

WAGNER & POLITICS

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1.

How should we think about Wagner? Those who are troubled by that question, as I am, presumably think that as an artist he is worth being troubled about: that his works, or some of them, are demanding, inviting, seductive, powerful. Not everyone who cares about music need share that opinion. The relation of Wagner to the history of Western music and to the formation of a taste is not the same as that of, say, Bach or Mozart: he is not in the same way necessary. His works are indeed necessary to explaining its more recent history, very obviously so, but they are not in the same way a necessary part of a taste for Western music. Indeed, it is possible for a serious music lover to hate them—but that is not really the main point, since hatred can be a reaction to their power, in particular because of the peculiarities I shall be discussing. So Thomas Mann referred to Nietzsche's "immortal critique of Wagner, which I have always taken to be a panegyric in reverse, another form of eulogy." (1)

You can have a well-formed, deep relation to Western music while passing Wagner's works by, finding them boring or not to your taste. But it is clear, equally, that a passionate engagement with these works is not a mistake or a misunderstanding. They are amazing, and there is much to engage with. It is no accident not only that Wagner is voluminously discussed but that immense efforts, expenditure, and imagination are still devoted to producing these pieces.

As well as the troubled and the bored and the revealingly hostile, there has notoriously been a further party, of the utterly devoted, and perhaps there still is. Being devoted does not necessarily mean being uncritical, but if the members of this party are critical, it is on the very local basis that the Master did not always live up to his own standards. This party has a question to answer. No one can deny that some of Wagner's own attitudes are ethically and politically disturbing, some of them very deeply so. I mean that they are disturbing to us; and by that, I mean that they are rightly found disturbing by people who have seen the crimes and catastrophes of the twentieth century. We do certainly have to understand his attitudes in the context of his time, taking into account the options and ideological contrasts that were available then. We need to understand what his attitudes meant. But, equally, we have to take into account what they have come to mean.

When it is said that "we have" to take such things into account, one thing this means is that we have no alternative if we are not to be misunderstood. In Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* (V.iv.38), Claudio says, "I'll hold my mind [i.e., stick to my intention to marry her], were

she an Ethiopie." In the Norton Shakespeare, the editor, Stephen Greenblatt, gives an explanation: "In other words, black and therefore, according to the Elizabethan racist stereotype, ugly." (2)

A review in the London Sunday Times criticized him for this on grounds of excessive political correctness. But as Greenblatt reasonably said in an interview, would they have actually preferred it if he had said "black and therefore ugly"? In Wagner's case, "we have no alternative" does mean this, but it means something else as well: that we have no alternative to taking into account his attitudes and what they have come to mean if we are to experience and reflect on these works at the depth they demand—more precisely, if we are to understand them at the level needed for them to become a significant part of our experience. (Indeed, so far as staging is concerned, we have to take these things into account if we are to put these works on at all, and this is a point I shall come back to.)

If we try to understand as a genuine historical question what range of opinions and attitudes were available in Wagner's world—"where he was" on various matters—we find that in some cases, he was already in a pretty bad place. Above all, and most notoriously, there is his anti-Semitism. His articles *Das Judentum in der Musik*, attacking Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn and, generally, the artistic impotence of Jews, did not make a big stir when they were first published under a pseudonym in 1850. The document had considerably more effect when he reissued it under his own name in 1869, with additions in an even sharper tone and with more directly racist implications ("so far from getting rid of his errors," Liszt said, "he has made it worse"). The racist emphasis, influenced by Gobineau, was prominent in other publications of his last years. It has reasonably been claimed that Wagner by his own writings contributed to the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Germany in the 1880s, in particular by helping to make it culturally respectable. (3)

Moreover, it was not only during the Nazi time, through the friendship of Wagner's daughter-in-law, Winifred, with Hitler, that the Bayreuth festival, which Wagner founded in 1876, became associated with the most repellent ideas. The house journal, the *Bayreuther Blätter*, was founded in 1878, when Wagner was still alive, by an acolyte, Hans von Wolzogen, who, as a historian of the festival has put it, used the journal as an ideological instrument to propagate a racist, anti-Semitic, chauvinistic, xenophobic and anti-democratic ideology.

It would be difficult to find anywhere in the Western world in the late nineteenth century, even in the darkest corner of the French right, a publication so poisonous, so hate-filled, so spiritually demented. (4)

In some other cases, the attitudes that Wagner held were capable of taking more benign forms, but Wagner's versions were not among them. This seems to be true of the particularly chauvinist form that he gave to the idea that there should be a German art. (5) Thomas Mann considered this in his famous essay (from which I have already quoted) "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner," which, given as a lecture in 1933, led directly to his exile from Germany, and which is, along with some of Nietzsche's thoughts, still the most helpful reflection that I know on these questions. (6) Mann pointed out, using a distinction made by a Swedish writer, that Wagner's aspiration was for a German art in the sense of *nationale Kunst* rather than *Volkskunst*—that is to say, the nationalism was a matter of the destiny and political significance of German art, not of its materials.

This in itself may seem an entirely intelligible, even innocent or laudable nineteenth-century ambition. But then we have to recall that the problem of a distinctively German art, and its relation to a self-conscious artist working in a broader European tradition, had been a preoccupation of German thought since at least the late eighteenth century. Above all it had been a recurrent concern to Goethe, with regard to the German language, its traditions of writing, the public for that writing, the self-conscious cultivation or rejection of differences from the rest of Europe, the relation of German art to various possible political regimes in the German-speaking states, and so on. Indeed, in his writings on these subjects Wagner, unsurprisingly, praises Goethe and Schiller.

Now the German world in the 1860s was certainly a very different place from what it had been in 1800. Yet it is still relevant to point out that in Goethe's case the question of how to achieve a distinctively German art was a problem for him, a problem to which he responded in ways that honored its complexity; whereas for Wagner it was, of course, a problem to which, at any given stage of his career, he knew the answer, as against the traitors and enemies who took a different view. This absence of the Goethean spirit, not just in a form anachronistic by the 1860s, but in any form at all, is something I shall come back to when we confront the impression, not lightly to be dismissed, that for all their wonders and power there is an all-consuming assertiveness in Wagner's works which can be disgusting. (7)

I have moved directly from talking about Wagner's personal attitudes, as expressed in his writings, to talking about the character of his work. That is not an oversight; the problem is that the two cannot entirely be separated. It is possible that artists with politically disturbing views could produce works that are not politically disturbing. There are without doubt several things wrong with Hans Pfitzner's remarkable opera *Palestrina* (first produced in 1917), such as its heavy-handed attempt to present the Council of Trent in the style of *Die Meistersinger*; but they do not express what was wrong with Pfitzner himself, whose conservative and nationalist views were congenial enough to the Nazis that (to his great resentment) he was required to undergo denazification after World

War II. Wagner's relation to his works was not like this. That is obvious now and has been obvious since they were created, but we shall have to ask what it is about the works that makes this so.

What is troubling is that the problems raised by his repellent attitudes, on the one hand, and the disturbing power of his work on the other, cannot be solved by a distinction between "the work" and "the man." Or rather, we cannot immediately call on that distinction to solve them. The problems that matter of course concern the work: it is only the fact that we want to take the work seriously that forces us to confront Wagner at all. But it does indeed force us to confront him, because Wagner's is a case in which, if we are to deal adequately with the work and its power, we have to take into account the attitudes of the man and what they have come to mean. I do not mean that his views, even his views of his own works, necessarily determine our interpretation of them. His works are independent, in varying degrees, from the outlook expressed in what he wrote around and about them, but we have to ask in every case how far they are independent of it, and in what ways. We need to understand, in particular, how far what moves us in the work may be connected with what frightens and repels us in his attitudes.

Some contemporary approaches to the work, though they are very vocal about Wagner's attitudes, fail to grasp that this is the question, and fall short of what we need in order to think about it. A lot of writing about Wagner in the last thirty years conceives the problem as that of revealing a hidden scandal; they try to trace the ways in which the attitudes have marked the works.⁽⁸⁾ These writers spend a lot of effort, for instance, in trying to find signs of anti-Semitism in the operas themselves, claiming that the representations of Mime, Klingsor, Beckmesser, and other characters introduce Jewish stereotypes. I am not concerned with the question, still much disputed, of whether the attempts at decipherment of these characters are correct. Even if a nineteenth-century audience did not need as much help in recognizing such stereotypes as, seemingly, we do; even if Wagner consciously intended them (for which there is no direct evidence); the point is that these supposed signs are too trivial to help with the only question that can reasonably concern us. The only reason for worrying about Wagner's works is that they are powerful and interesting. But if that is so, what difference would these signatures, these local coded messages, make?

In effect, these writers reduce the problem of Wagner's anti-Semitism (so far as the works are concerned) to these supposed traces, to the idea that, in one instance or another, Wagner is knowingly signaling it. This cannot help to deal with any deep anxieties caused by Wagner's works. In fact, it serves to reconcile these writers' admiration for them with their bad conscience about his attitudes, but at a painless and superficial level. They have externalized the problem, moving it from where it truly belongs.

We can take an analogy from a quite different work of Thomas Mann's, *Death in Venice*: these critics treat the threat, the dangerousness, of Wagner, as if it were the outbreak of cholera, which with luck you can signal and confine by whitewashing and disinfecting the walls. But our, and their, real problem with Wagner is not like this at all—rather, it is like Aschenbach's problem with Tadzio. These critics do not accept at the right level the way in which Wagner is related to his works. They are saying, in effect, that there had better be something wrong with the works, and they have come up with a circumscribed and relatively painless way of identifying what this is.

In a well-known book Robert W. Gutman has written: Unhappily, a proto-Nazism, expressed mainly through an unextinguishable loathing of the Jews, was one of Wagner's principal leitmotifs, the venomous tendrils of anti-Semitism twining through his life and work. In his final years, his hatred reached out further to embrace those with black and yellow skins. This attitude cannot be shrugged off as an unfortunate whim or a minor flaw in a musical hero.

This underlines the point that the presence of some anti-Semitic signatures is not in itself enough: they are not going to show that anti-Semitism is "one of [the] principal leitmotifs" of Wagner's work. The works will have to be more thoroughly polluted than that, and in his book Gutman gives interpretations to suggest that they are (though he does less to show that these interpretations are inescapable). But then he is thrown back to the question of why these thoroughly polluted works are supposed to be interesting or important to us. To this, his answer appeals simply to the music: Yet Wagner survives, and primarily because he was a great musician. His ripe late-romantic style retains much of its allure.... A music of almost unparalleled eloquence and intimacy keeps his works on the stage. (9)

This is not an answer at all. Having refused to separate the man and the work, Gutman tries to separate the work and its music, an aim which can be seen to be failing already in the use of words such as "eloquence" and "intimacy," and which is anyway peculiarly hopeless in the case of Wagner, who took unprecedented steps to unify musical and dramatic expression. If we end up with such an evasion, it is clear that we must start again.

2.

Some modern productions of Wagner's works have another way of trying to "externalize" the problems. It is a significant fact that we have seen in the opera house in recent years the coexistence of two kinds of radicalism. In cases to which it is appropriate, there is an increasing "authenticity" of orchestral and vocal performance, based on historical research; and at the same time there are productions and sets which display all degrees of rethinking and creativity up to the now notorious extremes of directorial whimsy—which themselves are more or less what has come to be expected.

These two developments might seem to go in opposite directions. It is true, of course, that they can conflict, as when the production makes it impossible for the singers to express what the music requires or invites them to express. (It is important that this should not be described as a conflict between music and drama; it is a conflict between the dramatic contribution of the music and the dramatic contribution of the staging.) But this is a matter of particular failures, not of what is intrinsic to the two kinds of radicalism. Even quite extreme versions of them, if they are put together in the right way, can produce a triumphant success (this was true of Peter Sellars's recent production at Glyndebourne of Handel's *Theodora*). They can combine to the same end. The musical performance tries to offer a closer approximation to the composer's means of expression; the production offers a version of what this drama, these emotional relations, can mean in terms that make sense to us now—it tries to find visual and dramatic equivalences, which work for us, to the expressive content both of the words and of the music as that music is now presented to us. No theatrical presentation of the drama that was simply determined by historical research could possibly do that.

In fact, the idea of a theatrical production of an opera which is "authentic" in the sense in which musical performances can aim to be "authentic" (and that itself, of course, raises large questions which are not the concern here) seems to be virtually nonsensical. Critics who attack what they see as the extreme innovations of recent directors and call for "traditional" productions of the Ring cannot mean that we should be given what Wagner in 1876 in Bayreuth actually had—for one thing, we know what Wagner thought of what he got in 1876.⁽¹⁰⁾ But quite apart from that, since the question is one for us, of what we should do, even the most devoted intentionalist will have to ask not what Wagner wanted granted the resources he had, but what he would have wanted if he had had our resources; and that means of course, also, resources to present his works to audiences who have seen what we have seen (and not only on the stage). We are back, unsurprisingly, where we started, with the problems of staging Wagner's works for us now. In pursuit of a truthful production, there is absolutely no alternative to re-creation.

The objection to some recent productions of Wagner is not that they are in a new idiom, but rather that they do not use that idiom to re-create. What some of them offer is mere comment. Unlike the decipherment of the supposed anti-Semitic signatures, which I have just considered, the ideologically critical treatment of the works in these productions is not minor or episodic. Their comments may be continuous, as when Wotan is throughout represented as a tycoon in the current Bayreuth production of the Ring. The problem arises if they are no more than comments, external to any response to the content of the works; in that case, they are like the supposed decipherment of anti-Semitic messages.⁽¹¹⁾ Just as being given a decoding of Beckmesser's vocal style as Jewish, even if it were correct, would do very little to help one understand or shape one's reactions to *Die Meis-*

tersinger, so a continuous subjoined ethical health warning added to the Ring—the mechanical injection into it of modern hate-figures, for instance—does not help one to face what the Ring, both for good and for bad, requires one to face.

We have to address the works and the problems they present on a larger scale. We have to ask: What general features of Wagner's style contribute to the problems? I should like to suggest three, all of them characteristics that were mentioned by Thomas Mann.

Wagner shared with other nineteenth-century artists, notably Ibsen, the aim of uniting the mythic and the psychological. One might even suggest—this is my suggestion, not Mann's—that in a certain sense Wagner is Ibsen inside out. Ibsen succeeded in some of his works in taking realistic bourgeois domestic drama and giving it the weight, the sense of necessity, that one can find in Sophocles; Wagner took myths and medieval epics and installed in them a psychology which is often that of bourgeois domestic drama. There is a basic problem with this enterprise, implicit in Walter Benjamin's observation that the heroes of ancient tragedy or epic lack an inner life in a modern sense: many, if not all, of those ancient works gravely express a necessity that transcends biographical particularity. To reconcile this fact with a drama for which intensity almost unavoidably means intense subjectivity is a hard undertaking, as many nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists have found.

In fact, there are three levels involved. Besides the mythical or medieval materials, and the explicit motivations and situations of bourgeois drama, Wagner engages in depth psychological explorations which are expressed in words and music that go far beyond naturalistic drama. Wagner is most successful in reconciling the mythical and the psychological, so it seems to me, when it is this last element that prevails: when the subjective intensity is so extreme, solitary, and unrelated to citizenly or domestic life that in its own way it takes on an authority which is perhaps analogous to that of ancient tragedy. This is notably so in Parsifal and in Act III of Tristan. Elsewhere he succeeds because he can sustain an analogy with domestic drama which does not need to apologize for itself: an obvious example is Act I of *Die Walküre*.

Sometimes the analogies are imperfectly negotiated, and even the "arts of transition" of which Wagner was justly proud cannot hold the levels together. I personally think that this is true, at all three levels, of King Mark's recriminations in Act II of *Tristan*. There is the problem that the view of the lovers from an everyday social perspective is less interesting at this point than what we have just experienced inside the world of night that they have entered; and in addition, for all the references to heroes and courtly honor, it is hard to dissociate Mark's complaints from a bourgeois embarrassment, doubtless familiar to Wagner himself. In such cases there are problems for production, but with skill and luck they can be dealt with. However, there is one central case,

the character of Siegfried, in which there is a real vacuum, a collapse at the heart of the work, and the very questionable conception of heroism which is associated with him has, I am going to suggest, a political significance.

Another, and very manifest, feature of the style is that Wagner really did break down in some ways the conventional distinction between the musical and the nonmusical. As Mann put it, while the old criticism that Wagner's music is not really musical was absurd, nevertheless it was not entirely unintelligible: Wagner's work does in a way fuse the musical and the literary. Mann says about the E-flat chord that starts *Das Rheingold*:

It was an acoustic thought: the thought of the beginning of all things. Music has been here pressed into service in an imperiously dilettante fashion in order to represent a mythical concept.(12)

This implies that the "deeds of music made manifest" which, as he was finishing the Ring, Wagner said were offered in his work, (13) and the psychological/ ethical/political significance of the text (or rather, one should say, the action), can only be understood in terms of each other. It is no peculiarity of Wagner that what the work means is not given merely or primarily by the action: it is true of all opera, or at least of all great opera. But Wagner's style does make the dramatic relations between music and action at once more pervasive and emotionally more immediate. We have already seen one consequence of this, that one cannot adequately explain the power of Wagner by simply appealing to the music. There is another consequence, in (so to speak) the opposite direction: that if someone feels that there is something ethically or politically suspect about, in particular, the Ring, that feeling, whether it is correct or incorrect, is not going to be met simply by appealing to the action or, more narrowly, to the text.

It is a paradox that some defenders of Wagner, having elsewhere extolled the unity of music and text in his works, think it is enough to meet these ideological criticisms to point out that, according to the plot, oath-breaking and theft do not pay off. Whatever the hopes may be for recovering an overall sense of the end of the Ring, you are not going to find it in its closing words, and it is a significant point, a point which comes back again to the figure of Siegfried, that one of the most overwhelming and also, I am going to suggest, unnerving episodes of *Götterdämmerung*, the funeral music, has no words.

Wagner is, more than any other, a "totalizing" artist; in any given work, all the elements relate to one underlying conception or tone. Mann, once more, puts this very well, in terms which, from a technical point of view, are no doubt exaggerated, but which express something entirely recognizable:

It is this infinite power of characterization that...separates the works from each other, and develops each of them from a basic sound which distinguishes it from all the others; so that inside the totality of the oeuvre, which it-

self constitutes a personal world, each individual work again forms a self-contained unity, like a star.

Nietzsche said that in any given work of Wagner's it is as though it were all presented by one impersonator with a very distinctive voice; and, since the biographical presence is also strong, this impersonator may easily be taken for the composer.⁽¹⁴⁾ All doubt, duality, or underdetermination is either internalised into the action (the characters are represented as undecided or in conflict), or it is externalized, existing outside the work altogether (the work stands against the rest of the world); doubt and duality do not exist at the level at which the work offers itself. The work itself voices or implies total unity and certainty. Because the voice of the work is so distinctive in Wagner's case, and, once again, the historical presence of the composer is close (for instance in suggesting what the whole enterprise stands against), the sense is not of a world assumed, but of an outlook asserted.

The extreme modernism of Wagner's later style implies that he is not taking for granted the ethical or social assurances which give structure to many other confident dramatic works of the nineteenth century, such as those of Verdi. But at the same time, though he represents ambivalent characters and actions that have ambiguous or perverse consequences, he was not disposed in the least to the typically modernist development by which ambivalence and indeterminacy become part of the fabric of the presentation itself, so that it is essential to the work that it does not finally tell its audience what to make of it. There are few operas, in fact, that have achieved this effect, but they include two of the greatest among twentieth-century operatic works, *Pelléas and Lulu*.

3.

I come back to the absence of the Goethean spirit that I mentioned earlier in connection with *Die Meistersinger* and the project of founding a German art. Part of the suspect quality of Wagner lies in the fact that although he portrays conflicts and contradictions, such as Wotan's indecisions, his recognition that he cannot directly achieve what he wants, the tensions between power and love, and so on, Wagner's tone in presenting these things seems to have at each point an indomitable assurance. He is telling us what it all adds up to. This aspect of Wagner's style can produce fear and resentment; one can have the sense of being locked inside Wagner's head; and it can also give a sense of fraudulent manipulation. Moreover, as soon as Wagner's assurance—the feeling that he thinks he has a hold on what is unconditionally significant—encounters the political, particularly in his trying to transcend it, it can become deeply alarming.

These features and the reactions they arouse may mean that some of his devices simply do not work. But sometimes Wagner's inventions work when it seems that they should not, and then our resistance (and hence our conflicts) can be especially strong. More than one consideration that has already come up leads us to particular and

very central examples of this, the funeral music in *Götterdämmerung*, the orchestral interlude between the scene of Siegfried's death and the final scene of the whole Ring. The funeral music is almost entirely retrospective in its effect, and it is essential to our experience of the Ring that this should be so. No one, I think, could describe it as regretful, or melancholy, or resigned. It is manifestly triumphant. It is offered as the celebration of the life, just ended, of a great hero. Yet, as many critics have noticed, the subject of this shattering musical memorial scarcely exists as a person.

Siegfried is the least self-aware, in every sense of the word the least knowing, of Wagner's heroes. He does not know much about anything, least of all about himself, and a lot of what he does know he forgets for most of *Götterdämmerung*, under the influence of Hagen's drug. Although, in his dying moments, the memories of his love for Brünnhilde are restored to him, they do not bring with them any greater understanding, but only a return to a blissful past. In this, and in his relation to these magic drinks, he is quite unlike Tristan, who in his great monologue in the third act comes to see how everything that happened flowed from himself—that he himself, as he says, brewed the love potion. To Siegfried, on the other hand, the machinery of spells remains external, and represents nothing in his motivations or his wishes. If he had any character at all, it would be only a limitless—one might almost say clinical—guilelessness.

His encounter with Brünnhilde did teach him something, fear. This gave him, we are told, a new experience, but it is notable that we are not given much more than the telling of it. There is a good deal of psychological material in the last scene of Siegfried after Siegfried awakens Brünnhilde, and it is of course expressed in the music, but it almost entirely concerns Brünnhilde's transition from warrior to lover. Siegfried as lover gets new music, but very little of a new psychology. What he carries forward from the encounter is nothing but a blissful memory; and when he reasserts his individuality as a hero and returns to the world of action, there is no project for him except action itself. "Zu neuen Taten!" ("New deeds!") is the first thing that Brünnhilde says to him in *Götterdämmerung*, and, if we take it for granted that he is to resume the only life he is able to live, there is nothing else for her to say. What matters is the absence of an inner life, not in itself the absence of intelligence. Parsifal is defined by a holy lack of intelligence, but in the course of the action he gains an inner life; the confrontation with memory and sexuality that is enacted in such extraordinary terms in the second act changes him completely, whereas to Siegfried nothing significant happens at all.

It is not impossible for a great hero to lack an inner life: as Walter Benjamin pointed out, the heroes of epic and ancient tragedy are often presented with a notably reticent indication of their subjectivity. But it is much harder to present as a great hero one who is simply naive and unimaginative, and whose great deeds, the slaying of the dragon and the journey to Brünnhilde, are not so much emblems of courage as the products of an infantile fear-

lessness. This is no Achilles. He appears, moreover, in a drama in which subjectivity, self-consciousness, reflection, personal ambivalence, and so on are pervasive, expressed in the artistic means themselves, and, above all, central to the existence of another character, Wotan, who has a better claim to be the hero.

Because the celebration represented by the funeral music is of the seemingly uncelebratable, there is a crisis of theatrical production at this point. Recently we have often been given an empty stage or Siegfried's body lying undisturbed. On the occasions I have seen them, these came out as lame or desperate devices; but it is not surprising that there is desperation. Critics complain of a willful, contemptuous rejection of the heroic. But it is not the directors' fault that there is a failure of the heroic. They are reacting, if inadequately, to a feature of the work which, if it is allowed to emerge, is bound now to seem empty or potentially alarming.

Since there is this dramatic failure, it is a real question why the funeral music can indeed be effective, in fact overpowering; and it is not enough to say that it is an astonishing piece of music, since it is a piece of dramatic music in the deepest Wagnerian sense. I think that there is an answer to the question of how it can move us so much, and I shall come back to this. But the problem that comes first, one that is signaled by the directors' difficulties, is that of heading off a different kind of message—an implicitly political message—which can readily fill the gap left by Siegfried's absence as hero. I said that the funeral music, granted that absence, can be alarming. The reason for this lies in its relation to the political, or rather, unpolitical aspects of the Ring.

The serene and reconciling motif that appears in the last moments of *Götterdämmerung* used to be called "Redemption through Love." None of these labels for the leitmotifs has any authority, but this was worse than most. For what, even in Wagner's overgenerous use of such words, has been redeemed? Brünnhilde of course sacrifices herself by riding into Siegfried's funeral pyre, but if this is to count as redemption, rather than suttée on horseback, it has to have some further result. She says, "This fire, burning my frame, cleanses the curse from the ring." Indeed, the gold is now purified, because it has been returned to the Rhine—the only place, as the Rhinemaidens sang in the last words of *Rheingold*, for what is close and true:

*Traulich und treu
ist's nur in der Tiefe.* (15)

The gold has been redeemed, if one insists on the word. But there is no suggestion that the gold's return, or the deaths of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, have also redeemed the world, at least if that means that the world has become a better or freer place. The future of the world, at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, is plainly not a concern, while the gods have no future at all. This is an embarrassment to the familiar political interpretations of the Ring. They all begin with a great impetus from Rhein-

gold, with its manifest images of expropriation, self-impoverishment, and slavery, but even the most resourceful of them tend to peter out as the cycle proceeds, finding material at its end only for some vapid aspiration to a politics of innocence.

The problem with this is not that the Ring, as it proceeds, avoids politics. It is rather that the hope for a politics of innocence is one thing that it seems to reject. If one wants transportable lessons from the Ring, a conclusion to be drawn from the story of Wotan will be that there is no politics of innocence, because nothing worth achieving can be achieved in innocence. Only in the depths, where nothing has been imposed on nature or wrested from it, is the tender and true. But the nobility and grandeur of the funeral music stand against this. Not because of what it says (it says nothing) but, all the more, because of what it does, it can carry the suggestion that perhaps there could be a world in which a politics of pure heroic action might succeed, uncluttered by Wotan's ruses or the need to make bargains with giants, where Nibelungs could be dealt with forever: a redemptive, transforming politics which transcended the political.

Such ideas had in Germany a long, complex, and ultimately catastrophic history. Politics, or at least "ordinary" politics, the politics of parties, power, bargaining, and so on, was seen as something divisive, low, materialistic, and superficial, in contrast to something else which was deep, spiritual, and capable of bringing people together into a higher unity: something, moreover, which instead of peddling satisfactions, demanded renunciation and suffering. There were two main candidates for this higher thing, art and the nation, or, indeed, the two together.

Such ideals informed the influential conception of the *Sonderweg*, the idea of a special path that German development might follow, distinct from (in particular) Britain and France; and one expression of the difference lay in a supposed contrast between *Kultur*, which was German and deep, and *Zivilisation*, which was shallow and French. (Thomas Mann himself had supported such ideas during the First World War, and still in part sought to justify them in the diffuse work which he published in 1918, significantly called *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* ("Reflections of a Non-Political Man") (16).

All the elements of this tradition were to be exploited in a desultory but ruthlessly opportunistic way by Hitler. (17) Hitler was far from unpolitical, but he pretended to be, and perhaps himself believed that in him the nation had transcended politics: that the politics which brought him to power and which, together with terror, kept him in it, was indeed a politics of transcendence. Wagner was certainly deeply committed to the nationalist ideals of the *Sonderweg*, but it is rare in his works (as opposed to his writings) that the will to transcend politics points in a distinctively political direction. *Die Meistersinger* certainly has political implications; as Nietzsche rightly said, it is against *Zivilisation*, German against French. Moreover, it invites questions, which it notably fails to answer, about the politics of art. Hans Sachs believes in the judgment of the Volk, and in the last scene the young knight Walter

gets their enthusiastic approval, with a composition which, we are told, reconciles inspiration with tradition. Wagner no doubt thought that the same could truly be said of his act as a whole. But in fact nothing in this bland formula, or in the way it is worked out in *Die Meistersinger*, is going to close the gap between Wagner's intensely radical avant-garde experiments and music that could be straightforwardly popular as, for instance, Verdi's was.

The politics of art—the relations of Wagner, his music, and the German people—remains at the end of the opera an unsolved question. But the relation of all this to politics in a narrower sense, the politics of government, is not even a question in *Die Meistersinger*. Although in the last moments of the work (in a notably obtrusive passage, which Wagner seems to have put in at Cosima's insistence) Wagner gets Sachs to declare the ideals of artistic nationalism, he is careful not to commit himself to what its political implications might be. Sachs's last words on the subject are :

*Even if the Holy Roman Empire
dissolved in mist,
yet there would remain
holy German art!*

And this in its context can fairly be taken to say that the ideals of German art can survive, even if politics change radically or go badly wrong. This might be called the avoidance of politics.

With *Parsifal*, the one work that Wagner wrote after he had completed *The Ring*, the situation is different again. Nietzsche was clearly wrong when he said that Wagner had ended up by prostrating himself in front of the Christian cross. Wagner did nothing of the sort: roughly speaking, he took some colored snapshots of the Eucharist and used them to illustrate his journey into the psychology of sex, guilt, memory, and pain. (He thought that Nietzsche lacked a sense of humor, because he presented him with a copy of the *Parsifal* poem inscribed from "Richard Wagner, Oberkirchenrat"—as it were, "The Right Reverend Wagner"—and Nietzsche did not find it funny.) But the work does undoubtedly steal some of its resonance from Christian ritual and its associations, and in particular, Wagner's recurrent theme of a redeemer sustains in this case much of its familiar religious meaning. Indeed, in the magnificent climax to Act III, Gurnemanz, crowning *Parsifal* as king, uses language so dense with references to redemption and salvation that it has even been suggested that he is addressing not *Parsifal* but the Redeemer Himself. (18)

Although *Parsifal* becomes a king, he is not a king over any subjects. Nor does the opera suggest that mankind is reclaiming its identity from religion, as in the more Feuerbachian moments of the *Ring*. Here we can speak of a genuine absence of politics. What we have is the exploitation of religious remnants in the interests of a drama that operates almost entirely at the level of depth psychology. This involves a kind of trick, because in

places the work has to pretend that the whole of human life is transcended and justified by something higher (as it is represented in the final scene, indeed, literally higher), the Holy Spirit. But the psychological material is so powerful, the symbols of the wound and the spear are strong enough, and, above all, the musical invention is so

compelling that Wagner's Allmacht, his capacities as a magical manipulator, enable him just about to get away with it. The director is left with some nasty problems, but we need not be, and certainly not any that have to do with politics.

It is not an objection to *Parsifal* that at the time of writing it Wagner wrote increasingly crazy articles tying its story together with themes of racial purity. It might be, for some people, an objection to going to see *Parsifal*: they might feel that they did not wish to be associated in any way with a work written by a man with such an outlook. That is, as people say, their privilege. But it has nothing at all to do with interpreting or responding to *Parsifal*, because whatever theories Wagner may have had, they do not structure the work, or surface in it, or demand our attention in experiencing it.

When Robert Gutman, for instance, says, "*Parsifal*'s sudden insight in the magic garden was the realization that by yielding to Kundry he would dilute his purebred strain," he is not reporting the plot, the text, or any implication of the music's associations. He is simply saying how it might look to someone who thought about little but Wagner's racist writings. My point here is not to reinstate the distinction between the work and the man, which I have already said is not a helpful device in Wagner's case. The point is just that one cannot decide in advance, either positively or negatively, what facts about the man, his views, and their history may be relevant to responding to a given work. In particular, if we acknowledge its power, it is a question of what it is in us that does so, and in the case of *Parsifal* we have a good enough idea of what that is to know that it has nothing essentially to do with Wagner's racist ravings.

In *Die Meistersinger*, politics is avoided, and from *Parsifal* it is merely absent, but with the *Ring*, neither of these is true. The cycle emphatically addresses issues of power, and if at its end it suggests that the world in which they arise is overcome, it is hard not to be left with the feeling that the questions of power and its uses have not so much been banished as raised to a level at which they demand some "higher" kind of answer.

I said earlier that there is an explanation of why the funeral music can move us so much even when we recognize that the supposed object of its triumph does not exist. I suggest that it makes sense because we hear it as the celebration not of a man but of a process, of all that has gone before in the *Ring*. The *Ring* as it moves toward its end elicits a cumulative sense of its own complexity and power, and it is this that the funeral music celebrates. The music itself helps to bring this out, as motifs associated with earlier parts of the story come to

the surface. In celebrating its own fulfillment, the work can make us feel that the whole disaster-laden history has been worthwhile.

What this expresses is not—and it is very important that it is not—the idea that life is redeemed by art, the idea that real life, and real suffering, cruelty, and humiliation, are justified because they can issue in great works of art. It is doubtful that Wagner believed this even about his own works. It is not that the splendors of the Ring can justify real life. Rather, the Ring's celebration of what it has presented can symbolize for us ways in which life even in its disasters can seem to have been worthwhile. In these terms the Ring emerges as what it should be, an affirmative drama, and not in a way that invokes a hypothetical and deeply suspect politics of heroism and sacrifice.

The problem still remains, however, whether the part that Siegfried plays in the story can, on any adequate reading, bear the weight that it is required to bear. Some of the strains in the work come, without doubt, from the complex changes of mind that Wagner underwent as he wrote it. But the problem is not just that the work is imperfect. What really matters is a product of history, that the strains pull us toward a sense of the work in which the transcendence of politics tends to suggest not the absence of politics, but a higher, transcendental, politics, of a peculiarly threatening kind.

This is signaled by problems of theatrical production, and those problems remain even if we come to hear the funeral music as a tragic affirmation rather than the celebration of an embarrassingly nonexistent hero. The questions that emerge concretely as problems for the theatrical director are in any case questions for all of us, if we do not allow Wagner's extraordinary ingenuity to deflect us from them. Particularly with regard to the Ring, but not only there, it may be impossible, even in our imagination, to re-create Wagner's works altogether adequately. It may be that the total unity of psychology, myth, and morally redemptive significance to which Wagner aspired is an illusion, not just in the sense that it is unattainable—that is true of Beethoven's ideals of freedom—but because, as Nietzsche said, it is based in some part on a pretense that a set of theatrical, often grandiose, gestures can reveal the nature of the world. If that is so, then to that extent no honest treatment of it can make it work as a whole. We can do it justice—but then it comes out guilty of that pretense, and justly associated, for indelible historical reasons, with a politics that has since Wagner wrote moved into the gap left by that pretense. Or it can come out less guilty—but then theatrical re-creation will have negotiated this as an accommodation between historical memory, what Wagner tried to bring about, and what we can now, decently and (as we say) in all honesty, accept.

If, at least for some of Wagner's works, a production which "did them justice" would find them guilty, this will constitute the historical vengeance of the ethical on an

artist who uniquely raised the stakes high enough for such a vengeance to be even possible.

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NOTES

1 "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner" in *Pro and Contra Wagner*, translated by Allan Blunden (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 100. (In quotations from Mann, I have sometimes modified the translation.)

Nietzsche's attacks on Wagner certainly represent an ongoing deep fascination with him, but some of his remarks may also strike a chord with those who are less involved: "My objections to Wagner's music are physiological objections. What's the point of dressing them up in aesthetic formulae?"

2 Norton, 1997.

3 This is argued by Jens Malte Fischer in a helpful and admirably balanced new introduction to an edition of Wagner's pamphlet, *Richard Wagner und Das Judentum in der Musik: Eine kritische Dokumentation* (Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig: Insel, 2000). For a review of Wagner's anti-Semitism, see the article by Dieter Borchmeyer in *A Wagner Handbook*, edited by Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski and translated by John Deathridge (Harvard University Press, 1992).

4 Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (Yale University Press, 1994), p. 84. According to Cosima's diary, Wagner did once tell Wolzogen that he wanted the journal to strike a broad, idealistic note, and keep away from "specialities," such as vegetarianism and agitation against the Jews. See Cosima Wagner, *Die Tagebücher* (Munich/Zürich: R. Piper, 1977), Vol. 2, p. 700; cited by Fischer, p. 118.

5 His articles "German Art and German Politics" (first published anonymously in a newspaper in 1867, then in book form in 1868) can be "interpreted, at least in part, as a commentary on *Die Meistersinger*," according to John Deathridge in *The New Grove Wagner* (Norton, 1984), pp. 52-53. I come back later to the question whether *Meistersinger* is itself expressly political.

6 There is one significant qualification to be made: that neither in this essay, nor (yet more remarkably) in pieces written during and after the Second World War, did Mann, so far as I know, mention Wagner's anti-Semitism.

7 It was a "nameless presumptuousness" in wanting to have something to say about everything that Mann particularly had in mind when he said in a letter to Emil Preetorius of 1949 that "there is a lot of Hitler in Wagner."

8 For instance: Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* (Harcourt Brace, 1968); Hartmut Zelinsky, in *Richard Wagner: wie anti-semitisch darf ein Künstler sein?* (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 1978); Barry Millington, *Wagner* (Princeton University Press, 1984); Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution* (Yale University Press, 1992); Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (University of Nebraska Press, 1995). The idea goes back at least to Theodor Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, written in 1937-1938, first published as a whole in 1952; English translation by Rodney Livingstone, *In Search of Wagner* (Verso, 1984.)

9 Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music*, pp. xiv, xviii. It is ironic that Gutman drops a condescending sneer toward Wagner's early biographers for their "Victorian delight in bringing ethical standards to bear on artistic affairs."

10 Wagner did very much like the Parsifal that he got in 1882, apart from a problem with the moving scenery.

See *Richard Wagner on Music and Drama*, selected by Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn. From translations by H. Ashton Ellis (University

of Nebraska Press, 1970), pp. 369-376. It would certainly look very strange now.

11 It is perhaps worth saying that I do not think that this criticism applies to Patrice Chéreau's 1976 Bayreuth production of the Ring, which is widely known on video (issued by Philips). Some of its inventions are gratuitous, but for the most part it embodies extremely sensitive responses to the drama.

12 As Adorno pointed out (In Search of Wagner, p. 28), the idea that Wagner was a "dilettante" goes back to Nietzsche's essay "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth," written at the time of the first festival in 1876.

13 In the essay "Über die Benennung 'Musikdrama,'" 1872.

14 Nietzsche contra Wagner, second section ("Where I Offer Objections"; Leipzig: C.G. Naumann, 1889).

15 In Andrew Porter's translation: "Goodness and truth dwell but in the waters." See Richard Wagner, The Ring of the Nibelung (Norton, 1977).

16 Translated by Walter D. Morris (F. Ungar, 1983).

17 The presence of this among other cultural legacies in Nazi discourse, and above all in Hitler's own speeches, is the subject of J.P. Stern's fascinating book Hitler: The Führer and the People (London: Fontana/Collins, 1975).

18 See Lucy Beckett, Richard Wagner: Parsifal (Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 52-53.