

Being Wagner: The Triumph of the Will—
Simon Callow

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While there are successes in Simon Callow's book *Being Wagner*, there are also significant failures. The most substantive success of the book is its accessibility. Written for a non-specialist audience by a non-specialist (Callow, while familiar with Wagner's musical output, is a relative newcomer to other aspects of Wagner's life), *Being Wagner* is an easygoing, readable book. Another success is that Callow's book is often genuinely funny: a hard feat for a biography treating a serious cultural figure such as Wagner. This is particularly so between pages 26 and 31, as seen in Callow's discussion of Wagner's wedding to his first wife:

The heartless frivolity of the event chilled Wagner, he said. The pastor, at least, took it seriously – maybe rather too seriously, delivering a severe sermon in which he warned them of dark days ahead. There was, he said, a glimmer of hope: they would be helped by an unknown friend. Wagner perked up at this: who was this mysterious benefactor, he wanted to know. To his considerable disappointment, it turned out to be Jesus. (30)

Passages such as these certainly make for entertaining reading, but merits such as these are largely overshadowed by a number of failures of this text.

The first striking thing about this book is the, frankly, weird book cover: a famous satirical cartoon of Wagner, with an image of Callow himself protruding from Wagner's open cranium. One cannot help but infer a bit of arrogance, intentional or not, here. It is as if the author—or perhaps the publisher, hoping to shift more copies by placing the face of Callow, a successful actor, on the front cover—implies that this book will be able to do what other books on Wagner haven't been able to: to get inside Wagner's head. Although this is not the explicitly stated intent of the author, the cover gives one the sense that it just might be.

Both the title of the text and the author's rationale for writing it confirm these initial suspicions. Indeed, Callow hopes to discover "what it was like to *be* Wagner" (cover overleaf; italics mine)—or, as he remarks in the foreword, "what it was like to be near" him (xvi). The foreword closes with an orienting question for the text that Callow presumably intends to answer by book's end: "What was going on inside Wagner's head?" (xxii). Callow's reasons for providing such an account, one presumes, is that the author doesn't think previous biographies and works on Wagner have been successful in doing this; otherwise, why would Callow so heavily frame the book around this question?

In light of this orientation, one must ask: does Callow succeed in presenting what it was like to be Richard Wagner? In some places, arguably, yes; in many others, no. For a book that claims to offer insight into what it was like to *be* Wagner, it makes little attempt to clarify what is surely a central issue for providing such an insight: namely, what (and how) Wagner thought, and how his thinking developed. The lack of sustained treatment of the philosophical development of Wagner's thought—integral for successfully grasping Wagner's motivations for both the subject matter of his works, and his reasons for presenting them as such (and so, too, the often obsessively defined ways in which he dictated their performance)—is notable. When Callow does attempt to provide such a treatment, the end product comes out as weak or simply inaccurate.

One case of this is a particularly fascinating section voiced by Montmartre in *Death in Paris* that Callow quotes at length (44) yet leaves completely unanalyzed. In the section, Montmartre remarks:

I believe in God, Mozart and Beethoven, likewise in their disciples and apostles; I believe in the Holy Ghost and in the truth of the one and indivisible Art; I believe this Art to be an emanation of God that dwells in the hearts of all enlightened men[...] I believe that all men are blessed through Art and that it is therefore permissible to die of hunger for its sake [...] On the other hand I believe that the souls of Art's true disciples will be transfigured in a shining heavenly fabric of glorious harmony and be united therein forever – may such a lot be mine! Amen! (44)

It is unfortunate that all Callow is able to muster about this truly telling statement is that it "may well have represented Wagner's deepest feelings" (Ibid.). Callow inverts the alchemist's trick here, and turns a passage that should be golden evidence for the kind of analysis he wishes to offer into something leaden, making this statement easy for the reader to pass over. A proper

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appraisal of this section would claim that it offers a telling insight into *what it was like to be* Wagner at the time of this writing. It utilises satire and anti-religious lampoon to deliver a significant glimpse into the psychology of a man who holds the role of art integrally to the task of salvation. The failure to analyse such a significant passage calls the credibility of Callow's book into question. In this case, this is especially true, as *Death in Paris* remained one of Wagner's favorite stories, and he continued to return to it throughout his later life (reading it aloud to Cosima again in 1878, as we learn from her diaries).

This failure of Callow's, however, is best exemplified by his inadequate treatment of Schopenhauer's life-changing influence on Wagner. For instance, in his terse discussion of Wagner's "intellectual avenues" of pursuit (108), Callow gets Schopenhauer's philosophy flatly wrong when he writes that "Schopenhauer describes the world as an illusion, and an enslaving one at that, which can only be escaped by connecting to another dimension—that of erotic love" (109). He also writes: "the only human experience that is in any sense real [for Schopenhauer] is sexual love, which, in its all-consuming intensity, obliterates the material world" (ibid). He later describes "deep, transcendent, self-obliviating physical love, in the Schopenhauerian sense" (155).

The descriptions are short, yet this doesn't save them from disaster. Callow's descriptions here will be surprising to anyone who has taken the time to actually read Schopenhauer. (Somewhat incredibly, Callow at least at one point calls Schopenhauer's main work *The World as Will and Presentation* (111), which decent editorial scrutiny should have rectified.) Schopenhauer repeatedly offers descriptions of the sexual impulse as, variously, "the most decided affirmation of the will to live" (*WWR*, I, 328), something which Nature impels "with all her force" (Ibid., 330). In the second volume of the *World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer is consistent on these matters, arguing that the "[s]exual impulse is the kernel of the will-to-live and consequently the concentration of all willing" (*WWR*, II, 514), that it is the "invisible central point of all action and conduct" (*WWR*, II, 513), and that humans (or more specifically for Schopenhauer, men) are the sexual impulse made "concrete" (*WWR*, II, 514). Any distinction that might be exploited in support of Callow between sex and eros in a broader, less primal, and more intellectualized sense is rendered obsolete by Schopenhauer, who further writes of "that far-sighted, definite, and capricious selection for the satisfaction of the sexual impulse which is called love" (*WWR*, II, 536).

This theme continues elsewhere in Schopenhauer. In his *Essays and Aphorisms*, he writes, "Coitus is the sign that, despite every increase in illumination through the intellect, the will to live continues to exist in time"

(64/5). Not content with confining this description of the sexual impulse to metaphysics, Schopenhauer mixes in his notorious misogyny for good measure: "...has it not been noticed that sexual desire, especially when concentrated into infatuation through fixation on a particular woman, is the quintessence of this noble world's imposture, since it promises so excessively much and performs so miserably little?" (Ibid., 64) This stands in stark contrast to Callow's contention that Schopenhauer and Wagner were of one mind regarding recourse to the erotic as a form of salvation.

If Callow was unsure of his subject matter here, it would have been better to duck out of treating the intricacies of such philosophical exposition altogether, rather than offering the confused and inaccurate picture that he does. Although the "Acknowledgements" section at the end of *Being Wagner* has Callow thanking Bryan Magee for conversations on philosophical matters (221), it seems Callow could have benefited from a few more extensive conversations. Indeed, this issue is treated adequately in Magee's book, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, which it would have been useful to consult (216–218).

Callow also fails to account for the development of Wagner's tensional and crucially insightful relationship with religion, and the prospects that one might glean from it any insights into what Wagner wanted—at least onstage—to promote: namely, a secular form of salvation. Like Wagner, Schopenhauer too had an uneasy relation with the notion of salvation (as the prospect of the "cessation of the will"). Furthermore, as in the case of Wagner, Schopenhauer's notion of salvation relies on religious rhetoric and experiences (drawn from Buddhism, Christianity, the *Upanishads*, and Plato) seemingly irreducible to purely secular or atheistic accounts. *Being Wagner* would have benefitted from a treatment of this sort, by discussing similar such issues in relation to Wagner.

Callow also leaves the development (or regress, depending on who you ask) in Wagner's religiosity insufficiently addressed. One might be reminded here of Nietzsche's proclaimed disgust at *Parsifal* as Wagner's "alliance of beauty and sickness," particularly given Nietzsche's idolization of Wagner during their near-decade long acquaintance. Nietzsche saw in Wagner a resignation in the face of what Nietzsche saw to be the life-denying tenets of Christian morality: given the grounds upon which Nietzsche offered this famous critique of Wagner, it would have been prudent for Callow to address the synthesis of religiosity and Schopenhauerianism in Wagner's later works. The issue of how and to what extent Wagner aligned himself with both a version of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, and to a particularly renunciatory version of Christianity, should have been covered so as to further promote what it was like to be Wagner during the production of *Parsifal*.

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How this relationship between Christianity and Schopenhauerian pessimism bears upon the content of Wagner's ideals for his works, and the mind that wished to transmit this content (which Callow is aiming to get inside), is important yet overlooked. Although Callow draws attention to Parsifal's climbing the altar steps and taking the Grail—"Miracle of supreme salvation, the Redeemer redeemed!" (189)—he writes that *Parsifal* "is not a Christian piece. It is, at its absolute core, a Schopenhauerian piece: it rejects the world as nothing but a tragic illusion" (187). Such a claim seems to ignore the relationship between Christianity and Schopenhauer's thought, on a still-significant rhetorical level at the very least. Here, one ought to again think Nietzsche's analysis of Parsifal as a work that combines both a Christian ethic of renunciation and Christianity's unconditional will to truth. According to Nietzsche, however, such a combination reaches its culmination precisely in Schopenhauer's pessimism. Indeed, even Schopenhauer writes that "the true soul of the New Testament is undoubtedly the spirit of asceticism. This spirit of asceticism is precisely denial of the will to live... In this sense my doctrine could be called the true Christian philosophy, however paradoxical this may seem to those who refuse to penetrate to the heart of the matter but prefer its superficialities." (*Essays and Aphorisms* 62/3).

A final bone of contention: it is not at all clear what Callow is trying to achieve with the subtitle of the book, *The Triumph of the Will*. Is Callow trying to reclaim it from Riefenstahl's propagandistic usage? Given the controversies surrounding Wagner and his appropriation by the Nazis, this is a curious move, and one that is emblematic of Callow's conflicting claims regarding Wagner's relationship with nationalism. Thomas Carlyle once described the *Ring* cycle as the *Iliad* of the North: the *Iliad* bound the notion of ancient Greek nationhood around a mythical story, from which the Greeks took ideals about religion, conquest, social and political conduct, and the ethical life. So too would Wagner's *Ring* attempt to do this, as a created Gesamtkunstwerk intended to forge and demarcate a more concrete conception of German national identity.

At one point, Callow contends that Wagner was no musical nationalist (43), but this falls out of synch even with Callow's own descriptions both of Wagner and the *Ring* cycle. From the outset, Callow talks of the *Ring's* "Teutonic tub-thumping" (xxi), describing its impetus as the promotion of a new "German" world based on pagan myths and heroic ancient figures (figures easy to "nationalize", as it were) (49, 89). For Callow, Wagner's Germanness underlies Wagner's artistic energies and creativity (48, 127). As a piece of evidence from Wagner's life that might evade the charge of offering (at least) an aestheticized form of nationalism, Callow discusses *The Ban on Love* and its Mediterranean

influences (48–9); but aside from this early work and a smattering of other suggestive phrases, how convincing is the idea that Wagner embraced internationalist values, both in his life and in transmitting them into his other works? Indeed, Wagner’s socialist tendencies were thoroughly nationalist; his critique of capitalism was firmly rooted in the *ursprünglich* German myths which he claimed resonated in the deepest chambers of his soul, alongside his quasi-Schopenhauerian outlook (104). Even at the relatively late period of the *Ring* and Bayreuth in his life, Wagner affirmed revolutionary tendencies, alongside his Christianity and a renewed commitment to his own form of German nationalism (177). Callow himself remarks upon this.

Thus in light of these conflicting passages, it is unclear what Callow actually thinks. It seems that Callow, while rightly willing to pass moral judgement about Wagner’s anti-Semitism, is less willing to associate Wagner with nationalism. But the numerous examples from across Wagner’s life—of nationalism, socialism and revolutionary politics—resonate together as one disturbing psychological disposition that Callow seems to ignore. Indeed, from the pseudo-history and the blood myths of the “The Wibelungs” essay of 1848 (143), to attempts to solicit the new Kaiser Wilhelm and Bismarck for funds (166), the evidence for Wagner’s “musical nationalism” stacks up, even if Callow writes ambivalently about it. Of course, one need not be a musical nationalist (or indeed any other kind of nationalist) to enjoy Wagner. Given Callow’s claims to be getting inside the head of Wagner, however, it is a shame that it is left unclear what exactly Callow thinks about one of the central issues of contention surrounding Wagner’s legacy.

In sum, while Callow’s *Being Wagner* serves as an accessible introduction to the life of this titanic and thoroughly Teutonic figure, it ultimately falls flat of its central aim and misunderstands key points of influence for Wagner. This biography offers only glimpses of Wagner’s psychology, and given Callow’s stated aims for the text, much more should reasonably be expected on this front. The book is replete with references to the un- or sub-conscious processes of mental life, both in Wagner and in humans in general (xv, 45 -6, 56, 57, 85 - 86, 89, 147, 167, and 168), but rarely are such processes subject to the analysis they warrant. Any work that claims to provide an analysis of what it is to “be Wagner” really should be doing better.

Works Cited

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