

The Relationship between Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Wagner

Richard Strauss once said, so I am told, that he considered the years in which the friendship between Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche was at its zenith, one of the most impressive and significant cultural moments of the nineteenth century.

—Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche

Prelude

On the morning of December 25, 1870, on her 33rd birthday, Cosima Wagner was awakened by the strains of *Siegfried Idyll*, which Wagner had arranged for musicians to perform on the stairs outside her bedroom in their rented house in Tribschen, near Lucerne, Switzerland. A guest present at that performance was the newly appointed 26-year-old professor of Classical Philology at the University of Basle, Friedrich Nietzsche. Thereafter Nietzsche would become a frequent visitor to Wagner's home. On January 1, 1871, Nietzsche returned to Basle and began writing *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, dedicated to Wagner. The two had quickly become mutual admirers. Of Nietzsche, Wagner said, "Strictly speaking, you are, aside from my wife, the one prize I have received in life." And of Wagner, Nietzsche wrote, "my only love-affair."^[i]

Nietzsche's infatuation extended to Wagner's music dramas. On hearing the preludes to *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, he wrote, "For the life of me, I cannot preserve an attitude of cool criticism in listening to this music; every nerve of my being is set tingling and it has been a long time since I have experienced a feeling of such sustained enjoyment as I did while listening to the latter overture."^[ii] Later he would compare the experience to taking hashish: "To escape from insufferable pressure you need hashish. Well then, I needed Wagner."^[iii] Their strong mutual admiration, with Wagner as mentor and Nietzsche as protégé, had begun in 1868, but by the mid-1870s, their relationship had begun to show strain. At the conclusion of the first Bayreuth festival in 1876, their split was complete. What drew them together? What drove them apart?

To answer these questions, one must keep in mind that there are two Nietzsches and two Wagners occupying different periods. The earlier Nietzsche was a disciple of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, subscribing to his pessimism, and a devotee of Wagner, another of Schopenhauer's disciples. The later Nietzsche repudiated Schopenhauer's pessimism, which rejected the world, and adopted an optimism which affirms it and turned his back on Wagner and his pessimism.

The earlier Wagner was an optimist in the mold of another German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach, and a political revolutionary. The later Wagner, after the failure of the Revolutions of 1848 in which he participated, became a pessimist. What drew the earlier Nietzsche and earlier Wagner together was their hope for regenerating culture through art, particularly dramatic art, and their allegiance to Schopenhauer. What drove them apart were their fundamentally opposed worldviews, the later Wagner's Schopenhauerian pessimism, and the later Nietzsche's Feuerbachian optimism.

Act I—Mutual Interests and Philosophies

Nietzsche and Wagner, like many others in mid-19th century Germany and elsewhere, were opposed to the industrialized and mercantile culture that exploited nature and fragmented and alienated its members. Nietzsche wished to supplant this alienating and soulless industrial culture with a new, “tragic culture,” emulating that of archaic Greece, the period from Homer to the midpoint of the fifth century, only to be followed by decadence and decline. Its virtue was that it took its cue not from science or ethics, but from art, particularly poetic. It was preeminently an aesthetic culture.

It was perhaps a bit of good luck that Nietzsche and Wagner both believed that the way to recreate this tragic culture as a replacement for the spiritually bankrupt modern one was the revival of Attic tragedy through Wagner’s music dramas. Attic tragedy of the fifth-century BCE was a public spectacle involving poetry, music, and dance as part of a religious ritual—the original *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork). At the center of the theater was an altar to Dionysus, to whom sacrifices were ritually offered before a performance of the drama. Wagner agreed with Nietzsche about the association of Attic tragedy with religion and myth. He understood the Nordic and Greek gods as personifications of the unconscious forces governing the human mind, and he expressed these ideas in his *The Artwork of the Future*. Wagner aspired in his music dramas to recreate the union of the arts in ancient tragedy, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Nietzsche understood that Wagner hoped to regenerate European culture on the model of Greek tragic culture. Both agreed that art is “the highest task and the real metaphysical activity of this life,”^[iv] higher than science and religion. The function of art was to relate through symbols the truth about humanity implicit in religion.^[v]

Nietzsche’s hearing of *Tristan und Isolde* was a significant event in his life. According to Dietrich Fischer-Diskau, “It was *Tristan* that helped young Nietzsche confront the Dionysian,” specifically because of “the heady and orgiastic language of *Tristan*.”^[vi] He initially thought that Wagner’s music dramas were animated by the Dionysian spirit, although he later changed his mind. As he said, “I began by interpreting Wagner’s music as the expression of a Dionysian powerfulness of soul. In it I thought I heard the earthquake by means of which a primeval life-force, which had been constrained for ages, was seeking at last to burst its bonds, quite indifferent to how much of that which nowadays calls itself culture, would thereby be shaken to ruins.”^[vii] Small wonder that Nietzsche dedicated *The Birth of Tragedy* to Wagner. In it he argued that ancient Greek tragedy resulted from the harmonizing of two dominant forces in the human psyche, the Dionysian (named for the god of tragedy) and the Apollonian (named for the god of philosophy). The Apollonian represents rationality, moderation, and the affirmation of individuality. It is typified by the words, stage action, and mise-en-scène of the drama, whereas the Dionysian represents their opposite and is expressed by the music.

However, there is a question about who first came up with the idea of Greek tragedy as the harmonization of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. According to Nietzsche’s sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, it was Nietzsche: “When Wagner, for example, in his essay: ‘On the Destiny of Opera,’ speaks of the compromise between the Apollonian and

Dionysian art in the Greek tragedy, it is easy to see that this thought was borrowed from my brother.”^[viii] But according to Nietzsche himself, it was Wagner. In a letter to Carl von Gersdorff of November 18, he wrote, “Well then, the design [of *The Birth of Tragedy*] is settled—to be modelled on Wagner’s “The Destiny of Opera”—rejoice with me!”^[ix] Wagner’s influence on Nietzsche may even have extended to Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, which is paradoxical, since it was written well into Nietzsche’s anti-Wagnerian period. This work, according to Roger Hollinrake, was inspired by Wagner, as indicated by excerpts from the *Ring* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, respectively.

Even after his breakup with Wagner after 1876, although critical of the *Ring*, Nietzsche continued to have a soft spot for *Tristan und Isolde*. He spoke of its metaphysical significance, of its probing into the true nature of things, à la Schopenhauer be it noted, even though Nietzsche repudiated Schopenhauer’s pessimism. *Tristan* is

the actual opus metaphysicum of all art, a work upon which there lies the broken glance of a dying man with his insatiable sweet longing for the mysteries of night and death, far distant from life, which, as evil, deception and separation, shines with an uncanny ghostly morning brightness and distinctness: and with this a drama of the most austere strictness of form, overwhelming in its simple grandeur, and only thus adequate to the mystery of which it speaks, the mystery of death in life, of unity in duality.^[x]

Nietzsche’s phrase “opus metaphysicum” is perhaps a covert reference to the *Opus Metaphysicum* of 1617 by Christoph Scheibler, a Lutheran theologian and philosopher.

According to the early Nietzsche, ancient Greeks did not respond to the misery and absurdity of life with resignation and Buddhistic negation of will (as did Arthur Schopenhauer, the German philosopher contemporary with Wagner and Nietzsche, who had a strong influence on Wagner and his mid- and late-career compositions), but instead turned to tragic art, whereby they affirmed life in all its power, joyousness, and perdurance. Nietzsche had the same response. These ideas resonated strongly with Wagner. Upon reading *The Birth of Tragedy*, Wagner wrote in a letter of 1872 to Nietzsche, “I have never read anything more beautiful than your book! . . . You have now given to the world a work which is unequalled. . . . Each of us has read your book twice—once alone during the day, and then aloud in the evening. We fairly fight over the one copy and regret that the promised second one has not yet arrived.”^[xi]

Wagner and Nietzsche also agreed as to the gestation of Greek tragedy in choral song, which originally constituted the whole of the tragedy. In his 1870 essay on Beethoven, Wagner wrote, “from the midst of the choral song the drama was projected upon the stage.”^[xii] And Nietzsche wrote, “We must understand Greek tragedy as the Dionysian chorus which again and again discharges itself in an Apollonian world of images. So those chorus parts which are interwoven through tragedy are to a certain extent the maternal womb of the whole so-called dialogue, that is, of the whole world of the stage, of the real drama.”^[xiii] This view echoes Schopenhauer’s idea of music as the primordial art. Wagner became a devotee of Schopenhauer’s a decade before Nietzsche did.

Nietzsche deplored the decline of the arts in his time, especially dramatic art, into base entertainment, a decline obvious in their comparison to the state of the arts in ancient Greece: “There is really only one short way of convincing oneself of how vulgar, how peculiarly and oddly vulgar, our theatrical institutions are, and that is to compare them with the former reality of the Greek theatre.” He hoped that the Bayreuth Festival dedicated to Wagner’s music dramas would help reverse this decline. He looked to its attendees’ being rejuvenated by it and going on to confer that blessing on society at large: “Must not those who are permitted to participate in it not be transformed and renewed, so as henceforth to transform and renew in other domains of life.”^[xiv] In line with this hope, Nietzsche wrote an “Appeal to the German Nation,” where he stated that for him Bayreuth stood for all people of high seriousness, not just Germans, who were committed to the purification of drama and the regeneration of culture it promised.

But why should the theater be the birthplace of “tragedy in a nobler form” and thereby the regeneration of art generally? It is because there the spectators are more likely to be moved, especially if they hear music, than they are in art galleries and museums: “Wagner endeavors to achieve the renaissance of art by proceeding from the only existing basis, namely, the theatre. Here the masses are genuinely moved and are not obliged to resort to pretense as in museums and concert halls. To be sure, this is a very crude mass, and as yet, it has been demonstrated to be an impossibility to weaken the domination of the theatre.”^[xv] From Wagner’s likely viewpoint, what’s not to like about Nietzsche?

Act II: Beyond Philosophy—Nietzsche on Wagner the Man and His Music

Scene 1—The Man

Early in their relationship, Nietzsche regarded his friendship with Wagner as the most momentous event in his life. A few weeks before his mental collapse in 1888, he said to his sister, Elisabeth:

Here where I am speaking of the vivifying influences of my life, a word is necessary to express my gratitude for that which above all other things, refreshed me most profoundly and most genuinely. This was, unquestionably, my intercourse with Richard Wagner. All the rest of my human relationships I treat quite lightly, but at no price would I be willing to blot from my life the Tribschen days—those days of mutual confidence, of cheerfulness, of sublime flashes—the deep moments.

In a letter to Wagner, he wrote: “I know of only one other man, and that man your twin brother of intellect, Arthur Schopenhauer, whom I regard with the same veneration—yea, even more, as *religione quadam*.”^[xvi]

Nietzsche’s *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* is an extended encomium to Wagner. Undertaking this must have been onerous since at the time of its composition Nietzsche had regarded Wagner, in his sense, “decadent.” The object of his praise was his idealized Wagner. Nietzsche regarded Wagner as a kindred philosopher who, though purveying various philosophies, was ever true to his higher self in suffering and learning, thereby maintaining his integrity and autonomy.

For Nietzsche, Wagner spoke as the zeitgeist of modernity, that of late nineteenth-century culture. Nietzsche observed, “Through Wagner modernity speaks her most intimate language: it conceals neither its good nor its evil: it has thrown off all shame. And, conversely, one has almost calculated the whole of the value of modernity once one is clear concerning what is good and evil in Wagner.” He went on to ask rhetorically, “What is it in our age that Wagner’s art expresses?” and answered: “That brutality and most delicate weakness which exist side by side, that running wild of natural instincts, and nervous hyper-sensitiveness, that thirst for emotion which arises from fatigue and the love of fatigue.—All this is understood by the Wagnerites.”^[xvii] Clearly, Nietzsche regarded Wagner as a universal genius like Goethe and Shakespeare: “His conceptions are, like those of every great and good German, *supra-German*, and his art speaks, not to nations, but to individual men.”^[xviii]

Wagner reciprocated Nietzsche’s high esteem for him: “I find that, with and through Nietzsche, I have got into very good company. You cannot know what it means to a man who has spent a long life in the society of inferior or rather stupid persons, at last to be able to say: God be praised, here comes a new type of man, possibly an entire generation. When this happens, one feels compensated for having been obliged to live for half a century in a madhouse.”^[xix]

Scene 2—The Music

Nietzsche had much to say in praise of Wagner’s music. But here I shall confine myself to what he said about it that reflects their shared beliefs at the basis of their friendship. Here is what he said about Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, modelled on Attic tragedy, uniting words, stage action, and music to form an expressive affective unit—a synesthetic experience—having a salutary effect on its spectators:

Wagner, . . . , as the first to recognize the inner deficiencies of the spoken drama, presents every dramatic event in a threefold rendering, through words, gestures and music: the music transmits the fundamental impulses in the depths of the persons represented in the drama directly to the soul of the listeners, who now perceive in these same persons’ gestures the first visible form of those events, and in the words a second, paler manifestation of them translated into a more conscious act of will. All these effects take place simultaneously without in the least interfering with one another, and compel him before whom such a drama is presented to a quite novel understanding and empathy, just as though his senses had all at once grown more spiritual and his spirit more sensual, and as though everything that longs to know is now in a free and blissful transport of knowing.

Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* had a significance for Nietzsche well beyond the theater: “It is quite impossible to produce the highest and purest effect of which the art of the theatre is capable without at the same time effecting innovations everywhere, in morality and politics, in education and society.” As such, Wagner’s music dramas, particularly *The Ring*, speak directly to the audience. The *Ring* challenges them to internalize Wotan’s renunciation of political power and Brünnhilde’s abandonment of knowledge for love.

The *Ring* dramatized Nietzsche's and Wagner's shared critique of the current socio-political order, a *Gesellschaft* instead of their preferred *Gemeinschaft*.^[xx] Here is Nietzsche's succinct synopsis: "In *The Ring des Nibelungen* the tragic hero is a god who thirsts after power and who, through neglecting no path to its attainment, binds himself with treaties, loses his freedom, and becomes enmeshed in the curse which lies upon all power."^[xxi] Note that the power Nietzsche had in mind was political power, not the individual's will to power expressed in one's self-discipline and heightened vitality. Nietzsche understood the *Ring* to be Wagner's symbolic portrayal of a socio-political order based on a system of contracts and legal arrangements, the source of all evil: "Whence arises all the evil in this world?' Wagner asked himself. His own answer: from 'old contracts', as all revolutionary ideologists have done. . . from customs, laws, morals, institutions, from all those things upon which the ancient world and ancient society rests."^[xxii] This is in the spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who diagnosed the ills of society as the result of oppressive institutions such as customs and laws. He once famously said, "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains."^[xxiii] He believed that human beings were born naturally good and were corrupted by civilization. Something of the same spirit informs George Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite*, which interprets the *Ring* as a Marxist critique of capitalism, "that his picture of Niblunghome under the reign of Alberic is a poetic vision of unregulated industrial capitalism as it was made known in Germany in the middle of the nineteenth century by Engels's Condition of the Laboring Classes in England."^[xxiv]

In Nietzsche's interpretation of the *Ring*, the remedy for this contractarian and legalistic socio-political order is war: "How can one get rid of the evil in this world? How can one get rid of ancient society?' Only by declaring war against 'contracts' (traditions, morality). The character Siegfried does this." For Nietzsche, *The Ring* is an allegory of this revolt, beginning with Siegfried's birth, resulting from incest and adultery, an affront to traditional morality.

Wotan also declares war on contracts by breaking his spear with its record of his oaths and contracts carved on it. Brünnhilde does it too by disobeying Wotan's demand to allow Siegmund to be killed so as to honor his oath to Fricka to punish adultery. Wagner had carried his Revolutionary zeal as a participant in the Revolutions of 1848 into the dramatic sphere. Yet the expected golden age was not to be. Instead, all was destined for destruction—the *Twilight of the Gods*. Wagner had a change of heart. His optimism was checked by his reading of Schopenhauer, the arch pessimist. Wagner's optimism succumbed to pessimism. The goal now was no longer redemption, but destruction, the destruction of the old order of things.

A word here about Nietzsche's understanding of decadence, a condition against which he constantly railed. It can afflict both individuals and a culture. Individually, it is a disorder of the self, a loss of psychic integrity. It is manifest in the self-abnegation of asceticism, the willful suppression of one's animal instincts. Its symptoms include resentment, obsession with guilt, and the fanatical pursuit of enervating ideals like asceticism and extreme rationalism (the case with Socrates). Culturally it takes the forms of nihilism and democracy. By contrast, undecadent individuals neither repress nor give full rein to their

instincts, but cultivate or discipline them in a certain way, that is, not to eliminate but to channel them to beneficial ends—the way of Epicurus, it might be said. Of Wagnerians' decadence in particular Nietzsche said that they rejected the mundaneness of quotidian life, instead replacing it with the “real” life of the illusory theater where they can indulge in and be overwhelmed by grandiose passions. This illusion becomes an addictive drug whose constant ingestion enables them to cope with the everyday world. However, Nietzsche's criticism of the escapism that Wagner induced in the theater would not apply presumably to the theatrical realism of such as Strindberg and Ibsen, whose plays deal with the nitty-gritty and even sordidness of life.

Act III—Twilight of a Friendship

Nietzsche's earlier panegyric on Wagner and his music now became a denunciation. The first crack in the relationship between Nietzsche and Wagner occurred during Nietzsche's attendance at the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876. He went, expecting a high-minded audience devoted to the aesthetic ideals commemorated by the Festival. Instead, he found only a mass of philistine bourgeoisie bent on mere entertainment, a diversion from the dreary business of getting and spending. He was appalled by the commercialization and vulgarity of the spectacle that he encountered at Bayreuth: “My blunder was this, I travelled to Bayreuth with an ideal in my breast, and was thus doomed to experience the bitterest disappointment. The preponderance of ugliness, grotesqueness, and strong pepper thoroughly repelled me.”^[xxv] In particular, Nietzsche thought that the Festival's organizers had betrayed Wagner's and his ideals.

Furthermore, curiously enough, the music dramas themselves, which he had earlier celebrated, affronted Nietzsche's moral and aesthetic sensibilities:

Not only had he been disappointed by the musical side of the Festival, but his ethical and aesthetic taste had also been offended. His very soul had been nauseated by the Wagnerian operatic figures with their “erotic obsessions,” by the “re-modelling” of the Edda myth, by the aid of the perverse traits of French romance” (for example, Siegfried's origin), and by the sultry sensuality which lies at the bottom of all the Wagner music. He longed again for healthy, virile, well-balanced sentiments held in check by joy, pride and the pleasure in being moderate, just as the fiery steed is reined in by the powerful rider who takes pleasure in his task. He longed for music full of happiness, pride, high spirits, *limpidezza*, gigantic power, and yet held well within bounds by the highest laws of style. He had expected music of this kind from the Wagner who had created the figure of Siegfried, but this was not the music he found in Bayreuth.^[xxvi]

Nietzsche had now come to see Wagner's art as a species of pathology, with his music dramas parading on stage their characters as pathological types. He also noted wryly that this pathology belonged to his contemporary culture: “Is Wagner a man at all? Is he not rather a disease? Everything he touches he contaminates. *He has made music sick.*” Wagner corrupted music by using it to stimulate people's nerves through hypnotic devices:

Wagner is a great corrupter of music. With it, he found the means of stimulating tired nerves,—and in this way he made music ill. In the art of spurring exhausted creatures back into activity, and of recalling half-corpses to life, the inventiveness he shows is of no mean order. He is the master of hypnotic trickery, and he fells the strongest like bullocks. Wagner's success—his success with nerves, and therefore with women—converted the whole world of ambitious musicians into disciples of his secret art.[\[xxvii\]](#)

Nietzsche went further and undercut the very conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which earlier he extolled, by opining that program music alone, with its implicit narrative, such as the tone poems of Franz Liszt and Richard Strauss, could serve better the ends of the music drama.

He thought that the unification of the arts in the theater devalued music, the supreme art. Nietzsche “did *not* consider theater the unification of arts enjoying an equal status, a goal overriding the value of absolute music. To Wagner, the words still had a vital effect on the music.” He thought that Wagner was moving away from opera toward absolute music, albeit with a program: “He wrongly surmised that Wagner was unconsciously aspiring to create the ‘greatest symphony of all,’ which would overcome the basic ill of opera and in which the chief instruments would intone a singing that the action would sensualize.”[\[xxviii\]](#)

Nietzsche even turned against the theater, the domain of the classic Greek tragedy whose spirit he longed to see revived. He criticized Wagner's followers for elevating the theater above all the other arts, for which he coined the neologism “theatrocracy.” Here is what he said:

the craziness of a belief in the pre-eminence of the theatre, in the right of the theatre to rule supreme over the arts, over Art in general . . . the theatre is something lower than art, something secondary, something coarsened, above all something suitably distorted and falsified for the mob. In this respect Wagner altered nothing: Bayreuth is grand Opera—and not even good opera.

Nietzsche condemned the theater for its inducing a mob mentality and diminishing the individual. The theater had become another idol, Demolatry: “The stage is a form of Demolatry in the realm of taste, the stage is an insurrection of the mob, a plebiscite against good taste. . . . The case of Wagner proves this fact: he captivated the masses—he depraved taste, he even perverted our taste for opera!” The theater induces a mob mentality where strict conformity prevails and one's individuality is lost: “In the theatre one becomes mob, herd, woman, Pharisee, electing cattle, patron, idiot—Wagnerite: there, the most personal conscience is bound to submit to the levelling charm of the great multitude, there the neighbour rules, there one becomes a neighbour.”[\[xxix\]](#)

In the end, Nietzsche classified Wagner not as a philosopher (as earlier), or even a musician, but as an actor: “Was Wagner a musician at all? In any case he was something else to a *much greater degree*—that is to say, an incomparable *histrion*, the greatest mime, the most astounding theatrical genius that the Germans have ever had, our scenic artist

par excellence. He belongs to some other sphere than the history of music, with whose really great and genuine figure he must not be confounded.”^[xxx] H. L. Mencken, an admirer of Wagner, though acknowledging his gifts, also regarded him as an actor at heart.

Wagner for Nietzsche had become the arch seducer, a purveyor of decadence in the forms of obscure idealism, nihilism, and religiosity. Nietzsche likened him to the seductress Circe, the goddess who lures sailors to their doom:

In this sense Wagner is a seducer on a grand scale. There is nothing exhausted, nothing effete, nothing dangerous to life, nothing that slanders the world in the realm of spirit, which has not secretly found shelter in his art, he conceals the blackest obscurantism in the luminous orbs of the ideal. He flatters every nihilistic (Buddhistic) instinct and togs it out in music; he flatters every form of Christianity, every religious expression of decadence. He that hath ears to hear let him hear: everything that has ever grown out of the soil of impoverished life, the whole counterfeit coinage of the transcendental and of a Beyond found its most sublime advocate in Wagner’s art, . . . in the persuasion of the senses which in their turn makes the spirit weary and morbid. Music in the form of Circe.

For Nietzsche, Wagner’s power of seduction was no more evident than in *Parsifal*: “In the art of seduction ‘Parsifal’ will forever maintain its rank as a stroke of genius.”^[xxxi] He was ambivalent about it, though, because he admired its unmistakable musical qualities. On hearing the *Parsifal* prelude, Nietzsche wrote in a letter to Peter Gast of January 21, 1878: “Recently I heard the Vorspiel of Parsifal for the first time (in Monte Carlo!). . . . but purely from an aesthetic standpoint, has Wagner ever written anything better?”^[xxxii] It was the “immoral” message advocating celibacy that stuck in Nietzsche’s craw: “For ‘*Parsifal*’ is a work of rancour, of revenge, of the most secret concoction of poisons with which to make an end of the first conditions of life, it is a bad work. The preaching of chastity remains an incitement to unnaturalness: I despise anybody who does not regard ‘*Parsifal*’ as an outrage upon morality.”^[xxxiii]

What might explain Nietzsche’s complete about-face from acclaiming Wagner and his music dramas to denouncing them? Perhaps it was the maturing of his philosophical ideas. According to Mencken, “Nietzsche grew so vastly during the years that the two men were together that it was quite impossible for him to go on as a mere satellite, even of a Wagner.” Wagner failed to realize that Nietzsche “was a European figure of the first calibre— perhaps the most salient and original personality seen in the groves of learning since Goethe.” Consequently, “Among equals there can be no disciples. Wagner resigned Nietzsche as flighty and incomprehensible, and Nietzsche resigned Wagner as half a charlatan .”^[xxxiv]

Another possible explanation for the Nietzsche/Wagner split may have been Wagner’s uncharacteristic profession of Christianity, as reported by Nietzsche’s sister: “But this make-believe on Wagner’s part and this pretense of having become a naive, pious Christian was more than my brother could stand.” Nietzsche suspected that Wagner’s professed religiosity had the ulterior motive of currying favor with the political authorities for their support of the Bayreuth Festival: “he considered it quite impossible that Wagner, the avowed atheist, should suddenly have become a naive and pious believer. He could only

regard Wagner's alleged sudden change of heart, as having been prompted by a desire to stand well with the Christian rulers of Germany and thus further the material success of the Bayreuth undertaking."

Wagner's specious conversion would have particularly disturbed Nietzsche, who placed the highest premium on honesty and truth: "It is impossible for me to recognize *greatness* which is not united with candour and sincerity towards one's self. The moment I make a discovery of this sort, a man's achievements count for absolutely nothing with me, as I feel that he is only playing a part and everything he does is based upon insincerity." According to Elisabeth, Nietzsche held in his mind two contrary ideals of Wagner: "Two passionately cherished ideals stood opposed to one another; on the one hand, the Catholic-romantic figure of Parsifal, implying negation of life—on the other, the powerful figure of Siegfried, god-like, transfigured, and the personification of life affirmed. To my brother's mind, Wagner had always personified the latter ideal, and hence his bitter disappointment!"^[xxxv]

Another factor undermining their friendship was Wagner's virulent anti-Semitism, which Nietzsche had detected in *Parsifal*. On his sister's marriage to the notorious anti-Semite Ludwig Bernhard Förster in 1885, he complained, "Your alliance with an anti-Semitic boss expresses an alienation to my entire way of being, an alienation that keeps filling me again and again with resentment or melancholy."^[xxxvi]

Nietzsche's sister offered another reason for her brother's break with Wagner. For too long, Nietzsche had been content to serve as Wagner's acolyte, thereby impeding his own intellectual development: "Was there ever a great spirit willing to have its course circumscribed and mapped out by another? At that time, the current of my brother's development was flowing in broader and deeper channels than ever before and was he now to permit it to be dammed up into a corner?"^[xxxvii] Indeed, Wagner had subjugated Nietzsche, who rankled at his bondage: "In Tübingen the young professor was to learn the art of subjugation. The first commandment of this art was: Fulfill thy every task, be it never so degrading. By idealizing his visits to Tübingen, Nietzsche succeeded in obscuring the fact that he had been relegated to the level of a slave."^[xxxviii]

Nietzsche came to realize retrospectively that he had idealized Wagner: "I no longer recognized Wagner, or rather I realized that I had been cherishing in my mind an ideal portrait of the Wagner I thought I knew. . . . I must bear the fate of all idealists, who see the object of their adoration tumbling from its pedestal, Ideal monster: the real Wagner shrinks away to nothing." Nietzsche's sister agreed: "He placed Wagner upon a pedestal far transcending anything human and found his highest consolation in so doing; his thoughts had always been concentrated upon the perfection of the human type, and he believed to have found in Wagner the highest specimen of manhood. Now his idol lay in ruins at his feet—an idol who tyrannically wished to prohibit any intellectual tendency other than his own, now enfeebled by age and weakness."^[xxxix]

Introspectively Nietzsche admitted, "I gained an insight into the injustice of idealism, by noticing that I avenged myself on Wagner for the disappointed hopes I had cherished of

him.”^[xli] Nietzsche confessed, “I had recognized the fact that my faith in Wagner was based upon an error; we were too essentially different in our innermost natures and this was bound to cause a separation, sooner or later.” Nietzsche expressed the difference in their natures poetically as follows:

We were friends and have become as strangers. But it is best so and we will neither conceal this nor draw a veil over it as if we had any cause to be ashamed. We are like two ships, each of which has its own course and its own goal; it may be that our paths may cross again and that we shall celebrate a feast-day together as we did in the past when the gallant ships lay in one harbor and under one sun, as if their common goal had already been reached. But then came a time when we were driven far apart by the inexorable power of our several missions into far distant seas and under strange skies, and perhaps we shall never meet again. Or it may be that we shall meet, and fail to recognize one another, so great will be the change that the various suns and seas have wrought in us!^[xlii]

Related to the above was their fundamental disagreement over the world’s justification. Both believed it needed justification, that religion failed to provide it, and only art could do so. For Nietzsche, the aesthetic justification was self-assertion through the will-to-power. For the later Wagner who abandoned Feuerbachian optimism for Schopenhauerian pessimism, it was self-renunciation. Still, Nietzsche hoped that though their paths diverged they would both come to venerate their past friendship.

Even after his break with Wagner, Nietzsche remained his admirer. To Heinrich Köselitz he wrote: “At the end, it was the ageing Wagner against whom I had to defend myself. As far as the real Wagner is concerned, I count on inheriting a large part of his legacy myself.” To the end, Nietzsche was obsessed with Wagner. Nietzsche thought Wagner’s achievement reincarnated in him: “As early as 1882, he had told Malwida von Meysenbug that ‘the best of Wagner’s achievement’ would live on in him.” And six years later he prophesied, “‘Wherever the name Wagner occurs, the name Nietzsche can be substituted without reservation.’ ‘Wagner’ was to become one of his most frequently used words in the final year of his creative life.” According to a visitor, during the time of his insanity, “if the name of Wagner happened to be mentioned, he never failed to say, ‘I loved that man dearly.’”^[xliii]

Wagner, too, felt the loss of Nietzsche’s break with him. He wrote to Nietzsche’s sister, Elisabeth, “Tell your brother that I am quite alone since he went away and left me.”^[xliv] After his disillusionment with Wagner, Nietzsche penned this retrospective appreciation of him: “I call Wagner the greatest benefactor of my life. What makes us related, the fact that we have suffered more profoundly—from each other, too—than people of this century could possibly suffer will forever reconcile our names.”^[xlv] According to Thomas Mann, Nietzsche’s criticism of Wagner is an inverted panegyric . . . another form of glorification.”^[xlv]—a case of the lady doth protest too much. Nietzsche’s ambivalence toward Wagner has been described as a classic case of projection.

Act IV: Denouement

What are we to make then of Nietzsche's about-face with respect to Wagner and his music? Nietzsche, let it be remembered, was a pianist and composer of sorts who was well acquainted with music. His earlier positive evaluation of Wagner's music therefore is astute and carries weight. But later he recants. Why? I do not think the reason is musical, for Wagner's genius is not in doubt. His influence on a host of later musicians and composers is legend.

Acknowledgments

I want to express my appreciation to the Triangle Wagner Society for inviting me to submit this article by an enthusiastic listener inspired by his appreciation for Wagner's music and for two great figures of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer. I also want to thank three members of that society, Margie Satinsky, Steve Shafer, and Virginia Clark, for considerably improving the original manuscript with their editing. Finally, thanks to Julian Young for taking time to review this article and suggesting some revisions.

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[i] In a draft of *Human, All Too Human*, though later he deleted this phrase from his proofs.

[ii] Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, trans. Caroline V. Kerr (London: Duckworth & Co., 1922), 4-5.

[iii] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*, trans. Duncan Large, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 28.

[iv] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 17-18.

[v] Roger Scruton, "Nietzsche on Wagner." <https://www.roger-scruton.com/articles/31-understanding-music/181-nietzsche-on-wagner> (Note, this document is not paginated.)

[vi] Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, *Wagner and Nietzsche*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 63.

[vii] Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche Contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, 3rd ed. (London and Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911), 64.

[viii] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, 73.

[ix] As cited by Harvey & Ridley, *Nietzsche's The Case of Wagner and Nietzsche contra Wagner*, xix, n. 4.

[x] Nietzsche, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Texts in German Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 232.

[xi] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, 94, 99.

[xii] Richard Wagner, *Beethoven*, trans. Edward Dannreuther, 3rd ed. (London: William Reeves, 104.

[xiii] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 50-51.

[xiv] Nietzsche, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Texts in German Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 210, 211.

[xv] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, 193, 200.

[xvi] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, ix, 12.

[xvii] Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, 3rd. ed. (Edinburgh and London: T. N. Foulis, 1911), 18, 88.

[xviii] Nietzsche, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, 250.

[xix] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, 140.

[xx] This distinction between contrasting models of social order was made by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. A *Gemeinschaft* is a society where its relationships are vital, affective, and personal, and so characterized by a high degree of cohesiveness, communality, and long duration. Examples, even paradigms, of this type of society are families, religious congregations, and the Masonic Order. By contrast, in a *Gesellschaft* human associations are formed on the principles of the social contract and self-interest. Examples are bureaucracies, political parties, labor unions, corporations, and nations.

[xxi] Nietzsche, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, 252-53.

[xxii] Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, 25.

[xxiii] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (London: Everyman's Library, 1966), 5.

[xxiv] George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Niblung's Ring* (London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1912), v-vi.

[xxv] *Selected Aphorisms from Nietzsche's Retrospect of His Years of Friendship with Wagner*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, 3rd. ed. (Edinburgh and London: T. N. Foulis, 1911), 79.

[xxvi] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, 272.

[xxvii] Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, 27, 28.

[xxviii] Fischer-Dieskau, *Wagner and Nietzsche*, 133, 134.

[xxix] Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, 47, 61.

[xxx] Ibid., 35.

[xxxi] Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, 47-48, 48.

[xxxii] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, 304-05.

[xxxiii] Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, 70.

[xxxiv] Mencken, "Introduction, xi, xv.

[xxxv] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, 295, 294. 295, 296.

[xxxvi] Fischer-Dieskau, *Wagner and Nietzsche*, 146.

[xxxvii] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, 225.

[xxxviii] Joachim Köhler, *Nietzsche and Wagner: A Lesson in Subjugation*, trans. Ronald Taylor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 59-60.

[xxxix] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, 280, 310.

[xl] Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, 96.

[xli] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, 311.

[xlii] Köhler, *Nietzsche and Wagner*, 169, 12.

[xliii] Förster-Nietzsche, ed., *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, 311.

[xliv] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 29.

[xlv] Mark Berry, "Adorno's Essay on Wagner: Rescuing an Inverted Panegyric," *The Opera Quarterly*, vol. 30, nos. 2-3, Spring-Summer (2014): 205.