

Copyright Notice

Staff and students of Royal Holloway, University of London are reminded to respect copyright law with regard to this extract and the work from which it was taken. This Digital Copy has been made under the terms of a CLA licence which allows you to:

- * access and download a copy;
- * print out a copy

Please note that this material is for use ONLY by students/staff registered on the course of study as stated below. All other staff and students are only entitled to browse the material but are not permitted to download and/or print out a copy.

You may retain Digital Copies after the end of the course, but strictly for your own personal use.

Except as provided for by copyright law, no further copying, storage or distribution (including by e-mail) is permitted without the consent of the copyright holder.

The author (which term includes artists and other visual creators) has moral rights in the work and neither staff nor students may cause, or permit, the distortion, mutilation or other modification of the work, or any other derogatory treatment of it, which would be prejudicial to the honour or reputation of the author.

It is an infringement of the author's copyright to distort, edit, plagiarise, or distribute the whole or part of this extract without permission of the copyright holder. Quotations may be used as part of reasonable study and research activities.

Please contact Royal Holloway Library Digital Copies Service (digitalcopies@rhul.ac.uk) for further information on the use, distribution and request of Digital Copies for Teaching.

Course of Study:

Extract Title:

Title Author:

Publication year, Volume, Issue:

Pages to/From:

Source Title:

ISBN/ISSN:



Nietzsche's critique of Wagner

Introduction

It is not only for Nietzsche that there has been a Wagner "case": Wilhelm Furtwängler, hardly an anti-Wagnerian, wrote an essay in 1941 entitled "Der Fall Wagner, frei nach Nietzsche".¹ And for anyone who cares to think about such matters, there is something of a "case" to answer, whether of rabid devotion, even dependence, or of virulent hatred. It is a "case" that existed before Nietzsche had put pen to paper on the subject: the 1850s witnessed a great polarisation between Wagner's most devoted disciples, the so-called *Zukunftsmusiker*, and his aesthetic — and often personal — enemies, immortalised by his caricature of Eduard Hanslick, the Viennese music critic, as Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*. That said, it does seem to be to Nietzsche that one must — or at least can — turn for most of the serious reservations to be expressed about Wagner's work. Wagner's erstwhile disciple must surely be accounted his most dangerous opponent.

The problem is, however, that there are at least two other "cases" to consider when examining Nietzsche's critique of Wagner. First, there is that very conversion to which we have just alluded. It could plausibly be argued that, as in so much of his work, Nietzsche is really addressing the "Case of Nietzsche". Certainly, as will be seen, Wagner's position was much more constant than that of his antagonist. This might easily lead one to suspect that the "Case of Wagner", or at least its Nietzschean variety, has as much to do with Nietzsche's undeniably changing circumstances and opinions as with any constructive — or even destructive — critique of Wagner. Such a conclusion would, however, be misguided. It is hoped that this essay will demonstrate that the existence of the Case of Nietzsche does not invalidate his own Case of Wagner. And even if it did, it ought surely to be of interest to the Nietzsche scholar.

The second, rather more serious, problem is what we might call the "Case of Wagner-and-Nietzsche". A commentator on one figure can hardly avoid mentioning the other — though some give it a pretty good shot. Most writers do, however, tend to be violently partisan on the subject. Take, for example, Ernest Newman in his four-volume biography of Wagner (this passage was, admittedly, written during the Second World War):

As for the relative values of a system of "virile" German real-politics and an art that helps us to turn our back for a few hours on disgusting reality, the spectacle of the world during the last few years is perhaps sufficient comment on that matter. Even some Germans [!] may possibly be reflecting by now that they might have been happier under a Wagnerian philosophy of "world-redeeming love" than under one of "power". Could fifty Wagners have led the nation into worse disasters than one Nietzsche has done?²

To this, Walter Kaufmann retorts, "Hitler, of course, knew fifty times as much about Wagner as he did about Nietzsche," and the only more "typical proto-Nazi"

than Wagner he can find is the unspeakable Bernhard Förster, Nietzsche's brother-in-law.³

Hostility would not be so bad, however, were it not so frequently combined with breathtaking ignorance. Kaufmann mentions Wagner because he cannot avoid doing so, but he clearly has no sympathy for, or even interest in, the composer. And sweeping statements such as "evidently" Nietzsche's mind was "basically of the utmost simplicity where music was concerned" are typical of much of the "literature" concerning Wagner and Nietzsche.⁴ There do exist honourable exceptions, notably, Thomas Mann.⁵ But the trinity of "cases" confronting us does perhaps justify some further enquiry into the content of Nietzsche's critique of Wagner and further attempts at explanation. Separation of the two areas is, admittedly, somewhat arbitrary and is unsustainable in any strict sense, but will at least be attempted for the sake of analysis.

Part One: The Case of Wagner

Knowing where to start is never easy in any exegesis, nowhere more so than with so "unsystematic" a thinker as Nietzsche. None the less, there seem to be few more suitable candidates than what he saw — and, probably, most of us still do — as Wagner's Romanticism. The sacralisation of art lay at the heart of the Romantic movement; art became a supplement to, even a substitute for, religion, with the creative artist as its high priest. And in Nietzsche's first true offensive against Wagner, *Human, All Too Human*, it is the "artist", anonymous but clearly identifiable, who comes in for some of his most savage criticism. Whereas in the fourth (and perhaps worst) of his *Untimely Meditations*, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, he had written of the evolution "at last [of] the greatest sorcerer and benefactor of mortals, the dithyrambic dramatist [Wagner]",⁶ Nietzsche now saw Wagner's art not as Dionysian but as quintessentially Romantic. The 1886 Preface to *Human, All Too Human* spells this out quite clearly. By this time he is far less loath to utter the name he had previously not dared speak, and writes: "I deceived myself over Richard Wagner's incurable romanticism."⁷

This expresses itself in a number of ways, first of all in the musical qualities of Wagner's art. Wagner, like so many artists, does not know what he can do best. So whilst "his character prefers large walls and audacious frescoes" (just like so many Romantics), his "real masterpieces" are those of the moment, "very short, often only

3. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th edn (Princeton 1974), 41.

4. Newman, *Life of Wagner* (note 2), IV, 539.

5. See Thomas Mann, *Wagner und unsere Zeit: Aufsätze, Betrachtungen, Briefe*, ed. Erika Mann (Frankfurt am Main 1963), 63-121; trans. by Allan Blunden as "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner", *Thomas Mann: Pro and Contra Wagner* (London 1985), 91-148.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich and Berlin 1988), I, 472; trans. by R J Hollingdale as *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge 1983), 226 (IV:7).

7. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, II, 14; trans. by R J Hollingdale as *Human, All Too Human* (Cambridge 1996), 6 (I Preface 1).

1. Wilhelm Furtwängler, *Ton und Wort: Aufsätze und Vorträge 1918 bis 1954* (Wiesbaden 1966), 121-70.

2. Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4 vols. (Cambridge 1976), IV, 529-30.

one beat long" — rather like Webern, one might say.⁸ In a passage presaging so many misunderstandings of leitmotif technique, Nietzsche condemns "our greatest miniaturist in music" for his pathetic, confused attempts at developing his "little unities". The gargantuan Romantic in Wagner compels the composer to put together things which do not grow out of one another.⁹

If there remains some equivocation here, matters take a turn for the worse when it comes to the "profundity" of Wagner's music. The Greeks "were superficial — out of profundity," whereas Wagner's brand of profundity is to have Wotan saved by a free spirit and immoralist, a "profundity" Nietzsche claims to take great care not to understand.¹⁰ In other words, it is the "profundity" of ideas; the music is "literature", a charge which might, ironically, be born of the distrust felt by many German Romantics for literature and its supposed one-sidedness.¹¹ Such "profundity", needless to say, is much worse when it conveys a message to which Nietzsche stands violently opposed:

What would Goethe [a familiar anti-Wagner] have thought of Wagner? — Goethe once asked himself "What is the danger which hovers over all Romantics [...]" His answer was, "Suffocation by chewing over and over again moral and religious absurdities". In short: *Parsifal*.¹²

At least Bizet, in *Carmen*, comes closer to the truth with Don José's final cry, "Yes! I myself have killed her; O my Carmen, my Carmen whom I worshipped!" There is no question here of redemption through love. None the less, it is idealism in music *per se* to which Nietzsche truly objects. Music should not be some means of communication, should not be used for "something other than music": it should be pure form — an idea, by far from the only one, that Nietzsche shared with Hanslick.¹³ Rather ludicrously, he believed his friend and assistant, "Peter Gast", to have restored respect for musical autonomy and thereby hailed him as a "new Mozart".¹⁴

Nietzsche, however, was no Pierre Boulez. Had it been possible to listen to Wagner "objectively", he would still have objected. There was another aspect to his almost neoclassical attack on Wagner's music: "Let us never admit that music 'serves for recreation', that it 'cheers up', that it 'furnishes enjoyment'. *Let us never*

furnish enjoyment! We are lost, if people again think of art as hedonistic. That belongs to the bad eighteenth century!" Spoken like a true member of Les Six, one might say. And his celebrated opposition of *Carmen* to such Romantic morbidity leads him to proclaim, "Il faut méditerraniser la musique."¹⁵ Aesthetics as physiology attacks Wagner's endless melody (again echoes of Hanslick), endless melody which leads one down to the sea — presumably not to the Mediterranean — and renders one's footing so insecure that one must surrender to the elements without reservation: "one must swim", no longer dance.¹⁶

We have already mentioned the role of the genius as high priest of Romantic culture. It might be thought that Nietzsche would be sympathetic to such an idea, perhaps as a staging post on the journey to the over-emphasised idea of the *Übermensch*. Yet it is hardly surprising that Nietzsche should react against the idea of a role in which he, as a young Wagnerian, had cast the Master as exemplar. In an interesting passage in his *Nachlaß*, dated 1888, he places the concept of "genius" in an historical context rather different from the typical Romantic typography. The resurgence of the *canaille* during the French Revolution has led everything to "become mob", opening the door for what Max Weber would later term the "charismatic" leader (a topic familiar to all those acquainted with Wagner's heroes). Such "geniuses" as Wagner and Victor Hugo "become heralds of those feelings with which one moves the masses — the note of sympathy, even reverence, for all that has lived a life of suffering, lowliness, contempt, persecution, sounds above all other notes".¹⁷ Clearly, this does not augur well for any noble morality or supra-morality. And in *Human, All Too Human*, the book which signals his break with Wagner, Nietzsche is continually concerned to deflate the idea of "genius". "Every human activity", he writes, "is amazingly complicated, not only that of the genius: but none is a 'miracle'." Moreover, why should such ability — or claimed ability — to view directly the essence of the world be limited to artists? Should not scientists be equally esteemed?¹⁸ To put it in terms perhaps more sympathetic to the younger Nietzsche, should not Hans Sachs *qua* cobbler be as likely as Hans Sachs *qua* "artist" to catch a fleeting glimpse of that which is obscured by the *Wahn* that is *überall*?

It is here that Nietzsche's critique becomes rather difficult to follow, at least if one is attempting to paint a general picture from a number of works. For alongside the deprecation of the artistic "genius", there also stands the accusation that Wagner was not even this. In *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche points to Wagner's need to justify his music and ideas in prose, to what he terms the composer's "school of expediency". This is a school which teaches that whatever Wagner cannot accomplish is objectionable, that he could accomplish more but will not to do so out of principle. Such are the methods he employs in order to conceal his inability as a musician; rather, Wagner remains a "commentator of the 'Idea'".¹⁹ Elsewhere, Nietzsche even

15. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,26 and 16 ("The Case of Wagner" 6 and 3).

16. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,422; Engl. trans. ("Nietzsche contra Wagner"), 666 ("Wagner as a Danger" 1).

17. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (note 11), 461 (Section 864).

18. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, II,152-3; Engl. trans. (*Human, All Too Human*), 86-7 (Section 163).

19. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,35-6 ("The Case of Wagner" 10).

8. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,418; trans. by Walter Kaufmann as "Nietzsche contra Wagner", *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York 1954), 663 ("Where I Admire").

9. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,28 ("The Case of Wagner" 7). Interestingly, this is not wholly dissimilar from Wagner's criticisms — *critique* would imply something more considered — of Brahms; see Klaus Kropfinger, *Wagner and Beethoven: Richard Wagner's reception of Beethoven*, trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge 1991), 250-52.

10. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,439; Engl. trans. ("Nietzsche contra Wagner"), 683 (Epilogue 2); see also VI,17 ("The Case of Wagner" 3).

11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R J Hollingdale (London 1968), 437 (Section 829). Whilst I am not unaware of the dangers inherent in using this source, I am quite happy to utilise Nietzsche's *Nachlaß* in such cases as additional confirmation.

12. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,19 ("The Case of Wagner" 3).

13. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (note 11), 441 (Section 838).

14. Curt Paul Janz, "Das Gesetz über uns: Friedrich Nietzsches Wagner-Erfahrung", *Der Fall Wagner: Ursprünge und Folgen nach Nietzsches Wagner-Kritik*, ed. Thomas Steiert (Laaber 1991), 29.

claims that Offenbach, who at least attained some moments of high-spirited perfection, has more right to the name "genius".²⁰ It seems probable, however, that too much could be made of Nietzsche's apparent indecision; much of what he has to say on this subject appears to involve different ways of saying much the same thing. So whilst it is important to draw attention to such ambivalence, we should now move on to what Nietzsche saw as one of the most important consequences of Wagner's — or the Romantic artist's — shortcomings.

Excessive (or false) claims to genius are reflected, he claims, in Wagner's theatricality. In *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, Nietzsche had lauded Wagner's courage in eschewing Meyerbeerian "effect", in rejecting the calculated courting of popularity.²¹ The Nietzsche of *The Case of Wagner*, however, harangues the composer for a tyranny far worse than Meyerbeer had ever exercised — worse still than even Wagner claimed Meyerbeer had exercised — over the Paris Opéra. Here, Wagner's genius is theatrical; indeed, Wagner is "the most astonishing theatrical genius the Germans have had". His supposed use of music as language, as *ancilla dramaturgica*, makes it blasphemous to speak of "Wagner and Beethoven". Those elementary means, which we have seen Nietzsche claim to be the only means Wagner can use, then create "nothing but effect".²²

This might seem to be more or less a recapitulation of what has already been said, but there is something more serious at stake here. Wagner, the theatrical genius, the herald of the feelings that move the masses, was — like his mentor, Meyerbeer — well aware of the nature of his public: "It is not the public of Corneille that Wagner has to indulge, merely the nineteenth century, [...] merely Germans."²³ But whereas Meyerbeer's aim had at least been merely to entertain, Wagner's stage-player tyranny oppresses his similarly non-musical audience. "Do look at those youths — benumbed, pale and breathless! They are Wagnerians."²⁴

It is perhaps the equation of "theatricality + endless melody = Wagnerian" that concerns Nietzsche most of all. Given his preoccupation with genealogy, he tends to focus on the producer of the "effect", but Nietzsche's — and Zarathustra's — insistence that each man should discover his own way of living should warn us not to forget the cultural consumer. Wagner's *success* is most worrying of all for the fate of culture. Those who sit in the theatre "have one kind of logic: 'He who upsets us is strong; he who raises us is divine; he who makes us foresee is profound.'"²⁵ Thus not only does Wagner's art arise from impoverishment and need rather than from a sense of overflowing fulfilment, so does the reception of his works. Wagner may be following the incorrect path, but at least it is, to some extent, his own. The Wagnerian subsists, courtesy of the Master and his "narcotic art".²⁶ *Tristan und*

20. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (note 11), 439 (Section 834).

21. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, I,474; Engl. trans. (*Untimely Meditations*), 228 (IV:8).

22. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,30-31 ("The Case of Wagner" 8).

23. op. cit., 32-3 (9).

24. op. cit., 29 (8).

25. op. cit., 24 (6).

26. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,325; trans. by RJ Hollingdale as *Ecce homo* (Harmondsworth 1979), 92 ("Human, All Too Human" 3).

Isolde, with its "voluptuousness of hell",²⁷ always remained the paradigmatic work of art for Nietzsche. However, he, unlike the Wagnerian, realised the need to put on gloves when reading the score.²⁸ The situation is, of course, still worse if the doctrine peddled by this hypnosis is a malevolent one (that is, if the work is *Parsifal*), but, as with the question of Wagner's "idealism" in music, the method itself is to be opposed.

It is a method of *décadence*, a word we have avoided until now, not because it is unimportant, but because for our purposes it has much the same meaning as Romanticism. Nietzsche's later writings are suffused with the term and its deleterious consequences; it crops up time and time again in *The Case of Wagner*. Wagner is "the artist of *décadence*, [...] *Wagner est une névrose*".²⁹ More than any other figure, "Wagner sums up the modern world".³⁰ So just as he previously stood as the quintessential Romantic, Wagner is now the archetypal *décadent*. The latter may roughly be said to subsume the former; the focus is wider, encompassing the whole of the modern world, but the underlying criticisms remain much the same. In that it is a "sign of *décadence* that nobody defends himself against Wagner", the term is perhaps more useful, since it can refer to Wagnerism — a consequence of Romanticism — in a way that the earlier term cannot. Wagner is also thereby entitled to join other bugbears, such as Flaubert and other Parisian *décadents*, although, needless to say, he always retains first place amongst his fellow purveyors of *ressentiment*.

One final area of Nietzsche's critique does fit better with his analysis of *décadence* than with that of Romanticism, namely, Wagner's *rapprochement*, as Nietzsche saw it, with Christianity, in *Parsifal*. In the 1886 Preface to the second part of *Human, All Too Human*, he laments that "Richard Wagner [...], in truth a decaying, despairing romantic, suddenly sank down helpless and shattered before the Christian cross",³¹ a telling contrast with the hostile attitude of Goethe, "the last German of noble taste",³² towards the Cross. *Parsifal*, he later wrote, "will always maintain the chief place in the art of seduction", but here the *décadence* is worse than that of *Tristan und Isolde*, since Wagner flatters — and, by his seduction, presumably makes converts to — "every kind of Christianity and every religious expression of *décadence*. [...] Everything that has grown on the soil of impoverished life, the entire false coinage of transcendence and another world, has in Wagner's art its sublimest advocate".³³ *Parsifal* provides, then, in many ways the *ne plus ultra* of Nietzsche's Wagner critique. It seduces; it purveys an idea; it purveys a wrong idea; it exemplifies the modern *décadent* world. And even the most ardent Wagnerian could hardly maintain that it leads one to dance or to tap one's foot.

27. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,290; Engl. trans. (*Ecce homo*), 61 ("Why I Am So Clever" 6).

28. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (note 11), 555.

29. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,21-2 ("The Case of Wagner" 5).

30. op. cit., VI,12 (Preface).

31. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, II,372; Engl. trans. (*Human, All Too Human*), 210-11 (II Preface 3).

32. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,52 ("The Case of Wagner" Epilogue).

33. op. cit., VI,43 (Postscript).

Part Two: The Case of Nietzsche

In many cases, to ask why χ advances a critique would seem rather an odd thing to do. The answer would surely be "because χ believes his criticisms to be true". But with Nietzsche's critique of Wagner, there is a deeper aspect to the question itself. The question could be rephrased as "why did Nietzsche undergo a permanent transformation from devoted Wagnerian to rabid anti-Wagnerian?" How could the writer of such words as "if I myself think that in essence I am right, then that only means that *you* with your *art* must be eternally right"³⁴ later write "*Wagner est une névrose*"? It is, of course, here that Wagner commentators with little sympathy for Nietzsche have a field day. Ernest Newman, once again, furnishes a perfect example: "Manifestly his soul was at that time [1888] a boiling cauldron of hatred for his fellow-countrymen for not having accepted him as their mentor; and for their failure to do so the 'old robber', the 'old seducer' Wagner, he held, was principally to blame."³⁵ Quite when, or where, Nietzsche holds Wagner responsible for his non-reception in Germany remains a mystery.

Looking back in his "autobiography", *Ecce homo*, at his early friendship with Wagner, Nietzsche was moved to write:

I need to say a word to express my gratitude for that which [...] has refreshed me by far the most profoundly and cordially. This was without any doubt my intimate association with Richard Wagner. I offer all my other human relationships cheap; but at no price would I relinquish from my life the Tribschen days, those days of mutual confidences, of cheerfulness, of sublime incidents — of profound moments.³⁶

Nietzsche was in effect house philosopher *bei* Wagner, a mutually satisfactory arrangement. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, was dedicated to Wagner. Yet though these times were indubitably happy ones for Nietzsche, it was always likely that problems would arise. It is difficult to dissent from the following assessment in Newman's biography:

Nietzsche's gift to Cosima at Christmas, 1870 was the sketch of a work he was planning on *The Origin of the Tragic Idea* — the germ of the later *Birth of Tragedy*. Cosima was delighted with the sketch, but characteristically noted in her diary that she was "particularly pleased that Richard's ideas can find an extension in this field". As usual, she could see little reason for the young professor's existence except in so far as his Greek scholarship might be put to Wagnerian uses.³⁷

And if Cosima was interested in Nietzsche only insofar as he could be useful to her husband, her husband was never likely to be interested in anyone with priorities differing from his own *grands projets*. This, after all, was a man so single-minded in his artistic integrity that his attempt to write a work "of modest dimensions" for more or less immediate performance resulted in *Tristan und Isolde*.³⁸ Sooner or later, such a situation was bound to result in a display of independence

from by far the most gifted member of the Wagner coterie, especially given the Freudian father-son aspect to the relationship (Nietzsche's father had died when Friedrich was four years old and was actually born in the same year as Wagner).

Before the point of automatic self-destruction was reached, however, an external blow dealt some damage which, if not fatal, was far from negligible. This was the Wagners' move to Bayreuth, in preparation for the first Bayreuth Festival, and the consequent separation of disciple and master. "Last Saturday was a sad and deeply moving farewell to Tribschen," wrote Nietzsche to Erwin Rohde. "Tribschen is all over now. [...] These three years I have spent near Tribschen, in which I paid twenty-three visits here — what they mean to me!"³⁹

The final blow, at least in biographical terms, came only in 1876, the year of the first Festival. Distanced both philosophically and geographically, Nietzsche was already expressing reservations in his private jottings: "Wagner's art speaks a theatrical language"; "The tyrant who suppresses all individuality other than his own and his followers'. This is Wagner's great danger: to refuse to accept Brahms, etc.; or the Jews."⁴⁰ Or Nietzsche? Be that as it may, he still felt able in 1876 to publish *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*. Then came the Festival itself. The complex series of events — and non-events — need not be recounted here.⁴¹ The important points are, first, that Nietzsche fell quite ill and had to leave early, and, secondly, that the reality of the Festival was wholly at odds with Nietzsche's expectations. Greek tragedy was not to be reborn at Bayreuth; true culture could never be founded there. "What I have never forgiven Wagner? That he *condescended* to the Germans — that he became *reichsdeutsch* ... As far as Germany extends it ruins culture."⁴² One can only guess at Nietzsche's reaction had he been present when Wagner received Wilhelm I at the station, as if an equal to the new German Emperor. The *Bildungsphilister* he had excoriated throughout the *Untimely Meditations* were now ensconced in Bayreuth itself.

Thus Nietzsche was quite justified in maintaining that the origins of *Human, All Too Human* "belong within the weeks of the first Bayreuth Festival".⁴³ To be a Wagnerian was now just as eccentric to him as to be a philologist. His devotion, previously strained, had now snapped; he was thereby able to confront those more problematic aspects of Wagner and his work which he had tried — sometimes successfully — to ignore. For example, "theatricality" had always been present in Wagner's music. Hitherto, Nietzsche had believed — or claimed to believe — this to be a trait the composer had long since overcome:

I doubt whether there has been another great artist in all history who started out so greatly in error and who engaged in the most revolting form of his art with such goodwill and naivety: and yet the way in which he did it had greatness in it and was therefore extraordinarily fruitful.

34. M S Silk and J P Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge 1981), 111.

35. Newman, *Life of Wagner* (note 2), IV, 597.

36. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI, 288; Engl. trans. (*Ecce homo*), 59 ("Why I Am So Clever" 5).

37. Newman, *Life of Wagner* (note 2), IV, 325-6; see also CT, 26 December 1870.

38. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, trans. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London 1987), 371 (Wagner to Liszt, 28 June 1857).

39. Silk and Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (note 34), 111.

40. J P Stern, Introduction to *Untimely Meditations* (note 6), xxvii-xxviii.

41. For a detailed chronology, see Roger Hollinrake, *Nietzsche, Wagner, and the Philosophy of Pessimism* (London 1982), 242-8.

42. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI, 289; Engl. trans. (*Ecce homo*), 60-61 ("Why I Am So Clever" 5).

43. op. cit., VI, 323; Engl. trans., 90 ("Human, All Too Human" 2).

Now Nietzsche could, as we have seen, pronounce the erstwhile “critic of effect” its greatest and deadliest purveyor.⁴⁴

There was, however, more to the break with Wagner, or at least to its continuation, than the undoubtedly biographical and psychological factors noted. They helped to push Nietzsche to the brink, and perhaps over it, but to embark upon a lengthy crusade he required intellectual ammunition, not mere personal resentment. He does, therefore, on occasion even admit that he had been mistaken, that many of the young Nietzsche’s ideas had been misguided. In his final review of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche amplifies and extends the criticism he had already made in the *Attempt at a Self-Criticism* of 1886. He repudiates the philosophy of Schopenhauer, which so influenced both Wagner and the young Nietzsche: “Precisely tragedy is the proof that the Greeks were *no* pessimists: Schopenhauer blundered in this as he blundered in everything.”⁴⁵

More importantly for our purposes, Nietzsche came to see his Wagnerism as a trial, as something of which he had to rid himself, in effect as a temptation against which he must be eternally vigilant. Thus in *The Case of Wagner* he could write, “No one, perhaps, has been more dangerously entangled in Wagnerism, no one has defended himself more strongly against it, no one has been more glad to rid himself of it.”⁴⁶ As early as *Human, All Too Human*, he was justifying “treachery” and “betrayal” on the basis of changing convictions (though without yet mentioning Wagner by name).⁴⁷ But the point is that in overcoming Wagner, in self-overcoming, one does not simply reject what has gone before. In the Preface to *The Case of Wagner*, he writes that if in this he maintains the proposition that Wagner is hurtful, he must also maintain Wagner’s indispensability to the philosopher.⁴⁸ Allan Janik makes a most interesting point here, regarding Nietzsche’s celebrated opposition of Wagner’s music and Bizet’s *Carmen*. Bizet’s setting is based on — one might say it is a mediterraneanisation of — a story by one of Goethe’s favourite authors (that is, of Nietzsche’s favoured anti-Wagner). And in one of his conversations with Eckermann, Goethe both lauds Mérimée and speaks of ultra-Romanticism as a fever which, once passed, leaves us in better health than we were in to start with.⁴⁹ Nietzsche, it must be said, goes one step further than this. Not only does he pass through Wagnerism (ultra-Romanticism or ultra-*décadence*); he must also fortify himself by continuing to pass through it and continuing to overcome it. That, after all, is the message of Zarathustra’s speech “On the Three Metamorphoses”. And that — along with various psychological reasons, no doubt — is why Nietzsche was compelled to continue to address the Case of Wagner.

But what, it might be asked, was the role of Christianity in the Case of Nietzsche? This, we should argue, is something of a red herring. The “Christianity”

of *Parsifal*, of Wagner prostrating himself before the Cross, was “revealed” to him quite a while after he had to all intents and purposes severed all links with the composer. By January 1878, when he received a copy of the full text, he had virtually completed *Human, All Too Human*. *Parsifal* was at most a final aggravation, leading — or enabling — Nietzsche to add passages such as: “But certainly frivolity or melancholy of whatever degree is better than romantic retreat and desertion of the flag, an approach to Christianity in any form.”⁵⁰ Moreover, Nietzsche had heard the prose draft as early as 1869, an event which appears to have had no effect upon his relationship with Wagner. And though, as we have seen, Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner often reserves a particular venom for *Parsifal*, the role of Christianity is either as an intensifier or as a symptom or manifestation of *décadence*. It is not integral to the critique itself.

Conclusion: The Case of Wagner and Nietzsche

It is surely no exaggeration to see Wagner as the most important figure in Nietzsche’s life and work. In the second part of this essay, we have attempted to explain the radical change of heart and mind he experienced with regard to his erstwhile mentor. The figure of Wagner looms large here; he should retain great importance in a more general consideration of Nietzsche’s philosophy. For it is simply not the case that Nietzsche continually returned to Wagner due to some unfortunate inability to rid his system of the old monster. Wagner is *not* an unfortunate interloper, but a paradigmatic case. After all, Nietzsche could write that Wagner summed up the modern world. And, as we have argued, Wagnerism was for Nietzsche a state — mental and physiological — that one had continually to overcome. It seems extraordinary, then, that so many commentators are eager to play down the role of Wagner in Nietzsche’s thought; they should recall Nietzsche’s remark that Wagner is “indispensable — to the philosopher”.

When it comes to Wagner, or at least to Wagner criticism, we should be equally generous with regard to the role of *his* great antagonist. Of course, there are some points on which Nietzsche is, quite simply, wrong. For example, *Parsifal* is not pure *because* he is chaste. As Michael Tanner points out, the only references in *Parsifal* to chastity are in relation to the self-castrated Klingsor, who is not at all pure and is far from immune from the most terrible yearning.⁵¹ But with regard to Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner and his art, there is much to be gleaned even for those unfortunate enough to have no interest in Nietzsche *qua* philosopher. It may seem rather unfair once again to invoke Ernest Newman, as if he were the only culprit, but he does provide the most excellent, wrong-headed examples. Nietzsche’s

final writings on Wagner are merely journalism of the cheapest, most ill-bred kind [one is tempted to refer to the blackness of the pot and kettle, given Newman’s own scandalous and unwarranted character-assassination of Liszt], the sort of mud-flinging that any man

44. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, I,474; Engl. trans. (*Untimely Meditations*), 228 (IV:8).

45. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,309; Engl. trans. (*Ecce homo*), 78 (“The Birth of Tragedy” 1).

46. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,11 (“The Case of Wagner” Preface).

47. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, II,354-5; Engl. trans. (*Human, All Too Human*), 198-9 (Section 629).

48. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, VI,12 (“The Case of Wagner” Preface).

49. Allan Janik, “Saint Offenbach’s Post-Modernism”, *Der Fall Wagner* (note 14), 370-71.

50. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, II,108; Engl. trans. from Lucy Beckett, *Richard Wagner: “Parsifal”* (Cambridge 1981), 113.

51. Michael Tanner, “The Total Work of Art”, *The Wagner Companion*, ed. Peter Burbidge and Richard Sutton (London 1979), 211.

with a comprehensive faculty for hating, and a gift for coining malicious epithets and stabbing phrases, can indulge in with respect to anyone or anything he hates merely because he or it is different from himself. There are many passages in Nietzsche's works and his note-books and letters that are well worth the consideration of the musical aesthete of today. [...] But very little that he has to say on the specific subject of Wagner's music calls for serious consideration [...]. The place in musical history for the author of *The Case of Wagner* is by the side of Hanslick, *par nobile fratrum*.⁵²

If one were to be extremely charitable, one might point out that Newman refers to Wagner's *music* rather than to his musico-dramatic totality. It is perhaps true that Nietzsche is less interesting on subjects such as musical autonomy than on, for example, the psychopathology of Wagner's works. But it is difficult to see that this is what Newman actually means, and to make such a distinction is to attribute to him a discernment such rantings scarcely justify, irrespective of the possibility of separating music and drama. Of course Wagner is "different" from Nietzsche, yet the two men exhibit striking similarities — more in their recognition and analysis of the contemporary cultural crisis they faced than in their solutions thereto. Nietzsche and his critique are surely indispensable — to the Wagnerian. Thomas Mann managed to combine both an enormous admiration for Wagner and Nietzsche, and a certain distance from them. If we are to follow anyone's lead, it is far more preferable that it be his than that of the violent partisans on either side. Let us award the last word to one of the few men to have reconciled these two titans, not after a fashion that ignored their differences, but in a way that understood and respected them:

My curiosity about it [Wagner's *œuvre*] has never flagged, and I never tire of listening to it, admiring it, following it — not without certain misgivings, I confess; but all the doubts, reservations and objections have in no way detracted from its appeal, any more than Nietzsche's immortal critique of Wagner, which I have always taken to be a panegyric in reverse, another form of eulogy. It was an expression of love-hate, an act of self-mortification. Wagner's art was the great love and passion of Nietzsche's life. He loved it as Baudelaire loved it [and] would prick up his ears at the sound of that name and remark: "I loved him dearly." He also hated him dearly, for intellectual reasons to do with his own views on the morality of culture [...]. But it would be strange indeed if I were alone in finding that Nietzsche's polemic against Wagner serves to stimulate my enthusiasm rather than deaden it.⁵³

Mark Berry

52. Newman, *Life of Wagner* (note 2), IV,331-2.

53. Thomas Mann, *Wagner und unsere Zeit* (note 5), 72; Engl. trans. 100-101.



David Cormack has revised the text of his article on William Ashton Ellis first published in *Wagner*, xiv (1993), 104-37 and xv (1994), 62-8. Copies of a printout of this revised text may be obtained from the editor, whose address appears on p. 2.