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Wagner and Nietzsche: on the threshold of the Twentieth Century

Gary Zabel

Over the past 100 years, the relationship between Wagner and Nietzsche has excited considerable interest, predominantly from a psychological point of view. This is not surprising, given the fact that the intense and ultimately tormented association between these two creative innovators had unmistakable oedipal overtones.[1] To begin with, Wagner was born in the same year as Nietzsche's father, who had died when Nietzsche was four. He was therefore biographically suited to play a central role in the younger man's emotional development. Nietzsche had first fallen under the spell of Wagner's music when, as a 16-year-old boy, he and two friends purchased and performed the piano arrangement of *Tristan und Isolde*. Thus he was already inwardly committed to Wagner's work when introduced to the composer by a mutual friend eight years later. A discussion about Schopenhauer, whose writings had deeply influenced both men, forged a bond between the two even at this initial encounter. During the following years, Nietzsche became a frequent visitor to Wagner's home, indeed almost a member of his household. It was there that he also became attached to Wagner's wife Cosima, whose sophistication he found impressive. Wagner's artistic reputation in Germany was not yet completely secure, and so he was happy to find a public advocate in the young professor of classical philology. In that capacity, Nietzsche wrote an 'Appeal to the German Nation' at the time of the first Wagner festival at Bayreuth; followed that appeal with a more elaborate aesthetic advocacy in the fourth of his *Untimely Meditations*; and conceived of his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, as an extended dialogue with the composer. The older man, however, proved unable to recognize the younger man's independent talents, and soon Nietzsche began to chafe under Wagner's domination. When Wagner insisted that he join him at Bayreuth, Nietzsche developed severe headaches and vomiting, clearly psychogenic symptoms. His mental anguish persisted until he was finally able to reject Wagnerian aesthetic doctrine. In the *Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, he symbolically murdered the father figure who had kept him from pursuing his own unique path. Nietzsche's oedipal drama was completed when he wrote Cosima Wagner a love letter after insanity had broken down his inhibitions.

Of course, the story of the relationship between Wagner and Nietzsche would be of merely clinical interest were it not for the fact that it was also the vehicle of an important cultural dispute. The manifold tensions that characterised their association attain a deeper and unitary significance when we recognise that the two emotionally entangled opponents were engaged in a struggle to determine the identity of the European avant-garde. This thesis may seem controversial, since it was not until the early decades of the 20th century that the avant-garde decisively emerged in the context of new anti-traditionalist movements in the arts. Expressionism, Dadaism, Futurism, and so on, first emblazoned upon the public consciousness an image of the artist as someone who breaks free of ruling conventions, someone who ventures ahead of contemporaries into uncharted and dangerous territory. But in spite of its definitive 20th-century establishment, this avant-garde image was anticipated by Wagner and Nietzsche through their common emphasis on the prefigurative capacities of art. One of Wagner's early aesthetic treatises was titled, 'The Art Work of the Future'; through the character of Zarathustra, Nietzsche insisted that his true audience had not yet been born. For both men, the value of art was not to be found in the dominant function that they believed it performed in contemporary society: that of diverting the public's attention from the emptiness of modern life. Art's value lay, rather, in its ability to reject the vacuous present that required such diversion, in the name of an almost prophetic invocation of a radically different future. The real significance of Wagner's and Nietzsche's tortured relationship lies in the fact that they were fated to develop this rudimentary avant-garde conception in fundamentally antagonistic directions.

Wagner's reflections on the meaning of art date from the time of his participation in the Dresden Uprising of 1848-49. The turmoil in Dresden was part of a wave of revolution that engulfed much of continental Europe, and that, as Marx pointed out, marked the emergence of the working class as an independent actor on the world-historical scene. Although Wagner was definitely a member of the radical socialist wing of the revolutionary movement (he met and plotted frequently with the anarchist leader Bakunin), the motives behind his activism were primarily aesthetic and only secondarily political. He saw the Revolution as a quasi-natural eruption, a 'volcano', which would sweep away the obstacles preventing the development of a vital and compelling form of art. According to him, these obstacles were rooted in the guiding principle of modern civilization, that of the competitive drive to accumulate wealth. As the power of money asserted its unbridled dominance over creative expression, art was reduced to a form of entertainment designed to provide distraction for individuals caught up in a high-pressured life. The transformation of art into a commodity for sale at an appropriate price emptied it of any significant content. Moreover, in Wagner's eyes, Christian religious dogma, especially in its Protestant form, contributed to the social degradation of aesthetic experience. By counselling the renunciation of instinctual needs, the postponement of gratification, Christianity

[1]See Walter Kaufman's discussion in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, 1974), pp. 30-41.

supported the process of accumulating capital that lay at the heart of the modern era. But in so doing, it condemned the experience of sensuous enjoyment that was the life-blood of art. In Wagner's view, then, Christian-capitalist society was intrinsically hostile to aesthetic purposes. Art could be liberated only by means of the destruction of that society.

Like many proponents of revolutionary change, Wagner appealed to the past in an attempt to provide guidance for the future. While he regarded contemporary opera as the prime example of cultural decadence, he took ancient Greek tragedy as his model of genuine art. Although the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles were the direct products of individual poets, they were the indirect creations, according to Wagner, of the Athenian people as a whole. For they were based on mythical traditions, and these traditions were communal in origin. Now, the key to Wagner's early aesthetic theory undoubtedly lies in his conception of the role that *mythos* plays in generating social solidarity. According to his formulation, through the creation and reception of myth in feasts, celebrations, and rituals, an historical community - a *Volk* - renews its collective substance by reminding its members of their descent from common ancestors. By means of the presentation of dramatic material involving the gods and heroes, 'in whose being [the Greeks] felt themselves included as one common whole'[2], tragic theatre merely substituted an artistic regeneration of fellowship for a religious one. In Wagner's view, the immediate enemies of art - the cult of monetary accumulation and the ascetic condemnation of sensuality - are two different expressions of a more basic condition. With the decline of the ancient world, society fragmented into a joyless congeries of isolated and antagonistic individuals. Especially in the modern period, it no longer knows what real art involves because it is a community without solidarity, a society without myth.

Wagner gave his support to the revolutionary movement because he believed that it would subvert the domination of commercial values, and restore art to its ancient role of renewing the folk-community. It is true that he sought to expand this role in a humanistic direction. The modern artist could no longer be limited to the narrow sphere of a particular racial group; his task instead was to address his creations to humanity as a whole. This universalist appeal was precisely what would distinguish the 'art work of the future' from its narrower Greek counterpart. But from the beginning, Wagner's humanism was undermined by a more powerful German nationalism. His goal was to use art as a hammer for forging an identity capable of binding the disparate principalities of Germany into a single national formation. This is why he drew the mythical material for his music dramas exclusively from Teutonic and Scandinavian legends and sagas. And it is also why his idea of the folk-community ultimately retained a restrictive racial connotation; it was defined as much by what it excluded as by what it encompassed. In his notorious article of 1850, *Judaism in Music*, Wagner portrayed Jews as a 'splintered, soilless stock'[3], incapable of contributing to the artistic life of the German nation. More radically, he went on to deny that they had the ability to participate in any national culture at all. At the extreme limit of his anti-Semitic reasoning, he identified Jews with the very principle of monetary greed that was responsible for the estrangement of art from its community-creating function.

Wagner framed his own aesthetic programme in relation to his general reflections on the social significance of art. In particular, his conception of the music drama as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an integrated work of art, was meant to oppose the fragmentation of human functions that was antithetical to a unified *Volk*. By suspending its internal division of labour, art was to project the image of a community in which individual distinctions had been overcome. The differences between music, poetry, and theatre - even painting (of scenery) and sculpture (of physical gestures) - would be effaced in the music drama, just as the isolated monads of contemporary society would be dissolved in the new German nation. It is ironic that, by general consensus, Wagner's real aesthetic achievement lies in his compositions, since his notion of the music drama subordinated music to the more important activity of developing dramatic ideas. But even when considered by itself, the music faithfully reflects his general aesthetic purposes. Elevation of the orchestra to a status equal to that of the voices, the continuous generation of so-called 'infinite melody', the use of dazzling blocks of orchestral colour, and the central significance of the leitmotive all have a single goal: that of inundating the audience with music, of collectivising its members by enticing them to lose themselves in the flood of oceanic feeling.

Wagner's later rejection of his youthful revolutionary enthusiasm led him to reinterpret his assault against the principle of individuation in the context of Schopenhauer's philosophy. He now equated the sacrifice of individuality with an act of renunciation in which the will to live is negated along with the pain that inevitably attends it. In his original scenario for the *Ring*, Wagner had conceived of Siegfried as a revolutionary hero who establishes a new and glorified image of humankind on the ruins of Wotan's *ancien regime*. However, in the final version of the music drama, the chain of guilt-laden action leads, not to the revolutionary reconstruction of the world, but to its sheer annihilation; the burning of Valhalla is the prelude to nothing more than an orchestral suggestion of spiritual tranquility. In his final work, *Parsifal*, Wagner abandoned his previous critique of Christianity, and presented a Christianized version of this message of renunciation. Still, his ultimate embrace of redemptive nothingness did not cause him to relinquish his efforts to contribute to the renewal of the German nation. It was precisely the confluence of nationalism and nihilism at Bayreuth that finally motivated Nietzsche to break with his mentor.

The break, however, was prefigured even in Nietzsche's most Wagnerian book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. In that treatise, he named Dionysus as the god who presided over the origin of Greek tragic drama, as well as the recent history of German music. According to the legend, Dionysus, the son of Zeus with a mortal woman Semele, was persecuted by Zeus' wife Hera. She first dismembered the illegitimate child, and then, after his miraculous reconstitution, drove him into insanity. After inventing wine on Mount Nysa, Dionysus spread the gift of intoxication while wandering through North Africa and Asia Minor, accompanied by a wild band of

[2] *Wagner on Music and Drama* (New York, 1964), p.81.

[3] *Ibid*, p.52.

Satyrs and Maenads. For Nietzsche, both the dismemberment of Dionysus, and his association with wild drunkenness, represent a shattering of the principle of individuation that was linked in the Greek mind with the god Apollo. Through intoxication, dance, and, most important of all, the playing of music based on 'the heart-shaking power of tone, the uniform stream of melody, the incomparable resources of harmony'[4], the participants in the Dionysian mystery cults overcame their fragmentation into separate individuals, and sank back into the original oneness of nature. In the development of Attic tragedy, the mystery cult was transformed into the dramatic chorus, and the myth of Dionysus's dismemberment was reenacted in the fate that befell the tragic hero. By contemplating the hero's destruction, the audience learned that everything that exists is destined to perish, that the most elevated human achievements ultimately come to nothing. But, according to Nietzsche, such knowledge made a higher form of delight possible. Tragedy taught an aesthetic joy in the game that reality plays with itself in creating, shattering and rebuilding the teeming realm of individual forms. 'The world', Nietzsche wrote, 'can only be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon'. Its sole point lies in the exuberant display of appearances that it involves, the spectacle of their creation and destruction. He went on to argue that contemporary music as well as ancient tragedy expressed this insight. 'The delight created by tragic myth has the same origin as the delight dissonance in music creates. The primal Dionysian delight, experienced even in the presence of pain, is the source common to both'.[5]

The Birth of Tragedy shared with Wagner's aesthetic essays an attempt to enlist the forces of myth in opposition to the inner poverty of the modern era. Still, their basic messages diverged. Wagner preached a negation of the will to live based on the recognition of its ultimate futility; Nietzsche recommended an affirmation of existence as a game in which destruction is the price of creation. Nietzsche's subsequent criticisms of Wagner stem from this early, not completely conscious, divergence. They all involve the judgement that the composer, finally, was no devotee of Dionysus; his gods instead were nihilism, decadence, and *resentiment.* Nietzsche developed this assessment by means of a sort of clinical analysis of Wagner's artistic style. According to him, Wagner was not actually a musician at all, but a dramatist, an actor, a genius of the stage, a mime. His music was merely a form of theatrical rhetoric, a means of underscoring gestures and suggesting psychological motives. This characterisation did not really depart, in any fundamental respect, from the claims that Wagner himself had made about his work. But Nietzsche went further in interpreting Wagnerian theatricality as the symptom of a neurotic condition. The secret of Wagner's art consisted in the fact that it was the product of an hysteric. The proof of this lay in 'the convulsive nature of his affects, his overexcited sensibility, his taste that required ever stronger spices, his instability which he dressed up as principles, not least of all the choice of his heroes and heroines – . . . (a pathological gallery)'.[6] According to Nietzsche, Wagner succeeded in creating a powerful public art from his neurosis because the sickness was itself an expression of the dominant modern condition; it was a symptom of revenge against life. This correspondence between private neurosis and public disorder is what lent a political dimension to Wagner's nihilism. His histrionics were capable of manipulating the music drama audience because they touched a common nerve. As we have seen, the purpose of such manipulation was to create a new national community, or in Nietzsche's less flattering language, a 'herd'. But as the anti-Semitism that was rampant at Bayreuth demonstrated, a nihilistic spirit of revenge lay behind the transformation of the Wagnerian public into an internally united but outwardly antagonistic *Volk.* Jews would be the first, but not the only victims of that spirit. In an eerily prescient aphorism, Nietzsche wrote: 'It is full of profound significance that the arrival of Wagner coincides in time with the arrival of the "Reich" . . . Wagnerian conductors in particular are worthy of an age that posterity will call one day . . . *the classical age of war*'.[7]

Nietzsche knew where the attempt to harness myth in the service of the modern nation-state was heading. In Wagner, he detected an unholy alliance between the artistic invocation of archaic experiences and the political will to annihilation. Half a century later, that alliance was to lead one branch of the avant-garde into the arms of the fascist movement. F. T. Marinetti, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and Albert Speer are the spiritual grandchildren of Wagner. Nietzsche's grandchildren – artists who have vanquished nihilism – are more difficult to identify. Perhaps they are awaiting the advent of a society sufficiently at peace with itself to eschew the spirit of revenge. Perhaps, even today, they have not yet been born.

[4]Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York, 1956), p.27.
[5]*Ibid,* p.142.
[6]Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York, 1968), p.622.
[7]*Ibid,* p.636.

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