

*Human Beasts of Prey and Fellow-Suffering**

RICHARD WAGNER

[T]he emergence of huge deserts, like the African Sahara, must certainly have cast the dwellers on the once luxuriant coasts of inland seas into such straits of hunger as we can only form an idea of by recalling stories of the awful sufferings of the shipwrecked, whereby completely civilized citizens of our modern states have been reduced to cannibalism. On the swampy margins of Canadian lakes animal species allied to the panther and tiger still live as fruit-eaters, whereas upon those desert fringes the historic tiger and lion have become the most bloodthirsty of all the beasts of prey. That it must have been hunger alone, which first drove man to slay the animals and feed upon their flesh and blood; and that this compulsion was no mere consequence of his removal into colder climes, as those assert who deem the consumption of animal-food in northern parts a duty of self-preservation, is proved by the patent fact that great nations with ample supplies of grain suffer nothing in strength or endurance even in colder regions through an almost exclusively vegetable diet, as is shewn by the eminent length of life of Russian peasants; while the Japanese, who know no other food than vegetables, are further renowned for their warlike valor and keenness of intellect. We may therefore call it quite an abnormality when hunger bred the thirst for blood, as in the branches of the Malayan stock transplanted to the northern steppes of Asia; that thirst which history teaches us can never more be slaked, and fills its victims with a raging madness, not with courage. One can only account for it all by the human beast of prey having made itself monarch of the peaceful world, just as the ravening wild beast usurped dominion of the woods: a result of those preceding cataclysms which overtook primeval man while yet all unprepared for either. And little as the savage animals have prospered, we see the sovereign human beast of prey decaying too. Owing to a nutriment against his nature, he falls sick with maladies that claim but him, attains no more his natural span of life or gentle death, but, plagued by pains and cares of body and soul unknown to any other species, he shuffles through an empty life to its ever fearful cutting short.

[To] the beasts, who have been our schoolmasters in all the arts by which we trapped and made them subject to us, man was superior in nothing save deceit and cunning, by no means in courage or bravery; for the animal will fight to its last breath, indifferent to wounds and death: "It knows nor plea nor prayer for mercy, no avowal of defeat." To base man's dignity upon his pride, compared with that of animals, would be mistaken; and our victory over them, their subjugation, we can only attribute to our greater art of dissembling. That art we highly boast of; we call it "reason" and proudly think it marks us from the animals: for look you! it can make us like to God himself—as to which, however, Mephistopheles has his private opinion, concluding that the only use man made of reason was "to be more bestial than any beast." In its great veracity and naiveness the animal is unable to estimate the moral meanness of the arts through which we cowed it; in any case it finds something daemonic in them, which it obeys in timid awe: but if its master exercises kindness toward the daunted beast, we may assume that it recognises something divine in him, which it reveres and loves so strongly that it devotes its natural gifts of bravery entirely to the service of fidelity, to the point of agonising death. Just as the saint is driven irresistibly to attest his loyalty to God by martyrdom and death, so the animal with its love to a master as god. One only tie, which the saint has been able to break, still binds the animal to Nature, since it cannot be aught but sincere: compassion for its young. In resulting dilemmas, however, it knows how to choose for the best. A traveller once left his brach behind him in the stable of an inn, as she had just brought forth young, and pursued alone the three leagues journey to his house; next morning he finds on the straw in his yard the four sucklings, and beside them their dead mother: four times had she run the distance to and fro in haste and anguish, carrying home her litter one by one; only when she had brought the

* *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*. Translated and edited by Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987, pp. 422-424.

last pup safely to her master, whom she now had no more need to leave, did she yield to the lingering pains of death. This the "free" burgher of our Civilization calls "houndish fidelity," with a contemptuous accent on the "hound." Yet in a world from which all *reverence* has vanished, or tarries but as hypocritical pretence, is there no example for us to take from the affecting lesson of the animals we govern? Where devotion true till death is met between man and man, we need not be ashamed to regard it as already a noble bond of kinship with the animal kingdom, since there is good reason for believing that this virtue is purer, ah! diviner in its exercise by animals than by man: for, quite apart from their value in the eyes of the world, in his sufferings and death man is able to recognise a blessed expiation; whereas the beast, without one ulterior thought of moral advantage, sacrifices itself wholly and purely to love and loyalty—though this also is explained by our physiologists as a simple chemical reaction of certain elementary substances. . . .

Fellow-Suffering

Recently, while I was in the street, my eye was caught by a poulterer's shop; I stared unthinkingly at his piled-up wares, neatly and appetizingly laid out, when I became aware of a man at the side busily plucking a hen, while another man was just putting his hand in a cage, where he seized a live hen and tore its head off. The hideous scream of the animal, and the pitiful, weaker sounds of complaint that it made while being overpowered transfixed my soul with horror. Ever since then I have been unable to rid myself of this impression, although I had experienced it often before. It is dreadful to see how our lives—which, on the whole, remain addicted to pleasure—rest upon such a bottomless pit of the cruellest misery! This has been so self-evident to me from the very beginning, and has become even more central to my thinking as my sensibility has increased ... I have observed the way in which I am drawn in the [direction of empathy for misery] with a force that inspires me with sympathy, and that everything touches me deeply only insofar as it arouses fellow-feeling in me, i.e. fellow-suffering. I see in this fellow-suffering the most salient feature of my moral being, and presumably it is this that is the well-spring of my art.

But what characterizes fellow-suffering is that it is by no means conditioned in its affections by the individual qualities of the suffering object but rather by the perception of suffering itself. In love it is otherwise: here we advance to a feeling of fellow-joy, and we can share the joy of an individual only if we find the latter's particular characteristics acceptable in the highest degree, and homogeneous. This is more likely in the case of common types, since here it is purely sexual relations which are almost exclusively at work. The more noble the nature, the more difficult it is to achieve fellow-joy through reintegration: but, if we succeed, there is nothing to equal it! Fellow-suffering, by contrast, is something we can feel for even the commonest and least of beings, a being which, apart from its suffering, is totally unsympathetic towards us, indeed, may even be antipathetic in what it is capable of enjoying. The reason for this, at all events, is infinitely profound and, if we recognize it, we shall thereby see ourselves raised above the very real barriers of our personality. For what we encounter when we exercise fellow-suffering in this way is suffering as such, divorced from all personality.

In order to steel themselves against the power of fellow-suffering, people commonly assert that it is demonstrably the case that lower natures feel suffering far less keenly than a higher organism: they argue that, as the sensibility that first makes fellow-suffering possible increases, so, proportionately, does suffering gain in reality: in other words, the fellow-suffering that we expend on lower natures is a waste of emotional effort, being an exaggeration, and even a pampering of feeling. This opinion, however, rests upon a fundamental error which is at the basis of every realistic philosophy, for it is precisely here that we see idealism in its truly moral stature inasmuch as it reveals the former as an example of egotistical narrow-mindedness. The question here is not what the other person suffers but

what suffer when I know him to be suffering. After all, we know what exists around us only inasmuch as we picture it in our imagination, and how I imagine it is how it is for *me*. If I ennoble it, it is because I myself feel deeply when I imagine his suffering, and whoever, by contrast, imagines it to be insignificant reveals in doing so that he himself is insignificant. Thus my fellow-suffering makes the other person's suffering an actual reality, and the more insignificant the being with which I can suffer, the wider and more embracing is the circle which suggests itself to my feelings. But here lies an aspect of my nature which others may see as a weakness. I admit that unilateral actions are much impeded by it; but I am certain that when I act, I then act in accordance with my essential nature, and certainly never cause pain to anyone intentionally. This consideration alone can influence me in all my actions: to cause others as little suffering as possible. On this point I am totally at one with myself, for only in this way can I hope to give others my joy, as well: for the only true, genuine joy is to be found in the conformity of fellow-suffering. But I cannot obtain this by force: it must be granted me by the other person's friendly nature, which is why I have only ever encountered a single perfect example of this phenomenon!

But I am also clear in my own mind why I can even feel greater fellow-suffering for lower natures than for higher ones. A higher nature is what it is precisely because it has been raised by its own suffering to the heights of resignation, or else has within it—and cultivates—the capacity for such a development. Such a nature is extremely close to mine, is indeed similar to it, and with it I attain to fellow-joy. That is why, basically, I feel less fellow-suffering for people than for animals. For I can see that the latter are totally denied the capacity to rise above suffering, and to achieve a state of resignation and deep, divine calm. And so, in the event of their suffering, as happens when they are tormented, all I see — with a sense of my own tormented despair—is their absolute, redemptionless suffering without any higher purpose, their only release being death, which confirms my belief that it would have been better for them never to have entered upon life. And so, if this suffering can have a purpose, it is simply to awaken a sense of fellow-suffering in man, who thereby absorbs the animal's defective existence, and becomes the redeemer of the world by recognizing the error of all existence... But to see the individual's capacity for redeeming the world through fellow-suffering atrophy, undeveloped and most assiduously neglected, makes me regard people with utter loathing, and weakens my sense of fellow-suffering to the point where I feel only total insensitivity towards their distress. It is in his distress that the individual's road to salvation is to be found, a road which is not open to animals; if he does not recognize this to be so but insists upon considering it to be locked and barred to him, I feel an instinctive urge to throw this door wide open for him, and am capable of going to lengths of great cruelty in order to make him conscious of the need to suffer. Nothing leaves me colder than the Philistine's complaint that he has been disturbed in his contentment: any compassion here would be pure complicity. Just as my entire nature involves shaking people out of their common condition, here, too, I feel an urge simply to spur them on in order to make them feel life's great anguish!