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Wagner: moralist or monster?

by [Roger Scruton](#)

A review of Richard Wagner, Last of the Titans, by Joachim Köhler.

To succeed with a new biography of Wagner a writer must have access to unpublished sources, or a new vision of the composer's work, or literary abilities that match those of such accomplished predecessors as Ernest Newman, or at the very least a striking interpretation of the composer's character. In *Richard Wagner, Last of the Titans*,^[1] Joachim Köhler sets out to impress the reader in all four of those respects, and even if he is at times too insistent on his *trouvailles* and *aperçus* there is no doubt that his book is a serious and much pondered study with which every Wagner enthusiast will want to come to terms. While staying within permissible bounds of speculation (something that he did not do in his recent study of Nietzsche), Köhler leans as far as he reasonably can towards a particular pattern of denigration, one which undeniably has much to be said for it, over and above its popular appeal in an anti-heroic age.

The Wagner presented by Köhler is a figure damaged from the earliest age by an unloving mother and usurping stepfather, but consoled during childhood and adolescence by the tender love of a favorite sister. Wagner idealized this sister as the good *anima* of his dreams, and wandered through adult life in the hope of meeting her. Her role was to redeem him, to assuage all guilt, suffering and rejection by sacrificing herself on the altar of his need—and all this not only as a sister but also as a lover and a bride. The actual women in Wagner's life were unable to carry out this demanding agenda, and even the heroines of the operas sometimes fall short, by asking some damn fool question, or by getting hitched against their will to some damn fool of a man.

It is hardly surprising, on this interpretation, that Wagner's love-life was so disastrous, beginning with his capture by Minna, by all accounts a self-centered tart with no understanding of her husband's genius, and ending with a second capture by the prudish Cosima who, according to Köhler at least, decided to air-brush her husband out of history and to replace him with a version more congenial to her self-esteem. In between those two formidable enemies Wagner managed to snatch quite a bit on the side from floozies and servant girls, but loved with all his heart only once—the mysterious Mathilde Wesendonck, whose attitude was probably “maybe”—Köhler being no more able to resolve the million-dollar question than any other of those who have attempted it. Did they or didn't they? The same question can be asked of Tristan and Isolde in Wagner's version of the story, and this reminds us of a remarkable fact—that the composer who expressed the height of erotic yearning and who built therefrom a comprehensive philosophy of the human condition, composed one of the greatest and strangest of all tributes to the ideal of chastity.

Incidentally, the book reproduces sketches and photographs of Wagner's women. Whether sempstress, temptress, or redemptress each appears as a singularly unattractive and self-centered

frump. I suppose we should be grateful for this. Repeated exposure to ghastly females led the master first to imagine a better version and then to set her to music. Still, these gormless faces, staring from stilted daguerrotypes, reminded me of how very unlucky he was, and prompted a strong surge of commiseration.

Köhler's outline of Wagner's character is familiar, the composer having traced it again and again in his dramatic works, using the narrative trope of the wanderer in search of a redeeming love as a vehicle upon which to hang an unprecedented weight of mystical and philosophical thinking. But Köhler adds to the picture in interesting and contentious ways, and makes bold and often inspired attempts to present the masterworks in the light of the biography and the biography through the lens of the works. Here, in briefest summary, is the picture that emerges: Wagner was an emotional parasite, who demanded complete loyalty without returning it, who sponged ruthlessly off both friend and foe, who shamelessly exploited those who most generously loved him—from his cuddly servant girls to his half-crazed patron, King Ludwig II of Bavaria—and who was pinned down at last by the straitlaced and “bigoted” Cosima in a warm bath of luxury from which he nevertheless wished to slip out by the plug-hole. He quickly saved himself from his early social and political ideals, when in the aftermath of the failed Dresden uprising of 1849 he saw the cost of retaining them, and thereafter gave himself up to one all-consuming political passion, which was anti-Semitism. This was directed first towards Meyerbeer, to whom Wagner had every reason to be grateful and to whom, for that very reason, he wasn't, and then, with the notorious pamphlet on Jewishness in music, to the entire Hebrew race. Cosima encouraged this passion, since it was also hers, and in time anti-Semitism became a comprehensive *Weltanschauung*, which blended nicely with Cosima's naïve bigotries. Many people loved him, but all were rewarded in the end with some gesture of repudiation, when it was discovered that they too belonged to the ever-growing conspiracy by which he thought himself surrounded. The roll-call of victims extends from Mendelssohn, whose music taught Wagner so much, to Nietzsche, the philosopher who first penetrated to the moral center of the composer's art.

This depressing picture is backed up by some home-grown psychoanalysis, including striking interpretations of the dreams that Wagner recounted to the innocent Cosima (innocent in this respect at least) and which she wrote down in her diary. Köhler scrapes around as much as he can in the sub-soil of Wagner's early years in order to back up his psychopathology with a suitably alarming picture of step-father Geyer (whose name means hawk or vulture— *hol' dich der Geier* being the German idiom for “Devil take you!”). I was not convinced by this aspect of the book, and drew from the portrait of Wagner's early years a lesson quite the opposite of the one intended—namely, that bereaved families were able to rebuild a realm of love and support far better in those times, when the welfare state did not step in to relieve them of the duty to do so. Psychoanalysis of the dead is in any case an impossible enterprise. As Wittgenstein pointed out, the criterion of truth of a psychoanalytic interpretation is the patient's preparedness, under analysis, to accept it and (I would add) build on it. In the absence of a patient, Köhler's analysis of Wagner is as empty as Freud's of Leonardo (which also, come to think of it, relied upon a hidden “vulture,” perceived in the folds of St. Anne's dress in the celebrated picture of the Virgin and child with St. Anne).

The main facts of Wagner's life are well enough known. What remains to add are the peccadilloes and petticoats (many ordered for himself by Wagner who, as Köhler delightedly points out, was a bit of a cross-dresser). Köhler is an artful writer, who is aware that most of his readers will not need reminding of the principal facts, and will therefore be looking at every point for some new interpretation, some surprising detail or maybe some believable overview of this extraordinary prodigy of a human being. He knows exactly when to curtail a story too much told and how to punctuate a familiar narrative with the detail that casts doubt on it, with the result that, however much you know about Wagner, you will probably stumble over some uncomfortable fact that causes you to think again about what it all means.

Still, the retort springs instantly to mind: so what? What is so bad about these vampires who suck our blood in order to remind us (what we are always in danger of forgetting) that our veins really do contain some? How lucky for Otto Wesendonck that his wife was loved by someone who immortalized not only her, but the name of Wesendonck, in music whose beauty will never until the end of time be surpassed. How lucky for Minna that, her second-rate promiscuous character notwithstanding, she has gone down in history as the abandoned wife of someone worth being abandoned by; how lucky for the mad King Ludwig that he ruined the public purse of Bavaria on behalf of someone who turned mortal money into immortal music. How unlucky for Germany that more of its petty monarchs did not follow suit, but instead chose to invest in the worst of all possible causes, namely the war on France which was to lead in due course to the temporary destruction of Europe and the permanent psychosis of Germany.

It is over this question, in fact, that I take most exception to Köhler's account. Köhler closely associates Wagner with the German nationalist movement, in which the building of Bayreuth and the works performed there played an undeniable role. He believes it is no accident that Hitler's love of Wagnerian symbols fuelled the Nazi frenzy or that the anti-Semitism so vehemently expressed in the composer's prose writings should later have re-emerged in Germany as a call to genocide. And because Köhler is a sophisticated writer, with a real grasp of the moral and philosophical issues that are dramatized and debated in the operas, his antagonistic reading of Wagner's personality percolates into his reading of the works. The Dutchman is Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew (and also Geyer, the allegedly hated stepfather); Alberich is the insidious money-grubbing Jew who pollutes the moral order from a place beneath it; Beckmesser is the Jewish interloper who undermines the honor and public spirit of the city. *Parsifal* is an affirmation of the divine light of Jesus—the light bestowed by mortal sacrifice—against the dark tyranny of the God of Israel. *Die Meistersinger* is not the innocent comedy proclaimed by its author, but a sinister avatar of German racism, so that Hans Sachs's interruption of the rejoicing at the opera's end to warn against the enemies of German art betrays, for Köhler, the real underlying tendency of the drama. And so on.

My response to this reading (which has been a commonplace of Wagner criticism since Adorno) is to ask: what if Wagner had never written his notorious pamphlet on Jewishness in music? What if he had never uttered an anti-Semitic remark but merely greeted all reference to the Jewish race with an enigmatic smile? Would we then be inclined to read anti-Semitism into the works that allegedly contain it? My response is: surely not. To someone who says "just look at Mime, the falsely humble, snivelling, wheedling, power-hungry schemer—isn't this the very caricature of the Jew?" I would reply simply: "who is the anti-Semite?" Moreover, if the Dutchman is really the Wandering Jew, what a vindication of the Jewish race, that Wagner should project onto it his own longing for redemption! If Veit Beckmesser is a Jew, what a great advertisement is *Die Meistersinger* for racial integration, that this vain little man should be so fully absorbed into the life of the city as to occupy the public office of Marker, that he should be accepted by everyone as a legitimate contender for the hand of Eva, and that he should be judged at last only by his musical and poetical performance and not by his race!

But of course Beckmesser is not a Jew, Wagner's spite against the half-Jewish Hanslick notwithstanding. Nor is the warning that Hans Sachs pronounces at the end of the work an invocation of *nationalist* sentiments. Wagner hesitated on artistic grounds to include this passage, succumbing perhaps to Cosima's pressure but also aware of the artistic need, at this juncture, to hold up the flow of jubilation and to remind the *real* interloper, Walther von Stolzing, that he cannot simply back away from the community whose old order he has challenged. Sachs's intention is to enfold Walther within a common loyalty and common moral and artistic inheritance. He therefore reminds the company of what has really been at stake throughout the opera, namely the equal need in both art and life for "tradition and the individual talent," to quote from another great artist who has

been tarred with the anti-Semitic brush.

Anybody who thinks of *Die Meistersinger* as a celebration of German nationalism as we know it has surely lost the plot. The drama is an invocation of the self-governing city. It presents us not with the new Germany of the nation state but with the old and lovable Germany of the Burg, the Germany celebrated by Hegel as “bürgerlicher Gesellschaft,” in which autonomous corporations maintain order and meaning without depending on the state, in which local ties are sustained by religion, family, and the “little platoons” of civil society, and whose peace is symbolized in the serene F-major melody of the Nightwatchman, as he obstinately disregards the dissonant G-flat of his own policeman’s horn.

True, this society needs to be renewed from time to time, and that is what the drama is all about—as are all comedies if we are to follow Christopher Booker in his brilliant summary of story-telling, *The Seven Basic Plots*. But it is not the state, still less the unified national state created by Bismarck, that Wagner summons to the aid of this community whose corporate feelings have staled. It is erotic love, shaped by the project of marriage, flowing through the channels of custom, and renewing family and civil society, along with the musical tradition that has the endorsement of these things as its true moral goal.

Wagner was in the business of creating legends, not dramas only. He therefore draws extensively on the archetypes of folk tales. As in so many “rags to riches” children’s stories, his heroes tend to be orphans, or else to arrive, like Walther, from an inexplicable “elsewhere.” They are on the surface antagonistic to the existing social order: but their antagonism is gradually overcome, often by some wise father-figure like Sachs or Gurnemanz, who is able to understand and forgive. Köhler is a modern German in this, that he prefers the revolutionary philosophy of Wagner’s Dresden years to the later endorsement of the bourgeois order and the ethic of Christian renunciation. But that endorsement, made explicit in *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*, is the true tendency of all the mature dramas, and is evinced in a final reconciliation between useful adventure and aged restraint. The outward form of this reconciliation is presented in the last act of *Die Meistersinger*, and its inner price is the theme of *Parsifal*. Those works can be read as tributes to the rediscovered father, and if stepfather Geyer lies at the back of this, then that only shows how much Wagner saw him as an object of love.

Köhler’s desire to read the composer’s life (as he sees it) into the dramas makes for some pungent and illuminating criticism. He is a perceptive synthesist, who recognizes the high seriousness of Wagner’s intentions, and who draws fruitfully on Wagner’s own accounts, in the letters to Röckel and Frau Wesendonck, to convey the grandeur of Wagner’s artistic aims. He astutely points out that the philosophical ideas that underpin the late masterpieces come less from Schopenhauer than from Hegel and the Young Hegelians. Particularly important for the Wagnerian worldview is Hegel’s great meditation, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, on the master and slave—a passage which, Köhler tells us, the composer discussed with his fellow revolutionaries while manning a watchtower during the Dresden uprising, and which he was to translate from abstract concepts to concrete drama in his unforgettable portrait of Nibelheim. Köhler’s impressive grasp of German romantic philosophy enables him to see Wagner in his true intellectual context, and to uncover the intellectual input that Wagner’s own writings leave largely unacknowledged. Hence his book is a worthy study in the history of ideas that will be appreciated even by those who take exception to its denigrating portrait of the master.

As for this portrait, who can doubt that there is truth in it? Unfair though Köhler is to Cosima—whose *Diaries* testify to real intellectual and literary gifts—who can deny that she wanted to possess Wagner as an institution as much as to love him as a man? Harshly though Köhler judges Wagner in the matter, who can doubt that the composer’s treatment of Ludwig II was manipulative in the extreme, and devoid of the compassion that the King so evidently needed? In these and many

other ways Wagner scarcely earns our respect. But it is also true that Wagner suffered, both from his own bad behavior and from the incomprehension with which he was treated. In his creative work he devoted himself to the highest of ideals, with no special pleading on his own behalf and with a serene and objective vision of what is at stake in human life. Indeed, he was a great moralist, and the lessons expounded in his later works are as pertinent today as they were when he first announced them. He worked conscientiously on behalf of a vision that he wished urgently to share, and gave time and energy not merely to projects of his own but to the works that he admired, and to the public culture which for so long refused to admit him. He inspired love in both men and women, and was as likely to squander his borrowed money on others as on himself. All in all, and putting the supreme blessing of Wagner's works against the imaginative wrongdoing of his life, I would say: how lucky were those who paid his debts.

Notes

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1. *Richard Wagner, Last of the Titans*, by Joachim Köhler; Yale University Press, 688 pages, \$40. [Go back to the text.](#)

Roger Scruton's latest book is *Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged* (Encounter).

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