

## Chapter 10

### After Wagner

Over the next few years, Nietzsche would maintain friendly relations with Wagner, although the two men gradually saw each other less frequently. In late 1874, for example, the two were close enough that Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth, was entrusted to live in the Wagner's house while they were touring. The rarity of Nietzsche's Bayreuth appearances was partially due to his worsening health. The migraines and stomach problems steadily worsened and he would frequently be confined to bed for days at a time. His letters paint a miserable picture of these frequent bouts of illness. His sensitivity to light would keep him inside his shuttered bedroom for days, only able to eat bread and water. He was forced to restrict his reading to fifteen-minute sessions before his poor eyesight would bring on headaches and nausea. On one occasion, a planned trip to Bayreuth with Rohde, Overbeck and Gersdorff had to be cancelled because Nietzsche's doctor ordered him to a spa in Sternabad. Other planned visits came to fruition, only to have Nietzsche take ill in Bayreuth, spending the vacation alone in a darkened room. Wagner's solution to the problem was to get Nietzsche married, and when that failed he approached Nietzsche's personal doctor, telling him Nietzsche's headaches resulted from excessive masturbation. Nietzsche was enraged by Wagner's indiscretion (or slander, depending on the truth of Wagner's claims) and insensitivity, and the resulting stress only worsened his physical condition.

Even when relatively healthy, Nietzsche's desire to visit the Wagners continued to lessen. Compounding Wagner's infuriating insensitivity was Nietzsche's moral

squeamishness. Wagner's adulterous past and his and Cosima's unusual living situation always bothered Nietzsche, the son of a pious Lutheran minister. Knowing of Nietzsche's prudishness, Wagner would often make vulgar remarks about his relationship with Cosima, just to see Nietzsche's uncomfortable reaction. Upon their arrival in Bayreuth, the Wagners took on an even more public stature and Nietzsche's uneasiness grew. It was during these years (1875-76) that Nietzsche began working on his fourth *Untimely Meditation*—this one to focus on Wagner. His three previous *Meditations* addressed Schopenhauer, David Strauss, and “On the Use and Abuse of History,” and included severe social criticisms. Whereas the first three had been written relatively quickly, Nietzsche had considerable trouble writing the fourth one. Upon its publication, Nietzsche sent a copy to Wagner who was generally pleased with the book. Although the book was in no way an attack on Wagner, it takes an objective and distanced approach to its subject. He closes the work by placing Wagner's significance to modernity in perspective, explaining it as, “...not the prophet of the future, as he would perhaps like to appear to us, but rather the interpreter and illuminator of the past.”<sup>1</sup> Indicative of the tension between the two, Nietzsche wrote to Rohde describing Wagner's reaction: “On the book itself not a word, at most a sigh of relief.”<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the following months a variety of small disagreements erupted between Nietzsche and Wagner. Richard and Cosima criticized Nietzsche for befriending Paul Reè, a Jew. Nietzsche traveled to Geneva and visited Voltaire's house, raising Wagner's anti-French ire. Nietzsche became enamored with the Mediterranean countries

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, transl. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983); 254: Richard Wagner in Bayreuth, 11.

<sup>2</sup> HKB III, 275.

and drew unfavorable contrasts to German culture. Of all the instances of discord between them, most biographers point to *Parsifal* as the definitive break between Nietzsche and Wagner. In order to understand *Parsifal's* significance, a short synopsis is in order. Parsifal is a young, orphaned simpleton who happens to meet several knights of the Holy Grail. Their leader, Amfortas, has been seduced by a woman (Kundry) and stabbed with the Holy Spear by his nemesis, Klingsor. He can only be healed by innocent youth made wise by compassion. Parsifal's show of compassion towards Amfortas offends the other knights and he is driven away. Klingsor soon learns of the boy's existence and, unlike the knights, realizes the role he is to play. He sends Kundry to seduce Parsifal, but at the last second Parsifal recoils from her, realizing his destiny and identifying the misery inherent in existence. The enraged Klingsor throws the spear at Parsifal, who catches it and vanquishes the evil king. Parsifal then returns victorious to Amfortas and redeems virtually everybody.

To quickly summarize the ideological nature of *Parsifal*, Wagner's opera sets the Schopenhauerian idea of the will against a backdrop Catholicism. Parsifal must first acknowledge the misery and meaningless chaos of existence and then resign himself to its incomprehensibility. He achieves victory by denying the desires imposed upon him by existence (in this case, by denying Kundry) and approaching life with compassion (his quest to find Amfortas and heal him). Nietzsche was enraged by Wagner's opera for two reasons. First, Wagner co-opted Christianity as a mere backdrop for his opera in spite of his atheism. While Nietzsche was vehemently opposed to Christianity, he was appalled at Wagner's superficial treatment of it. A movement that played such a large role in shaping and, from Nietzsche's perspective, perverting western culture deserved the

highest respect and seriousness. Wagner had treated a powerful and worthy adversary as if it were set dressing. Secondly, the strength and power advocated and idolized in his earlier operas was suddenly replaced with an apology for self-pity and decadence. Nietzsche's suspicions of Wagner's unethical and hypocritical use of the arts for mere effect had been suddenly and irreversibly confirmed.

In his scathing critique, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, he describes the fateful day he received *Parsifal* in the mail.

...since Wagner had moved to Germany, he had condescended step by step to everything I despise—even to anti-Semitism . . . It was indeed high time to say farewell: soon after, I received the proof. Richard Wagner, apparently most triumphant, but in truth a decaying and despairing decadent, suddenly sank down, helpless and broken, before the Christian cross . . . Did no German have eyes in his head or pity in his conscience for this horrid spectacle? Was I the only one whom it *pained*?<sup>3</sup>

Much of Nietzsche's pain came from a sense of betrayal. Their long talks about the regrettable cowardice of modernity, about the need for courage to question the status quo, and the great rewards resulting from an embrace of life's absurdities and miseries had no analogy in *Parsifal*. Instead, unquestioning faith, simple obedience and compassion were glorified, all against the superficial backdrop of Christianity. Nietzsche's outrage required several books for adequate expression, and in *The Case of Wagner* he cries:

Drink, O my friends, the philters of this art! Nowhere will you find a more agreeable way of enervating your spirit, of forgetting your manhood under a rosebush.—Ah, this old magician! This Klingsor of all Klingsors! How he thus wages war against *us!* us, the free spirits! How he indulges every cowardice of the modern soul with the tones of magic maidens. Never before has there been such a *deadly hatred* of the search for knowledge!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, transl. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1984); (NCW); 676; How I Broke Away from Wagner, 1.

<sup>4</sup> CW, 184: Postscript.

His remarkable anger at the work was in part motivated by its beauty and genius. The effectiveness of the work to stir the soul only served to amplify the amount of damage the work could wreak.

Declarations that, "...Parsifal is a work of perfidy, of vindictiveness, of a secret attempt to poison the presuppositions of life—a *bad* work,"<sup>5</sup> are followed by statements that *Parsifal* was, "*the stroke of genius* in seduction.—I admire this work; I wish I had written it myself..."<sup>6</sup> By every account, Nietzsche realized the genius of the work, and when he finally saw it performed over ten years later, he was deeply moved. His objection was that such genius had been used to coddle the listener by covering up life's sufferings and beating us into submission with wonderfully crafted deception. Beyond *Parsifal*, Nietzsche suddenly saw a recurring theme in all of Wagner's operas: redemption. In *Tannhäuser*, "innocence prefers to redeem interesting sinners." In *The Flying Dutchman*, "the Wandering Jew is redeemed, settles down, when he marries," and *Die Meistersinger* teaches us, "...beautiful maidens like best to be redeemed by a knight who is a Wagnerian." Redemption to Nietzsche was escapism, it was tantamount to attributing divine characteristics to another and then pledging allegiance to them.

To summarize all of Nietzsche's criticisms of Wagner in one word, Nietzsche thought Wagner was a "romantic." Romanticism, for Nietzsche, represented the celebration of life's poverty. The popular topics of romantic art—unrequited love, longing for death, martyrdom—focus on life's miseries and provide redemptive rewards for those who experience them. Take, for example, the scorned lover. He is filled with

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<sup>5</sup> NCW, 666.

<sup>6</sup> CW, 184: Postscript.

sorrow because the one he loves does not love him. The adherent of romanticism asks the lover to describe his pain, to explain what it felt like and how it tortured him. Nietzsche calls this *resentement*, a French term that literally means “feel again.”<sup>7</sup> He describes it as the perverse joy in reliving miserable experiences and can be compared to picking at a scab. After visiting upon the poor man the indignities of *resentement*, the romantic adds insult to injury to depriving him of that experience by redeeming it. Now, the scorned lover becomes a martyr to the noble god of love. The heart-wrenching experience was not, as he originally thought, a terrible event, rather it was an act of nobility. The impetus for human growth originally supplied by his suffering has been removed by romantic apologist. The romantic then goes on provide metaphysical justifications for anybody’s and everybody’s suffering under the auspices of compassion and kindness. The suffering masses embrace the romantic and seek, through his art, “...either rest, peace, a smooth sea, delivery from himself, or intoxication, paroxysm, stupefaction, madness.”<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, Nietzsche champions the Dionysian. The Dionysian man, “...suffers from superabundance of life, who desires a Dionysian art and likewise a tragic view of and insight into life...”<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche’s idealized man—his “Übermensch”—experiences suffering and realizes that it is part of life. He does not gloss over it, apologize for it, or wallow in it, rather he embraces all of life—the good and the bad—and takes an active role in it. “What is best about a great victory is that it liberates the victor from the fear of

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<sup>7</sup> It should not be confused with the English, “resentment.” Although the two words originally meant the same thing, the English word has evolved to indicate a much more specific emotion.

<sup>8</sup> GS, 328: V, 370.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

defeat. ‘Why not be defeated some time, too?’ he says to himself; ‘Now I am rich enough for that.’”<sup>10</sup> In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he explains that the title’s very concepts are derived from a desire to explain away suffering. If these two polar opposites exist, then suffering can be reduced to the currency traded between the two. Suffering becomes a fee paid to attain metaphysical rewards or a price paid by those who do evil. The organic unity of experience is partitioned and man’s growth is stunted. The early Greeks possessed this “superabundance of life” and bravely faced all facets of their existence. Ever since then, explains Nietzsche in *Genealogy of Morals*, the romantic ideology gained more and more followers until the concepts of good and evil and the apologetic stance towards suffering became accepted as fact. It was Nietzsche’s job to lead man away from its weakness and toward its idealized form—the “Übermensch” (translated as “Overman” or “Superman”). “Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman--a rope over an abyss.”<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche had thought Wagner was his partner in this, “...dangerous crossing, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous trembling and halting,” only to realize Wagner had been seducing society into the bowels of romantic escapism.

The vehemence and unrestrained hostility found in these critiques begs the question of whether something more than mere philosophical disagreement could have rankled Nietzsche to such an extent. To use Nietzsche the philosopher to deconstruct Nietzsche the Wagnerian critic, it may be fruitful to refer to a distinction he makes in *The Gay Science*. In this 1882 work, Nietzsche describes two modes of criticism: one

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<sup>10</sup> GS, 199, III: 163.

<sup>11</sup> TSZ, Prologue: 4.

stemming from “...an overflowing energy that is pregnant with the future...” and the other “...a tyrannic will of one who suffers deeply.”<sup>12</sup> The former is characterized by immense creative energy that must destroy in order to build anew. Nietzsche associates this with the *übermensch*, the power of whose will is so great that it must exert itself through action—in this case destructive action, but only as a precursor to subsequent creation. The latter mode of criticism, however, is provoked not by overflowing strength, but by powerlessness, weakness, and ultimately, revenge. Considering the wounds to his pride Nietzsche received from Wagner, the latter explanation may play a larger role in Nietzsche’s criticisms of Wagner than he admitted. Nietzsche’s description of the “tyrannic will” is filled with such vivid description, that an autobiographical interpretation of it seems unavoidable.

But it can also be the tyrannic will of one who suffers deeply, is tormented, and would like to turn what is most personal, singular, and narrow, the real idiosyncrasy of his suffering, into a binding law and compulsion—one who, as it were, revenges himself on all things by forcing his own image, the image of his torture, on them, branding them with it.<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, he concludes the paragraph by linking the “tyrannic will” with Wagner’s music. To be fair, Nietzsche’s motivation was most likely motivated largely by purer motives, but his claims of a sharp distinction between the “tyrannic will” and the qualities of the *übermensch* are, in practice, not so clear.

Despite the possible motivational impurity of his Wagnerian critiques, they proved to be a catalyst for further intellectual development. True to his famous motto, “That which does not destroy me makes me stronger,” his break with Wagner triggered

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<sup>12</sup> GS, 329-330: V, 370.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

an incredible outburst of creative work. In the next twelve years he would write some of the most influential works in European history, including *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, *Human, All too Human*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Gay Science*. Finally freed from any shame or inferiority complexes inherent in his friendship with Wagner, Nietzsche obtained the self-confidence necessary for such groundbreaking works. His emotional and intellectual pruning went even further than Wagner, extending to a revaluation of all things that were important to him.

Lonely henceforth and badly mistrustful of myself, I then took sides, not without indignation, *against* myself and *for* everything that hurt and was hard just for me: thus I found the way again to that courageous pessimism which is the opposite of an idealistic mendaciousness, and also, it seems to me, the way to *myself*, to *my* task.<sup>14</sup>

This revaluation also extended to composition, and he never again wrote any new music.

Despite his lack of musical output, music continued to play an immense role throughout the rest of his life. He became an even more avid patron of the theater and concert hall and developed a deep affinity for the music of Bizet. In particular, he fell in love with *Carmen*, seeing it performed over twenty times. He believed it reflected the true Dionysian spirit and repeatedly contrasted it with Wagner's works. He described it as, "approach(ing) lightly, supplely, politely. It is pleasant, it does not *sweat*. 'What is good is light; whatever is divine moves on tender feet': first principle of my aesthetics."<sup>15</sup> Associating Bizet's music with the warm, healthy climes of the south, he described Wagner's music as cold, dreary, damp, and just as liable to infect the listener with a spiritual illness as Germany's weather was to create a physical one. His musical

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<sup>14</sup> NCW, 676: How I Broke Away from Wagner, 1.

<sup>15</sup> CW, 157: 1.

migration southward was reflected in a physical one, as Nietzsche spent much of his later years near Turin in Italy.

As his musical output stopped, his literary output continued to increase. In 1888 for example, he wrote *The Wagner Case*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, *Ecce Homo*, and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*. These last works show Nietzsche at his most wrathful, heaping criticisms and condemnations on virtually all components of German and European culture. Almost as if to maintain an equilibrium, the praise he reserved for himself increased dramatically through this same period. *Ecce Homo*, for example, is comprised of four chapters entitled, “Why I am So Wise,” “Why I am so Clever,” “Why I Write Such Good Books,” and “Why I am a Destiny.” Many commentators have pointed to this growing megalomania and the contemporaneous strange fixations as an indication of his descent into insanity. Examples of his fixations include his almost manic attachment to *Carmen*, an intense interest in all things dietary, and his rhapsodic feelings toward Turin. In his last year of apparent sanity, Nietzsche’s emotions and judgements became increasingly polarized and everything he encountered was regarded as either wonderful and perfect, or evil and corrupt. Despite these changes however, the works he completed in 1888 are still considered by most Nietzsche scholars to be among his most important.

In January 1889, Nietzsche observed a cab driver beating his horse in the streets of Turin. After rushing to the horse’s aid and throwing his arms around the animal’s neck to protect it, Nietzsche collapsed. Overbeck, a friend and former colleague, brought him back to Basel and he was subsequently committed to an asylum in Jena. He never regained his sanity and spent the rest of his life under the care of his mother and sister.

Although his critical faculties were forever obscured, his love for music and abilities at the piano remained with him until his death in 1900. He spent most afternoons at Jena improvising at the piano, and after his release to his mother's home in Naumburg, she utilized the family's piano to monitor her invalid son. As long as she heard music coming from the other room she knew Nietzsche was in good spirits. No written record of these post-1889 improvisations exist.