

Introduction

Heroism is, at best, a dubious quality. We admire heroes because they embody all that we consider most admirable in ourselves. Heroes are possessed of an excess of human energy, which has a propitious effect on the world around them. They display greater courage than regular people do, they know what they want and are fearless in achieving it. Through their exploits we glimpse, however briefly, images of human perfection and, depending on our beliefs, of something divine. But heroes are not easy to live with. The moment we try to incorporate heroism into our everyday lives, we play down whatever is individual about it and lay stress on its social virtues. Community newspapers encourage readers to nominate as “local heroes” those whose selfless labors are a benefit to the community. We designate as heroes people who help us, set us good examples, and save us from our worst selves. But, as Emerson put it, “the heroic cannot be the common, nor the common the heroic.”¹ The heroic in our mundane world can be positively oppressive, especially when it claims authority over us. Our leaders may conceive of themselves as heroes, but the moment they do so, we find ourselves obliged to deny them. We hem them in with bureaucratic limitations and reduce them to our own size or smaller by insisting that they are models of indecision and inefficiency. We may be unjust in these judgments, but, even if we are, we show good sense in making them, for our pragmatic instincts resist the idea of anyone having authority over us on the strength of personality alone. Hence while we admire heroes, we must consign them to the sidelines of life: to sports arenas, where they can engage in heroic feats that have no tangible impact on our lives; to religious cults, where if we subject ourselves to charismatic authority, we do so entirely as a matter of choice; or to popular movies, where action-heroes feed our fantasies by evincing a singular freedom from the moral and physical restraints that normally confine us. Our aversion to public heroism has its downside. Our over-rationalized society promotes inaction, and we often call for people of heroic stature who might clear

the logjam of procedures and regulations that seem to stand in the way of commonsensical action. Once such people have acted, we tell ourselves we will be able to work with a renewed sense of freedom. But heroism like this is rare and even more rarely allowed.

If we can measure the attitudes of different generations to heroes and the heroic, it is likely that our own time displays a greater degree of skepticism toward the viability of the heroic in public life than any previous age, and for good reason. The millions who died in two World Wars, in the Holocaust, and in dictatorships in several parts of the world were victims of political forces that were in many instances nothing but hero-cults, as consideration for the glory of one leader, ethnic group, or national interest overrode all human rights. If the apocalyptic history of the twentieth century has resulted in anything positive, it should be a relentless and abiding mistrust of any claim to heroic privilege and authority. It should have led too, one might think, to an equal mistrust of that composer and dramatist whose works have been taken as the supreme articulation of heroism as a formative power in public and private life, Richard Wagner.

Wagner's works have never found uncontested acceptance. When he was alive, he polarized audiences and critical opinion; now, 120 years after his death, he has lost none of his power to divide the public. Each generation discovers a Wagner to outrage it. The last *fin de siècle*, encouraged by the febrile imagination of Friedrich Nietzsche, projected onto Wagner's works its intense fear of sexuality; Max Nordau charged Wagner "with a greater abundance of degeneration than all the degenerates put together."² During the first half of the twentieth century, as Europe's obsession with the nation-state reached its climax in the rise of fascism, Wagner came to be seen as "the most important single fountainhead of Nazi ideology."³ Our own generation, committed to the rights of ethnic minorities, has subjected the anti-Semitic aspects of Wagner's work to withering and persistent scrutiny. Wagner, more than any other canonical figure in the literary, visual, and performing arts, has demonstrated an unerring capacity to serve as a lightning-rod for each generation's anxieties about itself.

What is remarkable about these anxieties is the intensity with which they are expressed. This may arise in part as a reaction to the unabated enthusiasm the music-dramas continue to generate in the opera-house. Those who suspect Wagner might claim that the response his music-dramas receive represents covert endorsement of political ideologies and sexual attitudes that have been long discredited. But opera audiences are not notably illiberal and it is more likely that they are responding to the heightened atmosphere

Introduction

3

of the music-dramas which, as Thomas Mann put it, “implies that the highest and best available to man is a life cast in the *heroic* mould.”⁴ The heroic ambience often weakens the ironic aspects of the action and thereby has the effect of suggesting that all issues arising from the action are put forward for our admiration. The idiom of opera, as Herbert Lindenberger has written, “can draw us temporarily out of our individual selves and raise us to what we take to be a higher form of consciousness, in the process of so doing . . . lead[ing] us to think ourselves greater than we are.”⁵ If this is true, then we should remain always aware of the causes of this self-aggrandizing process, especially in the case of Wagner, whose heroes may often stand for ideas we have difficulty in coming to terms with today.

This book, which comprises an examination of the workings of heroism and the heroic in Wagnerian music-drama,⁶ is not so much about the ideas in Wagner’s work as about the dramatic action and theatrical mechanism by which they are set into play. Through a discussion of the literary, theatrical, and operatic culture out of which Wagner’s work came, I identify two modes of heroism, romantic heroism and epic heroism, which were to be central to his entire oeuvre, and a third, messianic heroism, toward which his thought was tending, but which was only treated as a viable phenomenon in his two last music-dramas. The heroic experience lies so close to the heart of his music-dramas that Wagner was induced to devise innovative uses of the stage-space to give it theatrical expression. This initiated several modern developments in the use of the stage, which I often touch upon. I divide Wagner’s career into three phases, in each of which romantic and epic heroism play discrete but interlocking functions. The first phase, after the apprentice works, comprises *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*, music-dramas governed by the dramaturgy of the early nineteenth-century theatre, in which action is centered on either the alienated romantic hero or the epic hero who cannot find acceptance in society. The hero remains essentially an outsider in the central work of Wagner’s career, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, in which concepts of romantic and epic heroism compete in a tragic universe. In the final phase, which comprises *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and *Parsifal*, Wagner attempted progressively to incorporate the hero into society as a messianic figure, an undertaking with questionable implications as the hero begins to acquire an authority that, in the traditions within which Wagner was working, had been denied him. The three modes of heroism I have identified in Wagner’s music-dramas are associated exclusively with male characters, but their viability is often challenged by the hero’s

female partner, whose selflessness in sacrificing herself for the man she loves displays a moral power that has greater force than that of the male hero, a circumstance most apparent at the end of the *Ring*. As the modern world is not at ease with Wagner's heroism, I conclude my study with an examination of how it has been represented on the modern stage. In my discussion of contemporary productions, I comment only on those I have seen.

I

Modes of heroism in the early nineteenth century

AN ANTI-HEROIC AGE

The age in which Richard Wagner grew up had little time for heroes. After the turmoil of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, Europe entered upon an uneasy and somnolent peace. During the period of “Restoration” that followed the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815, royalist governments attempted to return to the pre-revolutionary status quo, so there was little encouragement of critical and progressive thinking among artists, academics, or political radicals. In the German Confederation especially, curbs on freedom of speech were imposed by techniques prefiguring the modern police-state and applied by ever-expanding, impersonal bureaucracies. Through the Carlsbad decrees of 1819, freedom of the press was suspended, universities placed under rigorous state supervision, and political protest banned. Although these proscriptions were not applied uniformly and prison sentences were not always harsh, whoever challenged public authority did so at their peril. But this was not the worst of times. The post-war economic boom resulted in an expanded middle class and improved standards of living, so for those who enjoyed a modicum of prosperity, life was not unpleasant. Germans turned to the cultivation of their personal and professional lives, and their culture of this time, known to us as “Biedermeier,” expressed itself in modest, sentimental artistic forms that celebrated the family and cozy domesticity and avoided the uglier aspects of life. In Biedermeier art, the city was represented as an extension of the pastoral world, not as an arena for the incipient industrial revolution. If Biedermeier idealized any period other than its own, it was the Middle Ages, which represented for many the apogee of the organic urban community in which all individuals had their allotted place. Biedermeier also fostered public culture through the founding of institutions of art, education, recreation, and public health in cities large and small.¹ For those with some protection from economic hardship, there was a touch of the idyllic

in Biedermeier life, but for those excluded by necessity or choice from its intimate family circles, life was harsh and channels of protest against these circumstances difficult to come by.

Censorship did not entirely silence dissent, which was heard through clandestinely published periodicals and pamphlets. In the mid-1830s the loosely associated group of writers known as “*Junges Deutschland*” (“Young Germany”) published novels protesting against social complacency and advocating a more progressive dispensation, which would allow, among other liberties, free love. But their work was suppressed and some authors imprisoned. For the most disenchanting writers, such as Heinrich Heine, survival was possible only in exile, in the more cosmopolitan environment of Paris. In Germany, any radical social schemes and political ideologies were forged through private dialogue among radicals, scholars, and writers, not in public debate. Nevertheless, nothing could suppress the growing sense of alienation among the disenfranchised, underprivileged, and indigent in what was for them an impersonal, oppressive society. In fact, the muzzle placed on the public expression of dissent only served to augment it, so that the quiescent surface of public life was twice shattered by civil disturbances of exceptional violence, the revolutions that swept Europe in 1830–32 and 1848–49. As they were driven by the ideologies of socialism, liberalism, and nationalism, these revolutions gave rise to forces that would shape the future world. In retrospect, the age of Biedermeier bred more change than its tranquil surface suggests. It was an age that looked backward and forward, in which “the juxtaposition of old and new appears to be extremely intense, when values, ideas, habits, and institutions seem to be torn between two orders . . . when some people lament an old world in decline, while others yearn for a new one waiting to be born.”²

If there was any sign of incipient change in Germany, it was the nationalist cause. For centuries, the political fragmentation of Germany had ensured the country’s weakness internationally and backwardness internally. The idea of a unified nation offered the Germans prospects of greater influence in Europe and freedom from restrictive provincial governments. Nationalism gave the Germans a sense of common origin and a common direction. As Thomas Nipperdey has written, “the nation transcends the world of daily notions to constitute something primal and something still to come . . . it is a dynamic principle, which triggers actions and emotions. In the epoch of political faiths, the nation acquired something like a religious character . . . eternity and a future fulfilled, sacredness, fraternity, sacrifice, and martyrdom.”³ German nationalism first arose as a symptom of German opposition to Napoleonic occupation and flourished during the

Prussian-led war of liberation against France. In abeyance for over a decade after the fall of Napoleon in 1815, when it was regarded as a potentially revolutionary movement, nationalism enjoyed a vigorous revival during the 1830s and 1840s as public perception of the political advantages of unity grew. But the strength of this revival, which articulated ambitions for a single state, was an extension of the idea of a cultural or folk nation,⁴ which had been fostered in Germany since the late eighteenth century. German national identity had been formed from a wide range of writings, from Johann Gottfried Herder's anthropological essays, through romantic poetry and prose, to Johann Gottlieb Fichte's popular *Lectures to the Nation*, delivered to enthusiastic audiences of students in French-occupied Berlin in 1807–08. From these multiple sources emerged the image of the Germans as a race distinct from their French, Latin, and Slav neighbors. The Germans considered themselves to be the original folk of Europe and insisted their language was pure as it had not been corrupted by foreign admixture. They claimed to be distinguished by the simplicity of their lives and the honesty of their dealings. Germans saw themselves as a people who prized inwardness, as individuals free to develop their own personality, and "the concept of individuality, unique and self-contained, was transferred from the individual to the national community."⁵ German culture was deemed distinct from that of the classically oriented French, which had dominated Europe during the Enlightenment. It had its roots in primeval nature, it prized feeling and instinct more than pure rationality, and German society was considered to have achieved its apogee in the organic communities of the Middle Ages in which communal and individual interests had been at one. The romantics revived the literature of the Middle Ages with the intent of creating a foundation for German national literature in the medieval epic, *Nibelungenlied*, the collection of folk-songs *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (published 1804–07), and the translations of the songs of the courtly Minnesänger. By the 1830s and 1840s, the cultural ferment earlier in the century had been transformed into demands for national unification.

Wagner's entire work arose from the cultural and political tensions of the Biedermeier period of his youth and early adult life. Like the writers of *Junges Deutschland*, with whom he was acquainted, he found it impossible to acquiesce in a society that tolerated the mediocre and offered no place to an art that was individual or unorthodox. At the same time, he was temperamentally unsuited to the anti-romantic liberalism of *Junges Deutschland* and to the acerbic and often ironic tone of their writings. In his youth Wagner had read widely in early romantic literature and he returned to it in the 1840s when he was establishing himself as a composer of national

stature. He was therefore agreeable to the romantic image of Germany as a pastoral land where individuals were free to cultivate their inner life. But he also needed a means of articulating his bitterness and sense of isolation from a world in which he had little part. He found it in the literature of later romanticism, which confronted the fallibility of the ideals of the earlier romantics and the failed ambitions of the age of revolution. His ideas of heroic action as a means of saving humanity from the materialism, fear, and lovelessness that were destroying it arose first from this literature and were later enhanced by his return to an earlier romanticism oriented around nature. But they also derived from his reading, in the 1840s, of medieval epics, whose heroes were embodiments of human strength and courage. While the heroes of his early operas and music-dramas, up to and including *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*, are based on the prototype of the late romantic hero, by the time he wrote *Lohengrin* he had fully incorporated notions of epic heroism as well. Consequently, to determine the origins of the Wagnerian hero, we should explore first the romantic then the epic hero.

THE ROMANTIC HERO

The romantic hero displayed a multiplicity of characteristics and purposes, but all manifestations of the figure have three qualities in common: a deep reverence for nature, a tendency to respond to the world through feeling rather than rational cogitation, and the insistence that the world can only be understood when viewed from a subjective viewpoint. “The romantic,” as Lilian Furst puts it, “invariably apprehends the outer world through the mirror of his ego.”⁶ These three qualities have, of course, been constant traits in human beings, but they are so persistent in romanticism that they became central to the movement. Wagner not only shared these values, he centered his work around them.

Although some scholars have seen the romantic hero as originating in the “sentimental hero” of eighteenth-century drama and fiction,⁷ it was in Rousseau’s conception of “*l’homme sauvage*,” “savage” or “natural” man, that the romantic identity of humanity with nature was first unambiguously asserted. Rousseau argued that humans had been happiest in primal or near-primal states, existing solely in nature or small communities close to nature, desiring only what they needed, and living content when those needs were met. In nature, the human “heart is at peace and body is healthy,”⁸ and peaceful coexistence is assured by the primary emotion of compassion. This serenity is, however, thrown into disorder when humans claim property and

engage in competition, which inevitably constrains their freedom. Rousseau sees history as an accumulating process of enslavement and corruption until order can be maintained only through dictatorship. Society is the condition which indicates that humans have abandoned their naturally virtuous state. As long as humans remain within society, their natural goodness is lost, but if they can detach themselves, become wholly individual and nothing social, they can in part recuperate their lost virtue.⁹ So they would do best by retreating to pure nature, where, Rousseau claims, “we can call ourselves happy, not with a poor, incomplete and relative happiness, such as we find in the pleasures of life, but with a sufficient, complete and perfect happiness which leaves no emptiness to be filled in the soul.”¹⁰ Such happiness arises only when isolated individuals are entirely sufficient to themselves, and they can cultivate the inner world of the mind and imagination until it acquires a reality more complete than that of the objective world. Rousseau also initiated romantic concern with subjective vision, his autobiographical *Confessions* being postulated on the assumption that the unique and individual self was a realm of legitimate enquiry.

The Rousseauian romantic hero is unproblematic so long as he exercises a benign influence over those with whom he lives. Frederick Garber posited a model of romantic heroism in which the “glories of the self” enable the romantic hero “to expand outward in all directions, absorbing and thereby affecting more and more of what is outside oneself.”¹¹ But such a hero, perhaps best realized in Wordsworth’s projection of himself in his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, is in fact relatively rare. Wagner was familiar at least with one instance of him, the hero of Novalis’ novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802), a fictional medieval poet, who feels an intrinsic closeness with nature, which feeds his imagination and forms his creative mind. Heinrich apprehends the world through aesthetic not moral perspectives. He learns that humans were happiest when they lived in a state close to that envisaged by Rousseau, one of “idyllic poverty,” in which they possessed few material goods, but whatever they owned was functional and had iconic value. Later, more prosperous ages were characterized by greater monotony and uniformity in their cultures. Heinrich realizes that the function of the poet is to bring harmony to the social world by connecting the present with the past and recalling times when “nature must have been more alive and meaningful than today.”¹² The creative act benefits the poet as well as his listeners, as his imagination allows him to develop an inner world that resists the stressful pressures of the outer and substantiates the romantic ideal of solitude as the most desirable human state. Romantic love is the

only agency that can penetrate that solitude and intensify the pleasure it offers, and through it the poet becomes aware of a “higher world” and beauty beyond human senses. To recapture this in poetry is the goal of the poet’s life. In *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Rousseau’s “natural man” becomes the romantic artist.

But characters like Heinrich are rare in romantic literature. More common is the romantic hero who feels a “sickness unto death . . . when the direction of energy is reversed and the world impinges on the self,”¹³ and his preoccupation with the self and his difference from others becomes so intense that it consumes him. The most celebrated of early romantic heroes, Werther in Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774), commits suicide as he cannot consummate his love for Lotte. His feelings for her are identical with his worship of nature and idealization of simple country life, but they vitiate his natural goodness. Werther is partly a victim, as marital custom and social convention stand in the way of his desires, but Goethe does not unambiguously endorse his hero, leaving it an open question as to whether his suicide results from self-pity and self-dramatization or is dictated by tragic necessity. The aristocratic hero of Chateaubriand’s popular short novel *René* (1802) lives most happily in solitude, where he can nourish “the innermost feelings of his soul.”¹⁴ However, his final retreat to the American wilderness is not willingly chosen, but an escape from what he longs for most, an incestuous union with his sister, the most forbidden, yet most desirable relationship, as through it brother and sister can most fully experience oneness with nature. Nature can destroy those it nurtures, and living solely within it can as well express *Weltschmerz* as love of solitude.

During Wagner’s youth, the most familiar guise for the romantic hero was that of a wanderer. Traveling in romantic literature rarely indicates progression toward a fixed goal or ideal, but declares isolation from others, so the hero’s ceaseless wanderings become a metaphor for the soul unable to find peace either in itself or in settled society. René, whose travels to distant countries and ruins of ancient civilizations are metaphoric for life as a voyage away from childhood, comes to the bitter conclusion: “Happy are they who reach the end of their travels without ever leaving the harbor.”¹⁵ The most celebrated of romantic wanderers, who possessed the imagination of readers throughout Restoration Europe, was the hero of Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812–18), an infinitely self-conscious figure, burdened by guilt from a past he cannot reveal and nostalgic for a transcendent love, which cannot be fulfilled. He wanders without tangible goal, sardonically observing a world debased by corruption, in which the weak are exploited