibility of desiring the mother: Tristan is no longer afraid of Isolde, despite her strength and her assumed desire. For Isolde, not feeling anxiety means that she is ready to face death in order to fulfil her desire. She eventually takes the torch and claims 'Die Leuchte – | wär's meines Lebens Licht, – | lachend | sie zu löschen zag' ich nicht' (50), throwing the torch on the ground. Here the torch is not only a symbol for separation, but also for life.

A discussion of light

Tristan rushes in and they start a love duet 'second to none in its graphic musical representation of the sexual act' (Deathridge 1996: 116). In the libretto, nothing seems to indicate intercourse: the flesh is spiritualised, sex being only figured through music. In Nietzschean terms, music as the art of Dionysus diverges from the words and scenic representation, which are Apollo's domain. On this Apollonian level, the heroes start a conversation about light. Tristan identifies his enemy: 'der Tag', whose 'Neid' led to putting 'sein scheuchend Zeichen', the torch, at Isolde's door (53). Day represents separation: 'fern der Tage | Trennungs-Klage' (68). Out of frustration over his long wait, Tristan exclaims 'dem tückischen Tage, | dem härtesten Feinde, | Haß und Klage!' (53). As a rival who imposes separation and forbids entrance through the door of the beloved, the personified Day represents a paternal figure. Further to frustration, complaint and hatred, Tristan assumes a desire to kill this intruder: 'o könnt' ich die Leuchte, | der Liebe Leiden zu rächen, | dem frechen Tage verlöschen!' Like a son jealous of his mother's love for his father, Tristan reproaches: 'Selbst in der Nacht [...] | hegt ihn Liebchen am Haus, | streckt mir drohend ihn aus' (53), associating Isolde with the threat exerted by the paternal Day.

This threat of separation and potentially of castration is expressed through the word 'scheuchen' which recurs in various forms. In the previous scene, Isolde had already asked Brangäne 'lösche den scheuchenden Schein' (TI: 47). She knew well the effect of the torch on her beloved, since he calls the torch Day's 'scheuchend Zeichen' (52). Later in their duet, Tristan will be ready to deny the threat was effective: 'Sein dämmernder Schein | verscheuchte uns nie?' (67) although he remains in an Oedipal position towards Day. Isolde

enters her lover's Oedipal position on Day as a paternal figure, but highlights his own complicity with the paternal authorities. She replies to his reproach for having kept the torch lit with another reproach: 'War's nicht der Tag, | der aus ihm log, | als er nach Irland | werbend zog, | für Marke mich zu frein [...]?' (54) Day spoke through Tristan's mouth while he was Marke's messenger, which marks the collusion of the two paternal figures, Day and Marke, and of Tristan with them. For Isolde, Tristan was then a 'Tages-Knecht' (56), obeying the paternal law and serving Day as well as Marke.

Tristan explains that Day tore Isolde away from him by making her similar to the sun, 'in hehrster Ehren | Glanz und Licht' (54). In this, Wagner uses rhetoric typical of his medieval precursors: Gottfried also describes Isolde in terms linked to light and to the sun, but this is meant to be thoroughly positive, while Wagner reverses the medieval system of values, presenting light as negative and night as positive (Rosenband 26-27, 62-64). Before drinking the potion, Wagner's Tristan still behaves like a medieval courtly hero who sees the Lady as a 'Personifizierung des Lichtes' (Rosenband 39). However, this means that he does not dare to come close: Isolde, haloed with light, appears as a possession of Day, the father. What enables Tristan to overcome Oedipal anxiety is the potion, which 'scheucht' [...] des Tages | täuschenden Schein', reflecting against Day its own dread. Using again a variant of the word 'scheuchen', Isolde replies 'Doch es rächte sich | der verscheuchte Tag' (58). Just after having drunk the potion, Tristan still submits to the paternal law, since he hands Isolde to Marke, and she must live in the 'schimmernd' day life that characterises Marke's court. Both heroes thus give Day paternal features and refer to a fight between Day and the desire for reunion, which foreshadows Nietzsche's account of Apollo and Dionysus.

Mystical night

Although the lovers are still caught in Marke's realm of Day, Tristan reminds Isolde that the potion did bring them to another world: 'nun waren wir | Nacht-Geweihte!' Their conversation thus shifts to a valorisation of night that echoes with Christian mysticism. Pseudo-Dionysius initiated this tradition in *The Mystical Theology* which opens with a prayer to the Trinity: 'Guide us to that topmost height of mystic lore [sic] which exceedeth light and more than exceedeth knowledge, where the [...] mysteries [...] lie hidden in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence' (997 A; 1920: 191). Mystics should follow the example of Moses and penetrate 'unto the Darkness of Unknowing' (1001 A; 194). They will thus move

beyond the world characterised by the separation between subjects and also beyond knowledge, which is a faculty of differentiation and as such of separation, into darkness as a space of union with God. This forms the basis of negative theology. As Nicholas of Cusa explains in *De docta ignorantia*, religion as a cult needs positive affirmations, with God being adored ‘as The Most Wise, The Most Good, The Light Inaccessible’ (1954 [1440]: 59) and so on; but on its own, such affirmative theology presents God as a creature of whom it can be said that he has such and such quality. By contrast, negative theology claims ignorance: God is nothing of what can be said. ‘He who is worshipped as Light inaccessible, is not light that is material, the opposite of which is darkness, but light absolutely simple and infinite in which darkness is infinite light; [...] He who is infinite light itself shines always in the darkness of our ignorance’ (59). The implicit reference here is to the Prologue of John. God is a light encompassing all darkness, a light beyond the separation between light and darkness. As I suggested in my introduction, the Prologue of John describes the birth of Christ as an inversion of human birth: light descends into darkness, in opposition to the baby who leaves darkness and is brought to light. Light is dissociated from itself and becomes flesh while still remaining light, whereas the baby leaves the maternal flesh and comes to light while still being flesh.

Commenting on the Prologue, Eckhart argues that God continuously gives birth, and not only to Christ. Anyone can be procreated by God in the darkness to which Christ came: ‘Nicht nur der Sohn des himmlischen Vaters wird in dieser Finsternis, die sein Eigen ist, geboren’ (1985: 423). This eternal birth happens in the soul of the one who is ready to receive God: ‘Gott geht hier ein in den *Grund* der Seele’ (417), which he alone can reach. God thus penetrates the deepest site of the soul that in the Christian tradition is female. The birth resulting from this penetration is a birth of light, and not of the flesh: ‘In dieser Geburt ergießt sich Gott mit Licht derart in die Seele, daß das Licht im Sein und im Grunde der Seele so reich wird, daß es herausdringt und überfließt’ (426). Apart from the female soul, no woman is involved in this procreation whose model is the relation between God the Father and his son.

The expected result for the soul which has been the site of that birth is to access divine ignorance, Eckhart building in this on Pseudo-Dionysius. Nicholas of Cusa develops Eckhart’s doctrine through his concepts of *filiation Dei* (Schwaetzer 2006) and of *visio Dei* (McGinn 2006). Mieth distinguishes two types of experience humans can have of God according to the Christian tradition: ‘Gottesschau und Gottesgeburt’ (1980). However, both

vision and birth are interrelated in Eckhart's and in Nicholas's theologies (Largier). In the first part of *De visione Dei*, Nicholas describes the vision of God as being at the same time the vision we have of God and the vision with which God beholds us. McGinn calls this *visio facialis* a 'réciprocité des regards' (2006: 151). In the second part, Nicholas argues that the God to which we have access through the *visio Dei* is the Trinity of Love. God's love is thus manifested through a mutual gaze, which corresponds to the second model described above: that of the transitional space. In the third part of *De visione Dei*, Nicholas also shows that the way to access the vision of the Trinity is the *filiatio* that is given to us through Christ's incarnation (McGinn 2006: 151). What leads to the transitional space is thus a birth, and the spiritual union with God encompasses aspects of both the birth and the transitional space models.

In these mystical theologies, the goal is to reunite with God and to take part in a birth that is a reversed one: mystics leave the illuminated world and enter a space of darkness where they will be able to experience God, their (pro)creator. However, this darkness 'is beyond Light' (Pseudo-Dionysius 1025B; 1920: 194). It is the light of a father who plays the maternal role, encompassing darkness. The mother and her flesh are erased, and the father appropriates the ability of giving birth, a reversed birth which will not be traumatic but opens up the uterine space of merging. Thanks to the fact that this birth happens in light, the separation between light and flesh, which issued from birth, is abolished: the God of light is a total womb that includes the entire world.

Further to the models of birth and vision, Christian mystics also described the union with God as erotic love, in the wake of the Song of Songs. This love does not have to be sacralised by marriage. In '*En una noche oscura*', a high point within Spanish poetry and mysticism, John of the Cross describes the soul looking for God as a woman who secretly leaves her house by night and joins with her lover. The poem certainly echoes with the second act of Wagner's opera; however, Borchmeyer notes that John uses eroticism 'zum Bild der Unio mystica, während bei Novalis und vor allem bei Wagner die religiöse Symbolik umgekehrt der Darstellung einer neuen Mystik des Erotischen dient' (1982: 268). I would add that night in the poem serves the woman's intention to reunite with her lover but is not what she longs for; it is only a way for her to reach a spiritual light that already guides her through darkness: 'sin otra luz y guía | sino la que en el corazón ardía' (1997: 50).

The valorisation of night as such was initiated by Edward Young in *The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality* (1744). Young's themes were taken over by

many poets especially in Germany, a fashion Goethe mocks in *Der Triumph der Empfindsamkeit* (1779). As Borchmeyer suggests, ‘Zwischen dieser von des Mondes und des Gedankens Blässe melancholisch angekränkelten Nachtstimmungen und der mythischen Vision der Nacht in der romantischen Dichtung liegt eine Welt’ (1982: 265). The longing of German Romantics for a lost union that can eventually be found again in night and death culminates in Novalis’s *Hymnen an die Nacht*. In the wake of Thomas Mann, who notes the use of the terms ‘Nachtgeweihte’ in the opera and ‘Der Nacht Geweihte’ in Novalis (1963: 96), the parallels between Novalis and Wagner have often been highlighted (Scott 1998). Both Novalis and Wagner glorify night as the access to a higher realm than can be offered by day; night is the place of truth that Tristan’s ‘nacht-sichtig’ eye can contemplate, in a way that recalls Christian mysticism. Novalis remains closer to the Christian doctrine in that he does not condemn light. Nevertheless, I would say that Wagner’s opera is a variation on the same theme that is also elaborated in the works of the mystics referred to above: the birth complex as a dialectic of light and flesh.

Maternal night and paternal day

While Pseudo-Dionysius prayed to the Trinity to lead him into darkness, Wagner’s heroes directly pray to the night: ‘O sink hernieder, | Nacht der Liebe, | gib Vergessen, | daß ich lebe, | nimm mich auf | in deinen Schoß, | löse von | der Welt mich los!’ Night here explicitly takes on the maternal role. The word ‘Schoß’ can refer both to external and to internal areas of a woman’s body: here, the heroes being returned to the ‘Schoß’ would have left the world, which suggests that ‘Schoß’ means the womb. Although they sing their prayer together, each says ‘ich’ and not ‘wir’, expressing her or his own desire to cut the link with the world and to merge with the maternal flesh. Tristan claims that for ‘Nachtgeweihte’ like themselves, only this desire remains, ‘das Sehnen hin | zur heil’gen Nacht, | wo urewig, | einzig wahr | Liebeswonne ihm lacht!’ Also using a metaphor that points towards pregnancy, Urmoneit says that this image of Wagner ‘in nuce den ganzen Gehalt des Musikdramas in sich birgt’ (1987: 104). In the womb are to be found eternity and truth, not as God but as a smiling ‘Liebeswonne’, which corresponds to transitional space. Tristan thus does not present the return to the womb as solely a merger of the flesh but also integrates intersubjective elements, such as this smile of the loving mother to her baby.

According to Sans, ‘Tristan et Isolde considèrent l’espace et le temps comme les pires

ennemis de leur amour' since 'l'espace et le temps sont, par excellence, le principe d'individuation' in the perspective of Schopenhauer, which Wagner takes over through the opposition between light and night (Sans 1969: 59). I would say, rather, that they aim at a space and a time beyond birth, the uterine space where they would wish to stay for an eternity, without any risk of a new separation trauma: 'ohne Scheiden, [...] | traut allein, | ewig heim, | in ungemess'nen Räumen' (TI : 68). The question that drives them is to find how to get back inside the womb, and therefore they display a predilection for images of interiority, including their own interiority. Tristan says of the potion 'Durch des Todes Tor, | wo er mir floß, | weit und offen | er mir erschloß, | darin sonst ich nur träumend gewacht, | das Wonnereich der Nacht' (58). This is again an image of reversed birth: death, like the uterine neck, is the door through which uterine water flows, this time not favouring the baby's birth as when the parturient loses water, but leading him to the desired realm. Still following the logic of this image but this time transferring the womb into himself, Tristan continues 'Von dem Bild in des Herzens | bergendem Schrein | scheucht'er des Tages | täuschenden Schein, | daß nacht-sichtig mein Auge | wahr es zu sehen tauge' (58). The 'Bild' that was haloed by light is Isolde's; here, the woman is thus present as a small version of herself inside Tristan's heart, which encompasses her as a womb encompasses a foetus. So Tristan temporarily casts himself in the role of the mother while at the same time orienting his gaze towards the dark inner space of his heart as if he could thus be translated entirely into it.

A similar idea underlies the mystical texts I have referred to. Eckhart writes that the way for the soul to welcome the birth of God is 'einzig dieser Finsternis und diesem Unwissen nachzuhängen und nachzuspüren' (1985: 434). Nicholas of Cusa explains that man must withdraw from his senses and his thoughts, only to be gathered back into himself where he can recognise himself as an image of God. These are the conditions for a birth of light in the soul by which he will be transformed into a son of God. This idea is also present beyond Christianity in Plotinus when he describes the conditions for ecstasy, that is, for a contemplation of the principle that is beyond being and has generated everything that is. Plotinus calls this principle the One. Similarly to the God of negative theology, the One is beyond characterisation; nothing can be said of it as such. But when referring to it, Plotinus abundantly uses the metaphor of light. The eye of the Intellect sees this light when 'veiling itself from other things and drawing itself onwards' (V 5, 7) and Plotinus exhorts 'Let us fly to our dear country' (I 6, 8). This homeland is inhabited by a divine Father: 'Our country from which we came is there, our Father is there' (I 6, 8). Dorschel establishes a similarity between Plotinus and Wagner:

Nur scheinbar im Gegensatz zur neuplatonischen *Lichtmetaphysik*, in Wahrheit mit der *selben* Pointe, i.e. daß Einswerdung der Weg zur Wahrheit ist (das Licht der Aufklärung ist freilich von anderer Art: es will Differenzen kenntlich machen), wird im *Tristan* die *Nacht*, in der die Unterschiede verschwinden, bis *Alles Eins* und *das Eine Alles* ist, zur Chiffre der *Erlösung*. (1987: 14)

I would say that in both cases, ‘Erlösung’ refers to an erasure of the separation between light and flesh and to a reunion with the mother inside the womb, only keeping from life the loving intersubjectivity of the transitional space. Like the German mystics whom he influenced (Beierwaltes 1972), Plotinus presents the (pro)creator as a male and unites the properties of light and of the womb, erasing the mother’s flesh and the separation that occurred at birth. The eye that sees the light of the One is not the organ, but the eye of intelligence. Plotinus dismisses the flesh, characterising life as the soul’s fall into ‘the mud of bodies’ (VI 7, 31). In the contemplation he describes, ‘il n’y a aucune distance entre ce qui voit et ce qui est vu’ (Darras-Worms 2007: 232), since the eye of intelligence itself is a light: ‘Light then sees another light: it therefore itself sees itself’ (V 3, 8). Here, vision seems to take precedence over birth. However, Plotinus’s treatises are full of images that refer to birth. By contemplating the principle, one ‘sees the spring of life’, which, behaving like a good mother, ‘has not given its gifts and then gone away but is always bestowing them’ (VI 9, 9). The contemplator ‘is one, having joined, as it were, centre to centre’ (VI 9, 10). He becomes a womb in a total womb which is also pure light, erasing the separation between light and flesh. Through this union with its parent, the soul itself becomes pregnant: it ‘generates gods in quiet contact with that Good’ (VI 9, 9). As in Nietzsche’s account of the male procreator, the soul thus overcomes birth trauma by taking over the maternal ability to give birth. In this logic, Plotinus compares himself to a pregnant woman: ‘my soul is still in even stronger labour. Perhaps she is now at the point when she must bring forth, having reached the fulness of her birth-pangs’ (V 3, 17). This recalls Zarathustra, pregnant with his idea of the eternal return and eager to give birth to it. Nevertheless, the metaphor of vision maintains the intersubjective space: ‘l’extase plotinienne est la rencontre de deux sujets’ (Mossé-Bastide 1972: 130) who do not become one although they are in the closest possible union within a womb of light.

While Plotinus and the Rhenish mystics seek to erase any trace of the maternal flesh, Wagner’s heroes oppose Marke and the light associated with him, and glorify the maternal

night, wherein they also celebrate their union in the flesh, at least if we believe the music. Wagner declines the dialectical relation of light and flesh through different variations. In Isolde's accusation that Day lied through Tristan's mouth, light is inside him and emerges from him in his words. Tristan develops this image, describing how Day penetrated him 'bis in des Herzens | tiefsten Schrein' (51). Isolde aimed at replacing light by night through the death potion (56), and succeeded in removing light from Tristan's heart: 'da erdämmerte [...] | im Busen mir die Nacht', he says (57). Successively, light and night thus occupy the foetal position inside Tristan's uterine heart. This corresponds to the fantasy of bringing the entire world into the womb, as pendant to that of transferring uterine features onto the world. In both cases, the expected result is to recreate a total womb while erasing the distinction between light and flesh. Isolde and Tristan oscillate between the two fantasies: they tear themselves away from the world, but merely leaving the world is not enough, as the womb to which they would come would not be as complete as the mother was for the foetus, and would still be a part of the world, which means that they might still have to leave it again. Therefore, after Marke's arrival, Isolde accepts that she will follow Tristan into a place from which she knows there will be no departure: 'wie flöh' ich wohl das Land | das alle Welt umspannt?' (75). In their ecstasy at the end of the love duet, they already believe not only that they have reached that place but that they have become it: 'selbst dann | bin ich die Welt' (61). But in thus anticipating the merging of womb and world, the heroes – despite Brangäne's warnings – forget that they are still alive, that they belong to the world (Bronfen 2008: 353).

In contrast with Isolde's and Tristan's mysticism of night, Brangäne remains in the tradition of the alba that is sung when illicit lovers have to separate at daybreak (Wapnewski 1978: 54-58; Borchmeyer 1982: 262). In Rankian terms, Brangäne expresses the anxiety awakened by the proximity to the foetal state, as both protagonists dangerously indulge in the desire to return. Although most of the anxiety is expressed by Brangäne, Isolde and Tristan also hint at it in the repetition of their wish to never wake up again ('Nie-wieder-erwachens | wahnlos | hold bewusster Wunsch' 150, 'Nie erwachen' 152), to never experience a trauma similar to birth. They associate this anxiety with departure from the maternal night, telling the 'ew'ge Nacht' 'Wen du umfangen, | wem du gelacht, | wie wär' ohne Bangen | aus dir er je erwacht?' (160). However, trauma does eventually take place: at the highest point of their ecstasy and while the music mounts towards orgasmic climax, 'the cadence, like the coitus, is *interruptus*' (Millington 1992: 819). 'Brangäne's cry bursts forth, proclaiming the lethal truth of the passionate abyss in which Tristan-Isolde founders' (Poizat 1992: 173). Light irrupts

onto the stage together with Marke and his retinue. The pleasurable union of the lovers in the flesh is thus interrupted by an intruder, the father. This echoes with the Oedipus complex, but due to the fact that the arrival of Marke coincides with the onset of the day in Wagner's stage directions, the lovers' separation here can also be seen to reproduce birth: they are brought to light in a cry. Whereas Isolde's extinguishing of the light at the beginning of the act opens the space of a reversed birth, Marke and Day force the protagonists out of that uterine space. Tristan tries to deny that birth has happened again, calling Marke and his retinue 'Tagesgespenster' as if foetal ghosts could be found in the world and as if, therefore, the world was a womb. But Marke's complaint forces Tristan to listen: he is brought back to the father's world. The lovers thus come to realise that a new trauma has interrupted the reversed birth they had been fantasising in the previous scene, and therefore that the only possibility to really fulfil reversed birth is death. At this point, the focus that is on Isolde for Act One and the beginning of Act Two, then equally shared during most of Act Two, shifts to Tristan; and the intersubjective space they also share throughout their love scene vanishes when the curtain falls.

Back and forth through the neck of the uterus

Act Three opens on a Tristan caught helplessly in the stage of being in love. The action takes place in Karéol, Tristan's homeland. Tristan is enveloped in bandages like a baby in swaddling clothes, and is thus returned to the situation he was in when being healed by Isolde before the beginning of the opera. But this time, he will not be satisfied with transitional space. Tristan awakens from a comatose sleep in which he had returned to a womb-like space: 'Ich war | wo ich von je gewesen, | wohin auf je ich geh: | im weiten Reich | der Weltennacht' (192). But one thing was missing to make of it a proper womb: the presence of Isolde. She is still alive, caught in light and not with him in the kingdom of darkness. So Tristan was stopped on the way towards the womb and had to come back to life: 'Krachend hört' ich | hinter mir | schon des Todes | Tor sich schliessen: | weit nun steht es | wieder offen, | der Sonne Strahlen | sprengt' es auf; | mit hell erschloss'nen Augen | muss ich der Nacht enttauchen' (194). The reversed birth was itself reversed into a proper birth through the action of light, which was not only to be found at the end of the birth tunnel but actually forced the uterine door to open. Day itself becomes traumatic just as the maternal flesh was during birth: 'nun wächst [...] mir des Tages | wilder Drang' (196). Hence Tristan's indictment:

‘Verfluchter Tag | mit deinem Schein!’ Recalling his waiting at the beginning of Act Two, Tristan hallucinates that the torch is lit again and despairs ‘Das Licht – wann löscht es aus? | [...] Wann wird es Nacht im Haus?’ (196). Wapnewski doubts that anything can be said ‘zur Rettung dieser Verse’ in which he sees a ‘Hausvaterschluß’ inappropriate for the tragic situation of the hero (1978: 53). Groos defends them by arguing that they ‘complete the nexus of light|torch metaphors established in Act Two’ and echo other poets of Romanticism. I would add that Tristan does not cast himself as a ‘father of the house’ but as a child who will be able to inhabit the protective house of the womb once darkness will have created the appropriate settings. Tristan implores an imaginary Isolde to extinguish the light, which suggests that she, and not only Day, is guilty for his suffering (‘Sie rief mich aus der Nacht’, II: 86).⁶ Ultimately, the woman is answerable for birth trauma. The desire Tristan expresses for Isolde at this stage is not love anymore, but a burning desire to die with her, or rather, within her: ‘sie zu finden, | in der einzig | zu vergehen, | zu entschwinden’ (84). It is a ‘furchtbare Sehnen’ (200) that ‘sehrt’ and ‘zehrt’, working against life. Tristan eventually associates it with his parents: the melody that signifies Isolde’s absence also signified his parents’ death. While he ponders about his destiny, Isolde does not appear as a subject and hardly, indeed, as an object: his ‘meditation on the causes of his torment and jouissance fails to include Isolde’ (Poizat 1992: 175). Tristan rather refers to his desire in direct connection with death: ‘Im Sterben mich zu sehnen, | vor Sehnsucht nicht zu sterben’ (204). He again comes close to a reproach addressed to Isolde who opened the wound she had healed, but immediately transfers this reproach onto the potion Isolde gave him, and finally onto himself. Having described how he himself brewed the potion, Tristan exclaims ‘Verflucht, wer dich gebraut!’ and faints. Here he seems to send malediction on himself, but since the person who actually brewed the potion is supposedly Isolde’s mother, if not herself, the reproach is in fact addressed to the maternal figure.

At this point, Isolde’s ship approaches, and Tristan awakens. Already able to see her although she has not yet arrived, he describes how ‘sie lächelt mir Trost | und süße Ruh’ (93), casting her as the loving mother of transitional space, and goes so far as to recognise in her a hero as himself: ‘sie naht wie ein Held, | sie naht mir zum Heil!’ However, he does not

⁶ On the word ‘Night’, Wagner resolves the Tristan chord to a G dominant-seventh chord, which, together with the many E naturals, gestures towards C Major, the key often associated with Day. The Tristan chord thus serves to express the emergence from night into day. This strengthens my suggestion that the Tristan chord is associated with birth.

remain in transitional space and mutual recognition, nor enables her to heal him. Instead, he tears off all his bandages and rejoices at his blood running free, fantasmatically regressing to the state of a baby freely urinating. As a consequence, Tristan dies at the very moment of seeing Isolde, just having the time to say her name but actually in complete indifference to her person as a subject. He has no interest in spending time with her before dying. All he needs is for her to be there at his death so that he can accomplish his fantasy of returning to the womb. This wish has nothing to do with intersubjective love: Tristan actually shuts down the space of intersubjectivity at the very moment when it could have opened. He treats Isolde as merely an enabling device for his desire and through the pain he inflicts upon her, punishes his mother for having given birth to him. Isolde understands this indeed as a punishment: ‘Strafst du mich so | mit härtestem Bann?’ (226). She sees herself exiled from the womb to which Tristan has returned alone, not taking her with him and therefore not playing his role as a hero. Her wish is ‘daß wonnig und hehr | die Nacht wir teilen’ (100), sharing the womb with him as with a twin brother; and first, to spend an hour with him alive, as a ‘letzte Weltenglück’ in the transitional space.

The transfiguration

Isolde’s death has usually been referred to as a ‘Liebestod’, although Wagner called it her ‘Verklärung’ and used the term ‘Liebestod’, instead, to characterise the Prelude. Isolde does not have a physical cause for her death, contrary to the wounded Tristan. She dies as a result of his death, remaining, like Brünnhilde, ‘dem Liebespartner bis in den Tod hinein verbunden’, which sustains ‘ein sexistisches Wunschbild’, as Rieger (2015: 199) notes. For Clément, Isolde’s *Liebestod* is a paradigm of woman’s death in opera and ‘la pire des morts proposée au coeur des femmes’ (1979: 105). To some extent, the fantasy conveyed here, like in *Der fliegende Holländer*, is that of a man who wishes to die and to be accompanied in death by a woman who loves him to the point of sacrificing her life for him. In his introductory note to the opera, Wagner asks ‘Shall we call it Death?’, suggesting that it might be instead the reunion of Tristan and Isolde’s flesh in the form of the two intertwined plants that, according to the legend, emerged from their grave. As Hutcheon & Hutcheon say, ‘This death is a fulfilment of desire’ (1999: 287). Flugel argues that ‘the notion of life after death is connected with that of life before birth (intrauterine 'omnipotence'), in which there is 'peace'

and in which gratification is achieved without effort or frustration' (1953: 45), referring to Ferenczi. So once again, female death here opens the way to the womb for the man.

Isolde, who implores Tristan to remain alive for just one hour, calling him, talking to him, although he is already dead, is desperately trying to keep open the space of intersubjectivity that he has shut. In contrast with him, she is in a state of loving and not just of being in love. Moreover, she also maintains an entry-point to spiritual love. Just before she arrived, Tristan had exclaimed 'Hör ich das Licht?' (98), a moment of synaesthesia in which light is associated with Isolde whose arrival he hears. Isolde refers back to this image at the beginning of her *Liebestod* (Scott 1998: 779), asking the other attendants whether they see 'wie er leuchtet' (107). Light is no longer connoted negatively, and instead of being enclosed in their hearts or lying through their mouths, light has become Isolde herself for Tristan and emanates from his flesh for Isolde. Tristan has thus 'become a *saint* whose body, contrary to natural processes, has acquired miraculous qualities' (Spitzer 1962 [1949]: 174).

Transfiguration is a major theme in Christian theology and iconography, Christ often being represented in an almond-shaped aureole of light (the mandorla), surrounding his entire figure, which makes him appear like a foetus in a womb made of light. However, Wagner, when referring to the end of his opera as a transfiguration, has Isolde in mind more than Tristan. He associates Isolde with Titian's *Assunta dei Frari*, a painting showing Mary surrounded by light and ascending towards God the Father. In her diary, Cosima records Wagner claiming that the figure in the painting is Isolde and not the mother of God. Isolde thus takes on the place of the mother at the moment when maternal flesh is transformed into light. In Titian's painting, Mary moves towards a cloth that angels hold between her and God's head at the level of God's belly, as if the angels are about to envelop her in the cloth; God's legs are replaced by a surface depicting pure light, but if they were visible, Mary's head would be around the level of his knees. So she moves towards the place where the womb would be if God were a woman, and is about to disappear into it. In this, God the Father occupies the position of the mother, and God's mother is also the daughter of God who aims to reunite with her father. Plotinus similarly describes the soul as a chaste daughter who loves her father (the One), was violently separated from him at birth and aims at returning to him (VI 9, 9).

In his prose sketch for the scene, Wagner had planned that Isolde would listen to the melodies that 'appear to rise up as if out of Tristan's soul' (quoted by Deathridge 1996: 109). So, she was merely listening, her only action being to throw herself into the musical sea and

die. However, Wagner ultimately did not keep her silent: Parly defines her *Liebestod* as ‘an ecstatic celebration of the potential of the female voice’ (262). However, Isolde mostly sings in counterpoint. As Deathridge argues, her voice here is ‘passive in relation to the prominent orchestral melody’, the contrast between the two representing ‘an acoustical allegory for an extramusical idea that involves the subservience of Isolde to Tristan’. Isolde is not active but ‘transformed into an innocent shell serving only to receive the sound of Tristan's music’ (Deathridge 1996: 110). In this perspective, Isolde figures the womb to which Tristan, at least under the form of his music, may return. ‘If the sound is identified with Tristan, it is gendered as male, and as such pierces, fragments and obliterates the female subject’ (Tambling 1997: 276).

Yet Deathridge also addresses the moment ‘when the orchestra begins to engulf Isolde in an ever-increasing surge of sound [...] which envelops her own voice and eventually kills her’ (1996: 111). Isolde sees herself surrounded by the waves of music (‘um mich klinget’, ‘mich umwallend’, ‘mich umrauschen’). This suggests that Isolde also occupies the child’s position and Tristan the maternal position, Isolde being swallowed into the uterine water of music that emanates from his body. She dies in obedience to male desire, but still, her drowning enables her to fulfil her own desire to return in a similar way to Tristan. Although she keeps the space of love open for longer than Tristan, she also eventually makes him into the object enabling her return. ‘If Tristan is thus engulfed by a bitter desire that the old melody has revived, Isolde too, in her transfiguration, is engulfed by the fascination of a melody’ (Poizat 1992: 176); both fantasise absorption inside the body of the (m)other. ‘As desiring subjects, Tristan and Isolde are indistinguishable’: ‘Isolde reaffirms that the subject of desire is indifferent to gender’ (Kramer 1990: 164). Indeed, Isolde, in fulfilling her own desire to return to the womb, reaffirms that both sexes are equal subjects of this desire. Kramer here, rather, refers to the Freudian language of libido, of which he finds a typical application in the *Liebestod*: ‘The ego-libido that was invested in the beloved as object-libido now flows back onto the subject and becomes ego-libido once more, yielding a flood of narcissistic pleasure so overwhelming that the ego drowns in it’ (166). Freud refers once to *Tristan und Isolde*, in a footnote to the Schreber case, and suggests the converse of Kramer: ‘An “end of the world” based upon other motives is to be found at the climax of the ecstasy of love (cf. Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*); in this case it is not the ego but the single love-object which absorbs all the cathexes directed upon the external world’. Kramer believes that Freud has Act Two in mind here. Insofar as Isolde describes the waves that surround her as being external to her and issuing from Tristan’s body, I am not convinced by Kramer’s argument

that they would figure her own ego-libido. In the transfiguration, just as Freud describes, Isolde's ego is dissolved into her love-object, which has taken on the dimensions of the world. Her rapture issues from union with a transcendent other.

On that basis, Spitzer compares the transfiguration with John of the Cross's aforementioned poem *'En una noche oscura'*. Both have as subject matter the 'ecstatic union of a human ego with a non-ego' (1962: 142). Spitzer sees as a difference the fact that Isolde does not directly long for union with Tristan, 'but with the elements into which he himself has dissolved' (175). In fact, in the poem, God as totality is embodied as a lover, whereas in Wagner, the lover's body becomes a totality. I would therefore say that the poem remains attached to the sexual model, while Isolde's end of the world scenario realises her fantasy of being back in a total womb. Spitzer argues that mystics such as John of the Cross describe the 'emptiness created by the soul in order that it may be filled by God', while the sea of nothingness in which Isolde sinks is not a void, but 'a turbulent mass of waves, perfumes, breaths [...] ruled over not by a personal God, but by the violent forces of Nature' (176). This may be true of the transfiguration, but I would say that Isolde and Tristan do describe ecstasy in terms that recall the mystical void. At the end of their love duet in Act Two, they see themselves beyond naming ('Ohne Nennen') and access a superior knowledge ('neu Erkennen'), like theologians who approach the knowledge of God through the negation of all his names and properties. Isolde and Tristan successively reach three steps in their ecstasy. At the end of Act One, they conclude their duet on 'Du mir einzig bewusst, | höchste Liebeslust!' In Act Two, they conclude on 'ein-bewusst: | heiß erglühter Brust | höchste Liebeslust!' (164); and Isolde pronounces the last words of the opera as 'unbewusst – | höchste Lust!' The parallels between these three variations on 'bewusst' and 'Lust' have frequently been noted (Spitzer 1962: 177, Weisstein 1987: 80, Groos 1988: 467). Their gradation can be read in a mystical perspective: in Act One, the lovers are still separated and while they only perceive each other in the world, they have not yet accessed a higher form of union. In Act Two, they either share the same consciousness ('ein-bewusst') and the same 'Brust', being one, or they identify exactly with each other but are still two; the libretto remains ambiguous between one and two, although the vocabulary of burning desire ('Entbrennen', 'erglühter') and the orgasmic music point towards a situation in which two seek to become one. At the end of her transfiguration, Isolde does not use the word 'love' that they have used in the two previous occurrences, now only talking of 'höchste Lust', and she erases the last traces of consciousness and therefore of separation: 'unbewußt'. In this, she seems to go beyond human love into the realm of mystical ignorance where she reunites with a luminous

darkness. For Rieger, Isolde remains in the state of human love in that her transfiguration is a depiction of orgasm (2015: 210), an interpretation reinforced by the fact that shortly after Isolde's last words, the harmonic tension opened by the very first chord is at last resolved in the musical conclusion of the opera. However, in my reading, the dominant desire in the opera is not sexual but concerns a return to the womb. In Act Two, the heroes refer to such a return as that which death will bring them, but they also seem to be experiencing it already in their ecstatic moment at the end of the duet. The word 'Lust' articulates this tension between desire and fulfilment (Groos 1988: 467), which has a musical equivalent in what Kramer calls the '*Lust-trope*' (1990: 148). Isolde's utterance of 'Lust' as her last word, without connecting it to 'Liebe', shows that the imminent fulfilment of her desire to return takes precedence over love.

The term she actually connects 'Lust' with is 'unbewußt' (TI: 108). Having submerged herself into the uterine water of music, she is about to reach a place where she will be unconscious. The state of un-consciousness is the state of one who has reached the womb. Furthermore, the unconscious as a name for a dark and most impenetrable site in the depth of our psyche is in itself a figure of the womb. Wagner's presentation of the unconscious as an object of desire in his opera enables us to see that psychoanalytic explorations of the unconscious are fed by the desire to find a way back to the womb. In this perspective, it is not surprising that Freud developed his model from the analysis of female patients, in whom it was arguably easier to imagine a womb, especially when the name applied to their disease ('hysteria') was etymologically linked to the uterus.

Chapter 6

Das Rheingold: the primal scene

Wagner conceived *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in a regressive process, first planning the last opera, *Die Götterdämmerung*, then moving backwards up to *Das Rheingold*, where the origin of the story was to be told. Although an opera in its own right, *Rheingold* represents a ‘Vorabend’, while the three following operas represent one day each, starting with the ‘1. Tag’, *Die Walküre*. So *Rheingold* is supposed to take place before day one. This already suggests that Wagner associated the opera with birth and antenatal time. The first scene of *Rheingold* stages the event from which the entire cycle narrated in the *Ring* will issue: Alberich tearing the gold away from the Rhine where it was protected by the Rhine’s daughters. This event itself, I will argue, is depicted as a birth. Although Alberich is supposedly a villain, the name of the tetralogy refers to him. The ring ultimately does not belong to Wotan, Siegfried or Brünnhilde, but to the Nibelung who forged it from the Rhine’s gold. The first scene and its male protagonist are thus determinant in the cycle, which lends a synecdochal dimension to my interpretation of this establishing sequence. Besides Alberich and the theme of birth, the scene also presents the figures of the Rhinemaidens who, I contend, are linked to the transitional stage.⁷ However, as a detailed account of the scene reveals, elements that correspond to the antenatal or to the transitional stages in the scene are not clear-cut but rather superposed in a multi-layered structure into which I will delve.

Throughout my analysis of the scene, I will build on Wagner’s stage directions as well as on the sung text. Hardly any representation on the contemporary stage actually conforms to these directions, and not only because non-conformity is nowadays common practice. Wagner imagines the scene as taking place on the bed of the Rhine, the whole height of the stage being filled with water. This defies the laws of gravity and is as such unrealisable on a stage. A representation with any form of realism was impossible in Wagner’s time, when scenic technologies were still rudimentary. What Wagner depicts is not a set but an imaginary landscape into which he projects his characters. Since the object of my analysis, here, is the products of Wagner’s imagination, I will take into consideration the whole of the scenic picture. Like Artin (2012: 28) and Oberhoff (2009: 133), I contend that the landscape depicted

⁷ In what follows I will use a closer translation of the German ‘Rheintöchter’ (Rhine’s daughters) that insists on the family relationships.

in the scene figures the human and especially the maternal body. This echoes with Winnicott's idea that the child first perceives the world as a continuation of the mother's body: projecting maternal features onto the landscape, Wagner activates transitional space.

The world's lullaby

The musical opening of the opera consists in a figure whose simplicity is striking, in contrast to the Tristan chord. Building on 'devices of the pastoral genre', it 'gives the listener a sense of returning back to a state of pristine innocence' (Deathridge 2008b: 50). The contrabasses start with an E flat in their low register and the rest of the orchestra progressively joins in ascending arpeggios of the E flat major chord. The German term for E flat being 'Es', Bernd Oberhoff suggests a parallel with Freud's 'Es' (2009: 126), the primal part of the psyche that Freud links with birth: 'Die älteste dieser psychischen Provinzen oder Instanzen nennen wir das *Es*; sein Inhalt ist alles, was ererbt, bei Geburt mitgebracht, konstitutionell festgelegt ist' (1938: 67-68). According to Cosima's diary (17 July 1869), Wagner called this opening 'das Wiegenlied der Welt', which refers to the maternal dimension; it seems here that the world is cast as the mother whose voice is expressed in the music, but the ambiguity of the genitive between subject and object makes it also possible that the world is the child being rocked. In fact, both interpretations may coexist, the world mothering itself. Although the lullaby image points towards the time after birth, the emergence of the E flat chord represents the primal moment of the tetralogy, and therefore, figuratively, its birth. According to Thomas Mann, this beginning is hardly music, but rather 'der Gedanke des Anfanges aller Dinge' (1974 [1933]: 381). Darcy describes the prelude as 'an orchestral metaphor for the creation of the world' (1989: 92): as life gives birth to itself in Nietzsche's account, here the world gives birth to itself through Wagner's music.

In *Mein Leben*, Wagner claims that he conceived the prelude and was thus brought to put his libretto into music thanks to a vision he had in La Spezia. Deathridge shows that Wagner's sketch for the beginning of *Rheingold* hardly provides any evidence for Wagner's claim (1985: 195-97) of a 'direct relation between certain key events in his life and his artistic inspiration' (188). Even if it seems likely indeed that the vision was reconstructed a posteriori for the sake of Wagner's self-glorification, what interests me is the unconscious logic of the image. The vision that initiates Wagner's symbolical procreation of the tetralogy is that of an immersion in water: Wagner felt as if he was sinking into 'ein stark fließendes Wasser' that

developed into the E flat major chord (1976: 512). Music is thus directly associated with oceanic feeling, with Wagner being immersed in a river of music like Isolde in melodic waves during her transfiguration. Artin refers to the Christian symbolism of baptism ‘in which the font is a “womb” from which the soul is “reborn”’ (2012: 42). ‘The water of *Rheingold* is the womb. It is also the unconscious, the depths of the Wagnerian self’, according to Artin. ‘Womb and unconscious are logically fused in the symbol of water, since intrauterine life represents primal unconsciousness’ (45). I would add that, conversely, the depths of the unconscious represent the womb, as suggested above. Water sets the stage for unconscious fantasies related to intrauterine life.

Settings

When the curtains open in *Rheingold*, Wagner imagines a scenic equivalent to the immersion into water expressed by the music. We are on the bed of the Rhine. The height of the stage is ‘*von wogendem Gewässer erfüllt, das rastlos von rechts nach links zu strömt*’ (R: 7), like the swiftly flowing water of his vision. The current flows from right to left, in the direction opposite to that of reading in Western alphabets, so that the eyes of Western audiences would follow the flow in a way that would feel backwards to them, which suggests an inversion of the usual course of time. Our common experience of water is to see it below us, or, when diving, around us; here, water is above. This suggests an inversion of the usual relation to space: we have toppled head over heels into a world where everything seems possible.

Wagner’s indications on lighting in the *Ring* often depict ambivalent states: ‘If Tristan plays on the dialectics of day and night, of darkness and light, the visual imagery of the *Ring* is seminally concerned with different shades of brightness, haziness, and visibility’ (Kreuzer 2012: 180). As the state of lighting when the curtain opens, Wagner indicates a ‘*Grünliche Dämmerung, nach oben zu lichter, nach unten zu dunkler*’ (R: 7). We are in a liminal moment between night and day which could, so far, be either morning or evening, although the apparition of the sun later in the scene will resolve this ambiguity. As in the common daylight experience, light comes from above, but its source cannot be identified, since it probably lies beyond the water. Watching this stage, the spectators project themselves into a space distinct from the illuminated world and displaying uterine features. The ground, where we expect the singers to appear, is on the dark side, which may correspond to common daylight experience

but not to usual scenic practices, in which the ground is the space on which the most lighting is concentrated in order to illuminate the actors or singers.

Aware that his male protagonist is unlikely to sing in water, Wagner foresees a space, 'der Manneshöhe', free from the water that fills the rest of the stage (R: 7). Similarly to the 'Dämmerung' that characterises lighting, the transition between water and this apparently dry space is progressive, the flow dissolving 'in einem immer feineren Nebel'. The elements of water and air are thus mixed without clear-cut separation, which brings us to a place anterior to the separation between darkness and light, humidity and air, maternal flesh and world. The sky of this place is constituted by the flow running 'wie in Wolkenzügen' in the lighter part of the stage, another sign of the fusion between water and air. Although the space where Alberich will stand is distinguished from the main current, it still belongs to the same watery place, and its darkness ('den nächtlichen Grund') gives it uterine features. The existence of a dry space in which it is possible to stand on the ground may provide the audience with a feeling of security counterbalancing the anxiety awakened by the representation of the womb. Still, anxiety is present in this picture: *'Überall ragen schroffe Felsenriffe aus der Tiefe auf und grenzen den Raum der Bühne ab; der ganze Boden ist in ein wildes Zackengewirr zerspalten'*. These rocks recall the threatening objects, including the father's penis, which, according to Melanie Klein, children suppose to be inside the womb (1961). They play a separating role, delimiting the stage. Fissures in the ground open to abysses sunk 'in dichtester Finsternis', which suggests yet another depth, another more secluded womb within the uterine space attracting all the more desire for the fact that neither our body nor even our eye can reach it, while this very impossibility also protects us against anxiety.

In the middle of the stage stands one erected rock *'mit seiner schlanken Spitze bis in die dichtere, heller dämmernde Wasserflut hinaufragt'* (R: 7), like a phallus penetrating the flow of uterine water. The water is at the same time 'dichter', which points towards a fleshy dimension in opposition to air, and 'heller', which puts it on the side of light. Wagner thus distributes characteristics of the flesh and of light amongst the different components of his stage picture without ever putting too much of them on the same side, which would likely awaken his own and the spectators' anxiety. Still invisible, the Rhine's gold is hidden on the rock like a glans that will be revealed upon erection, to follow the comparison of the rock with a phallus, or like a foetus suspended on the uterus wall. In my contention, both of these comparisons correspond to layers of the imaginative landscape Wagner depicts. Gold can take phallic as well as foetal – and, as we will see later, vaginal and anal – features, depending on

the images Wagner uses to depict it and on the other objects or subjects it is put in relation with. This very plasticity is what makes the products of Wagner's imagination so compelling.

Sirens' playing

Around the rock 'kreist in anmutig schwimmender Bewegung' a woman, Woglinde, singing an enthusiastic song. Having not seen Gold yet, we do not know why she is so excited by the rock, but if it is phallic, then its imposing dimensions could explain her jubilation. On another layer, Woglinde is not exactly a woman but a siren, halfway between a woman and a fish. This recalls Ferenczi's hypothesis that the ultimate desire of mankind is to return to the original ocean in which all species once lived before our predecessors left the ocean to live on earth. For Ferenczi, the presence of water in the womb in itself is a reminder of the fact that life once developed in the ocean, and the desire to return to the womb is thus an elaboration on that yet more primal desire (1924). Wagner, by staging the opening scene of the *Ring* under water amongst sirens whose bodies figure the link between human and fish, indeed displays a 'thalasser Regression', as Adorno puts it with regard to *Tristan* (1974: 93).

Wagner introduces Woglinde as one of the Rhine's daughters, which points towards yet another level. She is immersed in her father, who thus takes on the maternal role; as we will soon discover, she shares this womb with two more daughters, a variation on Wagner's twin fantasy I have mentioned regarding *Tristan* and which is fully acted out in *Die Walküre*. Oberhoff also links this scene to intrauterine life: 'Bildlicher Ausdruck dieses pränatalen Daseins ist das sorglose, scheinbar ewig währende Spiel der schwimmenden Nixen' (2009: 127).

However, I would argue that the daughters' singing and playing rather correspond to another level again, that of the transitional stage. Woglinde first sings 'Weia! Waga!' (R: 7); as with *Der fliegende Holländer*, the opera starts with echolalia. Ten of the twelve words she sings at this point start with the consonant W, the first letter of Wagner's own name, and they include many an 'a' and 'g': it seems that this baby is learning to speak by learning how to pronounce variations on the beginning of the composer's name. In the parts of her echolalia that make sense, Woglinde asks the water to rock her: 'Woge, du Welle! Walle zur Wiegen!' This does not, correspond to the 'Ur-narzissmus' Oberhoff refers to as characteristic of intrauterine life: Woglinde is aware of the difference between her own self and the paternal (or rather, maternal) water. And she also recognises her sister as a different self with whom

she would enjoy playing as well ('mit Wellgunde wär ich zu zwei'). Wellgunde asks her sister 'wachst du allein' (7), which announces a potential danger or at least a serious activity; 'allein' here is the first accentuated word of the opera not starting with a 'w', and thus gains emphasis. But the possibility of gravity and solitude is immediately closed again when the sisters start playing together. The theme of their play is capture and flight: Wellgunde at first takes on the role of the catcher and Woglinde claims herself to be 'Sicher von dir' (8), escaping a pseudo-danger and a pseudo-aggressor.

Like Wellgunde, the third sister first manifests herself only as a '*Stimme, von oben*' (8), as if they were coming from the adult world before joining the space of childhood. Flosshilde, an alto whose name does not start with a W but with its unvoiced variant F, and whose voice sits in the low register in contrast to her two soprano sisters, tries to play a parental role for them, interrupting their play and reminding them of their duty: 'Des Goldes Schlaf | hütet ihr schlecht, | besser bewacht | des Schlummernden Bett, | sonst büßt ihr beide das Spiel!' (8). This is the first mention of Gold in the opera, and it is referred to as a living being which needs to be taken care of during its sleep. Oberhoff suggests that it may represent 'jenes "Goldschätzen", das im Leib der Mutter mal schläft und mal wacht' (2009: 127). However, pregnant mothers do not need to worry about their foetus being asleep or not, while the sleep of the newly born is a central preoccupation for parents. I would therefore say that Gold here is, at least on the explicit level, compared to a toddler. Still, on a deeper level, Gold's sleep figures intrauterine life: its awakening later in the scene will take the form of a birth trauma, Flosshilde already adumbrating that moment through the anxiety she expresses in her warning. She reproaches her sisters for occupying the position of children instead of the maternal one, and therefore for behaving like bad mothers towards the proper baby, who is Gold and not them. But the two insouciant sisters remain in the child's position into which they eventually draw Flosshilde, making her play with them. Wagner insists on their easy movements in water, which sustains a denial of birth trauma: the sisters can easily proceed through the maternal body, and are in a uterine space where no birth seems likely to occur.

Bad baby

Yet another baby has made his way into this space: Alberich, who is '[a]us einer finstern Schlufft [...] dem Abgrunde entstiegen' (8-9). Insofar as he comes from a darker and deeper site, and reaches the stage at a moment when the sisters are playing, his arrival corresponds to

a birth process that brings him from the womb to transitional space. This connects him to the anxiety awakened from birth trauma. However, the anxiety surrounding Alberich here and in the entire *Ring* is also a consequence of his apparent ability to return to the womb. As a dwarf, he has kept the stature of a child, and at the end of the scene he will receive unlimited power, which puts him in an ideal position to fulfil the return. He therefore draws the audience's identification, although in this case the anxiety awakened by a possible satisfaction of the desire for antenatal return makes him appear as a negative hero, a villain. Building on Wagner's biographical elements, Artin claims that Alberich is the figure of 'the dreamer's arch-rival, his father', or rather putative father, Geyer (2012: 45), and that he is also 'an aspect of Wagner himself' (48), who had a 'somewhat dwarf-like appearance' (69). I am closer to the approach of Oberhoff, who mostly draws from the libretto to argue that the scene is a representation of the developmental stage 'in dem der vorgeburtliche reine Narzissmus eine erste schwere Niederlage erleidet' (2009: 128). The scene thus tackles elements from both the foetal and the intersubjective stages.

Artin and Oberhoff consider the Nibelheim, from whence Alberich comes and to which he will return, as the place of anality (Oberhoff 2009: 135; Artin 2012: 72). This does not contradict my contention that Wagner's description of Alberich's arrival echoes with birth. Artin refers to the infantile theory of anal birth (2012: 104) which, according to Rank, the child develops in a denial of the mother's genitalia, and which sustains 'den unbewussten Wunsch des Knaben, Kinder – auf dem analen Weg – gebären zu können' (1924: 38). Rather than emphasising Wagner's bowel issues as Artin does, I would thus suggest that Wagner satisfies the desire to procreate in the symbolical field when giving an anal birth to Alberich. The dwarf will then explore the vaginal way in his attempts to seduce the Rhine's daughters.

Having just reached the scenic space, Alberich '*hält, noch vom Dunkel umgeben, an und schaut dem Spiele der Wassermädchen mit steigendem Wohlgefallen zu*' (R: 9). This could also describe the position of the spectators sitting in darkness and, hopefully with pleasure, watching the three sisters playing. Throughout the scene, Alberich will be a support of identification for the audience; his status of villain distances us from him on the conscious level, but on the unconscious level, he reminds us of the little child we once were and of the various traumas and wounds we experienced then.

Whereas Woglinde's initial words sound as if she is learning to pronounce the first half of Wagner's name, Alberich starts with 'He he! Ihr Nicker!' (9) and the letter 'N' that was absent in Woglinde's mouth is recurrent in the rest of his speech, as if he was

pronouncing the second half of Wagner's name. The wish he expresses at this point is to reduce the distance between him and the women above him, of whom he asks 'neigtet ihr euch zu mir'. This recalls the situation of a toddler in its cradle, wishing that its mother would come closer. The sisters wonder to whom this voice belongs, Flosshilde noting 'Es dämmert und ruft'. The word 'dämmert' here, referring to a state of light, is not usually attributed to a person, but since the baby they take care of is Gold, they may be expecting to see a light when encountering a new baby. However, they recognise the Nibelung, and Flosshilde urges her sisters to protect Gold: 'Vater warnte | vor solchem Feind'. The law of the father here is that they should protect Gold against male enemies, which, in nineteenth-century ideology, echoes with the patriarchal demand on women to protect their virginity. The three sisters '*versammeln sich schnell um das mittlere Riff*' (10), siding with the paternal phallus as well as protecting Gold. Alberich apostrophises them as 'Ihr, da oben!' and they answer in one voice 'Was willst du dort unten?', which emphasises their spatial positions. Growing up fast, he asks whether he can share their play, like a child trying to join a group of fellow children. The sisters wonder whether he really is a child who wishes to play, or an adult enemy who would mock them. Alberich's subsequent speech convinces them of a third hypothesis: 'der Feind ist verliebt'. Indeed, Alberich, after his birth process and his desire to play, has now reached a stage in which he expresses sexual desire: 'Wie gern umschlänge | der Schlanken eine mein Arm'. What has awakened his desire is the light with which they are haloed: 'Wie scheint im Schimmer | ihr hell und schön!' Their childish playing, their slim bodies ('der Schlanken') and their luminous appearance distance them from maternal features that might have awakened his anxiety instead of his desire. This sexual excitation has nothing to do with their individual personalities: Alberich wishes to embrace one of them, no matter which one. The sisters are reassured by Alberich's desire since this does not make him appear as a potential predator of Gold.

Alberich as the girls' plaything

From this point, they start to play a cruel game with him. In Oberhoff's analysis, 'So wie der Säugling die sich entfernende Mutter weder festhalten noch ihr nachlaufen kann, so erfährt auch Knirps Alberich eine gleichartige lokomotorische Ohnmacht'. Toddlers are 'in das Reich der Triebe geworfen, indem sich schon früh libidinöse Regungen einstellen', and cannot yet control these excitations, which also creates 'ein Gefühl der Ohnmacht' that will be amplified

further if their caregivers over-stimulate them sexually. In this scene, ‘die schädigende Erfahrung einer sexuellen Überstimulierung zur Darstellung gelangt’ (Oberhoff 2009: 129). The sisters move close to Alberich only to escape him at the moment when he thinks he has reached them. Thus they play again a game of chase as they did between themselves before his arrival, only with higher stakes since this man is potentially dangerous for them. On their side, this play enables them to work through female anxieties linked to sex. Casting themselves as the prey of man’s sexual desire and teasing him to hunt them, they put themselves in situations in which they could be captured and raped, and evade that danger at the last moment, thus experiencing pleasure as a discharge of anxiety. The disgust they display for him might also be the apparent face of their own unconscious desire.

In fact, the sisters invite Alberich into their playing as he asked them to, but they turn the game against him, systematically putting him in the position of loser, without exchanging roles as they do between themselves and without opening to him the intersubjective space that they have between themselves. They make themselves into the objects of his desire and him into the object of their scorn. Each of the sisters plays with Alberich in turn. While Woglinde contents herself with the hunter game, Wellgunde seems to open an intersubjective space between him and her, advising him to avoid Woglinde: ‘zu mir wende dich’ (13). Alberich obeys and praises her in return for her favour: ‘Viel schöner bist du | als jene Scheue’, building on her narcissism to seduce her. But she does the contrary, attacking his narcissism (‘Schwarzes, schwieliges Schwefelgezwerck!’, 14) as soon as she is close to him. ‘Sulfurous alludes to the odor of feces’, comments Artin (2012: 80) who refers to Fairbairn’s description of the child’s humiliation over the deprecation of his love: ‘the experience is that of shame over the display of needs which are disregarded or belittled. In virtue of these experiences of humiliation and shame he feels reduced to a state of worthlessness, destitution or beggardom’ (Fairbairn 1954: 113). This indeed corresponds to Wellgunde’s humiliating rejection of Alberich’s instinctual life. He reacts with violence, trying to rape her first, and then, when she has escaped, belittling her as she did him (‘Kalter, grätiger Fisch!’, 15) and slotting her into subhuman life (‘so buhle mit Aalen’). His apostrophe to her as ‘Falsches Kind’ may represent at the same time a reproach to her for pretending to be a good mother when she actually behaved as a bad one, an infantilisation of woman, and a projection of Alberich’s own anxiety about being the wrong child, the one who is not loved, an anxiety that fully emerges later in the scene.

However, Alberich has not gone all the way through a failed recognition process yet: the third sister, Flosshilde, steps up her sisters' game. She presents herself as a new Senta ('süßen Trost | schüfe die Traute dir!'), descends to him, pretends to be sensitive to his flattery, flatters him in return, lets him caress her. She exclaims 'Wie deine Anmut | mein Aug' erfreut, | deines Lächelns Milde | den Mut mir labt!' (16), referring to the gaze and smiles lovers exchange like a mother with her child in the transitional space and to the action of suckling. It seems that she has regressed to the child position and sees Alberich as a maternal figure, as if he had successively put her in the hypnotic state that, according to Ferenczi, prepares women for sex (1924). Alberich's narcissistic wound starts healing. But once she holds him firmly in her arms, she opens it again yet more deeply: 'Deinen stechenden Blick, | deinen struppigen Bart, | o sah' ich ihn, faßt' ich ihn stets!' (17). Going even further than her sisters in sadism, she first makes him hope that he is loveable and brings him into the intersubjective space of love, only to destroy that space and to mock his hope that any woman would provide him with positive recognition. Holding him in a suffocating position while she thus reveals herself as a bad mother for him, she also puts him back in touch with birth trauma. What disturbs her in him seems to be the signs that he is an adult man: his penetrating gaze, his beard, his prickly hair; again, her disgust here may be a symptom of repressed desire. But she also describes him as toad-like, which points towards her own anxiety regarding birth, since toads live between water and earth and thus seem able to go back and forth amphibiously between womb and world. Alberich tears himself '*erschreckt aus Flosshildes Armen*', manifesting the fact that she has succeeded in awakening birth anxiety in him. His pain is intense enough at this point that he expresses it as such ('Wehe! ach Wehe!'), before reacting again to his humiliation by insults.

The three sisters, united, tease him into hunt and displays of dominance: 'Warum, du Banger, | bandest du nicht | das Mädchen, das du minnst?' (18). Here the man bears the name of anxiety, and what they ask from him is to bind them. In Rank's understanding of masochism, bondage corresponds to a 'teilweiser Wiederherstellung der intrauterinen Lustsituation der Unbeweglichkeit' (1924: 35). The sisters thus react to Alberich's reproach by putting themselves in the child's position again, and in that of sexual prey, engaging him not to be a baby, suffering from anxiety, but a predator: 'Greife nur zu | und grause dich nicht!' This succeeds, with Alberich reaching an erection ('Wie in den Gliedern | brünstige Glut | mir brennt und glüht!'), while the combination of 'Wut und Minne' he feels prepares him for a rape ('eine muss mir erliegen') that would compensate for his feelings of impotence

and inferiority. After the failure of hypnosis, he tries the second mean that men use to seduce women in Ferenczi's account: violence.

Wagner does not take sides with either Alberich or the Rhine's daughters in the scene. Yet in his presentation of their encounter, the girls excite male desire and are excited themselves by his hunt, while the audience is brought to understand Alberich's frustration. This corresponds to the typical defence of rapists: the victim was overly attractive, so it is her fault if she was raped, and she wanted to have sex anyway, so no rape occurred. At the same time, the scene also puts the blame on the maternal figure for wounding the child's narcissism, disregarding his needs, rejecting his love, not recognising his subjectivity and thus transforming him into a rapist.

Gold's birth into light

Although Alberich displays a significant improvement in his mobility through the rocks, he is unsuccessful in catching one of the girls, and concludes his hunt with a despairing 'Fing' eine diese Faust!' Also raising his gaze as a phallic ersatz, he suddenly sees a spectacle by which he is 'angezogen und gefesselt', his sexual energy being transferred into the scopic regime:

Durch die Flut ist von oben her ein immer lichter Schein gedrungen, der sich an einer hohen Stelle des mittelsten Riffes zu einem blendend hell strahlenden Goldglanze entzündet; ein zauberisch goldenes Licht bricht von hier durch das Wasser. (19)

What replaces the former object of his desire is his contemplation of a ray of light penetrating water and touching the glans of the central rock, at which point an orgasm of light expands through water. In this image, light does not bring separation, but merges with the water in a union that denies the separation between mother and world. The stage at this point represents a uterine space that no longer has an exterior, since the source of light that at the beginning seemed external is now inside it. In the postnatal understanding, light is what cannot be found in the womb, and seeing the light means that one has been born. Yet here, the spectators can see the light while being in a uterine space. As in the mystical works referred to in the chapter on *Tristan und Isolde*, the themes of birth and of vision are thus intertwined, vision providing the spectator with a satisfaction of the desire to abolish birth.

There are two ways of erasing the separation between womb and world, and to return to a womb possessing the dimensions of totality, like the maternal womb does for the foetus. One is to make the womb into a total world that includes the source of light, as in this scene. The other is to make the world into a total womb sunk into darkness, as Isolde and Tristan seek to do. By switching the light off in the auditorium in Bayreuth and aiming for unified spectacles that would captivate the totality of the spectators' attention, Wagner contributed to the creation of conditions in which the spectators similarly experience a fusion between womb and world. On the one hand, their world, the auditorium, is sunk into darkness, and they remain immobile in it like foetuses back in the womb, listening to oceanic music in the case of opera. On the other hand, they watch a stage that contains its own sources of light and in which an entire world is represented.

Alberich, who watches light penetrating a uterine space, represents once again a support for identification for the audience, who watch the scenic space being filled with lighting. This spectacle within the spectacle is thus a *mise-en-abyme* of the audience experience. Staging the apparition of light at the highest point of Alberich's sexual excitement and giving to the union of water and light an orgasmic dimension, Wagner also suggests that the scopic regime builds on sexual energy but gives higher pleasures, and more secure ones, since the women elude Alberich, while the spectacle gives itself to any spectator. Like sex, spectacle has an illusory dimension that corresponds to the fact that it is only a partial satisfaction of the desire to return; but Wagner, aware of the tension between illusion and truth that he articulates in *Tristan und Isolde*, aimed at providing his audiences with the highest possible degree of satisfaction, which helps to explain both the fascination his work has exerted, and its anxious rejection by many in the wake of Nietzsche. Still, here Wagner does not glorify night, but light; while the presence of light inside the uterine space makes it into a total womb, it also prevents the spectators from fully experiencing the foetal situation and therefore protects them against the anxiety awakened by the satisfaction of the desire to return. Through light, the father continues to exert his influence, separating the child from the mother. As shown above, Nietzsche identifies the Apollonian as this protective role of light for the audience.

Furthermore, Wagner here does not only favour the desire to return but also keeps open the transitional space in which birth can be overcome. Woglinde comments first on the spectacle they watch by saying: 'Die Weckerin lacht in den Grund' (19). She refers here to the sun, female in German. Rank sees in sleep a 'dem intrauterinen fast gleichkommenden

Zustand' (1924: 72) and notes that primitive people associate night with a return of the sun to the womb (73). Here, the sun is not in the child's position but in that of a good mother who brings the joy and love of transitional space into the uterine space through her smile. The image echoes with Tristan's valorisation of night as a place where 'Liebeswonne ihm lacht'. Whereas Isolde and Tristan wish never to awaken from their nocturnal sojourn, here the sun as 'Weckerin' is associated with birth. But the positive connotations attached to it also extend to the birth process, which appears as a gentle awakening into light, in contrast to what the end of the scene will display. In Wellgunde's account, light traverses 'den grünen Schwall' and to that extent has its source outside the scenic space, but since it is a mother and the water represents the inside of the maternal body, the world here seems to turn inside itself, which maintains the fantasy of a total womb. The maternal sun salutes 'den wonnigen Schläfer', her son Gold, and, as Flosshilde says, kisses 'sein Auge, | daß er es öffne' (19), which again associates birth with vision: seeing light in the morning after a night of sleep reproduces the moment when we were first brought to light. The sun's child responds to his mother's attention by a smile (Wellgunde: 'es lächelt | in lichtem Schein', 20). In this birth process, the flesh of both mother and child are erased, which works for the denial of birth, since there is no hold for birth trauma on either the sun or a metal. Light takes on the maternal role towards a child that himself embodies light, being Gold. This union of two lights recalls Plotinus' account of the soul ascending towards the One and happily living in union with him, except that Wagner here attributes the correct gender to the creator, a mother. As a result of this union, Gold's 'strahlender Stern' flows through water, as if fulfilling the desire Nietzsche's Zarathustra expresses when comparing himself to 'ein Stern bereit und reif in seinem Mittage'.

Singing again their echolalia, the sisters welcome Gold into the transitional space and celebrate the smile by which he mirrors his mother: 'Leuchtende Lust, | wie lachst du so hell und hehr!' (20). While flesh is converted into light, the anxiety emanating from birth trauma is converted into 'Lust'. They encourage him in this awakening and promise him the happiness of transitional space: 'wache froh! | Wonnige Spiele | spenden wir dir'. To Gold, they behave like good mothers, praising him, gently accompanying his awakening, caring for him, offering their play to him.

Gold's traumatic birth

Birth trauma has so far been repressed, but it soon emerges in a second representation of Gold's birth. Gold has become for Alberich the object of his scopical desire: his eyes, 'mächtig vom Glanze angezogen, starr an dem Golde haften' (21). He asks the sisters what that object is, and their dismissive answer marks once again how differently they treat him and Gold. This puts him in the position of an unloved child whose brother attracts all maternal love. In Woglinde's description of 'der Wassertiefe | wonnigem Stern, | der hehr die Wogen durchhellt', Gold is the source of light that fills uterine water with joy: the womb has included the source of light, thus assuming total dimensions; and this light, as a penetrating star spreading its spermatogenic light in the water, retains from the flesh only sexual pleasure. Instead of seeing a foetus in the womb, which might awaken anxiety, we only see a light that has taken the foetal position. The water is dark when he sleeps and illuminated when he is awake, which makes of him a figure of the sun, except that so far Gold has never had to leave uterine water, even when awake. His gentle awakening is thus not yet a proper birth.

Themselves enjoying a return to the primitive situation of being immersed in water, the sisters invite Alberich to join in with their new playing: 'Willst du Banger | in ihm dich baden, | so schwimm und schwelge mit uns! | Wallalalala leialalei!' (21). Alberich cannot return to the womb where Gold, as the youngest brother, occupies the foetal position and blocks the path for his older brother. But the 'Banger' could discharge his anxiety and partially satisfy his desire by swimming in the light that fills uterine water. However, Alberich is not interested in that proposition: the sisters' 'Taucherspiele' may announce more delusion and provide only an illusory satisfaction. Dismissing their play, he also displays little interest for Gold.

This is enough to wound the narcissism of the two sopranos, who react to his devaluation of their favourite by a proud presentation: 'Der Welt Erbe | gewänne zu eigen, | wer aus dem Rheingold | schüfe den Ring, | der maßlose Macht ihm verlieh' (22). To enter into possession of Gold signifies becoming the inheritor of the world, and thus her child ('die Welt' being female in German), which promises the realisation of the wish to unite womb and world. To become omnipotent as he first believed himself to be as a child, the possessor of Gold must forge it into a ring. Surrounding the finger like the vagina surrounds the phallus during intercourse and like Gold's light already surrounds the phallic rock, the ring represents the route back to the womb. Yet this is only one interpretative layer. In Artin's understanding, the ring symbolises the vagina elsewhere in the Tetralogy 'as, for instance, when Brünnhilde gives it as love token to Siegfried', but in *Rheingold*, it symbolises the anal sphincter as 'the

agent of control over feces' (2012: 85) thanks to which the infant satisfies 'the demand that it control the excretory functions it once exercised indiscriminately' (84). Artin reminds us of Freud's explanation of money and gold as derived from the initial interest in the feces (83). In that perspective, the possession of the ring would enable Alberich to reach a developmental stage where he would no longer smell of feces, as Wellgunde reproaches him. Also focusing on the anal dimension of the ring, Oberhoff argues that thanks to the anal sphincter, the child gains control also over his affects (Oberhoff 2009: 136) and voluntarily closes his own body (137). 'Diese Grenzsetzung zwischen innen und außen führt zwangsläufig zur Differenzierung von Ich und Nicht-Ich. Das Erleben, ein von der Mutter getrenntes eigenständiges Wesen zu sein, wird spätestens von diesem Zeitpunkt an zur sicheren Erkenntnis' (138). The possession of the anal ring would enable Alberich to separate himself from the disappointing mother, while at the same time realising his fantasy of omnipotence. Oberhoff points at the ambivalence of the anal sphincter that, on the one hand, 'die Herrschaft über innere und die Abwehr äußerer Verfolger verspricht', but on the other, 'als ein Verräter und Vernichter des Ur-Narzissmus erscheint' (145). The ring then is not a means to return to the womb, but definitively separates from it.

Flosshilde tries to silence her unwise sisters by reminding them of the father's law: 'uns befahl er | klug zu hüten | den klaren Hort, | daß kein Falscher der Flut ihn entführe' (R: 22). Yet in this she herself drafts the plan that Alberich will follow, teaching him that it is possible to take the Gold away from water in a proper birth process. As in the myth of Adam and Eva, the original fall is attributed to a 'faiblesse féminine' (Clément 1979: 271). The foolish sopranos continue to draft the plan, Woglinde explaining how to enter into possession of the ring: 'Nur wer der Minne | Macht versagt, | nur wer der Liebe | Lust verjagt, | nur der erzielt sich den Zauber, | zum Reif zu zwingen das Gold' (22). This is a crucial moment. On the surface level, the choice is between omnipotence and the power of love. One way of interpreting this would be to say that only the one who renounces the satisfaction of desire provided by sex can fully realise the desire to return by regressing beyond the genital stage, in a typically neurotic way. But Alberich does not understand 'der Liebe Lust' as sexual pleasure, since he reasons that he could still attain pleasure without being loved ('Erzwäng' ich nicht Liebe, | doch listig erzwäng' ich mir Lust?', 24): money can buy sex, rape can force a woman to give sexual pleasure. In fact, the process by which Gold will be made a ring itself echoes with rape. 'Reif' means 'bracelet' but also 'mature'; in the interpretation of the ring as vaginal, Gold that first was impenetrable is forced to become a sexually mature sphincter like a woman forced to lose her virginity. Rank links defloration to sadism in his description of

‘dem für die meisten Männer besonders lustvollen (“sadistischen”) Akt der Defloration, dem schmerzlichen und blutigen Eindringen in das weibliche Genitale, in dem noch niemand drin war’ (1924: 41). The Rhine’s daughters thus teach Alberich how to satisfy his desire to return at the expense of women and of his little brother, who may actually be a sister (‘Gold’ is a neuter substantive in German).

According to Oberhoff, the opposition between ‘Liebe’ and ‘Lust’ is that ‘zwischen dem vorgeburtlichen Urnarzissmus (den Wagner stets meint, wenn er von “Liebe” spricht) und der Welt der Triebe’ (2016: 25). To renounce love means ‘die harmonische Symbiose mit der gottähnlichen Mutter aufgeben zu müssen’, renouncing the return to the womb where the mother was experienced as a totality. Alberich chooses ‘das Reich der Triebe’ (26). In this perspective, Alberich renounces his desire for intrauterine return and learns to master the anal sphincter, as children are supposed to do in their development. But why, then, is he a villain? Would Wagner present negatively the child’s attempts to grow, favouring instead a neurotic regression such as Nietzsche reproaches him for?

This, however, does not take into consideration the difference between ‘being in love’ and ‘loving’. I disagree that love in Wagner always corresponds to the state of being in love, in which, as Oberhoff argues, the adult seeks to find again ‘vorgeburtlichen Urnarzissmus’. Love refers also to the state of loving in which the transitional space opened after birth is revived. In my understanding, ‘wer der Liebe Lust verjagt’ forsakes this state of loving and renounces any return to the transitional space, but not necessarily to the womb. Throughout the scene, Alberich has felt excluded from the transitional space represented by the Rhine’s daughters: they manifest it in their echolalia and their playing, share it with Gold, but not with him. Instead, they refuse him any recognition, systematically wound his narcissism and frustrate his sexual desire. This does not give Alberich any way to work through his desire to return. On the contrary, the lack of intersubjective love forces him back into the desire for antenatal return. Wagner thus reveals the link between failures in the recognition process and sexual frustration on the one hand, and sadism and regressive desire to return on the other hand. Severely wounded in his narcissism, Alberich is bound to aim at a restoration of his ‘Urnarzissmus’ and sees in the shining diffusion of Gold an opportunity to do so. For someone who has experienced transitional space as a happiness from which he is excluded, it is easy to renounce ‘der Liebe Lust’. The sisters are therefore wrong in supposing that Alberich’s former display of sexual desire shows that he will not be ready to renounce love. Yet Woglinde herself notes ‘vor Liebesgier | möchte’ er vergehn’ (23), which shows that

Alberich's form of love is the state of being in love – in which he aims at disappearing into the womb – but not that of loving. Flosshilde also highlights the potential destructivity of his desire for its object: 'seiner Minne Brunst | brannte fast mich'; and Woglinde compares him to 'Ein Schwefelbrand | in der Wogen Schwall', a variation on the image of light inside water. Alberich is similar to Gold, except that he awakens anxiety in the sisters who therefore present him negatively and Gold positively. Still, the sisters are too happy with his desire for them, which flatters their narcissism, to be aware that he may really represent a danger.

Yet Alberich's object has become Gold, whom he directly addresses ('Der Welt Erbe | gewänn' ich zu eigen durch dich?', 24). He scales the central rock; still denying the danger, the sisters believe he is hunting them. Having reached the top, Alberich apostrophises them: 'Bangt euch noch nicht? | So buhlt nun im Finstern, | feuchtes Gezücht!' Throwing darkness on them, he confronts them with the anxiety that they have been repressing since the first manifestation of Gold. As his reference to their sexual activity indicates, anxiety here is the manifest face of a repressed desire: darkness is propitious to sex in that it recreates uterine conditions. Similarly, his calling them 'feuchtes' is an insult on the manifest level but also corresponds to a desire for uterine water and vaginal humidity. Taking his revenge against the sisters, Alberich announces 'Das Licht löscht' ich euch aus, | entreisse dem Riff das Gold, | schmiede den rächenden Ring' (24-25). Like parents who would punish their children by extinguishing the light, Alberich builds on the infantile fear for darkness analysed by Rank as a typical manifestation of birth anxiety (1924: 15). Insofar as Gold can be pulled out of the rock, the underlying image here is not that of a glans on top of a phallus, but rather that of a foetus attached to the uterine wall. Alberich is about to provoke a new birth trauma. Oberhoff reads this passage in the light of Melanie Klein, arguing that Alberich 'jene phantasmatische Aggression gegen die Inhalte des Mutterleibes in Szene setzt, die sich beim Säugling einstellt, wenn er Versagungssituationen ausgesetzt ist'. I would specifically say that Alberich targets the new foetus with which his mother is pregnant. The reason he gives for forging the ring is vengeance: by imposing birth trauma upon the favourite child and forcing it into a sexually mature sphincter, Alberich takes revenge on both the mother, guilty of having given birth to him, and the girls guilty of having rejected his desire. Taking as his witness 'die Flut' that in the scene has figured both uterine water and the space in which transitional playing has taken place, Alberich curses love.

This is followed by a double birth process: '*Er reißt mit furchtbarer Gewalt das Gold aus dem Riffe, und stürzt damit hastig in die Tiefe, wo er schnell verschwindet. Dichte Nacht*

bricht plötzlich überall herein' (25). In relation to Gold whom he tears away from the uterine wall and water, Alberich plays the role of the father in the fantasy according to which the father is responsible for separating the child from the mother and thus ultimately for birth. The sisters occupy the position of the bad mother who should have avoided that separation. But insofar as Alberich disappears into a darker and deeper site, he seems to fulfil his own desire to return to the womb, so that Gold's traumatic birth is immediately followed by Alberich's reversed birth. On stage, the irruption of darkness also points towards a reversed birth that propels the scene from a womb-like fantasy space, suffused with light, to the actual conditions of the womb. In Rank's perspective, any satisfaction of the desire to return contains the possibility of a new trauma that would put this foetal state to an end as birth once did, and as such, awakens anxiety. Here, the foetal state and trauma are simultaneously represented. The anxiety expressed by the sisters thus issues directly from a repetition of birth trauma, and indirectly from the latent satisfaction of the desire to return. Marred by that anxiety, Alberich appears as a villain, but the spectators unconsciously identify with him insofar as he seems both to have fulfilled his desire to return and to have retained the means to omnipotence.

The envied Jew

By forcing Gold into a ring, Alberich constitutes a treasure thanks to which he hopes to conquer the world in which Wotan rules. This could seem to adumbrate the anti-Semitic fantasy of a Jewish plot that pervaded Nazi propaganda. Without discussing the question of Wagner's own anti-Semitism, I will now build on the commonly assumed hypothesis that Alberich is a thinly disguised Jew to draw a few lines of connection between *Rheingold* and dark moments in the history of Germany, thereby to demonstrate how the birth complex can have implications on the level of political history.

As shown above, Alberich certainly is a negative hero, but still a hero. The scene is constructed in such a way as to favour the audience's unconscious identification with him. He has access to the womb, although the anxiety associated with birth trauma compromises him. He embodies anal and genital instincts that we have had to repress. By contrast, Gold is a baby cherished by the maternal figure, in which all flesh has been transformed into light. This bears similarities with the Nazi ideology glorifying the blond Aryan in opposition to the Jew, and emphasizing the privileged link between Aryan and motherland. According to this logic,

the 'Jew' Alberich destroys the happy union between the Aryan Gold and its maternal world, contaminates the purity of Gold by transforming it into money, and threatens to take over the rest of Wotan's Aryan world. The audience is made to hope for the annihilation of the evil represented by Alberich; but also to unconsciously identify with him, just as we unconsciously identify with the crew of the Flying Dutchman, whom Wagner described as the Wandering Jew in *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde* (1851).

I would suggest that this unconscious identification is a structural aspect of anti-Semitism, in particular in its most murderous manifestations. We recall that, in Rank's perspective, siblings identify with their youngest brother who seems to be in the best position to fulfil the return, while blocking their own (1924: 108). The older siblings envy the youngest one and wish for his death, that is, they wish him to return to where he comes from (26). Therefore, when siblings wish the death of their youngest brother, they simultaneously identify with him: if he were to die, he would fulfil his own desire and indirectly the desire of those who identify with him.

Artin mentions the hypothesis that Wagner 'concealed his brother Albert' in Alberich, but rather argues that the dwarf is 'a distorted portrait of step-father Geyer' (2012: 182), whose son Wagner feared to be. 'The (putative) Jew Geyer is envied for having achieved the wished-for return to the womb' (75), by virtue of his sexual relationship with Wagner's mother. Although I find the assumption that Alberich would represent any actual member of Wagner's family problematic, and therefore would not say that he is Albert, it is another matter to see the dwarf as a fraternal figure. After having dislodged Gold from the envied position, Alberich appropriates the privileges of the youngest brother and achieves a complete return to the womb, not only a partial return as the father does during intercourse with the mother. Close again to the idea that the dwarves represent fetuses, Artin compares them in the Nibelheim scene to 'a nestful of Jews who are – the logic of the symbolism says – siblings in competition for mother's body' (72). Indeed, Wagner stages the rivalry between Alberich and his brother Mime; but the Nibelheim scene mainly focuses on the rivalry between Alberich and Wotan. Descending into the depths of the earth, Wotan finds the dwarves already there, as younger siblings occupying in the womb. They are his rivals in his own aspiration to the mother's body, an aspiration that he satisfies when raping Erda.

In the first scene, Alberich is in the position of the older brother, and Gold of the younger. This sustains the identification with Gold, that is, in the frame of anti-Semitism, the identification with the Aryan. However, I would argue that in anti-Semitic fantasies, Jews are

typically perceived as the youngest siblings able to return to the womb. As the elected people, Jews have an enviable bond with God; they are said to be bestowed with a mysterious omnipotence and to assemble in secret uterine places from which they prepare the invasion of the illuminated world. This puts them in the position of youngest siblings whom the anti-Semites envy, with whom they unconsciously identify, and for whom they wish death. Anti-Semitism thus seems to build on the same psychic structure that also sustains the identification with heroes. The difference is that it targets real people who, when the anti-Semite's death wish is fulfilled, really die.

Referring to a moment when Hitler, 'at the nadir of his political career', asked that Isolde's *Liebestod* should be played for him, Deathridge suggests that 'Hitler heard the heroically elevated measures of Wagner's music as a sonic equivalent of the *völkisch* image of motherhood and homeland, the impression of long-lost oneness and well-being, which he, the long-awaited hero, was setting out to impose on Germany' (1996: 122). For Deathridge, the question is whether Isolde's *Liebestod* and, generally speaking, Wagner's music 'had a special appeal to a fascist mind like Hitler's over and above the common experience of being emotionally aroused by it' (123). I would suggest that, like Wagner in Nietzsche's account, Hitler was very sensitive to the birth complex, and that he stimulated fantasies linked with the birth complex in the German people, first to access power, and then to remove any Jewish sibling from the maternal womb of Germany. Hitler would thus have been the ultimate representative of the sickness from which Germany suffers according to Nietzsche, and which he diagnoses and investigates in Wagner. I have shown that Nietzsche's description of this sickness corresponds to the birth complex. Yet, as I have argued here, it is not only Wagner who suffers from the birth complex, but also Nietzsche; and it is, of course, well-known that Nazi ideology drew heavily upon Nietzsche's philosophy – in particular his conception of the will to power – as well as upon Wagner.

Nevertheless, taking seriously Nietzsche's account of the sickness he recognises in Germany as exemplified by Wagner might help to shed some light on one of the most abysmal enigma of modern history: how the Nazi regime could so quickly turn a cultured and advanced nation to barbarism. If the birth complex concentrates the most powerful desire and the most archaic anxiety, and if the individual and social development requires the repression of this complex, then a regime that undoes this repression and puts its people back in touch with the birth complex also undoes the process thanks to which they have reached civilisation. National Socialism stimulated the wish for symbiosis in the German people, and accordingly,

the wish to destroy any foreign element that would prevent the constitution of that symbiosis between mother Germany and her Aryan children. As Nietzsche elevated the will to power, National Socialism elevated sadism, and thus arguably created a mass neurosis, opening a space for Germans to act out the fantasy to kill their Jewish siblings. In their propaganda, the National Socialists built on the opposition between flesh and light by abjecting the Jewish flesh, as the Rhine daughters abject Alberich, and glorifying light, as the daughters glorify baby Gold. Much could be said in that perspective on the usage of light for the Nuremberg Feasts, although an elaboration of this would exceed the scope of the present thesis. My only aim here is to show that an analysis in terms of birth complex may bring new insights on the fantasies that underly artistic, intellectual and political phenomena.

I will now consider the reception and elaboration of models drawn from Nietzsche and Wagner in the scenic field by taking Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* as a case study to further expand on the birth complex and on its link with violence, both familial and political (the two converging here as intensely as in Wagner's *Ring*). Like its Sophoclean model, Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* is the story of a daughter's staggering hatred for her mother and of a son's matricide. I will read it through the lens of Rank's theory, extending the method applied to Nietzsche and Wagner, to argue that violence ultimately issues from the fantasy of matricide.

Section 3: Posterity of Nietzsche and Wagner

Chapter 7

Matricide and the Trauma of Birth in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*

Boys want to kill their father and to marry their mother, as Oedipus did: on this cornerstone rests the edifice of Freudian psychoanalysis. But Oedipus in Sophocles's play rushes into Jocasta's bedroom with a sword, only to find her dead, which also suggests 'a dream of matricide' (Bronfen 2010: 13). What if boys in fact primarily wished to kill their mothers? As shown above, Irigaray claims that psychoanalysis, Western philosophy, and indeed 'the whole of our society and our culture' are built on the grave of the mother (1991b: 36). Any memory of the bodily encounter with the mother is repressed. The link with the mother is erased. Furthermore, in the patriarchal system Irigaray denounces here, men symbolically kill not only the mother but also any woman by structuring society on the exclusion of feminine subjectivity. Women are restricted to biological procreation and are forbidden access to symbolic production, which includes the creative use of language as well as any form of social, political, and artistic activity. Matricide is thus the act by which men appropriate maternal power and kill the symbolically creative individual in any woman, leaving them only with the ability to be biologically pregnant, since this, men cannot appropriate – at least not yet.

Irigaray gives an example of this process in the Oresteian myth that explicitly displays the matricidal wish latent in the Oedipus myth. Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter Iphigenia. When he returns after ten years with the Trojan princess Cassandra, whom he has reduced to sexual slavery, his wife Clytemnestra kills him with the help of her lover Aegisthus. She sends her son Orestes away, keeping only her daughters Electra and Chrysothemis with her. Despite the fact that her father Agamemnon caused the death of her own sister, Electra calls death upon the head of her mother. When Orestes comes secretly back to the house, Electra encourages him in his own determination to murder Clytemnestra. He commits matricide, and is driven to madness by the Furies who are seeking vengeance for Clytemnestra. Brought in front of an Athenian tribunal, Orestes is finally acquitted, thanks to the goddess Athena who claims that, being born straight from the head of her father Zeus, she has no mother and therefore casts her vote for Orestes. Patriarchal justice condemns the murder of a husband by his wife, but not the murder of a mother by her son, nor that of a daughter by her father. Electra has been living with Clytemnestra all her life, and yet has been unable to act on her own account, waiting instead for her brother to return. The message is

clear: women should not act by themselves; at least, Greek women, those who live under a patriarchal system that casts itself as progressive by opposition to the barbaric world in which women such as Medea do commit murders.

The link between the death of Clytemnestra and the founding of patriarchy was first made by Bachofen: in *Das Mutterrecht* (1861), he presents the previous matriarchal system as an age of darkness and the *Oresteia* as an account of the transition to enlightened patriarchy. Irigaray develops the same idea but with an inversion of values: in her reading, the murder of Clytemnestra marks the first step in the colonisation of the symbolic order by male fantasies. Addressing male psychoanalysts, she asserts: ‘The symbolic you impose as a universal innocent of any empirical or historical contingency, is *your* imaginary transformed into an order, into the social’ (1991c: 94, emphasis in original). To disentangle these male fantasies, it will be useful for women to study myth, since ‘our imaginary still functions in accordance with the schema established through Greek mythologies and tragedies’ (1991b: 36). In her remarkable study *On Matricide*, Amber Jacobs pursues Irigaray’s path by proposing a structural analysis of the Oresteian myth with a view to theorising matricide (2007). She reminds us of Athena’s mother Metis, whom Zeus swallowed pregnant after having raped her – a myth echoing with that of Dionysus’s birth –. When Athena at Orestes’s trial claims that she does not have a mother, she is perpetuating the crime committed by her father against her mother. The erasing of Metis prefigures the murder of Clytemnestra. Jacobs’ discussion of André Green’s and Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic accounts of the matricide wish and of the Oresteian myth leads her to formulate a maternal law on which a symbolic order different from the patriarchal one could be built, thus resurrecting the mother from the pre-symbolic realm in which Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis have buried her. However, like Irigaray, Jacobs overlooks the traumatic dimension of birth, an element that can serve to elucidate the matricidal wish and the erasing of femininity from the patriarchal symbolic order. This element also pervades the rewriting of Sophocles’s *Electra* by Hofmannsthal, a Viennese contemporary of Freud’s and one of the Modernist writers most aligned with psychoanalysis.

Most scholars who linked *Elektra* to psychoanalysis have focused on the question of hysteria. Elektra shares many characteristics of Anna O. (Worbs 1983: 280–87), the patient of Josef Breuer thanks to whom he and Freud developed the psychoanalytic approach presented in *Studien über Hysterie* (1895). However, Lorna Martens insists on the fact that Elektra, contrary to Breuer’s and Freud’s understanding of hysteria, does remember very well the

traumatic event she experienced. Rather, Klytämnestra is the proper hysteric of the play (43). This debate crosses the feminist ‘reclaiming’ of hysteria (Mitchell 2000). Silvia Kronberger sees in hysteria an unconscious rebellion against imposed norms of femininity (2002: 19) and discusses Elektra’s case in that perspective (226–35), while Jill Scott argues that Elektra, as much as Anna O., performs hysteria as a way of opposing phallogocentric society (76–80). By contrast, Nancy Michael asserts that ‘[t]he representation of women is gynophobic, and the patriarchs, namely Orest and his guardian, murder those who subvert male ascendancy’ (2001: 111). Scott does not contest such claims, but she suggests that ‘misogyny and emancipation exist simultaneously in this drama’ (2005: 60). Reassessing the representation of femininity in *Elektra*, Antonia Eder puts the role of hysteria into perspective by foregrounding the influence of Bachofen on Hofmannsthal, for the latter certainly uses an archaic representation of women, but in such an over-determined way that it eventually threatens the patriarchal order (2011: 18–21).

Although I agree that Hofmannsthal’s reactionary views on women do not prevent his play from bearing a potential for challenging patriarchy, I use Rank’s theory to take a broader perspective than either Scott or Eder. My contention is that Hofmannsthal, while being influenced by Breuer and Freud’s work on hysteria, was also twenty years ahead of the psychoanalytic discourse, including Rank himself, in the illustration of the birth complex.

Elektra: A tragedy of birth in one act

In *Das Inzest-Motiv in Dichtung und Sage* (1912), Rank reviewed all the forms that the Oedipus myth took in Western literature and then tackled the Oresteian myth, focusing on the three Athenian tragedians and on Hofmannsthal. Rank’s interpretation of *Elektra* in this context is still very Freudian: the heroine’s libido is fixed on her father, and she hates her mother as a rival (328). Her brother’s case seems less straightforward to Rank, but he still proposes an Oedipal interpretation of Orestes’s jealous love for Clytemnestra that supposedly led him to kill his mother not because she had murdered his father, but because she had taken a lover. At the time of *Das Inzest-Motiv*, Rank was still Freud’s heir; he had not yet developed his theory of the birth trauma, and nothing in his analysis of *Elektra* foreshadows it. Yet in view of the many parallels between Hofmannsthal’s insights and Rank’s later theory, I contend that the play became influential on the latter’s later conceptualisation of the birth trauma. I therefore propose a more Rankian analysis of the play than Rank’s own analysis,

arguing that Hofmannsthal's account of matricide in *Elektra* reveals an underlying stratum dating back to the trauma of birth.

Elektra, addressing her mother, acknowledges an anxiety linked to the trauma of birth: 'Ich weiß auf der Welt | nichts, was mich schauern macht, als wie zu denken, | daß dieser Leib das dunkle Tor, aus welchem | ich an das Licht der Welt gekrochen bin' (E: 26–27). Recognising in her mother's body the site where she was born, she reconnects with her primal trauma, which awakens anxiety. The word anxiety comes etymologically from the Latin *angustus*, meaning narrow. Indeed, during birth infants suffer mainly because of the narrowness of their surroundings, especially when going through the neck of the uterus. If their own neck is compressed, the memory of this pain might make them later develop a dread of strangulation. Associated with the greatest pain, the image of a rope is recurrent in Hofmannsthal's play. Elektra claims to the so-called messenger before recognising him as Orestes, 'sie haben dich | geschickt, um mich zu foltern, meine Seele | sollst du aufziehn an einem Strick, und wieder | zu Boden schmettern!' (61). In Elektra's anxious fantasy, her mother via this messenger is trying to make her experience again a strangulation similar to the pain felt during birth. In revenge, she wants to cut her mother's throat, attacking her also at the neck. Klytämnestra has assimilated this threat: the maids say 'daß sie von Orest geträumt hat, | daß sie geschrien hat aus ihrem Schlaf, | wie einer schreit, den man erwürgt' (23). According to Rank, sleep is a way of reliving the foetal situation (1924: 39). While she was sleeping, Klytämnestra felt strangulated by her son in the same way as he felt during his birth, and she emerged, crying like a newborn baby from the symbolic womb of sleep.

In a typically neurotic way, Elektra encompasses sex within the same repression as birth trauma. She sees and condemns sex everywhere (Politzer 1973: 101). According to the maids, 'so schreit sie: nichts kann so verflucht sein, nichts, | als Kinder, die wir hündisch auf der Treppe | im Blute glitschend, hier in diesem Haus | empfangen und geboren haben' (E: 13). This image echoes with Elektra's own traumatic sliding in blood through her mother's genitalia, here metonymically symbolised by the entrance stairs of the palace where Klytämnestra lives. Heterosexual intercourse happens at the same place as birth, in the vagina, which explains why, in Elektra's fantasy, the maids have sex on the same stairs where they give traumatic birth to their children.

Elektra also rejects sex insofar as her representation of it involves the couple her mother forms with Aegisthus. Dismissing Chrysothemis who claims that she wants children, Elektra says, frowning: 'Die Höhle | zu sein, drin nach dem Mord dem Mörder wohl ist; | das

Tier zu spielen, das dem schlimmern Tier | Ergetzung bietet' (20). Interestingly enough, here the man is even lower than the woman. Klytämnestra, choosing a lover unworthy of her husband, degrades herself, but Elektra seems to warn her sister that sexuality in general is degrading for women.

In the later scene between them, Elektra wants her sister to help murder Klytämnestra and therefore changes strategy. She describes the lover Chrysothemis will then be able to have, and temporarily takes on his role, admiring her sister's beauty and ultimately endeavouring a symbolic rape: 'Mit meinen traurigen verdorrten Armen | umschling ich deinen Leib, wie du dich sträubst, | ziehst du den Knoten nur noch fester, ranken | will ich mich rings um dich und meine Wurzeln | in dich versenken und mit meinem Willen | das Blut dir impfen!' (50). Now that she believes Orestes to be dead, Elektra feels ready to assume the phallus herself and begins testing it on her sister. While she expresses the fantasy of merging their two bodies, Elektra's male identification is with a father fecundating the woman more than with a son fulfilling the return. But she then reverts to a child's position, seeing in Chrysothemis a strangling mother: 'Du könntest | erdrücken, was du an dich ziehst. Du könntest | mich, oder einen Mann mit deinen Armen | an deine kühlen festen Brüste pressen, | daß man ersticken müßte!' (49-50). Elektra is hardly able to see in women anything else than dangerous beings who threaten to make her experience again a trauma similar to birth.

Elektra's psychical bond with her mother has not been cut, so that she cannot overcome her trauma of birth nor grow independent from her mother. In the scene of their confrontation, she admits to Klytämnestra: 'Du bist ja | wie ein Koloß, aus dessen ehernen Händen | ich nie entsprungen bin' (27). Perceiving her mother as a giant, she occupies the child's perspective. Somehow, Elektra was not fully born since she did not entirely escape her mother's body. Her words are intended to please Klytämnestra but might in fact please Elektra herself by giving way to her fantasy of having never left the womb. Thus, the reason why Elektra refuses to leave the palace with Chrysothemis is not only because she would want to avenge her father, but also because she cannot tear herself from her mother. Only Klytämnestra's real death could break Elektra's dependency; and still, this death might not be enough, since Elektra claims: 'Ich weiß nicht, wie ich jemals sterben sollte – | als daran, daß du stürbest' (27). The two women are interdependent (Martens 1987: 42); their bond is such that Elektra could not die if her mother is still alive, nor live if she is dead, as the end of the play confirms. In Rank's account, the daughter's hatred for the mother, which is supposed to

favour a detachment from her, actually represents another form of ‘Fixierung’ on the mother (1924: 57).

Klytämnestra’s main crime is to have withdrawn what she had given: ‘Du hast mir ausgespieen, wie das Meer, | ein Leben, einen Vater und Geschwister: | und hast hinabgeschlungen, wie das Meer, | ein Leben, einen Vater und Geschwister’ (E: 27). The boundless water of the sea symbolises the uterine water where the mother is experienced as a totality (see Ferenczi 1924). Here, the sea-mother has not only given birth to Elektra but also to her family, before taking back in her deadly womb Elektra’s father and siblings as well as herself. This image recalls Klein’s analysis of infantile fantasies in which the mother has swallowed the paternal phallus (1961). In a Rankian perspective, Elektra’s reproach conceals an expression of her desire to return: she wishes to be back in her mother’s womb, but under the influence of anxiety, she reproaches her mother for having taken her back, which Klytämnestra has actually not done. Out of jealousy, Elektra wished death on her father and siblings, so that her reproach to Klytämnestra is to some extent a projection of her own feeling of guilt. The core reproach is hidden beneath the first part of the sentence, where Elektra seems to mention Klytämnestra’s gifts but actually evokes her own traumatic birth and the fact that her mother provided her with rivals. She has had to repress her desire to return, and under the influence of anxiety, she sees Klytämnestra as a dreadful object; but if anxiety is correlated with desire, then her desire must be as intense as the appearance of Klytämnestra is monstrous. Hofmannsthal here fully enters Elektra’s subjectivity in making Klytämnestra the threatening monster that her daughter fantasises, not the humiliated wife and wounded mother who avenged Iphigenia’s death.

At the end of the play, Elektra will be able to find again a fusion similar to the foetal state, although the proximity with birth trauma awakens anxiety: ‘der Ozean, der ungeheure, | der zwanzigfache Ozean begräbt | mir jedes Glied mit seiner Wucht, ich kann mich | nicht heben!’ (E: 74). Hysterical paralysis is here a somatisation of the conflict between the desire to live again a foetal immobility within the maternal totality, and the anxiety emanating from an unbearable realisation of that desire (1924: 49). Hysteria gives women the possibility to discharge the psychic energy issuing from birth trauma, in a way that can be seen as a protestation against the patriarchal order. Indeed, the woman refuses to solely occupy the maternal position and claims her right to be in the position of a child, expressing the pain she suffered during the birth trauma and her desire to be back in the womb. Nevertheless, the

hysterical woman fundamentally obeys the patriarchal injunctions in that she does not use her energy to create in the symbolic field, but directs it against herself instead.

Where does this submission of women to the patriarchal order come from? In Rank's account, the female genitalia remind women as well as men of the place where they suffered a birth trauma (38). Women are therefore likely to have an ambivalent relation towards their own genitalia, experiencing a mixture of desire and anxiety in the idea of being penetrated by a man or of giving birth (40). They may easily turn against themselves the violence initially directed against their mother, typically by renouncing any satisfaction of their desire to return in the symbolic as well as in the sexual dimension. Elektra refuses to play the female role and despises any sexually active woman. And yet, she submits to the patriarchal order that expands sexual polarity onto the social level by giving leading roles only to men and making women accept a society in which they cannot act nor exist by themselves.

The climax of Elektra's self-consumption can be found in her dance after the death of her mother. While Sophocles's play does not feature a dance of Elektra, dance was a key aspect of Greek tragedy (Nietzsche 1872). Rank suggests that dancing denies the traumatic character of birth by displaying a fluid moving through an open space instead of the difficult passage through the mother's body, and that its role in Greek tragedy was to alleviate the anxiety awakened in the audience by the representation of the pain suffered by the heroes (1924: 158). Hofmannsthal would then have been true to the essence of Greek tragedy by adding Elektra's dance to the Sophoclean plot. Interestingly enough, Elektra starts to dance just after her hysterical paralysis, as if the anxiety awakened by a fantasised return to the womb was so unbearable that she needed to deny the birth trauma through her dance. But she soon collapses, joining her mother in death.

Death and the hero

According to Rank, any absence, insofar as it is a separation, is associated with the trauma of birth (1924: 26). In the case of death, this association is reinforced by the idea that the deceased has lost our world. The only existence children have known outside this world is the foetal stage (27). Led by their own desire to return, children assume that the deceased has come back to the womb, and unconsciously give all the more value to death for the fact that it is a definitive absence, so that the deceased does not risk being torn away from the womb by a new trauma. This valorisation does not prevent mourning from being painful, since the

subject's own separation from the dead person awakens the memory of birth trauma (27). Death thus takes on characteristics linked to birth, especially the ambivalent relation between desire and anxiety.

These propositions help to understand the role of death in Hofmannsthal's play. In her daily ritual, Elektra tries to make her father leave his foetal situation: 'Der Vater fort, | hinabgescheucht in seine kalten Klüfte. | *Gegen den Boden*. Wo bist du, Vater? hast du nicht die Kraft, | dein Angesicht herauf zu mir zu schleppen?' (E: 14). Agamemnon is buried in earth like a foetus in the womb, although anxiety makes it appear as a cold rather than welcoming place. His daughter asks him to try and crawl through the earth with his head first, like a baby would do through the maternal body. It seems that she sometimes succeeded in having him join her, since she reminds him: 'Nur so wie gestern, wie ein Schatten, dort | im Mauerwinkel zeig dich deinem Kind!' (15). Appearing in the corner of a wall, he transforms her world into a womb, at least in her fantasy. When not fulfilling this ritual, Elektra takes the position of the foetus herself. She tells her sister 'Sitz an der Erd wie ich', but Chrysothemis is not fooled by this apparent rest, protesting 'Ich kann nicht sitzen und ins Dunkel starren | wie du' (18). Chrysothemis refuses to remain immersed in a darkness that Elektra values only because it reminds her of the womb. When she feels in danger, Elektra '*[k]auert sich, das Gesicht gegen die Wand*' (60), again taking up the foetal position.

Yet Elektra does not act to fulfil her desire to return, and to that extent, she is not the main heroic figure of the play. Orestes, being the youngest brother and the only son, seems in the best position for returning to the womb. His long absence may have been already perceived by his sisters as a return. Throughout the play, Elektra identifies with Orestes as the hero who will fulfil the deed of which she feels herself incapable. She compares herself to a dog that will follow Orestes's step, thus claiming inferiority. Only the announcement of his death makes her decide to act herself, and still, she tries to secure her sister's complicity. Chrysothemis is now the youngest child and therefore in a better position for the return. Elektra praises her, 'Du windest dich durch jeden Spalt, du hebst dich | durchs Fenster!' (49), highlighting her sister's ability to slide through their mother's vagina. But Chrysothemis, under the influence of anxiety, refuses to play this part and therefore does not qualify as a hero. Thus, Elektra resolves to act alone.

Just as she was becoming the heroine of the play, a stranger appears who we will later learn is Orestes in disguise. Elektra talks about the brother she believes to be dead as if he were still a child in the womb: 'indes das Kind da unten in den Klüften | des Grausens

lungert' (58). Elektra expresses frustration that her brother has already come back to the frightening and desirable womb, thus she believes he will not lead her as a hero would. When the messenger tells her Orestes is alive, she cannot at first change her mind: 'So ist er frei? wo ist er? | Du weißt es, wo? ist er versteckt? er liegt | gefangen! irgendwo in einem Winkel | gekauert wartet er auf seinen Tod!' (61). She first asks if he is free, thus outside of any symbolic womb. Answering this question herself, she assumes that he is hidden, which evokes the foetal position in a pleasurable way for her, since the child is protected. Then this image is marred with anxiety, making the hiding place appear instead as a prison. Finally, the image becomes more precise and more frightening as the foetal brother, folded over in his corner, is about to experience a form of trauma most similar to that of birth: death.

The scene of matricide

However, the hero's death is not the only way for him to fulfil the return. Orestes is alive and has come back to kill their mother. At the core of Hofmannsthal's play lies a fantasy that Elektra first exposes to her sister, then details to her mother before its realisation offstage, at the end of the play. In this fantasy, murdering the mother represents a reversion of birth that allows the hero and whoever identifies with him to go back to the womb. Telling it to Chrysothemis, Elektra describes herself as attending Orestes's action first as a mere listener: 'Ich liege | und hör die Schritte dessen, der sie sucht. | Ich hör ihn durch die Zimmer gehn, ich hör ihn | den Vorhang von dem Bette heben: schreiend | entspringt sie, aber er ist hinterdrein' (23). Elektra is lying on the ground like a child with her ear at her mother's belly to hear her little brother inside. Elektra then imagines her brother chasing her mother, herself following him: 'hinab die Treppen durch Gewölbe hin, | Gewölbe und Gewölbe geht die Jagd. | Es ist viel finsterer als Nacht, viel stiller | und finstrier als im Grab' (23). The topography of Klytämnestra's palace reproduces her maternal genitalia. Elektra avenges her own birth trauma by making her mother go through a similar traumatic descent. Yet this birth is a reverted one since Klytämnestra goes towards the deepest and darkest site in the palace. Paradoxically, Klytämnestra is in the position of the child, for 'sie keucht und taumelt | im Dunkel hin' (23), like a baby suffocating in the narrowness of the passage. Elektra's revenge is ambivalent: she makes her mother fulfil the desired return, but punishes her through the anxiety emanating from such proximity with the original trauma for which Klytämnestra is held answerable.

Later in the play Elektra tells Klytämnestra herself the same fantasy, with more details: ‘Er fängt dich ab: doch nur im Lauf! Wer schlachtet | ein Opfertier im Schlaf!’ (39). If Klytämnestra were going directly from sleep to death, from one uterine substitute to another, she would not pay for the trauma she inflicted on her children. Elektra instead makes her experience a similar trauma: ‘Du möchtest schreien, doch die Luft erwürgt | den ungeborenen Schrei und läßt ihn lautlos | zu Boden fallen’ (39). Klytämnestra cannot even cry as babies do at birth. Her cry remains unborn like herself, caught in strangulating surroundings.

At the conscious level of this fantasmatical scene, Elektra makes her mother experience herself the murder that she committed against Agamemnon. The set at the beginning of the fantasy that Elektra presents to her mother is the same as that for the murder: ‘Willst du nach rechts, | da steht das Bett! nach links, da schäumt das Bad | wie Blut! das Dunkel und die Fackeln werfen | schwarzrote Todesnetze über dich’ (39). Klytämnestra is caught between the conjugal bed and the bath where she murdered her husband. Light combined with darkness forms a net similar to the one she threw on Agamemnon while he was taking his bath. Yet this scene of the murder is also reminiscent of birth. The bed, associated with sex and sleep, is the place where partial satisfactions of the desire to return take place par excellence, and one is immersed in a bath almost like in uterine water. Klytämnestra murdering Agamemnon already made him undergo a reverted birth.

Indeed, in Elektra’s fantasy, the father is to be found at the deepest site of the palace, that is, in the womb: ‘so treiben wir sie fort, | bis eine Mauer alles sperrt, und dort | im tiefsten Dunkel, doch ich seh ihn wohl, | ein Schatten, und doch Glieder und das Weiße | von einem Auge doch, da sitzt der Vater’ (23). Having brought their mother up to the uterine wall, Elektra and her brother find a foetus: the father. We are again in a Kleinian fantasy, with the child imagining that her mother has swallowed the father’s penis. But Hofmannsthal’s description reveals the link of this fantasy to the birth complex. In the representation of sexuality as partial return of the man into the mother, the father appears to the child as the one who can go back to the womb and is therefore likely to be encountered there.

Klytämnestra now expects her son to try to reach her womb through a phallic substitute, ‘wie von Sinnen hältst du | den Nacken hin, fühlst schon die Schärfe zucken | bis in den Sitz des Lebens’ (39). Penetrating his mother’s body with his sword, the son partially realises his desire to return. But in Elektra’s fantasy, he delays the stabbing, prolonging Klytämnestra’s suffering from a pain similar to the birth trauma:

diese Zeit ist dir gegeben,

zu ahnen, wie es Scheiternden zumut ist,
 wenn ihr vergebliches Geschrei die Schwärze
 der Wolken und des Tods zerfrißt, die Zeit
 ist dir gegeben, alle zu beneiden,
 die angeschmiedet sind an Kerkermauern,
 die auf dem Grund von Brunnen nach dem Tod
 als wie nach der Erlösung schrein – denn du,
 du liegst in deinem Selbst so eingekerkert,
 als wärs der glühende Bauch von einem Tier
 von Erz – und so wie jetzt kannst du nicht schreien! (40)

The fundamental logic underlying these various images is the same. Klytämnestra is caught in a uterine, humid darkness. This situation could be pleasurable, but anxiety mars it, recalling that at the end of the foetal stage comes the birth trauma. The drowning shipwrecks are trying in vain to tear their surroundings, like babies trying to progress through a narrow neck of the uterus. Anxiety here takes three forms: the cry that corresponds to a physiological restriction of the throat and therefore to the birth process, including its end when the baby reaches the world and cries (although such cry also favours breathing and thus life); the darkness that makes life more vulnerable, but also corresponds to a repressed pleasure through its association with the womb; and death that frightens as the end of life, but which is also a symbolic equivalent to the womb. Hofmannsthal's images thus retain the ambivalence between the desire to return and the anxiety emanating from the birth trauma. Elektra's torture consists in exciting in her mother the desire to return in order to better awaken in Klytämnestra an unbearable anxiety. She goes so far as to describe Klytämnestra as pregnant with herself, which is the ultimate realisation of one's wish to fulfil the return without losing one's life. Having made of herself her own foetus, Klytämnestra finds again a definitive fusion between mother and child. But this fulfilment is also felt in an anxious mode that draws upon the representation of the maternal body as monstrous: Klytämnestra, who in a previous image was an iron giant, is now caught in an iron beast's traumatising belly. According to Elektra, Klytämnestra makes herself undergo a birth trauma: 'erhängt ist dir die Seele in der selbst- | gedrehten Schlinge' (41). She is at the same time the strangulating mother and the strangulated baby. To punish her mother for having caused her a birth trauma, Elektra thus lets her experience a death that takes the form of a reverted birth. She allows

Klytämnestra to fulfil the return that she herself desires. Throughout this fantasy, Elektra identifies as much with the victim as with the hero, Orestes.

This arguably reflects the structure of violence. As seen in Chapter Two, according to Rank,

scheint der typische *Sadist*, der im Blut und in den Eingeweiden wühlende Kinderschlächter (Gilles de Rais) oder Frauenmörder (Bauchaufschlitzer), die infantile Neugierde, wie es im Leibesinnern aussieht, restlos zu agieren. Während der Masochist den ursprünglichen Lustzustand durch affektive Umwertung des Geburtstraumas wieder herzustellen sucht, verkörpert der Sadist den unauslöschlichen Haß des Ausgestoßenen, der mit seinem voll erwachsenen Körper wirklich versucht, dort wieder hineinzukommen, wo er als Kind herausgekommen war, ohne Rücksicht darauf, daß er dabei auch sein Opfer zerfleischt, was keineswegs die Hauptsache ist. (1924: 35-36)

The core fantasy behind sadistic violence is thus the murder of the mother. The sadist at the same time avenges his trauma of birth and fulfils his desire to return by destroying a person who represents for him the maternal body, so that a way to the womb will be open. By killing his victims, the murderer also makes them go back to what he fantasises as a uterine dwelling, and he identifies with them while keeping his own life safe, in the same way as we identify with a hero who fulfils the return by undergoing dangers that would threaten us too much. Although Rank does not envisage this distinction, I would suggest that when killing women, the murderer's fantasy of going back to the womb himself takes the lead, while when killing children or men, he rather identifies with his victims as brothers, in a better position than himself to make the return.

Elektra and Orestes train their death wish directly against their mother, while the relation between them is that of intersubjective love. The dialogue that follows their mutual recognition is the only moment in the play when Elektra does not seem to be absorbed in murderous thoughts. Beyond the recognition of their identity, the siblings recognise each other's subjectivity. Orestes wonders why Elektra seems much older than she is, and she narrates her torments; he confesses his apprehension with regard to the murder, and she pities him. Here the siblings do not compete for the possession of the womb or for mother's love, but develop between themselves a loving relationship. Projected onto the social level, this model of interpersonal relation corresponds to a political system in which equality, integration and peace are valued. Yet the play shows that intersubjective love can soon revert back into

violence. Orestes's preceptor interrupts the scene between the siblings to call Orestes into action.

Killing his mother, Orestes acts out the sadistic wish to open a way towards the womb. Klytämnestra herself embodies the equivalence between murder and birth. Her first crime is to have made her child experience a birth trauma. The murder of Agamemnon represents a reverted birth, in which the mother provokes a new trauma by fulfilling too much her husband's repressed wish. But the concrete role of Agamemnon's murder in the play is to lift the repression that usually hides the death wish against the mother in women and even more so in men. With death figuring the womb for the unconscious, the birth trauma will easily be symbolised as a murder, as in Hofmannsthal's play. Since the mother is by definition a murderer, killing her and, by extension, damaging women is perceived as nothing but justice. Women are both physically and psychically undone because mothers give birth.

However, violence is not only directed against women. It is worth noting that Elektra wishes Aegisthus's death as well as Klytämnestra's, and that Orestes kills them both. Like the youngest brother, the mother's lover is absent for most of the play, which suggests that he has a privileged access to the womb. The paternal figure here is split between the good father, Agamemnon, and the bad father who, according to the maids, beats his stepdaughter. This situation mirrors the structure of fairy tales such as Cinderella, where a stepmother mistreating her stepchildren exposes the bad side of the mother, while the supposedly good mother is dead (Bettelheim 1976: 248–49). Presenting the parents as stepmother and stepfather allows for an expression of the children's reproaches and, ultimately, death wishes against these parents. Elektra could not bear to assume her death wish against her father. But she can assume it against Aegisthus, the father in disguise. Under cover of her 'Electra complex', Elektra thus also displays a proper Oedipal complex with a frustrated love for her mother and a repressed death wish against her father. Elektra's submission to her father may conceal the guilt that she herself feels towards him. Not only has she been unable to avenge his death, she might in fact have wished it as a child. This would explain her obsession for vengeance through which she hopes to wash away her guilt, and her constant avowal of love for her father, by which she denies having ever wished his death.

Elektra's fantasised scenario of revenge is an invention of Hofmannsthal's that does not feature in Sophocles's play. Martens argues that Hofmannsthal drew his inspiration for this scene from the method exhibited in *Studien über Hysterie*. Freud casts the analyst as a hero and the analyst's task as an adventurous exploration of the psychic labyrinth, which recalls Orestes following the tortuous ways of Klytämnestra's underground. Martens

concludes with the idea that Hofmannsthal's structuring image in the play is that of a dark and enclosed space that can be both the womb and the grave (1987: 46–49). Pursuing her suggestion that Hofmannsthal drew upon the psychoanalytic method to stage matricide, I would argue that he was sensitive to the matricidal dimension of Freudian psychoanalysis later denounced by Irigaray, and that the psychoanalytic approach is driven by fantasies linked to birth. The new method introduced by Breuer and Freud in the *Studien* is an exploration of psychic depths that seeks to cure the patient by bringing to light a trauma that has been enclosed in darkness. This process reiterates on the psychic level the work of a midwife helping the parturient to give birth, thus entering the line of Socratic philosophy (Irigaray 1974). Rank has highlighted the fact that the unconscious is figured in the dreams by the same symbols as the womb, so that the very desire to fathom the unconscious is a desire to get closer to the womb (1924: 126). I would argue that the similarities between *Elektra* and the *Studien* are due to the fact that both Hofmannsthal and Freud are driven by the desire to approach what is inside the mother's body while also handling the anxiety emanating from the primal trauma.

To navigate this hazardous path, both authors adopted a similar strategy: foregrounding women. It seems that penetrating the psyche of his female patients provided enough stimulation for Freud to father psychoanalysis; and centring his play on Electra rather than Orestes enabled Hofmannsthal to formulate fantasies that could have remained repressed otherwise. The idea of a female murder reminds both men and women of the terrifying side of the mother, which contributes to the fact that it is harder to envisage than the idea of a male murder. However, it would be unbearable for male audience members to identify directly with a man who kills his mother, insofar as their psychic balance is built on the repression of this wish in themselves. So, having the sister wishing, but not enacting, the mother's death, and the brother enacting this death without bearing alone the responsibility of his act since it partly falls on Elektra's shoulders, is a convenient solution. Hofmannsthal could thus tackle the foundation of patriarchy while at the same time reaffirming it. He took a woman as the central figure of his play and let her express a resistance to the traditionally restrictive female role, but without giving her a viable alternative, and he made sure that she would be destroyed by the end of the play, contrary to his Greek precursors who do not address Electra's fate after her mother's death. In Irigaray's account of the *Oresteia*, 'Electra, the daughter, will remain mad' (1991b: 37), prisoner of an unprocessed relationship with the mother, while man washes his hands of matricidal blood. In Hofmannsthal's play, both Elektra and her mother go through madness and die, and Hofmannsthal washes his hands of female blood.

Darkness

In a letter to Strauss, who was hesitating to put *Elektra* into music for the reason that the play had similarities with his previous opera *Salome*, Hofmannsthal emphasises their different ‘Farbenmischung’: ‘bei der “Salome” so viel purpur und violett gleichsam, in einer schwülen Luft, bei der “Elektra” dagegen ein Gemenge aus Nacht und Licht, schwarz und hell’ (1952 [1906]: 16). In this melange, darkness prevails over light. While Sophocles wrote his play for the outdoor Athenian theatre, in which the sun served as the only means to illuminate the stage, Hofmannsthal destined his adaptation for the Berlin theatre led by Max Reinhardt, who was famous for his creative use of the lighting techniques available at the time. ‘Hofmannsthal changed not only Sophocles’ order of events, but he also shifted the emphasis away from Sophocles’ daylight imagery to that of night’ (Michael 2001: 85). In Sophocles, the first scene is set at dawn and features Orestes, who, like the sun, has come to cast away darkness; upon entering the stage, Electra glorifies light and air. By contrast, Hofmannsthal’s play starts when the sun is declining, and he indicates scene by scene the progression of the sunset. In her entrance, ‘*Elektra kommt aus der schon dunkelnden Hausflur gelaufen*’ and she immediately springs back, ‘*den einen Arm vor dem Gesicht*’ (E: 9), as if she did not want to be seen or to see herself. After the departure of the maids, ‘*Sie ist allein mit den Flecken roten Lichtes, die aus den Zweigen des Feigenbaumes schräg über den Boden und auf die Mauern fallen, wie Blutflecke*’ (14). Her only company is a light that takes on a bloody colour from the flesh. Schneider compares the projection of light here to Elektra’s own hallucinatory projections (2012: 205). Klytämnestra’s approach is first manifested by the noises of animals brought to sacrifice, and by the light of torches. She appears at a brightly lit window before descending into the dark courtyard where her daughter waits for her. Upon hearing the news that Orestes has died, Klytämnestra immediately calls for torches and more torches. Elektra thus appears to privilege darkness, while Klytämnestra tries to protect herself from her daughter by surrounding herself with light. In the perspective of Elektra, which the play privileges, light has negative connotations. The moment when the stage is the most brightly lit corresponds to her nadir, Klytämnestra escaping her to triumph over Orestes’s death. In his ‘Authentische Vorschriften für die Inszenierung’, Hofmannsthal highlights that the courtyard is darker than the external world, which reinforces the uterine dimension of the space in which Elektra has chosen domicile (1997 [1903]: 380). Light characterises the world

in which Klytämnestra lives a separate existence, and Elektra's aim is to make her mother join with her in the night.

When Orestes first appears, he '*steht in der Hoftür, von der letzten Helle sich schwarz abhebend*' (E: 54). He thus takes over from the sun, and, as the sun enters the womb of earth, he enters the maternal house to penetrate his mother's body with a sword. Like Sophocles's, Hofmannsthal's Orestes is thus a solar figure, although Hofmannsthal rather draws upon the sun's return to darkness than upon its victory over darkness. Elektra uses a torch once, as do the servants do, to show Aegisthus that she has reversed her position. The torch serves as a sign that she submits to his and her mother's ruling. Yet, thanks to it, she actually guides Aegisthus to his death, remaining faithful to the camp of night. Aegisthus wonders why there is no light inside the house: the answer is that the son has already returned to the womb. At the end of the play, Chrysothemis mentions the thousand torches that have been lit to celebrate Orestes's victory, but he himself does not appear, as if he were not able to leave the womb. Elektra remains in her own uterine space, the courtyard, and dies.

Hofmannsthal's indications on lighting thus sustain the same complex of desires and anxieties as his characters verbalise: if they are realised, the audience sitting in the dark watch a stage itself mostly sunk in darkness. This brings the audience yet closer to the foetal situation and, when light illuminates that darkness, to the experience of birth.

Coda

In Ancient Greece, plays were represented at venues in the open air, with the audience sharing the same daylight as the performers and with the shadows cast by the sun as the only touches of darkness. By contrast, since its birth in the early seventeenth century, opera has been mostly performed inside, which supposes the use of stage lighting. At the start of the nineteenth century, the auditorium in German opera houses was lit as well as the stage, although specific lighting techniques such as the footlights meant that auditorium and stage were not lit in the same way. Following the example of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen in his Court Theatre, Wagner in Bayreuth had the light on the auditorium dimmed (Carnegy 2006: 76). This was the condition for achieving some darkness on stage, since light in the auditorium spreads onto the stage. Hofmannsthal's indications on light in *Elektra* suppose that the audience is sunk in a complete darkness, as is nowadays standard in theatre and opera houses.

Going into a theatre to sit in darkness while watching an illuminated stage has similarities with the mystical attempt to retreat from the world and find the light at the core of oneself. For Eckhart, the believers who do so enable themselves to attend the birth of God in their own soul. In John of the Cross's poem, the soul reaches light after a journey through night. The spatial organisation of modern theatre and its division between darkness and light reproduce the structure of this introspective approach while transposing it onto the external level. Instead of finding light in the depths of their own souls, audience members find it in the depths of a theatre, attending a birth process that takes place on stage. Whereas the mystic aims at experiencing the birth and vision of God, spectacle builds on vision to reactivate the experience of birth.

Appia

Struck by the gap between Wagner's intentions and the concrete productions of his operas at the time, the Swiss Adolphe Appia (1862-1928) drew sketches for their sets and wrote several essays to justify his propositions, starting with 'Notes de mise en scène für den Ring des Nibelungen' (written in 1891-92). His work was a source of influence for many directors, first

and foremost Wieland Wagner who, from 1951, staged ground-breaking productions of his grand-father's operas for the 'Neu-Bayreuth'.

Appia insists that life should be the guiding principle on stage. Therefore, he takes the actors as point of departure in the scenic representation, and criticises the fact that the two-dimensional painted canvases that, at the time, were used as sets, do not match the three-dimensional corporeity of the actors. Moreover, the stage lighting that was primarily designed to illuminate the canvases should rather be focussed on the actors (1983 [1895]: 269-70).

Appia suggests replacing the canvases by sets on which the actors can move and with which the light can play.

Appia ultimately gives light the role of creating life on stage. This is paradoxical, since light seems to be the antipode of organic life. Yet in this thesis I have exposed the complex of relations between light, flesh and life, a complex that has pervaded Western culture since Plato and the Prologue of John. Light is for Appia that which brings unity to the different elements of a staging, which recalls the aforementioned religious and metaphysical accounts that describe the divine principle of unity as a light. Appia's model is ultimately that of a living organism constituted by several elements, rather than a model of symbiotic unity in which the elements would be indistinct. His aim is to 'réaliser un ensemble organique dans toutes ses parties' (1983 [1891-92]: 110). Insofar as light gives unity to the scenic organism, it is the principle of its life.

To fulfil this function, light according to Appia must be 'active', which means that it must be contrasted by darkness. He complains about the fact that stages are fully illuminated to comply with the audience's desire to see as much as possible of the actors. As a result, 'on ne voit rien du tout; un objet éclairé de trois ou quatre côtés, qui ne fournit pas d'ombre, est au point de vue représentatif une abstraction' (112). 'On ne rendra la vie aux physionomies, aux gestes, aux groupes [...] qu'en leur rendant *l'Ombre*' (113). Thus, when not lit properly, even actors do not have a living presence on stage. Light magnifies the flesh of the actors and manifests their life, in the line of the Christian theology of transfiguration mentioned above. The play between light and darkness also recalls Nietzsche's developments on the veil thanks to which Apollo protects the audience against Dionysian anxiety and awakens an erotic desire to see. According to Appia, 'Un objet n'est plastique pour nos yeux que par la lumière qui le frappe' (1986 [1904]: 348). If some aspects of the object remain in darkness, the spectators must reconstitute them, which awakens their imagination. Appia translates 'plastique' by 'gestaltend' (1986 [1899]: 72). As the editor Marie-Louise Bablet-Hahn highlights in her

footnote to this passage, the word ‘gestaltend’ is more active than the French ‘plastique’ and means the action of giving form (1986: 424, note 45). Light animates objects and enables them to create themselves new forms, similarly to Nietzsche’s description of the process by which life generates new forms of life.

Appia conceived sets in which light can penetrate the space with its life: ‘L’éclairage nous donne ainsi le moyen d’extérioriser en quelque sorte une grande partie des couleurs et des formes que la peinture figeait sur ses toiles, et de les répandre vivantes dans l’espace’ (1986 [1904]: 349). Light thus creates a living space that surrounds the actor, who ‘se plonge lui-même dans cette lumière’ (1988 [1919]: 378), as in water. To the extent that he conceives a living space welcoming the actor’s flesh, Appia displays the desire to make the stage into a womb filled with light and thereby assuming the dimension of totality. Yet he also highlights the creative flexibility of stage lighting, which ‘possède tous les degrés de clarté, toutes les possibilités de couleurs, telle une palette; toutes les mobilités aussi; elle peut créer des ombres, répandre dans l’espace l’harmonie de ses vibrations’ (1954: 3). This richness calls for a playful use of all the possibilities offered by stage lighting. The space to which light gives life is therefore an area of playfulness, and the unity it receives from light is not symbiotic, but issues from the relation between several terms. To that extent, Appia’s living space is a transitional space. Finally, insofar as the unity thus created is one transported into light beyond the flesh, Appia’s model also displays features characterised above as belonging to spiritual love. So the art of staging as pioneered by Appia takes over the three forms of love I have distinguished: attachment to the birth complex, transitional space, and spiritual love. Light in its relation to darkness and in its playful variations expresses the birth complex while also opening a space in which it can be overcome.

Yet, as Nietzsche warned in regard to Wagner, the danger remains that an expression of the birth complex fails to channel it and therefore prevents rather than favours its overcoming. In fact, Appia progressively moved away from his conception of ‘active’ light to conceive instead scenic devices thanks to which audience and stage were immersed in the same diffuse light. Such a setting recalls Athenian theatre rather than Wagnerian opera. Appia’s collaboration with Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, the creator of eurhythmics — a new music pedagogy based on movement — in Hellerau, convinced him that the spectators should themselves take an active part to the spectacle. This led him to criticise the form of theatre in which the audience passively sit in darkness: ‘Jusqu’ici l’on ne demande du public que de la tranquillité et de l’attention. Pour l’y encourager on lui offre un siège commode et on le

plonge dans un clair-obscur favorable à l'état de complète passivité' (1988 [1911]: 150). The starting point is not anymore the actor's but the spectator's body: 'C'est de lui-même, de son propre corps, qu'il lui faut partir; c'est de ce corps que l'art vivant doit rayonner et se répandre dans l'espace pour lui conférer la vie; c'est ce corps qui commande aux proportions et à la lumière; c'est lui qui crée l'œuvre d'art' (150). Like Nietzsche celebrating Bizet's lively rhythms and his usefulness for the project to create oneself, Appia celebrates Jaques-Dalcroze's eurhythmics thanks to which the spectator becomes at once artist and artwork.

In Hellerau, spectators and performers shared a commonly lit space in which they were all active and magnified in their individuality while collaborating towards the same project, which corresponds not only to Athenian theatre but also to the Athenian ideal of democracy. By contrast, in the model previously developed by Appia when he was following in the wake of Wagner, the aim of staging is to 'imposer à toutes ces individualités la même vision' (1986 [1899]: 66). This corresponds to Wagnerian music: 'Pour elle le public n'est qu'une seule individualité' (68). The Wagnerian form of spectacle thus seems to constitute the audience into a symbiotic unity onto which one can force a specific vision.

Although Wagner aimed to recreate Athenian theatre, there is a fundamental difference between the symbiotic community his art favours and the relational society characteristic of democracy. In Athens, attending theatre was a civic duty. Theatre was seen as a means to train the citizens for the art of discussion; and according to Aristotle, theatre provides a 'catharsis', that is, it stimulates affects that could prevent the citizens from taking rational decisions, in order to better discharge these affects. Wagner rather saw his art as a way of recreating the lost unity of the German people; he stimulates affects but delays their discharge; and his operas are conducive to an immersive experience for the spectator, rather than to the critical distance on which the art of discussion can build. As Nietzsche argues, Wagner's operas excite anxieties and desires to the point that they can become dangerous for the audience, who, collectively indulging in regressive tendencies, may lose the ability to master themselves and fall prey to a dictator, which is precisely what Athenian theatre was meant to prevent. I would argue that the difference between both forms of theatre is reflected in the role both give to light, so that specific uses of stage lighting can be seen as sustaining specific political systems. In the Athenian theatre illuminated by daylight, Apollo dominates and sustains democracy; in Bayreuth sunk into semi-darkness, Dionysus leads the audience towards dangerous abysses.

Visions of the future

Although a detailed exploration of these questions would exceed the scope of the present thesis, I would suggest that the use we make of stage lighting techniques reveals much about our own society and about the way we want to shape it. Theatre houses today are typically equipped with oblong spotlights that can be manoeuvred at the rear and project light from an opening at the front, which gives them a phallic dimension: unsurprisingly, the field of lighting design is still predominantly masculine, although a few women have made their reputation, starting with Jean Rosenthal who pioneered the profession. In the recent technological developments, spotlights have been made more and more mobile and versatile, which arguably facilitates playfulness. Yet the introduction of gas-discharge and LED bulbs instead of the 'conventional' incandescent bulbs has meant the appearance on stage of a light that does not vibrate as incandescent light does, and which does not cover the full spectrum of colours. Projected onto the actors, this new kind of light does not magnify their flesh but rather makes anyone appear cadaveric. The blue light LED bulbs emit hurts the eyes of the audience members, which distances them from the stage and prevents their identification with the performers. Light thus loses its connection to life; and the space it creates, while perhaps playful, is not living anymore nor conducive to the communication between different subjectivities. I would therefore not qualify it as transitional. Preventing more than it stimulates the desire to see, such a light is not erotic either. I would rather associate it with the stage of polymorphous perversity recognised by Freud, in which the child (in a theatre, the spectator) is exposed to stimuli it cannot process coming from various sources. Contemporary stage lighting typically provides the audience with visual excitations that have a fragmentary effect, instead of sustaining life and unity. It forecloses empathy in the audience rather than opening them to intersubjectivity. This corresponds to a society that facilitates immediate gratifications, more than the constitution of an integrated and empathetic self.

Besides reflecting society, stage lighting also reflects our vision of modernity. In science-fiction movies as well as in corporate buildings, modernity is typically signified by a cold and stark light shed on inorganic materials, such as glass and metal, and on gadgets that replace the human workforce. By contrast, a hotel that positions itself as traditional will typically display a warmer light and organic materials, such as wood and fabrics, while having the clients be served by proper people. The representation of modernity thus builds on a break with the flesh, which itself serves to signify the break with the past. Ultimately, the

flesh that is erased in the representation of modernity is the flesh of the mother. Our most ancient experience indeed is that of the union with the mother's flesh. Therefore, to signify that we have moved away from the past, we exhibit that we have moved away from the flesh. Instead of maternal properties, many an object supposed to pass off as modern is given phallic properties. The representation of modernity thus amounts to a denial of the link to the mother and to a glorification of masculinity. By contrast, both Nietzsche and Wagner sharply criticised modernity while fostering the ambition to create something new (Deathridge 2008b), an attitude that corresponds to their appropriation of the maternal position. Although this cannot be shown in more detail here, the birth complex thus has impact on our relation to modernity and is a driving force in our attempts to shape society.

I believe that theatre could be used in such a way as to discharge the birth complex and strengthen transitional space, which would hopefully be beneficial for women, favour inter-subjectivity and sustain democracy. In this, I take over Aristotle's conception of catharsis, which serves to establish the positive role of theatre in society. However, I also take seriously Nietzsche's claim that theatre can potentially harm a society, not only benefiting it as is nowadays commonly assumed. Of course, complete freedom is required for artists, and it is certainly not politically correct to pronounce judgements in this field. Yet I contend that some productions foster positive tendencies in society, while others awaken dangerous drives, and that it may be important to be aware of this if we want to build a better society. In my view, a staging can reach a catharsis of both the anxiety emanating from birth trauma and the desire to return to the womb. If it stimulates them without providing the possibility of a discharge, both remain frustrated, which may lead ultimately to misogyny and to a violent society. By contrast, a staging that enables audience members to work through the birth complex and provides a transitional space in which they may overcome birth helps them to live better, individually and in society. As much as the art of directing actors, the art of using lighting is key to achieving this. Actors and lighting: today again, the union of flesh and light can bring a new life to the stage.

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I use the following abbreviations:

AC	<i>Der Anti-Christ</i>
EH	<i>Ecce Homo</i>
FWI	<i>Die fröhliche Wissenschaft</i>
FWA	<i>Der Fall Wagner</i>
GM	<i>Zur Genealogie der Moral</i>
GT	<i>Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geist der Musik</i>
GD	<i>Götzen-Dämmerung</i>
JGB	<i>Jenseits von Gut und Böse</i>
MA	<i>Menschliches, Allzumenschliches</i>
NW	<i>Nietzsche contra Wagner</i>
Z	<i>Also sprach Zarathustra</i>
KSA	<i>Nachgelassene Fragmente</i>

Wagner

I use the following abbreviations for Wagner's operas:

FH *Der fliegende Holländer*, ed. by Egon Voss (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2004)

TI *Tristan und Isolde*, ed. by Egon Voss (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2003)

R *Das Rheingold*, ed. by Egon Voss (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999)

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