

For its part, the ANC would rather rail against stereotypes than do something about the social and economic conditions under its rule, which are worsening all around, for poor blacks whose needs the government is ignoring but especially for whites. According to Helen Suzman, a former longtime Progressive Party member of the South African Parliament and an outspoken opponent of the white-minority government, President Thabo Mbeki is an anti-white demagogue. "His speeches all have anti-white themes," she told London's *Sunday Telegraph* some time ago, "and he continues to convince everyone that there are two types of South African—the poor black and the rich white."

Although she did not comment on the high crime rate, Suzman did note something perhaps even more ominous: "Debate is almost non-existent and no one is apparently accountable to anybody apart from their political bosses. It's bad news for democracy in this

country." She added an observation that will strike many as ironic: "Even though we didn't have a free press under apartheid, the government of that day seemed to be very much more accountable in parliament." Referring to her extensive efforts to expose the brutal workings of apartheid through the years, Suzman observed, "It would never be possible today to ask as many questions as I did."

Suzman also decried South Africa's racial quota system that demands proportional representation in employment, pushing blacks into positions for which they are not yet qualified and making it "increasingly hard for young white people to find jobs." She "can understand why white parents are worried about the future." While she certainly does not want to return to the old system and professes herself "hopeful about any future for whites in this country" (curious, that "any"), she is "not entirely optimistic."

Be that as it may, extrapolating from the remarks of the Nobel Committee and Swedish Academy, we can see *Disgrace* as offering guilty white readers the opportunity to indulge in self-hatred and to savor the pleasure of contemplating the abasement of Western man and woman, while imagining a spiritual reward for doing so. (In his own life, as we have noted, Coetzee has foregone this bracing humiliation and has sought safety in the "cosmetic morality"—not to mention the physical safety and comfort—of the West.) But in order for Western man to luxuriate in this strangely titillating, if as yet only theoretical, picture of his own undoing, he also has to agree to accept the portrayal of South African blacks as incapable of living according to the rule of law and the demands of civilization. Accepting that portrayal is something for which the West should feel guilty, and there is the real disgrace. It turns out that denigrating "Western" morality ultimately means denigrating everybody. ■

*Carol Iannone is editor at large of Academic Questions.*

[*Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans, Joachim Köhler, trans. by Stewart Spencer, Yale University Press, 705 pages*]

## A Muse of Fire

By R.J. Stove

"Let us not fall into the old error of intelligent reactionaries, that of ignoring our own debt to revolutions."—G.K. Chesterton

MORE WORDS, it is said, have been written about Wagner than about even Shakespeare: indeed, than about anyone else in history except Christ and Napoleon. Notwithstanding—or because of—this plethora, one-volume Wagner biographies seldom do their subject justice. The most stimulating single books on Wagner, at any rate in English, tend to be resolutely non-biographical: guides to Wagner's aesthetics (Bryan Magee's *Aspects of Wagner* and *The Tristan Chord*), surveys of individual operas (any bearing Deryck Cooke's or Rudolph Sabor's name warrants respect), and even reminiscences of Wagner recording sessions (John Culshaw's *Ring Resounding*). For more than half a century, the definitive life of Wagner has been the four-volume account (1933-1946) by British musicologist Ernest Newman. Excellently written and brim-full with love for Wagner's finest creations, Newman's epic nevertheless suffered from the protracted embargo on the revelatory diaries of the composer's widow Cosima, an embargo imposed by her eldest daughter and lasting until 1972.

Accordingly, the present publication by an established German scholar arouses hopes as exalted as Valhalla itself, particularly insofar as it promises and often provides a vigorously eclectic approach. Far too much existing Wagner literature suffers from a painful absence of either eclecticism or vigor, being Jungian (and therefore largely worthless), Freudian (and therefore entirely worthless), or Marxist (say no more).

Köhler cultivates, at least through the conduit of his translator, a lucid idiom

## MOVING?

### Changing your address?

Simply go to **The American Conservative** website, [www.amconmag.com](http://www.amconmag.com). Click "subscribe" and then click "address change."

To access your account make sure you have your TAC mailing label. You may also subscribe or renew online.

If you prefer to mail your address change send your TAC label with your new address to:

**The American Conservative**  
Subscription Department  
P.O. Box 9030  
Maple Shade, NJ 08052-9030

that on this topic can only be beneficial. His first chapters, devoted to Wagner's upbringing, are a mesmeric read. Wagner never knew whether his true father had been the colorless Leipzig police registrar Friedrich Wagner, or the flamboyant thespian and painter Ludwig Geyer, whom Friedrich's widow later married. Enforced and lifelong ignorance of one's own paternity is a condition apt to demoralize persons far more phlegmatic than the hyperimaginative, nerve-torn Richard. But it needed no taint of possible bastardry to leave the young composer infatuated with the stage, which in fact became his opiate.

Wagner never escaped, and clearly never wanted to escape, the atmosphere of rackets theatrical vagabondage that Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* had taught the German middle classes to love. He possessed that weird combination, so familiar in actors, of shameless attitudinizing and total moment-by-moment sincerity. As in Greek legend Antaeus was doomed whenever his feet left the earth, so in 19th-century German reality Wagner was doomed whenever his feet left the theater. There he thrived. There his conducting talents manifested themselves. There, too, he met his first wife, the actress Minna Planer, who—save for his short-lived sister Rosalie—probably inspired more selfless love from him than did any other creature that was not a tail-wagging quadruped.

He not only made drama his whole life, he made his life a whole drama. "Whatever my passions demand of me," he once wrote to his eventual father-in-law Liszt, "I become for the time being—musician, poet, director, author, lecturer or anything else." Thus speaks one who must publicly perform, whatever the sacrifice involved. Like so many other showfolk, he blended entire hopelessness in domestic concerns with astounding shrewdness in manipulating colleagues. Admirers vied for the privilege of lending him money that he never returned; frequently he helped himself with equal nonchalance to these admirers' cigars and wives. "Wagner must be worshipped like a god," babbled

Cosima's first husband, conductor-pianist Hans von Bülow. A man can hardly avoid sadism when his associates fall over each other to exhibit their masochism. Wagner's narcissistic garrulity helped him, as it has helped so many other social-climbing womanizers. (It failed to beguile Schumann, though. Of Wagner, Schumann complained: "He talks without ever stopping." Of Schumann, Wagner complained: "One cannot converse with anyone who never opens his mouth.")

The middle of Köhler's chronicle somewhat drags for a simple reason: Köhler—despite a fleeting reference to "the dreariness of his [Wagner's] life as a pure thinker"—seems much more interested in Wagner's theory than in his practice. The more draughts of metaphysical intoxicant Wagner imbibes, the more Köhler likes it. Drunk on Hegel, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Friedrich von Schelling—drunk also on the anarchism of Bakunin, whom Wagner in Dresden knew and conspired with personally—Wagner enjoyed abundant leisure, after the collapse of Saxony's 1849 uprising, to philosophize until hell froze over or he paid off his creditors, whichever came first.

Such leisure did nothing for his expository gifts. From his embittered middle years, many of them spent in despondent Swiss exile, dates most of his worst literary output, including nearly all the material for his novelettish memoir; the diatribe *Judaism in Music* (at first published anonymously); and *Jesus of Nazareth*, his wretched libretto for a projected opera, exemplifying the "Mary Magdalen was Christ's concubine" genre which culminated in our own epoch with *The Da Vinci Code*. Happily for opera, Wagner's musical creativity burst forth even as his prose creativity shriveled. This phenomenon Köhler underrates.

Even in the book's early stages one senses a short-changing of Wagner the musician and more so in its central sections. It is frankly misleading to say of Wagner, as Köhler does, "In itself, music meant nothing to him." A creator for

whom music in itself meant nothing would never have shown Wagner's youthful proficiency in writing elaborate and thankless counterpoint. Neither would he have honed his skills in construction and orchestration by copying out entire Beethoven scores, as Wagner the novice did with atypical humility. (Since Köhler rightly mentions all this self-imposed studying, we may well wonder why he did not draw from it the obvious conclusion.) Wagner owed—a point numerous commentators have made—less to formal tuition than did any other great composer. With this musical autodidacticism, and assiduous acquisition of non-musical *kultur* as well, came a lifelong sense of unease. Always he lacked the cheery professional detachment of Rossini and Donizetti, who could toss off an entire opera within weeks, cynically recycling earlier music if punitive deadlines loomed.

The dedication with which young Wagner shed the hypertrophic clichés of his first major opera, *Rienzi*—major in bulk rather than in value—to arrive at *The Flying Dutchman*'s astonishing originality is among 19th-century art's most inexplicable and laudable developments. Yet reading Köhler, one somehow never fully realizes the change's importance. Köhler's overview of *Lohengrin* alternates inspired depiction of Wagner's instrumental techniques for limning the opera's villainess Ortrud, with pretentious schoolboy smut. Wagner intended *Lohengrin*'s prelude as an allusion to the Holy Grail; Köhler, alas, knows better. He calls this prelude "a musical evocation of the miracle of sexuality as so often depicted in the visual arts, not least by Bernini in his *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*." For such poppycock, a 10-page excursus on *Judaism in Music*'s foolish spite hardly supplies sufficient compensation, any more than do Köhler's reports upon Wagner's flatulence and transvestite tendencies.

At times, Köhler's comments on Wagner's music are simply false. Wagner's stylistic debt to Liszt, far from having "always been treated as a taboo," receives ample mention in readily available sur-

veys of both men's oeuvres, and Wagner conceded the debt, albeit not in ways which Liszt welcomed. The ambiguous dissonance in Tristan's second complete bar remains indeed breathtaking—and has generated scholarly literature in oceanic magnitude—but Köhler's proclamation that this dissonance “rendered its listener deaf to traditional harmonies” is Whig drivel. Köhler maintains with equal implausibility that the *Ring* cycle's final episode, *Götterdämmerung*, “is concerned solely with politics.” (Solely?) Nor does Köhler communicate Wagner's achievement in substituting for his youthful tendency towards foursquare phrases a remarkable rhythmic suppleness. Several critics, despairing of conveying this suppleness in their own words, have applied to Wagner Coleridge's description of Shakespeare: “he goes on creating ... evolving B out of A, and C out of B, and so

Ludwig continuing to underwrite Wagner's dreams for what became the Bayreuth festival theater.

Köhler repeatedly emphasizes the panic that Cosima inspired in her spouse and goes so far as to blame her for impeding Wagner's creative powers. *Parsifal*, admittedly, came after their marriage, but Wagner composed most of *Parsifal* while in a frenzy of longing for Judith Mendès, daughter of poet Théophile Gautier. (Judith's inspirational role goads Köhler into another bizarre verdict: “Many writers on Wagner have been unable to grasp that works about love must have been based on the physical experience of love.” Somebody please tell this to Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura.) Cosima inflamed her husband's anti-Jewish and anti-French rhetoric; outlived him by 47 years; burnt mountains of his correspondence; and

maufrey harms the Bard's. As early as 1889 Bernard Shaw urged fellow devotees to perform Wagner's music in England “instead of expensively embalming its corpse in Bavaria.”

Köhler writes with understandable impatience about Bayreuth's—and its approved historian's—opportunism, which has for decades resembled less a valid theatrical tradition than a heritage of Mafiosi. (Dare one say, in this context, “the Sopranos”?) During the Third Reich, Bayreuth cluttered the stage with Aryan supermen. Soon after the war, it made “de-Nazified” phallic symbols compulsory. It can now achieve nothing better than its odious recent *Parsifal*, in which Leninist buffoon Christoph Schlingensief transferred the action to Namibia while junking Wagner's specified Act III stage directions to make room for film footage of decomposing rabbits. Much more sensible to appreciate Wagner at home or via library headphones through the best complete Wagner recordings from the 1950s and 1960s, long ago transferred to CD. Conducted by the likes of Wilhelm Furtwängler, Rudolf Kempe, Hans Knappertsbusch, and Sir Georg Solti, these productions demonstrate a level of musical—especially vocal—expertise that leaves the rotting-bunny brigade for dead.

How often have we music lovers groaned inwardly at the prospect of hearing Wagner again, only to be swept up anew in his art's sheer charismatic majesty once the curtain actually rises or the CD actually begins! “A glorious sunset mistaken for dawn,” Debussy said of this art (although his words no longer resemble the reproach that they appeared to be during modernist ideology's heroic youth). “What a clever rattlesnake!” snickered the apostate Nietzsche, grown incapable of either tolerating Wagner or ignoring him. We can see what both men meant; but Wagner's most incandescent sonic triumphs evoke, rather, *Henry V*'s chorus: “a muse of fire, that would ascend / The brightest heaven of invention.” ■

*R.J. Stove lives in Melbourne, Australia.*

## VIENNA'S OPERA HOUSE GAVE TRISTAN 77 REHEARSALS THEN ABANDONED IT AS UNPERFORMABLE.

on, just as a serpent moves, which makes a fulcrum of its own body, and seems for ever twisting and untwisting its own strength.”

In 1864, Wagner turned 51, impregnated Cosima (both parties being still married to others), and received the first of those kingly benefactions that changed his life. By 1864, with a brace of seemingly superfluous operatic manuscripts under his belt (Vienna's opera house gave Tristan 77 rehearsals and then abandoned it as unperformable), he had so damaged his career that a brilliant future for him could have been predicted only by a lunatic. Fortunately there emerged just such a lunatic: that besotted *deus ex machina* Ludwig II. The enthusiasm—not to mention a villa and hard cash—that Ludwig lavished on the composer led to Munich's malcontents (wrongly) berating Wagner as a regal catamite. Köhler's narrative quickens when he recounts the sort-of-happy ending to Wagner's earthly existence (1864-1883), with Cosima as Wagner's ferocious champion and with

waged an impressive blackmailing operation against Ludwig, who dwelt in fear that his homosexual appetites would figure in a court case. Wagner himself leveled similar charges at Nietzsche, charges that in their falsehood reduced their victim to uncontrollable rage, though others will perhaps discern in Nietzsche's wrath at Nietzschean amorality a certain piquancy.

Somehow, amid all this strife and much else, Bayreuth came into being. Audiences for the complete *Ring*'s 1876 premiere included Kaiser Wilhelm I (who with his habitual clumsiness told the composer, “I never thought you'd bring it off”), the faithful Ludwig, and Brazil's Emperor Pedro II, as well as Liszt, Bruckner, Saint-Saëns, and Tchaikovsky. But should this theatrical shrine have outlived Wagner? To contemplate Bayreuth's record since 1883 is to conclude that however needful the institution was in Wagner's lifetime, its survival now harms his cause, just as Stratford-on-Avon's voguish tourist galli-

[*Namath: A Biography*, Mark Kriegel, Viking, 447 pages]

# Super Bowl Superhero

By Robert Stacy McCain

WHEN SUPER BOWL XXXIX kicks off Feb. 6 in Jacksonville, Florida, more than 140 million television viewers will tune in to watch the spectacle. The half-time show is not likely to be as sensational as last year's MTV-produced extravaganza, complete with a breast-baring "wardrobe malfunction" by Janet Jackson. Millions, however, will watch the show simply to see the commercials. The ten most-watched TV events in history are all Super Bowls, and advertisers use the opportunity to debut their most imaginative ads. At about \$2 million per 30-second spot—Anheuser-Busch alone will buy some \$25 million worth of commercial time—the Super Bowl XXXIX broadcast will generate more than \$100 million for the Fox network.

Oh, and there will also be a football game.

The commercial glitz and tawdry showbiz aspects of the Super Bowl have long since eclipsed whatever athletic significance the event once had. Much the same is true for Joe Namath, perhaps the man most responsible for making the elaborate hoopla of Super Bowl Sunday an annual ritual of American life.

Namath was one of the most gifted athletes ever to lace on a pair of cleats—the first pro quarterback to pass for more than 4,000 yards in a season—but his celebrity status, his notorious booze-and-broads lifestyle, and his identity as a symbol of the '60s sexual revolution have obscured his tremendous athletic accomplishments.

His abilities carried Namath from the small steel-mill town of Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania to international fame in the 1960s. He was the brightest star of the game at a time when televised sports were transformed from an occasional

weekend amusement shown in black and white into the full-color prime-time spectacle of Super Bowl Sunday.

Few of the millions of viewers who tune in Feb. 6 will know that the Super Bowl wasn't "Super"—neither officially nor in fact—until the third such game was played in 1969. The game originated with the 1966 deal that merged the National Football League with the upstart American Football League. Namath had something to do with that merger. In December 1964, when it was reported that the University of Alabama's senior quarterback was prepared to sign with the AFL's New York Jets for an unheard-of \$400,000, the headline-making offer signaled that the new league meant to compete seriously with the NFL. The bidding war for football talent eventually prompted a merger, and as part of the deal, the NFL-AFL championship game was first played in January 1967.

More than 30,000 seats were empty for that 1967 game, a mere afterthought to the NFL championship game. As Mark Kriegel writes in his Namath biography, "Those foolish enough to pay \$12 a ticket—an outrageous sum in those days—were rewarded with the Green Bay Packers' less-than-exciting win over

the reason was Joe Namath.

With his shaggy hair and sideburns, his dark Hungarian looks, and his slouchy posture, Namath defied the crew-cut all-American QB image typified by Bart Starr of the Packers and Johnny Unitas of the Colts. Shortly after he'd signed with the New York Jets, a *Sports Illustrated* cover photo featured Namath against a backdrop of Broadway lights, and the nickname "Broadway Joe" stuck, caricaturing him (not altogether unfairly) as a cocky, high-living showoff.

The brash young quarterback from the brash young league upped the ante for the 1969 Super Bowl when, at a dinner the Thursday night before the game, he declared, "The Jets will win Sunday. I guarantee it."

The Guarantee: With that one gesture, made in response to a heckler at a Miami Touchdown Club banquet, Namath ensured that the Jets' 16-7 win over the Colts in Super Bowl III would establish a legend that another 35 Super Bowls (most of them boring, lopsided blowouts) could do nothing to diminish.

Like the championship game he made famous, the memory of Joe Namath today is more about showbiz spectacle than about football—and that's a shame

NAMATH WAS ONE OF THE **MOST GIFTED ATHLETES** EVER TO LACE ON A PAIR OF CLEATS—THE **FIRST PROFESSIONAL QUARTERBACK** TO PASS FOR MORE THAN **4,000 YARDS IN A SEASON.**

the Kansas City Chiefs, 35-10, a score that seemed to vindicate the notion of the AFL as a Mickey Mouse league." The second NFL-AFL title match in 1968 was hardly more impressive: the Packers stomped the Oakland Raiders 33-14.

When the AFL's Jets took the field at the Orange Bowl in Miami on Jan. 12, 1969, they were 18-point underdogs to the NFL's Baltimore Colts. The game that followed, Kriegel aptly notes, was "sloppy, full of folly, frustration, and squandered opportunity." But it was also "the stuff of legend," as Kriegel says, and

because Namath was easily one of the most talented players the game had ever known. No less a judge of football prowess than legendary Alabama coach Paul "Bear" Bryant pronounced Namath the greatest athlete he'd ever seen. In 12 pro seasons, Namath completed 1,886 passes for 27,663 yards and 173 touchdowns, despite repeated injuries to his famously damaged knees.

Whatever his feats on the field, however, Namath was more than a football player. He was a symbol, an icon of an era of sudden cultural change. Namath's