Hans Rudolf Vaget

THE POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF HITLER'S CULT OF WAGNER

aus:
Zum Gedenken an Peter Borowsky
Herausgegeben von Rainer Hering und Rainer Nicolaysen
(Hamburger Universitätsreden Neue Folge 3.
Herausgeber: Der Präsident der Universität Hamburg)
S. 103-127

IMPRESSUM DER GESAMTAUSGABE

Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek
Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.ddb.de abrufbar.

Diese Publikation ist außerdem auf der Website des Verlags Hamburg University Press *open access* verfügbar unter
http://hup.rrz.uni-hamburg.de.

Die Deutsche Bibliothek hat die Netzpublikation archiviert. Diese ist dauerhaft auf dem Archivserver Der Deutschen Bibliothek verfügbar unter http://deposit.ddb.de.

ISBN 3-9808223-6-2 (Printausgabe)
ISSN 0438-4822 (Printausgabe)

Beratung: Eckart Krause, Hamburg
Umschlaggestaltung: Behrooz Elmi, Hamburg
Typografie: Benno Kieselstein, Hamburg
Erstellt mit StarOffice / OpenOffice.org
Druck: Uni-HH Print & Mail, Hamburg

Der Bildabdruck erfolgt mit freundlicher Genehmigung von Hans Liermann, Hamburg.

GESAMTINHALTSVERZEICHNIS

9 Zeittafel Peter Borowsky

15 Vorwort

17 TRAUERFEIER FRIEDHOF HAMBURG-NIENSTEDTEN, 20. OKTOBER 2000

19 Gertraud Gutzmann
Nachdenken über Peter Borowsky

25 Rainer Nicolaysen
Trauerrede für Peter Borowsky

31 GEDENKFEIER UNIVERSITÄT HAMBURG, 8. FEBRUAR 2001

33 Wilfried Hartmann
Grusswort des Vizepräsidenten der Universität Hamburg

41 Barbara Vogel
Rede auf der akademischen Gedenkfeier für Peter Borowsky

53 Rainer Hering
Der Hochschullehrer Peter Borowsky
61 Klemens von Klemperer
Anderer Widerstand – Anderes Deutschland? Formen des Widerstands im „Dritten Reich" – ein Überblick

93 GEDENKFEIER SMITH COLLEGE, 27. MÄRZ 2001

95 Joachim Stieber
Peter Borowsky, Member of the Department of History in Recurring Visits
103 Hans Rudolf Vaget
The Political Ramifications of Hitler's Cult of Wagner

129 ANHANG

131 Bibliographie Peter Borowsky
139 Gedenkschrift für Peter Borowsky – Inhaltsübersicht
147 Rednerinnen und Redner
149 Impressum

Hans Rudolf Vaget

THE POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF HITLER'S CULT OF WAGNER

> Der Bursche ist eine Katastrophe; das ist kein Grund, ihn als Charakter und Schicksal nicht interessant zu finden.
>
> (Thomas Mann, *Bruder Hitler)*

Too many otherwise persistent historians and critics, faced with the problem of situating within the context of German culture the singular phenomenon that was Hitler, have too often taken the easy way out – by scapegoating the *Führer's* lifelong idol, Richard Wagner. Among them are Peter Viereck (who, in a way, started it all in 1939), Robert Gutman, Hartmut Zelinsky, Paul Lawrence Rose, Marc Weiner, and Joachim Köhler, who, in his *Wagners Hitler: Der Prophet und sein Vollstrecker* (1997, English 2000), goes so far as to suggest that the German dictator was "merely" the executioner of Wagner's ideas. Köhler argues that Hitler's entire political program was essentially an attempt to turn the mythologically coded world of Wagnerian opera into a social and political reality. All of Hitler's major undertakings – the takeover and shaping of the

Nazi Party, the establishment of the Nazi state, the waging of World War II, and the perpetration of the Holocaust – were ultimately the means to an aesthetic end: "The achievement of the Wagnerian world of the 'work of art of the future'." In everything he did, Hitler acted as the "agent" of the Bayreuth Circle, accomplishing the task originally set by that great prophet of the Third Reich and of the Holocaust: Richard Wagner.

Recently, Frederic Spotts, the author of a fine history of the Bayreuth Festival, took up the whole vexed matter and re-examined Hitler's multifarious meddling with the arts – primarily architecture and music. In a thought-provoking and useful new study, boldly entitled *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (2002), Spotts laudably ignores those endless speculations about psychic and sexual abnormalities – the most eagerly pursued red herrings in Hitler studies – and proposes instead that the Führer's social, racial, and geopolitical agenda was ancillary and subordinate to the realization of what was fundamentally an aesthetic project, namely, to create "the greatest culture state since ancient times, or perhaps of all time". Spotts largely confirms and amplifies what Peter Reichel had argued in his pioneering book of 1991, *Der schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches.*

This poses an urgent question that both Spotts and Köhler

dodge: What was the role of aesthetic experience in general and of Wagnerian opera in particular in the identity formation of Adolf Hitler? How, precisely, did Hitler become the man Spotts delineates for us – that eager and lavish supporter of the arts who was simultaneously bent upon perpetrating the "crime of the century" and in doing so became, as Saul Friedländer in *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (1997) has observed, "the ultimate standard of evil" in our time, "against which all degrees of evil may be measured". Spotts confines himself, by and large, to the period of the Third Reich and refrains from any psychological speculation to explain the bewildering, strangely nonpolitical case of a devastating political leader driven by, we are told, his aesthetic ideals.

Köhler, on the other hand, takes a short-cut by offering Wagner as the key to the puzzle of Hitler's personality and evil and by positing that he was simply the most radical and fanatical disciple of the sinister prophet of Bayreuth. Unfolding his elaborate and fantastical argument Köhler applies a crude notion of influence to establish the connection between the *Führer* and his master, ignoring as he does everything that reception theory has taught us. We all use the term "influence" loosely as a shorthand for what we know is a complicated historical transaction. Köhler allows no complication of

mediation to interfere with his determination to demonstrate the presence of "Hitler" in Wagner. For the conscientious historian, however, the task is not to construct "Wagner's Hitler", despite that clever titular reversal, but rather to reconstruct Hitler's Wagner. This is a far more difficult matter.

Some of the difficulties were duly noted by Joachim Fest in his 1973 biography. Striking as the affinities between Hitler and Wagner may at first sight appear – the outsider's resentment against the bourgeoisie; the bohemien affect of an artistic existence; the basically non-political relationship to the world; the uncertainty about their ancestry; the morbid hatred of Jews – none can be simply attributed to the so-called influence of a widely idolized cultural figure. Much of what we find in young Hitler represents a constellation of phenomena perfectly typical of the era in which he grew up. The most characteristic elements of his *Weltanschauung* – nationalism, Darwinism, anti-Semitism – were in the air in Vienna at the time, which he could not help but breathe. Still, in Fest's view, the *Meister* emerges both as the young man's ideological mentor and as Hitler's great exemplar.

After almost a quarter of a century, Fest felt compelled to revisit the issue of Hitler and Wagner in an essay entitled *Um einen Wagner von außen bittend. Zur ausstehenden Wirkungsge-*

schichte eines Großideologen (1996). Here he contends that historians have tended to neglect the composer's long-term political impact. Identifying him as an ideological megaforce, he calls for a comprehensive history of his reception in Germany, for it was Wagner's ideology that proved to be the most explosive mix to pour forth from the laboratory of ideas that was the 19th century. Fest's own assessment of the matter, though, is not free from contradiction. On the one hand he argues correctly that no direct succession from Wagner to Hitler can be established; on the other, he identifies Wagner as the *Führer*'s decisive teacher. He disputes the claim that Hitler's murderous anti-Semitism can and must be traced back to Wagner: the *Führer*'s racial anti-Semitism was uncompromising, he argues, whereas Wagner's hostility towards Jews was selective and inconsistent.

Fest's point about Hitler's and Wagner's anti-Semitism has been corroborated by, among others, Saul Friedländer, who noted (at the Schloss Elmau Symposium of 1999 on *Richard Wagner im Dritten Reich*) that Hitler, in all his speechmaking, never once invoked Wagner's well-known hostility towards *das Judentum*. Why not? He could easily have argued that if the great Richard Wagner called for the elimination of Jews from German culture, then how could our current anti-Jewish

laws and policies be wrong? We are simply carrying out what Wagner intended. But Hitler never said anything of the sort. Friedländer offers two explanations. First, perhaps Hitler considered Wagner's position insufficiently radical since both *Das Judentum in der Musik* and *Parsifal* leave open the possibility that Jews can find redemption by shedding their Jewish identity, as Ludwig Börne had done, and as the figure of Kundry implies. Second, perhaps the *Führer*'s very adulation of Wagner simply "did not allow for any disclaimers or any ambiguity", so as not to call into question the lofty standing of Richard Wagner as one of the patron saints of the Third Reich. Third, if we may add a reason of our own, perhaps Hitler was astute enough to realize that mining Wagner for proto-Nazi ideas, and exploiting Wagner for crude propaganda, might have diminished his standing as the supreme example of the creator of an art that was thoroughly German, heroic, sublime, and highly auratic. On account of these very qualities, Wagner's music was indispensable for the pervasive aestheticization of political life – to use Walter Benjamin's well-known formula – that became the hallmark of the Third Reich. Hitler, whose adulation of Wagner was an almost singular phenomenon even within the Party hierarchy, seems to have been well aware that a demonstratively nonpolitical cult of Wagner was, in

the long run, politically more effective than any short-sighted propagandistic exploitation.

It goes without saying that neither Fest nor Friedländer would deny the historical links between Wagner's anti-Semitism and Hitler's radical, murderous hatred of the Jews. But those links lie outside the narrow corridor of the Hitler-Wagner relationship and cannot be subsumed under the notion of influence in the customary sense; their paths of transmission are more circuitous.

This, then, throws into relief the crucial methodological problem and underlines the need for a new way of looking at the entire Hitler-Wagner complex. The crux of the matter, it seems to me, lies in the fixation of historians on the notion of influence. We can no longer use this term as trustingly as Viereck, Fest, Köhler, and a host of others have done. In reception theory, "influence" has given way to notions of reception and appropriation, denoting a more complex and indirect mode of intellectual transfer, and shifting attention from the source to the recipient. Thus, what may look to the untrained eye like a direct line from Wagner to Hitler could in fact be an optical illusion – the result of multiple refractions. For what we call influence accrues from an entire constellation of factors involving language, media, cultural practices of remembering, and

the various ways in which these factors interact within a sharply defined historical space. As in all cases of intellectual precursorship, the basic tenet of reception theory fully applies to the case of Hitler and Wagner: a tradition does not perpetuate itself; rather, it is appropriated and adapted to the needs of the recipient and, in the process, bent and deformed.

Similarly problematical is Fest's contention that Wagner was Hitler's ideological mentor. If the matter were so simple, we should expect to find in *Mein Kampf* more than a single reference to Wagner, one made almost in passing. But that passing reference is all there is. As with "influence", then, the very notion of mentor seems incongruous with Hitler's study habits, which were those of an autodidact and dilettante. Furthermore, from what we know about young Hitler, the experience of *Lohengrin* and of *Rienzi* preceded his reading of Wagner's prose tracts. And that adolescent aesthetic experience – more irrational and thus more idiosyncratically formative than the traditional master-disciple relationship – was by no means solitary or unique: Hitler shared it with great numbers of his contemporaries.

Wagner's "grand tragic opera", *Rienzi*, an early work that never became part of the Bayreuth canon, offers the most promising starting point for accessing the peculiar nature of Hit-

ler's Wagnerianism. As we know from the memoir of August Kubizek, a budding musician and Hitler's boyhood friend, the two youths attended a performance at the Linz Landestheater early in 1905, when Hitler was fifteen, that appears to have had the impact of an epiphany. "In that hour", he is reported to have said later on several occasions, "it all began." But what, precisely, began in that hour? His enthusiasm for Wagner? This is improbable, since he had earlier seen *Lohengrin*, at age thirteen. No, what more likely began was the elaboration of a particular fantasy triggered by Wagner's opera – the fantasy of becoming the leader of the Germans and of restoring Germany's greatness, just as Rienzi, the last tribune in medieval Rome, had attempted to do for Rome. As we shall see, *Rienzi* set one of the fundamental patterns of Hitler's life. The significance of this youthful experience, then, can hardly be exaggerated. It shows, to begin with, that to young Hitler, as for untold numbers of Germans (and not only Germans), Wagner was primarily a great purveyer of overwhelming emotions, and only secondarily a purveyer of political ideas. Hitler's youthful experience is furthermore crucial as much for the psychological pattern it reveals as for its content.

Indications are that we no longer cringe when Hitler and art are discussed together in a serious fashion. This is terribly

important, for many issues with far-reaching implications for our understanding of the interplay of culture and identity, and of the political ramifications of such interplay, ride on this singularly critical and consequential case. Much is to be gained, therefore, from looking at young Hitler through the lense of a typology of the artist, for strictly speaking, as Otto Werckmeister has argued in "Hitler the Artist" (*Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1997), he was "a professional artist", though clearly one "at the lowest level of the artistic proletariat".

Once we look closely at the peculiar complexion of Hitler's shaky status as an artist, a psychologically portentous aspect of the structure of his personality begins to come into focus. We see that two very dissimilar artistic sensibilities co-existed. In painting and architecture, his artistic impulse had but a modest potency. In music, on the other hand, he appears to have possessed an unlimited capacity for emotional transport, albeit of a purely receptive nature, as evidenced by his youthful *Rienzi* experience. Hitler may thus be regarded as a fairly typical dilettante in the sense that this term had acquired at the turn of the century, denoting as it did, one who led an inauthentic life based, in the last analysis, on imitation. Dilettantes populate the work of Arthur Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, of Heinrich and Thomas Mann. In Hitler, the inter-

action of those two different artistic dispositions – one excessive, the other deficient – was controlled by no intellectual discipline. This appears to have led to a blockage and, eventually, a re-routing of his artistic ambitions to the field of politics, where he then was able to indulge his architectural fantasies on a much grander scale. As a budding painter, he was unable to imagine himself rising to the lofty level to which, the example of Wagner in mind, he secretly aspired. In music, however, where he had no practical skills, he seems to have had unlimited powers of emotional involvement which he would have had to invest in something altogether different – by becoming a populist leader like Rienzi. Such a realization seems to have dawned on him in 1919, when he discovered his talent as a political orator.

By reinventing himself as a politician in the image of Wagner's operatic hero, Hitler the thwarted artist followed to perfection the typical psychological pattern of the dilettante – a stock figure of German literature since Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Indeed, it was Goethe who provided the classic definition of the dilettante as a would-be artist who "attempts to produce effects with the effects that affected him". This was precisely Hitler's case. Having failed as an artist, Hitler hitched his fate to a cultural icon whose national standing

and international renown were beyond question. He began to practice a demonstratively nonpolitical cult of Wagner, referring to the composer in public as the greatest genius that Germany had yet produced. This proved to be highly effective in the political arena: perceived as a devoted admirer of Wagner, Hitler was able to win respectability and cultural legitimacy and, eventually, to create a charismatic aura of genius for himself. Nazi propaganda routinely explained that the Führer was Providence's gift to the German people in the hour of their greatest need. But Hitler's cult of Wagner – that deliberate act of Wagnerian self-fashioning – tells a different story: that of a charismatic orator who reinvents himself by attuning his own needs and aspirations to those of the people and the historic moment.

In all of this, a key role must be attributed to the metapolitical notion of *Erbe*. It represents a privileged, even auratic form of reception in which the inheritor masks its basic character of appropriation by pretending merely to heed a call from the past. The importance of the notion of cultural inheritance to our understanding of the Hitler-Wagner nexus becomes immediately clear as we cast a brief comparative glance at the case of Anton Bruckner. As Albrecht Riethmüller has shown, when Hitler decided to elevate this Austrian composer

into the pantheon of German art, he arranged, in June 1937, a pompous induction ceremony at Walhalla, the German Hall of Fame. In retrospect, it becomes clear that this act of cultural annexation was the prelude to the political annexation of Austria that occurred a few months later. But this is not the point I wish to make here. Bruckner was a devoutly religious and nonpolitical man; by no stretch of the imagination could he be claimed as a precursor. The case of Bruckner, then, is one of willful appropriation in the narrowest sense of the word.

The case of Wagner is quite different, for a certain ideological affinity – at its core nationalistic and anti-Semitic – was self-evident and needed no propagandistic amplification. Moreover, Wagner had thematized again and again, from *Rienzi* to *Parsifal*, the idea of *Erbe*, even of *Welterbe* – world dominion. German Wagnerians thus grew up with the expectation that the Master's heritage would one day be claimed. After Wagner's death, the Bayreuth Circle, especially Houston Stewart Chamberlain, proceeded to radicalize the notion of a Wagnerian heritage by linking it to the hegemonic ambitions of Wilhelminian Germany. And throughout that post-Wagnerian era, a diffuse but vaguely appealing expectation was kept alive that one day a Parsifal-like savior would appear when Germany needed it most. Thus, when Hitler claimed that he was now

wielding the sword that had been forged by Wagner and Chamberlain (as he did in his 5 May 1924 letter to Siegfried Wagner), he was in effect claiming to be Wagner's political heir. The reference to Nothung, the magic sword handed down from Wotan to Siegmund and on to Siegfried, resonated not only for Hitler but also for his followers with powerful mythological and cultural overtones that lent him the aura of a potential savior in the manner of a Lohengrin, a Siegfried, or a Parsifal and, with that, the glamorous semblance of historical legitimacy.

The cult of genius was but one expression among many of the fundamental racism, of Nazi *Weltanschauung.* Chamberlain, Rosenberg, Hitler, and Goebbels were convinced that the capability of the Aryan race to produce genius was proof of its superiority over all other races, especially the Jewish race, which, as Wagner had "explained" it, was incapable of creating great art. Sophomoric as this now sounds, this kind of discourse had devastating implications in that it served to legitimize in the eyes of the faithful the aggressive, hegemonic aspirations of Hitler's Third Reich. The global success of Wagner's music, so the argument went, had demonstrated the superiority of German culture and had underlined the Aryan race's right to domination. By striving to achieve political he-

gemony for Germany, Hitler was completing what Wagner had begun.

Perhaps the most potent side-effect of Hitler's cult of Wagner was something altogether different – the setting in motion of a messianic anticipation of the coming of a savior. It was precisely this promise of a savior that constituted, as Fritz Stern has argued (*National Socialism as Temptation*), the greatest temptation of the larger Hitler phenomenon in the eyes of ordinary Germans. From what did Germany have to be saved? The answer to this question was self-evident to many: from the omnipresent forces of darkness, the Bolshevist-Jewish world conspiracy that prevented Germany from taking its rightful place in the sun. In order to activate such messianic expectations and thereby to strengthen the aura of a savior that was in fact accruing to him, Hitler needed simply to repeat again and again that Germany was facing an apocalyptic battle for its survival. The link to Wagner needed no explanation since the creator of *Die Meistersinger*, through the figure of Hans Sachs, had portrayed himself as a new John the Baptist – as someone who was merely preparing the way for the One who would not only sing „Wach auf", but who would truly awaken all Germany.

It seems evident, then, that the cult of Wagner provided a

space for an intense emotional interaction between the *Volk* and their leader. The emotional bond was all the stronger as it existed in a metapolitical sphere of aesthetics, nationalism, and mass psychology in which every appeal to reason of the sort that Thomas Mann repeatedly issued had no chance of being heeded. Ian Kershaw, in his monumental biography of Hitler, has identified the widespread efforts to "work towards the Führer" – "dem Führer entgegenarbeiten" – as the key to understand precisely "how the Third Reich operated". Hitler's highly personalized charismatic rule "invited radical initiatives from below" and offered them backing as long as they stayed in line with his *Weltanschauung.* In other words, his followers were encouraged to tap into their own emotional reserves, their Wagnerian dreams, to help Hitler become the heroic leader and savior that he wanted to be.

If Kershaw were a Wagnerian he would have realized that the phenomenon of willing cooperation beyond the call of duty was greatly facilitated, even inspired, by the common cult of Wagner. The shameful action taken against Thomas Mann by the forty Munich Wagnerians in April l933, which amounted to his "national excommunication", represents one such instance. They did their share, and did so of their own free will, to make sure that what would reign in the new Ger-

many would be the "true" spirit of Wagner and not the false, cosmopolitan Wagnerianism of a Thomas Mann.

Easily the most egregious example of Wagnerians working towards the *Führer* was provided by the "National Socialist Monthly", *Deutsches Wesen.* Its first issue, timed to coincide with the l933 Bayreuth Festival, was devoted to the topic of "Richard Wagner und das neue Deutschland". Here, the most eager of the believers, from eminent musicologists, such as Alfred Lorenz and Otto Strobel, to Party hacks, like Benedikt Lochmüller and Hans Alfred Grunsky, tried to outdo each other in assuring the world that the new Germany of National Socialism was in fact the Germany envisioned by Wagner. Their Nazification of Wagner exceeded in enthusiasm even the pronouncements of Joseph Goebbels, whose radio address during an intermission of *Die Meistersinger*, sounds rational and measured in comparison with the total delirium with which those guardians of the *heilige deutsche Kunst* enthroned Adolf Hitler as the new *pontifex maximus* of Wagnerianism.

Against this background, then, we can now gauge more realistically the extent to which Wagnerian opera contributed to the identity formation of Hitler and his rise to power. I shall attempt, in this concluding section, to shed some additional light on this nexus by briefly assessing Hitler's response to the

three Wagnerian works that meant the most to him: *Rienzi, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg,* and *Parsifal*. I hope to show that the psychological as well as the political significance of the Hitlerian cult of Wagner derived primarily not from Hitler's engagement with these works but from that engagement's interaction with other forces within the cultural space in which he chose to operate.

As I have earlier suggested, the impact of Wagner's *Rienzi* on young Hitler may be likened to that of an epiphany. Henceforth, Wagner's opera occupied his mind and as it were colonized his budding political sensibility. However, what rendered the aesthetic experience politically consequential was its resonance in the particular historical context in which Hitler found himself. At crucial stages in his apprenticeship – in Karl Luegers Vienna and in the post-war Germany of 1918/19 – Hitler seems to have read history through the looking glass provided by Wagner's *Rienzi*. It was evidently this opera that enabled him to see in Karl Lueger, as he wrote in *Mein Kampf*, the prototype of the modern popular tribune, "den gewaltigsten deutschen Bürgermeister aller Zeiten". Historical reality seemed to validate Wagner's vision of the charismatic *Volkstribun* and convince him of its viability as a political ideal.

With the military pomp and religious aura of its music,

Rienzi offered what the fifteen-year-old dreamer and drifter sorely lacked: a heroic career model. That model was powerfully reinforced and further internalized, first, through the example of Karl Lueger, and second, by the example of Mussolini, who, in 1922, became the original fascist leader in the image of Cola di Rienzi. There are intriguing indications that, as he took his first steps in the political arena of post-war Munich, Hitler looked to *Rienzi* for guidance, as though this opera were his metapolitical compass. As Brigitte Hamann tells us in *Hitlers Wien*, he had observed that at the meetings of the Pan-German groups the overture to *Rienzi* was played. He adopted this custom for his political rallies in Munich and made it a ritual element of the massive Party rallies in the Third Reich. That piece – both military and solemn in character – served as a kind of signature tune of the Hitler movement and of the political liturgy celebrated annually at Nuremberg. So attached was Hitler to this music that, as Albert Speer reports in his reminiscences, he refused to replace it with any of the laudable pieces composed for the occasion by eager Nazi musicians.

In a particularly revealing conversation of 1930 (reported by Otto Wagner in Heny A. Turner's *Hitler Memoirs of a Confidant*), Hitler pointed out that he had learned an important lesson from *Rienzi*. Wagner's hero fails, he observed, because he

has no political party behind him and because he neglects to destroy his enemies. And indeed, from the outset of his career we see Hitler determined not to repeat the "mistakes" of his operatic model. Precisely to that end, he took over a tiny political party and turned it into a devastatingly successful mass movement. And as soon as he was able to do so, he began destroying his enemies, both real and imagined. Hitlers Wagnerian self-fashioning, basically a psychological phenomenon, here reveals its stark political ramifications.

For his fiftieth birthday, Hitler requested and received, among other Wagnerian treasures, the autograph manuscript of *Rienzi*. What may at first strike the observer as a whim was surely motivated by his emotional bond to this particular work. Far from being capricious, his request breathes the air of inevitability. Eerily, having refused several urgent entreaties to allow the precious documents to be taken out of Berlin to a safe place, he apparently took all his Wagner autographs with him to the *Führerbunker*, the final stop of his catastrophe-bound life, where all further traces of them vanish. Even his pathetic end in the *Bunker* is reminiscent of Rienzi's demise in the burning ruins of the Roman Capitol. But the most striking similarity is that between Rienzi's turn against Rome and Hitler's turn against Germany. The end in sight, Hitler, in his *Poli-*

tical Testament, cold-bloodedly dismissed his own people as the loser in a historic struggle, undeserving of the greatness he had intended for it. Given all the echoes of *Rienzi* in Hitler's career, it was almost inevitable that his end would point back to the concluding lines from Wagner's tragic grand opera: "The last Roman curses you. / Cursed be this city! / Decay and wither, Rome! / That is the will of your degenerate people."

The political repercussions of the historical Cola di Rienzi upon the 19th and 20th centuries are today often overlooked. It seems indicative of the intellectual milieu that sparked Wagner's interest in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Rienzi. The Last of the Tribunes* (1835), the book from which he culled his libretto, that approximately at the same time the twenty year old Friedrich Engels drafted a play on the same subject, also based on Bulwer-Lytton and intended as libretto for an opera. Not only Hitler but also Benito Mussolini chose Rienzi as a model. This is presumably the reason why in some early analyses of National Socialism, such as Franz Neumann's *Behemoth* (1942), Cola di Rienzi, rather than Cesar, is identified as the true historical prototype of modern fascism. But while Mussolini was inspired by Bulwer-Lytton's historical novel, Hitler's emotional bond to Rienzi was forged rather by Wagner's opera of 1842. The difference lies in the quality and intensity

of the aesthetic experience, and that difference, it appears, proved decisive.

It is not difficult to see why *Die Meistersinger* also occupied a special place in Hitler's mind. The community Wagner imagined and glorified in that opera comes close to the *völkisch* ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, as opposed to a modern society. The corporate principles on which Wagner's Nuremberg functions, the emphasis on community with its concomitant rejection of universalist values, clearly appealed to Hitler. Nor is it too obvious to mention that Wagner's *Volksgemeinschaft* is led by a charismatic artist who enjoys the affection of the people. Unlike *Parsifal,* with its two momentous scenes of disarming and its message of compassion, *Die Meistersinger* contained nothing that could be perceived as undermining the war effort, which is probably the reason that this opera was played during the so-called "Kriegsfestspiele" of 1943 and 1944 almost to the bitter end.

There are indications that Hitler came to visualize his own political career in the spirit of *Die Meistersinger*. As early as May l923, half a year before he undertook his failed putsch, he quoted Wagner's rousing "Wach auf" chorus in a political speech. The ubiquitous Nazi slogan "Deutschland erwache" thus always carried with it these obvious Wagnerian overtones.

When power was finally achieved, Hitler and Goebbels arranged for a propaganda spectacle that has entered the history books as the "Day of Potsdam". It was intended to deceive the public about the revolutionary and terroristic designs of the regime. Ostensibly a show of loyalty to the traditional powers and of historical continuity, the "Day of Potsdam" culminated in a specially arranged, festive performance of *Die Meistersinger* in the Prussian State Opera. Wagner was to provide the capstone to this most successful propaganda effort of the new regime. At that performance on 2l March l933, the people of Nuremberg were instructed, during the "Wach auf" chorus, to turn to Hitler's box, thereby transferring their homage from Hans Sachs to Adolf Hitler. Perhaps no other moment better encapsulates the political uses of Wagner in the Third Reich than this unashamedly operatic gesture. The identification with Prussian tradition in Potsdam during the day and with Wagner at the opera at night achieved for the new regime an incalculable strengthening of its claims to historical and cultural legitimacy. It almost goes without saying that at the Bayreuth Festival that year, this theme was repeated in full orchestration and in deafening fortissimo: "As we listened to the conclusion of *Die Meistersinger* today", wrote Hans Alfred Grunsky, "it seems to us as though we were hearing in our in-

ner ear, together with the jubilant 'Heil Sachs', the 'Heil Hitler' with which millions of people greet our *Volkskanzler*."

Parsifal provides the most illuminating example of the way in which the Wagner cult catapulted Hitler into the role of designated savior of Germany. After Hitler's first visit to Wahnfried, 30 September l923, Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Winifred Wagner provided open letters which the aspiring politician gratefully used for his own purposes. It was the first time that Hitler received an enthusiastic endorsement from a widely respected cultural institution in Germany. Of particular interest are Chamberlain's letters of 7 October l923 and of l January l924. Ailing and suffering since l9l4, he casts himself in the role of Amfortas who now feels comforted and relieved knowing that the new Parsifal has appeared on the scene: "Germany in the hour of her greatest need gave birth to a person such as Hitler." Like Wagner's Parsifal, Hitler is called upon to perform a "Heiltat", but this time for Germany as a whole. His mission is to rid Germany of the lethal influence of Judaism – the "todbringendem Einfluß des Judentums auf das Leben des deutschen Volkes". Chamberlain pointed out to the faithful that no one in Germany had the courage and the determination to carry out that necessary task – no one, that is, except Hitler. Whereupon he virtually anoints the new Parsi-

fal. In fact, Chamberlain gave Hitler a double role, that of Parsifal, the healer, and that of Siegfried, the liberating hero. When Hitler famously wrote that the spiritual sword with which he was fighting was forged in Bayreuth, he was actually taking a cue from Chamberlain. Apparently, Hitler had no difficulty imagining himself both as Parsifal and as Siegfried and encouraged his followers to see him in those mythical roles.

From what has been said here it should be obvious that the elimination of The Jew from German life was indeed part and parcel of Hitler's Wagnerian mission, as envisioned by Chamberlain. Those familiar with the Wagnerian code understood the implications of Hitler's endorsement by Wahnfried. Hitler did not need to give explanations, nor did the public need them. From that moment on, Hitler could be certain that he was the bearer of a mission and that he could present himself as the political heir to Wagner. No transgression or misappropriation was required here. The role of the guardian of the Wagnerian legacy and of the future savior of Germany, as defined by Chamberlain, was offered to him, the devout, ostensibly nonpolitical admirer of the *Meister*, on a silver platter.