
Richard Wilhelm Wagner (1813–1883) was one of Europe's great cultural revolutionaries—early convinced that the full expression of his art required a social and political revolution. Even after his political revolutionary days, when his art was supported by Ludwig II of Bavaria and he had become an immensely successful artist, he remained an artistic innovator of immense importance.

Most of Wagner's prose on artistic subjects stems from the period around 1850, and is suffused with the atmosphere of the later Romantic period. He wrote much less in his later career when his music began to attain greater success. His formal education and musical training were relatively scant. From 1833 to 1839 he was chorus master, then conductor at several German provincial opera houses. He worked in poverty in Paris, then, before the 1848 Revolution, he became royal music director at Dresden where he wrote and produced Tannhäuser (1845) and finished scoring Lohengrin (1848).

He had to flee because of his part in the May Revolution in Dresden in 1849; he returned to Germany under the patronage of the Bavarian king in the 1860's, and later established his theater at Bayreuth where his masterpiece, The Ring of the Nibelungen, was produced in full in 1876.

Wagner's aesthetic theory contains familiar themes presented in sometimes confusing form, for he was not given to clear prose expression. He was fascinated with the uses of myth and legend as a source of profound truths about existence; he came increasingly to depend upon a version of the Volk—a sort of primitive communal soul—as the inspiration of true art. He grounded his theories familiarly enough in history; he attacked the philistinism of the triumphant bourgeoisie, who at first preferred an art quite unlike the combination of music and drama that he expected he would develop and lead as the culmination of artistic progress.

The following document is one of his few political tracts. Since Wagner took an active part in the May uprising in Dresden with his anarchist friend Bakunin, there is no reason to doubt his sincerity; but, as in the case of Lamartine, there may be reason to doubt how realistic he was at this point in his career. His political thought was never a major pursuit. He had strong negative reactions to what he considered bourgeois plutocracy and bad taste, believing that art needed a community without class divisions, but with warm emotional ties. In this essay he is nationalistic and socialist. Nationalist he remained, and he became increasingly anti-Semitic and distinctly anti-democratic. In
1849, however, he could feel at one with the masses who were to produce his "Revolution."


If we peer across its lands and peoples, we find throughout the whole of Europe the effervescence of a mighty movement, whose first vibrations have already reached us, whose full weight threatens soon to crash upon us. Europe seems to us a huge volcano, from whose inside an ever-waxing fearsome roar resounds, from out whose crater columns of black smoke ascend to heaven big with storm, and mantle all the earth with darkness, while here and there a lava-stream, a fiery harbinger, breaks through the hard-set crust and bears destruction to the vale below.

A supernatural force seems clutching at our quarter of the globe, intent on lifting it from its old rut and hurling it to pathways new.

Ay, we behold it, the old world is crumbling, a new will rise therefrom; for the lofty goddess Revolution comes rustling on the wings of storm, her stately head ringed round with lightnings, a sword in her right hand, a torch in her left, her eye so stern, so punitive, so cold; and yet what warmth of purest love, what wealth of happiness streams forth toward him who dares to look with steadfast gaze into that eye! Rustling she comes, the e'er-rejuvenating mother of mankind; destroying and fulfilling, she fares across the earth; before her soughs the storm, and shakes so fiercely at man's handiwork that vasty clouds of dust eclipse the sky, and where her mighty foot steps falls in ruins what an idle whim had built for æons, and the hem of her robe sweeps its last remains away. But in her wake there opens out a ne'er-dreamt paradise of happiness, illumed by kindly sunbeams; and where her foot had trodden down, spring fragrant flowers from the soil, and jubilant songs of freed mankind fill full the air scarce silent from the din of battle.

Now turn and look below, around you. There you see one, the mightiest prince, with halting heart and catching breath, yet seeking to assume a tranquil, cool demeanour, to shut his eyes and those of others to what he clearly sees to be inevitable. There see another, his leathern face all ploughed by vices, exerting all those petty sharper's arts that have brought him in so many a