Hero-dom and Christendom

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis

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AFTER recognising the necessity of a regeneration of the human race, if we follow up the possibilities of its ennoblement we light on little else than obstacles. In our attempt to explain its downfall by a physical perversion we had the support of the noblest sages of all time, who believed they found the cause of degeneration in the substituting of animal for vegetable food; thus we necessarily were led to the assumption of a change in the fundamental substance of our body, and to a corrupted blood we traced the deprivation of temperaments and of moral qualities proceeding from them.

Quite apart from such an explanation, one of the cleverest men of our day has also proved this fall to have been caused by a corruption of blood, though, leaving that change of diet wholly out of sight, he has derived it solely from the crossing of races, whereby the noblest lost more than the less noble of them gained. The uncommonly circumstantial picture of this process supplied us by Count Gobineau in his "Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines" appeals to us with most terrible force of conviction. We cannot withhold our acknowledgment that the human family consists of irremediably disparate races, whereof the noblest well might rule the more ignoble, yet never raise them to their level by commixture, but simply sink to theirs. Indeed this one relation might suffice to explain our fall; even its cheerlessness should not blind us to it: if it is reasonable to assume that the dissolution of our earthly globe is purely a question of time, we probably shall have to accustom ourselves to the idea of the human species dying out. On the other hand there is such a matter as life beyond all time and space, and the question whether the world has a moral meaning we here will try to answer by asking ourselves if we mean to go to ground as beasts or gods.

The first point will be, to examine the special attributes of those noblest races, through whose enfeeblement they lost themselves among ignoble races. The more definitely has recent science inclined us to accept the natural descent of man's lower races from the animal species most resembling them, the harder is it to assent to a derivation of the so-called white race from those black and yellow: as to the explanation of the white tint itself our physiologists are still at variance. Whilst yellow races have viewed themselves as sprung from monkeys, the white traced back their origin to gods, and deemed themselves marked out for rulership. It has been made quite clear that we should have no History of Man at all, had there been no movements, creations and achievements of the white men; and we may fitly take world-history as the consequence of these white men mixing with the black and yellow, and bringing them in so far into history as that mixture altered them and made them less unlike the white. Incomparably fewer in individual numbers than the lower races, the ruin of the white races may be referred to their having been obliged to mix with them; whereby, as remarked already, they suffered more from the loss of their purity than the others could gain by the ennobling of their blood.

Without touching on the endless varieties produced by ever fresh inarchings of scions from the old root-stocks, our object merely bids us linger with the purest and noblest, to realise its overwhelming difference from the less. If a review of all the races makes it impossible to deny the oneness of the human species; and if that common factor may be defined, in its noblest sense, as the capacity for conscious suffering,—we shall have to seek for what distinguishes the white race, if we are actually to rank it high above the others. With fine acumen Gobineau discovers it, not in an exceptional development of moral qualities, but in a
larger store of the temperamental attributes from which those morals flow. (4) These we should have to look for in that keener and withal more delicate sensibility of Will which shews itself in a complex organism, united with the requisite intensity of Intellect: the point being that, in answer to the cravings of the will, the intellect shall rise to that clear-sightedness which casts its own light back upon the will, and, taming it, becomes a moral prompting; whereas the overpowering of the intellect by the blindly craving will denotes the lower nature, since here we cannot class the stimuli as motives lit as yet by light of intellect, but simply as common promptings of the senses. However passionate may be the signs of Suffering in these lower natures, its conscious record in the downtrod intellect will be comparatively feeble; on the contrary it is just the strength of consciousness of Suffering, that can raise the intellect of higher natures to knowledge of the meaning of the world. Those natures in which the completion of this lofty process is evidenced by a corresponding deed, we call Heroic.—

The plainest type of heroism is that evolved by the Hellenic sagas in their Herakles. Labours put upon him to destroy him, he executes in proud obedience, and frees the world thereby from direst plagues. Seldom, in fact scarcely ever, do we find the hero otherwise than in a state of suffering prepared for him by fate: Herakles is persecuted by Hera out of jealousy of his divine begetter, and kept in menial subjection. In this main trait we surely should not do wrong to recognise an allusion to that school of arduous labours in which the noblest Aryan stems and races throve to grandeur of demigods: the by no means mildest climates whence they enter history at last, as men matured, supply us with a clue to the fortunes of their ancestry. Here we find the fruit of suffering and deprivations vanquished by heroic toil, that proud self-consciousness whereby these stocks are once for all distinguished from the others throughout our whole world-history. Like Herakles and Siegfried, they were conscious of divine descent: a lie to them was inconceivable, and a free man meant a truthful man. Nowhere in history do these root-qualities of the Aryan race shew forth more plainly than in the contact of the last pure-bred Germanic branches with the falling Roman world. Here history repeats the one great feature of their mythic heroes: with bloody hands they serve the Romans, and—rate them infinitely lower than themselves, much as Herakles despised Eurystheus. The accident of their becoming masters of the great Latino-Semite realm was fatal to them. Pride is a delicate virtue and brooks no compromise, such as crossing of breed: but the Germanic race without this virtue has—naught to tell us. For this Pride is the soul of the truthful, of the free though serving. He knows no fear (Furcht), but respect (Ehrfurcht)—a virtue whose very name, in its proper sense, is known to none save those oldest Aryan peoples; whilst honour (Ehre) itself is the sum of all personal worth, and therefore can neither be given nor received, as is our practice to-day, but, a witness of divine descent, it keeps the hero unashamed even in his most shameful of sufferings. From Pride and Honour sprang the rule that, not property ennobles man, but man this property; which, again, was expressed in the custom that excessive possessions were speedily shared out, for very shame, by him to whom they haply fell.

Upon looking back to these characteristics and the inviolably noble code that flowed therefrom we certainly are justified in seeking the cause of their loss and its [279] decay in a depravation of those races’ blood, since we see the fall undoubtedly accompany their hybridising. This fact has been so completely established by the talented and energetic author named above, that we need only refer our friends to his work on the Disparity of the Races of Man, to rest assured that what we now propose to link thereto will not be viewed as superficial guess-work. For we now must seek the Hero where he turns against the ruin of his race, the downfall of its code of honour, and girds his erring will to horror: the hero wondrously become divine—the Saint.

It was a weighty feature of the Christian Church, that none but sound and healthy persons were admitted to the vow of total world-renunciation; any bodily defect, not to say mutilation,
unfitted them. (5) Manifestly this vow was to be regarded as issuing from the most heroic of all possible resolves, and he who sees in it a "cowardly self-surrender"—as someone recently suggested, (6)—may bravely exult in his own self-retention, but had best not meddle any further with things that don't concern him. Granted that different causes moved different men to so completely turn their will from life, yet the act itself is always characterised by utmost energy of will; was it the look, the likeness or the mental picture of the Saviour suffering upon the cross, the influence of a pity overcoming all self-will was invariably united with the deepest horror at the attributes of this world-shaping Will, and to such a point that the will exerted all its strength in revolt against itself. From that moment we see the saint outvie the hero in his endurance of suffering, his self-offering for others; almost more unshakable than the hero's pride is [280] the saint's humility, and his truthfulness becomes the martyr's joy.

Now what part can "Blood," the quality of Race, have played in fitting for the exercise of so holy a heroism? The last, the Christian dispensation had its origin in that intensely complex blend of races white and black which, dating from the rise of the Chaldæo-Assyrian empire, supplied the basic character of the nations of the later Roman empire. The author of the great work now before us calls this character the Semitic, after one of those main stocks transplanted from North-eastern parts to the Assyrian plains; he proves to demonstration its transforming influence on Hellenism and Romanism, and finds its essential features still preserved in the self-styled "Latin" race despite all fresh cross-breeding. This race's property is the Roman Catholic Church; its patron-spirits are the saints that Church has canonised, nor should their value be diminished in our eyes by their now being upheld to the people's veneration in nothing but un-Christian pomp. But after centuries of huge perversion of the Semite-Latin Church we see no longer any genuine Saints, no Hero-martyrs of the Truth, arise therefrom; and if the falsehood of our whole Civilisation bears witness to corrupted blood in its supporters, 'twould be no stretch for us to say that the blood of Christendom itself is curdled. And what a blood? None other than the blood of the Redeemer's self which erewhile poured its hallowing stream into the veins of his true heroes.

The blood of the Saviour, the issue from his head, his wounds upon the cross,—who impiously would ask its race, if white or other? Divine we call it, and its source might dimly be approached in what we termed the human species' bond of union, its aptitude for Conscious Suffering. This faculty we can only regard as the last step reached by Nature in the ascending series of her fashionings; thenceforth she brings no new, no higher species to light, for in it she herself attains her unique freedom, the annulling of the internecine warfare of the Will. The hidden background [281] of this Will, inscrutable in Time and Space, is nowhere manifest to us but in that abrogation; and there it shews itself divine, the Willing of Redemption. Thus, if we found the faculty of conscious suffering peculiarly developed in the so-called white race, in the Saviour's blood we now must recognise the quintessence of free-willed suffering itself (des bewusst wollenden Leidens selbst), that godlike Pity which streams through all the human species, its fount and origin.

What we here can only touch in terms most hard to understand, and easily misconstrued, may take a more familiar aspect in the light of history. How high the most advanced white race could raise itself in weightiest matters of the world through keenness of that faculty which we have called the human species' bond of union, we see in its religions. The Brahminic religion we surely must rank as the most astounding evidence of the breadth of view and faultless mental accuracy of those earliest Aryan branches; on a groundwork of profoundest knowledge of the world they built a religious structure that has weathered all these thousand years unshaken, a dogma still obeyed by many million men as habit of all life and thought, high arbiter of death and suffering. It had one only fault: it was a race-religion. The deepest explanations of the world, the loftiest injunctions for redemption from it, to-day are taught, believed and followed by a vastly hybrid populace wherein no trace of true
morality can be detected. Without tarrying by this sight, or even seeking out the grounds of this phenomenon, let us merely remember that a race of conquerors and subjugators, appraising the enormous gulf between themselves and inferior races, founded at once a religion and a civilisation, whose mutual support and interaction were to ensure the permanence of a dominion based on careful calculation of existing natural factors. A masterpiece without its equal: binding the cruelly oppressed to their oppressors by so firm a metaphysical concordat, that any mutiny was made unthinkable; for even the Buddha's broad endeavour for the human species must break against the stubborn racial veto of the white dictators, and become a superstition freshly palsyng the yellow race.

From what blood, then, could the ever more consciously suffering genius of mankind bring forth a saviour, seeing that the blood of the white race was manifestly paling and congealing?—For the origin of natural Man our Schopenhauer propounds an hypothesis of wellnigh convincing power (7): going back to the physical law [Mariotti's] of increase of force under compression, he explains the unusual frequency of births of twins after abnormal periods of mortality as if the vital force were doubling its exertions under pressure of a pestilence that threatened to exterminate the species; which leads him to the theory that the procreative force in a given type of animals, threatened with extinction by opposing forces through some inherent defect in its organism, may have become so abnormally augmented in one mated pair that not merely does a more highly organised individual issue from the mother's womb, but in that individual a quite new species. The blood in the Redeemer's veins might thus have flowed, as divine sublimate of the species itself; from the redemptive Will's supreme endeavour to save mankind at death-throes in its noblest races.

Though we must regard this as the extreme limit of a speculation hovering between Physics and Metaphysics, and eschew all further pursuit of a path that has betrayed so many of our able minds into the most nonsensical farragos—especially under guidance of the Old Testament—yet from this hypothesis concerning the Redeemer's blood we may derive a second and the weightiest distinction of his work, namely the simplicity of his teaching, which consisted almost solely in Example. The blood [283] of suffering Mankind, as sublimated in that wondrous birth, could never flow in the interest of howsoever favoured a single race; no, it shed itself on all the human family, for noblest cleansing of Man's blood from every stain. Hence the sublime simplicity of the pure Christian religion, whereas the Brahminic, for instance, applying its knowledge of the world to the ensurance of supremacy for one advantaged race, became lost in artificiality and sank to the extreme of the absurd. Thus, notwithstanding that we have seen the blood of noblest races vitiated by admixture, thepartaking of the blood of Jesus, as symbolised in the only genuine sacrament of the Christian religion, might raise the very lowest races to the purity of gods. This would have been the antidote to the decline of races through commingling, and perhaps our earth-ball brought forth breathing life for no other purpose than that ministrance of healing. (8)

Let us not mistake, however, the enormity of the assumption that the human species is destined to attain a uniform equality; and let us admit that such equality is unimaginable in any but a horrifying picture, like that which Gobineau feels bound to hold before us in his closing words. Yet it is only through our being obliged to look at it through the reek of our Civilisation and Culture, that this picture gains its full repellence: and to recognise these as themselves the lying offspring of the human race's misdirection, is the task of that spirit which left us when we lost our nobleness of blood and at like time found the Christian martyrs' antidote employed for binding us to all the lies and humbug of Church-rule. [284] Assuredly no task can be more cheerless, than to review the human races journeyed westward from their central-Asiatic home, and find that all their civilisation and religion has never yet enabled them to take concerted steps for so distributing themselves over the kindliest regions of the earth that by far the largest portion of the obstacles to a free and healthy evolution of pacific
polities (friedfertiger Gemeinde-Zustände) should disappear through mere abandonment of the forbidding wastes which now so long have lodged their greatest numbers. It certainly may be right to charge this purblind dulness of our public spirit to a vitiation of our blood—not only by departure from the natural food of man, but above all by the tainting of the hero-blood of noblest races with that of former cannibals now trained to be the business-agents of Society,—provided one does not overlook the further fact, that no blaze of orders can hide the withered heart whose halting beat bewrays its issue from a union pledged without the seal of love, be it never so consanguineous.

However, if we mean to seek a gladdening outlook on the future of the human race past all these horrors, nothing can be of greater urgence than to follow up each vestige of surviving qualities, and count the possibilities of their enhancement. Here we shall have to bear in mind that, if the noblest race's rulership and exploitation of the lower races—quite justified in a natural sense—has founded a sheer immoral system throughout the world, any equalising of them all by flat commixture decidedly would not conduct to an æsthetic state of things. To us Equality is only thinkable as based upon a universal moral concord, such as we can but deem true Christianity elect to bring about; and that only on the subsoil of a true, but no mere "rational" Morality (as I lately saw desired by a philologist), can a true æsthetic Art bear fruit, the life and sufferings of all great seers and artists of the past proclaim aloud.—

And now that we have reached our own domain [viz. Art.—Tr.], we will take breath for further dealings with the problem broached.
Notes

Note 1 on page 5

Heldenthum und Christenthum originally appeared in the Bayreuther Blätter for September 1881.—Tr.

Note 2 on page 5

Vide p. 39 antea.—Tr.

Note 3 on page 5

Cf. "Alles ist nach seiner Art: an ihr wirst du nichts ändern"—Siegfried, act ii—which even Schopenhauer, so unappreciative of the literary Ring des Nibelungen, marked strongly with approval.—Tr.

Note 4 on page 6

"Mit schöner Sicherheit erkennt ihn Gobineau nicht in einer ausnahmsweisen Entwicklung ihrer moralischen Eigenschaften selbst, sondern in einem grösseren Vorrathe der Grundeigenthümlichkeiten, welchen jene entfliessen."

Note 5 on page 7

Cf. "Doch büssen wollt' er [Klingsor] nun, ja heilig werden. Ohnmächtig in sich selbst die Sünde zu ertöden, an sich legt er die Freylerhand, die nun, dem Grale zugewandt, verachtungsvoll dess' Hüter von sich stiess"—Parsifal, act i.—Tr.

Note 6 on page 7

Cf. Nietzsche's Morgenröthe (pubd. July 1881), Aph. 38:—"The same impulse that becomes a painful feeling of cowardice under the reproaches cast on it by custom, becomes an agreeable feeling of humility if a code such as the Christian commends it to man's heart and calls it good."—Tr.

Note 7 on page 8

Parerga II., § 93.—In the succeeding chapter, § 94, Schopenhauer also lays stress on the impossibility of Man's three chief races having sprung from one and the same pair, though he rejects their loose division into "white, yellow and black" (adopted by our author apparently for sake of common parlance) and adopts the modern designations of "Caucasian, Mongolian and Æthiopic."—Tr.

Note 8 on page 8

"Während wir somit das Blut edelster Racen durch Vermischung sich verderben sehen, dürfte den niedrigsten Racen der Genuss des Blutes Jesu, wie er in dem einzigen ächten Sakramente der christlichen Religion symbolisch vor sich geht, zu göttlichster Reinigung gedeihen. Dieses Antidot wäre demnach dem Verfalle der Racen durch ihre Vermischung entgegen gestellt, und vielleicht brachte dieser Erdball athmendes Leben nur hervor, um jener Heilsordnung zu dienen." I have thought it best to quote the German of these last two
sentences, as their construction presents peculiar difficulties to the translator; a remark that applies, in fact, to almost all the remainder of this article.—Tr.