

# 1. Wagner Lives

## *Issues in Autobiography*

Wagner's biography has been researched to within an inch of its life. It has been dissected, drenched with no end of detail, eroticized, vilified, heroized, and several times filmed.<sup>1</sup> Its foundations are the collected writings, which in the first instance Wagner edited himself in the spirit of an autobiographical enterprise;<sup>2</sup> a separate and lengthy autobiography, *Mein Leben* (My life), dictated to his mistress and later second wife, Cosima, daughter of Franz Liszt;<sup>3</sup> notebooks and diaries;<sup>4</sup> photographs and portraits;<sup>5</sup> an unusually large number of letters;<sup>6</sup> mounds of anecdotal gossip; and no end of documentation on the way he lived and how his contemporaries saw him.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, he is almost the exact antithesis of Shakespeare, whose life, or at least what is safely known about it in terms of verifiable "facts," can be told in a relatively short space. I have summarized the history of Wagner biography elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Here I want to look at Wagner's own portrayals of his life, some issues they raise, the philosophical spirit in which I believe they were attempted, and their effect on the generation that came immediately after him.

Biographers of Shakespeare have had to resort to imaginative reconstructions and not infrequently to knowingly forged documents that have accorded their subject more lives than a cat.<sup>9</sup> In stark contrast, there appears to be only one life for Wagner, which he did his best to determine in large part himself. It was also a singular life in another sense: he was a maverick, turbulent, exceptionally creative on many levels, never afraid to attempt the impossible, uncannily prescient of modern thinking about media and human psychology, genuinely revolutionary in aspiration, and yet prone to an institutionalism with protofascist traits that were largely, but not only, the result of posthumous aggrandizement on the part of his apostles and admirers.<sup>10</sup> In all its colorful detail, the story has been repeated so many

times—with its hero's adventures, amours, tribulations, and eventual acceptance among Western music's cultural elite all in their proper place—that at first sight it seems like a never-changing biographical myth.

To speak of Wagner's life in the singular, however, is seriously to underestimate his own sophisticated view of biography and autobiography and the appreciable distance of that view from the standard mapping of famous lives in the nineteenth century. Lytton Strachey rightly spoke in his *Eminent Victorians* of the "air of slow, funereal barbarism"<sup>11</sup> of the (normally) two leather-bound volumes produced by the biographical undertaker of Victorian times, whose bounden duty it was to incarcerate the distinguished personage in an everlasting literary mausoleum. There is no reason to suppose that Wagner would have disagreed with him. Strachey admitted the value of these gloomy reservoirs of information for his speculative approach to biography. And Wagner, too, was not slow to appoint an official biographer, Carl Friedrich Glasenapp, who began with the obligatory two volumes, later expanding them to six after Wagner's death.<sup>12</sup> A schoolteacher from Riga, Glasenapp not only had frequent personal contact with the subject of the biography and hence ample opportunity to get acquainted at first hand with his memories and intentions, but he also obtained privileged access to many sources zealously protected by his immediate family. These included the diaries of Cosima, which she continued from day to day with a stubborn and almost bureaucratic thoroughness for fourteen years until just before Wagner's death, supremely conscious of the biographical burden that had been placed upon her.

#### THE "LIFE" AS A TOTALITY

Wagner began dictating *Mein Leben* to Cosima on 17 July 1865 in Munich at the request of King Ludwig II of Bavaria. He finally finished its fourth and last part (covering the years 1861–64) fifteen years later in Naples on 25 July 1880. The first page of the manuscript (entirely in Cosima's hand except for corrections and additions by Wagner) bears their entwined initials "W[agner] R[ichard] C[osima]."<sup>13</sup> This signaling of a pact between them was subsequently reinforced by the beginning of Cosima's diaries four years later on 1 January 1869, effectively turning her for good into the historian of her husband-to-be (they were married on 25 August 1870), despite her ostensible intention, expressed in the very first entry, to convey to her children "every hour" of her life, and not his. There were occasional doubts:

I want to convey the essence of R. to my children with all possible clarity, and in consequence try to set down every word he speaks, even

about myself, forgetting all modesty, so that the picture be kept intact for them—yet I feel the attempt is failing: how can I convey the sound of his voice, the intonations, his movements, and the expression in his eyes? But perhaps it is better than nothing, and so I shall continue with my bungling efforts.<sup>14</sup>

Still, Cosima's awareness that the aging composer would never have the inclination or the energy to complete *Mein Leben*, which ends with the young king calling Wagner to Munich in 1864 and pulling him out of a spiral of impecuniousness and anxiety, made her increasingly certain that she would be regarded as the authentic biographical conduit of his life's final stage. Not unjustly described by one prominent critic as "the foreign secretary of the Holy Grail,"<sup>15</sup> she soon became, after his death, the long-standing prime minister of everything concerning the perpetual refurbishment of his legacy. Only three days before he died, he told her that he still intended "to finish the biography."<sup>16</sup> Even this was only the last remnant of an earlier promise he had made to the king that he would continue *Mein Leben* up to the moment his wife had herself begun "to keep a most exact record of my life and work, so that after my death my whole life up to the last hour will one day be available in every detail [*lückenlos*] to my son."<sup>17</sup>

Wagner's ambition to present his life to his son in its totality with the aid of Cosima's diaries raises three complicated issues. First, in terms of its narrative strategy and underlying ideology, the concept depends to no small extent on the inclusion of his own death. Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions*, the first part of which was published in 1782, placed the vanity of his life and its immediacy in the foreground—unremitting self-knowledge as a bastion against the untruth of the mere biographer's "ingenious fictions"<sup>18</sup>—and did not envisage the prospect of death because the present emotion of the subject and the reliving of the subject's history in the act of writing were for him all important. A certain confessional style and the reenactment of history subjectively in the moment were crucial for Wagner too, as we shall see. The creation of the self through writing, however, was conditioned in Wagner's case to a great extent by a score settling with the outer world. In turn this outer world was envisaged as a history in need of "correction" that must culminate, according to the metaphysics of pessimism that pervade his works and writings, in the welcome escape of the subject in death.

A second issue arises from the fact that anyone wanting to present his life in literary form—especially a life like Wagner's, which has been lived in the supposed spirit of a Greek tragic hero transposed into the mayhem of the modern world (a common male autobiographical model in the nineteenth

century)—knows that it will be impossible to narrate the all-important death of the hero in his own words. To put it another way, the search for wholeness in autobiography is plagued by the difficulty that in the real world one cannot tell the tale from a position beyond the grave, unlike countless fictions (e.g., the film *Sunset Boulevard*) that take advantage of a narrator miraculously able to recount her own death and the logical steps of the life that led up to it. There is no doubt that the older Wagner became the more remorselessly he pursued this idea of the single life “up to the last hour” that could be presented to posterity as a unified vision. He did not enter into intimate relations with Cosima solely to ensure the survival of that vision. But she was nearly twenty-five years younger (and outlived him by forty-seven years), making it clear from the start that she would in all likelihood be in a position to finish the story on his behalf.

The much-discussed issue of gender relations in nineteenth-century biography and autobiography is a third issue,<sup>19</sup> if only because the striking narrative reticence of Cosima’s diaries does not always conceal the real sentiments of a strong-willed woman under the severe constraints of obligatory self-erasure. On 21 November 1874, the momentous day that saw the completion of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* twenty-six years after it had been started, Cosima experienced some shabby treatment from her husband. Instead of uttering the usual passive words of the admiring wife, she involved her own feelings in the situation with some unusually revealing thoughts. Launching into a bitter description of how she and her children had burst into tears, she asked, not without self-pitying rhetoric, why she was being denied the right to celebrate the completion of the grand project to which she had dedicated her life “in suffering”: “How could I express my gratitude other than through the destruction of all urges toward a personal existence? . . . If a genius completes his flight at so lofty a level, what is left for a poor woman to do [except] to suffer in love and rapture?” What follows in the diaries is still more eloquent. There are no entries at all until 3 December 1874: almost two weeks of complete silence.

The redoubtable Mrs. Oliphant, discussing Lucy Hutchinson’s *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson* in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1882, pointed out that this “noble memorial” to Lucy’s deceased Roundhead husband was erected without a single “I” in the narrative, followed by Lucy effacing herself, “as if she died with him.”<sup>20</sup> Cosima did use the “I,” as we have just seen, though for much of the time it was part of a tense conformity to the ideology of female sacrifice in the name of male authority that included recording the life of that authority “up to the last hour.” But on 13 February 1883, the day of Wagner’s death, Cosima wrote nothing. She took

no food for hours, insisted on being alone with his body for the rest of the day and night, cut off her hair and laid it in his coffin, accompanied the body from Venice back to Bayreuth in black robes, and remained hidden from sight for more than a year, receiving nobody and speaking only to her children. Only through Lucy Hutchinson's reticence about her role in her husband's life, Mrs. Oliphant suggested, did she achieve immortality for herself. Stung by rumors of an imminent decline in the fortunes of the Bayreuth Festival Theatre, Cosima returned from her condition of extreme self-denial to become its renowned guardian for more than twenty years—a right she knew she had earned in the eyes of society after years of discreet labor and self-effacement, most of them recorded faithfully by the diaries that were to secure her lasting fame.

#### THE REWRITTEN DIARY AND METAPHORS OF EXPERIENCE

In terms of genuine autobiography, Wagner's life remains a fragment to this day. Moreover, the fate of the diary he started when barely in his twenties in correct anticipation of his illustrious career is indicative of an unexpected complexity with respect to not only sources, but also the nuanced, and indeed modern, view he took of the whole enterprise. The early diary is known as "The Red Pocket-Book" (*Die rote Brieftasche*) because in *Mein Leben* Wagner reports that in August 1835 he began using "a large red pocket-book" to make notes for his "future [auto-]biography."<sup>21</sup> To King Ludwig he described this document as a means of sketching "vivid tokens of experience, as if for the eye" (*plastische Merkmale des Erlebten, gleichsam für das Auge*) in order to hold on to a quasi-visible memory of his impressions and their "inner feeling" (*des innerlich Empfundenen*).<sup>22</sup> This striking statement transforms the diary at once from an omnium-gatherum of facts into tiny snapshots of a life serving to remind their creator of his subjective reactions to the events in it.

A few years later, Wagner's recording of his life became still more interesting. At the point in the dictation of *Mein Leben* when, within its narrative, his health and finances really began to take a turn for the worse (Easter 1846), he sat down—in February 1868—to create a second diary out of the first. These revised "vivid tokens of experience" are known as the "Annals," which in their complete form run to thirty-six pages of print.<sup>23</sup> Except for its first four pages, which only go as far as Wagner's arrival in Paris on 17 September 1839, the rest of "The Red Pocket-Book" is lost, most commentators assuming, though no proof exists, that Wagner simply destroyed it.

According to one, “the further forward he got in the portrayal of his life, the more he felt constrained by the fact that the Pocket-Book naturally contained a great deal that was impossible to dictate [in *Mein Leben*] to his friend and later wife.” Given Cosima’s forbearance in her diaries toward his past affairs, the observation is not entirely compelling. But the same scholar then came up with a less banal reason: “he also wanted to see some things *differently* to when he first made a note of them under the immediate impression of what he was experiencing at the time.”<sup>24</sup>

All of a sudden we are in Proustian territory. To support the idea of autobiography as process—never finished, never complacent—Wagner clearly felt the need to confront experiences noted in the past with an immediate response in the present to his recorded memory of them. Or, as Georges Gusdorf put it in a seminal essay on autobiography, “a second reading of experience . . . is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself a consciousness of it.”<sup>25</sup> The factual discrepancies between Wagner’s earlier and later accounts of himself and their many striking changes of emphasis can therefore be accounted for by his instinct for a double-edged narrative informed by a philosophical awareness of its own process. He regarded his life as a totality—an epitaph configured by the element of death as an endpoint that paradoxically attempted to convey his life as he lived it. But he also wished to present his life as a series of lived “moments” that resist the idea of a finite end, a contradiction reflecting both an underlying discomfiture with the image of himself as eternal monument, and a hankering for the status that image enjoyed in the nineteenth century.

Skeptical observers with forensic instincts may wince at this argument, unable to quell suspicions of an elaborate ruse to justify some barefaced lying on Wagner’s part. Indeed, the problematic aspect of Gusdorf’s argument is the claim that the “literary, artistic function” of autobiography is of greater importance than its “historic and objective function in spite of the claims made by positivist criticism.”<sup>26</sup> Gusdorf admits that the historian has a duty to countermand self-biography with cold facts and alternative narratives. But he is not prepared to concede the exposure of the “literary, artistic function” as ideology, or, to put it more benignly, to admit that the literary approach itself can serve to distort fact in the name of a larger vision with its own subjective “truth” that transforms harsh realities into positive and powerful images. Wagner’s claim in *Mein Leben* that he heard Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient sing Leonore in Beethoven’s *Fidelio* in Leipzig in 1829 has no evidence to support it. And the scholarly fuss that ensued after the present author wrote that in *The New Grove Wagner* (1984) still failed to produce any.<sup>27</sup> The observation was not meant to discredit Wagner.

On the contrary, it was intended to draw attention to a deliberately constructed metaphor of huge psychological importance to him in his later years: the great singer of his youth as a redemptive “woman of the future,” carrying the spirit of Beethoven and the destiny of true German art in her hands.

And this is not the only alternative story. Take the claim about the “impoverished” revolutionary in exile in Switzerland in the 1850s.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to the impression given in *Mein Leben*, Wagner was accorded privileged treatment from the outset and received substantial financial support, including huge sums from Otto Wesendonck, whose total patronage was second only to that of King Ludwig II.<sup>29</sup> But his royalist sympathies, anti-Semitism, ultraconservative friends (like Bernhard Spyri), dalliance with the archaic, love of ostentatious luxury (Liszt wrote to the Princess of Sayn-Wittgenstein of his “dandified” appearance and penchant for wearing “a hat of slightly pinkish white”), and elitist disdain for democracy gradually alienated most of his fellow émigrés with liberal views, including Georg Herwegh, who came to know a rather different Wagner from the one they were expecting. In *Mein Leben* Wagner needed the myth of the genius among the scrooges and inhibited intellectuals in “this little philistine state”<sup>30</sup> to downplay the support he had received from Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck, and for good measure to gloat that Zurich had thus forfeited its chances of becoming his Bayreuth.

The creator of the momentous artwork of the future may have invented a tendentious yarn about how he narrowly escaped the land of the cuckoo clock. Equally, in terms of his literary view of autobiography that has no qualms about the use of fictional strategies, the reasons for its tendentiousness are not entirely trivial. Wagner tells of exciting and dangerous expeditions up sheer-faced glaciers and precipitous descents from vertiginous peaks at this memorable moment in *Mein Leben*, all of these stories tinged with entertaining theatrical exaggeration. But a comment to the effect that a letter from Herwegh dragged him down from his “lofty Alpine impressions into the unpleasant everyday world”<sup>31</sup> immediately suggests that the exaggeration is actually a way of bringing home to the reader the contrasting “lives” of the artist: the one emphatically identified with subjective freedom and nature, the other marooned in the narrow confines of day-to-day living. Wagner’s devout Swiss biographer, Max Fehr, who naïvely claimed that for all Wagnerians Switzerland is “hallowed soil,”<sup>32</sup> reports that in 1855 Wagner seriously considered as the festival site for the first production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* the village of Brunnen on Lake Lucerne, a location in full view of the spectacular mountains of Uri and the famous Mythenstein near

Rütli, the birthplace of the Swiss confederation. Lake barges fastened together by carpenters in the bay of Brunnen would function as the stage, while the audience would be seated along the shore. Apparently the whole fantastic plan was only abandoned when the realization dawned that the waters in the bay could become disruptive in stormy weather. But whether the story is accurate or not (Fehr gives no source),<sup>33</sup> the very idea of striving for a myth-laden natural setting for the performance of the *Ring* is manna to the vivid Wagnerian imagination, immediately setting into relief as incidental the mere “facts” of the real life of the artist, which can be distorted at will to accommodate the larger picture.

This is still more obvious in a fascinating autobiographical essay, *A Communication to My Friends* (1851), written near the beginning of Wagner’s stay in Switzerland, in which (in a move familiar to students of early romanticism) he not only depicts his life as opposed to the mundane world, in which he exists in reality, but he also equates it with the work of art itself. “I make *life*,” he wrote, “the first and foremost condition of the phenomenon of the work of art,” later defining this phenomenon as a “development *in time*.”<sup>34</sup> As his emphases suggest, arid notions of timelessness and a “life” not lived to the fullest do not define the present; only the life of the true artist and the work of art together are its “moving, willing, and fashioning organ.”<sup>35</sup> His view is not identical with the antichronological aesthetic of some of the new biographers in the 1920s (e.g., the self-styled “psychographer” Gamaliel Bradford),<sup>36</sup> though the striking psychological and philosophical ambition of *A Communication to My Friends* does place it well beyond those nineteenth-century biographies that he regularly read and criticized.<sup>37</sup>

Yet it is not generally realized how obsessed Wagner was with chronology; he often dated his manuscripts not just to the day, but to the exact time of day.<sup>38</sup> This Goethe-like ambition to determine history as his own philologist, so to speak, looks at first sight like an attempt to create a “timeless” archival monument in keeping with conventional nineteenth-century biographical ethics, contrary to his professed views on the subject. The logic of his narrative, however, suggests that the punctilious dating of manuscripts is merely the converse activity of the genuine artist who, as the dynamic “organ” of presence, is therefore all the more capable of escaping the chronological force of history. The ideal life is never equivalent to the mere dating of musical works, only to its exact opposite: the experience of time in the works’ actual realization. Or, as he put it in the forward to his collected writings, “[The reader] will thus inwardly grasp that these are not the collected works of a writer, but a record of the life’s work of an artist, who

in his art, over and above the general pattern of things, sought life. This life, however, is precisely the *true music*, which I recognize as the only genuine art of the present and the future."<sup>39</sup>

THE COLLECTED WRITINGS AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY:  
THE USES AND ABUSES OF CHRONOLOGY

Wagner edited ten volumes of his collected writings, the first nine appearing in the early 1870s and a tenth in 1883, the year of his death. In the foreword—in many respects a key text for understanding his entire output—he says that he is publishing his writings in chronological sequence in order to show “how the most diverse of occasions always awoke in me *one* motif that is at the core of my entire project as a writer, even though my writings are so dispersed.” Almost in the same breath, however, he claims that ordering the writings according to when they were written “has the advantage of preventing the impression of a truly scientific system among so much that is disparate.”<sup>40</sup> Nowhere is the contradiction explained. Wagner almost certainly knew that there could never be a truly unified method of bringing together such diverse subjects as autobiography, history, philosophy, politics, music theory, the texts of the works themselves, and performance practice as an ordered system. He also realized that in order to make his life seem like a consequential unfolding of events he had to modify the writings and their ordering at significant junctures. Indeed, the occasional manipulation of chronology, discreet addition, self-censorship, minor rewriting, telling omission, and many other modifications amounting to a “second” experience of the original texts are why, among other reasons, the ten-volume edition must count as one of the most illuminating parts of his autobiographical legacy.

The early “Autobiographical Sketch” (1843), placed right at the start of the collected writings (out of chronological order), is an early example of how Wagner presented his various “lives.” The artist who has to fight for his existence in the real world of politics and poverty is set against the occasional episode when the artist experiences time creatively outside that world in a nearly mythic realm, as in the famous narrative about the ship’s stormy journey from Riga to London via Norway that inspired him to write *Der fliegende Holländer*. The essay ends with a suddenly redemptive sentence that hankers after a mythical dimension of time beyond all pedantry and dryly objective chronology. Nothing could have better suited the intransigent Francophobe that Wagner had become in the meantime when he set about preparing the publication of his collected writings in 1871: “I left

[Paris] in the spring of 1842. For the first time I saw the Rhine: with glistening tears in my eyes I, poor artist, swore eternal fidelity to my German fatherland."<sup>41</sup>

But the Wagner of the early 1840s was not quite the fanatic nationalist of the early 1870s, and the essay had to have its wings clipped. A self-critical sentence in favor of Italian opera to the effect that "Germans who write operas" are incapable of writing an "independent free melody" had to go.<sup>42</sup> And other essays in the first volume—most of them originally written in Paris (1839–42)—had to succumb similarly to prudent makeovers. In the essay *On German Music*, which first appeared in a Parisian journal in 1840, an event like the successful international premiere of an opera by Rossini is set against a mythical primal scene of German music. Within the confines of this unsullied *Heimat*, according to the young Wagner, there exists an opportunity for the German genius to arise "out of his limited world . . . to create something universal."<sup>43</sup> And remarkably, Meyerbeer is cited as the prime example of the German composer who can set out, *must* set out, "in alien terrain" (*auf fremdem Terrain*) on the path of a truly universal art with its roots in his native land. For the fifty-eight-year-old composer who had long since made Meyerbeer his archenemy and celebrated the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, this was simply unacceptable. In the version edited for the collected writings, the pro-French sentiments of his younger self are provided with ironic footnotes, and the passage praising Meyerbeer remorselessly cut.<sup>44</sup>

There is much more. The essay *The Wibelungen* in the second volume describes, among other things, a supposed relationship between a historical figure, Friedrich Barbarossa, and a mythical one, Siegfried. In his edition, Wagner placed the essay just before the libretto of *Siegfrieds Tod* (the first version of *Götterdämmerung*) as an example of a neat transition of the artist from history to myth, opera to music drama, and, above all, the final escape of the artist from the narrowing constraints of institutionalized culture into exile and subjective freedom. What he did not say—and not only because it would have seemed utterly pedantic—was that he continued to work on the essay for some time after the summer of 1848, when this famous peripeteia in his life is supposed to have taken place.<sup>45</sup> Had the essay been placed a year later, where it really belongs, and no longer antecedent to the Dresden Uprising, it would have muddied the core of the narrative: the beginning of the flight of the artist *before* the Dresden Uprising in May 1849 from the alienating world of Parisian historical opera, toward his creation *after* the revolution of a "true" music that presents a mythic "life" beyond history.

But *Der Ring des Nibelungen* did not escape the dramaturgical methods of the Parisians entirely; its concluding images of volatile nature and collapse alone are unthinkable without Auber's *La muette de Portici* or Meyerbeer's *Le prophète*. And famous readings of it as historical and political allegory like Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898) will always present a convincing, if partial, truth that contradicts its place in the collected writings as the desired removal of the artist from history and politics into myth. Indeed, the possibilities Wagner found in myth, which he claimed made possible a new kind of music of great authenticity and power (as opposed to music still rooted in the real world of facts and appearances), reflect only one side of his life and work at the time, suggesting that his chronology is more part of a vivid theatrical construct than an objective way of reflecting the messier reality of how he actually evolved as an artist. More generally, his method served to underpin the literary enactment of a life as a work of art, a "development *in time*," in which various contradictory strands, embracing both the mundane and the ideal, accordingly converged (and this is the narrative's monumentalizing moment) toward a final and crowning achievement. The tenth and last volume, edited posthumously "in chronological sequence" according "to the express intention of the Master,"<sup>46</sup> ends not with a last-written theoretical essay, open letter, or autobiographical communication, but with an artistic creation, the complete text of *Parsifal* (actually published some years before), and its last line: "Redemption to the Redeemer."

#### THE "LIFE" AFTER WAGNER

Wagner's original intention to bequeath to posterity a single "life" that included a description of his final hour by his wife was thwarted at the last minute by the very same (and very common) subjugation of the female subject that had made a continuous authentic narrative of that life seem possible in the first place. It was a small sign that the concept of his life as a totality was doomed to failure from the beginning. The four-year gap between the end of *Mein Leben* and the start of Cosima's diaries, to cite just one instance, is covered only by the "Annals," the rewritten diary Wagner created in 1868. Consequently, the part of the diary covering the years 1864–68 was published at the end of a modern German edition of *Mein Leben* in 1976 in the belief that, together with the first publication of Cosima's diaries in 1976–77, they would, in the words of the editor, at last enable everyone to survey Wagner's life in its entirety on the basis of an unbroken line of "autobiographical testimony" (*Selbstzeugnisse*).<sup>47</sup> As the

English translators of the edition tactfully point out, however, while the “Annals” may be valuable material for the biographer, “they do not constitute autobiography.”<sup>48</sup> And neither, for that matter, do Cosima’s diaries, which, despite the impression of self-biography by proxy they may give to some, fuse the trivial with the important in almost surreal fashion, as diaries tend to do. What they cannot offer is a coherent narrative of a life. For critical Wagner biographers, often confronted in any case with a tortuous legacy of sex, lies, and invidious hype in the sources they have to deal with,<sup>49</sup> the task of piecing together his life on the basis of “authentic” documents is therefore less straightforward than it seems to be at first sight.

In the case of the autobiographer, Nietzsche’s admonition comes to mind that a self-reflective account can be dangerous if it is seen to be “useful and important for one’s activity to interpret it *falsely*.”<sup>50</sup> It may not be wrong to suppose that this salutary warning has its origin in Nietzsche’s experience with the first three volumes of the private edition of *Mein Leben*, the proofs of which he corrected when he was still on good terms with Wagner in the early 1870s. His involvement with *Mein Leben* even included the invention and supervision of the crest on the title pages of the volumes. The crest merges an image of the seven-star constellation called the Plough (*der Wagen*) with a vulture (*Geier*) that was duly provided by Nietzsche, on Wagner’s recommendation, with a distinctive ruff to distinguish it from an eagle.<sup>51</sup> The image was meant to symbolize a “double” paternity, the natural father Friedrich Wagner and the stepfather Ludwig Geyer. Given the strikingly contrasted characters of the “fathers”—one an intellectual bureaucrat, the other an actor and painter—the crest poses an interpretative challenge for any truly alert biographer, as its inventor was the first to realize. Geyer was not Jewish, but his name had sufficient Jewish resonance for an older and more skeptical Nietzsche and his friend Heinrich Köselitz (a.k.a. Peter Gast) to play with the idea that Geyer was the real father, and Wagner hence possibly of Jewish extraction. Köselitz joked that on learning (incorrectly) that the mother, or one of her lovers, was called “Beer,” he spent an entire evening referring to Wagner as “Geyerbeer.”<sup>52</sup> More importantly—and fatefully—Nietzsche let hints of these malicious speculations spill over into a notorious footnote in the first postscript of his polemical *The Case of Wagner*. He writes, “Was Wagner a German at all? . . . His father was an actor by the name of Geyer. A Geyer [vulture] is practically an Adler [eagle].—What has hitherto circulated as “Wagner’s Life” is *fable convenue* [a myth that has gained acceptance], if not worse. I confess my mistrust of every point attested to by Wagner himself.”<sup>53</sup>

Concerning Wagner's life, this was not Nietzsche's only spectacular volte-face. In 1872 he complained to his friend Erwin Rohde that a newly published pamphlet, Theodor Puschmann's *Richard Wagner: A Psychiatric Study*, used tactics that spurned crude rejection for the more subtle approach of "insidious, deeply malicious innuendo" that would "undermine the confidence of the coming generation."<sup>54</sup> Five years after Wagner's death in 1888, he did not hesitate to use such tactics himself, claiming that "Wagner is a neurosis . . . Our physicians and physiologists confront their most interesting case [of degeneration] in Wagner, at least a very complete case."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche proved to be the leader in a more general desire to dent Wagner's posthumous (and massive) cultural authority by using aspects of his life to question his sanity, the stability of his body, his virility and sexual orientation, and even his racial character. In Wagner's case, already symptomatic of an age rapidly becoming disenchanted with masculine "genius," Nietzsche had finally opened up what Norma Clarke has trenchantly called the "dreadful prospect . . . of male failure."<sup>56</sup>

Soon after the appearance of Puschmann's pamphlet came the publication of sixteen letters from Wagner to a Viennese seamstress in the highly respected Viennese daily newspaper *Neue freie Presse*. The editor, Daniel Spitzer, prefaced the letters, which contained orders for satin bedspreads, silk ribbons, rose garlands, and countless satin dressing gowns, with Hunding's line from *Die Walküre*, "How like the woman he looks," which in its original context has quite a different meaning. The way was open for the adoption of Wagner by the leaders of the movement for homosexual emancipation in the third volume of Magnus Hirschfeld's *Yearbook for Sexual Intermediary Stages with Special Consideration of Homosexuality* (1901) and Hanns Fuchs's book *Richard Wagner and Homosexuality* (1903). And it was open for many other Wagners retrieved from notorious publications in the past in a classic essay by a modern scholar, Isolde Vetter. In these publications he was described, among other things, as a sadist, an effeminate male running around in bisexually suggestive lace drawers, a criminally insane egotist, an epileptic, a dermatitic fetishist (!), a transvestite and hemorrhoid sufferer, a megalomaniac hysteric, a non-Nordic sensualist, a paranoiac, a graphomaniac, and just a plain old degenerate.<sup>57</sup>

Even in Wagner's most intimate circle there were tremors of discontent, especially about *Mein Leben*. When Cosima wrote to King Ludwig II of Wagner's worry about the impression the "hopelessly repugnant experiences" in his life would make on the "cherished exalted one," she was herself already sounding apprehensive. "Had I not fervently implored him to say everything, everything, however embarrassing," she told the king, "he

would not have taken note of many things."<sup>58</sup> The subjective tone of *Mein Leben* did indeed go beyond the boundaries of what was then acceptable in biography and autobiography. After obtaining a copy in 1892 that had been surreptitiously struck off by the printer of the private edition, Wagner's early biographer, Mrs. Burrell, clearly expecting something different, refused to believe that Wagner could be its author and became obsessed with the idea that he was "not responsible" for the book.<sup>59</sup> Its uninhibited subjectivity was probably also the reason why, after his death, Cosima asked the recipients of the edition (limited to fifteen and later eighteen copies) to return the volumes to Bayreuth, where most of them were destroyed. Even the king obliged. One of Wagner's Swiss friends, Jakob Sulzer, who had known the composer well in the years after the Dresden Revolution, wrote in a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck in August 1887 that he hoped *Mein Leben* would never come to light "in its authentic shape" because the moment of psychological self-examination at work in it could never do justice to the literal external truth it claims to finesse. "Wagner was an extremely subjective nature, his entire knowledge of the world, the entire knowledge that he wanted of the world, was what he got from the arbitrary reflection of it that he carried in his own consciousness."<sup>60</sup>

But that was precisely the point. Sulzer unwittingly put his finger on the reason for the existence of an autobiography that had consciously eschewed attempts to recall the past as accurately as was humanly possible in favour of a radical theodicy of selfhood. Quite apart from Wagner's deliberate attempts in his works and autobiographical writings to go far beyond the dialectical tension between the private and the public that had defined the romantic sense of self, even the involuntary gap, which Gusdorf sees between the avowed plan of autobiography to retrace the history of a life and "its deepest intentions,"<sup>61</sup> is blithely overridden by Wagner, who practically from the start set out to construct himself as an evolving subjective presence at odds with the "fact" of real chronological time, fully cognizant of the philosophical implications of such a move.

That this strategy came into conflict with Wagner's ambition to bequeath to his son and to posterity the authentic narrative of a life completely formed to the point of including his own death explains the insecurities not far beneath the surface of his autobiographical writings, not to mention those of his biographers. Far too many of them strive to treat the texts as if they are "straight" narratives, only quickly to come up against a blank wall of puzzled incomprehension when the realization dawns that the narrator is not telling the truth in any simple sense of the word. There is an air of repression about it all—the ego seeking involuntarily to evade certain

memories and feelings that could endanger its sense of wholeness and existence in the present—and the wounds Nietzsche and others sought to inflict on Wagner's cultural authority were no doubt the result of a shrewd perception of the remarkable psychological radicalism of the texts, including some of his letters, which made him vulnerable to gleeful, hand-rubbing posturing about the propriety of his behavior.

Nor is the problematic status of Wagner's writings about his life confined to their interpretation by his critics. Worries among his closest allies, as we have seen, also contributed to the bifurcation of his image into the ogre of doubtful probity and "the *artist* and creator of so many immortal masterpieces, who should not and cannot be impugned,"<sup>62</sup> as (of all people) the editor of the 1906 edition of his "letters to a seamstress" put it, at the same time alluding to supposed sexual abnormalities that made no difference to the genius of the music. It is no accident that *Mein Leben* had to wait for the age of Freud and the "new biography" for its first public printing in 1911. But even those who read it intelligently could not dislodge the already long-standing cliché of a Wagner at once "perverse" and "great," a grotesque parody of his own division of himself into the artist rooted in a supposedly degenerate world and his heroic "other" who sought life in the "true music." The candor of his writings about himself and misunderstandings of their *raison d'être*, in other words, helped to create the myth of two apparently irreconcilable Wagners that is still the line of least resistance in any untroubled admiration of his art. The irony is that it was Wagner himself who first set out to challenge the apparent discrepancy. The naïve separation of the "so-called genius"<sup>63</sup> from reality, and also from a direct warts-and-all subjectivism well beyond romanticism, was one he rejected. It is exactly this insight, however, together with his skeptical view of the role of autobiography in the nineteenth century that places Wagner's narratives about himself among the most remarkable and underappreciated of modern autobiographical testimonies.