

Nietzsche, Bayreuth and the Greeks' tragic age

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with Richard Wagner's and Nietzsche's interpretations of the "tragic age" and the investigation they carried out in their works, regarding the link between posterity and Greek art. Using the relationship with Greece as a point of reference, the article also analyses the philosophic reasons for the friendship and subsequent theoretical rupture between Wagner and Nietzsche.

Keywords: Wagner, Nietzsche, Greece

Christianity adjusts the ills of an honourless, useless, and sorrowful existence of mankind on earth, by the miraculous love of God; who had not — as the noble Greek supposed—created man for a happy and self-conscious life upon this earth, but had here imprisoned him in a loathsome dungeon: so as, in reward for the self-contempt that poisoned him therein, to prepare him for a posthumous state of endless comfort and inactive ecstasy. (Richard Wagner, *Art and Revolution*, 1849).

In a letter to his friend Franz Overbeck¹, some days after the death of *Parsifal*'s composer, Nietzsche says that Wagner was the most complete man he had ever met. He still adds that there

¹ Letter from 22 Feb, 1883. Cf. JANZ. Die todliche Beleidigung. In: MONTINARI; MULLER-LAUTER; WENZER. (Herausg.). *Nietzsche-Studien*, Band 4, p. 261. For some time, the discussion on what this 'mortal offence' consisted of, relied, for some scholars of Nietzsche and Wagner's lives, on much more personal than theoretical circumstances. However, Mazinno Montinari brought new light to the question, based on a broader investigation on Nietzsche's correspondence, finding a possible and more theoretical explanation to the matter. In 'Nietzsch-Wagner' im Sommer 1878', an article published in *Nietzsche-Studien*, in 1985, Mazinno Montinari cites Curt Paul Janz, Nietzsche's biographer, and Martin Gregor-Dellin, Wagner's biographer, as two researchers that had kept themselves to the interpretation of this 'mortal

was, between them, a sort of “mortal offence” (*Tödliche Beleidigung*) and that it would have been awful if Wagner had lived more. In another letter, of the same time, to his friend Malwida von Meysenbug, Nietzsche says that Wagner’s death had hit him awfully, but this event would have also been a relief, because it was too difficult to have to be an adversary of someone he had honored and loved so much. He writes: “Wagner offended me mortally. (...) I felt his slow and artful retrace to Christianity and to the Church as a personal affront.”²

To understand the dimension of the shock that Nietzsche underwent also demands understanding the kind of opposition Wagner made to Christianity, in a certain period of his life, so that his possible conversion to the Christian ideals had offended the author of *The Birth of Tragedy* in such a violent way. Wagner was, in the beginning of his artistic and intellectual activity, a convinced adversary of Christianity, and it is in the context of his opposition to the Christian world and to the modern world that lies the starting-point of his reflection on the Greeks and his link with Nietzsche’s thought. The composer will start to think of the Greeks in the sense of a confrontation with the Christian values that would have dominated western civilization after the decadence³ of tragic values, and also in the sense of a contrast between the way art was lived in Greece and the way it was being lived in modernity.

The opposition between Christianity and Antiquity is one of the most important theoretical consensus between Nietzsche's and Wagner’s thoughts. In his youth, Nietzsche seemed linked to Wagner both in his opposition to Christianity and in his valuing the Greeks, as well as in the critical analysis of modern life. Wagner’s ideas on the Greeks, published mainly in the texts from the exile period, influenced very much the teacher of philology from Basel. Throughout his writings, from *The Birth of Tragedy* to *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche refers implicitly or explicitly to the Wagnerian ideas presented in these texts. Some of the ideas mostly mentioned by Nietzsche are those concerning the antagonism between the frivolous and superficial way opera was performed in

offense’ in the biographical sense. Montinari, based on a Nietzsche’s letter to Malwida von Meysenbug, on 23 February, 1883, assumes a philosophical sense for the question, seeing that Nietzsche himself felt personally offended with Wagner’s conversion to Christianity. Cf. MONTINARI. Nietzsche-Wagner im Sommer 1878. In: *Nietzsche-Studien*, Band 14, p. 21.

² Letter from 23 February, 1883. Cf. MONTINARI. Nietzsche-Wagner im Sommer, 1878. In: *Nietzsche-Studien*, Band 14, p.21.

³ All the references to the notion of “decadence” in this text are not used considering the term *decadence*, according to the French essayist Paul Bourget, which will only come out later in Nietzsche’s works. Here we use the term “decadence” in the same way Wagner already uses it in his essay *Art and Revolution*.

Europe, and the essential and profound way they imagined the drama of the future should be, inspired by Greek culture. One can put together the opposition to Christianity, the criticism to modernity, and the valuing of Greek culture with proposals for a change in modernity inspired by a view of the Greek world as the ultimate points in which the theoretical complicity between Wagner and the author of *The Birth of Tragedy* would have been based on.

To think about the contradiction between Greece and modernity, between the Greeks and Christianity, was for Nietzsche and Wagner a creative, and even political way of dealing with culture. The decadence of the Greek values is for them the main cause of the superficiality and unproductivity of modern age. In the essay *Art and Revolution*, Wagner reflected on the internal political factors related to the disintegration of Greek tragedy and pointed emphatically to the conflict between the Christian age and ancient culture. This conflict, over which Nietzsche says he kept a hostile silence in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is going to be explicitly approached by the philosopher in his later writings. For both Nietzsche and the Wagner of the exile period, the overcoming of Christian conception of the world is absolutely necessary for the process of the rebirth of tragedy.

Thus, hope returned to the young teacher and the artist he believed in. Greek culture, like a phoenix reborn from ashes, could again take its flight and celebrate the Dionysian feast of existence. Nietzsche believes that this celebration will be once again possible through German music in its course from “Bach to Beethoven and from Beethoven to Wagner”.⁴

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, after the display of the evolution of Greek art through the figures of Apollo and Dionysus, and after the reflection on the end of a conception of the world inaugurated by tragedy, Nietzsche takes up the construction of the hypothesis of the rebirth of the tragic element in German culture. At this time, the philosopher brings Apollo and Dionysus, Schopenhauer and Wagner, Greeks and Germans together in the same perspective, and illustrates the conception of the rebirth of tragic music with the figure of an “artist Socrates” (*Künstlerischen Sokrates*),⁵ whose reference is found in Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*.

⁴ NIETZSCHE. *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. In: *Sämtliche Werke*, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden, p. 127.

⁵ NIETZSCHE. *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. In: *Sämtliche Werke*, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden, p. 96.

Nietzsche reflected on what was properly Wagner's flourishing in culture, what strengths, possibilities and hopes were represented by the composer. The event in Bayreuth expressed, for him, a confront with modernity. The essay *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* is fundamentally a criticism of modern values, decadence, hypocrisy, and the triviality of modern life and an attempt to demonstrate the possibility of regeneration through a new art, which would bring a new meaning to man, as he thought Greek art did. Nietzsche judges art to be absolutely necessary in the context of decadence, because only through it man would be able to awaken again, enlightened again about reality. Bayreuth would be an attempt to bring together all those who were dissatisfied with modern culture, all of those who felt the stuffy and luxurious atmosphere in which this culture was installed, it would be an attempt to regenerate art itself so that it could be again the birth of culture, and would not only be the mediocre expression of a cultured audience, of amateurs and art critics, of passive and superfluous spectators. Nietzsche writes about this: "One can say that, in the physical economy of our cultured contemporaries, art is a necessity sometimes absolutely liar, sometimes infame and dishonored, a nothing or a vice."⁶ And he adds: "To free art, to restore its integral health it would be necessary to triumph over modern soul."⁷

Thus, the restoration of artistic integrity is related to the restoration of the integrity of society as a whole. Nietzsche presents, in item 7 of the essay *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, a re-reading of Plato's cave myth. For him, it is as if modern society were involved by shadows, by puppets, by the imprisoned men's hypocrisies and lies in the cave. The artist would then be a superior individual who would have access to truth, to light, to reality, and would lovingly go back to the underground to try to free his partners.

The most lucid and enlightened artist concerning the reality of nature would be, in Nietzsche's view, the dithyrambic dramatist, who has the faculties of an actor, a musician and a poet. Wagner was understood as an authentic dithyrambic dramatist, whose superior self triumphed over the inferior self and would have resisted the temptations, the conflicts and seductions of modern world. In the sequence of these ideas, the philosopher mentions a contrast with Platonism concerning the presence or exile of the poet in the *Republic*. If for Plato it was convenient to exile the poet so that

⁶ NIETZSCHE. Richard Wagner in Bayreuth. In: *Sämtliche Werke*, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden, p. 460.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 463.

he would not threaten the State, for Nietzsche, it is exactly the contrary: one must keep the poet within the community so that he can be the denial of the State, to keep the lie of the State from becoming the justification of life, so that he can watch over the real meaning of existence. The poet is necessary for the defense of reality itself.

This perspective was remarkably guided by the artist metaphysics developed in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Through art, man could know reality, art was a pure look over things, beyond conventions, beyond theoretical principles. This solidarity between the artist and the real world made the artist an enchanted being, enlightened, a genius of nature. As it is known, Nietzsche took Schopenhauer's philosophy into account, for whom philosophers, artists and saints were the only men capable of erasing the blindness of illusions, reaching the knowledge of the true world.

Still according to Schopenhauer's thought, he imagines that among all arts, music is the fundamental one. The great meaning and role of music in modern age is, according to Nietzsche, to keep the possibility of access to the reality of nature. Music would be the voice of nature, the voice of the interior reality of life. To found a State over music is to found a State over reality itself, as the ancient Hellenes would have done. Modern men's language is, according to Nietzsche, perverted. They have become the slaves of men, conventions, artificialisms, correct thought, and of distinct and clear ideas. Through music, there would have be a return to nature, beyond all limits and framings of language. Wagner's role in Nietzsche's philosophy came to where it did because Wagner was the poet, the musician, the dithyrambic dramatist who expressed most clearly, for Nietzsche, the ideal of the Schopenhauerian artist. Without Schopenhauer's philosophy, Wagner's presence in Nietzsche's works would have been much more restricted. So much so that Nietzsche's breaking up with Schopenhauer happens at the same time as with Wagner, and the attack on Wagner will be, since then, closely related to the criticism of metaphysics.

What is still fundamental, and will be kept throughout all Nietzsche's works, is the idea that art is the main way to fight decadence, the main weapon against nihilism, and life's most transparent way of expression, which, for the mature Nietzsche, means to say that art is the most transparent mode of the will of power, the main anti-nihilist principle, as Heidegger understood it in his studies on Nietzsche. The essay *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* is still valid on this fundamental question. Whatever the judgment that the philosopher may have on the composer in a later phase, the figure

of Wagner, strictly understood as Nietzsche's interpretation, serves, in that occasion, to illustrate a fight against modern values and a possibility of recreation of values starting from artistic activity.

In Nietzsche's view, besides being a philosopher and an artist, Wagner was a man of action, gifted with a monumental will of achievement. It was this talent for activity that made him take hold of history in a plastic, creative way, and also made him essentially motivated to act upon his contemporaries' lives. Although he was headed towards future, Wagner needed to accomplish his works in the present; he could not, as a philosopher, trust the efficiency of his ideas in the future, based on written documents, in texts. The composer did not put aside the help of written ideas but, as an artist, his works had to be put into practice and, because of that, he needed to create the proper conditions for the flourishing of his dramaturgy and music. If he was only a philosopher, Wagner could have been passive, but as an artist, and particularly as a drama artist, he needed to act, he needed action and the present to go on trusting the future.

The summit of Wagner's activity was celebrated, according to Nietzsche, with the creation of Bayreuth theater. The philosopher reflects initially on the Bayreuth event as something immensely meaningful, as an absolute mark, a turning point in the history of modern art. This was also Wagner's original thought. With Bayreuth, the composer thought to have resurrected and recreated an art which would not only be seen and heard, but integrally lived by the audience. It would be the possibility of recreating the artist-auditor of ancient drama. Bayreuth is, for Wagner and his companions, a revolution in the role the spectator played in the work of art, representing an internal change in the audience, a new perspective that can not be mistaken for the art critic's of the amateur's superficial perspectives, that is, for the perspective of what Wagner called, as well as Nietzsche, the Philistine of culture. The phenomenon of Bayreuth can not, thus, be understood in a strictly aesthetic way, for it would broadly repercute socially and politically. In the essay on Bayreuth, Nietzsche gives particular attention to the spectator, to the question of the dignity of those for whom the Bayreuth theater was created. It was then it's a matter of questioning the audience and of knowing if they could measure up to that event.

At the time he wrote the untimely meditations, Nietzsche's hopes were immense. He believed he would find a new world in Bayreuth. He writes: "It is the first periplus around the world in the domain of art. It seems that one discovered not only a new art but art itself."⁸

In 1876, the ideas published by Nietzsche have a strong link with the Bayreuth project. He believed in a historical correspondence between Kant and the Eleatics, Schopenhauer and Empedocles, Wagner and Aeschylus. The German culture would work, at this moment, on a revitalization of Greek culture associated with new forces, with the products of modern science and technique. Wagner is then considered an anti-Alexander (*Gegen-Alexander*),⁹ a historical strength capable of retying the Gordian knot of Antiquity, a force of reintegration that ties solidly what was broken up and lost. For the reconstruction of culture, in the Greek sense, a series of individuals would be necessary like Wagner, a series of anti-Alexanders, a conjunction of transforming and active personalities.

The complicity between the artist and the philosopher, as it is known, was broken publicly in 1878, with the publishing of *Human all too Human* and all the new redirecting that Nietzsche will give his thought from then onwards, changing decisively his youth metaphysical thought, inspired by Schopenhauer and Wagner.

In *The Gay Science*, in aphorism 279, entitled "Star Friendship" (*Sternen-Freundschaft*), the philosopher reveals the profound consideration he had for his friend as well as the awareness of their inevitable breaking up. He writes:

We were friends and have become estranged. But this was right, and we do not want to conceal and obscure it from ourselves as if we had reason to feel ashamed. We are two ships each of which has its goal and course; our paths may cross and we may celebrate a feast together, as we did (...) But then the almighty force of our tasks drove us apart again (...) That we have to become estranged is the law *above* us: by the same token we should also become more venerable for each other! And thus the memory

⁸ NIETZSCHE. Richard Wagner in Bayreuth. In: *Sämtliche Werke*, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden, p. 433.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p.447.

of our former friendship should become more sacred! There is probably a tremendous but invisible stellar orbit in which our very different ways and goals may be *included* as small parts of this path,—let us rise up to this thought!¹⁰

It is in the name of this thought, of this possible star course that ties Wagner and Nietzsche's lives, that one can investigate and discuss the deep bond between them. The fact that Wagner had supposedly taken a different path does not invalidate the feast and the communion he earlier celebrated with Nietzsche. And, despite all disagreement, all diversion and conflicts, Wagner and Nietzsche remain completely linked to each other. Wagner appears in Nietzsche's works sometimes as a forerunner and companion, sometimes as an adversary, but in both situations his presence seems to be absolutely decisive and indispensable.

In its fundamental lines, *The Birth of Tragedy* is in large communion with Wagner, both in its mistakes and its possible successes. The fundamental mistake of *The Birth of Tragedy* is, for Nietzsche, beyond the link with Wagner, and with metaphysics, particularly Schopenhauer's metaphysics. In 1870, Wagner's essay on Beethoven revealed the same attempt at applying Schopenhauer's metaphysics of music.

After Nietzsche's breaking up with metaphysics, from 1878 onwards, and precisely after the attempt at a self-criticism added to *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1886, the text can be read in a different way, through a more critical and selective perspective, in which the metaphysical and Schopenhauerian aspects are neglected, making the aspects of Dionysian interpretation of life, of the exclusively sensible celebration of existence, more important. This second self-critical version of *The Birth of Tragedy* remains, in its turn, in relative coherence with Wagner's texts during the exile period – *Art and Revolution* (1849), *Opera and Drama* (1851) and *The Art-work of the Future* (1851) –, since these texts are considered as non-metaphysical, and inspired by a conception of life in the Greek sense, contrary to Christianity.

By referring to the path they walked together, Nietzsche certainly bore in mind this coherence with Wagner's original thought, the fact that they were both adversaries and critics of the Christian

¹ ⁰ NIETZSCHE. *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*. In: *Sämtliche Werke*, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden, p. 523. [<http://www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/diefrohl7e.htm>]

world, of scientificism and modernity as a whole. Nietzsche's indignation concerns what he understood as Wagner's apostasy: the question of knowing how can somebody who had invested so much against Christianity and modernity fall into their webs and be seduced again, and again invited to supper together with modern and Christian men. As he revealed in the letter to his friend Malwida, already mentioned above, Wagner's return to the Christian world hit him as a personal and mortal aggression.

Nietzsche understood that Wagner was not able to resist the vices and temptations of modernity, that he was not able to keep his independence and, furthermore, would not be able to beat the pessimism, nihilism and decadence of modern times. What before seemed to have been a sign of cure, regeneration, recovering of freedom and innocence, presented itself as a more definitive symptom of failure, loss and ruin.

By reinterpreting Wagner's works through this perspective, the philosopher then realizes the hidden meaning of Wagner's dramas and understands that they are, after all, works of renunciation, disenchantment. However much Wagner had, in the time of exile, supported ideas of freedom and celebration of the joy of living, his works, from *The Flying Dutchman* to *Parsifal*, would be liable, if we accept Nietzsche's criticism, to a fate that would avoid the realization of the ideals of strength, beauty and freedom defended by the composer in his theoretical thought. One can claim that, in Nietzsche's view, only the figure of Siegfried¹¹ can be kept, as Wagner's only really strong, free and beautiful character, the others being ruined, lost and used up by failure, despair figures. That is, they are, in Nietzsche's view, electively Schopenhauerian figures, tired of the world, tired of life.

The opposition of the author of *The Birth of Tragedy* was transferred to what Wagner came to represent, that is, to the disenchantment and cowardice that supposedly existed in a failed conception of life inspired by Schopenhauer's thought. It was an opposition to the nihilism that was incarnated and exemplified in Wagner's person and works. The passion of this opposition only made sense due to the role that Wagner played in XIXth century culture. He was seen by Nietzsche as a force capable of determining and recreating values, capable of strengthening Christianity, of supporting the nihilist conceptions of life. It is not that Wagner was only a retrograde defender of

¹ ¹ NIETZSCHE. *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. In: *Sämtliche Werke*, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden, p. 420.

old ideals. For Nietzsche he became a renewer of old ideals, this was his major danger, his most intense harmfulness.

Nietzsche's campaign against modern and Christian values had now to turn against Wagner. Understood under the perspective of nihilism, Wagner becomes the greatest antagonist of the possibility of creation of values inspired by Greek life.

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