

## SOME MISINTERPRETATIONS OF HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON'S MARGINALIA IN ECKART'S BIOGRAPHY OF COSIMA WAGNER

HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON'S ANNOTATIONS in the collection of books she assembled as source material for *The Young Cosima*<sup>1</sup> offer invaluable insights into her thoughts about the characters, but one must be very careful not to draw hasty conclusions from these scattered and private opinions. They must never be taken in isolation: a cursory examination of the marginal comments often suggests a particular response on H.H.R.'s part which a closer study of the remark in conjunction with the text does not always support. This is especially so in the first volume of du Moulin Eckart's biography of Cosima Wagner,<sup>2</sup> wherein his frequent extravagant claims of Cosima's accomplishments and motives can elicit a caustic response at least partly generated by H.H.R.'s reaction to his exalted style and uncritical attitude towards his subject.

Dorothy Green's representation of some of the marginalia in this volume gives a misleading impression of both the tone and significance of particular notes.<sup>3</sup> By inserting several exclamation marks of her own, Mrs Green has altered the impact of H.H.R.'s actual comment. For example, she asserts:

Cosima's ambitions for Bülow arouse Richardson's contempt more than once: 'She chose his friends for him!' she notes on page 130, and again: 'the time-server!'<sup>4</sup>

H.H.R.'s annotations on this part of p.130 are as follows. An exclamation mark appears in the left-hand margin directly in line with a statement of Eckart's (underlined in the original German) that the newly married Cosima was "school-ed and experienced in all the arts of hospitality" [allen Künsten der Gastlichkeit erzogenen und erfahrenen]. The incredulity expressed by the exclamation is a natural result of H.H.R.'s understanding of Cosima's cloistered existence up to this point and is in reality more a criticism of Eckart's claim than it is of Cosima herself. Directly underneath this H.H.R.'s comments read: "Chose his friends for him / Would't [sic] let him, in his / Noblesse be taken / advantage of. / The Timeserver." Apart from the final two words, this is simply a summary of the underlined parts of the accompanying text, and incorporates Eckart's word "Noblesse". There are no exclamation marks apart from that already remarked on, and the tone can scarcely be described as contemptuous.

Although it is certainly possible, it is not absolutely clear that "The Timeserver" refers to Cosima. It could equally possibly apply to the "amiable little Jew Fischel" whose behaviour is described in the next couple of sentences (which carry over on to p.131), and alongside which H.H.R. has written "opportunist!"<sup>5</sup> Should this be so, it is not the only occasion on which H.H.R. has carried a comment over to the following page. Another example occurs on pp.351 and 352. The note on the top of p.352 reads: "And I must / say she did it / very well", and appears to have no connection with the text until one turns back to the previous page where she has written: "C. takes up / her pen for / W". The note on p.352 can therefore be seen to be H.H.R.'s assessment of Cosima's letter to

the King which makes up the printed text at this point.

As a further illustration of H.H.R.'s alleged critical attitude to Cosima, Dorothy Green quotes from two notes which appear in the left hand margin against the first thirteen lines on p.132 of Eckart. Again she omits part of one comment; selects only that which appears to support her argument, and ignores what is perhaps the most significant remark. She writes:

... and on page 132: 'Should think she'd kill his creative power altogether. B. was to equal Wagner'; 'Wasn't going to have a stick-in-the-mud for a husband'.<sup>6</sup>

The full marginal notes alongside this section of the text appear thus:

!! / Poor thing! / More repressed / energy. / Shd think she'd / kill his creative / power altogether. / B was to equal Wagner. /

A space and then:

Wasn't going to / have a stick in / the mud for a / husband.

On the previous page Eckart explained how Cosima was furthering her already considerable musical education by taking lessons in composition from a family friend. The double exclamation which begins the first note expresses H.H.R.'s reaction to Eckart's report of Cosima's desire to "offer advice and take an active part" [mitraten und mittaten]<sup>7</sup> in discussions of all musical questions with her teacher and her husband. Such a novice in the art of composition would hardly be in a position to "offer advice" to established musicians.

Cosima's life to this point had been hedged with restrictions enforced by her father, the Church, Princess Wittgenstein, Madame Patersi and Frau von Bülow. Her newly found independence released a flood of energy which she directed towards furthering her husband's progress. H.H.R.'s personal feelings towards Cosima as she read are expressed more in the revealing "Poor thing!. More repressed energy" than in the more critical statement which follows it. Despite her impression that Cosima could perhaps "kill [Bulow's] creative power altogether" by her overwhelming eagerness to assist, her treatment of the *Oresteia* incident in *The Young Cosima*,<sup>8</sup> which incorporates this idea, exhibits only sympathy and understanding for Cosima.

The second of the annotations ("Wasn't ... husband"), is again simply a translation of part of the accompanying text in which H.H.R. uses her own expression "stick in the mud" for the more usual "hack" or "drudge". [ ... so sehr war sie darauf bedacht, dass ihr Gemahl nicht einer der vielen musikalischen Handlanger bleibe ... ]. To read the annotation without considering its relation to the text leads to the misconception that it is intrinsically critical of Cosima.

Dorothy Green cites further marginalia which she claims "arouse Richardson's contempt" for Cosima's ambition. She writes:

On page 232, against the account of Cosima's bringing Liszt and Wagner together again, she writes 'One of the first of her

masterings!' And on page 239 'Cosima a born manager ... never to let go of Wagner's hand again!'"

No exclamation appears in H.H.R.'s note on the relevant portion of p.232. It reads: "C brings / L. & W. / together / one of the first / of her masterings".<sup>10</sup> Without the false emphasis of the inserted exclamation mark, the comment is reduced to a statement of fact with no particularly pejorative tone discernible.

Mrs Green's version of the annotation on p.239 invites more serious criticism. Again an exclamation mark has been introduced, but in addition H.H.R.'s marginal notes have been rearranged, and an inaccurate paraphrase represented as a direct quotation. Eckart is dealing with the time of the Bülow's move from Berlin to Munich and comments that Wagner's fate is akin to that of his own Flying Dutchman, but that he might now be sure that the woman who would remain true until death "had taken the rudder in her tender but strong hand and from that moment onwards steered safely through all whirlpools, floods and storms." [ ... mit zarter, aber fester Hand das Steuer nahm und es von jetzt ab sicher durch alle Strudel und Strömungen und alle Stürme hindurchgelenkt hat.] The bracketed portion is all underlined, and the first eight words circled for emphasis. The comment "quite so, never / to let go of it again" appears next to these circled words — "it", of course, referring to the rudder and not to Wagner's hand — while underneath them at the end of the underlined sentence, is the comment "A born / manager."

H.H.R.'s first words show her agreement with the text, and while "never to let go of it again" is in some small way a personal comment on Cosima's action, it also puts Eckart's allusion to Senta in *The Flying Dutchman* into plain terms: Cosima would from now on steer the course of Wagner's life. Dorothy Green has apparently read the marginal note, seen the word "Hand" among those circled by H.H.R., and assumed that the "it" of the note was Wagner's hand. Her failure to translate the appropriate part of the text has led to her inaccuracy on this occasion, and to her further assumption that H.H.R.'s assessment of Cosima as a "born manager"<sup>11</sup> was necessarily derogatory. "A born manager!" would perhaps have added more substance to her argument, but that is not what H.H.R. wrote.

Finally, on p.459 of *Ulysses Bound*, Mrs Green writes:

Perhaps most revealing of all is the note pencilled beside the photograph of Cosima in her seventies, opposite page 608. The expression on her face has elicited the comment: 'Das Schwankleid?' an untranslatable noun, connoting jesting, farce, perhaps 'fake-sorrow'.

The photograph and its caption are all important here. The photograph is of a serious-faced young woman wearing a light-coloured dress extensively trimmed with swansdown. Its caption reads: "Cosima Wagner (Mitte der 70er Jahre)", i.e. "Cosima Wagner in the mid [eighteen]-seventies." It could never be taken to represent a woman *in her seventies*.<sup>12</sup>



Cosima Wagner (Mitte der 70er Jahre)

The meaning of "Das Schwankleid" then seems obvious — the noun is a compound of two separate words, Schwan and Kleid, i.e. "swan-dress". When she noticed the swansdown trimming in the photograph, H.H.R. probably recalled "das Schwankleid" she had read about on p.859 of Eckart. That garment was one of a number of dresses Wagner bought for Cosima during the seventies and which she wore on special occasions: "das 'Schwankleid', auf das er besonderen Wert legte, und das sie nur an feierlichen Tagen trug" [the "swan-dress" on which he placed a particularly high value, and which she wore only on solemn or festive occasions].

I do not claim that H.H.R. is never critical of Cosima — there are quite a few annotations where this is unmistakably the case; but it is surely a matter of great importance that scholars using this difficult and frequently ambiguous material should pay the most scrupulous attention to the context of the individual marginalia.

Maureen Mann,  
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<sup>1</sup> This collection, which is housed in the archives of the University of Tasmania Library, is described in *Monash University English Department Bibliographical Checklists, No.2* (Melbourne, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Richard, Graf du Moulin Eckart, *Cosima Wagner: Ein Lebens- und Charakterbild* (München, 1929-31). Subsequently referred to as Eckart.

<sup>3</sup> See Dorothy Green, *Ulysses Bound* (Canberra, 1973), pp.458-59. Subsequently referred to as *U.B.*

<sup>4</sup> *U.B.*, p.458.

<sup>5</sup> Fischel "der als Publizist und als Mensch jene wirklich rührende Hingebung bis zum letzten Atemzuge bewährt hat, zu der der Jude fähig ist. Er sprang mit seiner Feder opfermütig und mit einer Klugheit, die in der Tat das Herz geweckt, für den Freund und seine grosse Sache ein, und er war deshalb auch im Hause Bülow von dessen Gattin stets geehrt als einer der Getreuen." Eckart, p.131. [Fischel "both as man and as a writer maintained till his last breath that truly touching devotion of which a Jew is capable. He entered the lists on behalf of his friend and his great cause selflessly and with a wisdom genuinely prompted by the heart, and for this reason was honoured in Bülow's house by his wife, too, as one of their trusty friends."] Eckart, *Cosima Wagner*, tr. Catherine Phillips (London, 1930), p.92.

<sup>6</sup> *U.B.*, p.458.

<sup>7</sup> Eckart, p.132. H.H.R. has circled these two words in the text. Eckart's choice of "mitraten" could be another of his exaggerated claims of Cosima's abilities.

<sup>8</sup> See *The Young Cosima* (Heinemann, 1939), pp.97-100.

<sup>9</sup> *U.B.*, p.458.

<sup>10</sup> It is not clear whether the final word is "masterings" or "masterys". Spelling was not always H.H.R.'s strong point, and in this case it is immaterial which word was intended.

<sup>11</sup> Most of Cosima's past and future actions confirm that this is in fact an accurate description.

<sup>12</sup> Cosima was born on December 24th, 1837, and would thus be in her late thirties or early forties when the photograph was taken. The German term for a person aged between 70 and 80 is "Mitte-siebziger".

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