Introduction to a work of Count Gobineau's

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis

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Source

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By Richard Wagner
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Introduction to Count Gobineau's "Ethnological Résumé of the Present Aspect of the World"

[Bayreuther Blätter, May-June 1881.]

WHAT will be the destiny of the “Bayreuther Blätter” after its immediate function—that of reporting on the work of the Patronat-Verein—has been fulfilled, must be contingent upon the measure of interest that can now already be awakened in its readers by our excursions into realms of culture and civilisation which at first might seem remote, but in our opinion lie too pressingly near us.

If I am correctly informed, my thoughts on "Religion and Art" have found no unfavourable reception with our readers. As we take our stand upon the field of Art, and only from that base do we attempt to find a right and reason for exploring the remotest regions of the world, our friends might certainly deem it fittest, and even most agreeable, if we always placed Art or one of its special problems in the foreground. Only, it has been borne in upon me that, just as in the proposed Buhnenfestspiels, and the house expressly planned and built therefor at Bayreuth, I had to gain myself a basis for the right performance of my artistic works, so for Art itself, for its proper standing in the world, a new soil must first be won; a soil that cannot be supplied, in the first place, by Art itself, but by the world—that selfsame world to whose familiar understanding it is to be offered. For this we had to take our general state of culture, our Civilisation, and try how it might look reflected in our floating ideal of a noble art: but the mirror stayed dark and featureless, or gave us back a grinning parody of our ideaL So we will lay aside the mirror, for our next day's march, look eye to eye upon the carking world, and tell ourselves without disguise or terror what we think of it.

When Saint Francis, after long and serious illness, was led again before the wondrous landscape of Assisi and asked how it now pleased him, he answered, turning from the ecstasy of inner vision of the world to look once more upon its semblance: "Not more than erewhile." We asked Count Gobineau, returned from weary, knowledge-laden wanderings among far distant lands and peoples, what he thought of the present aspect of the world; to-day we give his answer to our readers. He, too, had peered into an Inner: he proved the blood in modern manhood's veins, and found it tainted past all healing. What his insight shewed him, will be a view distasteful to our learned men of Progress. Who knows Count Gobineau's great work "On the Disparity of the Races of Man," will probably have convinced himself that here are none of those mistakes so 'common to the everyday inquirer into the daily progress of mankind. We, on the contrary, can but be grateful to that work of one of the shrewdest of ethnologists for an explanation why our truly lofty minds stand lonelier every day, and—perhaps in consequence—grow ever rarer; so that we can imagine the greatest artists and poets surrounded by a world to which they have naught to say.

However, as we found in Schopenhauer's very demonstrations of the badness of the world the guide to an inquiry into the possibility of its redemption, there perhaps is hope that even in the chaos of impotence and unwisdom which our new friend lays bare to us we may find—if once we thrust into it fearlessly—a clue that leads to higher outlooks. Perchance that clue would not be visible, but only [40] audible—a sigh of deepest pity, haply, such as once we heard from the Cross on Golgotha, and now goes up from our own soul.

My friends know what I deduce from that audible sigh, and divine the paths it opens to my mental vision. But only on the road whereon such dauntless minds conduct us, as that of the author of the following essay, can we hope to see the dawning of those paths.

This briefer work, undoubtedly, is merely meant to give a general survey of the present...
condition of the world, taken rather from a political standpoint; to those well-acquainted with the issue of the researches contained in its author's masterpiece, already mentioned, it may seem little more than the familiar table-talk of the profoundly-versed and wide-experienced Statesman, in answer to the equally intimate question, what he really thinks will be the end of our world-complications. It nevertheless should arouse in our friends that horror we so much need to shake us from our optimistic lethargy, and make us earnestly look round us for the only access to those paths I spoke of.