



Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890

Reasons to Forego a Performance of Wagner's *Parsifal* at Bayreuth (July 23, 1889)

The novelist Theodor Fontane (1819-1898), regarded by many as the most important German-language realist writer of the nineteenth century, admired neither Richard Wagner (1813-1883) nor his operas. In this letter to his wife Emilie, Fontane describes a performance of Wagner's opera *Parsifal* in the Festival Theater in Bayreuth in 1889, six years after Wagner's death. With wit and understatement, Fontane mocks the opera as excessively long: he admits that he lacks the stamina to endure such a performance.

To Emilie Fontane

Bayreuth, July 28, 1889, Sunday night, 9 p.m.

[. . .]

It is now 9 p.m., and when I think that *Parsifal* will not be over for another hour, at the earliest, I simply can't imagine how I would have endured those aeons inside the theater. I heard the overture and, just as I was leaving, caught a glimpse of the first scene; then I strolled slowly back to my hotel (which is quite far away) and did some reading; then I went into town and had my first coffee at a confectioner's shop near the big bridge (across from the military barracks) and then a second one at the much talked-about Sammet's, since I needed to do something after all. Then I walked back to my hotel, where I wrote two letters. I took these letters to the post office and went for yet another half-hour walk. Then, back at the hotel again, I read for a whole hour and then had supper and tea in my room – *Parsifal*, though, is still far from over, despite all this. The 1500 people who attended today's performance will have to be miraculously healthy, otherwise, in three day's time – for it's raining and utterly freezing – 750 of them will be afflicted with catarrh, diarrhea with vomiting, stomach flu, and rheumatism. A passionate person can withstand anything; for my part, I am almost sad that while traveling (and at other times, as well), I have always been a weakling. [. . .]

It is now 9:20, but *Parsifal* is still playing. The catering tents are outside; some people must have frozen to death by now, or else this world no longer makes sense.

As always,
Your "Old one."

Source: Theodor Fontane to his wife Emilie Fontane, Bayreuth, July 28, 1889, in Theodor Fontane, *Werke, Schriften und Briefe* [Works, Writings, and Letters], section 4, *Briefe* [Letters], vol. 3. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftlicher Buchgesellschaft, 1980, pp. 706-07.

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