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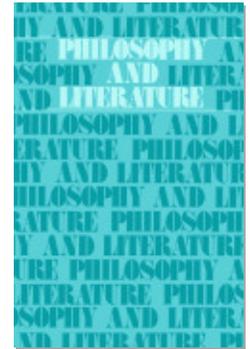
*The Wagner Companion* (review)

D. D. Todd

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*The Wagner Companion*, edited by Peter Burbidge and Richard Sutton; 462 pp. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979, \$9.95.

This book should be in the library of everyone interested in Wagner, music, nineteenth-century intellectual history, and German literature and philosophy. But it has faults and omissions.

There is no detailed analysis of the music-dramas. The preface promises a second volume; presumably this gap will be filled there. The indexes are skimpy; I found them virtually useless. The bibliography is helpful, but omits works which should be in any up-to-date bibliography, e.g., the English translation of Cosima Wagner's *Diaries*; the recent re-issue of Newman's *Wagner Nights*; Derek Watson's new biography; the English translation of Carl Dahlhaus's *Richard Wagner's Music-Dramas*; Deryck Cooke's *I Saw The World End*; and the English translation of Curt von Westernhagen's two-volume biography. No work by Theodor Adorno is listed.

The book is divided into three sections, each containing four essays covering background studies, Wagner as dramatist and composer, Wagner as polemicist and theorizer, Wagner criticism, and the phenomenon of Bayreuth. Peter Burbidge's "Richard Wagner: Man and Artist" is a model of its kind. The essays on the intellectual, literary, and musical background are good, but readers of this journal will find Michael Black's essay on the literary background particularly informative. Lucy Beckett's "Wagner and His Critics" is a crisp and informative piece of work. But she gives too short a shrift to Hanslick's objections to Wagner's efforts to force non-musical content into his music; there are serious philosophical issues here, and the issue is far from settled, either philosophically or historically. She also fails to discuss the important efforts of Theodor Adorno to come to terms with Wagner as, for good and ill, the *primus motor* of modern German culture. Her discussions of Nietzsche and Mann as critics are excellent and, rightly, she awards the palm to Mann as the more sensitive and sensible of the two. Curt von Westernhagen's "Wagner as a Writer" is informative, but spoiled by a tendency to try to clean up Wagner more than is possible. Wagner may well have regarded his *Das Judentum in der Musik* (1850) as only "one of his occasional pieces," but if so, this is only one more case of Wagner's lifelong habit of moral self-deception. The truth is, Wagner was an obsessed, nasty, brutal, and brutish anti-semitic, and nothing redeems him for it. Fortunately, Wagner's anti-semitism is totally absent from his art, and it was his art, and not his prejudices, which he contributed to Western civilization and culture. Far too much goes on being made of the fact that Wagner was such a despicable person.

Michael Tanner's "The Total Work of Art" is the only really philosophical piece in the book, and it is superb. It should be read only after the other essays have been thoroughly assimilated because it assumes an immense knowledge of the sort the other essays provide. It also has its faults. For example, his scornful judgment of Richard Strauss as incorrigibly mediocre is unjustified.

There are too many such disdainful and oracular pronouncements in this essay. It is also marred by Tanner's attempt to cover too much territory at one go; one has to have marathon powers to follow him all the way.

Unlike critics who focus either virtually exclusively on Wagner's music or superficially on the libretti as literary works, Tanner takes the philosophical content of Wagner's *oeuvre* seriously. He finds a (not *the*) key to the proper understanding of Wagner in what he argues persuasively is Wagner's refusal of transcendent redemption. Tanner's handling of this critical concept is stunningly skillful, and by its means he is able to unify and integrate material which many other Wagner critics have found incoherent or inconsistent. *Parsifal*, for example, became the capstone of Wagner's lifelong labors, and not, as many have thought, a bit of Christian religiosity in Wagner's spiritually relapsing senility. Tanner's way of interpreting Wagner gores many oxen, and will, no doubt, occasion great furies. I look forward eagerly to the publication of his forthcoming Cambridge University Press book, *Wagner, Nietzsche and Tragedy*.

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

D. D. TODD

*Literature and Negation*, by Maire Jaanus Kurrik; xi & 276 pp. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979, \$22.50.

Not too long ago a discussion of philosophy in literature would involve one of two things: either a survey of philosophical views held by characters in novels, or an analysis of the literary style of some particular well-chosen philosopher who embellished his or her text with literary niceties such as metaphor and rhythmic prose. In *Literature and Negation*, Maire Jaanus Kurrik continues to a deeper level the work of mining down this peripheral and glancing contact between the two disciplines, taking it to an intersection where ontology, metaphysics, and epistemology do not just inform the opinions and actions of characters in books, but are involved in the very shape and aim of literary construction.

To do this, Kurrik covers a staggering amount of territory. She summarizes virtually every philosophic view of negation of any significance since Plato and then adds short correlative discussions of well-known literary works such as *Anna Karenina*, *Middlemarch*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Emma*, to name just a few. The form of the literary work and the underlying project which it realizes are seen in the context of the philosophical problem of negation and affirmation.

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, according to Kurrik, the prevailing concern is with the struggle, through the negation of the flesh, the devil, and mortality, either to a final Christian mystical affirmation (as in *Paradise Regained*) or to the terminal negation of suicide (as in *Timon of Athens* or Racine's *Phaedra*.) Turning from God, the nineteenth-century novel