# Symphilosophie

*International Journal of Philosophical Romanticism*

## Wagner as Philosopher

*Michael Steinberg*[1]

ABSTRACT

Wagner was never averse to self-promotion, but he downplayed his abilities as a philosopher, and he never attempted anything like a philosophical text. In the essays he wrote in exile and some of his letters, though, one can see him engaged with the issues raised by the early German idealists and the more philosophically inclined Romantics, and in that context his apparent fragments assemble themselves into a surprisingly coherent philosophy, one which moves from fundamental questions about self-consciousness and its relationship with supra-personal processes towards the social function of art and the critique of bourgeois culture. Wagner's "materialist idealism" both illuminates the action and text of the *Ring* and remains interesting and thought-provoking in its own right.

*Keywords*: Wagner, idealism, aesthetics, sociology of art, revolution

RÉSUMÉ

Wagner n'a jamais été contre l'autopromotion, mais il minimisait ses aptitudes comme philosophe et n'a jamais tenté d'écrire un texte philosophique. Dans les essais écrits en exil et dans certaines de ses lettres, on le voit toutefois s'intéresser aux questions soulevées par les philosophies des premiers idéalistes et romantiques allemands. Dans ce contexte, ses considérations d'apparence fragmentaire s'assemblent pour former une philosophie étonnamment cohérente, qui va des questions fondamentales sur la conscience de soi et sa relation avec les processus supra-personnels à la fonction sociale de l'art et à la critique de la culture bourgeoise. L'« idéalisme matérialiste » de Wagner éclaire à la fois l'action et le texte du *Ring* tout en demeurant intéressant et stimulant en soi.

*Mots-clés* : Wagner, idéalisme, esthétique, sociologie de l'art, revolution

[1] PhD in Intellectual History, independent scholar, 109 Rutgers Street, Rochester, NY, 143607 USA – mlstein@rochester.rr.com

Wagner seems to have had, at best, an ambivalent attitude towards philosophy.[1] His autobiography is not always a reliable source, and there are reasons to doubt his memory of his first encounter with Feuerbach, but it still provides an illuminating account of his early interest in the subject:

> I had always had an inclination to fathom the depths of philosophy, just as I had been led by the mystic influence of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to search the deepest recesses of music. My first efforts at satisfying this longing had failed. … I had procured Schelling's work, *Transcendental Idealism*, … but it was in vain that I racked my brains to try and make something out of the first pages, and I always returned to my Ninth Symphony.
>
> During the latter part of my stay in Dresden I … chose Hegel's *Philosophy of History*. A good deal of this impressed me deeply, and it now seemed as if I should ultimately penetrate into the Holy of Holies along this path. The more incomprehensible many of his speculative conclusions appeared, the more I felt myself desirous of probing the question of the "Absolute" and everything connected therewith to the core. For I so admired Hegel's powerful mind that it seemed to me he was the very keystone of all philosophical thought.
>
> The revolution intervened; the practical tendencies of a social reconstruction distracted my attention, [until] a German Catholic priest and political agitator … drew my attention to "the only real philosopher of modern times," Ludwig Feuerbach. My new Zürich friend, the piano teacher, Wilhelm Baumgartner, made me a present of Feuerbach's book on *Tod und Unsterblichkeit* ("Death and Immortality"). The well-known and stirring lyrical style of the author greatly fascinated me as a layman. … The frankness with which Feuerbach explains his views on these interesting questions, in the more mature parts of his book, pleased me as much by their tragic as by their social-radical tendencies. … It was more difficult to sustain any interest in *Das Wesen des Christenthums* ("The Essence of Christianity") by the same author, for it was impossible whilst reading this work not to become conscious, however involuntarily, of the prolix and unskillful manner in which he dilates on the simple and fundamental idea, namely, religion explained from a purely subjective and psychological point of view. Nevertheless, from that day onward I always regarded Feuerbach as the ideal exponent of

[1] This article is an excerpt from Michael Steinberg's forthcoming book *The Philosopher's Ring—Wagner as Thinker and Dramatist* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2026).

> the radical release of the individual from the thralldom of accepted notions, founded on the belief in authority.[2]

In the end, however, he concluded that "what had really induced [him] to attach so much importance to Feuerbach was the conclusion … that the best philosophy was to have no philosophy … and secondly, that only that was real which could be ascertained by the senses."[3]

Wagner was never as modest as he claimed to be. He did start off a long and important letter to Röckel, dated January 25, 1854, by restricting the Real, or true Being, to that "which is appreciable to the senses," but this common-sense realism soon disappears. Later in the same letter he redefines it in terms that echo—consciously or not—Fichte's "one life":

> [T]he essence of reality consists of infinite multiplicity … [an] inexhaustible multiplicity, incessantly renewed and renewing. … [which] can only be apprehended by feeling, as the one ever-present though ever-varying element. This variability is the essence of the *real.*[4]

In no way is this a random agglomeration of disconnected events. There is only one reality, an "ever self-renewing and self-creating, … ever self-fulfilling, self-satisfying principle," characterized by "endless cohesion."[5] All things arise within that single but ungraspably complex process.

This is a genuinely philosophical starting point, positing a kind of transcendental ground for the realm of experience, and Wagner frequently restated it or implied it even after he discovered Schopenhauer. It owes much to the biological theories of Wagner's day, and he often works it out in biological terms, but it evokes the same kind of activity that the idealists had seen in the self-manifestation of the divine or the self-realization of the Absolute. Since those thinkers had generally rejected a personal deity and all notions of providence, Wagner's focus on activity alone kept him surprisingly close to their standpoint. What counted for both was the continuous process of creation, transformation, and destruction, the endless fertility that we associate with the natural world but which underlies and forms our own lives and thoughts as well. In Wagner's words, "Nature creates and shapes unintentionally and involuntarily as the need arises—out of necessity therefore—and

---

2 Richard Wagner, *My Life,* "authorized translation." (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1911), 520–22.

3 *My Life*, 522.

4 Ricard Wagner, *Letters to August Roeckel*, tr. Eleanor C. Sellar. (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1897), 78, 81, 82 (January 25–26, 1854), *SL* 102.

5 Richard Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future*, tr. Emma Warner (London: The Wagner Journal, 2013), 18, *PW* I, 79.

it is this same necessity which is the creative, shaping force behind human life."[6]

Things are not so simple for conscious beings like ourselves, however. On this subject, too, Wagner revised and naturalized elements of idealism while preserving its underlying structure. To become self-conscious we had to remove ourselves from the underlying activity of all things: "The moment we humans became aware of our difference from nature, … when we set ourselves apart from nature and … thought began to develop within us—this was the moment we went astray, error as the first expression of consciousness." We separated ourselves from reality, and from that moment on we have tried to bridge that gap, through our personal lives, our art, our politics, and most of all through our science, philosophy, and religion; "the history of the birth of knowledge out of error is the history of the human species from primitive myth to the present day."[7]

Wagner was confident that through that struggle "enlightened nature will herself become self-aware."[8] But this would bring us to a very different kind of knowledge from the facts and theories that we usually rely on. Discovering it is difficult, and searching for it is all too likely to lead us into deeper errors than the ones we are trying to undo, bedazzling us with "fanciful image[s] based not on nature but on arbitrary willfulness."[9] We want to know, and to know that we know, but all thought is marked by the separation on which self-consciousness depends. What is real is prior to and beyond that split, so it cannot be an object of knowledge. By thinking about it we just push ourselves farther and farther away from what we think we are understanding. We mistake image for reality:

> [Humanity] has recourse to endless expedients in order to grasp the Universe as a *whole*: these expedients in all their endless complexity are simply a group of concepts; and in our pride at having thus attained to a concept of the world in its entirety, we lose sight of our true position, forgetting that after all we have grasped nothing but the concept, and that consequently we are simply taking pleasure in the instrument of our own making, while all the time we remain further removed than ever from the *reality* of the world.[10]

---

6 *The Artwork of the Future*, 13, *PW* I, 69–70.

7 All quoted text *The Artwork of the Future*, 13, *PW* I, 69–70.

8 *The Artwork of the Future*, 13, *PW* I, 69–70.

9 *The Artwork of the Future*, 14, *PW* I, 71.

10 *Letters to August Roeckel*, 80–81 (January 25–26, 1854), *SL* 302. The inaccessibility of the real ground of existence is something of a Romantic commonplace; as Tieck wrote late in life: "Is it not more devout, more noble and upstanding, to simply acknowledge that

One can read this as an anticipation of some modern philosophies of science, but Wagner first thought of it as a critique of religion: "we suppressed [nature's] physical forms in favor of a cause that is inaccessible to the senses … conceiving the infinite cohesion of her unconscious, unintentional processes as the deliberate expression of some inchoate, finite will."[11]

It is worth pausing here. In *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach had more or less taken it for granted that people projected human qualities onto the divine. He had assumed this to be the result of a primitive animism; in the distant past we didn't know enough about why the sun rose and set, why there was death, why there were storms and earthquakes and so on, so we made up gods to explain these facts. Wagner had a much more sophisticated starting point; he could explain why there was a place for the gods to begin with. They (or He) occupied a throne that we had set up ourselves.

Consciousness begins with a fall. Once we had separated ourselves from reality we could no longer simply live in it. It had become a puzzle that we had to solve. Everything, both good and bad, seemed to have its own life and follow its own rules, and once we started thinking of ourselves as outside observers we had figure out those rules and "grasp the Universe as a *whole*." We wanted to explain things and events that seemed to stand in front of us, and that led us to imagine that these were put together and managed by something that stood behind them, a figure we could imagine only on the model of our own isolated, active, and thinking selves: a god, in other words. As Wagner wrote in *Opera and Drama*, "*the concordant action* of human and natural forces in general … appears super-human and supernatural by the very fact that it is ascribed to *one* imagined individual, represented in the shape of Man."[12]

Wagner came to see, too, that these intellectual and emotional needs are at work in more than just religious life. This was a step beyond Feuerbach. We can get rid of the gods, Wagner understood, but it is much harder to stop asking the kinds of questions that those gods were designed to answer, and this is why science was as limited as religion. He insisted that "at the begin-

---

we cannot perceive this [connection], that our knowledge can only relate to the individual, and that we must resign [to any further claim]?" (Quoted in Manfred Frank, trans. Millán, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 212.

11 *The Artwork of the Future*, 13, *PW* I, 70. Cooke sees superstition as the "original" error. Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 254. Wagner's text, however, identifies the separation of humanity from nature as the primordial error of consciousness; the positing of a cause behind nature is a consequence of that error, and is not identical with it.

12 Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, trans. Ellis, *PW* II, 154. He cites Feuerbach in this connection.

ning of science we stand in the same relation to life as we did when we began to set our own human life apart from nature";[13] there may be no gods involved, but we are still trying to find an external principle that explains away the world of the senses. This is a doomed enterprise, however. Science generates just another set of limited ideas that can never capture a limitless reality. "The essence of science is therefore as finite as that of life is infinite, just as error is finite while truth is infinite."[14]

We cannot think our way out of those constraints. Understanding that impasse leads some of us to reject the "barren illusion" of theory, "to turn to *reality* and to approach it by means of feeling." But "how is this to be done, seeing that *reality* as an imagined *whole* can only be made intelligible to the intellect, and cannot be brought into relation with feeling?"[15]

Wagner's uncle Adolf had suggested to Tieck that idealism was a "hunger cure" that removed us from the purely human so we could recuperate in a world of both nature and humanity.[16] Wagner himself had a different "hunger cure." It was giving up the fiction of a world that could be grasped by the mind. We do not need right views or better theories; "we must entirely renounce the pursuit of the Universal."[17] What we need is the most radical kind of trust. Much as Fichte did, Wagner insisted that we could embrace reality only by surrendering the Ego of self-consciousness and the detached thinking that self-consciousness makes possible.

Wagner asked Röckel: "To be real—to live—what is it but to be born, to grow, to bloom, to wither and to die?"[18] He went on:

> Therefore to be at one with truth is to give oneself up as a sentient human being wholly and entirely to reality—to encounter birth, growth, bloom, blight and decay frankly, with joy and with sorrow, and to live to the full this life made up of happiness and suffering—so to live and so to die.[19]

It is probably not coincidence that Wagner was, at least briefly, very taken with the Sufi poet Hafiz, whom he praised to Röckel as "the greatest of all

---

13 *The Artwork of the Future*, 14, *PW* I, 72.
14 *The Artwork of the Future*, 14, *PW* I, 72.
15 *Letters to August Roeckel*, 81 (January 25–26, 1854), *SL* 302, translation altered.
16 *Letters to and from Ludwig Tieck and His Circle: Unpublished Letters from the Period of German Romanticism Including the Unpublished Correspondence of Sophie and Ludwig Tieck*, ed. Percy Matenko, Edwin H. Zeydel, and Bertha M. Masche (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 164, translation mine.
17 *Letters to August Roeckel*, 82 (January 25–26, 1854), *SL* 303.
18 *Letters to August Roeckel*, 81–82 (January 25–26, 1854), *SL* 302–3.
19 *Letters to August Roeckel*, 82 (January 25–26, 1854), *SL* 302–3.

poets."[20] It is also tempting to see this as an anticipation of Nietzsche's *amor fati*, the deep sense "that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it … but *love* it."[21]

For it was love, and sexual love in particular, that Wagner saw as the path towards selfless oneness with the Real. He told Röckel that "we can only fully grasp a phenomenon if we can at one and the same time completely absorb it, and be absorbed by it," and to achieve that absorption, he added, "We must look to love, and to love only":[22]

> [O]nly that which is real can be eternal, and it is through love that we attain to the most perfect manifestation of reality; therefore Love only is eternal. The fact is, egoism ceases at the moment when the "I" passes into the ''Thou."[23]

We believe that we are separate beings who must armor ourselves against an indifferent or hostile world, and our finitude "has power to strike terror into our souls; but it can do so only if we have lost our hold on *reality.* If, on the contrary, we are possessed by a sense of the reality of love, that terror vanishes, for love annihilates the notion of limitation."[24] At that point we let go of the ego and of all the hedges and defenses with which we struggle to protect it. There is only the real, and in love we sense and embrace our identity with its movement. That is why falling in love seems like a deeper wisdom than anything we can think or speak, and why every step that lovers take can feel effortlessly choreographed.

Wagner wrote endlessly about love in all of its forms, at least those that he could accept within his at-least-publicly heteronormative outlook.[25] But it is essential to recognize that he did not give it such importance because it made people nice or kind. It was not worthy because it inspired us to do good deeds or to treat others as they deserved to be treated. Love was important because "it is through love that we attain to the most perfect manifestation of reality."[26] We therefore misunderstand much of the *Ring* if we think of this

---

20 *Letters to August Roeckel*, 59 (September 12, 1852), *SL* 270.

21 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo," tr. W. Kaufmann, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 714.

22 *Letters to August Roeckel*, 82–83 (January 25–26, 1854), *SL* 303.

23 *Letters to August Roeckel*, 86, *SL* 304.

24 *Letters to August Roeckel*, 86, *SL* 304.

25 He praised Spartan homosexual love but this was premised on a belief that "it excluded the motive of physical, selfish pleasure." *The Artwork of the Future*, 63–64, *PW* I, 168.

26 *Letters to August Roeckel*, 86 (January 25–26, 1854), *SL* 304 (Note that Wagner's text does not refer to the "sentiment" of love, as the *SL* translation has it).

as a desirable or socially beneficial emotional state or as "a natural instinctive need for mutual love and fellowship," in Deryck Cooke's words.[27] Love is central to human life because of its transformative and even destructive power. It returns us to reality, and so long as we live in love we are freed from the misleading separation on which we had premised our conscious lives.

Love has both power and inestimable value because it aligns us with the all-encompassing activity of what is real, the ever-flowing river in which we gladly immerse ourselves. It is a liberating force, freeing us from the selfish compulsion to look after our own private needs and impulses, and through it we live as willing participants in the life we share with all others. Like Fichte's ethical person, we become pure presentations of reality, and this—not self-indulgence or untrammeled power—is genuine freedom. Wagner never developed a theory of ethics, but ethical concerns are rarely absent when he talks about love, and one can easily trace a line that goes from Kant's moral law through Fichte's egoless morality to Wagner's praise of love.

Erotic union, for Wagner, was both immersion in reality and a passage into shared agency. "Now, a human being is both *man* and *woman*, and it is only when these two are united that the real human being exists, and thus it is only by love that man and woman attain to the full measure of humanity. But when nowadays we talk of a human being, such heartless blockheads are we that quite involuntarily we only think of man."[28] This is a model for all truly human connections. "Every other manifestation of love can be traced back to that one absorbingly real feeling,"[29] and this experience grounds the community of the entire human race. People "only find understanding, redemption and satisfaction in a higher element; and this higher element is the human species. … And the individual human can only satisfy his or her need for love by giving, indeed by giving him or herself to others and at the highest level to humankind."[30] Just as in sexual love, this is not self-denial but self-realization: "only by wholly merging with the other, with the community therefore, that you can be fully what you are, what you can be and what you reasonably want to be. Only in communism is egoism fully satisfied."[31]

This underpins Wagner's utopian politics, but for him it also led to art. In the early 1850s he had little use for religion, which he saw as just another "external, imaginary power" whose votaries concocted images which they

---

[27] Cooke repeats this formula almost verbatim in many passages starting around p. 253 of *I Saw the World End.*

[28] *Letters to August Roeckel*, 84 (January 25–26, 1854), *SL* 303. The *Symposium* was a favorite of Wagner's, and he may well be echoing the fable that Plato ascribes to Aristophanes.

[29] *Letters to August Roeckel*, 83 (January 25–26, 1854), *SL* 303.

[30] *The Artwork of the Future*, 27, *PW* I, 96–97.

[31] *The Artwork of the Future*, 28, *PW* I, 99.

sold to us as pictures of the real. They were nothing like that, of course, so it was left to art to accomplish what religion only claimed to do. Art would show humanity that it reflects and embodies "the inner necessity of nature." It would bring reality to light. That gives it a quasi-religious, even sacramental function.[32]

For Wagner art is a form of revelation; it is nature itself that gives it birth. In the very first sentence of *The Artwork of the Future* he hints at this in a statement too compressed to be taken in quickly: "Humans are to nature as art is to humans." He goes on to expand this thought:

> Once nature had developed the right conditions for humans to exist then humans came spontaneously into being: as soon as human life develops the conditions for art to emerge, so art springs spontaneously to life.[33]

These are separate moments in the same activity. One and the same movement fashions both human consciousness and art, and in both thinking and artistic creativity an invisible reality is made visible. Just as nature becomes aware of itself through humanity, humanity becomes aware of itself through art.

If Wagner had read through Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*, or if he had flipped to the end after "racking his brains to make sense of its first pages," he would have seen that, for Schelling, all philosophy culminated in the work of art, which "reflects to us the identity of the conscious and unconscious activities."[34] "To put it more briefly," Schelling had written, "nature begins as unconscious and ends as conscious," and through art "the unconscious activity operates as it were through the conscious, to the point of attaining complete identity therewith."[35]

This would be quite easy to translate into Wagner's terms, but doing that would miss the point. Schelling saw this entire process as a private one, carried out by individuals and ultimately by the solitary Romantic genius, who alone could unite the infinite productivity of nature with an infinite freedom of thought.[36] Nothing could be less Wagnerian. Wagner did generally feel himself to be solitary, but he saw that as the fault of his times, not as the precondition for art; the "artist of the future" would be "necessarily the

---

32 *The Artwork of the Future*, 14–15, *PW* I, 71.
33 *The Artwork of the Future*, 13, *PW* I, 69.
34 Friedrich Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), 225. As was typical of Schelling, he soon gave up on this idea.
35 Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 219.
36 Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 228.

community of all artists."[37] As a man of the theater, especially, he insisted that artistic work was always collaborative, and the camaraderie of the artists and artisans at Bayreuth was a delight to him; "Very often the relations between Wagner and his artists were extremely jolly and free-and-easy. At the last rehearsal in the salon of the Hotel Sommer he actually, out of sheer high spirits, stood on his head."[38] He dismissed talk of artistic genius as a gift or an "absolute windfall" (think of the play and movie *Amadeus*) as "uncommonly vapid and superficial."[39]

Real genius was different. It was nothing but "receptive force" applied to something that had already fashioned itself within the life of the community:

> That which operates so mightily upon this [receptive] force that it must finally come forth to full productiveness, we have in truth to regard as the real fashioner and former, as the only furthering condition for that force's efficacy, and this is the Art already evolved outside that separate force, the Art which from the artworks of the ancient and the modern world has shaped itself into a universal Substance, and hand in hand with actual Life, reacts upon the individual with the character of the force that I have elsewhere named the *communistic*.[40]

"Thus the poet cannot create, but only the folk; or the poet only in so far as he comprehends and utters, represents, the creation of the folk."[41] Art is thus profoundly social. Wagner saw this ideal at work in ancient Greece, and especially in Athenian tragedy, which he read closely and creatively, if sometimes oddly. His term for the unconscious artwork of the community was "Mythos," and in Mythos "all the shaping impulse of the Folk" collaborated in showing to "its senses a broadest grouping of the most manifold phenomena, and in the most succinct of shapes."[42] What the tragedian did was make the Mythos visible; "the shapes that had been in Mythos [as] merely shapes of Thought, were now presented in actual bodily portrayal by living men: so the actually represented Action now compressed itself, in thorough keeping with the mythic essence, into a compact, plastic whole."[43]

---

37 *The Artwork of the Future*, 78, *PW* I, 196.
38 Quoted in Mann, "Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner," in Mann, Essays of Three Decades. (New York: Knopf, 1948), 329.
39 Richard Wagner, *A Communication to My Friends*, trans. Ellis, *PW* I, 288.
40 *A Communication to My Friends*, *PW* I, 288.
41 Richard Wagner, "Sketches (1849–1851)," trans. Ellis, *PW* VIII, 349.
42 *Opera and Drama*, *PW* II, 154.
43 *Opera and Drama*, *PW* II, 154.

Putting it briefly, "Tragedy is nothing other than the artistic completion of the Myth itself; while the Myth is the poem of a life-view in common."[44] This social grounding is what makes it possible for art to be "the faithful, conscious image of the authentic human being and of a human life lived according to natural necessity."[45] The calling of art is to make that necessity, that activity, into something sensible and therefore knowable, thus completing a kind of circle: in self-consciousness the unity of nature splinters into sensible events, which are woven together by the community in its stories and images, and through art these elements are focused and fused into sensible representations that show us our original identity with reality itself. Art is the mirror that shows us that we ourselves are the mirror of nature.

This is not a primal unity, as Nattiez thinks.[46] It is something achieved, and we can see the *Ring* cycle as an attempt to achieve just that. But this is also why Wagner's tetralogy is such a monster. It has something alien about it. Looking around him Wagner saw nothing like the idealized collective life he thought he could see in ancient Athens. It was exactly the opposite, an "anti-art way of life."[47] Thinking had cut itself off from "the totality of all reality," seeing itself "not as the last and most contingent, but rather as the first and least contingent agency, and therefore as the foundation and cause of nature," and once that happened "the bond of necessity snap[ped] and arbitrary wilfulness rage[d] unchecked … through the workings of thought, unleashing a tide of madness into the real world."[48]

Genuine art begins with "the real, physical human presence, from his life need, whose pre-condition in turn is nature's actual, tangible presence." In a community shaped by the give-and-take of free people art was conservative. It made manifest what the people themselves had felt and done, as they lived close to the roots of experience and thus to the necessity of the real. (This is more emotional openness than some back-to-nature primitivism.) In a world of "nature-sundered" individuals, though, the circle through which reality comes to self-awareness is broken, and concepts and ideas about things replace the things themselves. Wagner calls the source of those ideas *Geist,* an untranslatable word meaning mind or spirit, and its triumph, unmoored from natural necessity and the real lives of a human

---

44 *Opera and Drama*, *PW* II, 156.
45 *The Artwork of the Future,* 14, *PW* I, 71.
46 Jean-Jacques Nattiez, tr. S. Spencer, *Wagner Androgyne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 18.
47 *The Artwork of the Future*, 20, *PW* I, 82.
48 *The Artwork of the Future*, 20, *PW* I, 32.

community, is the exact opposite of the human freedom it might seem to exalt. It makes real human beings interchangeable and expendable:

> If the spirit created nature, if thought made reality, if the philosopher precedes the human then nature, reality and human beings are no longer necessary, their existence is superfluous, harmful even … Then nature, reality and human beings only gain meaning, their existence is only justified when the spirit—that unconditional spirit, which is cause, effect and law unto itself—uses them according to its own absolute, sovereign pleasure. If the spirit in itself is necessity then it is life that is arbitrary, a fantastic masquerade, an idle distraction, a frivolous whim, [and] every purely human need is a luxury, [while] luxury on the other hand is a need.[49]

Real life vanishes from view. Since we are never apart from reality, though, the belief that we can stand above it and dictate our terms to it can only be a delusion, and any cultural product that proceeds from a delusion can only be sterile. We produce dead imitations of real art, following fashion rather than necessity:

> Fashion … requires nature's absolute obedience; it demands the complete self-denial of true need in favor of an imaginary one; it forces humans' natural sense of beauty into the worship of ugliness; it kills our health to teach us to love sickness; it destroys our strength and power to make us find contentment in our weakness. Where the most laughable fashion reigns, there nature is seen to be most ridiculous; where the most criminally unnatural reigns, there the expression of nature appears the highest crime; where insanity takes the place of truth, there truth must be locked in the insane asylum.[50]

And Wagner could see no way out: "the needs of art can never exist where fashion dictates the rules by which we live."[51]

Under these conditions art could not be conservative. "With us," he wrote in *Art and Revolution*, "true Art is *revolutionary,* because its very existence is opposed to the ruling spirit of the community."[52] In that same essay, though, he admitted that the social conditions for true art were missing. "The perfect Art-work, the great united utterance of a free and

---

[49] *The Artwork of the Future*, 20, *PW* I, 83. (Includes quotations in previous paragraph.) Wagner's *Geist* should not be confused with Hegel's *Geist,* which is closer to Wagner's unknowable real.

[50] *The Artwork of the Future*, 20–21, *PW* I, 84.

[51] *The Artwork of the Future*, 21, *PW* I, 85.

[52] Richard Wagner, *Art and Revolution*, trans. Ellis, *PW* I, 51–52.

lovely public life, the *Drama*, *Tragedy* … is not yet born again: … Only the great Revolution of Mankind … can win for us this Art-work."[53]

He was sure that this "great Revolution" would come soon. Though the culture of the present day had set itself against nature, its "heavy load … will one day grow so ponderous" that "down-trod, never-dying Nature" will "hurl the whole cramping burden from her, with one sole thrust."[54] "Nature and her fulness" would then be the wealth of the whole human community, equally, and the needs which had blighted the lives of the poor would be cast away (onto machines, apparently); "then will man's whole enfranchised energy proclaim itself as naught but pure *artistic* impulse."[55] Art would be reborn.

But Wagner did not want to wait, and he was more inconsistent than usual on this point: "The true artist who has already grasped the proper standpoint," he maintained, "may labour even now—for this standpoint is present with us—upon the Art-work of the Future!"[56] He would turn back to a Mythos from the distant past, reconstructed through his own prodigious if undisciplined reading. He claimed the right to do this because, he said, "The incomparable thing about the Mythos is, that it is true for all time."[57] Yet the *Ring* had no place in the life of its own day. In the early 1850s, with the idea of Bayreuth some years in the future, Wagner was convinced that it could be performed only after a revolution, not those that had failed or been put down in 1848 and 1849 but the grander one he expected, because only "the men of the Revolution" would understand that it made clear "the *meaning* of that Revolution, in its noblest sense."[58] And after that would come the truly revolutionary art, one that would bring about "the ascension of the *egoistic* essence of the individual into the *communistic* essence of the human race; the concretion of the abstract idea of Man into the actual, true and blissful common-being of *Mankind.*"[59]

These are dangerous ideas, and not always in a good way. As is all too well known, Wagner's ideas were quickly turned into ideological cover for a nascent European far right. He himself was the first to move in that direction, attacking Jews as archetypes of nature-sundered humanity, people incapable of true creativity because they were cut off from their roots. This was

---

53 *Art and Revolution*, *PW* I, 53.
54 *Art and Revolution*, *PW* I, 55.
55 *Art and Revolution*, *PW* I, 57. Oscar Wilde's "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" is a witty elaboration of this idea.
56 *Art and Revolution*, *PW* I, 60–61.
57 *Opera and Drama*, *PW* II, 191.
58 To Theodor Uhlig, November 12, 1851, *SL* 234.
59 Richard Wagner, "Art and Climate," trans. Ellis, *PW* I, 261.

unjustifiable and not at all theoretically necessary, but it served to rationalize Wagner's irrational hatred of Jews as a whole, and after his death, thanks to the deplorable politics of the Bayreuth circle, the antisemitic views of his widow, their daughter Eva's marriage to the English racist Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and their daughter-in-law Winifred's devotion to Hitler, Wagner and his festival came to be identified first with proto-fascism and ultimately with Nazism.

Hitler may have been the sole fanatical Wagnerian among the Nazi elite, but some of Wagner's texts and imagery and selected extracts from his scores seemed to anticipate the blood-and-soil ideology of National Socialism. Yet Nazi "culture" and governance were hardly in keeping with Wagner's theories. His ideal art was a mirror, not a model, arising from the shared creativity of ordinary people, and the reality of Fascism was exactly the opposite of this. As the sterile classicism of Arno Breker, the "official state sculptor" of Nazi Germany,[60] might suggest, it was never the organic cultivation of a grounded form of communal life. It was the imposition from above of a fraudulent image of community, enforced by a regime of propagandists and policemen far more intrusive and destructive of anything worthwhile in life than individualist capitalism has ever needed. So far from realizing a Wagnerian ideal, it actively suppressed any creative spontaneity. Instead of fostering a community that could shape itself and give birth to genuine art, it tried to force an entire nation into the mold of a pseudo-artistic idea, and it channeled a murderous rage toward anyone who seemed to threaten that idea. It killed art in the name of the people and killed people in the name of art.

Actually existing fascism was deeply anti-Wagnerian. It is not always easy, though, to separate Wagner's philosophy from its distorted echoes, and his own character and prejudices make that even harder. It is worth doing all the same. Wagner's imaginative development of a kind of materialist idealism deserves to be rescued from right-wing Wagnerians. It may need to be rescued from Wagner himself.[61]

---

[60] Richard Evans, *The Third Reich in Power, 1933–1939* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 167.

[61] *PW* refers to *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, translated by William Ashton Ellis. The University of Nebraska reprints are photo reproductions of the first editions, which were published at the end of the nineteenth century, and the volume numbers and pagination are the same in both. Titles without an author are all Wagner's work.
I have used and quoted the only modern translation of any of these texts, *The Artwork of the Future*, translated by Emma Warner (London: The Wagner Journal, 2013), and have supplied parallel citations to the Ellis translation.
*SL* refers to Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, eds. & trans., *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*. (London: J.M. Dent, 1987).