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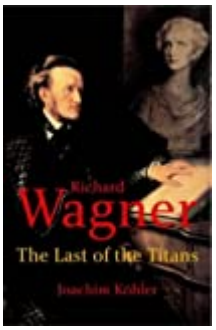

Joachim KÖÂ¶hler. *Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 688 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10422-6.

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The Interpretation of Dreams: KÃ¶hler v. Cosima

Wife-beater, cross-dresser, alcoholic, laudanum junkie, ingrate, spendthrift, deadbeat, philanderer, betrayer, blackmailer (of Ludwig), plagiarist (of Mendelssohn), stalker (of Meyerbeer) and of course antisemite–the Richard Wagner that Joachim KÃ¶hler has given us in this tome of a biography seems scarcely to deserve the epithet "last of the Titans." Yet there is something for all sides of the Wagner wars here, not just in the way of scandal and sinister foreshadowing, but also in the way of a rapt and implicitly exculpatory admiration for this most demanding of historical figures. But if Wagner comes across, in spades, as all those things we expect of the Great Artist–conflicted, tormented, wildly imaginative, irresistibly charismatic, impossibly gifted, possessed, obsessed and so on–then KÃ¶hler comes across as mainly conflicted. Over the past two decades, he has gained a reputation for courting the outrage of Wagnerites and the skepticism of scholars through his unapologetically speculative pronouncements on the Wagner-Nietzsche and Wagner-Hitler connections. (The only side of this devil's triangle he has yet to explore is the Nietzsche-Hitler one.) Nietzsche, he declared in his *Zarathustra's Secret: The Interior Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1990; English ed. 2002) was homosexual, and, as KÃ¶hler went on to say in *Nietzsche and Wagner: A Lesson in Subjugation* (1996; English ed. 1998), the break with the Wagners became definitive–and nasty–not because Wagner prostrated himself before the Christian God but because he blabbed about Nietzsche's sex life. Even more controversial was KÃ¶hler's *Wagner's Hitler: The Prophet and his Disciple* (English ed. 2000), which suggested, almost in so many words, that Hitler was simply enacting the Master's master plan, achieving politically the world-transforming ends for which Wagner had striven aesthetically. With this monumental biography, however, KÃ¶hler uses provocation to build an extraordinarily sympathetic portrait of Wagner, as though daring his readers to put aside their outrage at his egregious behavior toward other people and see his life once more as Thomas Mann had seen it, with suffering as its dominant mode and greatness as suffering's vindication. Remarkably, it–the strategy, the prose, the portrait, the book altogether–works.[1]

To be sure, KÃ¶hler's biography will not please everyone, but it is nevertheless well worth reading and even savoring, for those who have already experienced the fascination of Wagner and for those who have resisted it.[2] KÃ¶hler, a German journalist and editor, has a method and target. His method is loosely psychological and his target is Cosima Wagner. He chose the former at least in part because of the actions of the latter. As KÃ¶hler

explains at the outset, Wagner's second wife controlled (and interfered with) key documents of her husband's life: his memoirs were dictated to her and subsequently subjected to considerable editing (a his-and-hers joint project); her diaries were an extended commentary on Wagner as she wished him to be; she destroyed hundreds of letters from Heine, Baudelaire, Berlioz, Nietzsche, Semper, Gobineau and (her first husband and Wagner's erstwhile acolyte) Hans von BÃ¼low, along with the traces, epistolary and otherwise, of adulterous love-affairs, chiefly those with Mathilde Wesendonck and with herself; she, and not Wagner, laid the cornerstone of the Bayreuth enterprise and made it into the "well-oiled publicity machine" that it remains (pp. xii-xiii). In KÃ¶hler's view, she presented Wagner to the world as "the nation's unifying saviour" by imbuing the "Hoffmanesque artist" with a "certain bourgeois stolidity" and "plung[ing] the iridescent kaleidoscope of his colourful existence into a uniform granite grey" (pp. xii-xiii). And if Richard was Cosima's first victim, her subsequent victims became too numerous to count, for in due time the worship of "Cosima's Wagner" allowed an Austrian Wagnerite to transform himself into "Wagner's Hitler" (p. xiii).

But *The Last of the Titans* is not primarily about "Cosima's Wagner." It represents KÃ¶hler's effort to throw off the Bayreuth-controlled biographical tradition ("a whole host of tame authors," as he unkindly puts it) and find (what else?) the man behind the legend (p. xiii). Typical of the dramatic way in which KÃ¶hler handles his material, he waits until very late to announce his secret to unlocking the door behind which we find the real Wagner, and it is none other than the interpretation of the man's dreams: "The most important evidence for all that fell victim to her urge to control Wagner's life and thought," he writes, "has survived, ironically in her own hand," in the form of his dreams which she "wrote … down exactly as he recounted them" (p. 545). What follows are a number of suggestions for the meaning of things like the rosebush he dreamt was growing at the side of his bed (his sister Rosalie). But for the reader who has made it to this point, the long-delayed revelation of the "Key to all Mythologies" merely recapitulates themes KÃ¶hler has already introduced and developed, in his accounts of that "iridescent kaleidoscope" of the events, relationships, travels, purchases, illnesses, addictions, triumphs, failures, essays, ideas and operas that, taken together, constituted Wagner's true life. Before the dreams, there were the traumas of childhood, and KÃ¶hler provides a fascinating, believable account of Wagner's early years. Moreover, the figures in this earliest of Wagnerian dramas–mother, father, stepfather, uncle, sisters, self–accompanied Wagner to the end of his days in the archetypal guises of treacherous mother, absent/dead/true father, usurping stepfather, true father/uncle, sister/lover, solar hero and so on. This cast of mainly unpleasant characters, far more than the dreams Cosima wrote down, provides KÃ¶hler with the basic explanatory framework for everything great and disastrous in Wagner's life, from his music dramas to his antisemitism.

Part of the effectiveness of KÃ¶hler's book stems from the boldness with which he pursues his archetypal analysis, as though once again daring us to accuse him of simplification or speculation. There is an undeniable repetitiveness to the KÃ¶hlerian procedure, yet as one reads, for instance, of how Alberich "the usurper" steals the gold "just as . . . Wagner's mythological self was snatched from his cradle by Geyer [his stepfather], separated from his family and carried off into the darkness" (p. 326) or how the archetypal sisters (the Valkyrie) plead with the unforgiving father (Wotan) "as though Wagner recalled his sisters weeping outside the door while Geyer chastised him" (p. 357), the connections KÃ¶hler makes seem striking. Nor is the influence of the archetypes confined to the art. Explaining Wagner's unhappiness in Riga (1837-39), KÃ¶hler writes of an "all too familiar pattern," with the company director Karl von Holtei "stepping effortlessly into his late stepfather's shoes" and Wagner's wife Minna changing "from the ideal sister to the wicked mother who betrays her own son" (p. 104). More consequentially, KÃ¶hler uses his archetypes to explain the radical shift in Wagner's attitude toward Giacomo Meyerbeer and Felix Mendelssohn, both of whom, especially Meyerbeer, helped or said encouraging things to him and both of whom were initially objects of Wagner's admiration and imitation. The condition of the relationship changed abruptly when Wagner decided, during his first Paris period (1839-1842), that Meyerbeer had betrayed him and was responsible for his inability to crack the formidable Paris opera scene. Likewise, a belief that Mendelssohn deliberately lost one of Wagner's scores added him to the list of betrayers. Thus KÃ¶hler posits psychological causes for what became an all-embracing condemnation of Jews and Jewishness, with these men's rapid transformation in Wagner's mind from true father to usurping and betraying false father the essential trigger.

The tendency of such analytical procedures is necessarily to focus attention on the interior life of the newly-minted antisemite rather than on the surrounding cul-

ture, with its many ways of hating the Jews. But this is a biography, after all, and KÃ¶hler is consistent in retaining his focus on what and how Wagner thought about his world, not on the nature of that world as such. For understanding why this particular man came to regard the Jews as a whole as his personal tormentors, then took on as his acolytes any number of people, starting with Cosima, who shared and encouraged him in these views, the psychological/archetypal explanation seems appropriate. It is, indeed, a more powerful explanation than generalities about widespread antisemitic attitudes in those days or speculations about grudges against Jewish money-lenders.

Moreover, KÃ¶hler relies on the explanatory device of these archetypes for a reason. He understands Wagner as a person hopelessly, gloriously stuck in his own past, re-experiencing over and over again the unbearable intensity of a child's response to the world and turning all that naked, unmediated sensitivity into his art. One of KÃ¶hler's favorite images is that of the mine, an appropriately romantic theme (as Theodor Ziolkowski has shown us) and one that Wagner once thought to explore by writing an opera based on E.T.A. Hoffmann's story, "The Mines of Falun."[3] Discussing Wagner's discovery of the Brothers Grimm, KÃ¶hler writes that "Wagner lived in a permanent state of regression, a state that resembled a descent into an abandoned mine, its tunnels extending not only as far as the forgotten legacy of the 'German folk' but also to the legacy of his own particular past," which became "the wellspring of his own creativity" and the "archetypal kingdom of his future dramas" (pp. 152, 160). By depicting Wagner in this way, as someone in an unending, indeed titanic, struggle with his demons (and his *daemon* or *genius*?), KÃ¶hler gives us a truly rounded Wagner and gets so far beyond the "great music–terrible person" trope that one wonders at ever indulging such simple dichotomies in the first place. "Love–tragedy" were, in KÃ¶hler's typically dramatic telling, the last words Wagner wrote before "the pen slipped from his fingers"–"words that had defined the whole of his life and were not to release their hold on him even at the moment of his death" (p. 635).

Yes, this book could be shorter; yes, KÃ¶hler speculates a little too freely; yes, he might lay a little too much of the fault for the Bayreuth cult at Cosima's feet (although I feel no need to rush to her defense). He sometimes over-dramatizes his already-dramatic-enough subject; he is inconsistent about when he believes Wagner and when he doesn't; and he sometimes contradicts himself ("in itself, music meant nothing to him," p. 63; "For Wagner, the main thing was the music.... Music alone expressed the truth," p. 73). But all these cavils aside, the biography and especially its argument by archetype, does fail spectacularly in one very important task, and that is in finding a way to integrate Wagner's music into the story of Wagner's life. The man pursued by his demons found a way to overcome them and to liberate himself from them, as anyone who has listened to just five minutes of his music can tell. KÃ¶hler neither describes the music–always a difficult task, to be sure–nor writes much about the music as the essential element in whatever emotional or psychological understanding Wagner achieved, of himself and of humans in general. A great book about a composer should make one eager to listen to his music. This book achieves many things, shedding new and surprising light on Wagner's childhood, on his intellectual debts to Hegel and Feuerbach (including a persuasive argument against the widely-accepted importance of Schopenhauer), on his minor works, on his deep ambivalence about the theater and thus about Bayreuth, even as they became the substance of his waking life. But KÃ¶hler does not make us want to listen to the music, and that is a shame.

Notes

[1]. For the quality of the prose in English, we have translator Stewart Spencer to thank.

[2]. *The Last of the Titans* is perhaps not the best place to begin one's Wagnerian studies, but a quick read through the biographical entry on Wagner in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* would sufficiently equip one for the journey ahead. See Barry Millington et al., "Richard Wagner," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed March 15, 2006), at `http://www.grovemusic.com`.

[3]. Theodore Ziolkowski, *German Romanticism and its Institutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

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