

Leit motive

THE WAGNER QUARTERLY



Richard Wagner

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The Editor's Thoughts

Greatly contrasted to Issue 100, this issue is devoted to a single subject: an important part of Wagner's own explanation of the meaning of his *Ring*.

We believe that most readers will see this matter as being of much interest. While an almost endless number of authors have written their own take on what Wagner intended in his monumental work, curiously it is unusual to encounter an author citing Wagner's own views when offering an explanation of the *Ring*.

We have provided here a three-part issue: first is a general introduction; second, the Preface to the late-Nineteenth Century translation of the dozen letters that Wagner wrote to a friend; third, a complete translation of a single one of those twelve which Wagner had written in 1854. It is lengthy and perhaps the most important of the twelve.

An awareness of the historical background of this key letter seemed necessary if the reader is fully to comprehend the circumstances. Accordingly,

we have provided the complete Preface to the volume of the 1897 translations of all twelve letters which Wagner had written to August Röckel.

The only modification we have made to the Preface is to add section headings so that this lengthy Preface will be more quickly understood. We have left the original spelling.

Lastly, we have published here the complete Letter IV (of the total of twelve). Letter IV is considered by many of those persons familiar with it as being the most revealing of all concerning Wagner's thoughts about his *Ring*.

It is long and the first part of it (which itself is lengthy) concerns Wagner's ideas about certain philosophical matters that form the foundation of what he has to say subsequently in this letter, specifically about the *Ring* starting on page 27. This may be one of the most interesting and revealing essays that one will ever encounter about the *Ring*.

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LEITMOTIVE – THE WAGNER QUARTERLY is a journal intended for all persons interested in the works, life, and influence of Richard Wagner (1813–1883). Although many of our authors and readers are scholars affiliated with academic institutions, many are informed lay persons with a keen interest in Wagner studies.

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David Dalto, Founding Editor (1985–1989)

Paul Schofield, Editor (1990)

About the Authors

Houston Stewart Chamberlain ("Wagner. Preface.") 1855–1927 was born in England, but, as an adult, settled in Germany. He met Cosima at the 1882 Bayreuth Festival when "Parsifal" was first performed. Later they corresponded extensively. Chamberlain published several major works and was distinctly anti-Semitic. He married Eva, the daughter of Cosima and von Bülow. The translator to English of Wagner's letters to August Röckel, Eleanor C. Sellar, selected Chamberlain to write the Preface to her book.

Eleanor C. Sellar ("Richard Wagner's Letters to August Roeckel"), in 1897 published her translations of the twelve letters that Wagner had written his close friend from the days he spent in Dresden up to and including the Resurrection of 1849. Ms. Sellar was English.

Wagner's Own Explanation of His *Ring*

The Background of the Röckel Letters and The Text of Letter IV

Wagner wrote more prose than any other major opera composer: 3,000 pages of text on unusually complex topics, plus 10,000 letters. One wonders how he had time to compose his operas?

However, in his voluminous writing, he almost never offered his own ideas in explanation of the *Ring*. The single, significant exception is the very few of the twelve letters that he wrote to his good friend, August Röckel (who was in prison).

The following article offers (1) an introduction to the conditions that brought about Wagner writing these revealing letters, plus (2) the full text of Letter IV. The first part applies to all of the letters that Wagner wrote to Röckel. Ms. Sellar, the translator, selected Houston Stewart Chamberlain to write this introduction because of his closeness to Bayreuth and Cosima Wagner: he was an "insider."

The *Ring* is a unique work of art that has come to fascinate generations of people, not only for its almost addictive music, but also for a powerful storyline that is completely different from any other opera. If one considers the operatic works of Verdi, Mozart, Rossini, Bizet, Puccini and all of the rest, never does anything even remotely like the *Ring* surface. That cannot be said of almost any other opera.

As is well-known, Wagner wrote the libretto for his *Ring* in the reverse order from the sequence in which the four operas are performed. The reason for this (which has perhaps greater significance than is often recognized), was that he had initially thought that he was composing a single opera like each of the those that he had already written. However, as his work progressed, he found that his grand conception to explain the world and life was more

complex than he had originally thought and would require, therefore, more operas to express fully.

He was a serious student of ancient Greek tragedy¹ and seems clearly to have been greatly influenced by it. However, Wagner was himself, in addition to all else, a philosopher who was trying not only to compose an opera, but simultaneously he was attempting to understand life and the universe—human existence in its entirety. Among his extensive studies, he had delved into the world's religions and the works of important philosophers.

So it can be seen that when we attend a performance of the *Ring*, it is a great deal more than simply four evenings' entertainment. It is Wagner grasping for an understanding of everything that humans experience.

This journal (as well as a great many other publications, including a huge number of books) has frequently had pieces about the *Ring*, almost universally focused on explaining to the readers what the author thinks is the meaning of Wagner's great work.

Irrespective of how many times one has attended the *Ring* and irrespective of how many books one has read on the subject, what Wagner intended to communicate is often unclear, subject to multiple interpretations and, quite often, unintelligible. It can be most puzzling.

Wagner, but for a single exception, left us almost no clues about the specific meanings that he personally attached to his *Ring*. That single exception (as above) is the small group of letters that he sent to his close friend and compatriot, August Röckel.

Of particular significance is that Wagner and Röckel had worked together in Dresden until the uprising in 1849, and that Wagner considered Röckel to be his intellectual equal (or as close to it as was possible for Wagner). Accordingly, he did not "sugar-coat" what he wrote, certain that Röckel would understand his intentions.

Röckel, most fortunately for us, carefully preserved what Wagner sent to him, but his responses to Wagner's letters have been lost: how one wishes it possible to learn Röckel's thoughts.

The 1897 Translations

Eleanor C. Sellar, a British woman, published all twelve of these letters (which she had translated) in 1897². As an introduction to her translations, she included an essay (below) by a man also a native of England, Houston

1. Michael Ewens, *Wagner and Aeschylus, The Ring and The Oresteia*, (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd, 1982).

2. Sellar, Eleanor C., *Richard Wagner's Letters to August Roeckel, with an introductory essay by Houston Stewart Chamberlain* (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1897).

Stewart Chamberlain.

Chamberlain had been born in England in 1855. As an adult he settled in Germany and became a German citizen. He also was fascinated with Wagner and his writings. After attending the 1882 Bayreuth Festival when *Parsifal* was first performed, he befriended Cosima. George Marek³ reports that a large number of letters were exchanged between the two of them. In 1908 Chamberlain married Cosima's daughter Eva, whose father was Hans von Bülow (Wagner having been her step-father). It seems unlikely that Chamberlain had ever known Wagner personally, but nevertheless Chamberlain was deeply impressed with the composer.

Chamberlain was a political philosopher and published several large works. Like many others in Bayreuth at the time, he was strongly anti-Semitic and during World War I he was strongly anti-British, even though his father had been a high-ranking officer in the Royal Navy. Before Chamberlain's death in 1927, he had met Hitler, apparently supporting him. Stewart Spencer is critical of Chamberlain⁴, stating that he had distorted Wagner's meanings in a volume of Wagner's letters that Chamberlain had published. We are inclined to believe that Spencer is accurate in his appraisal.

Thus, one needs to be cautious about accepting at face value everything that Chamberlain has written, including that in his following piece. We believe what he wrote here to be generally accurate and especially useful in understanding the circumstances and background of this unusual happenstance—Wagner (1) wanted to correct what he saw as Röckel's misunderstandings; further, (2) he knew that Röckel could understand what he wrote, and (3) he, Wagner, had the ability to allocate the time necessary to create such long and complex documents as the Letter IV, here. It was a rare occasion.

It would also seem that the translator had the option of selecting anyone she wished to write the introduction and felt that Chamberlain was the best qualified.

Chamberlain was "on the scene" and his essay (below) provides information, and, more importantly, a useful orientation specifically concerning Wagner's letters to Röckel. At the least, Chamberlain's commentary has overall historical interest even if small parts of it may reflect the author's personal prejudices.

— Editor

3. George R. Marek, *Cosima Wagner* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

4. Spencer, Stewart, *Wagner Remembered* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).

WAGNER.

(Houston Stewart Chamberlain's

'Preface' To the Sellar 1897

Translation of Wagner's Letters to Röckel)¹

It is curious to observe how much deeper the French go in their interest for Richard Wagner than the English. The English flock to Bayreuth, that is true, and they flock to Richter's concerts and to the wretched parodies of Wagner's operas with which the metropolis is occasionally gratified; but even among enthusiasts, hardly one in a thousand knows anything about Wagner, the *man*, nor of the stubborn battle waged by him during fifty years against a demoralised and demoralising stage, and against the perversion of music—or of what he calls "*the Christian Art*"—into a mere accomplishment, mere trade and handicraft. Hardly anyone in England (outside a small cluster of enthusiasts) takes the trouble to study seriously Wagner's doctrine of a new form of Drama which resembles the Opera only on the principle of "*les extrêmes se touchent*." We simply like his music, or we don't like it, and trouble our heads no further on the matter. In France, on the contrary, the literature on Wagner is almost as voluminous and at least as valuable as that in Germany. All the principal Journals and Reviews—the *Revue des deux Mondes*, the *Revue de Paris*, the *Revue Bleue*, the *Revue Blanche*, etc. —have frequent and interesting articles on Wagner, signed by men of the highest literary standing, such as Catulle Mendès, Mallarmé, Gaston Paris, Schuré, Wyzewa, not one of whom is a professional musician, or would ever dream of severing the composer in Wagner from the poet and philosopher. In short, the French have long since discovered that of which we still remain ignorant; viz., that Wagner is not only a remarkable musician, but a creative genius of the very first order; a man so many-sided in his interests and so lucid and energetic in his thought,

1. The section headings have been added to Chamberlain's original.

that, quite apart from his music, he deserves to be studied as one of the most remarkable minds of this century.

Wagner's Letters

Now, it is no good trying to swim against the tide, and I fear even Mr. William Ashton Ellis' admirable translation of Wagner's prose writings is not likely to do much good until our interest in Wagner has been aroused. Nothing is so likely to arouse it as Wagner's letters, for these show us the *man*; he seems to step out of them bodily before our eyes. And this man is so upright, simple, sincere, and lovable, such a manly man, that we at once feel under the spell and long to know more about him. There is nothing of the *style épistolaire* in Wagner's letters; they are always written rapidly, and rarely is there a word struck out or altered. Spontaneousness was one of the great charms of Wagner's personal intercourse: it is the same with his letters. A few of these, read with the vivid remembrance of his music in our ears, suffice to make one feel intimate with him. His extraordinary sensitiveness comes out in almost every letter. No impressions from outside are necessary; whatever subject his thought rests on, his mind at once adopts a peculiar complexion, his voice modulates into the key most fitted to this emotion. In one and the same letter he is boisterously gay as a schoolboy, and suddenly, as the picture of a suffering friend suggests itself, he strikes the deepest chords of melancholy; or, again, some word casually dropped lays bare the underlying philosophical current, and he launches forth into subtle dialectical argument, such as would do honour to a Petrus Abaelardus. However, where Wagner is at home, and where we feel that his words are *master words*—that is, when he talks of the Drama and Music, and this, as the absorbing aim and object of his life, is the subject of almost all his letters. His interest are many—politics, philosophy, religion, literature—but they all centre and culminate in *Art* (understood in the comprehensive sense of the German word "Kunst").

Art–Drama–Music

Art is for him, as it was for Schiller, the source and crown of civilisation; Art is the handmaiden of religion. And what Art is for civilisation, that the Drama is for Art. The Drama is not only the climax of the inventive powers of man, but it is the fountain-head from which the several individual arts originate, and towards which they again converge; it is the heart that propels the life-giving blood to the entire body, and which gathers it back from each separate member in order to infuse new life into the whole. There is no reason, and in fact no possibility, of separating Wagner's music from his Drama. "Go

deep enough, there is music everywhere," says Carlyle, in speaking of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. The poet Wagner goes deep, and what eyes cannot see, nor words utter, finds shape and language in music such as his. This is not the music of mere sensual melody and rhythm that serves as an opiate after toil and care, or as a pastime to charm away an idle hour. It is a music akin to that in which popular instinct had so often given expression to feelings which the mere words of its ballads and songs were able to convey but imperfectly; it is the music which the genius of Mozart unconsciously lights upon, thus transforming frivolous and preposterous libretti into immortal creations; it is the music of those deepest depths in which Beethoven lived and moved and had his being. Wagner's music is not melodramatic, it is not intended to illustrate the stage action; with him *the music IS the drama*, and both the action which we see and the thoughts that words give expression to are merely a reflex, an "allegory" of the real dramatic action, of the action in the "depths" that Carlyle alludes to, where Music is the one and only language of man and of all creation.

It was necessary to lay some stress upon this point, for much in Wagner's letters would be quite incomprehensible to anyone accustomed to think of him as a mere musician, in the ordinary superficial sense of the word. Such a person would be perplexed to find Wagner always engrossed in the poem and in the dramatic action. Wagner, who dislikes theory in Art, and who writes such book as the *Artwork of the Future* and *Opera and Drama* merely because this was the only means of making way for his new conception of the Drama, rarely, if ever, in his letters starts theoretical discussions concerning music. He is naturally very full of his works, and what he says is most instructive, both for our knowledge of his works individually and for a thorough mastery of his conception of Art and the Drama in general. However, it will only be found instructive to those who start unprejudiced, and with the sincere desire, not of finding fault with Wagner, but of understanding him and entering into his way of feeling as regards the organic relationship between Music and the Drama.

The Liszt and Uhlig Letters

Three collections of letters by Wagner have been published. One consists of some two hundred letters to Liszt² a second, of one hundred and seventy-five letters to his Dresden friends, Uhlig, Fischer, and Heine;³ the third collec-

2. An English translation the Wagner-Liszt letters, under the title *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt*, by the late Dr. Hueffer (of The Times), was published by H. Grevel & Co., King Street, London.

3. The correspondence by J. S. Shedlock, was published also by H. Grevel & Co.

tion of letters, those addressed to Roeckel and here introduced to the English reader, is comparatively very small—twelve letters only; but owing to a peculiar combination of circumstances, these twelve letters are so full of varied interest, that perhaps no other publication exists which is so qualified to serve as a first introduction to Wagner.

Liszt was, both intellectually and as a musician, immensely superior to Wagner's other correspondents. But this very superiority, added to the fact that Liszt was constantly actively engaged in propagating Wagner's works, and in pleading his cause before kings and princes and before the public, rendered it unnecessary for Wagner to enter into details concerning his poems in writing to Liszt as he does with others. What forms the subject-matter of this correspondence is, on the one hand, debate and counsel concerning the endless difficulties which beset his life; on the other hand, the outbreaks of passionate love and gratitude on the part of the poor exile, who feels that but for this great man's unswerving devotion he must be lost forever. The correspondence with Liszt is thus a mine of biographical facts, and at the same time one of the most pathetic documents we possess concerning Wagner. But, as Liszt says in one of his letters: "One single chord brings our two hearts nearer to each other than any amount of verbiage." Intimacy is seen quite as much in what people hold their tongues about as in what they say to each other.

Wagner's letters to Uhlig are of a totally different nature. Uhlig was a clever and a refined man, gifted with a singularly receptive intellect. Liszt never entered into the detail of Wagner's thought, Uhlig did; Liszt cared little or nothing for Wagner's social aspirations after a regenerated humanity, crowned by a regenerated Art: he was content to know that Wagner was a "divine genius," and to serve him and admire his works. Uhlig, on the contrary, was the first man to enter into the spirit of Wagner's doctrine, and to understand that no more than you can separate his music from his poems, no more can you sever his artistic from his social convictions. He was the first also to acknowledge this publicly, and to defend in the Press what may be called the "Wagnerian doctrine." Political and social questions, also questions concerning the essence of music and of dramatic art, are thus naturally and freely dwelt upon in these letters, constituting their great interest.

The Röckel Letters

Now, what causes the peculiarity of Wagner's letters to Roeckel is precisely the fact that this correspondent does not submit his judgment to Wagner's as that of a superior mind, but that he discusses every point on a footing of intellectual equality. Uhlig's cleverness showed itself in nothing more than in the

sagacity with which he gauged the immense superiority of Wagner's mind over his own. Roeckel was certainly gifted enough to feel the same, but he did not feel it in the same degree. His intimacy with Wagner, dated further back than that of Liszt and Uhlig, to a period when the young poet and musician was himself still hesitating on many questions, still wavering between the promptings of the inner voice, which impelled him to revolt, and the enticing hope that Society, and with it theatrical art, might be renovated by less radical measures. Roeckel had been the friend and confidant of this early period of mental fermentation. Day after day, during five or six years, he had discussed all these burning questions with Wagner and it is perhaps not advancing too much if we attribute to Roeckel's high moral courage and unflinching devotion to truth some share in that final evolution which led Wagner to break openly and without hope of return with a theatre and a social organisation which he at heart despised. This it was which made of Wagner the truly great man he was. It was natural that the friend who had witnessed the critical phase of this evolution, and perhaps been instrumental in the triumph of the heroic principle over the worldly one, should feel more independence in the presence of this master mind than those who encountered it later. Wagner looked for contradiction and discussion when he spoke with Roeckel, nor was he disappointed. Moreover, in the hard school of adversity, during the dreary years of imprisonment, Roeckel's mind seems to have acquired a considerable inflexibility, not to say stubbornness. Wagner pushed on boldly; once he had admitted the premises, he followed them out to their ultimate conclusions. Roeckel refused to follow him. No doubt Uhlig did not always understand what the Master meant, and we may be sure he occasionally differed from him; but he did not discuss, his veneration for genius would not have allowed him to do so. He simply pointed out what he could not grasp. Roeckel, on the contrary, although bound to Wagner by the ties of the most intimate friendship—a friendship that death alone severed,—seems to have opposed him at every point. His letters unfortunately are lost, but we can guess at their contents from Wagner's answers, and we have every reason to feel grateful to Roeckel for the honest consistency with which he contradicts Wagner about politics, attacks his philosophy, and criticises his poems. For it is to this pugnacious opposition that we owe the beautiful commentary on, the *Ring des Nibelungen* and on the Drama in general in letter No. 4, the lucid dissertation on Schopenhauer's philosophy in letter 6, the inquiry concerning the influence of philosophy on Art in letter 7, that on the aim and scope of politics in letter 8, and so on. In short, the special character and the peculiar interest of these letters to Roeckel are due to two causes. On the one hand, to Wagner's great af-

fection for this particular friend, and consequent wish to be fully understood by him; and, on the other hand, to Roeckel's inability to see things in the same light as his illustrious correspondent, and to his plainspoken acknowledgment of this fact.

Röckel's Background

Here it may be well to insert a few lines concerning August Roeckel. The reader will like to know who this friend was, to whom Wagner clung so steadfastly. If, as the Latin proverb says, "a man may be judged by his friends," to know Roeckel will teach us something of Wagner also.

August Roeckel's father, Joseph August Roeckel, was a native of the Palatinate. At that time, towards the close of the last century, this province was politically united with Bavaria, and it so chanced that Joseph A. Roeckel, who had begun life in the diplomatic service, was appointed Secretary to the Bavarian Chargé d'Affaires at Salzburg, which brought him into the neighbourhood of Vienna, at that time the metropolis of music. Here Baron Braun, so well known in the history of music as Beethoven's friend and as director of several Viennese theatres, happened to hear the young attaché sing, and was so much struck by his beautiful voice and musical gifts, that he at once proposed that Roeckel should take an engagement at Vienna, where they were sorely in need of a tenor. Diplomacy was a precarious career at that moment—1805,—and, after some hesitation, Roeckel accepted Baron Braun's offer, and exchanged diplomacy for the stage. In Vienna he saw a good deal of Beethoven: one of his first parts was as Florestan in "Fidelio." He also came into contact with all the other musical men of the day, more especially with Hummel, who married his sister. Joseph A. Roeckel later became director of the theatre at Aix la Chapelle, and, after having acquired the necessary experience in this branch, he made proof of both pluck and talent, venturing as the very first impresario to carry the German opera to Paris and to London.

The reader will gather from all this how full of interest must have been the youth of our August Roeckel. Born at Graz in 1814, he travelled with his father through Germany whilst still a boy. He then spent two years in Paris, where he witnessed the revolution of July, 1830, and afterwards lived for several years in London. Constantly in the atmosphere of music and surrounded by musicians, his great aptitude for this art developed early, and already at seventeen years of age he was such a consummate chorus-master that the Théâtre Italien engaged him in this capacity, in the hopes of bringing their chorus up to the level attained at Joseph A. Roeckel's German opera. This last was conducted for some time by none less than Hummel. But life in England seems not to

have suited August Roeckel's fancy, and whilst his brothers, Edward Roeckel and J. L. Roeckel, settled in England, August returned to Germany, and joined his uncle Hummel at Weimar, under whom he studied composition. After having been for several years "Musikdirector" at Bamberg, he was appointed to the same post at Weimar, where, having married the niece of the celebrated composer, Albert Lortzing, he spent the happiest years of his life from 1838 to 1843. In this small town, still alive with the traditions of the great epoch only just closed Roeckel's talent and energy were fully appreciated, and by none more than by Goëthe's [*sic*] daughter-in-law and her sons, Wolfgang and Walther, the sincerity of whose friendship for Roeckel and his family was put to the proof in the bitter years that were to come. 1843 was a momentous date in Roeckel's life. He exchanged the quiet seclusion of Weimar for Dresden, where the political effervescence was already beginning to stir up the whole population, and here he met Richard Wagner, with whom he soon became very intimate. Both these facts, or rather these two facts combined, had a fatal influence on the rest of his career, for they ended by throwing him out of the profession for which he had been bred and for which he had early shown such great gifts, and by casting him headlong into the turmoil of politics. A sorry exchange in any case, and more especially for a man of such rigid principles, who was far too honest, too high-minded and self-sacrificing to be likely to serve his own interests whilst serving those of the community.

Röckel in Dresden

August Roeckel has more than once been called Wagner's "bad genius," a most absurd accusation; it would be much truer to say that Wagner's friendship, productive as it was of deep and life-long happiness, was nevertheless Roeckel's evil star. As "Musikdirector" to the Dresden Royal Opera House, to which Wagner had been appointed Kapellmeister on the 1st of February, the same year (1843), Roeckel became Wagner's colleague: their professional duties made them meet every day, and they soon became intimate. Wagner's "Rienzi," performed for the first time on the 20th October, 1842, on this very Dresden stage, and his "Flying Dutchman" following rapidly (2nd January, 1843), had made his name celebrated throughout Germany. When Roeckel arrived at Dresden in the spring of 1843, Wagner was just finishing the poem of "Tannhäuser," the score of which he at once began. In the spring of 1845 "Tannhäuser" was finished, but before its first performance (on the 19th October, 1845) "Lohengrin" was already begun and the "Meistersinger" sketched: and scarcely had Wagner jotted down the last note of the "Lohengrin" score, in the summer of 1847, when he launched forth into elaborate historical re-

searches for a spoken drama, "Frederic Barbarossa," and forged his tetralogical musical drama, "The Ring of the Nibelung," out of the confused mass of mythological Sagas and legends of the "Edda" and the "Nibelungenlied." In the same summer (1848) in which Wagner wrote the complete sketch of this *opus summum* of his life, he also drew the outlines of his "Jesus of Nazareth," which has been described by a Catholic priest as "perhaps the most successful attempt ever made to place the divine person of our Saviour on the stage." This was what Roeckel was witness to during the years 1843–1849, in which he was Wagner's almost daily companion. Before the evidence of such stupendous creative power, his own talent, or rather his belief in his own talent, vanished. Roeckel had written songs and compositions for the pianoforte, and his appointment at Dresden he owed to an opera, "Farinelli," which Wagner (as I am told) thought well of. But how insignificant and futile was all this compared to the immortal works which he now saw springing into existence day by day! Had Roeckel been less gifted intellectually, he would not have recognised Wagner's genius, and had he been less high-minded, he would have felt envy, instead of admiration; or, again, if his own talent as musician had been more robust and original, intercourse with Wagner would have stimulated his creative faculties (as was the case with Lizst, for example). As it was, the proximity of genius seems to have blotted out all Roeckel's ambition in the domain of Art. Thus Wagner's friendship robbed him of a life-interest, and almost drove him to consecrate his energy to another direction. He did not give up his place at the Dresden Opera House, but he became an active politician, a pamphleteer, the editor of a revolutionary paper, and a favourite orator at public meetings. His enemies called him a demagogue, but that was a base calumny. He was a tribune in the proudest sense of the word, and no Englishman who knows what the political state of Germany was at that period will refuse his admiration to the man who, unlike so many other German revolutionists, risked his liberty and his life for the cause of the people against their tyrants, and paid for it by thirteen long years spent in a dungeon.

The Revolution of 1849

The revolution which broke out in Dresden in May, 1849, was entirely the doing of the King of Saxony and his Ministry. By their vacillation and continual shuffling they drove the people mad, and, when Dresden rose, the whole intelligence of the country—the Universities, the Bar—rose with it, and the then legal Government of Germany, the Frankfort [*sic*] Parliament; openly sided with the Saxon people against their rebellious Ministers. The Saxon people, who were perfectly loyal subjects of their hereditary Monarch,

and only claimed the rights they possessed by law and the accession of their country to the Constitution voted at Frankfort [*sic*], whereby a united Germany was to be established, would have won the day. But Count Beust, the King's chief counsellor, called on the Prussians for aid, who were, of course, too happy to profit by the occasion to gain a firm footing in Saxony. The Parliament at Frankfort [*sic*] stigmatised this armed intervention as "a scandalous breach of the Constitution." But in the meantime the Prussian troops had already reached Dresden, and had crushed the people's aspirations after liberty and law in the way military Powers [*sic*] usually do such things. The horrors enacted by the soldiers and officers make one's blood run cold. Roeckel, one of the few leaders of the movement who retained his coolness and courage up to the last, was condemned to death, a sentence that was commuted into life-long imprisonment. He never would consent to do as the others, and petition the King's indulgence; having committed no crime, he needed no forgiveness, nor would he ever consent to sign a paper pledging his word never again to engage in politics. On the contrary, he used to tell his prison authorities that, as soon as he was free, he would again attack the Government as it deserved. And so Roeckel was one of the very last men to be let out of prison. Not until 1862 did the Saxon Government grow sufficiently ashamed of itself to put an end to this persecution. Soon after, the Prussian army once more appeared before Dresden and threw up earth works (some of which may still be seen) all round the town, but the Royal Government had not as much pluck in 1886 as had the wretched inhabitants in 1849; it thought discretion the better part of valour, and submitted without striking a blow to Prussia's conditions. As for Count Beust, he had proved such a prodigious diplomatist that he was considered ripe for Austrian service; nor did he disappoint his cunning allies of heretofore.

Röckel After Dresden

Before returning to Wagner and to the letters contained in this volume, it may be well to finish this brief sketch of August Roeckel's life. It will not detain us long, for nothing very remarkable occurred after his release from prison. Politics absorbed his whole interests, and journalism was the only means open to him of serving his political aims and at the same time that of earning his livelihood. And so we find him as newspaper editor, first at Coburg, then at Frankfort, later on (under Wagner's protection), in 1866, at Munich, which he soon had to leave, however. He finally settled in Vienna as editor of the *Kleine Presse*. The mere geographical sequence suffices to show that Roeckel remained up to the end an irreconcilable enemy of Prussia. He had longed,

and he had fought, and he had suffered, for a great, united, and independent Germany, and now that the dream of his life was accomplished, he shut himself out voluntarily from his "Fatherland." Thus we see him at the close of his life not only sharing the same fate as the great antagonist of Germany's unity and his own personal persecutor, Count Beust, but actually on the best terms with him—the once enemies united by their common hatred of Prussia, and Roeckel, the undaunted Liberal, actually serving to the best of his abilities a reactionary and anti-German Government. It is a singularly melancholy fate, and doubtless contributed to shorten his days. In 1871 he had a first attack of paralysis; others followed. He never recovered to any extent, and had soon to give up his journalistic work and retire to the house of his youngest son, Richard Roeckel, at Pesth. There he died, on the 15th June, 1876, two months before the first performance of his great friend's "Ring des Nibelungen," at Bayreuth. The only work of Roeckel's that remains of him is his book *Sachsen's Erhebung und das Zuchthaus zu Waldheim* (the revolt of Saxony and my prison at Waldheim). Wagner alludes to it in the twelfth letter of this collection. It is a most thrilling narrative, and although the author, with his great modesty, keeps himself in the shade, one seems to become quite intimate with him during those long years of imprisonment. No one can read it without respecting him and loving him. Roeckel was the sort of man for Englishmen to understand and appreciate.

Wagner As Contrasted To Röckel

And now let us go back to that other man, whom it will always be infinitely more difficult to understand because, as one of the most perfect types of absolute *genius*, or, as Carlyle would have put it, of the Hero as poet, his intellect moved in obedience to laws different from those which govern ordinary men.

I have pointed out the absurdity of the opinion which stamps Roeckel as Wagner's evil genius and thinks that it was his fault that Wagner got mixed up in the revolt of 1849. Years before he and Roeckel first met, Wagner had declared, "My path leads me to open revolution against what the present day calls Art." And as, in Wagner's mind, the Art of a nation or of an epoch is not a casual excrescence, but the logical outcome of the whole life of Society, a corrupt Art is unquestionably indicative of a corrupt Society, and to revolt against Art is to revolt against the Society from which this Art springs. In this sense, which, it will be allowed, admits of no equivocation, Wagner may be said to have been a revolutionist ever since 1840, and his very latest writings leave no doubt that he continued to be a revolutionist down to the day of his death. But the events of 1849, which marred and broke poor Roeckel's

life, have in Wagner's life no importance beyond that which the increased experience of men and things signifies for such a mind. As a generous man, he could not hesitate on which side to place his sympathies, and when the actual conflict came—the fighting in the streets, the flocking in of the peasantry into the town, to ward off the foreign enemy and to stake their lives for their rights,—we are not astonished to see that his sympathy with the people is sufficiently marked to awaken suspicion on the part of the authorities, and to force him to seek safety in flight. No doubt Wagner felt the influence of the wave of enthusiasm which swept across Germany in 1848–49. No doubt he was at that moment the victim of many illusions, and set his hope on men and on popular movements; but all this remains for him superficial and external. He is like a rock; the waves break at its feet and sometimes cast their spray up to its very head, but the rock neither moves nor crumbles. In reality, Wagner never at any time had any sort of sympathy with *politics* properly so called. Politics and diplomacy, to Wagner's mind, go only skin deep. They can do no more than settle details, no more than hurry on events or retard them a little; and whilst seeming to lead, they in reality obey, driven on by deeper currents they have neither power to stay nor to alter. In regard to this question, the eighth letter of this collection will be found particularly interesting. It was those deeper currents which alone absorbed Wagner's attention. He was a good and loyal Saxon, but he never utters a word against Prussia; later on we find him the confidant of the King of Bavaria at a most critical period of history, but he does not gravitate southward, as did Roeckel, for his judgment is not blinded by political prejudice; he was a staunch and enthusiastic German, yet no man had a keener eye for the shortcomings of his countrymen and whilst Germany after 1870 knelt adoring at the feet of the man of blood and iron, Wagner pointed out how little this mere politician was in touch with the higher aspirations of the nation, and how he had reaped, but could not sow.

I have thought it necessary to insist at some length on this point, because the difference between Wagner and Roeckel is not merely one of degree; it is not merely that the one is a genius and the other a man of talent, but it is a difference which affects the whole man. What bound them together in friendship was evidently sympathy of character, and not intellectual affinity. By this I do not mean to convey that Roeckel was intellectually inferior to men like Liszt and Uhlig, but that the natural bent of his mind led him to diverge from Wagner on many, perhaps on most, points, and that he was far too independent a character to be over-awed, even by genius. He and Wagner were both high-minded, outspoken, and unselfish men. Otherwise they were as dissimilar as possible, and I imagine that this dissimilarity constituted an

additional zest to the friendship which bound them to each other. Both are idealists; but the one is a man who enlists his enthusiasm in the cause of the wrongs and sufferings of those who surround him, who longs to rescue the oppressed and to reform what is corrupt by practical means, by changing the form of government, by influencing public opinion, and so on; in short, he is essentially a politician, and the practical politician ends by eclipsing the poet and the artist his inner soul harboured. The other, on the contrary, is a creative genius, intensely wrapped up, it is true, not in Art only, but in all the questions that concern the welfare of his country and of humanity at large, but who is quite incapable of doffing, even for a single moment, the artist and the poet, in order to discuss present events in a matter-of-fact, political way. When he does get mixed up in politics, as he did in 1849, and again later in Munich, he is yet never a party man, for what he aims at soars high above the conflicting currents of the passing moment. "The political events of the day never had any interest for me," writes Wagner in 1864. What does interest him are the great currents that sweep humanity on through centuries, to weal or to woe. In his *Art and Revolution*, written (1849) whilst his contemporaries were discussing the Frankfurt Parliament, the growing influence of Prussia, and so forth, Wagner traces back the origin of the present state of society to the age of Pericles and of the decline of the Greek tragedy, and the Future he foretells is one "the poet alone can conceive of." Thanks to his extraordinary powers of imagination, genius sees not only the one short passing moment with its actors and all the petty influences which they obey, but grasps the Past out of which this Present grew, thus discerning in history Fate and Providence, and dives down into the depths of the unconscious but none the less propelling soul of nations, distinguishing with the keen eye of the poet a future still veiled to other men. No wonder Roeckel and Wagner often disagreed.

I do not think a detailed commentary to these letters is necessary, still less a critical examination of their contents. In order to understand them and to enjoy them, it is sufficient to know who the man was who wrote them, and who the man was to whom they were addressed. They will be found full of varied interest. Those who know nothing about Wagner will get but a one-sided, yet true and vivid, impression of his remarkable personality; those who have a superficial acquaintance with him will realise how little they knew up to now; the few who would enrich their mental lives by a comprehensive knowledge of this great mind and noble character will read these letters over and over again, and always find new matter to claim their attention and captivate their thought.

—Houston Stewart Chamberlain

Wagner's Letter IV To August Röckel

LETTER IV.

Zürich,

25th January, 1854

How I came to leave your letter unanswered for almost four months is a matter easily explained to myself; but it will be more difficult to make it clear to you, my dearest friend. Anyhow, the chief blame is due to the importance and interest of your letter. To answer it in any way adequately was not so much a question of my will as of my power to do so. All last summer I was very unsettled. Liszt paid me a visit in July; later, I went to St. Moritz in the Grisons (6,000 feet above the sea); in the end of August to Italy—at least to such parts of it as are open to me,¹—Turin, Genoa, Spezzia: from there I intended to go to Nice and to remain there for some time; but in a strange land my sense of solitude so overwhelmed me that suddenly, and partly in consequence of a purely physical indisposition, I fell into a state of melancholia, and set out with what speed I could across Lago Maggiore and the St. Gothard, and came straight home. While I was recruiting here your letter reached me, and at the same time I heard from Liszt asking me to meet him in Paris. I spent the month of October there, which caused the newspapers to infer that Liszt and I had the intention of bringing out my operas on the Paris stage. During all this confusion I was unable to answer your letter, and meant to do so on my return to Zürich. But once there, I was overcome with such an intense longing to get to work at the music of my “Rheingold” that I was not in a proper frame of mind to reply to your critical remarks on my poem. No! really I could not. So I threw myself passionately—after an interval of six years—into music, and determined not to write till I had finished the composition of “Rheingold.”

1. Owing to Wagner's exile from Saxony, the Austrian provinces were interdicted to him.

Well, that is done, and now I understand my own reluctance to answer you sooner; for now, the work being accomplished, I am in a quite different position to reply to your criticism, or rather *not* to reply to it—that doubtless were best, for you are right in criticising; but I, too, am right in conceiving and carrying out the work as best I can and may. Therefore, I shall not quarrel with you about it, but I should like to talk it over a little with you.

But in the first place, and in regard to my actual letter, let me tell you what a boon you conferred on me by the accounts you sent me of yourself and of your well-being. I come back to it: you strike me as being almost happier in your position than I am in mine. Every line of your letter bears witness to your perfect soundness and sanity. Now I admire you for this. The fact that you are allowed to write me a letter of five sheets proves that there has been an improvement in the actual conditions of your life, for which I am indeed thankful; though I must confess I can imagine circumstances under which I might have to forego every alleviation to existence, without suffering a pang on account of that which I was called on to renounce. One thing is paramount—freedom! But what is freedom? Does one mean by it—as our politicians seem to hold—lawlessness? Certainly not! Freedom is sincerity. He who is sincere—that is, true to himself, in perfect harmony with his own nature—he is free. Outward constraint is powerless unless it succeeds in destroying that sincerity in its victim, and inducing him to dissemble, and thus attempt to make himself and others believe that he is something different to what he really is. That alone is true servitude. But one need never submit to that. Let a man be actually in bondage, if he preserves this sincerity of soul, he keeps his essential freedom intact, at least in a higher measure than another who has ceased to feel that constraint—active everywhere in the world—simply because he has submitted wholly to its power, and for its sake has consented to play the hypocrite.

I believe that this sincerity (*Wahrhaftigkeit*) is in fact no other than what philosophers and theologians mean when they talk of truth (*Wahrheit*). Truth is an idea, and by its nature is nothing else than sincerity in concrete form. The simple meaning of this *sincerity* is nothing else than *reality* (*Wirklichkeit*), or, better still, the *Real*, the *Actual* (*das wirklich Seiende*); and that only is *real* which is appreciable to the senses (*sensuous*), whereas what is non-appreciable, to the senses is unreal and merely abstract and imaginary. If, therefore, I am right in considering *sincerity* as the most complete manifestation and expression of *reality*, *Truth* is nothing else than the abstract idea of this feeling, at least that is what it has become in philosophy. And yet this idea is as far removed from *reality* as *sincerity*, as I conceive of it, is akin to

this latter, and consequently from all time no word has given rise to so much error as this word Truth, which gradually has become the source of every sort of fallacy, till finally the idea—as must always be the case with mere abstract ideas—has become nothing but a term (word), and out of terms one can always build up a system; but it is a very different matter to lay hold on reality. We have no certain experience of reality except through feeling, and feeling, be it remembered, is once and for all an affair of the senses.

It is clear that in using the word *senses*, the idea to be conveyed is not mere *animal* senses, as the term is contemptuously applied by philosophers and theologians, but the *human* senses capable of reaching to the stars and of measuring their courses.

Having established this, I think we shall be at one in our views concerning the "World" (in so far as it is the domain for the exercise of this feeling of sincerity) if we allow ourselves to be guided exclusively by the one genuine source of experience, namely, sensation, and only pay attention to impressions derived from this source. Man, acting in conformity with his organisation, has recourse to endless expedients in order to grasp the Universe as a *whole*: these expedients in all their endless complexity are simply a group of concepts; and in our pride at having thus attained to a concept of the world in its entirety, we lose sight of our true position, forgetting that after all we have grasped nothing but the concept, and that consequently we are simply taking pleasure in the instrument of our own making, while all the time we remain further removed than ever from the *reality* of the world. But the man who can find no lasting delight in the phantasms of this illusion at last becomes conscious that his own mind rebels against its tyranny. He recognises the unreality of this barren illusion, and feels impelled to turn to *reality* and to approach it by means of feeling. Then the question arises: how is this to be done, seeing that *reality* conceived of as a *whole* can only be made intelligible to the intellect, and cannot be brought into relation with feeling? It can only be done by recognising that the essence of reality consists of infinite multiplicity (*Vielheit*). This inexhaustible multiplicity, incessantly renewed and renewing, can only be apprehended by feeling, as the one ever present though ever-varying element. This variability is the essence of the *real*; the unreal, or that which is imagined, alone being invariable and immutable. Nothing but what is variable can be real. To be real—to live—what is it but to be born, to grow, to bloom, to wither and to die? Without death as a necessary concomitant, there is no possibility of life: that alone has no end which has no beginning; but nothing *real* can be without beginning, only abstract ideas.

Therefore to be at one with truth is to give oneself up as a sentient hu-

man being wholly and entirely to reality—to encounter birth, growth, bloom, blight and decay frankly, with joy and with sorrow, and to live to the full this life made up of happiness and suffering—so to live and so to die. This is “to be at one with truth.” To make such a consummation possible we must entirely renounce the pursuit of the Universal. The Universal is made manifest to us only in separate phenomena, for of such alone can we in the true sense of the word take cognizance. Now we can only fully grasp a phenomenon if we can at one and the same time completely absorb it, and be absorbed by it. Where must we look for the most complete example of this marvellous process? Ask Nature. We must look to love, and to love only. All that I cannot love remains outside myself, and I remain outside of it—a condition in which a philosopher perhaps, but not a sincere man, may imagine that he grasps phenomena. Love in its most perfect reality is only possible between the sexes; it is only as man and woman that human beings can truly love. Every other manifestation of love can be traced back to that one absorbingly real feeling, of which all other affections are but an emanation, a connection, or an imitation. It is an error to look upon this as only one of the forms in which love is revealed, as if there were other forms co-equal with it, or even superior to it. He who after the manner of metaphysicians prefers *unreality* to *reality*, and derives the concrete from the abstract—and, in short, puts the word before the fact,—he may be right in esteeming the idea of love as higher than the expression of love, and may affirm that actual love made manifest in feeling is nothing but the outward and visible sign of a pre-existent, non-sensuous, abstract love; and he will do well to despise that love and sensuous function in general. In any case it were safe to bet that such a man had never loved or been loved as human beings can love, or he would have understood that in despising this feeling, what he condemned was its sensual expression, the outcome of man’s animal nature, and not true human love. The highest satisfaction and expression of the individual is only to be found in his complete absorption, and that is only possible through love. Now a human being is both *man* and *woman*, and it is only when these two are united that the real human being exists, and thus it is only by love that man and woman attain to the full measure of humanity. But when nowadays we talk of a human being, such heartless blockheads are we that quite involuntarily we only think of man.

It is only in the union of man and woman, by love (sensuous and super-sensuous), that the human being exists; and as the human being cannot rise to the conception of anything higher than his own existence—his own being,—so the transcendent act of his life is this consummation of his humanity through love. He can only renew it, the whole of life being after all but a

constant renewal of the multiplicity of vital phenomena; and it is this renewal which alone explains the true nature of love, approximating it to the ebb and flow of the tide—constantly changing, and ceasing only to begin afresh. It is therefore a grievous error to look upon that power in love, by virtue of which it constantly renews itself, as a weakness; and, on the other hand, to glorify as the real, lasting love that abstract, imaginary feeling, centred on God knows what, which after all is but the spectre of real love. The mere possibility of its indefinite continuance proves the unreal nature of this abstract sentiment. Eternal, in the true sense of the word, is that which annuls finiteness (or, better, the idea of finiteness). But between the *real* and finiteness there is no connection to be established, for the *real*—namely, that which is characterised by change, renovation, and multiplicity—is the negation of what we imagine to ourselves as finite. The infinity of the metaphysician is eternal unreality. Finiteness is a mental image, which sure enough has power to strike terror into our souls; but it can only do this if we have lost our hold on *reality*. If, on the contrary, we are possessed by a sense of the reality of love, that terror vanishes, for love annihilates the notion of limitation. To sum up, only that which is real can be eternal, and it is through love that we attain to the most perfect manifestation of reality; therefore Love only is eternal. The fact is, egoism ceases at the moment when the “I” passes into the “Thou.” But it is impossible to keep a firm hold on the “I” and “Thou” if one is bewildered by notions of the Universal. “I” and the “Universe” merely mean “I” my own self; and the Universe is only then real to me when it passes into the “Thou,” and this can only happen through the medium of the loved one. This process can be renewed through the medium of child, or of friend; but in order to love child or friend with a perfect love, a man must have first known what it is to lose himself in an all-absorbing feeling, and this he can only learn through his love to a woman. At the best, this feeling for child and friend is only a makeshift, a fact of which those are most conscious who have most fully realised the ecstasy of mutual love as between man and woman. All other affections are merely a proof of the multiplicity of our human nature, which brings to light strange anomalies, sometimes of an absurd, but equally often of a tragic, kind.

But enough! I venture to intrude on your solitude with this confession of faith, for I feel sure that there is no fear of your saddening yourself by agreeing with me. Not only you, but I—indeed, each one of us—live at the present moment under circumstances and conditions which we can only look upon as stopgaps and makeshifts; for each of us the only true, the only real life can only exist in the imagination as an unattained ideal. I had reached the age of thirty-six before I had divined the true meaning of my creative impulse; up

till then Art had seemed to me to be the end, life the means. But the discovery had come to me too late, and the result of following this new bent could not be other than tragic. A wider outlook into the actual world forces home the conviction that for the moment Love is impossible. It has come to this, that one of my friends, in addressing himself to Germans, could affirm with truth: "You do not know what Love means. How should men be capable of loving who have no initiative of Character? The thing is impossible." Therefore if we must put up with a makeshift, it seems to me it were best frankly to accept things as they are, and to abide by this acknowledgment of the truth, even if this avowal bring us no other good than the proud consciousness of having gained a knowledge by means of which we may be enabled to guide the wills and aspirations of mankind into the way of redemption. It is true that in doing this we are working for humanity as a whole; but we are driven to it by realising the fact that the individual cannot be happy by himself, but only when all are happy can he obtain perfect satisfaction. As you perceive, this is quite your point of view; only for me it is not a final standpoint—merely a temporary platform, a means to an end. This end is still ignored by the majority of mankind; but I have indicated above what I understand it to be, namely, the perfect consummation of love as the fullest, most complete perception of reality, of truth; but not an abstract, ideal, nonsensuous love (such as alone is possible in the present state of things), but the love of the "I" and the "Thou."

It follows that I look on all the prodigious efforts of the human race, and on all our actual science, as ways and means towards an end, which in itself is a very simple, but a very divine thing. I therefore, respect all these efforts; I recognise a necessity in every onward step, and I rejoice heartily at each new advance; but personally I cannot take part in all this striving (which, strangely enough, is ignorant of its gain), seeing that the simple end to which it all tends stands out so prominently before me that I cannot turn my eyes away from the object to the means.

Only the pressure of a great movement could bring about such an act of self-denial on my part; and I should hail that with joy as the sole means of redemption for me.

And now, you must not take it ill if I only smile at the advice you give me to tear myself away from dreams and egoistic illusions, and to devote myself to what alone is real to life itself, and its aspirations. For I, on the contrary, believe that I am devoting myself to absolute Reality, in the most effective, deliberate, and determinate way by carrying out my own views, even those that entail the most suffering, and by dedicating every one of my faculties to this end. Surely you yourself must agree with me if, for example, I deny to

Robespierre the tragic significance which hitherto he has had for you, or only admit it with considerable qualifications. This type is peculiarly unsympathetic to me because in individuals constituted as he is there is no trace to be discovered of that which constitutes the true end and aim of humanity since our degeneracy from Nature. The tragic element in Robespierre's character really consists in the spectacle he offers of utter helplessness, when, at the goal of his highest aspirations to power, he stands confronted by his own incapacity to make any sort of use of this power that he has attained. It is only in the confession of this helplessness that he becomes tragic, and in the fact that his own downfall is brought about by his inability to achieve anything towards the happiness of mankind. I am thus of opinion that his case is the precise converse of what you conceive it to be. He had no high end in view for the sake of which he condescended to unworthy means; on the contrary, it was to disguise this absence of any such end, and to conceal his own want of resource, that he had recourse to the ghastly paraphernalia of the guillotine, for it has been proved that the "Terror" was carried out purely as a means of government, and in maintenance of authority, without any sort of genuine passion; it was conducted on purely political grounds—that is to say, in an ambitious and selfish spirit. In the end, this miserable being, who at last had no other resource than to advertise his inept "vertu," put the means in place of the end, as happens with all these purely political heroes, who duly come to grief from their own incapacity with such uniformity that it is to be hoped the whole class is shortly destined to disappear from history. On the other hand, I maintain that my "Lohengrin," according to my own conception,² symbolises the most profoundly tragic situation of our age, namely, the longing which besets us to descend from the highest heights of mortal contemplation and to plunge into the depths of human affection—the desire to be immersed in feeling—that desire which modern reality is as yet powerless to satisfy.

On all this I have enlarged sufficiently in my preface. It would only remain to indicate what, situated as I am, I feel impelled to do in furtherance of the aim of bringing both myself and mankind nearer to that which I recognise as the goal of human endeavour—a goal from which I, as an individual, am cut off, because the rest of mankind as yet deliberately cut themselves off from it—unless I were to have recourse to means which I can now no more bring myself to use. Here my art must come to my aid, and the work that I conceived under this influence is no other than my Nibelung poem. I am inclined to think that it was not so much the obscurity of my version of the poem, as the

2. That is to say, not "Lohengrin" pruned down and distorted for the use of Opera Houses.

point of view which you persistently adopted in opposition to mine, which was the cause of your failing to understand many important parts in it. Such mistakes are of course only possible in the case of a reader who substitutes his own ideas for those of the poet, while the simple-minded reader, perhaps unconsciously to himself, takes in the matter more easily, just as it is. For myself the poem can only be interpreted in the following way:

Presentment of reality in the sense in which I have interpreted it above.
Instead of the words —

“A fateful day is dawning for the gods;
And wilt thou not deliver up the ring?
Then be assur’d thy race ere long shall end —
Thy noble race — in shameful overthrow.”

I now make Erda say merely —

All that is — ends:
A fateful day dawns for the gods:
I counsel you beware of the ring.”

We must learn *to die*, and to die in the fullest sense of the word. The fear of the end is the source of all lovelessness, and this fear is only generated when love itself begins to wane. How came it that this feeling which imparts the highest blessedness to all things living was so far lost sight of by the human race that at last it came to this: all that mankind did, ordered, and established was conceived only in fear of the end? My poem sets this forth. It reveals Nature in her undisguised truth, with all those inconsistencies which, in their endless multiplicity, embrace even directly conflicting elements. But it is not the repulse of Alberich by the Rhine-daughters — the repulse was inevitable owing to their nature — that was the cause of all the mischief. Alberich and his ring would have been powerless to harm the gods had they not themselves been susceptible to evil. Wherein then is the root of the matter to be sought? Examine the first scene between Wotan and Fricka, which leads up to the scene in the second act of “The Walküre.” The necessity of prolonging beyond the point of change the subjection to the tie that binds them — a tie resulting from an involuntary illusion of love, the duty of maintaining at all costs the relation into which they have entered, and so placing themselves in hopeless opposition to the universal law of change and renewal, which governs the world of phenomena — these are the conditions which bring the pair of them to a state of torment and mutual lovelessness.

The development of the whole poem sets forth the necessity of recognising and yielding to the change, the many-sidedness, the multiplicity, the eternal renewing of reality and of life. Wotan rises to the tragic height of *willing* his own destruction. This is the lesson that we have to learn from the history of mankind: *to will what necessity imposes*, and ourselves to bring it about. The creative product of this supreme, self-destroying will, its victorious achievement, is a fearless human being, one who never ceases to love: Siegfried. That is the whole matter. As a matter of detail, the mischief-making power, the poison that is fatal to love, appears under the guise of the gold stolen from Nature and misapplied—the Nibelungs' ring, never to be redeemed from the curse that clings to it until it has been restored to Nature and the gold sunk again in the depths of the Rhine. But it is only quite at the end that Wotan realises this, when he himself has reached the goal of his tragic career; what Loge had foretold to him in the beginning with a touching insistence, the god consumed by ambition had ignored. Later in Fafner's deed he merely recognised the power of the curse; it is only when the ring works its destroying spell on Siegfried himself that he realises that only by restoration of what was stolen can the evil be annulled, and he deliberately makes his own destruction part of the conditions on which must depend the annulling of the original mischief.

Experience is everything. Moreover, Siegfried alone (man by himself) is not the complete human being: he is merely the half; it is only along with Brünhilde that he becomes the redeemer. To the isolated being not all things are possible; there is need of more than one, and it is woman, suffering and willing to sacrifice herself, who becomes at last the real, conscious redeemer: for what is love itself but the "eternal feminine" (das ewig Weibliche).

So much for the broad and general lines of the poem, which may be taken as summing up its more particular and special features.

I cannot believe that you have misapprehended my meaning and intention: only it seems to me that you have attached more importance to the connecting links and parts of the great chain than they, as such, deserve; and as if you had been bound to do this, in order to read into my poem your own preconceived ideas. As a whole I do not agree with your criticisms with regard to a certain want of lucidity and distinctness of statement: on the contrary, I believe that a true instinct has kept me from a too great definiteness; for it has been borne in on me, that an absolute disclosing of the intention disturbs true insight. What you want in drama—as indeed in all works of Art—is to achieve your end, not by statement of the artist's intentions, but by the presentment of life as the resultant, not of arbitrary forces, but of eternal laws. It is just this that distinguishes my poetical material from all the poetical material which alone

absorbs poets' minds at the present day.

For example, by insisting, as you do, that the intention of Wotan's appearance on the scene in "Young Siegfried" should be more clearly defined, you are prejudicing in a marked manner the fateful element in the development of the drama, which to me is so important. After his farewell to Brünhilde, Wotan is in all truth a departed spirit; true to his high resolve, he must now leave things alone, and renouncing all power over them, let them go as they will.

For this reason, he is now only the "Wanderer."

Look well at him, for in every point he resembles us. He represents the actual sum of the Intelligence of the Present, whereas Siegfried is the man greatly desired and longed for by us of the Future. But we who long for him cannot fashion him; he must fashion himself and by means of our annihilation. Taken in this way, Wotan is, you must acknowledge, highly interesting; whereas he would seem to us most unworthy if he appeared as a subtle intriguer, which indeed he would be if he gave counsel apparently against Siegfried, though in reality favourable to Siegfried and consequently to himself. That were a deception worthy of our political heroes, but not of my jovial god, bent on his own annihilation. Look at him in his juxtaposition to Siegfried in the third Act. In presence of his impending destruction, the god has at last become so completely human that—contrary to his high resolve—there is once more a stirring of his ancient pride, brought about by his jealousy for Brünhilde—his vulnerable point, as it has now become. He will, so to speak, not allow himself to be merely thrust aside; he chooses rather to fall before the conquering might of Siegfried. But this part is so little premeditated and intentional, that in a sudden burst of passion the longing for victory overpowers him, a victory moreover which he admits could only have made him more miserable. Holding the views I do, I could only give the faintest and subtlest indication of my design. Of course I do not mean my hero to make the impression of a wholly unconscious creature: on the contrary, I have sought in Siegfried to represent my ideal of the perfect human being, whose highest consciousness manifests itself in the acknowledgment that all consciousness must find expression in present life and action.

The enormous significance that I attach to this consciousness which can scarcely ever find adequate expression in mere words, will be quite clear to you in the scene between Siegfried and the Rhine-daughters. Here we see that infinite wisdom has come to Siegfried, for he has grasped the highest truth and knows that death is better than a life of fear: knowledge of the ring, too, has come to him, but he does not heed its power, for he has something

better to do; he keeps it only as a proof that he at least has never learnt what fear means. Confess, in the presence of such a being, the splendour of the gods must be dimmed.

What strikes me most is your question, "Why, seeing that the gold is restored to the Rhine, is it necessary that the gods should perish?" I feel certain that, at a good performance, the most simple-minded spectator will be left in no doubt on that point. Certainly the downfall of the gods is no necessary part of the drama regarded as a mere contrapuntal nexus of motives. As such, indeed, it might have been turned, twisted, and interpreted to mean any conceivable thing—after the manner of lawyers and politicians. No, the necessity for this downfall had to arise out of our own deepest convictions, as it did with Wotan. And thus it was all important to justify this catastrophe to the feelings of the spectator; and it is so justified to anyone who follows the course of the whole action with all its simple and natural motives. When finally Wotan gives expression to this sense of necessity, he only proclaims that which we have all along felt must needs be. At the end of "Rhine Gold" when Loge watches the gods enter Walhalla and speaks these fateful words: "They hasten towards their end who imagine themselves so strong in their might," he, in that moment, only gives utterance to our own conviction; for anyone who has followed the prelude sympathetically, and not in a hypercritical, cavilling spirit, but abandoning himself to his impressions and feelings, will entirely agree with Loge.

And now let me say something to you about Brünhilde. You misunderstand her, too, when you attribute her refusal to give the ring up to Wotan to hardness and obstinacy. Can you not see that it was for love's sake that Brünhilde sundered herself from Wotan and from all the gods, because where Wotan clung to schemes, she could only—love? Above all, from the moment that Siegfried had awakened her she has no other knowledge than the knowledge of love. Now the symbol of this—after Siegfried's departure—is the ring. When Wotan claims it from her, one thing only is present to her spirit—what it was that originally alienated her from him, her having disobeyed for Love's sake; and this alone she is still conscious of, that for Love she has renounced her godhead. She knows also that one thing alone is god-like, and that is Love; therefore let the splendour of Walhalla fall in ruins, she will not give up the ring (her love). Just consider how poor, avaricious and common she would have stood revealed to us, if she had refused the ring because she had learned (possibly from Siegfried) of its magic, and the power of gold. Surely you did not seriously think such a thing of so grand a woman? But if you shudder because, being the woman she is, she should have preserved as a symbol of love

just this ring on which the curse lay, then you will have penetrated my meaning, and will have understood the curse of the Nibelungs in its most terrible and tragic significance; then you will admit the necessity of the whole of the last drama of "Siegfried's death." That had to be compassed in order that the malign influence of the gold should be fully revealed. How did it come about that Brünhilde yielded so readily to the disguised Siegfried? Simply because he had wrested the ring from her, in which her whole strength lay. The terror, the fatality (*das Dämonische*) that underlie the whole of that scene seem entirely to have escaped you. Through the fire which it had been foreordained that none but Siegfried should pass, which actually none but he had passed, another has made his way to her with but little difficulty.

Everything totters round Brünhilde, everything is out of joint; in a terrible conflict she is overcome, she is "forsaken of God." And moreover it is Siegfried in reality who orders her to share his couch; Siegfried whom she (unconsciously and thus with the greater bewilderment) almost recognises, by his gleaming eye, in spite of his disguise. You must feel that something is being enacted that is not to be expressed in mere words—and it is wrong of you to challenge me to explain it in words.

Well, I have certainly expanded pretty freely; the fear of doing so was really the cause of my delay in writing. I was perturbed to find that you had so completely misunderstood certain features of my drama. This has made clear to me, that only in its complete form and under favourable circumstances would the work be safe from misapprehension, and as I was seized with a violent longing to begin the musical composition, I gladly gave myself up to my desire, before writing to you. The completion of the music of "Rhine Gold," at once so difficult and so important, has restored my sense of security, as you perceive. I now realise myself how much of the whole spirit and meaning of my poem is only made clear by the music; I cannot now for my life even look at the words without the musical accompaniment. In the course of time I hope to send you the score. For the present, all I need say is that it has worked up to a perfect unity; there is scarcely a bar in the orchestra which is not developed out of preceding *motifs*. But it is difficult to enter fully upon this in a letter.

What you say as to the carrying out and performance of the whole work meets with my full approval; on these points your judgment is infallible. I shall certainly follow your advice. How I am ever to bring about a complete representation of the cycle is still a grave problem. But when the time comes I shall attack it, for otherwise I should be deprived of my one serious aim in life. I believe there would be no difficulty about the merely mechanical part of the undertaking; but how about my performers? The very thought makes

me groan. Of course I must look to young artists who have not been already entirely ruined by our present Opera system. I don't even in my dreams think of so-called "stars." How I am to educate my young company is the question. What I should like would be to have my whole troupe together for a year, without allowing them to perform once in public. I should in that way have daily intercourse with them, and train them both on their human and their artistic side, thus allowing them gradually to ripen for their task. So under the most favourable conditions I could not count on a first performance before the summer of 1858. But no matter how long it lasts, I feel something inspiring in such concentrated activity, for the sake of an object that is entirely of my own creation, which makes life worth living. As for the rest, I must turn a deaf ear to all your life-precepts and counsels; over these things one has no control—they come of themselves. Believe me, I too was once possessed by the idea of "the agricultural life." In order to become a radically healthy human being, I went two years ago to a Hydropathic Establishment; I was prepared to give up Art and everything if I could once more become a child of Nature. But, my good friend, I was obliged to laugh at my own *naïveté* when I found myself almost going mad. None of us will reach the promised land—we shall all die in the wilderness. Intellect is, as someone has said, a sort of disease; it is incurable. In the present conditions of life, Nature only admits of abnormalities. At the best we can only hope to be martyrs; to refuse this vocation is to put oneself in opposition to the possibilities of life. For myself, I can no longer exist except as an artist; since I cannot compass love and life, all else repels me, or only interests me in so far as it has a bearing on Art. The result is a life of torment, but it is the only possible life. Moreover, some strange experiences have come to me through my works. When I think of the pain and discomfort which are now my chronic condition, I cannot but feel that my nerves are completely shattered: but marvellous to relate, on occasion, and under a happy stimulus, these nerves do wonders for me; a clearness of insight comes to me, and I experience—a receptive and creative activity such as I have never known before. After this, can I say that my nerves are shattered? Certainly not. But I must admit that the normal condition of my temperament—as it has been developed through circumstances—is a state of exaltation, whereas calm and repose is its abnormal condition. The fact is, it is only when I am "beside myself" that I become my real self, and feel well and happy. If Goethe felt otherwise, I do not envy him on that account; as indeed I would not change places with any one, not even with Humboldt, whom you look on as a genius, an opinion I cannot share. No doubt you feel just as I do, and are not prepared to change with anyone; wherein you do wisely. I, at least, admire

you sincerely.

After all, I am not so much out of touch with Nature as you seem to think, even though I am no longer in a position to have scientific dealings with her. In these matters I look to Herwegh, who lives here, and has for long been a profound student of natural science. From this dear friend I have learnt many beautiful and inspiring things about Nature, and they have influenced me on many and vital points. But rather than let Nature take the place to me of real life—namely of love,—I would let her go by the board.

In this respect I am like Brünhilde with the ring. Better to die,—to live without thought of joy,—than renounce one's belief. You must not think because I reply in this manner to your advice, that I am ungrateful to you for it; how could I be ungrateful for the love that prompts you? No; indeed I rejoice in that love, and cannot tell you how deeply I am touched by it. This feeling of gratitude is only equalled by a sense of admiration for the strength and at the same time for the gentleness of your spirit.

One thing I wish, and that is a speedy performance of the work which you tell me you have written. Can the thing not be managed? Send me more details about it, in case I could help you. Have you heard nothing from the Publisher Avenarius at Leipzig? Unfortunately he is the only one with whom I have any influence; for with my own publishing firms I have only had dealings through others, and never satisfactorily to myself. As soon as I received your letter I wrote to him and begged him to correspond directly with you about terms, offers, etc. In spite of a second letter, I have had no answer from him.

I don't know what to send you just now that would be of interest to you. I myself have got quite out of the habit of reading; but if I come upon anything striking, I will pass it on to you.

My "Tannhäuser" is being performed almost everywhere in Germany; especially has it been taken up by the small theatres. The large ones, from reasons which one quite understands, still hold aloof. As regards the performances, I hear that they are for the most part wretchedly bad, so I do not quite know where the pleasure comes in. As I do not see them, I have ceased to be sensitive about this prostitution of my works; though a recent first performance of "Lohengrin" at Leipzig did make a very painful impression on me. I hear it was incredibly bad. Amongst other things, not one word was clearly declaimed throughout the evening, except by the heralds. It has come to this, that I regret ever having given my works to the public. In Boston they have got the length of having Wagner nights,—concerts where nothing is given but my compositions. They want me to go to America; if they could provide me there with the necessary means, who knows but that I should do so? But

to tour about as a giver of concerts, even for large sums of money, is what no one need expect of me.

And now, my dearest friend, I must stop. If necessary I could fill a folio of paper; there would be no lack of matter; but we must keep it for some other occasion. It is to be hoped—and see that you do it—that you will not keep me waiting so long for your letter as I kept you for this answer. Tell me much about your writings. If I have forgotten anything, I can retrieve it in my next letter. Now good-bye, dear old friend. Hope, — for even I am not without hope.

Yours,

RICHARD WAGNER.

Zürich, 26th Jan., 1854.
To August Roeckel,
Schloss Waldheim, Saxony.



Courtesy Nationalarchiv der Richard-Wagner-Stiftung Bayreuth

August Röckel

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