12 The Jewish question

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No question has exercised the Wagner literature of the last fifteen or twenty years like that of Wagner's anti-Semitism. From a strictly biographical point of view, of course, there is no question: Wagner's well-documented antagonism to the Jews as a presence in nineteenth-century Europe is a simple matter of record, although scholars can debate the exact origins, the shifting contours, or other "nuances" of his attitudes. The real question has to do with the consequences of these facts, either for our understanding of the operas or for any possible consensus regarding Wagner's implication in the murderous anti-Semitic policies of the Nazi regime that came to power in Germany fifty years after his death. These are almost certainly two separate questions. To argue that the extermination of European Jewry attempted in the later years of the Third Reich was a direct result of social messages encoded in Wagner's dramas and their music would be more than a little preposterous. But to argue that Wagner as a historical figure (which includes his writings and public persona, and indeed his artistic oeuvre) contributed in some significant way to the cultural climate in which Nazi ideologies could take root is by no means preposterous. It is the undeniable affinities between Wagner, "Wagnerism," Bayreuth, and Hitler (if not the entirety of the Nazi Party) that give the question of Wagner's anti-Semitism a moral urgency quite incommensurate with such other perennially popular topics as his adultery or his reckless borrowing and spending habits.[1] The great surge in attention to the theme of Wagner and the Jews in recent years might be attributed in part to a political and social turn in academic criticism at large, in reaction to the paradigms of aesthetic autonomy that dominated the earlier post-World War II generation. In the particular case of Wagner, the desire – even imperative – to rehabilitate him after 1945 was a major factor in discouraging scholarly attention to his notorious anti-Semitism.[2] However disturbing this component of the Wagner phenomenon remains today, we perhaps find the whole question ever more compelling as the notion of art's social significance, for better or worse, becomes ever more remote.

In the earlier nineteenth century the "Jewish question" referred to issues of Jewish emancipation: assimilation and enfranchisement in cultural as well as political terms. Depending on who posed it, the question asked either how this should be effected, or whether it should happen

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at all. For those, like Wagner, who grew to resent the effects of Jewish emancipation, the "question" became reformulated as a "problem," especially once the process of granting full political rights in Germany drew toward completion after 1869. As much as any anti-Semitic politician of the later nineteenth century, Wagner helped disseminate the view that, despite (or even because of) rapid assimilation, a Jewish presence in Germany and in Europe was a "problem" in need of a solution. What seems to have begun as personal animus with roots in his Parisian experiences between 1839 and 1850, in particular his early dealings with Giacomo Meyerbeer, became by the last years of Wagner's life a mania: an international "problem" with the broadest of cultural and historical implications, as he saw it.[3] Again, Wagner's contribution to the fully political anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime – which can never be precisely calculated, of course – is sooner to be sought in his contribution to the cultural and increasingly racialized discourse of "questions" and "problems" than in any subliminal messages conveyed (perhaps) by the characters, situations, and musical language of his dramas. Furthermore, the canonization of the once radical Richard Wagner as the guiding spirit of German culture by the end of the century made the domestication of his social views on the part of conservative nationalists all the more natural.

An inconvenient truth: the documentary record

The central text of Wagnerian anti-Semitism is of course the essay "Judaism in Music" ("Das Judentum in der Musik"), published pseudonymously in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1850. It was reprinted under the author's own name, with slight revisions and a long afterword, in 1869, and again in the fifth volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (first edition 1872). The apparently sudden, vehement eruption of this antagonism to the presence of "the Jews" in modern culture in the 1850 essay was for a long time regarded as a puzzling phenomenon, especially in light of Wagner's commitment to contemporary liberal, emancipatory causes. But as Paul Lawrence Rose has emphasized, the anti-capitalistic rhetoric of the social revolutionaries of 1848 – Karl Marx himself very much included – had fully absorbed several generations' worth of anti-Jewish feeling.[4] Wagner himself addressed the apparent conflict of principles quite succinctly toward the beginning of his essay, and in terms that immediately characterize the defamatory "straight-talking" tone that is meant to guide the whole enterprise. "In supporting their emancipation," he explains, we modern, liberal Germans "were supporting an abstract principle rather than a concrete example":

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> All our liberalism was a somewhat confused intellectual game, in so far as we proposed freedom for the Jews with no knowledge of the race [*Volk*], indeed with a distaste for any contact with them. Consequently our desire to give the Jews their rights sprang much more from principle than from real sympathy, and all the writing and talking about Jewish emancipation failed to mask our unwillingness to have any actual dealings with them.[5]

As usual in Wagner's writing, "we" means both himself and the German people, or even people in general. But it is difficult to say what he had thought about Jews up to this point in his life, whether based on personal experience, generalized observation, or inherited prejudice, and so the question remains why he suddenly let loose with this now notorious blast against them in September 1850.

Both Jacob Katz and Rose argue persuasively that the outburst of "Judaism in Music" was the result of personal resentment, envy, and suspicion toward the person of Giacomo Meyerbeer accumulating mainly in the period from 1847 through 1850, but with roots in the unhappy, unsuccessful years in Paris at the very beginning of the decade. Specific events of this period include a frustrated attempt to make professional headway in Berlin through a production of *Rienzi* in the fall of 1847 (the first time Wagner became specifically convinced that Meyerbeer was working against rather than for him); the visit to Paris in a profoundly disaffected mood in June 1849, newly exiled from Saxony and looking (at Liszt's behest) for operatic work in the French capital; and a longer, still more alienating sojourn in Paris from February through June 1850. During this first year of exile after the insurrection in Dresden Wagner's antagonism toward the modern operatic, economic, and cultural establishment (as personified in Meyerbeer) grew to a fevered pitch, even as he fought once more, without conviction and without success, to break into it in Paris. The success of Meyerbeer's *Le prophète* during this same period – his first major new opera since *Les Huguenots* of 1836 – increased Wagner's bitterness, and it was in fact a discussion of Meyerbeer's latest work in the pages of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* that provided the ostensibly proximate cause of the publication of "Judaism in Music."[6]

Without attempting a psychoanalytic investigation into the origins of Wagner's (or anyone's) anti-Semitic mentality, it is telling to juxtapose passages from one of Wagner's early letters soliciting Meyerbeer's patronage with a letter to Liszt after the publication of the "Judaism" essay.[7] In the first letter, written from Paris on 3 May 1840, Wagner is updating Meyerbeer, momentarily in Berlin, on the state of his affairs in Paris. He strikes a tone of amazing, almost parodic obsequiousness (as if appealing to a "Jewish" way of thinking?), addressing Meyerbeer as his

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"deeply revered lord and master." Hoping to leave behind journalism, arranging, and other piecework for Maurice Schlesinger's publishing firm, Wagner offers himself – for what purpose is obscure – to the all-powerful Meyerbeer:

> I have reached the point of having to sell myself . . . But my head & my heart are no longer mine to give away, – they are your property, my master; . . . I realize that I must become your slave, body & soul, in order to find food & strength for my work, which will one day tell you of my gratitude. I shall be a loyal & honest slave, – for I openly admit that I am a slave by nature; it gives me endless pleasure to be able to devote myself unconditionally to another person, recklessly, & in blind trust . . . Buy me, therefore, Sir, it is by no means a wholly worthless purchase! (*SL* 68; *SB* I:388–89)

And he returns to this rhetoric of human commodification in his closing salutation: "Your property: Richard Wagner." As with most classic cases (Caliban, Gollum, Uriah Heep), obsequious fawning masks or mutates into vicious resentment: Wagner projects his own hypocrisy back onto Meyerbeer, who is figured as the sly, slinking, envious *Unmensch*. Eleven years later, after two frustrating visits to Paris in the first year of his exile, he recalls to Franz Liszt the abjection of his early Parisian experience by way of explaining the publication of "Judaism in Music" and his "long suppressed resentment against this Jewish business":

> Meyerbeer is a special case, as far as I am concerned: it is not that I hate him, but that I find him infinitely repugnant. This perpetually kind and obliging man reminds me of the darkest – I might almost say the most wicked – period of my life, when he still made a show of protecting me; it was a period of connections and back-staircases, when we were treated like fools by patrons whom we inwardly deeply despised . . . I cannot [help] sensing in Meyerbeer my total antithesis, a contrast I am driven loudly to proclaim by the genuine despair that I feel whenever I encounter, even among many of my friends, the mistaken view that I have something in common with Meyerbeer. (*SL* 222; *SB* III:545–46)

Wagner goes on to congratulate himself for having publicly effected this dissociation from Meyerbeer "with such zeal." The impulse was indeed not new, for as far back as 1843, at the time of the first performances of *Der fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*), he had remonstrated with Robert Schumann for claiming to find "Meyerbeerian" elements in that opera. What could that possibly mean, he protested, "except perhaps a sophisticated striving after superficial popularity"; and how could he ever have drawn "inspiration from *that* particular source, the merest smell of which . . . is sufficient to turn my stomach" (25 February 1843: *SL* 105). It is not difficult to detect in this vehement disowning of a purported

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"protector" and mentor, now charged with cunning treachery, shades of young Siegfried's instinctive rebellion against his foster-father Mime.

As has often been pointed out, the array of anti-Jewish sentiments expressed in "Judaism in Music" was by no means new or unique to Wagner in 1850; but these sentiments had rarely been expressed in such a concentrated, vehement fashion in modern times. Indeed, Wagner prides himself on this very point. The great "service" he has to offer here is to articulate the "question" in all candor, pulling no punches, telling it like it is. The only way to deal with the question is to put all one's cards on the table, to acknowledge "people's instinctive dislike of Jewishness" ("What I refer to is simply what exists"), to "proclaim the natural revulsion aroused in us by Jewishness" rather than gloss over it politely ("Judaism in Music," 24–25; *GS* V:66–67). He makes it clear, too, that the issue is no longer one of religious difference – though by the time of *Parsifal* he would revive that as well – but one of cultural and ethnic difference: between one *Volk* and another. (Wagner is obviously feeling his way toward the as yet uncodified theory or "science" of race.) The most immediate issue remains the external, circumstantial one of economics: modern capitalism as a legacy of Jewish usury, and the destructive effect of the ("Jewish-controlled") market economy on the affairs of art. From circumstances, however, Wagner quickly turns toward appearances ("unpleasantly foreign") and essences: the Jewish nature (*Wesen*), the effect of "Jewish speech," and "Jewish influence on music" (see "Language and music," 211–15). The idea that a "people" so culturally and temperamentally alien, so fundamentally uncreative, should control the financial and institutional reins of art is naturally, to Wagner, intolerable. Where in his contemporary "reform" treatises on art and opera he had been at pains to establish the once and future bond between art and the *Volk*, here Wagner insists on the unbridgeable gulf between even assimilated, educated Jews and the people of the German nation. Distinctions between the common or ordinary Jews and affluent, cultured Jews are effortlessly dissolved in the broader essentializing discourse of "the Jew." While in other contexts Wagner has no trouble damning the artistic sterility of perfectly German composers such as Heinrich Marschner, Franz Lachner, or Joseph Rheinberger (not to mention Brahms!), or inveighing against the pedantry of eminently *völkisch* musical writers such as W.H. Riehl, in the heat of his anti-Jewish tirade all creative flaws identified in Jews are wholly and essentially Jewish. Necessarily he finds different faults in Mendelssohn than in Meyerbeer (the recently deceased Mendelssohn provides a foil, of sorts, for the real target in Meyerbeer). But these differences are likewise dissolved in the all-encompassing condition of Jewishness.

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The insistence on cultural, ethnic, and proto-racial "essences" in the essay points directly to the problem of its much cited and much debated ending. Having compared bad and worse in Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer, Wagner compares bad and better in the figures of the writers Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Börne. If religious conversion and baptism are not the answer to the Jewish "question," is cultural assimilation? (Full legal enfranchisement or gradual ethnic assimilation by intermarriage are not issues raised in the essay.) The answer Wagner calls for is the complete repudiation of "Jewishness," as achieved by Börne, an early radical journalist who had died in 1837.[8] Invoking the legendary figure of the Wandering Jew (Ahasuerus), prototype for his own Flying Dutchman, Wagner prescribes "redemption through self-denial" as the answer to the "curse" of Jewishness. But this "can be achieved by only one thing, and that is the redemption of Ahasuerus – decline and fall!" ("Judaism in Music," 39; *GS* V:85). Whether this call for an end to Jewishness by means of its willed "decline" (*Untergang*) – Wagner also speaks of "self-annihilation" in the preceding sentence – is strictly figurative, or whether it anticipates at some level the ruthlessly physical annihilation prescribed by the Nazi "final solution" is the continuing point of debate. (The fate of Kundry in *Parsifal* resonates with the question without clearly answering it.) The answer will have to depend ultimately on personal convictions regarding the character of Richard Wagner, which is to say that there can be no single, definitive answer.

Having thus "unburdened" himself on the subject in the 1850 essay, Wagner continued to air freely his views on the "Jewish question" for the rest of his life. At first this was just among individual friends and acquaintances; it would be some time before he put his own name to these views in print. Only a small circle – including the *Neue Zeitschrift* editor Franz Brendel, Liszt, Theodor Uhlig, and the other young disciples Karl Ritter and Hans von Bülow – knew for a fact that Wagner was the author of the essay first published under the name "K. Freigedank." (The pseudonym, meaning roughly "free-thinker," did at least clearly announce itself as such.) Not until 1869 did Wagner, rather unexpectedly, decide to reissue the essay as an independent brochure under his own name, lightly revised and extended by a sizeable afterword addressed to a Parisian friend and patron Marie Muchanoff (previously Kalergis, née Countess Nesselrode). Some years before this, anti-Jewish murmurings were coupled with the traditional critique of French political and artistic hegemony in Europe in a series of articles published in the *Süddeutsche Presse* (1867; reprinted as *Deutsche Kunst und deutsche Politik*, 1868), when Wagner thought to use his newfound influence with Ludwig II of Bavaria as a means of influencing, in turn, public opinion on matters cultural and broadly political.

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The more concrete denunciations of the "Judaism" essay regarding the corrosive effects of Jews and the "Jewish spirit" on the Germans were revived in a series of journal entries written for Ludwig in the fall of 1865, though published only later (1878) in the *Bayreuther Blätter* as "Was ist Deutsch?" ("What Is German?").

It was, in any case, the reissue of the 1850 essay as an independent publication by the now famous "Richard Wagner" that first brought his vehement anti-Semitism to the attention of a wide public in 1869. In this year, on the eve of German unification, the North German federation of states, headed by Prussia, granted full civil rights to Jewish citizens. However much Wagner may have been opposed to such legislation, it does not seem to have been the immediate cause behind the republication, since he had arrived at the decision already before the beginning of the year. In a letter to his part-Jewish disciple Karl Tausig in April 1869 he claimed rather that it had been the "unprecedented insolence of the Viennese press" upon the appearance of *Die Meistersinger*, the "continual, brazen lie-mongering about me, and its truly destructive effects" that induced him to take the reckless "step" of going public with the essay (*SL* 749). And, indeed, the new afterword is preoccupied not with the politics of Jewish emancipation, but with the wholly personal *idée fixe* that an out-and-out conspiracy of the "Jewish press" is working to undermine the cause of Wagner and his artwork of the future. His nemesis of the past decade, Eduard Hanslick, is implicated as the ringleader of this movement, given his increasing prominence as the voice of the Viennese musical establishment. Yet the conspiracy Wagner imputes to him and his fellow critics is not predicated on vengeance for the parody of anti-Wagnerian critics in Beckmesser, but on a (wholly undocumented, wholly conjectural) resentment against the original, pseudonymous "Judaism" essay.[9]

Beginning in 1869, the diaries kept by Cosima von Bülow (soon to be Cosima Wagner) until 1883 offer an intimate portrait of the role of anti-Jewish sentiment in Wagner's everyday conversation. The correspondence after 1850 (before then Wagner had kept largely mute on the subject, even in his letters) offers ample documentation as well, though less consistent in tone and frequency; some of Wagner's most impassioned attacks on the Jewish "threat" are to be found in the letters to King Ludwig, whom Wagner persistently attempted to convert to his views on the matter, always in vain. The enterprise of the Bayreuth festival consumed most of Wagner's attention (also as writer and publicist) for a time after 1870. But in the last five years of his life the *Bayreuther Blätter* provided a forum for further pronouncements on the issue of Jews and Judaism, now against the background of a public program of anti-Semitism – for the first time under that rubric – being carried out in Germany and Austria by the likes

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of Bruno Bauer, Wilhelm Marr, Julius Stöcker, and Bernhard Förster. Although Wagner famously declined, in 1880, to sign the anti-Semitic petition that Förster wanted to submit to the German Reichstag calling for a curb on the civic rights being granted to the Jews, there is no doubt that the newly racialized discourse of anti-Semitism played a large role in Wagner's late "regeneration" essays speculating – often wildly and almost incomprehensibly – on the means of shepherding the German people, and perhaps the rest of humanity, toward a utopian future founded upon the fairly fuzzy principles of an art-based Wagnerian faith.

Rose sees the essay on "German-ness" ("Was ist Deutsch?"), drafted in 1865, as inaugurating this late corpus of writings upon its publication in 1878. If "What Is German?" moves beyond the personal concerns of the 1869 afterword to issues of national culture and identity, the later essays chart a still broader, global territory. "Religion and Art" (*Bayreuther Blätter*, October 1880) speculates on the "fall of man" from a loosely post-Darwinian perspective, in terms of his degeneration into the carnivorous, warlike aggressor of modern Western civilizations. On the face of it, the essay seems to propose an innocuous, even distinctly virtuous Bayreuthian variant of the Salvation Army, committed to promoting pacifism, vegetarianism, kindness to animals, temperance, and of course spiritual elevation through art and music. The intellectual foundations of this vision owe something to Schopenhauer, including his broad philosophical-ideological critique of the Judeo-Christian ethical legacy. But particularly in the series of three "supplements" to this essay published between December 1880 and September 1881 ("What Avails This Knowledge?," "Know Thyself," and "Heroism and Christianity") Wagner's long-cultivated, visceral anti-Semitism repeatedly asserts itself, poisoning any lofty idealism with an all-too-human rancor. These are the only works of Wagner written under the influence of Count Arthur Gobineau and his (pre-Darwinian) *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (originally published 1853–55). Personally, however, Gobineau evinced no more than a casual, "aristocratic" brand of anti-Jewish prejudice, while as a theorist he promoted Semitic racial solidarity as a good example. It was his diagnosis of the ongoing "degeneration" of Germanic-Aryan stock in Europe that inspired Wagner's speculation on the possibilities of "regeneration" through a cooperation of racial, cultural, and aesthetic factors. These "regeneration" writings of the Bayreuth period are a complicated, contradictory brew. The ongoing fulminations against the Jews are ominous enough in the context of a renewed and newly racial anti-Semitism in Germany of the 1870s and 1880s. The speculative, utopian strain, for all that it might suggest strategies for Wagner's ethical redemption in the eyes of posterity, must also give us serious pause considering the consequences of such radical utopian agendas in the course of the following century.

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Language and music: anti-Semitism in the operas?

The foregoing recital of evidence serves only to remind us of an established fact: that Richard Wagner was a vocal anti-Semite throughout the second half of his life. Of this there has never been any question. For us today, the actual "Jewish question" in the case of Wagner is that regarding the possible relation of his anti-Semitism to his creative oeuvre. (The historical impact of this element in the works constitutes a related, more imponderable question, if we agree that such an element exists.) This is often identified as the only aspect of his anti-Semitism that might matter, since Wagner only matters any more as the author of his operas or music dramas, while the opinionated ideologist faded from cultural relevance along with the phenomenon of "Wagnerism" nearly a century ago.[10]

The question of anti-Semitism in the works begins and ends, probably, with *Parsifal*. And, more broadly, it is safe to say that the question really applies only to the operas written after 1850, that is, the mature "music dramas" fully executed only after *Lohengrin* (1848), the experience of the 1849 revolutions, and the "Judaism" essay. (The role of a messianic *Führerprinzip* in *Rienzi* or *Lohengrin*, or of the Wandering Jew legend in the character of the Flying Dutchman would have at most an indirect bearing on the question; reading any of the pre-1850 operas as anti-Semitic allegory would require much special pleading.) Although the essay "Religion and Art" and its three supplements were all written after both the libretto and score of *Parsifal* had been completed, they are plainly conceived in large part as commentaries on themes at work in the drama: spiritual and physical decline and regeneration (the Grail knights, Amfortas), a new theology of compassion for living things (Amfortas, the swan, even Kundry and nature at large – *was all da blüht und bald erstirbt*), and a vaguely mystical reinterpretation of Christian motifs such as Christ's blood, the Eucharist, and redemption. The agency of art in effecting "redemption" is no less important than that of moral and spiritual factors, as suggested by *Parsifal* as well as the late writings. And race, or "blood"? Robert Gutman was one of the first to draw attention to the explicitly anti-Semitic implications of these commentaries for a reading of the opera, its symbols, and its music.[11] Since then, Hartmut Zelinsky, Paul Lawrence Rose, and Marc Weiner have reiterated and developed the case for reading *Parsifal* as implicitly, but still deeply, anti-Semitic in conception.[12] Even apart from the "regeneration" essays, the centrality of Christian imagery and ritual in *Parsifal* and the fairly explicit Orientalizing and feminizing of the enemy agents, Klingsor and Kundry, and their environments make such a reading easily available. Arguments against this approach might identify it as narrowing or lowering the range of otherwise available meanings,

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as capitulating to obsolete, "essentializing" habits of thought better ignored (if they really were Wagner's), or as privileging surface representations over profounder meanings and experiences provided by the music.[13] Yet the case "against" *Parsifal*, if one accepts it, differs from hypotheses about anti-Semitic elements in the other works in concerning precisely the fundamental themes and textures of the drama, not merely isolated caricatures or allusions to ethnic-cultural stereotypes.

The most common objection to charges that the operas reflect the composer's deep-seated anti-Semitism is the obvious absence of overtly Jewish characters. That absence should hardly surprise us. Jewish characters and caricatures could find a place in realistic novels or in the spoken theater, especially contemporary farces or comedies of manners, but hardly in grandly idealistic music dramas based on German mythology, legend, or medieval romances.[14] The incorporation of explicit Jewish caricatures into the operas would have jeopardized their claim to being serious, timeless works of art. Fromenthal Halévy and Eugène Scribe might portray the plight of medieval Jewry from a modern, liberal-enlightened perspective in their highly successful grand opera of 1835, *La Juive* (a work early admired by Wagner and never renounced), but it is impossible to imagine where Wagner might have found plausible source material for some sort of anti-*Juive* without resorting to subliterary medieval propaganda. Scurrilous pamphleteering and high art were, for him, quite separate spheres. (Kundry, as a female manifestation of the Wandering Jew of medieval legend, is a possible, partial exception, suggested by Klingsor's reference to one of her past lives in the person of Herodias. But the issue is left ambiguous – deliberately, one assumes – and at any rate, she is no caricature.)

Hence the importance of his own scurrilous pamphlet *Judaism in Music* (in its independent reincarnation of 1869) in mediating between personal ideology and public art. If Wagner could not plausibly represent "real" Jews in his operas, he might construct characters who could be perceived as acting, sounding, and behaving "like Jews," and this might involve various levels of his synthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk*: language, singing, gesture, and orchestral music.[15] Wagner's decision to identify himself as the author of *Judaism in Music* is important here, since it could then be regarded as a key to such potential readings for anyone with a desire to use it so. Nearly all modern interpretations of anti-Semitic content in the operas refer to this key, although we still have very little evidence of whether or not Wagner's contemporaries chose to avail themselves of it.

The arguments about Jewish "difference" in *Judaism* all stem from the fundamental issue of language. The stereotype, in no way original to Wagner, is presumably as old as the diaspora, and is neatly summed up by the "easily assimilated" Old Lady from Rovnogobernia in Bernstein's

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Candide ("I never lerrrned zuh hu-mann leng-vege . . ."). As traditionally adhering to their own distinct ethnic enclaves, in this view, Jews have not absorbed the native languages of Europe as true mother tongues. (Bernstein's Old Lady identifies hers, tongue in cheek, as "a high-middle Polish.") Thus, Wagner argues, they remain cultural outsiders in every other regard, as well. The Central European Jewish lingua franca of Yiddish – what Wagner and his contemporaries referred to as Jewish-German *Jargon* or *Mauscheln* – is read as emblematic of a tendency to appropriate and distort all genuine cultural forms, from speech to writing to philosophical or political thought to singing, acting, and musical composition. Mendelssohn's adept but "soulless, formalistic" emulation of the German tradition from Bach to Beethoven and Meyerbeer's grotesque extremes of descriptive and "characteristic" music are but separate, distant points on a spectrum of uncreative, distortional adaptation of European musical idioms. Beckmesser's sorry efforts at an original love song in Act 2 of *Die Meistersinger* are surpassed in ineptitude only by his attempt to purloin Walther's prize-song in Act 3. Beckmesser's is a paradigmatic case in the way it involves language (poetry) and music at once, inextricably confounded in Wagner's representation. Upon his first appearance in the *Ring* cycle, in the opening scene of *Das Rheingold*, Alberich is a similarly awkward, unskilled suitor for the hand of native and natural beauty. His entrance is immediately marked as an intrusion on the natural order; the tone (even tonality) of his music, of his text, and of his physical behavior underlines this alien, intrusive, destructive status. Any anti-Jewish allegory here, it is true, must take account of the fact that the original sin of the myth – the theft of the Rhine-gold and the cursing of love – results from Alberich's rejection by the fair Rhine maidens. But then (the allegory could have it), he should never have shown up where he was not wanted. Indeed, as Theodor Adorno famously put it, "all the rejects of Wagner's works are caricatures of Jews": "The gold-grubbing, invisible, anonymous, exploitative Alberich, the shoulder-shrugging, loquacious Mime, overflowing with self-praise and spite, the impotent intellectual critic Hanslick-Beckmesser."[16]

If Wagner believed himself to have been a victim of a "Jewish conspiracy" in the press, as he insisted in 1869, there would also seem to have been something of a conspiracy of silence about the implicit "Jewishness" of the characters so readily recognized by Adorno. Apart from the case of *Parsifal*, where the prominence of religious motifs sometimes forced issues of Christianity vs. Judaism into the foreground, earlier productions of and critical reactions to the *Ring* and *Die Meistersinger* seem almost never to have articulated such insights into Wagner's "Jewish" characterizations, even up through the Nazi period in Germany.[17] And, yet, the preponderance of negative evidence is not enough to prove what individuals did

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or did not perceive in Wagner, especially in light of some very telling remarks attributed to Gustav Mahler in the memoirs of Natalie Bauer-Lechner. Rehearsing a complete *Ring* cycle in Vienna for the 1898–99 season, Mahler complained about the excessively "Jewish" characterization given to the role of Mime by the tenor Julius Spielmann ("The worst thing about it is the *Mauscheln*"). Not that Mahler disagreed with this interpretation: "Although I am convinced that this figure is the true embodiment of a Jew, intended by Wagner in the spirit of persiflage (in every trait with which he has imbued him: the petty cleverness, the greed, the whole *Jargon* so perfectly suggested by both music and text), this should – for God's sake – not be exaggerated and laid on so heavily, as Spielmann does – and in Vienna, at the 'Royal-Imperial Court Opera,' of all places, it would be pure lunacy, an all-too-welcome scandal for the Viennese!" To this he added that he knew of only one perfect interpreter of the role, "and that is *me*!"[18] Mahler's observation has been noted often enough, but not sufficiently contextualized. The element of caricature is clear to *him*, as it was apparently to Julius Spielmann, but he assumes that it is *not* common knowledge to the Viennese audience at large, or at any rate, that it would be highly impolitic to make a point of it in performance. A "conspiracy of silence" might in fact be an apt way of summing up the whole question of how the anti-Semitic portraiture of Wagner's "villains" was received prior to Adorno.[19]

Significantly, Mahler's remarks concerned the interpretation of Mime's role in *Siegfried* rather than *Das Rheingold*. In the prologue to the *Ring*, Mime is the chief representative of the Nibelungs as an oppressed, exploited proletariat. By scene 3 of the opera, after forging the ring, Alberich may well become the avatar of the modern industrial plutocrat, as George Bernard Shaw described him, and such plutocrats may have been quintessential Jews in Wagner's mind. But, even though Mime develops some of his characteristic vocal and gestural tics in his *Rheingold* scenes, there is no way of distinguishing him, dramatically, from the Shavian or Marxian working class. Throughout the first two acts of *Siegfried* the situation is quite otherwise. Freed from the invisible whip of Alberich, Mime now employs all his cleverness and guile to exploit the young Siegfried, in turn, while the rest of the Nibelungs are nowhere to be seen. Moreover, the whole process of Siegfried's self-discovery in these two acts constantly turns on his observations of Mime's difference. (Here music, even more than language, plays the vital role: in addition to his characteristic wheedling, keening, and kvetching, Mime's musical-gestural persona distinctly embodies the fidgety "Jewish restlessness" of which Wagner complained both in public and in private.)[20] The more he observes this, the more Siegfried registers an instinctive loathing for his foster father, "false" in every respect. By the

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time he is given the opportunity to murder Mime, in honest self-defense, there seems to be really no other viable solution to the Mime "problem." Even if we were to forget Wagner's characterization of his own relationship to Meyerbeer in the letter to Liszt of 18 April 1851 – and there is every reason *not* to forget it, since Wagner was drafting the text of *Siegfried* only a few weeks later – one would have to be culturally tone-deaf not to see how Siegfried's attitude toward Mime reflects a great deal of Wagner's attitude toward the Jews, whether in the guise of friends or enemies.

Sympathy for the devil

"R. tells me he once felt every sympathy for Alberich," Cosima notes of an evening discussion with her husband on 2 March 1878, after reading some Walter Scott. Dieter Borchmeyer has cited this observation as proof that Wagner could not have imagined Alberich or the other Nibelungs as "Jews."[21] The observation as well as Borchmeyer's interpretation of it raise a number of issues regarding the composer's personal life and private communications as evidence in the matter of the Wagnerian "Jewish question." Wagner's numerous friendships with Jews have long served as Exhibit A in the case for his defense. Of course, these "friendships" run a whole psychological gamut. At the beginning of 1847 he could still maintain to Eduard Hanslick (!) that "Meyerbeer is a very close personal friend of mine," whom he has "every reason to value . . . as a kind & sympathetic man," before going on to explain in the next breath how he represents everything "offensive about . . . the opera industry today" (letter of 1 January 1847: *SL* 135). He several times expressed his sympathy, of a sort, for the "tragic" case of Mendelssohn, as he called it. Even in the case of Jews who really could be counted as personal friends, such as Tausig, Levi, Heinrich Porges, or Joseph Rubinstein, Wagner's sympathies were an ambivalent affair. Any of them might be treated with sublime condescension (granted, perhaps no more than any friends of Wagner could expect), and the friendship with Hermann Levi is often characterized as an unstable mix of genuine affection, admiration, impatience, and downright sadism.

But to return to the case of Alberich. Richard and Cosima were comparing Alberich with the new villain, Klingsor. "R. tells me that he once felt every sympathy for Alberich, who represents the ugly person's longing for beauty" – thus the complete remark from the diaries. This feeling accords well enough with Alberich's dilemma at the opening of *Rheingold*, though it begins to sound less friendly. "In Alberich the naïveté of the non-Christian world, " he goes on, "in Klingsor the peculiar quality which Christianity brought into the world; just like the Jesuits, he does

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not believe in goodness, and this is his strength but at the same time his downfall, for through the ages *one* good man does occasionally emerge!" "Non-Christian" might seem to imply Jewish, but "naïveté" was hardly a trait Wagner associated with Jews, and one has to assume he is merely alluding to the pagan mythological world of the *Ring*. Klingsor – one of the weaker candidates for crypto-Judaism in the canon of Wagner villains – is likened to a Jesuit, another object-class of Wagnerian animus, but not at any rate Jewish by creed or (presumably) race. The larger point here, which has been made by Borchmeyer among others, is that throughout the volumes of candid remarks on his works recorded by Cosima, Wagner seems never once to have commented on the "Jewish" qualities of any of his dramatic characters or their music. The same applies to the more voluminous (if not always equally frank) evidence of Wagner's private correspondence. If Wagner had really intended subtexts of anti-Semitic caricature and allegory in the music dramas, it is indeed difficult to explain the absence of any references to such subtexts in the extensive private record of his thoughts and opinions, a record not otherwise lacking in candor. Could it be that the "conspiracy of silence" started at home?

Intentions do matter here, whatever the status of hard evidence. It makes little sense to speak of an anti-Semitic content filtering into the fabric of the works unconsciously, to suppose that Wagner's anti-Semitism was such an ingrained part of his psychology that, all unawares, he painted his villains with "Jewish" traits simply because this is how he felt and imagined evil. (Such pagan archvillains as Ortrud or Hagen have very little about them we can identify with Wagner's ideas of Jewishness, however labile those ideas often seem.)[22] Moreover, Wagner – a voracious interpreter of the most varied phenomena who assiduously recorded his own dreams – was far too self-conscious an artist to remain oblivious of such a dimension of his own work, even if we could suppose it to have evolved "unconsciously," at first. If we are to take seriously the possibility of an anti-Semitic layer in some parts of Wagner's oeuvre, we must believe that he was aware of it, whether or not this awareness was communicated aloud or committed to writing.[23] Hans R. Vaget articulates a plausible reading of the situation when he suggests that, on the whole, Wagner strove to keep his "anti-Jewish obsession" out of his creative work in view of the "broad, universal acceptance" he sought for it, and yet in a few cases (Beckmesser's role and Mime's in *Siegfried*) he finally couldn't quite help himself.[24] Wagner, in writing his operas, no less than the Nazis in staging them, Vaget argues, wanted to preserve a pure, "auratic" quality in them that would have been compromised by instrumentalizing them as "crude propaganda."[25]

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One more component of the Wagnerian "Jewish question," if we accept the idea that his creative work might not have remained uninfluenced by his anti-Semitism, is how we ought to respond to it, as readers, listeners, critics, performers, producers, and so forth. This question, too, has been subject to considerable debate, most publicly in the long-running informal ban on performances of Wagner in Israel. Scholarly and critical discussion, so often preoccupied with proving or disproving the relevance of anti-Semitism to the works, less often gets to the point of outlining a practical response, apart from those who, like Michael Tanner or Bryan Magee, deny the relevance and hence the need for a response.[26] David Levin has argued that critics as well as producers might draw attention to an "aesthetics" of anti-Semitism (or, Wagnerian anti-Semitism as an "aesthetic practice") in works such as *Die Meistersinger* or *Siegfried* without necessarily trying to dignify the alleged elements of caricature with straightforward, "realistic" representation.[27] It might seem surprising that modern opera directors still deeply committed to an ethos of radical provocation (and none more so than directors of Wagner) have so rarely wanted to touch this theme; they might reasonably worry that to make Wagner's anti-Semitism manifest on stage might confuse critique with simple complicity, or at any rate, that pointing up implicit caricature would more likely offend than provoke.[28] Slavoj Zizek engages some of these issues in his introduction to a recent reissue of Adorno's *In Search of Wagner* under the title "Why Is Wagner Worth Saving?" but offers only ambiguous answers. He condemns the hypocrisy of those who would defend and preserve the "beautiful music" while denouncing, if not simply denying, proto-Fascist and racist elements in the dramas. But it is unclear how neo-Freudian, neo-Marxist, and Lacanian interpretations solve the problem any differently than picturesque, Romantic-nostalgic productions would – by looking away.[29]

One way or another, we are left with the problem of making our peace with Wagner – revolutionary, intellectual, artist, and bigot – and justifying our sympathy with this complicated devil, at least as the author of his works. If nothing more, we can always rely on the fact that he did not make his anti-Semitism an *explicit* element of his operas (for that much is a fact), while much that *is* explicit remains liberal, generous, psychologically perceptive, touching, and, indeed, beautiful, if also sometimes long-winded and obscure. Still, despite current tendencies to argue otherwise, the question, or problem, of Wagner's anti-Semitism should not and cannot finally be limited to arguments about its relevance to the dramas and their music. It was Wagner's great aim to be much more than a musician, more than a composer of operas. The writer Berthold Auerbach, another of his Jewish friends and one whom he much admired during

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the years they both lived in Dresden, later reflected with dismay on the rise of public anti-Semitism in the new German Reich and its growing public acceptance. "Richard Wagner also had his effect in this. For he was the first to acknowledge himself as a Jew-hater, and he proclaimed Jew-hatred to be quite compatible with culture."[30] If Wagner influenced the tragic course of German anti-Semitism in the generations to follow, it was through his prominence as a public figure, indeed *as* a famous artist and composer, but not through the music he composed.

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