

## Leiden und Grösse Richard Wagners

*Th.Mann*

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... *und Kunst ist Wahrheit - die Wahrheit über den Künstler*. So what is the truth about Wagner? If we choose to take this subordinate clause tossed off in transit seriously. The Truth in Art, unlike in Science, Popper teaches us, is ultimately subjective. Mann has been an admirer of Wagner and his art since early childhood, music playing a very important role in his upbringing through his mother. Thus after decades of attendances at the opera, one of the pleasures of leading a high-bourgeois in a cultural city such as Munich, he is thoroughly familiar with all the works of the 'Meister'. But in a text you cannot convey music, only refer to it, in modern parlance supply a link, on which the reader is supposed to click. But of course most readers are not able to click, only a few can bring forth the music in their minds when referred to various passages out of Tristan, die Meistersinger, or whatever Wagnerian opera the author deems relevant to invoke. Mann probably can do it, and as noted a few other readers, maybe not so few because after all, what characterizes German culture and culture consumption, is, as Fontane emphasized in his account of English life, music. Thus any musically ignorant reader cannot expect to be elucidated on matters of music, true Mann has a didactic streak, but that streak tends more to concern his own instruction, than that of his readers.

The key to understand the art of Wagner is the notion of 'die Gesamtkunstwerk'. It is the merging of music, poetry and staging, that makes up his art, in each single discipline he is but a dilettante. His music is not really music, something that enabled the basically unmusical Baudelaire to appreciate it, compared to real music it is wanting, its charm and artfulness cannot be separated from the context it is called upon to contribute. It is not pure music, Mann seems to suggest, but applied for a certain purpose. It is literary music he explains, written in the way literature is conceived, but he warns, when Wagner tries to write in a literary vein, without the accompanying expression of music, it is a total failure. He is a synthesizer, incapable of providing isolated music and literature.

The life of Wagner was painful, at least judging from his outpouring in his letters. On the other hand one should be careful not to put too much weight on such manifestation of discontent as they tend to be more theatrical than sincere, delivered for effect rather than heartfelt expression. After all his voluminous expressions of unhappiness and desire to live a healthy normal life appear already in his late twenties, and he lived to a reasonably mature old age. Mann, however, decides to take them on for faith value, maybe because for dramatic effect, and writes admiringly of Wagner's remarkable resilience and patience. Patience, being described as the ultimate expression of everyday courage. True is, on the other hand, that Wagner took himself seriously, how could he otherwise, and thought of his personal life being subservient to a higher cause. Such an attitude is not very conducive to happiness, at least not the simple basic one, for which he professed a longing, and which turned out to be so evasive. Mann makes fun of his childish attempt to obtain animal contentment by submitting himself to cold baths at a spa. The unhappy artist sacrificing

his happiness for his art is an eminently romantic notion, yet some version of it is necessary in order to achieve that solid contentment that comes with a life of achievement, it does not have to be of the artistic kind. But Wagner was not an ascetic, he appreciated luxury, even in ostentatious opulence, and found it not only helpful but necessary for his work, and thus he saw no reason to deny himself its vulgar pleasures.

A decisive intellectual, and hence ultimately emotional, influence on Wagner was his encounter with Schopenhauer, just as the same reading encounter turned out to be momentous for Mann himself; and among whose impact, the identification of love with will, led Wagner to embrace the sweet romantic identification of love with death, which would be at the center, not only of *Tristan*, in his works.

The essay was written in 1933, a fateful year, in retrospect even an ominous one, before which much water had flown under Mann's bridges. It is somewhat ironic to read that Wagner knew that spirit and politics could not be separated, with the self-directed admonishment *..er hat nicht der bürgerliche-deutschen Selbsttäuschung angehangen, man könne ein unpolitische Kulturmensch sein - diesem Wahn, der Deutschlands Elend verschuldet hat* aimed at the author of 'Betrachtungen eines unpolitischen'. Wagner would have not only artistic, but perhaps even more so, political repercussions. Those centered at the notion of Germany and its mission among nations. Obviously by reaching back to Germanic myths, and extolling their virtues, so much at odds with modern civilized ones, Wagner was making a strong case for German nationalism, sentiments with which Mann would have found himself at home, twenty years ago, but which now would only embarrass him, as noted above. There is of course a ready-made excuse to be had. Just as individual love is but a manifestation of universal love, and one may incidentally argue that the abstract concept has no existence except in its specific manifestations, Mann envisions a Platonic form of nationalism, as a feeling and a guiding vision to give meaning to individual life, regardless of its specific object.

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