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Treasure and the desire to know: Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and Anthony Burgess's *The Worm and the Ring*

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“But Error is the mother of Knowledge; and the history of the birth of Knowledge out of Error is the history of the human race, from the myths of primal ages down to the present day.” [1] With these words, Wagner begins *The Art-Work of the Future*, written in 1849, about the time he produced the first drafts of his masterwork, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. In 1961, Anthony Burgess drew on the *Ring* to write *The Worm and the Ring*, recasting the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* within the context of an English grammar school. On reading Burgess's novel, one cannot help reconsidering Wagner's opera and viewing it first and foremost as a symbolic network of multifarious epistemological itineraries. As a *milieu* of scientific thought and scholarly knowledge, the setting of the school allows Burgess to reinterpret the meaning of the treasure in Wagner.

Obviously enough, treasure primarily calls to mind pecuniary symbols — the quest for riches itself evoking the quest for power. The idea of treasure also implies burial or *interment*. And even though treasure conjures up a whole array of connotations pertaining to natural resources — ore, lode or even the myth of cornucopia — treasure is rarely of purely natural provenance. It is more of a human construct, either because a natural deposit has been transformed by the human (remodelled or hidden) or because it has been culturally determined to be valuable. Thus, treasure seems to be an intrinsically anthropological object — and doubly so. On the one hand, it calls for a particular craftsmanship and a specific action operated on a natural object. On the other, as a human construct, treasure becomes an intellectual entity, which may be evidenced by its arbitrary nature. That is to say, an object may possess considerable value in one cultural situation and be totally valueless in another.

The idea of human transformation is extremely important in the context of this study. Wagnerian metals take their full value only after they have been turned into a ring or a sword. But the idea of a hidden hoard also implies a code, secret or something else that renders access to the desired object difficult or impossible — yet another human intervention. Consequently, often enough, treasure narratives deal with illegibility and the need to decipher a code or uncover a mystery. Because the access to the precious object is barred, encoded or conditioned by magical formulae or specific predispositions on the part of its seeker, the quest for treasure is on par with rites of passage.

Etymologically speaking, the word treasure (from lat. *thesaurus*, gr. Θησαυρός) indicates the act of putting aside, accumulating wealth or amassing. This meaning is still preserved in French where the verb *thésauriser* means *to pile up*. But the idea of accumulation of riches goes together with the notion of hidden wealth. In Russian, for instance, there are two words for *treasure* – one, *клад* (klad) is probably akin to the verb *to put* (*класть*), hence suggesting accumulation or collection; the other, *сокровище* (sokrovistche) is related to the verb *to hide* (*сокрыть*), thus closer to the English *hoard* or German *hort*. There is a distinction between a hidden, accumulated hoard, and a stolen or fought-for hoard (English *booty*, *loot*, or *plunder*, French *butin*). In Polish, there exists only one word — *skarb* — which seems to have stemmed from the word *skrb* (woe or sorrow). This astonishing origin seems to indicate that, besides the common associations related to treasure and implying a hidden trove, an accumulated pile of precious objects, or a hard-earned trophy, there exists a negative value, perhaps resulting from myths of malediction or curses.

Hidden, engulfed, stolen, or lost, treasures imply complex networks of relationships between those who are initiated and those who are not. The first group is separated from the

second by sophisticated itineraries and rites of passage with oracles, spells, curses and maledictions. The initiates must resort to cunning and guile to outwit opponents and persevere through traps, transgressions and dangerous expeditions. I argue that such networks may be interpreted as symbolical epistemological itineraries, often as allegories of quests for knowledge, and that the treasure in both Wagner's *Ring* and Burgess's *The Worm and the Ring* may be considered to carry such a meaning.

First, I will consider the ways in which Burgess transposes Wagner's *Ring* into fiction. I will argue that Burgess's text is predicated on a multi-layered intertextuality whose strata build up a clockwork of references to the Wagnerian *oeuvre*. Second, I will demonstrate that the *Ring* may be interpreted as an epistemological itinerary and that *The Worm and the Ring* follows suit, presenting a polysemous symbolism related to knowledge.

I BURGESS'S SUBVERSIVE ORTHODOXY

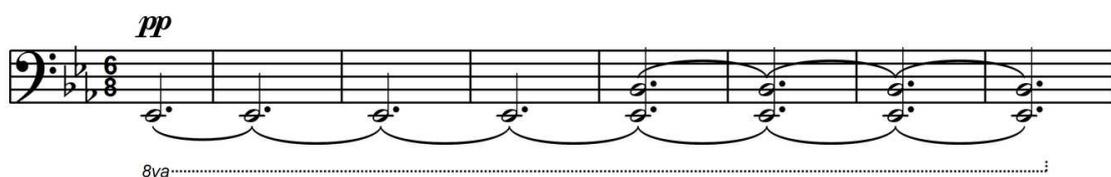
Because of its musico-literary and intertextual aspects, Burgess's novel may be considered a case of *musicalization of fiction*: a work of literature drawing on a given musical form or borrowing musical techniques. Werner Wolf explained the theory of musicalization in his critical work *The Musicalization of Fiction*. *The Worm and the Ring* does show some structural features akin to musical techniques, and it may thus be compared to at least two other novels Burgess wrote in close relation to musical structures, *Napoleon Symphony* (1974) and *Mozart and the Wolf Gang* (1991). Nevertheless, the relationship between Burgess's work and Wagner's work seems to be particularly intricate, relying on a multilayered mechanism of interartistic and intertextual relationships that must be considered. *The Worm and the Ring* does not simply borrow a structure or transform a plot. It is a complex literary work in which music and text intermingle. Moreover, Wagner's *Ring* is already a musico-literary work, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, because Wagner himself borrowed and forged different sources into one. Therefore, Burgess's novel is an interdisciplinary text drawing on an already interdisciplinary project.

Hence, theoretically, it should be possible to recognize different cases of borrowing. Burgess's novel may well relate to the libretto itself, thus showing intertextuality proper — a relationship between two texts. But it may also relate to music, a relationship that belongs to *intermediality*, i.e., a work of art implying different media in its creation. It is possible to draw a typology of different ways in which Wagnerian inspiration permeates Burgess's text. I prefer to speak of *undertexts* to signify that each layer is not necessarily immediately recognizable, that it is not independent of other layers, and, finally, that some of the elements are mock borrowings or subversions that undermine the Wagnerian undertext in some way.

Topical or symbolic undertexts

This type of intertextuality is at work from the very start of the novel. The *Ring* opens on the Rhine scene. The work begins with one note, E flat extending through several bars and symbolizing the beginning of the universe. The genesis starts with *pianissimo* dynamics and an extremely static and almost inaudible sonorous mass:

Example 1.



From the very beginning, it seems clear that the novel draws on thematic or symbolical fragments of the *Ring*. Most frequently, the fragmentary nature of the intermedial relationship comes to the foreground in the form of clues or allusions to Wagner’s work. The following table presents only some of the allusions and their possible correspondence with the *Ring*:

BURGESS	WAGNER
<p>“Above the easing rain a shining bow stretched, the colours neatly filed as on some garish cosmetic chart, arched and shameless, a covenant.” (Burgess, 78)</p> <p>“Ennis played, on the new Bechstein, a kind of limping march of his own composition. The staff hoods gave them a certain transient rainbow dignity.” (Burgess, 79)</p>	<p>In <i>Das Rheingold</i>, Wotan, creates a rainbow to access his new abode, the castle Valhalla.</p> <p>In the <i>Worm and the Ring</i>, Woolton, the headmaster, celebrates the opening of a new school.</p> <p>In both cases, the rainbow accompanies the inauguration of the new building.</p>
<p>“Lodge, pipe still going lovely, dipped into the gap between Rich’s jacket and more worn pullover and pulled out like a chestnut from the fire, a little book in blue leatherette.” (Burgess, 54)</p>	<p>In <i>Das Rheingold</i>, the god of fire, Loge, gives Wotan advice. Wotan has promised to give Freia to the giants who built Valhalla. Loge will go to the underworld in order to get back the stolen gold and use it against the giants and Alberich.</p> <p>In <i>The Worm and the Ring</i>, Lodge is associated with chemistry. In the passage, the simile alludes to fire.</p>
<p>“The bells now inaugurated a brief mad period of noise. Into this solid cacophony masters’ voices tried to pierce like hammered nails.” (Burgess, 58)</p> <p>“The world of disease, really an underground world, went on alive and bright and bustling under the lamps.” (Burgess, 157)</p>	<p>In <i>Das Rheingold</i>, Wagner makes use of anvils symbolizing the slavery of the Nibelungen.</p> <p>The passage seems to allude to the dichotomy of slaves/masters as well as to the Wagnerian anvil leitmotiv.</p>
<p>“In the cosy smoke of the fashionable bar of the Dragon, Dr Gardner stood with comfortable businessmen, men of his own class.” (Burgess, 73)</p>	<p>In <i>Siegfried</i>, the dragon, the transmogrified giant Fafner, keeps the treasure.</p> <p>In <i>The Worm and the Ring</i>, Gardner relates to Fafner, and the bar stands for the dragon. (The word <i>bar</i> is itself closely related to Wagner’s <i>oeuvre</i> because it signifies the ancient musical form Wagner uses in his operas.)</p>
<p>““When birds sing, Dad, is it meant to be really a kind of music?”</p> <p>‘Well’, said Howarth cautiously, ‘it’s a kind of self-expression, I suppose. But human music’s meaningless, isn’t it? Bird song always means something. It means things like ‘Come here, I’m waiting for you,’ or ‘I’ve just had a very good feed of worms,’ or it means sexual desire.’” (Burgess, 104)</p>	<p>In the third part of the <i>Ring</i>, having wounded the dragon, Siegfried drinks some of its blood and gets to understand the language of birds, which warn him.</p> <p>Burgess alludes to that episode, turning it into an overall meditation on language and musical meaning.</p>
<p>“rubbish wallah” (Burgess, 218)</p> <p>“there’s no smoke without fire” (Burgess, 223)</p> <p>“Fire sprang” (Burgess, 225)</p>	<p><i>Twilight of the Gods (Götterdämmerung)</i> finishes with Valhalla engulfed by fire and the treasure returning to the Rhine.</p> <p>The end of <i>The Worm and the Ring</i> gradually prepares this cyclical turn through different puns on fire or on the decline of gods.</p>

The reader is thus presented with a web of scattered references, puns and allusions. There appears an underlying text — an intermedial and intertextual *undertext* — whose first

manifestation is a network woven from more or less explicit hints. The mechanism of rewriting takes the form of punctual or local references that build up the first type of undertext. The novel turns intertextuality into a symbolical and allusive codification.

Narrative undertexts

It is quite difficult to draw a net wedge between what belongs to the dispersive network of references and what may be qualified as a *narrative undertext*. This second technique of rewriting in *The Worm and the Ring* takes up and rewrites entire chunks of the Wagnerian plot. The main difference between the *thematic undertext* and the *narrative undertext* in Burgess is quantitative — the former is limited to scattered intertextual elements, whereas the latter makes use of extended rewriting of the plot. Both types naturally dovetail and intermingle.

In this sense, the novel builds a network of correspondences with the characters of the *Ring*. The young girls in the school yard at the beginning of the novel tally with the young naiads who keep the treasure of the Rhine and enchant those who get close to it in order to distract their attention from the gold. Their names — Woglinde, Wellgunde, Flosshilde — are transformed but still recognizable — Linda, Thelma, and Flossie. Alberich, the king of the dwarves, the Nibelungen, is incarnated in the novel as Albert Rich. The headmaster of the school, Woolton, reminds us of Wotan, the god of gods, and Veronica Woolton represents Wotan's spouse, Fricka. The parallelisms between the works thus operate through onomastics (mostly hypocoristic transformation), and, more precisely, through paronomasia (as in the case of Lodge, the chemistry teacher who incarnates Loge, the god of fire, or Miss Fry whose name echoes that of Freia, the goddess of youth).

Moreover, it is also possible to find parallels between the plot of the *Ring* and the novel. For example, Christopher Howarth has some traits of Siegfried; his adultery with Hilda recalls Siegfried's love for Brünhilde. Adulterous bonds create a rich echo with the manifold Wagnerian transgressions. Thus, intertextual elements go far beyond sheer symbolical correspondences and become plot transferrals. Numerous plot chunks borrowed from the *Ring* can thus be found in *The Worm and the Ring*. Some of them have already been mentioned as allusions, but they can be extended to entire episodes. The key event in the *Ring* — Alberich outwitting the naiads and stealing the gold — may be reconstructed from the scattered network of allusions. In the *Rhinegold*, the theft is first associated with eroticism: the opening sequence is a play of seduction between Alberich and the naiads. But the naiads poke fun at Alberich; he slips and stumbles, and he finally forfeits love. In Burgess, Albert Rich first envisages the sexual potential of the young girls:

By God, he would have one of them, which one didn't matter. His little pug-face was flushed with a boy's lust. It wasn't right, it wasn't fair, the whole system was wrong in allowing them to flaunt their country-girl breasts [...]. And it was sex all day long, damn it, wasn't it, whichever way you looked at it. (Burgess, 4)

The girls make fun of him ("Your legs aren't long enough, Rich!" (Burgess, 4)), and the dance-like chasing and fleeing between them soon stops being merely "concupiscent" and "modulate[s] swiftly to the vengeful" (Burgess, 4). As to cursing itself, some of it appears as early as the incipit: "the raincoated dwarfs screamed their valedictions of insult" (Burgess, 4); "Everybody, damn it" (Burgess, 4). It becomes possible to reconstruct parts of the Wagnerian narrative within Burgess's novel out of isolated fragments.

Structural undertexts

The third correspondence between the works occurs on the level of structural elements. Like the *Ring*, *The Worm and the Ring* is organized into four parts. Otherwise, however, the number of divisions in every part of Burgess's work seems to diverge from

Wagner's. The intermedial comparison of the macrostructure between the works is less relevant than some internal, microstructural elements.

Burgess's novel unfolds two other types of structural undertexts: a) a motivic undertext and b) a phonetic or prosodic undertext. Both appertain to the microstructure, and both have something to do with the Wagnerian leitmotiv.

At first sight, it seems rather difficult to single out specific motives in Burgess that could be at one with those in Wagner. If defined as a recurring musical phrase, as mere repetition, the leitmotiv is scant in Burgess. Perhaps, one may point to the recurring phrase, taken from a poem by Martin Luther: "Ich kann nicht anders." But that takes into account only the signifier-part of the motivic function.

If one focuses on the signified-part of motifs, the novel seems more pregnant with structural parallels. The importance of the signified is precisely the basis of the Wagnerian leitmotiv, which is supposed to denote objects, characters or ideas. Added to that is the crucial role played by the temporal nature of the Wagnerian leitmotiv. In my opinion, the way Wagner deals with time through the leitmotiv is more significant than mere repetition or denotation. Indeed, the literary or linguistic nature of the sign in Wagner results in a specific time-treatment whose main consequence is the capacity of a motif to refer simultaneously to the past and the future. Often enough, a motif tells the listener what is on the point of happening before it happens or, conversely, reminds the spectator of what has already happened. Thus, the leitmotiv seems to imply, at least partially, the literary dynamics of anachronies (prolepsis, analepsis). In *Das Rheingold*, to take an instance, Loge comes and discusses possible solutions to free Freia, and listeners suddenly hear the motif related to the Rhine. The answer to the dilemma is clear: it is the gold that will be used to liberate Freia. The motif foreshadows what is to come and reminds us of what has already happened.

In much the same way, Burgess builds up a motivic undertext closely related to puns and allusions to the *Ring*. The difference between the sheer pun and the motivic one is that the latter carries a precise meaning related to what is actually taking place. It thus becomes a commentary on what is happening. The above-mentioned fire motif at the end of the novel demonstrates this mechanism. Another example may be that of water. In *The Worm and the Ring*, just as in Wagner, the substantial cause and origin keeps reappearing in the underlayers of the text. When Lodge asks Rich questions about the stolen treasure, puns on liquids are provided in the interstices on the text, so that the undertext becomes an intermedial leitmotiv, referring both to Wagner's use of temporality in the leitmotiv and to the textual temporality itself. ("Rich heard the waters of inspiration lapping again" (Burgess, 51); "In the w.c. next door water sang explosively." (Burgess, 55)). Similarly, when, on coming home, Howarth finds his wife, Veronica, in the company of Dr Leary and suspects adultery, readers are once again reminded of the original transgression ("Glass in hand, he went to make water, the lavatory-bathroom being on the ground floor." (Burgess, 90); "Heracliteans. You know, *Panta rhei*. They like to see things flowing." (Burgess, 92)).

It is noteworthy that the leitmotiv in Wagner and Burgess carries a temporal meaning before denoting anything else. It is also important to remark that in constructing his leitmotiv in the footsteps of Wagner, Burgess makes use of an eminently literary technique. In other words, in keeping with intermediality and the musicalization of fiction, the technique resorts to literary and linguistic means. It thus undergoes a detour of sorts — what Wagner strived to introduce in music (the specificity of Wagnerian meaning) is restored in this literary text through music.

This becomes even more obvious with leitmotifs related to intertextuality proper. Indeed, some of the quotations in Burgess's novel tend to recur, as though they were leitmotifs themselves. Howarth keeps referring to Rilke, and Lodge is a staunch admirer of Elizabethan poetry. And because it may be considered both as a commentary on the action

and as a proleptic or analeptic temporal mechanism, the cited text becomes akin to the specificity of the Wagnerian leitmotif. Lodge's recall of a line from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* [2], for example, is not simply a quotation — it preserves a link with Wagner through water and fire (“Light bubbled down, full fathom five. Thy father lies. Of his bones are phosphor made” (Burgess, 48)). Some intertextual citations are thus portent of a) their meaning proper b) the meaning from their context and from their (re)occurrence and c) the implicit intermedial meaning linked to Wagner.

The final mechanism of the undertext in *The Worm and the Ring* is at one with phonetic sublayers of the text. As in his other novels, Burgess resorts not only to puns toying with meaning, but also to a certain musicality of the word, playing with the acoustic potential of language. Sound-repetition, alliteration, assonance and paronomasia are the tools of Burgess's technique. Here the sonorous aspect of words takes on a specific dimension, contributing to the construction of a phonetic intermedial undertext. One example is the recurrence of the sound [ɔ:], naturally linked to the Latin *aurum*, gold. Puns on this sound are galore, echoing the English *or* (gold in heraldics), *orb* (as in a king's orb), *ore* (as metal ore), or even the French *or* (gold). The main idea of both works — the stolen treasure — is thus constantly recalled to the reader through a phonetic undertext. Quite frequently, it is possible to recognize a specific unfolding of such a *phonetic signature*: 1° some music or sound is mentioned in the vicinity of the phonetic undertext (musical allusion), 2° the phonetic undertext is reinforced by aid of a pun on Wagner or the *Ring*, 3° so that the phonetic undertext becomes easily recognizable (often underlined through alliteration as well). The following examples illustrate this underlying structure [3]:

“Albert Rich and his rain reflection sloshed through the puddles after the three giggling <u>fourth-form</u> girls.” (Burgess, 3)
“She was Veronica's sole luxury, her strip-lighted cocktail cabinet, her <u>Dior original</u> .” (Burgess, 13)
“His ears drumming to the <u>corn-corn-corning</u> .” (Burgess, 172)
“Howarth moved on to a café where billiard-balls clacked and an <u>accor</u> rdion on the radio wheezed a fast waltz.” (Burgess, 172)
“a <u>thorn</u> of ice hit a tooth like a tuning- <u>fork</u> ” (Burgess, 175)

Once again, the technique carries multiple meanings. Once again, it is closely linked to Wagner. On the one hand, the phonetic undertext becomes motivic in itself. On the other hand, it so happens that Wagner himself attached great importance to alliteration in his libretto [4], so that the numerous sound-repetitive devices in Burgess seem to hint at Wagner's technique as well (“the tiny tinny triangles of tin tabernacles of ten or more different sects tintinnabulated.” (Burgess, 190)), not merely as a prosodic technique, but as a means of inserting a secondary meaning — another undertext.

Intermediality and subversion

With its close relationship to Wagner, Burgess's novel subverts the apparent orthodoxy of the intermedial link.

A number of transferrals from Wagner to Burgess seem to reveal a mechanism of false correspondences. The girls wound Albert Rich in the eye, whereas it is Wotan who has lost his left eye in Wagner. If Albert Rich stumbles in the incipit just as Alberich does in *Das Rheingold*, it is also Woolton's mother who stumbles and is hurt at the opening of the new school. In this way, the metamorphosed archetypes are unstable. The archetype becomes a floating attribute that may well pass from one character to another. Such seems to be the case with the role played by Siegfried: Howarth seem to incarnate some of Siegfried's traits, but so does his son, Peter. Through such subversive elements, the novel keeps a number of

Wagnerian elements at bay, but it also plays with the comic and the ludic for which Burgess is renowned.

It seems essential that the novel be considered in terms of the multi-faceted metamorphosis of Wagner's work. First, it should be remembered that it is not entirely a project of the musicalization of fiction. Burgess seems to have abandoned the systematic *rapprochement* between music and literature [5]. Second, there exists a degree of ambiguity between the musical and the literary. And such ambivalence is already present in Wagner's work. The most obvious token of the blurred frontier between the arts appears with the leitmotiv, which functions both as a musical object, predicated on repetition, and as a literary object, closely related to linguistic signification. Finally, the nature of the transformation of Wagnerian elements in *The Worm and the Ring* may be understood in different ways: the notion of dispersal is essential, but also those of subversion, condensation or even miniaturization. This casts a different, modern light on the *Ring*, and gives the most crucial symbol of the work — the gold, the treasure, and its cognates — a new meaning in Burgess's novel.

II THE TREASURE AS KNOWLEDGE

To approach a modern meaning of the *Ring*, Burgess highlights the symbolism linked to knowledge. If it is to be interpreted in this way, treasure becomes a symbol of a usurped but easy path to information, reminiscent of the biblical apple. In that case, *The Worm and the Ring* appears to be an enhanced mode of the epistemological meaning of the *Ring*.

The epistemological itinerary of the *Ring*

The Rhine maidens – Woglinde, Wellgunde and Flosshilde – protect the Rhinegold. The opening of *Das Rheingold* shows the first, natural state of the treasure that, symbolically enough, emits a luminous aura. If interpreted as a source of knowledge sheltered by Nature, the scene unveils the first stage of the epistemological itinerary of the *Ring*. But the secret is uncovered, bringing about the first epistemological transgression. Alberich, the dwarf, is intrigued by the glow and asks the Rhine maidens about it. Heedless of danger, the Rhine maidens tell him the hoard can be turned into a ring which will give its owner the power to rule the universe on condition that he forswears love.

The first stage of the epistemological itinerary of *The Ring* consists in the discovery of the treasure, the breach of secrecy, the theft, the forsworn love and the malediction. The association of gold and light (vision) seems to justify the epistemological interpretation of the treasure (“Nicht weiß der Alb von des Goldes Auge [...]?” [6]).

The second scene reveals the second stage of the epistemological itinerary. Valhalla, the new castle, is finished, and Wotan, the ruler of the gods, has to pay the giants (Fasolt and Fafner) who have built it. Wotan promised to give them Freia, Fricka's sister and goddess of eternal youth. The giants remind Wotan of his promise. It must be kept because it has been engraved in Wotan's spear along with other laws and contracts, the runes. It stands for written, official, and compelling knowledge that has to be obeyed. Nonetheless, Wotan tries to circumvent the document, which suggests the second epistemological transgression — Wotan's knowledge and might are cursed (“Lichtsohn du, | leicht gefügter! | hör und hüte dich: | Verträgen halte Treu'! | Was du bist, | bist du nur durch Verträge: | bedungen ist, | wohl bedacht deine Macht | bist weiser du | als witzig wir sind, | bandest uns Freie zum Frieden du: | all deinem Wissen fluch' ich, | fliehe weit deinen Frieden, | weißt du nicht offen, | ehrlich und frei | Verträgen zu wahren die Treu'!” [7]).

The scene also constitutes the second revelation of the treasure — Loge tells Wotan about the stolen gold and its power. The power the ring can bring seems to be inscribed on it as though it were a text of law. (“Beute-Runen berge sein roter Glanz” [8]). The hoard is thus

likened to the treaties of law. The metamorphosis needs a magic formula, a text (“Ein Runenzauber | Zwingt das Gold zum Reif. | Keiner kennt ihn; | doch einer übt ihn leicht, | der sel’ger Lieb’ entsagt.” [9]). To *activate* the treasure, an unknown text is necessary unless love be foresworn. The gods begin to covet the hoard themselves, and the treasure becomes a potential way of freeing Freia. But theft must be committed (“Durch Raub!” [10]). Therefore, the treasure and the knowledge or the skill guaranteeing its power begin to undergo a series of thefts and transgressions (“Was ein Dieb stahl, | das stiehlest du dem Dieb” [11]).

The next step of the itinerary is Alberich’s brother’s complaint. Mime tells Wotan and Loge about the toil and slavery of the Nibelungen. The stolen treasure, associated with slavery, turns into a theft of knowledge and skill. Mime has forged the Tarnhelm, the invisible cloak. Once again a symbolical object tells us something about knowledge itself — how power is wielded more efficaciously when knowledge is narrowed down to one possessor only and how it operates better when it is kept secret. Knowledge appertains to wit and guile. Wotan and Loge outwit Mime and Alberich.

Next, when the ring has been cursed by Alberich, the gods engage in commerce with giants to get Freia back. The hoard acquires a commercial value. So does the goddess. The giants want as much gold as will cover Freia entirely, but when she is covered with gold, one of the giants spots an empty space (Ritze), and the ring must be used to fill it up. The crack within the whole symbolizes the incompleteness of the treasure unless it be returned to the Rhine. This idea of incompleteness accompanies many valuable objects in the *Ring* and casts a singular light on knowledge. At this stage, two truths become obvious: Fafner kills Fasolt, proving that the curse on the ring is unavoidable, and Loge knows that the twilight of the gods has begun (“Ihrem Ende eilen sie zu” [12]).

In the first act of *Die Walküre*, the epistemological itinerary is predicated on identity discoveries. Siegmund and Sieglinde gradually become aware of their kinship — they are both Wälungs. Through mirroring effects, mere intuition turns into certainty. This discovery is brought about through light, just as the treasure was discovered because of its light (“Was gleißt dort hell | im Glimmerschein?” [13]). The light uncovers the sword in the ash tree that was left there for Siegmund by the Wanderer (Wotan). The sword is above all a token of recognition and a final proof of Siegmund’s identity because he is the first to withdraw it from the tree’s trunk without difficulty. It has a symbolical epistemological value. Their names are revealed only at the very end of the first act.

The next epistemological stage also revolves around the opposition between knowledge and ignorance. Fricka wants Wotan to punish Siegmund and Sieglinde for their incestuous love. Fricka knows that Wotan betrothed them (disguised as Wälse, a mortal). Wotan needs a free hero, ignorant of his own destiny and Wotan’s plans (“Not tut ein Held | der, ledig göttlichen Schutzes | sich löse vom Göttergesetz” [14]), but he decides to obey Fricka’s order. This stage is fraught with transgressions and punishments: Siegmund will have to die; Brünhilde will be put to sleep encircled by flames; Sieglinde will have to flee, impregnated with the new hero, Siegfried.

In *Siegfried*, the opposition between knowledge and ignorance is at its utmost. Siegfried lives with Mime, Alberich’s brother, and knows nothing of his own forefathers. Nor does he suspect Mime’s plans to get the ring. But Siegfried has observed Nature and has understood there are fathers and mothers, so he questions Mime about it and puts Mime’s knowledge to the test. Mime eludes the questions (“Müßige Frage!” [15]), but Siegfried strives for knowledge (“So muß ich dich fassen | um was zu wissen” [16]). Knowledge is thus gained through lies and by force, but truth finally prevails.

In the second scene, the Wanderer meets Mime. Knowledge is at the centre of the scene. (“Mancher wähnte | weise zu sein, | nur was ihm not tat, | wußte er nicht; | was ihm frommte | ließ ich erfragen: | lohnend lehrt’ ihn mein Wort.” [17]). It is put to the test through

three riddles. Knowledge is thus set within an agonistic context. Wotan promises his head if he does not answer Mime's questions. The first question relates to the Nibelungen and is correctly answered; the second deals with the giants and is rightly answered as well; finally, the third one refers to the gods, which gives the Wanderer the opportunity to speak of his past. It, too, reveals epistemological symbols. Wotan had shaped himself a shaft from the world-ash-tree's branches. It is with this spear that he rules the world. He engraved treatises in the spear. The ash-tree is thus a symbol of original order and timeless knowledge — the tree's roots go down into the past, its branches go up into the future. It is noteworthy that the ash-tree dies away with Wotan's transgression and that etymologically the word *runes* should be linked to the word *branch*. In his turn, Mime is put to the test. The first question deals with the Wälungs and is answered, the second with Nothung and is also answered, but the third one is left unanswered — how should the Nothung be recreated? Mime has been unable to discover the mystery of creation (“Der weiseste Schmied | weiß sich nicht Rat!” [18]); his quest is thus branded as “eitlen fernern” [19].

An epistemological agonistics is shown. It is crucial that questions about cosmogony and the order of the world be raised, as though the scene were a metadiscursive sequence about the *Ring* itself. Siegfried forges the sword. Only the one who does not know fear can do that; only through letting the shards and re-forging the whole can Nothung be cast again. The sword is thus a telltale symbol of creation as recasting everything anew, almost from scratch. Here again, the idea of wholeness comes to the foreground — the sword is broken into shards and splinters, and only after being reduced to nothingness can it be wholly reconstructed.

In the next stage, knowledge is closely linked to warnings and new discoveries. When Siegfried stabs the dragon, the beast warns the hero. When Siegfried drinks some of the dragon's blood, he comes to understand the language of the birds, which give him council. The dragon's blood also allows Siegfried to read in Mime's thoughts, and it leads him to kill Mime. Finally, the birds sing about Brünnhilde.

The next part, *Götterdämmerung*, begins with an important allegory of knowledge — the three Norns are spinning the rope of destiny. The scene opens once again with light. Once again, Wagner presents the world-ash-tree, the symbol of (fore)knowledge. We also learn about the spring that used to flow under the tree — another symbol of wisdom — and that it is tarnished now. When Wotan drank of its water, he lost his left eye — the symbol of intuition that confirms the association of vision and knowledge (insight) and thus the one between the hoard and wisdom (“seiner Augen eines zahlt' er als ewigen Zoll” [20]). All these symbols have been destroyed, and now the rope of Destiny breaks, putting paid to all foreknowledge.

The final epistemological stage reveals the manipulation of knowledge and ignorance. Gunther, at the head of the Gibichungs, the people living by the Rhine, wants Brünnhilde as his wife and Siegfried as his sister's (Gutrune) husband. Siegfried is made to drink a magic potion to forget Brünnhilde and fall in love with Gutrune. A series of warnings (Brünnhilde's sister), betrayed secrets (Siegfried's weakness), plots and manipulations follows, at whose very core lies knowledge, memory and ignorance, with numerous symbolic elements, such as the magic potion or Wotan's ravens (his messengers).

This scheme of the epistemological itinerary of the *Ring* allows listeners to draw one important conclusion: Wagner's work is predicated on a multifarious network of symbols related to knowledge, to foreknowledge, to doom and to destiny; the itinerary is fraught with multiple transgressions, and it seems possible to interpret the entire work in relation to epistemology and to relate the latter to power.

Such a viewpoint is particularly relevant in relation to Burgess's novel because *The Worm and the Ring* revolves around the scholarly universe where the stolen treasure is first and foremost knowledge itself.

The value of the written word: the stolen treasure and its cognates in Burgess's *The Worm and the Ring*

The key idea of Burgess's novel is a confrontation between two temporalities: that of the Wagnerian cyclical and mythical time and that of an English grammar school of the early 1950s. The simple transferral of the treasure's value from Wagnerian gold to a girl's diary bears testimony to a specific interpretation linked to epistemology, hermeneutics or exegesis. Burgess seems to single out the epistemological approach to the *Ring*, underlining the idea of knowledge and other, derivative questions: the question of reliability, the valor of evidence, and the nature of fiction as opposed to reality or faith.

Thus, it is quite interesting to note that Burgess constantly brings readers' attention to the written word – letters, postcards, documents, research papers, forms, books or quotations loom large. The concept of fiction, of extreme importance in Burgess's creative *oeuvre*, is once again under investigation. It is the value attached to the written word that is under question. Ironically enough, the book has been withdrawn from sale and is still out of stock today because of a libel threat issued by a person whose identity was used in the novel.

Consequently, the written word lies in the opposition between reality and fiction. It seems plausible enough that parts of *The Worm and the Ring* should have been rewritten by the author for the second edition: clues about libel and the theme of naïve reading of fictitious events are thick on the ground and more than obvious. It would be fascinating to conduct research work on the genesis of this novel. In this work, I limit my analysis to the second edition text only, and I focus on the value of the written word as a token of the relationship between the epistemological nature of Wagner's *Ring* and the metaphorical aspect of the treasure as a vehicle of epistemological questions.

Because the stolen gold and the ring are metamorphosed by Burgess into a stolen diary, the symbolical meaning of the treasure seems to be metamorphosed from sheer power to intimate knowledge. But it is more accurate to speak of the symbol's contiguous gliding from the idea of power to the notion of epistemology over and over again. Indeed, at first sight, the stolen treasure in Burgess gives way to a discovery that will play a major part in the plot — secret, private information is revealed about a pupil's life. The diary describes alleged sexual intercourse the girl has had with the headmaster (“...*He had me in his study today. He has ever such lovely hands. He stroked my hair and then he kissed me. And then...*” (Burgess, 6)). The treasure thus becomes the source of erotic secrets.

Nevertheless, as a precious symbol, the diary swiftly takes on new threads of meaning. No sooner is it discovered than it becomes an object of speculation. It is Christopher Howarth who joins the argument between the girl and the thief, but he makes light of the contents of the diary, judging it certain to be only a naïve piece of adolescent writing (“(*Went to tea with Myrtle, pictures afterwards, will have to do homework on bus tomorrow morning, telly gone to be repaired, row between mum and dad*)” (Burgess, 8)). The treasure of intimacy thus appears as a projection of one's desires and has something to do with psychoanalytical interpretations of the *Ring* that see the treasure as a projection of hidden, unconscious contents.

Moreover, the diary *does* carry a symbolical meaning related to power, since several characters will speculate on how it could be used to overthrow the headmaster. Woolton represents humanist and Hellenic ideals, believes in goodness hidden in every one, and as the head of the school, is unable to assert his power and desperately tries to combat his own leniency.

The diary becomes an ambivalent object, related to both power and knowledge. It is possible to compare the treasure's development throughout the novel with the Wagnerian epistemological itinerary. The precious object goes through a series of stages. Soon after its discovery, Lodge is told by the headmaster to retrieve the stolen diary from Rich, who denies

having stolen it (“I didn’t steal anything [...] She lent it to me.” (Burgess, 49)). The diary also becomes a powerful weapon, namely in erotic matters:

Power. With that book he would have her where he wanted, when he wanted. And as for him... He had lain awake last night dreaming of blackmail. But how much better to be the only one in the school who could, with a wrist-flick, send packing the man at the top. If he wanted to. (Burgess, 50)

Lodge takes Rich to the Headmaster, and even though Rich tries to manipulate the teacher by telling him how indecent it is and that he has burnt the diary, the treasure ends up being retrieved (“Lodge, pipe still going lovely, dipped into the gap between Rich’s jacket and more worn pullover and pulled out like a chestnut from the fire, a little book in blue leatherette.” (54)). Once again, the contents of the diary are read out:

Mr Woolton had me in his study to tell me off about being late. But he didn’t tell me of. He asked me to sit down in his chair. He said don’t be frightened I am not going to punish you. He said you have awfully nice hair and he started to stroke it. Then he said do you mind if I put my hand down there. And then he said will you give me a kiss. So I did and he said come again tomorrow. And at the door before he opened it he did it again. (Burgess, 63)

This time the question of interpretation is at stake. Whereas Howarth analyzes it as an erotic fantasy resulting from an overabundant imagination, Gardner is keen to take it at its face value. The question of exegesis soon takes on a forensic value because the written word is to serve as evidence. This gives way to sophistry – all that is written, and because it is written, must be believed (“there it is, in black and white.” (Burgess, 64)). The debate upon the treasure is thus not about to whom it belongs but what it represents. The stake of the written word reminds us of the ancient debates about the Scriptures, which is justified by the underlying conflict between the Catholics and the Protestants in the novel, but it also echoes more general questions, such as the dialectic between fiction and reality or the one between truth and lies. Howarth wants to annihilate the diary, but Gardner is opposed to the idea and willing to bring *truth* to the daylight. He thus becomes the treasure-keeper, like Fafner, but unlike the latter his aim is more ambiguous. On the surface, he may be perceived as the patron of a cultural, sacrosanct value, but, of course, his pertinacity feeds less on the desire to know than on the desire to govern.

The diary as treasure takes on an interesting secondary meaning with religious overtones — as a teenager, Howarth kept a diary himself and it got confiscated and destroyed (“His own diary of religious doubts, found by the headmaster, burnt in the boiler-room, *auto-da-fé*.” (Burgess, 67)). Thereby related to religious beliefs, to inquisition, confiscation, censorship or *auto da fé*, from now on the treasure will stand for both knowledge (secret or forbidden truth) and the exertion of power over knowledge (censorship, confiscation).

Investigation is under way. Dr Gardner interviews the diary writer, Linda. The question of treasure turns to the question of privacy or intimacy (“nobody should have taken it, sir. It’s private.” (Burgess, 107)). What is the difference between the public and private written word? When does a written work become public domain and be considered out of copyright? What reliability does any written word carry? All these questions related to literature and fiction are answered by Gardner with sophistries (“when a person lets a diary out of his or her possession, Linda, it ceases to be private, it becomes public property. [...] many diaries have been published. Some are famous – Pepys, Evelyn, oh, lots of them. Similarly, a diary needs a really *safe* hiding-place.” (Burgess, 107)). And much as Linda tries to persuade Gardner that it is all a made-up story, Gardner denounces the improbability of fiction-writing:

I don’t believe it, Linda! A young girl like you imagining things like that with a man old enough to be your grandfather. [...] ‘If,’ he said, ‘you had made up these fantasies about a fictitious person, then you would have had something like a story, a genuine – if improper – work of the imagination. But you have introduced, deliberately and quite unmistakably, someone who actually exists – two people who actually exist. It’s far, far worse, of course, than if these events had really taken place. Don’t you see that? You’ve committed lie after lie to paper. You’ve published these lies – that means, in law, that

you've allowed other people to see them. In other words, my poor Linda, you're guilty of a libel. A libel. A libel is a publication of lies intended to *harm* a person. (Burgess, 109)

Burgess thus seems to highlight a certain process of fiction writing. It all happens as though the suspension of disbelief in reading fiction suddenly turned into enforced belief, as though fiction turned into Holy Scripture. Consequently, the epistemological stake is not only the opposition between the stable and unreliable word, but also between the written and the oral word and between religious and lay documents.

The diary becomes a powerful weapon. Ironically enough, the mighty treasure has nothing to do with gold but is only a leatherette notebook. The act of reading, which usually gives vent to fiction, imagination, fancy, individual liberty, and ambiguous, sometimes contradictory statements, is baffled, giving place to tyrannical univocity and unique, biased interpretations.

Linda is blackmailed. Howarth tries to get the diary back and persuade Gardner not to use the foul weapon against the headmaster. But the contents have already been discovered by the staff, who assume it to be truthful. The treasure is said to have been stolen or destroyed, and the headmaster is accused of having caused its disappearance. The school advisory board demands Woolton's resignation, which he refuses to present. And although the *truth* will never be known, the question of fiction remains syllogistically intermingled with stable knowledge, indubitable truth, certainty and reality ("Diary usually is that. Write down what happened. As in the battalion war diary. Day by day. No point otherwise." (Burgess, 223)).

The key ideas revolving around the main object of treasure permeate other types of written word in the novel. But they are too numerous to examine within the context of this paper. All of them together present a multifarious epistemological character; all of them somehow refer to the religious conflict; all of them revolve around power on the whole — the idea of manipulation appears quite clearly even in the religious context (echoes of inquisition and *auto da fé*). All of them, too, raise questions about fiction, legend, myth, reality, history and education. Importantly, as well, all major cognates of the main symbol of the written word seem to be related to the symbol of treasure.

The Wagnerian cloak of invisibility turns out to be embedded in a comic read by Mimms. Rich confiscates the comic under the pretext of "corruption of the young" (Burgess, 46). Howarth's research work gets plagiarized by Gardner. Knowledge thus appears to carry a specific price or value; like the treasure, it gets stolen, tapped, exploited, but also forbidden or confiscated. In any case, it becomes an instrument of power and manipulation.

Both Wagner's *Ring* and Burgess's *The Ring and the Worm* present complex epistemological systems, itineraries, and rites of passage. The treasure is a vehicle of the quest for power, but it is first a symbol of knowledge and initiation. Wagner's epistemological evolution is also a springboard for Burgess's questions about fictionality, literariness and the status of the written word in culture.

The treasure in Burgess's novel becomes a token of epistemological itineraries and a wellspring of questions related to literature and fiction. *The Worm and the Ring* may be considered a musicalized novel, predicated on a multilayered clockwork of intertextual and intermedial undertexts. To an extent, it echoes Wagner's composition itself — Wagner drew on multiple sources, such as *Edda*, *Nibelungenlied*, *Völsunga Saga* and *Thidriks Saga*. The creative process is one of condensed re-forging and re-creation. But whereas Wagner lifts, as it were, the precise temporal background of the legends to create an atemporal setting for his *oeuvre*, Burgess brings the myth and the legend back to a historical context. That enables Burgess to introduce epistemological questions within the context of multiple tensions between fiction and reality, deconstruction and re-creation, belief and disbelief. Through the symbol of a treasure's itinerary, both works meditate on epistemological mechanisms through

art, and, to take up Wagner's own words again: "science, therefore, can only gain her perfect confirmation in the work of Art." [21].

Notes

- [1] Wagner, Richard. *The Art-Work of the Future*. Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004. p.3.
- [2] It is a pun on Ariel's Song from *The Tempest*: "Full fathom five thy Father lies, | Of his bones are coral made: | Those are pearls that were his eyes, | Nothing of him that doth fade, | But doth suffer a sea change | Into something rich and strange | Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell." (William Shakespeare. *The Tempest*. I.2.397-403. Ed. G. B. Harrison. *Shakespeare Major Plays and the Sonnets*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1948, 1011).
- [3] The bold characters are mine.
- [4] See Jeffrey Buller's article on Wagner's use of alliteration: "The Thematic Role of *Strabreim* in Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*."
- [5] Burgess writes: "The realism overcame the symbolism." (Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God*, 368).
- [6] Henceforth, I will refer to Frederick Jameson's translation: "Knows not the elf of the gold's bright eye [...]?" (*Das Rheingold*, 1).
- [7] "Son of light, light of spirit! | hear and heed thyself; in treaties aye keep troth | What thou art, art thou only by treaties; | by bargains bound, bounded too is thy might: | art wiser thou than wary are we, | pledged are we freemen in peace to thee | cursed be all thy wisdom | peace be no more between us, | if, no more open, honest and free | in bargains thou breakest thy faith!" (*Das Rheingold*, 2).
- [8] "Booty runes hide in its ruddy glow." (*Das Rheingold*, 2).
- [9] "A Rune of magic makes the gold a ring; | no one knows it; but he can use the spell | who blessed love forswears." (*Das Rheingold*, 2).
- [10] "By theft!" (*Das Rheingold*, 2).
- [11] "What a thief stole, steal thou from the thief." (*Das Rheingold*, 2).
- [12] "They are hasting on to their end" (*Das Rheingold*, 4).
- [13] "What gleameth there from out the gloom?" (*Die Walküre*, I.3).
- [14] "Needed is one | who, free from help of the godhead, | fights free from the godhead's control." (*Die Walküre*, II.1).
- [15] "Idlest of questions!" (*Siegfried*, I.1).
- [16] "So must I grip thee, | knowledge to gain me." (*Siegfried*, I.1).
- [17] "Many weened that wisdom was theirs, | yet all they need they never have known; | when they questioned, freely I answered: | wisdom came with my word." (*Siegfried*, I.2).
- [18] "The wisest of smiths fails in the task!" (*Siegfried*, I.2).
- [19] "Empty knowledge" (distances) (*Siegfried*, I.2).
- [20] "The eternal tribute paid was the light of an eye." (*Götterdämmerung*, Prelude).
- [21] Wagner, Richard. *The Art-Work of the Future*. Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004. p.53.

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