

Richard Wagner, *What is German?* (1865/78)

Abstract

Richard Wagner (1813–1883) was Bismarckian Germany’s most important composer and conductor, but it is often forgotten that he was also an essayist. He grew up in the Kingdom of Saxony; from 1831, he studied music in Leipzig. In the late 1830s and 1840s, he served as musical director in a number of cities and lived for a time in Paris. He returned to Dresden in the 1840s and composed some of his greatest operas, including *The Flying Dutchman* [*Der fliegende Holländer*] (1843), *Tannhäuser* (1845), and *Lohengrin* (1848). Wagner fought on the barricades—on the side of the revolutionaries—during the Dresden Uprising of May 1849. Thereafter, he was forced to flee to Paris and beyond. During this time, he wrote essays describing his vision of opera as a total work of art [*Gesamtkunstwerk*]. He also authored “Jewry in Music” (1850), an antisemitic tract that was republished in 1869. Wagner went on to write more operas, including his massive four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* [*The Ring of the Nibelung*]. To encourage audiences to escape from the distractions of the big city, he chose the small Bavarian town of Bayreuth as the site for his Festival Theater, which opened in August 1876 with the premiere of the Ring Cycle. The preamble that Wagner wrote to the following text suggests that it was begun in 1865 and completed in 1878. In addition to its antisemitic passages, this essay illuminates Wagner’s yearning for a unified German art—indeed, for a German national identity.

Source

When lately searching through my papers, I found in disconnected paragraphs a manuscript of the year 1865; to-day, at wish of my younger friend and colleague in the publication of the “Bayreuther Blätter,” I have decided to hand over the greater portion for issue to our more distant friends of the Patronatverein.

If the question “What is German?” was in itself so hard for me to answer, that I did not presume to include the all-unfinished article in the Collected Edition of my writings, my recent difficulty has been the matter of selection; for several of the points discussed in these paragraphs had already been treated by me at greater length in other essays, particularly in that on “German Art and German Policy.” May this be my apology for the present article’s shortcomings. In any case I have still to close the train of thought I then sketched out; and that close—to which, after thirteen years of fresh experience, I have certainly to give a colour of its own—will this time be my final word upon the sadly earnest theme.

It has often weighed upon my mind, to gain a clear idea of what is really to be understood by the expression “*deutsch*” [German].

It is a commonplace of the Patriot’s, to introduce his nation’s name with unconditional homage; the mightier a nation is, however, the less store it seems to set on repeating its own name with all this show of reverence. It happens seldomer in the public life of England and France, that people speak of “English” and “French virtues”; whereas the Germans are always appealing to “German depth,” “German earnestness,” “German fidelity” (*Treue*) and the like. Unfortunately, it has become patent, in very many cases, that this appeal was not entirely founded; yet we haply should do wrong to suppose that the qualities themselves are mere figments of the imagination, even though their name be taken in vain. It will be best to seek upon the path of History the meaning of this idiosyncrasy of the Germans.

[...]

With the fall of outer political might, i.e., with the lost significance of the Romish Kaiserdom, which we

bemoan to-day as the foundering of German glory, there begins on the contrary the real development of genuine German essence (*Wesen*). Albeit in undeniable conjunction with the development of all other European nations, the German homeland assimilates their influences, especially those of Italy, in so individual a manner that in the last century of the Middle Ages the German costume actually becomes a pattern for the rest of Europe, whereas at the time of so-called German glory even the magnates of the German Reich were clad in Romo-Byzantine garb. In the German Netherlands German art and industry were powerful rivals of Italy's most splendid bloom. After the complete downfall of the German nature, after the wellnigh total extinction of the German nation in consequence of the indescribable devastations of the Thirty Years' War, it was this inmost world of Home from whence the German spirit was reborn. German poetry, German music, German philosophy, are nowadays esteemed and honoured by every nation in the world: but in his yearning after "German glory" the German, as a rule, can dream of nothing but a sort of resurrection of the Romish Kaiser-Reich, and the thought inspires the most good-tempered German with an unmistakable lust of mastery, a longing for the upper hand over other nations. He forgets how detrimental to the welfare of the German peoples that notion of the Romish State had been already.

To gain a clear idea of the only policy to help this welfare, to be worthy the name of German, we must before all ascertain the true meaning and peculiarity of that German essence which we have found to be the only prominent power in history itself. Therefore, still to keep an historical footing, let us somewhat more closely consider one of the weightiest epochs in the German people's evolution, that extraordinarily agitated crisis which it had to pass through at time of the so-called Reformation.

The Christian religion belongs to no specific national stock: the Christian dogma addresses purely human nature. Only in so far as it has seized in all its purity this content common to all men, can a people call itself Christian in truth. However, a people can make nothing fully its own but what becomes possible for it to grasp with its inborn feeling, and to grasp in such a fashion that in the New it finds its own familiar self again. Upon the realm of Aesthetics and philosophic Criticism it may be demonstrated, almost palpably, that it was predestined for the German spirit to seize and assimilate the Foreign, the primarily remote from it, in utmost purity and objectivity of intuition (*in höchster objektiver Reinheit der Anschauung*). One may aver, without exaggeration, that the Antique would have stayed unknown, in its now universal world-significance, had the German spirit not recognised and expounded it. The Italian made as much of the Antique his own, as he could copy and remodel; the Frenchman borrowed from this remodelling, in his turn, whatever caressed his national sense for elegance of Form: the German was the first to apprehend its purely human originality, to seize therein a meaning quite aloof from usefulness, but therefore of the only use for rendering the Purely-human. Through its inmost understanding of the Antique, the German spirit arrived at the capability of restoring the Purely-human itself to its pristine freedom; not employing the antique form to display a certain given "stuff," but moulding the necessary new form itself through an employment of the antique conception of the world. To recognise this plainly, let anyone compare Goethe's *Iphigenia* with that of Euripides. One may say that the true idea of the Antique has existed only since the middle of the eighteenth century, since Winckelmann and Lessing.

[...]

If therefore the German Princes had mostly worked in common with the German spirit, I have already shewn how since that time, alas! our Princes themselves almost quite unlearned an understanding of this spirit. The sequel we may see in our public State-life of to-day: the sterling German nature (*das eigentlich deutsche Wesen*) is withdrawing ever farther from it; in part the German is following his native bent to phlegma, in part that to fantasticism: and since the lordling and even the lawyer is becoming quite old-fashioned, the royal rights of Prussia and Austria have gradually to accustom themselves to being upheld before their peoples by—Israelites.^[1]

In this singular phenomenon, this invasion of the German nature by an utterly alien element, there is

more than meets the eye. Here, however, we will only notice that other nature in so far as its conjunction with us obliges us to become quite clear as to what we have to understand by the “German” nature which it exploits. — It everywhere appears to be the duty of the Jew, to shew the nations of modern Europe where haply there may be a profit they have overlooked, or not made use of. The Poles and Hungarians did not understand the value, to themselves, of a national development of trade and commerce: the Jew displayed it, by appropriating that neglected profit. None of the European nations had recognised the boundless advantages, for the nation’s general economy, of an ordering of the relations of Labour and Capital in accordance with the modern spirit of burgher-enterprise: the Jews laid hand on those advantages, and upon the hindered and dwindling prosperity of the nation the Jewish banker feeds his enormous wealth. Adorable and beautiful is that foible of the German’s which forbade his coining into personal profit the inwardness and purity of his feelings and beholdings, particularly in his public and political life: that a profit here, as well, was left unused, could be cognisable to none but a mind which misunderstood the very essence of the German nature. The German Princes supplied the misunderstanding, the Jews exploited it. Since the new-birth of German poetry and music, it only needed the Princes to follow the example of Frederick the Great, to make a fad of ignoring those arts, or wrongly and unjustly measuring them with French square and compasses, and consequently allowing no influence to the spirit which they manifested—it only needed this, to throw open to the spirit of alien speculation a field whereon it saw much profit to be reaped. ’Tis as though the Jew had been astounded to find such a store of mind and genius yielding no returns but poverty and unsuccess. He could not conceive, when the Frenchman worked for “*gloire*,” the Italian for the *denaro*, why the German did it simply “*pour le roi de Prusse*.” The Jew set right this bungling of the German’s, by taking German intellectual labour into his own hands; and thus we see an odious travesty of the German spirit upheld to-day before the German Folk, as its imputed likeness. It is to be feared, ere long the nation may really take this simulacrum for its mirrored image: then one of the finest natural dispositions in all the human race were done to death, perchance forever.

We have to inquire how to save it from such a shameful doom, and therefore first of all will try to signalise the characteristics of genuine “German” nature. — Once more let us briefly, but plainly recite the outer, historical documents of German nature. “*Deutsche*” is the title given to those Germanic races which, upon their natal soil, retained their speech and customs. Even from lovely Italy the German yearns back to his homeland. Hence he quits the Romish Kaiser, and cleaves the closer and the trustier to his native Prince. In rugged woods, throughout the lengthy winter, by the warm hearth-fire of his turret-chamber soaring high into the clouds, for generations he keeps green the deeds of his forefathers; the myths of native gods he weaves into an endless web of sagas.^[2] He wards not off the influences incoming from abroad; he loves to journey and to look; but, full of the strange impressions, he longs to reproduce them; he therefore turns his steps toward home, for he knows that here alone will he be *understood*: here, by his homely hearth, he tells what he has seen and gone through there outside. Romanic, Gaelic (*wälische*), French books and legends he transposes for himself, and whilst the Latins, Gaels and French know nothing of him, he keenly studies all their ways. But his is no mere idle gaping at the Foreign, as such, as purely foreign; he wills to understand it “Germanly.” He renders the foreign poem into German, to gain an inner knowledge of its content. Herewith he strips the Foreign of its accidentals, its externals, of all that to him is unintelligible, and makes good the loss by adding just so much of his own externals and accidentals as it needs to set the foreign object plain and undefaced before him. In these his natural endeavours he makes the foreign exploit yield to him a picture of its purely-human motives. Thus “*Parzival*” and “*Tristan*” were shaped anew by Germans: and whilst the originals have become mere curiosities, of no importance save to the history of literature, in their German counterparts we recognise poetic works of worth imperishable.

In the same spirit the German borrows for his home the civic measures of abroad. Beneath the castle’s shelter, expands the burghers’ town; but the flourishing town does not pull down the Burg: the “Free Town” renders homage to the Prince; the industrial burgher decks the castle of his ancient lord. The

German is conservative: his treasure bears the stamp of all the ages; he hoards the Old, and well knows how to use it. Fond of keeping, rather than of winning: the gathered New has value for him only when it serves to deck the Old. He craves for nothing from without; but he wills no hindrances within. He attacks not, neither will he brook attack. — Religion he takes in earnest: the ethical corruption of the Roman Curia, with its demoralising influence on the clergy, irks him to the quick. By Religious Liberty he means nothing other than the right to deal honestly and in earnest with the Holiest. Here he waxes warm, and disputes with all the hazy passionateness of the goaded friend of peace and quiet. Politics get mixed therein: shall Germany become a Spanish monarchy, the free Reich be trodden under foot, his Princes made mere eminent courtiers? No people has taken arms against invasions of its inner freedom, its own true essence, as the Germans: there is no comparison for the doggedness with which the German chose his total ruin, rather than accommodate himself to claims quite foreign to his nature. This is weighty. The outcome of the Thirty Years' War destroyed the German nation; yet, that a German Folk could rise again, is due to nothing but that outcome. The nation was annihilated, but the German spirit had passed through. It is the essence of that spirit which we call "genius" in the case of highly-gifted individuals, not to trim its sails to worldly profit.^[3] What with other nations led at last to compromise, to a practical insurance of that profit through accommodation, could not control the Germans: at a time when Richelieu forced the French to accept the laws of political advantage, the German nation was completing its shipwreck; but that which never could bend before the laws of this advantage, lived on and bore its Folk afresh: the German Spirit.

A Folk reduced to a tenth of its former numbers, its significance could nowhere survive but in the memory of units. Even that memory had first to be revived and toilsomely fed, to begin with, by the most prescient of minds. It is a wonderful trait of the German spirit, that whereas in its earlier period of evolution it had most intimately assimilated the influences coming from without, now, when it quite had lost the vantage-ground of outward political power, it bore itself anew from out its own most inward store. — Recollection (*Erinnerung*) now became for it in truth a self-collection (*Er-Innerung*); for upon its deepest inner self it drew, to ward itself from the now immoderate outer influences. 'Twas no question of its external existence, for that had been ensured by the continuance of the German Princes; ay! survived there not the title of "Romo-German Kaiser"? But its truest essence, now ignored by most of these its Princes—that was the German spirit's object to preserve and quicken to new force. In the French livery and uniform, with periwig and pigtail (*Zopf*), and laughably set out with imitations of French gallantry, the scanty remnant of its people fronted it; while its language even the burgher, with his garnish of French flourishes, was about to abandon merely to the peasant. — Yet when its native countenance, its very speech was lost, there remained to the German spirit one last, one undreamt sanctuary wherein to plainly tell itself the story of its heart of hearts. From the Italians the German had adopted Music, also, for his own. Whoso would seize the wondrous individuality, the strength and meaning of the German spirit in one incomparably speaking image, let him cast a searching glance upon the else so puzzling, wellnigh unaccountable figure of Music's wonder-man *Sebastian Bach*. He is the history of the German spirit's inmost life throughout the gruesome century of the German Folk's complete extinction. See there that head, insanely muffled in the French full-bottomed wig; behold that master, a wretched organist and cantor, slinking from one Thuringian parish to another, puny places scarcely known to us by name; see him so unheeded, that it required a whole century to drag his works from oblivion; finding even Music pinioned in an art-form the very effigy of his age, dry, stiff, pedantic, like wig and pigtail set to notes: then see what a world the unfathomably great Sebastian built from out these elements! I merely point to that Creation; for it is impossible to denote its wealth, its sublimity, its all-embracing import, through any manner of comparison. If, however, we wish to account for the amazing rebirth of the German spirit on the field of poetic and philosophic Literature too, we can do so only by learning from Bach what the German spirit is in truth, where it dwelt, and how it restless shaped itself anew, when it seemed to have altogether vanished from the world. A biography of this man has recently appeared, and the *Allgemeine Zeitung* has reviewed it. I cannot resist quoting the following passages from that review: "With labour and rare force of will he struggles up from poverty and want to the topmost height of art, strews with full

hands an almost incommensurable plenty of most glorious masterworks, strews it on an age which can neither comprehend nor prize him, and dies beneath a burden of downweighing cares, lonely and forgotten, leaving his family in poverty and privation. [...] The grave of the Song-dispenser closes over the weary home-gone man without a song or sound, because the household penury cannot afford the grave-chant fee. [...] Might the reason, why our composers so seldom find biographers, lie partly in the circumstance that their end is usually so mournful, so harrowing?" — And while this was happening with great Bach, sole harbourer and new-bearer of the German spirit, the large and little Courts of German princes were swarming with Italian opera-composers and virtuosi, bought with untold outlay, too, to shower on slighted Germany the leavings of an art that nowadays cannot be accorded the least consideration.

Yet Bach's spirit, the German spirit, stepped forth from the sanctuary of divinest Music, the place of its new-birth. When Goethe's "Götz" appeared, its joyous cry went up: "That's German!" And, beholding his likeness, the German also knew to shew himself, to shew the world, what Shakespeare is, whom his own people did not understand. These deeds the German spirit brought forth of itself, from its inmost longing to grow conscious of itself. And this consciousness told it—what it was the first to publish to the world—that *the Beautiful and Noble came not into the world for sake of profit, nay, not for sake of even fame and recognition*. And everything done in the sense of this teaching is "*deutsch*"; and *therefore* is the German great; and *only what is done in that sense, can lead Germany to greatness*.

To the nurture of the German Spirit, the greatness of the German Folk, nothing can lead, then, save its veritable understanding by the rulers. The German Folk arrived at its rebirth, at unfolding of its highest faculties, through its conservative temper, its inward cleaving to itself, to its own idiosyncrasy: once it shed its life's blood for the preservation of its Princes. 'Tis now for them to shew the German Folk that they belong to it; and where the German spirit achieved its deed of rebearing the Folk, *there* is the realm whereon the Princes, too, have first to found their new alliance with the Folk. It is highest time the Princes turned to this re-baptism: the danger that menaces the whole of German public life, I have already pointed out. Woe to us and the world, if the nation itself were this time saved, but the German spirit vanished from the world!^[4]

[...]

"Democracy" in Germany is purely a translated thing. It exists merely in the "Press"; and what this German Press is, one must find out for oneself. But untowardly enough, this translated Franco-Judaico-German Democracy could really borrow a handle, a pretext and deceptive cloak, from the misprised and maltreated spirit of the German Folk. To secure a following among the people, "Democracy" aped a German mien; and "*Deutschthum*," "German spirit," "German honesty," "German freedom," "German morals," became catchwords disgusting no one more than him who had true German culture, who had to stand in sorrow and watch the singular comedy of agitators from a non-German people pleading for him without letting their client so much as get a word in edgewise. The astounding unsuccessfulness of the so loud-mouthed movement of 1848 is easily explained by the curious circumstance that the genuine German found himself, and found his name, so suddenly represented by a race of men quite alien to him. Whilst Goethe and Schiller had shed the German spirit on the world, without so much as talking of the "German" spirit, these Democratic speculators fill every book- and print-shop, every so-called "Volks-," i.e., joint-stock theatre, with vulgar, utterly vapid dummies, forever plastered with the puff of "*deutsch*," and "*deutsch*" again, to decoy the easygoing crowd. And really we have got so far, that we presently shall see the German Folk quite turned to gabies by it: the national propensity to sloth and phlegma is being lured into fantastic satisfaction with itself; already the German people is taking a large part, itself, in the playing of the shameful comedy; and not without a shudder can the thoughtful German spirit look upon those foolish festive gatherings, with their theatrical processions, their silly speeches, and the cheerless empty songs wherewith one tries to make the German Folk imagine it is something special and does not

need to first endeavour to become it.

So far the earlier article, from the year 1865. My project was to get a political journal founded for the purpose of advocating the tendencies expressed therein.

[...]

However, I certainly had other grounds for leaving my task unfinished. — “What is German?” — The question puzzled me more and more. What simply aggravated my bewilderment, were the impressions of the eventful years which followed the time when that article was begun. What German could have lived through the year 1870 without amazement at the forces manifested here, as also at the courage and determination with which the man who palpably knew something that we others did not know, brought those forces into action? — Many an objectionable feature one might overlook at the time. We who, with the spirit of our great masters at heart, witnessed the physiognomic bearing of our death-defiant landsmen in the soldier’s coat, we cordially rejoiced when listening to the “Kutschkelied”^[5], and deeply were we affected by the “feste Burg” before the war and “nun danket Alle Gott” when it was over. To be sure, it was precisely we who found it hard to comprehend how the deadly courage of our patriots could whet itself on nothing better than the “Wacht am Rhein”; a somewhat mawkish Liedertafel product, which the Frenchmen held for one of those Rhinewine songs at which they earlier had made so merry. But no matter, they might scoff as they pleased, even their “*allons enfants de la patrie*” could not this time put down “lieb Vaterland, kannst ruhig sein,” or stop their being soundly beaten. — When our victorious troops were journeying home I made private inquiries in Berlin as to whether, supposing one contemplated a grand solemnity for the slain in battle, I should be permitted to compose a piece of music for performance thereat, and to be dedicated to the sublime event. The answer was: upon so joyful a return, one wished to make no special arrangements for painful impressions. Still beneath the rose, I suggested another music-piece to accompany the entry of the troops, at the close of which, mayhap at the march past the victorious Monarch, the singing-corps so well supported in the Prussian army should join-in with a national song. No: that would have necessitated serious alterations in arrangements settled long before, and I was counselled not to make the proposal. My Kaisermarsch I arranged for the concert-room: there may it fit as best it can! — In any case, I ought not to have expected the “German spirit,” new-risen on the field of battle, to trouble itself with the musical fancies of a presumably conceited opera-composer. However, divers other experiences made me gradually feel odd in this new “Reich”; so that when I came to editing the last volume of my Collected Writings, as already mentioned, I could find no right incitement to complete my article on, “What is German?”

When once I spoke my mind about the character of the Berlin performances of my “Lohengrin”^[6], I was reprimanded by the editor of the “Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung,” to the effect that I must not consider myself sole lessee of the “German spirit.” I took the hint, and surrendered the lease. On the other hand, I was glad to find a coinage minted for the whole new German Reich, particularly when I heard that it had turned out so original-German that it would fit the currency of no other of the Great Powers, but remained subject to a “rate of exchange” with “franc” and “shilling”: people told me this was tricky for the common trader, no doubt, but most advantageous to the banker. My German heart leaped high, too, when Liberally we voted for “Free-trade”: there was, and still prevails, much want throughout the land; the workman hungers, and industry has fallen sick: but “business” flourishes. For “business” in the very grandest sense, indeed, the Reichs-“broker” has recently been patented; and, to grace and dignify the wedding-feasts of Highnesses, with oriental etiquette the newest Minister leads off the torch-dance.

This all may be good, and well beseem the novel Deutsches Reich; but no longer can I plumb its meaning, and therefore I must hold myself unqualified for further answering the question: “was ist Deutsch?” Could not Herr Constantin Frantz, for instance, afford us splendid aid? Herr Paul de Lagarde, too? May they consider themselves most friendly invited to take up the answer to that fateful question, for

instruction of our poor Bayreuther Patronatverein. If they haply then should reach the realm whereon we had to take Sebastian Bach in view, in course of the preceding article, I might perchance be able to relieve my hoped-for colleagues of their task again. How capital, if I should gain these writers' ear for my appeal!

NOTES

[1] In the original there occurs a *Stabreim*, unfortunately irreproducible, of “Junker, Jurist and Juden.” [All footnotes are from *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, translated by William Ashton Ellis, vol. IV, *Art and Politics*, 2nd ed. London: William Reeves, 1912, pp. 149–69.]

[2] Cf. *Die Meistersinger*: “Am stillen Heerd in Winterszeit, wenn Burg und Hof mir eingeschnei't . . . ein altes Buch, vom Ahn' vermacht, gab das mir oft zu lesen.”—trans.

[3] “Es ist das Wesen des Geistes, den man in einzelnen hochbegabten Menschen ‘Genie’ nennt, sich auf den weltlichen Vorthail nicht zu verstehen.” The colloquialism “not to be up to” is really the best translation for what I have rendered “not to trim its sails to.”—trans.

[4] Cf. *Die Meistersinger*, Act III: “Habt Acht! Uns drohen üble Streich'—zerfällt erst deutsches Volk und Reich, in falscher wälscher Majestät kein Fürst bald mehr sein Volk versteht; und wälschen Dunst mit wälschem Tand sie pflanzen uns in's deutsche Land.”—trans.

[5] A song very popular with the German troops in the Franco-German War, originally attributed to a fusilier by name of Kutschke, but later ascertained to have been written by Field-chaplain Herm. Alex. Pistorius (1811–1877). The “determined man” of two sentences back is, of course, Prince Bismarck.—trans.

[6] Cf. vol. 3, p. 270, written in the year 1871.—trans.

Source of English translation: *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, translated by William Ashton Ellis, vol. 4, *Art and Politics*, 2nd ed. London: William Reeves, 1912, pp. 149–69.

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