

# **Know Thyself**

**By Richard Wagner**

**1881**

**Translated by William Ashton Ellis**



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# About this Title

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# "Know Thyself"

## A Continuation of "Religion and Art."

(1)

GREAT KANT taught us to postpone the wish for knowledge of the world to criticism of man's power of knowledge; if we thus arrived at the most complete uncertainty about the reality of the world, *Schopenhauer* next taught us to draw the most infallible conclusions as to the world's In-itself from a farther-reaching criticism, no longer of our mental faculties, but of that Will in us which goes before all knowledge. "Know thyself, and thou hast read the world"—the Pythia said; "look round thee, all of this art thou"—the Brahmin.

How totally these lessons of ancestral wisdom had been lost to us, we may judge by their having to be re-discovered after tens of centuries by Schopenhauer treading in the shining wake of Kant. For if we view the present state of all our Sciences and Statecraft, we find them void of any true religious core, and simply wed to a barbaric babbling, to which two thousand years of practice have given a well-nigh venerable aspect in the people's purblind eye.

Who ever finds that "Know thyself" applied to any rating of the world? Not one Historic action do we know, that betrays this doctrine's influence on the transactors. We strike away at what we know not, and should we haply hit ourselves, we think another struck us. Who has not witnessed this once more in the present stir against the Jews, let us say, when looked at in light of that doctrine? What has given the Jews their now so dreaded power [265] among and over us, not one man seems to stop and ponder; or if he goes into the question, he seeks no farther than the facts and phases of the last ten years, or at most a few years earlier: nowhere can we trace as yet an inclination to a deeper search into ourselves, in this case to a thorough criticism of the will and spirit of all that conglomerate of nature and civilisation which we, for instance, call the "German."

Yet the movement here alluded to perhaps is more adapted than any other to set us marvelling at ourselves: in it we seem to see the late reawakening of an instinct that appeared extinct. A man who some thirty years ago drew notice to the Jews' inaptitude for taking a productive share in our Art, and felt impelled to renew that attempt just eighteen years thereafter, (2) was met by the utmost indignation of Jews alike and Germans; it became quite dangerous to breathe the word "Jew" with a doubtful accent. But what once roused the bitterest

ill-will when spoken on the field of ethical Æsthetics, we suddenly hear cried in vulgar brutal tones upon the field of civic intercourse and party politics. The fact that lies between these two expressions, is the bestowal of full right upon the Jews to regard themselves in all conceivable respects as Germans (3) —much as a blanket authorised the blacks in Mexico to hold themselves for whites. Whoever weighs this matter well, even if its real absurdity escapes him, must at least be highly astonished at the levity—nay, the frivolity of our State-authorities, who could decree so vast, so incomputable a transformation of our national system without the smallest sense of what they were doing.

The formula ran as "Equalisation of the rights of all German citizens, without regard to difference of 'Confession.'"

How was it possible for there to be Germans, at any time, who could conceive of all that keeps the Jewish stem so wide apart from us under the idea of a religious [266] "confession," seeing it was first and solely in German history that divisions arose in the *Christian* Church which led to the State-acknowledgment of various confessions? However, if only we will turn that "Know thyself" with ruthless energy upon ourselves, this curiously perverted formula may afford us one of the principal clues to explanation of the seemingly inexplicable. The first thing then to strike us, will be the recent experience that our clerics feel lamed at once in their agitation against the Jews when Judaism itself is seized by the root, and the patriarchs for instance, great Abraham in particular, are submitted to a criticism involving the actual text of the Mosaic books. (4) At once the groundwork of the Christian Church, its "positive" religion, seems to reel beneath their feet; a "Mosaic Confession" is recognised; and its adherents are accorded the right to take their place beside us, to examine the credentials of a second revelation through Jesus Christ—whom even in the opinion of the late English Prime Minister they regard as one of their countless minor prophets, of whom we have made by far too much ado. To tell the truth, it will fall hard to prove by the aspect of the Christian world, and the character of the Culture shed upon it by a Church so soon decayed, the superiority of the revelation through Jesus Christ to that through Abraham and Moses: in spite of its dispersion, the Jewish stock has remained one whole with the Mosaic laws to this very day, whereas our culture and civilisation stand in the most crying contradiction to Christ's teaching. To the Jew who works the sum out, the outcome of this culture is simply the necessity of waging wars, together with the still greater one, of having money for them. Accordingly he sees our State society divided into a military and a civil class: as it is a couple of thousand years since he did anything in the military line, he devotes his knowledge and experience with great gusto to the civil class, for he observes that this must find [267] the money for the military, and in that affair his talents have been

trained to highest virtuosity.

Now the astounding success of our resident Jews in the gaining and amassing of huge stores of money has always filled our Military State authorities with nothing but respect and joyful admiration: so that the present campaign against the Jews seems to point to a wish to draw the attention of those authorities to the question, Where do the Jews get it from? The bottom of the whole dispute, as it appears to us, is Property, Ownership, which we suddenly perceive to be in jeopardy, notwithstanding that each outlay of the State has the look of aiming more at the insurance of possession than anything else.

If the application of "Know thyself" to our Church's religious descent would turn out poorly for our case against the Jews, the result will be no less unfavourable if we investigate the nature of the only thing our State systems understand by *possession*, before endeavouring to secure it from the Jews' encroachments.

"Property" has acquired an almost greater sacredness in our social conscience than religion: for offence against the latter there is lenience, for damage to the former no forgiveness. Since Property is deemed the base of all stability, the more's the pity that not all are owners, that in fact the greater proportion of Society comes disinherited into the world. Society is manifestly thus reduced by its own principle to such a perilous inquietude, that it is compelled to reckon all its laws for an impossible adjustment of this conflict; and protection of property—for which in its widest international sense the weaponed host is specially maintained—can truly mean no else than a defence of the possessors against the non-possessors. Many as are the earnest and sagacious brains that have applied themselves to this problem, its solution, such as that at last suggested of an equal division of all possessions, has not as yet been found amenable; and it seems as if the State's disposal of the apparently so simple idea [268] of Property had driven a beam into the body of mankind that dooms it to a lingering death of agony.

As the historic origin and evolution of our States seems worth a close examination in any verdict on their character, since thence alone do rights and conditions of right appear deducible, so the inequality of Possession, nay, its total absence in one great section of the State's constituents as result of the latest conquest of a country—e.g. of England by the Normans, or of Ireland in turn by the English—should be matter for explanation and, if need be, for vindication also. Far from embarking on inquiries of such difficulty ourselves, we have merely to point out the patent metamorphosis of the original idea of Property by the legal hallowing of usurpation, and to say that right by purchase nowadays has taken the place of right by earning, between which two came right by violence of seizure.

Clever though be the many thoughts expressed by mouth or pen about the invention of *money* and its enormous value as a civiliser, against such praises should be set the curse to which it has always been doomed in song and legend. If *gold* here figures as the demon strangling manhood's innocence, our greatest poet shews at last the goblin's game of *paper money*. The Nibelung's fateful ring become a pocket-book, might well complete the eerie picture of the spectral world-controller. By the advocates of our Progressive Civilisation this rulership is indeed regarded as a spiritual, nay, a moral power; for vanished Faith is now replaced by "Credit," that fiction of our mutual honesty kept upright by the most elaborate safeguards against loss and trickery. What comes to pass beneath the benedictions of this Credit we now are witnessing, and seem inclined to lay all blame upon the Jews. They certainly are virtuosi in an art which we but bungle: only, the coinage of money out of nil was invented by our Civilisation itself; or if the Jews are blamable for that, it is because our entire civilisation is a barbaro-judaic medley, in nowise a Christian creation. [269] A little self-knowledge on this point, methinks, would not come amiss to the representatives of the Church themselves, particularly when combating the seed of Abraham, in whose name they still go on to claim fulfilment of certain promises of his Jehova. A Christianity which has accommodated itself to the brute violence of every ruling power in the world might find itself when turning from the raging to the reckoning beast of prey, outmatched in cleverness and cunning by its foe; wherefore there is little present hope of special welfare from the support of either our Church or our State authorities.

However, an inner motive plainly lies at bottom of the present movement, little as it may be evinced by the behaviour of its leaders so far. We expressed our belief, above, that this motive was the re-awakening of an instinct lost to the German nation. People speak of an antagonism of *races*. In this sense we should have fresh cause for self-inspection, as it would necessitate our defining the relation of certain given breeds of man to one another. Here it would probably have to be recognised at the outset that, in talking of a German "race," it would be very difficult, nay, wellnigh impossible to compare it with a race so strongly pronounced, and still unaltered, as the Jewish. When learned men debate the relative value of mixed or pure-bred races, for the evolution of mankind, the decision must surely hinge on what we mean by man's developmental progress. The so-called Romanic nations, and the English too, are praised as hybrid stocks that obviously surpass in Culture-progress the peoples of a haply pure Germanic breed. On the other hand, if one declines to be blinded by the glamour of this culture and civilisation, and seeks the welfare of mankind in its bringing-to-birth of great characters, one finds that these far rather come to light—nay, almost solely—in pure-bred races; where it seems that the still unbroken nature-force of Race at first makes up for every higher human virtue yet unformed, and only to be

won through life's sore trials, by that of *pride*. This peculiar pride of race, that still gave us in the [270] Middle Ages such towering characters as Princes, Kings and Kaisers, may be met even to-day in the old nobility of German origin, although in unmistakable degeneration; and that degeneration we should have to take seriously into account if we wished to explain the fall of the German Folk, now exposed defenceless to the inroads of the Jews. For this, the proper course might be to first recall the unexampled devastation which Germany suffered through the Thirty Years War: after by far the greatest part of the male population had been rooted out of town and country, while the female had been violated to no less a degree by Walloons, Croats, Spaniards, French and Swedes, the relatively little-injured nobles may scarcely have felt themselves one racial body with the remnant of this decimated people. That feeling of community we still find markedly expressed in many a preceding epoch; and then it was the true patrician families, that contrived to re-illuminate the proper spirit after serious diminution of the nation's substance. This we may see in the revival of Germanic races by new offshoots from the parent stock, when tribal migration had robbed the home-stayers of their first heroic clans; we see it in the resuscitation of the German language by patrician poets of the Hohenstaufen era, after monkish Latin had become the only medium of gentility, whereas the spirit of their poetry thrust down to the peasant's hut and shaped one wholly equal speech for Folk alike and Noble; and once again we see it in the stand against the outrage foisted on the Germans by the Church of Rome, when the example of its lords and princes led the Folk to stout defence. 'Twas otherwise after the Thirty Years War: the nobles found no nation left, to which to feel their kinship; the great monarchic powers shifted from the stricter seat of Germany towards the Slavic east: degenerate Slays, decadent Germans, form the soil of the eighteenth century's history, a soil to which the Jew might confidently migrate from a Poland and a Hungary sucked dry, since even prince and noble durst no longer be ashamed of doing business with him; for—Pride [271] itself had just been pledged already, exchanged for vanity and greed.

Though in recent days we see these last two traits of character adopted by the Folk itself—our ancient relatives the Swiss can think of us no otherwise!—and though the title "German" has thus been almost coined anew, yet this new-birth still lacks too much, to constitute a real rebirth of racial feeling, a thing that always finds its first expression in a settled instinct. Our nation, one may say, has not the natural instinct for that which suits it, for what becomes it, helps and furthers it; estranged from itself, it dabbles in foreign manners. On none other have great and original spirits been bestowed, as on it, without its having known in time to treasure them: yet if the silliest news-writer or political cheap-jack but brazens out his lying phrases, it chooses him to represent its weightiest interests; whilst if the Jew comes tinkling with his bell of paper, it throws its savings at his feet,

and makes him in one night a millionaire.

The Jew, on the contrary, is the most astounding instance of racial congruence ever offered by world-history. Without a fatherland, a mother-tongue midst every people's land and tongue he finds himself again, in virtue of the unfailing instinct of his absolute and indelible idiosyncrasy: even commixture of blood does not hurt him; let Jew or Jewess intermarry with the most distinct of races, a Jew will always come to birth. Not into the remotest contact is he brought with the religion of any of the civilised (*gesittete*) nations; for in truth he has no religion at all—merely the belief in certain promises of his god which in nowise extend to a life beyond this temporal life of his, as in every true religion, but simply to this present life on earth, whereon his race is certainly ensured dominion over all that lives and lives not. Thus the Jew has need to neither think nor chatter, not even to calculate, for the hardest calculation lies all cut and dried for him in an instinct shut against all ideality. A wonderful, unparalleled phenomenon: the plastic dæmon of man's [272] downfall in triumphant surety; and German citizen of State, to boot, with a Mosaic confession; the darling of Liberal princes, and warrant of our national unity!—

Despite the enormous disadvantage at which the German race (if so we still may call it) appears to stand against the Jewish, we yet have ventured to suggest the re-awakening of a German instinct as one factor in the present agitation. As, however, we have been obliged to discard all idea of its being a purely racial instinct, we perhaps might search for something higher: a bent that, merely vaguely (*wahnvoll*) felt by the Folk of to-day, would at first appear indeed as instinct, though really of far nobler origin and loftier aim, and which might haply be defined as the spirit of the purely-Human.

From the Cosmopolitan proper, if such a man exists in fact, we probably should have little to expect for the solution of our problem. 'Tis no small thing, to run through the history of the world and yet preserve love for the human species. Here nothing but a rooted feeling of kinship with the immediate nation whence we sprang, can serve to re-knit the strand dissevered by a survey of the whole: here operates the thing we feel ourselves to be; we pity, and strive our best to hope, as for the future of our nearer family. Fatherland, mother-tongue: woe to the man bereft of these! But what unmeasured happiness, to recognise in one's mother-tongue the speech of one's ure-fathers! Through such a tongue our feelings and beholdings stretch right back to early Man himself; no fence and pale there hedge our nobles in, and far beyond the fatherland at last assigned us, beyond the landmarks of historic knowledge and all our outer trappings thence derived, we feel ourselves one kin with pristine Man's creative beauty. Such is our German language, the only heritage retained intact from our forefathers. Do we feel our breath fast quitting us, beneath the

pressure of an alien civilisation; do we fall into uncertainty about ourselves: we have only to dig to the roots in the true father-soil of our language, to reap at once a reassuring [273] answer on ourselves, nay, on the truly Human. And this possibility, of always drawing from the pristine fount of our own nature, that makes us feel ourselves no more a race, no mere variety of man, but one of Manhood's primal branches,—'tis this that ever has bestowed on us great men and spiritual heroes, as to whom we have no need to trouble whether fashioners of foreign fatherless civilisations are able to understand and prize them; whilst we again, inspired by the deeds and gifts of our forefathers, and gazing with unclouded eye, are able to rightly estimate those foreigners, and value them according to the spirit of pure Humanity indwelling in their work. For the sterling German instinct asks and seeks for nothing but this Purely-Human, and through that search alone can it be helpful—not merely to itself, but to all that shews the pure and genuine under never so great disguise.

Whom could it escape, that, suffering from the inability to truly manifest itself in either national or church-religious life, this noble instinct could but lead a feeble, indistinct, misunderstandable and scamped existence hitherto? In not one of those parties which aspire to guide the movements of our political or our intellectual national life, especially at the present day, does it seem to us, alas! to find a voice; even the names they take proclaim them not of German origin, still less inspired by German instinct. What "Conservatives," "Liberals" and "Conservative-liberals," and finally "Democrats," "Socialists," or even "Social-democrats" etc., have lately uttered on the Jewish Question, must seem to us a trifle foolish; for none of these parties would think of testing that "Know thyself" upon themselves, not even the most indefinite and therefore the only one that styles itself in German, the "Progress"-party. There we see nothing but a clash of interests, whose object is common to all the disputants, common and ignoble: plainly the side most strongly organised, i.e. the most unscrupulous, will bear away the prize. With all our comprehensive State- and National-Economy, it would seem that we are victims to a dream [274] now flattering, now terrifying, and finally asphyxiating: all are panting to awake therefrom; but it is the dream's peculiarity that, so long as it enmeshes us, we take it for real life, and fight against our waking as though we fought with death. At last one crowning horror gives the tortured wretch the needful strength: he wakes, and what he held most real was but a figment of the dæmon of distraught mankind.

We who belong to none of all those parties, but seek our welfare solely in man's waking to his simple hallowed dignity; we who are excluded from these parties as useless persons, and yet are sympathetically troubled for them,—we can only stand and watch the spasms of the dreamer, since no cry of ours can pierce to him. So let us save and tend and brace our best of forces, to bear a noble cordial

to the sleeper when he wakes, as of himself he must at last. But only when the fiend, who keeps those ravers in the mania of their party-strife, no more can find a where or when to lurk among us, will there also be no longer—any Jews.

And the very stimulus of the present movement—conceivable among ourselves alone—might bring this great solution within reach of us Germans, rather than of any other nation, if only we would boldly take that "Know thyself" and apply it to the inmost quick of our existence. That we have naught to fear from ultimate knowledge, if but we conquer all false shame and quarry deep enough, we hope the anxious may have culled from the above.

# Notes

1

"*Erkenne dich selbst*" appeared in the *Bayreuther Blätter* for February-March (double no.) 1881.—Tr.

2

See *Judaism in Music* , Vol. III. of the present series.—Tr.

3

Decreed by the Reichstag in 1871.—Tr.

4

It was not very long before this was written, that biblical critics began to turn their attention from the New to the Old Testament.—Tr.

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