2
Twisting Free With/Of Wagner

Through Wagner modernity speaks most intimately, concealing neither its good nor its evil – having forgotten all sense of shame.¹
Nihilism. It is ambiguous.²

– Friedrich Nietzsche

The ‘actuality’ of Wagner

In spite of the manifold divergence between Adorno and Heidegger, each converged upon the figure of Richard Wagner in the second half of the 1930s. Adorno’s book-length essay In Search of Wagner comprises an explicit treatment of the composer. But Wagner is no less fundamental to Heidegger’s lecture course on Nietzsche, ‘The Will to Power as Art’ (1936). This coincidence might initially be explained away as a continuation of the divergence, between the one who fled Nazism and the one who supported it. In Search of Wagner comprises, Adorno will later state, a search for the ‘source of Hitler’s ideology’. Heidegger’s assessment of Wagner is mediated through his reading of Nietzsche. As the English-language editor of these lectures puts matters, ‘Take the thinker of the “blond beast”. Add another who is a card-carrying member of the Nazi Party. The result bodes ill for the matter of thinking that is Heidegger’s Nietzsche.’³ Add an anti-Semitic composer, and the matter does not seem to bode any better.

Several factors contradict this thesis of continued divergence between Adorno and Heidegger, however. Most obviously, Heidegger opposes Wagner and Wagnerism in his lectures. The phenomenon of Wagnerism was in decline during the 1930s, even though the composer had become sanctified by Hitler with the approval of Wagner’s descendants. In his
Twisting Free With/Of Wagner

posthumously published interview with *Die Spiegel* (given in 1966 but published in 1976), Heidegger retrospectively situated his break with Nazism within these lectures: ‘Anyone who had ears to hear heard in these lectures a confrontation with National Socialism.’\(^4\) As ever, we must be extremely careful not to take Heidegger at his word where political statements are concerned. For Richard Wolin, this ‘confrontation with National Socialism’ was a confrontation with Heidegger’s own National Socialism – without taking responsibility for it.\(^5\) Nevertheless, the lectures do confront the biological-vitalist interpretation of Nietzsche that had attempted to legitimate racism. By the time of the last *Nietzsche* lectures, ‘European Nihilism’ (1940), and apparently prompted by Germany’s occupation of France, Heidegger would implicate both Nietzsche and Nazism within the catastrophe of European nihilism itself. The grounds for this implication do not concern politics as such, but rather military technology:

> It is not enough that one possess tanks, airplanes, and communication apparatus; nor is it enough that one has at one’s disposal men who can service such things... What is needed is a form of mankind that is from top to bottom equal to the unique fundamental essence of modern technology and its metaphysical truth; that is to say, one that lets itself be entirely dominated by the essence of technology precisely in order to steer and deploy individual technological processes and possibilities.\(^6\)

By 1940, therefore, it is possible to say that Adorno remains closer to Nietzsche than does Heidegger. Indeed, Nietzsche is crucial to Adorno’s reading of Wagner, by way of Horkheimer. Where Heidegger opposed Wagner, Adorno’s position is self-characterised as ‘ambivalent’, in the sense of ‘attraction and repulsion’. The critical Adorno is more sympathetic to (the reactionary) Wagner than was (the reactionary) Heidegger. Even this statement is complicated by the history and reception of Wagner – the left Hegelian turned student of Schopenhauer. Given the tensions between Adorno and Heidegger, this intellectual triangle remains intriguing – but what are the philosophical stakes of this old debate today? What is the ‘actuality’ (to use a false friend) of Wagner? Specifically, the problem of the relationship between capitalist modernity and the will lies at the heart of each Wagner study. But generally, at stake is nothing less than a rethinking of subjectivity itself. This chapter will claim that Adorno and Heidegger each address this issue through an understanding of modernity as being, in crucial respects, musical. There can be no waiting (for a better society) without willing