

The following excerpts come from an article by Bernard Williams called “Wagner and Politics.” They provide additional historical background that you may not have had about Richard Wagner, his views, and the ways in which his music was inspiring politically in the 20th century.

In your second and final draft of your essays, you do not have to quote this article directly (though you may choose to do so), but you do need to demonstrate that you have thought about the place that Wagner and his music occupy in history.

If we try to understand as a genuine historical question what range of opinions and attitudes were available in Wagner’s world—“where he was” on various matters—we find that in some cases, he was already in a pretty bad place. Above all, and most notoriously, there is his anti-Semitism. His articles *Das Judentum in der Musik*, attacking Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn and, generally, the artistic impotence of Jews, did not make a big stir when they were first published under a pseudonym in 1850. The document had considerably more effect when he reissued it under his own name in 1869, with additions in an even sharper tone and with more directly racist implications (“so far from getting rid of his errors,” Liszt said, “he has made it worse”). The racist emphasis, influenced by Gobineau, was prominent in other publications of his last years. It has reasonably been claimed that Wagner by his own writings contributed to the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Germany in the 1880s, in particular by helping to make it culturally respectable.

Moreover, it was not only during the Nazi time, through the friendship of Wagner’s daughter-in-law, Winifred, with Hitler, that the Bayreuth festival, which Wagner founded in 1876, became associated with the most repellent ideas. The house journal, the *Bayreuther Blätter*, was founded in 1878, when Wagner was still alive, by an acolyte, Hans von Wolzogen, who, as a historian of the festival has put it,

used the journal as an ideological instrument to propagate a racist, anti-Semitic, chauvinistic, xenophobic and anti-democratic ideology. It would be difficult to find anywhere in the Western world in the late nineteenth century, even in the darkest corner of the French right, a publication so poisonous, so hate-filled, so spiritually demented.

... [In Germany,] Politics, or at least “ordinary” politics, the politics of parties, power, bargaining, and so on, was seen as something divisive, low, materialistic, and superficial, in contrast to something else which was deep, spiritual, and capable of bringing people together into a higher unity: something, moreover, which instead of peddling satisfactions, demanded renunciation and suffering. There were two main candidates for this higher thing, art and the nation, or, indeed, the two together.

Such ideals informed the influential conception of the *Sonderweg*, the idea of a special path that German development might follow, distinct from (in particular) Britain and France; and one expression of the difference lay in a supposed contrast between *Kultur*, which was German and deep, and *Zivilisation*, which was shallow and French... All the elements of this tradition were to be exploited in a desultory but ruthlessly opportunistic way by Hitler. Hitler was far from unpolitical, but he pretended to be, and perhaps himself believed that in him the nation had

transcended politics: that the politics which brought him to power and which, together with terror, kept him in it, was indeed a politics of transcendence.

Bernard Williams, "Wagner and Politics," *The New York Review of Books*, 2 November 2000.
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/11/02/wagner-politics/>