

13 Specters of Nazism

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“Finally, I would like to draw your attention to a small mistake. The quotation defining the Jew as the visible demon of the decay of humanity comes not from Mommsen but from Richard Wagner.”¹ This was the closing barb in a caustic letter from Alfred Rosenberg to his archrival in the Nazi Party, Joseph Goebbels. The tension between Rosenberg and Goebbels manifested itself shortly after the Nazis took office in 1933, in their rivalry within the upper echelons of the party to secure control of cultural policy. Goebbels held the upper hand in this struggle and duly emerged as the winner and director of National Socialist cultural activities in his capacity as chief of the *Reichskulturkammer*.² But that was just the beginning: As Saul Friedländer puts it, “no occasion was missed in the Rosenberg–Goebbels feud.”³ The squabbling of these two intellectual giants of Nazism is reminiscent of nothing so much as the quarreling of the Nibelung dwarves Mime and Alberich – in *Siegfried* act 2, scene 3 – over who should rob Siegfried of the Ring and Tarnhelm.

Such rivalry within the Nazi hierarchy, the constant struggle for power and influence among Hitler’s lieutenants, was an important aspect of the Nazi regime. Nazism consisted of piecemeal attempts, by competing factions and fiefdoms, to interpret and enact Hitler’s utopian goal of national redemption through racial purification, war, and conquest. That the specters of Nazism and the Holocaust should loom so hauntingly over Wagner’s masterpiece *Der Ring des Nibelungen* seems, on the face of it, rather strange: Love and compassion ultimately triumph, the cycle shows that downfall awaits those motivated by greed and the lust for power, and “the truth of this ‘message’ was, indeed, never better confirmed than by the Führer and his gruesome movement.”⁴

¹ Letter from Alfred Rosenberg to Joseph Goebbels, 25 August 1937, in Rosenberg files, microfilm MA-596, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich, quoted in Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution 1933–1939* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London, 1997), 372. The quotation “der plastische Dämon des Verfalles der Menschheit” is from Richard Wagner, “Ausführungen zu *Religion und Kunst: Erkenne dich selbst*,” *SSD*, 10:263–74, here 272; trans. as “Continuations of *Religion and Art: Know Thyself*,” in *PW*, 6:264–74, here 271–2. References to the Ellis translations are given for the reader’s convenience, but translations from Wagner’s prose works are my own.

² Erik Levi, *Music in the Third Reich* (Macmillan: London, 1994), 15–24.

³ Friedländer, *Nazi Germany*, 372.

⁴ Jonathan Carr, *The Wagner Clan* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 181.

Nevertheless, in our post-Holocaust mental landscape, the question of whether or not Wagner's own virulent anti-Semitism is present in his works, including the *Ring*, remains the most controversial topic confronting Wagner scholarship. And, arguably, the recent focus on the anti-Semitic elements in Wagner's tetralogy has overshadowed its broader role in the rise of the Third Reich.

In the following, I will initially focus on that essential Jewish question – as Thomas Grey has written, “the actual ‘Jewish question’ in the case of Wagner is that regarding the possible relation of his anti-Semitism to his creative oeuvre.”⁵ Thereafter, I will move on to the wider question of Wagner's role in German history. Wagner was not the ideological well-spring of National Socialism, but the entanglement of the composer and his tetralogy with twentieth-century German history testifies to the uncomfortable affinity of music and barbarism.

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The question of whether or not Wagner meant the Nibelung brothers Alberich and Mime to be stereotypes of moneygrubbing Jews continues to trouble lovers of his *Ring*. Alberich, the egotistical, loveless, avaricious capitalist of Nibelheim, renouncing love and then cursing the Ring, is the more menacing of the two, a demonic counterpart to Wotan.⁶ Mime, “more of a *Quetsch* and a *Schlemiehl*,”⁷ is self-deluded and highly strung: oppressed by Alberich in *Das Rheingold*, his own unlovely bid for gold and power is portrayed in *Siegfried*.

Once it is accepted that the ideological aim of Wagner's *Ring* included not only the redemption of Germany from Jewry but also the salvation of Jewry itself from capitalism and its values, it seems but a small step to argue that the composer embodied the supposed vices of Jewry in some of his characters.⁸ A small step, but a controversial one.

Theodor Adorno, in his *Versuch über Wagner* of 1937–8, is often cited as the first scholar to assert that Alberich and Mime – along with Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* – are caricatures of Jews.⁹

⁵ Thomas S. Grey, “The Jewish Question,” *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2008), 203–18, here 211.

⁶ As suggested by Wotan's descriptions of Alberich as “Schwarz-Alberich” and himself as “Licht-Alberich” in *Siegfried* act 1, scene 2: *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion*, ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (Thames & Hudson: London, 1993) [WRC], 210–11; Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*, 2nd edn (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, NE, 1997), 135; Thomas S. Grey, “Bodies of Evidence,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8 (1996), 185–97, here 188.

⁷ Weiner, *The Anti-Semitic Imagination*, 135.

⁸ John Deathridge, “A Brief History of Wagner Research,” *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. and ed. John Deathridge (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1992), 202–23, here 223.

⁹ Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Verso: London, 1991), 21–7. Although not published until 1952, *Versuch über Wagner* was written in 1937–8, and chapter 1,

But occasional references to the *Ring*'s anti-Semitic ideology emerge almost from the beginning of the work's reception history – with Paulus Cassel, a converted Jewish writer, in 1881¹⁰ – and continue to the present day. Gustav Mahler, according to the recollections of Natalie Bauer-Lechner, said in 1898 of Mime, “I am convinced that Wagner intended to ridicule the Jews with this character (in every trait with which he endowed him: the petty cleverness, the greed and the whole *Jargon*, textually and musically so cleverly suggested).”¹¹

Following the First World War, Ernst Anders, writing in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, thought that Alberich was synonymous with Albion, with England, the “spirit of self-interest and greed, the enemy of ideals . . . the spirit of Jewry.”¹² “Alberich” was also used in the 1920s as a code word for a scheming Jew. Max von Schillings, the Berlin Staatsoper's conservative intendant until 1925, complained in a bitter letter to Richard Strauss about “Alberichs at work” in Weimar-era Berlin.¹³ And Paul Bekker, in his 1924 study *Richard Wagner: Das Leben im Werke*, saw not only Alberich and Mime but also Loge, Hunding, and Hagen, as anti-Semitic stereotypes; they “express the dark side of the world of Wagner's imagination.”¹⁴

Unsurprisingly, sporadic pronouncements linking race, Jewry, and the *Ring* cycle also crop up after the advent of the Third Reich. Rosenberg, the chief ideologue of the Nazi Party, referred in his magnum opus, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*, to the “whole bourgeois–capitalist world of the Alberichs” and warned of “the dream of the black dwarf Alberich, who cursed love for the sake of world domination . . . The Jew . . . until 1933, seemed stronger than us.”¹⁵ But Rosenberg, no respecter of Wagner's genius, thought the *Ring* cycle was too unwieldy and asserted that it would disappear from the repertoire unless it was revamped by another hand,¹⁶ so perhaps a better guide is the 1938 *Bayreuther Festspielführer*. Otto Tröbes pointed out that, although Wagner did not use the word “race” until later, “he had already realised in the final two parts of the

which contains his discussion of anti-Semitic stereotypes, was first published as part of “Fragmente über Wagner,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8 (1939), 1–14.

¹⁰ Paulus Cassel, *Der Judengott und Richard Wagner: Eine Antwort an die Bayreuther Blätter* (Berlin: Wohlgemuth, 1881), 35–7.

¹¹ *Gustav Mahler in den Erinnerungen von Natalie Bauer-Lechner*, ed. Knud Martner, rev. edn Herbert Killian (Karl Dieter Wagner: Hamburg, 1984), 122.

¹² Ernst Anders, “Richard Wagner als Prophet des Weltkrieges,” *Bayreuther Blätter* 43 (1920), 71–82, here 77.

¹³ Letter of November 24, 1922, quoted in Wilhelm Raupp, *Max von Schillings: Der Kampf eines deutschen Künstlers* (Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt: Hamburg, 1935), 216–18, here 217.

¹⁴ Translated by M. M. Bozman as *Richard Wagner: His Life in His Work* (J.M. Dent & Sons: London, 1931), 474.

¹⁵ Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 37–38th edn (Munich: Hoheneichen Verlag, 1934), 443 and 456.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 433.

Ring the basic theory of heredity and racial purity: ‘everything has its own nature, and this you cannot change.’¹⁷ In the same publication, Leopold Reichwein averred that the *Ring* “allows us to recognize with unparalleled clarity the terrible seriousness of the racial question.”¹⁸

Not least because none of the above – some Jewish, some Gentile – writers and commentators could foresee the terrible endgame of German anti-Semitism,¹⁹ it seems unlikely that they could have anticipated a post-Holocaust period in which the possible anti-Semitism in Wagner’s *Ring* cycle became a topic of ever-increasing debate. This debate began some fifty years ago now, in the 1960s, and followed a period in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the Nazi murder of some six million Jews during the Second World War was first bracketed off from Nazi atrocities in general and then became seen as an entity in its own right called “the Holocaust.”²⁰ Robert Gutman in 1968, then Hartmut Zelinsky in 1978, and then Paul Lawrence Rose in 1992 saw the *Ring* primarily as a propaganda tool for the promotion of anti-Semitism, as well as detecting an exterminatory tone to the anti-Semitic allegory in *Parsifal*.²¹ Joachim Köhler’s 1997 book *Wagners Hitler* stands at the apex of this school of thought, arguing that Wagner’s works were an incitement to genocide, duly enacted by Hitler and his movement.²²

Other writers in this period, such as Marc Weiner and Barry Millington, while drawing attention to the supposedly Jewish traits of characters such as Mime and Alberich, and locating Wagner’s anti-Semitic symbolism right at the heart of the matter – in the music itself – did not essentialize the anti-Semitic allegory to the same

¹⁷ Otto Tröbes, “Mit Richard Wagner ins Dritte Deutsche Reich,” *Bayreuth im Dritten Reich*, ed. Berndt W. Wessling (Beltz: Weinheim, 1983), 230–40, here 238. The quotation “Alles ist nach seiner Art; an ihr wirst du nichts ändern” comes from the Wanderer’s encounter with Alberich in *Siegfried*, act 2, scene 1: WRC, 233.

¹⁸ Leopold Reichwein, “Richard Wagner und der deutsche Dirigent der Gegenwart,” *Bayreuther Festspielführer 1938*, ed. Otto Strobel (Verlag der Hofbuchhandlung Georg Niehrenheim: Bayreuth, 1938), 31–4, here 33.

¹⁹ Rosenberg was sentenced to death for war crimes and crimes against humanity at the Nuremberg trial and hanged. But in the early 1930s, he thought the Nazi state would be dedicated to his new Nordic religion.

²⁰ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory* (Bloomsbury: London, 2000), 133; Ian Kershaw, “Hitler and the Holocaust,” *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2008), 237–81, here 237.

²¹ Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind and His Music* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1968), 161 and 389–440; Hartmut Zelinsky, “Die ‘Feuerkur’ des Richard Wagner oder die ‘neue Religion’ der ‘Erlösung’ durch ‘Vernichtung,’” in *Richard Wagner: Wie antisemitisch darf ein Künstler sein?*, ed. Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn (Edition Text + Kritik: Munich, 1978), 79–112; also Hartmut Zelinsky, *Richard Wagner: Ein deutsches Thema – Eine Dokumentation zur Wirkungsgeschichte Richard Wagners 1876–1976* (Zweitausendeins: Frankfurt, 1976); Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution* (Faber and Faber: London, 1992), 66–72 and 135–73.

²² Translated by Ronald Taylor as Joachim Köhler, *Wagner’s Hitler: The Prophet and His Disciple* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2000).

extent;²³ nor did they perceive Wagner's destructive imagery as anything other than metaphorical.²⁴ Jacob Katz and Dieter Borchmeyer are scholars who have made a serious contribution to the subject of Wagner's anti-Semitism, but nevertheless argued that it left no palpable trace in the *Ring* cycle or his other works.²⁵

The topic of the anti-Semitic element of the *Ring* cycle remains controversial today, but the stakes have changed since the 1990s, and – by and large – scholarly exchange has replaced angry claim and counterclaim. “If,” wrote Hans Rudolf Veget in 1993, the music dramas “were indeed vehicles for the propagation of anti-Semitism, as Mr. Rose believes, they would have no place in any cultural practice that we consider acceptable.”²⁶ In 2013, though, Veget concluded in the *Cambridge Wagner Encyclopedia* that the *Ring* and other works are “at least imbued with the spirit of anti-Semitism.”²⁷ Also in 2013, Köhler retracted his 1997 thesis that Wagner had incited the extermination of the Jews.²⁸

The central problem remains, as stated by Veget: “neither position is entirely convincing; both lack a clinching point.”²⁹ In response to Barry Emslie's claim that anti-Semitism was the central focus of Wagner's creative endeavors, Mark Berry, who detects no anti-Semitism in the *Ring*, has written that “issues such as renunciation of love, conversion of gold into capital, power-lust . . . may actually be his fundamental points rather than the surrogates for racism that many people divine.”³⁰ It is possible to agree fully with this latter statement yet nevertheless maintain that Wagner's fundamental points are made with surrogate characters embodying the supposed iniquities of Jewry.

No one would deny that the plot of the *Ring* and Wagner's characterization of the Nibelung dwarves Alberich and Mime reveal them to be

²³ On such reductive essentialism in Zelinsky, Rose, and others, see Laurence Dreyfus, “Hermann Levi's Shame and *Parsifal*'s Guilt: A Critique of Essentialism in Biography and Criticism,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 6 (1995), 125–45.

²⁴ Weiner, *The Anti-Semitic Imagination*, esp. the 1997 postscript, 355–61; Barry Millington, “Nuremberg Trial: Is There Anti-Semitism in *Die Meistersinger*?” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3 (1991), 247–60; also Barry Millington, *Richard Wagner: The Sorcerer of Bayreuth* (Thames & Hudson: London, 2012), 188–91.

²⁵ Jacob Katz, *The Darker Side of Genius: Richard Wagner's Anti-Semitism* (Brandeis University Press: Hanover, NH, 1986), ix–x and 124; Dieter Borchmeyer, “The Question of Anti-Semitism,” trans. Stewart Spencer, *Wagner Handbook*, 166–85, here 183–4.

²⁶ Hans Rudolf Veget, “Wagner, Anti-Semitism and Mr. Rose: Merkwürd'ger Fall!,” *German Quarterly* 66 (1993), 222–36, here 222.

²⁷ Hans Rudolf Veget, “Anti-Semitism,” *Cambridge Wagner Encyclopedia*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2013), 16–20, here 20.

²⁸ Published in English translation as Joachim Köhler, “Wagner's Acquittal,” trans. Tash Siddiqui, *The Wagner Journal* 8/2 (2014), 43–51.

²⁹ Veget, “Anti-Semitism,” 19.

³⁰ Barry Emslie and Mark Berry, “Wagner and Anti-Semitism,” www.thewagnerjournal.co.uk/wagnerandanti-se.html (accessed February 12, 2020). See also Barry Emslie, *Richard Wagner and the Centrality of Love* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), esp. 275–6.

greedy, loveless, and egotistical. It seems plausible that Wagner – given his high-flown idealism – wanted this trinity of vices alone to characterize the Nibelung brothers and that he really strove to keep his vulgar anti-Semitism out of the *Ring*. But somehow, he just couldn't do it – maybe at first subconsciously, the Nibelungs' physical appearance, their behavior, their language, their singing and their orchestral motifs took on the aspects that Wagner found repellent about Jews.³¹

The darkest side of this problematic masterpiece is in *Siegfried* acts 1 and 2, in the relationship between the virile Volsung hero Siegfried and his racial opposite, the misshapen Nibelung dwarf Mime. The scheming dwarf is Siegfried's foster-father, but in act 1 Siegfried forcefully establishes the physical difference between his heroic self and Mime's "shuffling and shambling, weak-kneed and nodding"³² persona, and thus the lack of a blood relationship. Furthermore, Mime's exaggerated gesturing, his fidgety deportment and his wheedling mode of utterance and language are in stark contrast to Siegfried's boisterous simplicity, his manly behavior, and his plain speaking. Crucially, this is all conveyed in the music. Mime's music employs staccato, dotted rhythms, and awkward grace notes, he is instructed to sing "in a pitifully screeching voice"³³ in the highest part of his vocal register, and reedy clarinets and bassoons dominate in the orchestra. Meanwhile, Siegfried's music is sometimes flowing and noble, sometimes gentle, and sometimes exuberantly rhythmic, and he is mostly accompanied by strings and horns.³⁴

Siegfried is instinctively repelled by Mime, and kills him in act 2, scene 3 with the words "have a taste of my sword, you loathsome babblers."³⁵ As Grey puts it, "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."³⁶ Compare Mime's characterization with the Jewish difference described by Wagner in his 1850 essay "Jewry in Music": Mime's ugly appearance, "filthy, fearful and wan, short and misshapen, hunchbacked and halting, with drooping ears and rheumy eyes," is surely as "disagreeably foreign" to Siegfried as Jewry is to Wagner, and Mime's high-pitched babbling as "alien and unpleasant" as the shrill sound of Jewish speech. Perhaps most tellingly – given the value Wagner placed on feelings as the instinctive bearer of his message – Mime, like the Jew, lacks any true passion or calm, and instead alternates between "prickly

³¹ Compare Hans Rudolf Valet, "Du warst mein Feind von je': The Beckmesser Controversy Revisited," *Wagner's Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (University of Rochester Press: Rochester, NY, 2003), 190–208, here 203.

³² Siegfried's description of Mime in act 1, scene 1: WRC, 200. ³³ WRC, 199.

³⁴ Weiner, *The Anti-Semitic Imagination*, 84–8 and 278–82; Millington, *The Sorcerer*, 188–9.

³⁵ WRC, 251. ³⁶ Grey, "The Jewish Question," 215.

unrest” and “lethargy.”³⁷ We can be sure that his anti-Semitic essay was fresh in Wagner’s mind when he drafted the *Siegfried* libretto in May and June 1851, for in mid April 1851 he wrote a letter to Liszt about the essay: “I harboured a long suppressed resentment against this Jewish business, and this resentment is as necessary to my nature as gall is to the blood.”³⁸

Why was the element of anti-Semitic allegory in the *Ring* so rarely talked about, at the time of the premiere and beyond? Why, in particular, did the famously loquacious composer not mention it? In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it may be that many Germans, including German Jews, were dimly aware that anti-Semitic elements could be discerned in the tetralogy. But most of these cultured Germans believed deeply in the transcendental truths of art. Given their sincerely held beliefs in the inviolable and universal transcendence of culture, it is likely that many idealist Germans – including Wagner himself – were frankly embarrassed by any hint of grubby anti-Semitic prejudice intruding into the mythic work of the Bayreuth Master. As a result, a “conspiracy of silence” mostly prevailed, inside and outside the Wagner household.³⁹

There remains the question of whether Wagner’s ideological objective was the redemption of Jewry or something more sinister and malign. The Holocaust scholar Saul Friedländer has summarized what he sees as the murderous dimension to Wagner’s notion of redemption:

The redemptive symbolism of the *Ring* and . . . *Parsifal* are indeed extraordinarily ambiguous whenever the Jewish theme . . . appears. Whether redemption from erotic lust, from worldly cravings, from the struggles for power is achieved . . . the Jew remains the symbol of the worldly lures that keep humanity in shackles. Thus the redemptive struggle had to be a total struggle, and the Jew, like the evil and unredeemable Klingsor in *Parsifal*, had to disappear. In *Siegfried* the allusion is even more direct: The Germanic hero Siegfried kills the repulsive Nibelung dwarf Mime . . . All in all the relationship between Siegfried and Mime, overloaded with the most telling symbolism, was probably meant as a fierce anti-Semitic allegory of the relation between German and Jew – and of the ultimate fate of the Jew.⁴⁰

This is going too far: The solution to the “Jewish question” in Wagner’s anti-Semitic imaginings did not extend to wholesale slaughter. It mostly existed in a vague utopian realm, and it is likely that he did not know, or much care, what he meant by the disappearance of Jewry in the sordid realm of material reality.

³⁷ WRC, 238; Richard Wagner, *Das Judentum in der Musik*, in *SSD*, 5:66–85, here 69, 71 and 78; trans. as *Judaism in Music*, *PW*, 3:77–100, here 83, 85 and 93; Richard Wagner, *Opera und Drama*, in *SSD*, 4:78; *Opera and Drama*, *PW*, 2:208.

³⁸ Letter to Liszt of April 18, 1851, *SL*, 221–2; Grey, “The Jewish Question,” 215.

³⁹ Grey, “The Jewish Question,” 214 and 216; Millington, *The Sorcerer*, 190–1.

⁴⁰ Friedländer, *Nazi Germany*, 88.

But it is the murderous reality of the Holocaust that inevitably dominates the debate. Consider the way in which the anti-Semitic stereotypes in the *Ring* have been deployed over the years: in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, it was Alberich, the powerful and demonic Jew, who was mostly identified with Jewry; in the post-Holocaust age, as suggested by Friedländer's words, it tends to be Mime, the Jewish outcast and victim, who is the focus of attention.⁴¹ The anti-Semitic caricatures seem to function like a dwarfish Rorschach test, simply confirming or reinforcing a preexisting symbolic landscape.

The consideration of such a symbolic landscape – the manner in which anti-Semitism flourished in Germany – can help to explain why the specter of the Holocaust continues to haunt the reception of Wagner's *Ring* cycle so disturbingly, not in the realm of rationality but in a more subjective sphere. The nebulous quality of German anti-Semitic thinking gave anti-Semitic ideology its compelling potency. It functioned as an overarching metaphorical structure that floated above quotidian reality; the image of Jewry could be endowed with disparate yet simultaneous meaning. In other words, anti-Semitic ideology existed in a hazy semantic universe that was closer to the poetic sphere of imagery and symbol than to the logical sphere of conceptual discourse, closer to the *Ring* cycle's densely symbolic web than to the events and causality of everyday life.

This today accounts for our deep unease with the *Ring*'s symbolic imagery of death and destruction. In our post-Holocaust symbolic landscape, it is difficult to see the relationship between the Germanic hero Siegfried and the repulsive dwarf Mime as anything other than a chilling rehearsal, or a ritual retelling, "of the relation between German and Jew – and of the ultimate fate of the Jew."⁴² Wagner has become part of that all-too-human tendency to weave a symbolic net out of the tangled chaos of experience and the complexities of history. Indeed, it could be said that Wagner has nowadays been well and truly hoisted with his own symbolic petard. The composer and his *Ring* cycle have become symbols of the Holocaust. And this association of Wagner with the Nazi devastation wrought upon Jewry is all the more potent because it is symbolic rather than real.

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⁴¹ The duality of Alberich and Mime may testify to the strong influence of traditional religious anti-Judaism on Wagner's anti-Semitism. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany*, 84: "the most powerful effect of religious anti-Judaism [on modern anti-Semitism] was the dual structure of the anti-Jewish image inherited from Christianity. On the one hand, the Jew was a pariah . . . on the other hand . . . an opposite image appeared . . . that of the demonic Jew . . . It is this dual image that reappears in some major aspects of modern anti-Semitism."

⁴² Friedländer, *Nazi Germany*, 88.

If Wagner – who died in 1883, fifty years before the Nazi rise to power – is popularly believed to have been the composer-in-residence of the Third Reich, this is largely due to Hitler’s love of the Bayreuth Master and his oeuvre. Hitler was a committed Wagnerite long before 1923, when he began his association with Bayreuth, the Wagner family, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the most important intellectual emissary of Bayreuthian anti-Semitism and German nationalism. Hitler, though, never referred to Wagner’s own anti-Semitism, as manifested in the theoretical writings or in the operas.⁴³

In one way, however, the anti-Semitism of Wagner and Hitler was uncannily similar. When we read that he “considered the ‘Jewish question’ from a visionary political perspective that did not reflect the real situation. The struggle against Jewry was for him an almost metaphysical objective,” it might plausibly be thought that the anti-Semite in question is Wagner, but it in fact describes Hitler’s mindset.⁴⁴ In “structuralist” explanations of Nazism, the cumulative radicalization of the regime that ultimately led to the Holocaust was driven by Hitler’s style of charismatic leadership, and by his hazy utopian ideology of national redemption through racial purity and conquest. Rival power bases and agencies vied for Hitler’s approval, leading to an uncoordinated decision-making process. Nazism became a shambolic mess – but this was a shambles that unleashed enormous destructive energy, an ever-accelerating descent into brutality and barbarism.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the instability inherent in the regime’s ceaseless dynamic implied not only destruction but also self-destruction.⁴⁶ This cannot have been a conscious intention, but German military ideology did manifest a fatalistic yearning for death and downfall, for “redemption packaged as a sacred act.”⁴⁷ Perhaps this is why the suicides of Hitler, Goebbels, and their fellow troglodytes in the bunker in 1945 seem like a ruinous travesty of the sonorous splendor of *Götterdämmerung*.

Such specters of Nazism abound in Wagner’s dialectical drama of redemption through love, but so do simplistic interpretations of the role of Wagner and his work in the history of the Third Reich. As the above

⁴³ Carr, *The Wagner Clan*, 187–8; Hans Rudolf Vaegt, “Operation Walküre: The Movie and the History,” *The Wagner Journal* 5/1 (2011), 4–16, here 8.

⁴⁴ Hans Mommsen, “The Realization of the Unthinkable,” *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, trans. Philip O’Connor (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1991), 224–53, here 237.

⁴⁵ Mommsen, “The Realization,” 239–53; Martin Broszat, “Hitler and the Genesis of the ‘Final Solution’: An Assessment of David Irving’s Theses,” in *Aspects of the Third Reich*, ed. H. W. Koch (Macmillan: London, 1985), 390–429; Martin Broszat, *The Hitler State*, trans. John W. Hiden (Longman: London and New York, 1981), x–xiv, 323 and 357–9; Kershaw, “Hitler and the Holocaust,” 237–81.

⁴⁶ Ian Kershaw, “‘Working towards the Führer’: Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship,” in *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution*, 29–48, here 44.

⁴⁷ Barry Emslie, *Speculations on German History: Culture and the State* (Camden House: Rochester, NY, 2015), 124.

paragraph suggests, connections between Wagner, Hitler, and the twisted endeavors of the Nazi regime are anything but simple and straightforward. For example, there was no upsurge in Wagner's popularity in opera houses during the Nazi period – in fact, the opposite was the case. Despite the Weimar Republic's reputation for artistic experimentation, Wagner was still the most performed opera composer, and this remained the case until the late 1930s. But by the 1942/43 season, in the middle of the war, Wagner performances had plummeted. Wagner's ranking had dropped from first to fifth place, overtaken by Verdi, Puccini, Mozart, and – horror of horrors – Lortzing.⁴⁸

To understand the possible impact of Wagner's music dramas, including the *Ring* cycle, on the trajectory of German history, we must travel back to the zenith of Wagnerism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the cult of Wagner which reached its heyday among educated German speakers at the turn of the twentieth century. The hold of Wagner's tetralogy on the imagination of the generations in the German-speaking world who came of age between Wagner's death and the rise of the Third Reich played a potent role in shaping their mentality. This aspect of Wagner reception is of special significance to the historian seeking to explain the political path taken by Germany partly because Hitler was one such Wagnerian.⁴⁹ It is of course important to distinguish between the compelling Hitler–Wagner connection, and the impact of the Wagner cult on ordinary cultured Germans. Moreover, Hitler's enthusiasm was not generally shared by the National Socialist movement or by the Nazi Party elite.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the Third Reich did make plentiful use of Wagnerian music, motifs, and stagecraft, for which it could call upon gifted musical and artistic collaborators. Within the nexus of Wagner, Hitler, and Germany, there lies a further salient point: that Hitler, as a *bona fide* Wagnerian who supported the Bayreuth Festival financially and politically, was able to captivate countless idealistic Germans – including many musicians and artists.⁵¹

It was that imperfect and ambivalent Wagnerite, Thomas Mann, who apprehended that German music and politics were somehow inextricably intertwined, that the extremes in German history of triumph and disaster,

⁴⁸ Franz-Heinz Köhler, *Die Struktur der Spielpläne deutschsprachiger Opernbühnen von 1896 bis 1966: eine statistische Analyse* (Statistisches Amt: Koblenz, 1968), 34 and 53. Wartime difficulties in staging Wagner may have played a part, but the parallel decline in the popularity of Weber's *Der Freischütz* suggests a general turning away from German Romanticism.

⁴⁹ Hans Rudolf Vaegt, "Wehvolles Erbe": *Richard Wagner in Deutschland – Hitler, Knappertsbusch, Mann* (S. Fischer: Frankfurt, 2017), 14 and 19; Vaegt, "Operation Walküre," 5–8.

⁵⁰ Carr, *The Wagner Clan*, 182–4; Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1994), 165.

⁵¹ Vaegt, "Wehvolles Erbe," 182–3 and 193; Vaegt, "Operation Walküre," 12.

hubris and nemesis, discipline and delusion were presaged in the grandeur and sorrows of the life and work of Wagner. Mann had more reason than most to have early doubts about the toxic legacy of the Wagner cult in Hitler's Reich. On February 10, 1933 – shortly after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor on January 30 – Mann delivered a lecture, "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner," at Munich University, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Wagner's death on February 13, 1933, and then embarked on a short lecture tour during which he gave his talk in Amsterdam, Brussels, and Paris.⁵² This resulted in a rather longer stay abroad than he had anticipated: In fact, he never returned to live on German soil again. The immediate impetus for his lifelong exile was the "Protest of the Richard-Wagner-City Munich," in which his characteristically cosmopolitan and quizzical portrait of the composer was denounced for insufficient devotion to the "great German Master."⁵³ The protest was initiated by the conductor and director of the Bavarian State Opera, Hans Knappertsbusch, and signed by a further forty-four Munich luminaries, including Richard Strauss and Hans Pfitzner.⁵⁴ Evidence suggests that Knappertsbusch's motive was to promote his credentials as a true defender of the Wagnerian faith to Hitler and thereby further his – so far thwarted – ambition to conduct at Bayreuth.⁵⁵

If anyone understood the mentality of the German educated classes, it was Mann, and he was quite possibly correct, in his perceptive and life-changing lecture, when he distinguished Wagner from his fellow Germans in one important respect: "he did not subscribe to the self-delusion of the German middle classes that one can be cultivated and unpolitical – the delusion that has been the cause of Germany's wretchedness."⁵⁶ This was a self-delusion, Mann could have added, but didn't, that he himself had once shared, as elaborated in detail and with great clarity in his *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, written during the First World War and published in 1918.⁵⁷

Idealist Germans of Mann's generation tended to conceive of two realms, the ideal and the material; the ideal was always preferable to the material. Material reality included the dirty business of politics, which middle-class Germans held in far lower esteem than the transcendental,

⁵² "Leiden und Grösse Richard Wagners," published in *Die Neue Rundschau* 44 (April 1933), 450–501; translated as "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner," in Thomas Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, trans. Allan Blunden (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 91–148.

⁵³ "Protest der Richard-Wagner-Stadt München," *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten*, April 16–17, 1933; translated in Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 149–51.

⁵⁴ Valet, "Wehvolles Erbe," 258–74; for the full list of signatories, see Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 150–1.

⁵⁵ Valet, "Wehvolles Erbe," 302–6. ⁵⁶ Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 142.

⁵⁷ Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (S. Fischer: Berlin, 1918); translated by Walter D. Morris as *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (F. Ungar: New York, 1983).

higher truths of art and culture.⁵⁸ This view sat alongside an idealist conception of the *Volk* as an organism which transcended its individual parts.⁵⁹ Individuals had their own abilities, but they were bound to something greater than themselves. Such a concept of the *Volk*, characterized as *völkisch* theory, is often seen as one of the sources of National Socialist ideology. But it pervaded liberal, democratic, and even forms of revolutionary and anarchist thought as well. Thus, at least since Schiller and Wagner had formulated their conceptions of theater and opera, the German notion of culture had contained a fundamental contradiction. On the one hand, educated Germans believed deeply in the transcendental inviolability of culture and in the autonomy of art. But they held a contradictory conception of art as political in the broadest sense, a belief that it both answered to and must be used to uphold the spiritual values of the *Volk*.⁶⁰

In light of the contradictory German conception of culture – seemingly transcendental, but simultaneously serving as handmaiden to the German *Volk* – the uses and abuses of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* by the Third Reich become more comprehensible. The Nazi regime often used textual quotations and musical excerpts from the *Ring* cycle to suit its purposes. Wagner's subject matter was a contributory factor. Long before *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was composed, the *Nibelungenlied* – a medieval epic dating from about 1200 and lost until 1757 – had already assumed an important place in the German national consciousness, particularly during the Napoleonic wars and in the nationalistic era that followed. After the premiere of the *Ring* cycle in 1876, the epic heroism of the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Ring* reinforced one another to create a mythological undertone to Germany's view of itself and its national destiny.⁶¹

Furthermore, the National Socialist exploitation of Wagner's Nibelung saga as a battle hymn was simply a magnification of a process that had begun earlier. For example, it is true that Hitler used Siegfried's sword as a belligerent leitmotif,⁶² but he was hardly alone in that. In July 1914, before the outbreak of the First World War, Siegfried's sword became a rallying cry for the Bayreuth audience and for Kaiser Wilhelm II – already cast by Chamberlain as Siegfried the dragon-slayer.⁶³ Similarly, Hitler in *Mein Kampf* and elsewhere made much use of the persuasive

⁵⁸ John Rockwell, "The Prussian Ministry of Culture and the Berlin State Opera, 1918–1931," dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, n.d., 16–17.

⁵⁹ The term "*Volk*" originates in this sense in the eighteenth century with Herder (see Introduction); it would become entwined with the project to unify Germany, and thus increasingly politicized into the twentieth century.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 19–20. ⁶¹ Vaaget, "Operation Walküre," 12.

⁶² Vaaget, "Operation Walküre," 10–11; Vaaget, "Wehvolles Erbe," 161–4.

⁶³ Millington, *The Sorcerer*, 112.

Dolchstoßlegende or “stab-in the-back” myth – derived, of course, from Hagen’s murder of Siegfried with a cowardly stab in the back in the *Nibelungenlied* and in *Götterdämmerung* – but Hitler did not create the legend. The lie that Germany was defeated in 1918 because the military had been betrayed, or stabbed in the back, by civilians on the home front was invented by the German High Command to explain why its army failed to hold its defensive line on the Western Front, christened – what else? – the “Siegfried Position” or *Siegfriedstellung*.

So it is not in the least surprising that Nazi warmongers and myth-makers drew upon the figure of Siegfried as the embodiment of German heroism, nor that they used the superior technological means at their disposal for propaganda purposes, creating, for instance, a synergy of Wagner’s elevated music and Nazi aerial warfare in newsreel footage of German air raids. After the conquest of Crete, the *Wochenschau* of June 15, 1941 showed aerial footage of Luftwaffe fighter bombers flying over the island to the accompaniment of the “Ride of the Valkyries.”⁶⁴

The most telling example of this synergy is that unearthed by Vaget: an obscure 1941 war film, *Stukas* (short for *Sturzkampfflugzeuge* or dive bombers), directed by Karl Ritter and featuring a Luftwaffe squadron preparing for the Battle of Britain in the spring and summer of 1940. Early in the film, the commander of the *Stuka* squadron and its medical officer, cultured Wagnerians both, entertain themselves by thumping out a four-handed transcription of “Siegfried’s Rhine Journey,” from *Götterdämmerung*, on the camp’s piano. Later, a pilot in the squadron is shot down, and subsequently shows symptoms of war-weariness. To recover his fighting spirit, he attends the 1940 Bayreuth Festival. Inside the Festspielhaus he hears “Siegfried’s Rhine Journey,” recognizes the music as that played by his senior officers, and rushes back to his squadron, emboldened and re-enthused, to commence battle.⁶⁵

Winifred Wagner, the director of the Bayreuth Festival, was a friend of Ritter’s, and presumably she gave him permission, exceptionally, to film inside the Festspielhaus;⁶⁶ and no wonder, for Wagner’s music here powerfully bolsters the notion of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (community of the people): “it is hoped and assumed that the love of Wagnerian music as exemplified by its leaders will trickle down to infuse the entire squadron with the heroic spirit of Wagner’s Siegfried.”⁶⁷ Also unsurprising is that the Third Reich, at this stage of the war, avoided the end of *Götterdämmerung*,

⁶⁴ Carr, *The Wagner Clan*, 177; Hans Rudolf Vaget, “Nazi Cinema and Wagner,” *The Wagner Journal* 9/2 (2015), 35–54, here 47; Hubert Kolland, “Wagner-Rezeption im Deutschen Faschismus,” *Bericht über den Internationalen Musikwissenschaftlichen Kongress Bayreuth 1981*, ed. Christoph-Hellmut Mahling and Sigrid Wiesmann (Bärenreiter: Kassel, 1984), 494–503, here 498–9.

⁶⁵ Vaget, “Nazi Cinema and Wagner,” 49–53. ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 49. ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

but this changed with the defeat at Stalingrad in 1943. When the events in Russia could no longer be kept hidden from the German population, Goebbels initiated a period of mourning with a radio broadcast of Siegfried's Funeral Music – thus elevating military catastrophe to heroic downfall.⁶⁸

Thomas Mann, meanwhile, after a period living in exile in Europe, moved to the United States in 1938, whence, with the benefit of distance and hindsight, his grave misgivings about the entanglement of Wagner's tetralogy with the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* grew. His thoughts crystallized in his 1940 response to an article, "Hitler and Richard Wagner," by the young American Peter Viereck. Wagner was, in essence, the ideological fountainhead of Nazism, argued Viereck – a thesis upon which he later elaborated in his book *Metapolitics*.⁶⁹ Mann found Viereck's account compelling but lacking in nuance, and instead emphasized the *Ring's* epic potential for good or ill:

I find an element of Nazism . . . in his "music", in his work . . . though in a loftier sense – albeit I have so loved that work that even today I am deeply stirred whenever a few bars of music from this world impinge on my ear. The enthusiasm it engenders, the sense of grandeur that so often seizes us in its presence, can be compared only to the feelings excited in us by Nature at her noblest, by evening sunshine on mountain peaks, by the turmoil of the sea. Yet this must not make us forget that this work . . . emerges from the bourgeois-humanist epoch in the same manner as does Hitlerism. With its *Wagalaweia* and its alliteration, its mixture of roots-in-the-soil and eyes-toward-the-future, its appeal for a classless society, its mythical-reactionary revolutionism – with all these, it is the exact spiritual forerunner of the "metapolitical" movement today terrorizing the world.⁷⁰

The notion that aesthetics, particularly music, paved the way for Germany's embrace of Nazism was a key motif of Mann's portrayal of the German catastrophe, *Doctor Faustus*, written from 1943 to 1947. The novel chronicles the life of Adrian Leverkühn, a fictional composer of twelve-tone music, but the "proximity of aestheticism and barbarism, aestheticism as the forerunner to barbarism" that characterizes Leverkühn and his circle was influenced by Mann's confrontation with Wagner's heady impact.⁷¹

Arguably, the intense focus on the anti-Semitic elements in Wagner's *Ring* has overshadowed this broader role in German history. Adorno, in

⁶⁸ Kolland, "Wagner-Rezeption," 500.

⁶⁹ Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From the Romantics to Hitler* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1941).

⁷⁰ "To the Editor of *Common Sense*," published in English in the January 1940 issue of the journal, in Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 196–203, here 201–2.

⁷¹ Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (Bermann-Fischer Verlag: Stockholm, 1947), 569–70 (last part of chapter 34).

his *Versuch über Wagner*, might have drawn attention to anti-Semitic caricatures in the *Ring*; but his wider objection to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was that it induced a wholly intoxicating, delusional and dangerous flight from social reality. As Gordon Craig has written, Wagner's "ability to make the world of dream and myth credible" was achieved by means of the music: "it was a music that had the power to dissolve reality."⁷² And no one embodied the dangerous potency of the cult of Wagner more than the Third Reich's enigmatic leader. And so we come to the thorniest "German question" in the case of Wagner: Did the impact of the composer's work on Hitler play a significant role in shaping the Führer's – and thus Germany's – political destiny?

Thomas Mann, for one, seems to have thought so. Hitler in his own eyes was always an artist, explained Mann in his brief essay "Ein Bruder," penned in 1938, shortly after his move to the United States. This was a psychological portrait of the Führer in which Mann acknowledged Hitler to be "a somewhat unpleasant and embarrassing brother." This "deeply painful kinship" arose because Hitler, like Mann, saw himself as an artist and had emerged from the same rich vein of German idealism and aestheticism at the turn of the twentieth century.⁷³ Perhaps because the characterization of Hitler as an aesthete above all was long viewed as a frivolous footnote to the historiography of Nazism, twentieth-century scholarship did not pursue this theme. That has changed in the twenty-first century, with Frederic Spotts's study of *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* leading the way,⁷⁴ to be followed more recently by two works which locate Hitler's conception of himself as an artist at the very heart of his leadership of the Nazi state: Wolfram Pyta's 2015 book *Hitler: Der Künstler als Politiker und Feldherr*,⁷⁵ and Hans Rudolf Vaget's 2017 "*Wehvolles Erbe*": *Richard Wagner in Deutschland*, an examination of the role played by Wagner in the lives and thought of a triptych of decidedly diverse Wagnerians – Hitler, Knappertsbusch, and Mann.

Vaget argues forcefully that studies of Hitler, including Ian Kershaw's monumental biography, have been unduly preoccupied with political, economic, sociological and military factors to the detriment of the aesthetic sphere. But precisely those cultural factors first perceived by Mann eighty years ago can reveal new and illuminating perspectives on the Third Reich and its leader.⁷⁶ In particular, Hitler's immersion in the cult of

⁷² Gordon A. Craig, *The Germans* (Putman: New York, 1982), 198.

⁷³ Thomas Mann, "Bruder Hitler," *Gesammelte Werke* (Fischer: Frankfurt, 1960), 12:845–52, here 849.

⁷⁴ Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (Hutchinson: London, 2002).

⁷⁵ Wolfram Pyta, *Hitler: Der Künstler als Politiker und Feldherr – Eine Herrschaftsanalyse* (Siedler Verlag: Munich, 2015).

⁷⁶ Vaget, "*Wehvolles Erbe*," 65–75 and 434.

Wagner is crucial to an understanding of Hitler's mindset: "The formation of Hitler's personality in all its most important aspects from his childhood in Linz until his suicide in the bunker of the Reich Chancellory was derived from one and the same spiritual source – the cult of Wagner, the most narcotic [*betäubendsten*] flower of aestheticism at the turn of the twentieth century."⁷⁷

To explain how Hitler differed from the many other denizens of the German-speaking sphere who were deeply immersed in Wagnerian virtual reality, Vaget suggests that Hitler internalized two of Wagner's characters, Wotan and Rienzi, in a process of Wagnerian "self-fashioning" or identity formation.⁷⁸ Vaget asserts that the Wagner family's nickname for him, Wolf, referred to Wotan's sobriquet, Wolfe, between the end of *Das Rheingold* and the beginning of *Die Walküre*, when Wotan is schooling Siegmund – read Germany – for his heroic future.⁷⁹ But in 1920s Germany, Wolf was simply a common nickname for Adolf, and, in the absence of any evidence, Vaget's argument lacks credibility. In the case of his claim that the young Hitler, after attending a performance of *Rienzi* in Linz, modeled himself on Rienzi, the people's tribune,⁸⁰ such evidence as exists would seem to contradict Vaget's speculations.⁸¹ Carr's explanation of the special Hitler–Wagner bond is more convincing: Aside from his evident love of Wagner's music and theatrical spectacle, Hitler seems to have identified with Wagner as a heroic historical figure who endured long years of struggle before his genius was recognized.⁸²

It may be, as Vaget also argues, that the Wagner cult spawned a belief in genius that inspired Germans to keep faith, to the bitter end, with Hitler's charismatic leadership, as defined by Max Weber in his essay "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority."⁸³ Rather than *Rienzi* or the *Ring* cycle, the relevant Wagner document in this context is *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, or, more specifically, the "Wach auf" chorus, that touchstone of the Nazi cult of Wagner, sung by the *Volk* of Nuremberg in act 3, scene 5, in honor of their beloved leader Hans Sachs. "There is," says Vaget laconically, "no would-be dictator in the world who, looking at that scene, would not like what he sees."⁸⁴ A gala performance of *Meistersinger*

⁷⁷ Ibid., 50. ⁷⁸ Ibid., 135–40; Vaget, "Operation Walküre," 9–11.

⁷⁹ Vaget, "Wehvolles Erbe," 159–66; Vaget, "Operation Walküre," 10.

⁸⁰ Vaget, "Wehvolles Erbe," 110–34; Vaget, "Operation Walküre," 9–10.

⁸¹ See Jonas Karlsson, "In that hour it began? Hitler, *Rienzi*, and the Trustworthiness of August Kubizek's *The Young Hitler I Knew*," *The Wagner Journal* 6/2 (2012), 33–47.

⁸² Carr, *The Wagner Clan*, 186 and 188.

⁸³ Max Weber, "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. with introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Routledge: Abingdon, 2009), 245–52; Vaget, "Wehvolles Erbe," 28, 83–4 and 98–102; Kershaw, "Working towards the Führer," 37–44.

⁸⁴ Vaget, "Nazi Cinema and Wagner," 44.

infamously launched the Nuremberg Party Rally each year, and the “Day of Potsdam” on March 21, 1933, a National Socialist extravaganza marking the opening of the new Reichstag in the former Kroll opera house, culminated with a performance of the same work at the Berlin State Opera, under Hitler’s favorite conductor, Wilhelm Furtwängler.⁸⁵ But it is important not to exaggerate Hitler’s elevation of *Meistersinger* as the festive opera *par excellence* – it had served that function in the Weimar Republic as well. To take just one example, the opening of the self-same Kroll opera house as a republican branch of the Berlin State Opera in 1924 was marked by a gala performance of *Meistersinger*, conducted by Erich Kleiber.⁸⁶

Of more significance to Hitler’s messianic popular appeal was the quasi-Wagnerian pomp and circumstance of the many public spectacles and propaganda gatherings in Nazi Germany, in particular the Nuremberg Party Rally itself and its representation on screen in Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will).⁸⁷ There is little doubt that this ceremonial theatricality, the dazzling massed ranks of soldiers and civilians hailing their Führer, owed something to Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to that “clever and ingenious wizardry” that so intoxicated Hitler.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the “performativity” of Hitler’s public persona is further testament to his debt to Wagner’s phantasmagoria.⁸⁹ As has long been acknowledged, his rise from political upstart to Reich Chancellor was facilitated by his oratory and showmanship, and by the skillful choreography of his public appearances.⁹⁰

It seems clear enough, then, that Wagner’s oeuvre was a potent factor in shaping Hitler’s personality, mindset, and flair for propaganda. Yet, as Kershaw implies in his biography, without the familiar stations along Germany’s *via dolorosa*, Hitler, as history has come to know him, would not have been possible.⁹¹ The question, then, becomes: Why did so many Germans at a time of acute crisis put their faith in a leader who saw himself as an artist, not as a politician or military leader? The answer may be that Hitler’s undeniable love of Wagner and his oeuvre gave him the stamp of inner authenticity. He was not, as Kershaw writes, “an empty vessel outside his political life”;⁹² that vessel was full to the brim with the magic potion of Wagnerism. And it was not the case that Hitler posed as a Wagner devotee

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 41 and 44–5; Carr, *The Wagner Clan*, 172–6. On Furtwängler, see Roger Allen, *Wilhelm Furtwängler: Art and the Politics of the Unpolitical* (The Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2018).

⁸⁶ Hans Curjel, *Experiment Krolloper 1927–1931* (Prestel-Verlag: Munich, 1975), 165–6.

⁸⁷ Valet, “Nazi Cinema and Wagner,” 37–41; Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (Macmillan: London, 2000), 211–12.

⁸⁸ Thomas Mann, “Auseinandersetzung mit Wagner,” *Der Merker* 2 (July 1911), 797–9, here 799; translated in Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 45–8, here 48.

⁸⁹ Pyta, *Hitler*, 14 and 63–79. ⁹⁰ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (London, 1998), 280–1.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, xii, xx. ⁹² *Ibid.*, xxiv.

in Bayreuth to “bestow a semblance of aesthetic legitimacy upon his true, nefarious intention: to prepare Germany for war.”⁹³ His aestheticism was not a deceptive camouflage for his barbarism; rather, it was barbaric in and of itself. Elsewhere, Vaget emphasizes that the doctrines of aestheticism lay apart from conventional dictates of good and evil, and implied the curtailment of any sense of moral responsibility or conscience.⁹⁴ Above and beyond the moral indifference of the aesthete, Hitler exhibited in extreme form the contradictory concept of culture outlined above, the belief that art, not politics, nurtured the *Volk*. Redemption through love and compassion would ultimately prevail in the Third Reich, as in the *Ring* cycle, but before that Wagner’s work must be used to sustain the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* in its quest for national redemption through war, conquest, and subjugation.

It is perhaps appropriate to end in Bayreuth, for the ongoing failure of Wagner’s present-day descendants fully to confront the festival’s Nazi past ensures that the specters of Nazism still haunt the town and its festival.⁹⁵ Lavishly bankrolled by various Reich agencies, Hitler’s “court theater”⁹⁶ reached a new level of theatrical and musical achievement in the prewar years, in part because Winifred Wagner had by 1931 assembled a talented team of collaborators: the administrator, director, and sometime conductor Heinz Tietjen; the designer Emil Preetorius; and – on and off – the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler.⁹⁷ Knappertsbusch, despite his effort to curry favor with Hitler in 1933, was not among the roster of conductors employed in Bayreuth during the Third Reich, as Hitler did not like what he understood as Knappertsbusch’s old-fashioned style of Wagner conducting.⁹⁸ This was a watershed year for the festival, not only because it marked Hitler’s first visit to the festival as Reich Chancellor, but also because Bayreuth saw the first fruits of the Tietjen–Preetorius partnership, a startlingly modern production of the *Ring* cycle.

Preetorius swept away the naturalistic clutter of the traditional Bayreuth stage, and made just as radical a break with the past in 1933 as would Wieland Wagner with his much-vaunted productions when the festival reopened as “New Bayreuth” in 1951. Preetorius’s stylized designs were informed by the flow of Wagner’s music, not by the composer’s

⁹³ Vaget, “Nazi Cinema and Wagner,” 54. ⁹⁴ Vaget, “*Wehvolles Erbe*,” 75–7.

⁹⁵ Millington, *The Sorcerer*, 303.

⁹⁶ Thomas Mann, “Richard Wagner’s Letters,” *Saturday Review of Literature* January 20, 1951; reprinted in Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 211–21, here 214.

⁹⁷ Carr, *The Wagner Clan*, 161–71 and 190–1; Stephen McClatchie, “Review” (of Spotts, *Bayreuth*), *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7 (1995), 277–84, here 279; Spotts, *Bayreuth*, 159–63, 168–9 and 176–7; Brigitte Hamann, *Winifred Wagner: A Life at the Heart of Hitler’s Bayreuth*, trans. Alan Bance (Granta Books: London, 2005), 147–205.

⁹⁸ Vaget, “*Wehvolles Erbe*,” 306–7.

realistic stage directions. The emphasis was on visual economy: His designs suggested the settings, rather than detailing them. Most importantly, the symbolic use of color and light was a counterpart to Wagner's musical score – fluid but concentrated light, controlled and directed. Preetorius's belated modernization of Bayreuth was indebted to the sketches and theoretical writings, dating from the 1890s, of the theatrical visionary Adolphe Appia.⁹⁹

Hitler seems to have been quite taken with this renewal of the *Ring* cycle, not being as hidebound in his scenic tastes as the vociferous critics of the staging would have wished.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, he shared with Wagner and the tetralogy itself an element of utopian futurity along with his *völkisch* outlook, a worldview pithily summarized by Mann above, in 1940, as a “mixture of roots-in-the-soil and eyes-toward-the-future.” Once the war had begun, Tietjen and Preetorius's *Ring* was co-opted into the war effort as part of the Bayreuth war festivals – two complete cycles in 1940 and 1941, and one in 1942, along with an additional four performances of *Götterdämmerung*. The audiences at these war festivals were “guests of the Führer” – soldiers and workers in the war industry.¹⁰¹ Cross-fade briefly from music drama to war film, and we must assume that in Ritter's cinematic tale *Stukas*, described above, the war-weary pilot recovers his bellicose spirit at the 1940 festival during a performance of that Tietjen–Preetorius *Götterdämmerung*.

Long before 1940, long before 1933, Mann and Preetorius had been friends in their Munich days. The state of that friendship after the war had ended in 1945 may be gauged by Mann's reference to his old friend “Pree” in an open letter: “To think that there was no more honorable occupation than to design Wagner sets for Hitler's Bayreuth – strange, what a lack of sensibility.”¹⁰² Despite this public censure of Pree by Mann, the two began corresponding between Germany and California shortly thereafter, although they never met again. At first glance, this apparently heartfelt correspondence indicates, touchingly, that these two old friends had patched up their friendship after the ravages of Nazism.¹⁰³ But a more plausible explanation is offered by Veget: For Mann, cold professional curiosity had taken the place of friendship. It was at this time, in early 1946, that Mann began the section of *Doctor Faustus* in which the affinity of aesthetics and brutality is explored by way of the “Kridwiß-Kreis,”

⁹⁹ Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of Theatre* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2006), 191 and 270–80.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 275–6; Hamann, *Winifred Wagner*, 204. ¹⁰¹ Veget, “*Wehvolles Erbe*,” 211–13.

¹⁰² Letter of September 7, 1945 from Mann to Walter von Molo, in Thomas Mann, *Briefe*, ed. Erika Mann, 3 vols (Fischer: Frankfurt, 1961–5), vol. 2 (1963), 440–7, here 443.

¹⁰³ Hans Wysling, “Aus dem Briefwechsel Thomas Mann–Emil Preetorius,” *Blätter der Thomas Mann Gesellschaft Zürich* 4 (1963), 8.

a discussion forum hosted by a certain Sixtus Kridwiß. The character is an undisguised portrait of Preetorius, aesthete beyond all else.¹⁰⁴ Seemingly oblivious to his role as sacrificial lamb to Mann's creativity, Pree justified his employment at Hitler's Bayreuth in a letter of June 1946: He had finally found the right conditions to stage "Wagner's prescient ideas," and he was captured, spellbound by his work as a designer, which was dedicated to Wagner's Bayreuth, not to Hitler's Bayreuth.¹⁰⁵

"Oh yes, there's a good deal of 'Hitler' in Wagner," wrote Mann to Pree in 1949, in a long letter about Wagner motivated by Pree's new book, *Bild und Vision*.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, the composer's grandsons Wolfgang and Wieland Wagner were busy endeavoring to dissociate Wagner and Bayreuth from the specters of Hitler and Nazism, in order to reopen the festival in 1951. Now masquerading as a victim of Nazism, Knappertsbusch was at last able to fulfill his long-cherished desire to conduct at Bayreuth, where his traditional style of conducting the *Ring* and *Parsifal* provided the absolute antipode to Wieland Wagner's avant-garde staging style.¹⁰⁷ Wieland carried on where Preetorius had left off, although Wieland denied any influence from that quarter vehemently, instead crediting his abstract, depoliticized stage to their shared inspiration, Appia. Wieland's empty spaces were almost free of settings, shaped only by lighting design; the play of light and shadow constituted theatrical space.¹⁰⁸ In his 1899 book *Die Musik und die Inszenierung*, Appia wrote: "Where no shadow exists, there is also no light."¹⁰⁹ Of course he was talking about stage lighting, but he could equally well have been describing the entanglement of Wagner's utopian *Ring* cycle with German history.

¹⁰⁴ Vaget, "Wehvolles Erbe," 460–3; Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 553–66 (middle part of chapter 34).

¹⁰⁵ Letter of June 10, 1946 from Preetorius to Mann, in Wysling, "Aus dem Briefwechsel Thomas Mann–Emil Preetorius," 14–15, here 14.

¹⁰⁶ Letter of December 6, 1949 from Mann to Preetorius, translated in Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 208–11, here 210.

¹⁰⁷ Ingrid Kapsamer, "Wieland Wagner's Intellectual Path," trans. Tash Siddiqui, *The Wagner Journal* 7/1 (2013), 39–65; Vaget, "Wehvolles Erbe," 249–58 and 307.

¹⁰⁸ Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of Theatre*, 263–9 and 284–6; Kapsamer, "Wieland Wagner," 51.

¹⁰⁹ Adolphe Appia, *Die Musik und die Inszenierung* (F. Bruckmann: Munich, 1899), 85.