

# THE 'TELEPHONE OF THE BEYOND': FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE'S ETHICAL CRITIQUE OF RICHARD WAGNER'S ARTISTIC PROGRAM

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## Abstract

Even before his first personal encounter with R. Wagner, Fr. Nietzsche had already been inspired by the composer's tragic music epos *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and by *Tristan und Isolde* in view of an ethical concept which he would further develop and, finally, turn against Wagner himself. The plots of those operas – designed by Wagner as a critique of the social values of his time that later received a metaphysical touch – lay bare mechanisms of moral corruption that poison human relationships in which egotist and material interests prevail.

Nietzsche agreed with Wagner's diagnosis. The life he envisaged as ideal was to be built on ethical values similar to those of the ancient Greek tragedians: a life of individual moral rigor and uncompromising truths in a world without transcendent meaning. Nietzsche called such recognition 'tragic insight' upon which 'true' life was to be built.

Nietzsche first believed that the *person* Wagner was the incarnation of such a 'true' life which he hoped would also become the paradigm of the cultural-ethical fundament of the newly founded German empire; during their friendship they developed plans accordingly. Nietzsche had to learn, however, that his mentor was more interested in his own person than in their common intellectual program; he felt that Wagner's metaphysical turn inspired by Schopenhauer was just a cheap trick feeding his personal vanity. The process of this gradual discovery led to the end of their friendship.

I reconstruct this story mainly on the basis of Nietzsche's notes published nearly seven decades after his death, leaving aside the well-discussed role of Nietzsche's 'aesthetical existence'.

**Keywords:** Wagner, Nietzsche, art, aesthetics, opera, ethics, morality.

## I. Ethics as ethos – Nietzsche's and Wagner's common moral ideals

In this paper I take a look at the development of Nietzsche's ideas on ethics in the 1870ies which initially were strongly influenced by Wagner in many aspects; some interpreters even regard Wagner's overwhelming influence on Nietzsche as a main cause of the ensuing health problems which at that time so dramatically changed his further way of life<sup>2</sup>. It is important to note that neither Nietzsche nor Wagner were professional scholars on moral and ethical issues, i.e. thinkers who wrote eru-

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<sup>2</sup> J. Köhler: *Friedrich Nietzsche und Cosima Wagner*, Berlin: Rowohlt 1996.

dite treatises on this subject. Rather, they were moralists in a broader sense. Both had a strong sense of personal ethical commitment and attitudes vis-à-vis the grand schemes of politics, culture, and social life of their time; they differed considerably from the ‘common’ values of the ‘common’ people.

For the first time in the history of philosophy Nietzsche introduced the term ‘meaning of life’ as a philosophical topic *expressis verbis*<sup>3</sup>. He related this term to the search for individualized ethical attitudes when pondering over forms of life on the background of the ‘tragic insight’ – that there is no transcendental rationale of life! A strong character under such existential conditions no longer seeks to comply with transcendental powers; it seeks instead compliance of an individual’s words with its deeds – it seeks an authentic life. During the period of their friendship Nietzsche, more than Wagner, was decidedly uncompromising with regard to an ethical stance which would allow “not even one step of accommodation. You only can have great success if you are faithful toward yourself.” (Letter to Gersdorff<sup>4</sup>, April 15, 1876<sup>5</sup>).

In his educational endeavors Nietzsche envisaged a “culture of unanimity between life, thinking, appearance and wanting”<sup>6</sup>, enabling thereby a self-assured – meaningful – life of individuals when immersed in such aspiring quests. In an unpublished note in 1874 Nietzsche, with Wagner in mind, wrote that the “most proper product of a philosopher is his life; it is his artwork”<sup>7</sup>. Intellectual role models combining such an intrinsic relationship between art and life were considered to be both the ancient Greeks’ ‘tragic ethos’ and, as their modern counterpart, the philosophy of Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer as the ‘genius of a heroic verisimilitude’<sup>8</sup>; Wagner as a person was for Nietzsche at the time of their early encounters the incarnation of both. Besides, he *composed* the ‘tragic ethos’, bringing it with the performances of his ‘music dramas’ into life on stage as an ‘artwork of the future’<sup>9</sup>.

The writings of Wagner during his Zurich period where he spent some years as a political émigré after his escape from Saxony in 1849 contained the political and social arguments of their critique. Nietzsche had become familiar with Wagner’s Zurich publications already since 1861. Since then Nietzsche admired the composer as a man with ‘ingenious plans for reforms’; he was attracted by Wagner’s thought that only a socio-political revolution would enable performances of the ‘artwork of the future’.

Staging the ‘true’ *condition humane*, i.e. evoking the ‘tragic insight’ of the Greek tragedians is, so Nietzsche, what Wagner did with his

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<sup>3</sup> V. Gerhardt: *Friedrich Nietzsche*, München: Beck 1992, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Fr. Nietzsche: *Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Volumes*, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari: München 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Nearly all quotes from there are translated into English by me.

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 334.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 804.

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 804.

<sup>9</sup> In the 1850 publication of this title Wagner introduced his concept of ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’.

operas. His 'Zukunftsmusik' (music of the future) provided the path to such 'tragic' experiences, especially in characters such as Tristan, Isolde or Bruennhilde and Siegfried. His operas were meant to present a drama beyond entertainment, invoking instead a state of mind among the spectators by which the general (public affairs) and the particular (individual demands) would be culturally and politically united through the bondage of his artwork of the future<sup>10</sup>.

From here Wagner conceived his idea of 'Musikdrama' (music drama), which became so fundamental for Nietzsche's further intellectual development ever since he became acquainted with Wagner's writings and music<sup>11</sup>. Nietzsche's thoughts as an adolescent were already dealing with music and its existential implications even years before he became aware of Wagner's ideas<sup>12</sup>. The personal encounter with him spurred his reflections on these subjects.

Gradually, however, Nietzsche had to change his image of Wagner: the more he became acquainted with the composer's personal world, especially with the world of Bayreuth and the very worldly 'genius' at its center<sup>13</sup>, the more he became disappointed about the discrepancy between image and reality of his mentor: In Bayreuth, he wrote ten years later, "Wagner had apostatized from himself."<sup>14</sup>

But there was something else. Nietzsche also felt that Wagner betrayed his own ideals of ethical life which Wagner so convincingly propagated in his operas, and which they had been discussing during the years of their friendship: to live an autarkic life depending on nothing else but on one's own ideas. Even worse, he felt that he himself would no longer live up to that standard. He began to realize that he had become his master's mouth-piece; he should reverse this fateful trend by distancing himself from his super-ego. The new ethos he was gradually developing for himself contained the idea that one's self would be even strengthened if he would free himself from any emotional bindings, even from his closest friends<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> G. Most: Die Geburt der Tragödie, in: S. Sorgner, H. Birx, N. Knöpfller: *Wagner und Nietzsche. Kultur-Werk-Wirkung*, Berlin: Rowohlt Verlag 2008, 424.

<sup>11</sup> V. Caysa: Biographie, in: S. Sorgner, H. Birx, N. Knöpfller: *Wagner und Nietzsche. Kultur-Werk-Wirkung*, Berlin: Rowohlt Verlag 2008, 50.

<sup>12</sup> D. Borchmeyer: *Nietzsche, Cosima, Wagner: Porträt einer Freundschaft*, Frankfurt am Main und Leipzig: Insel Taschenbuch 2008 15

<sup>13</sup> In *Nietzsche contra Wagner* he would retrospectively write: "since Wagner arrived in Germany, he condensed, step by step, to all what I despise".

<sup>14</sup> Fr. Nietzsche: *Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Volumes*, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari: München 1988, 323.

<sup>15</sup> During spring/summer of 1875 he wrote: "What I have ahead of me is to utter opinions considered to be shameful for that person who utters them; consequently, even friends and acquaintances would become shy and embarrassed. But I have to go also through this fire. Only then I belong to myself, more and more."

An uncompromising attitude even against himself would become his ethical measure; from there Wagner, like most others, would utterly fail.

## II. Nietzsche's Bayreuth

I wish to briefly recapitulate Nietzsche's development of his perception of Wagner as a person before we take a critical look at the book originally meant to be a paean of praise but which became a manifestation of camouflaged apostasy that had already taken place in the mind of the philosopher despite words suggesting otherwise. This book is of course *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*.

There was a convergence of minds and a common mental disposition regarding the function of arts in life long *before* Wagner and Nietzsche met for the first time: What both German cultural icons *in spe* had in common was a critique of the prevailing modern culture; a love for music and its philosophical role; a shared adoration for the ideas of Schopenhauer whose philosophical writings had become known to a broader readership only a few years earlier; an inclination to favor mythology vis-à-vis modern rationality as the better artistic means to evoke the metaphysically proper world of the 'will' according to Schopenhauer; a passion for the classical Greek culture as opposed to the present one; and a drive to reform and renew the cultural life in Germany (and Europe). In the late 1850ies Schopenhauer's pessimistic Weltanschauung was *à la mode* among German intellectuals.

What they had in common, too, was a revolutionary élan suggesting a radical overturn of the then social, cultural and political establishment so as to prepare the cultural ground for an audience capable of understanding the 'artwork of the future.' Wagner, however, had modified his views on this subject since his return to Germany. He favored now a revolution of theater performances not only in a Schopenhauerian<sup>16</sup> sense; and he also transformed the Bayreuth project into an enterprise with the composer himself at the center of its *raison d'être*.

For Nietzsche Wagner went through two phases of artistic metamorphosis since the late 1840ies. The first – Schopenhauerian – reform was a step Nietzsche – himself being a Schopenhauerian at the time of their first encounters – could conditionally accept; he still could find his own place in such an intellectual transition, with Bayreuth as its headquarter. However, the second step – the colonizing of Schopenhauer's philosophy with personal interests under the cover of 'Bayreuth' – was seen by Nietzsche as a grave departure of his (and their) early common ideas and ideals. He thought that Wagner's philosophical aspirations à la Schopenhauer were just etiquette, a pretext camouflaging the true, less philosophical intentions behind them; that he had rather put his ego at the center of the festival which he, however, 'sold' as a metaphysical event to the world. Nietzsche finally began to realize that he had been misused for such an unworthy task. He was aware of this personal 'tragic

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<sup>16</sup> This point is elaborated in the following chapter.

insight' when he began to write his book on Wagner in 1875. But he also felt that he could not openly state this disappointment; not yet.

Nietzsche had to cope with a delicate task as he wrote the book. On one hand he conditionally accepted the theoretical background of the Bayreuth concept including the Schopenhauerization of Wagner's social-revolutionary Zurich ideas which they both discussed during the Tribschen years. At the same time, however, he despised the way how Wagner dealt with this artistic-philosophical program in practice: Wagner organized the first festival in Bayreuth like the general manager of a huge enterprise, receiving emperors, kings and other noblemen as an integrated part of the game. He could observe that Wagner had up-graded himself as a member of the upper-class establishment which he so openly antagonized in his Zurich writings more than twenty-five years earlier.

How did Nietzsche square the circle with this book? How to praise a 'genius' in whose ideas you still believe but who, as a person, you feel has betrayed those ideas? What he did was that he (often indirectly) quoted from Wagner's early revolutionary Zurich writings of the 1840s as if he wanted to place a mirror before the now 'accommodated' Wagner of 1876<sup>17</sup>. With Zurich and the emperors coming to Bayreuth obviously in mind he wrote just weeks before the opening of the festival:

"It is quite impossible to reinstate the art of drama in its purest and highest form without effecting changes everywhere in the customs of the people, in the State, in education, and in social intercourse. When love and justice have become powerful in one department of life, namely in art, they must, in accordance with the law of their inner being, spread their influence around them, and can no more return to the stiff stillness of their former pupal condition."<sup>18</sup>

That is what the early Wagner in his *Artwork of the Future* wrote, though not *expressis verbis*, by which the artwork of the future was to affect social realities.

What was now – in 1876 – Schopenhauerian in Wagner was the role music plays in his concept of drama. Wagner was for Nietzsche composing in a way through which features of nature *itself* begin to appear as such: such features 'also want to resonate'<sup>19</sup> beyond their forms or, Schopenhauerian speaking, beyond their prisons of appearances. Wagnerian music thus had a liberating, a metaphysical component, namely to uncover "the language of pathos, of the passionate will, and of the dramatic processes within the soul of any human being"<sup>20</sup>. He did so by reinterpreting the passions set free by the music as expressions of Schopenhauer's grand will, its dark intuitive nature lying underneath the images of the world, its conscious appearances, from which we need to be freed – redeemed. Those dark elements, elusive for our rational facul-

<sup>17</sup> M. Montinari: Nietzsche und Wagner vor hundert Jahren, in: *Nietzsche Lesen*, Berlin, New York: de Gruyter 1982, 45-46.

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 452.

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 491.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 452.

ties, emerge from (or are liberated by) the effects of music composed in the style of Wagner – a function of music Nietzsche labelled *dionysic* –, and ready to be experienced by a deeply stirred audience expecting redemption within the ideal setting of the Bayreuth theater with its invisible orchestra.

It is not difficult to uncover the literary traces of Nietzsche's lecture of Wagner's *Beethoven* of 1870, the composer's most 'Schopenhauerian' essay on music he studied and discussed intensively during his copious visits in Tribschen. In his *Birth of the Tragedy* of 1872, which he later, in 1886, called the result of an 'intimate dialogue' ('*Zwiesgespräch*') with Wagner<sup>21</sup>, Nietzsche elaborated the reasons why he found Schopenhauer's thoughts on music so compelling. In reference to Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Perception* he wrote that music "represents the unmediated image of the will itself and thus together with the physical world also the metaphysical world, i.e. together with the phenomenon the thing-in-itself."<sup>22</sup> That only music has access to this metaphysical side of all beings led to the grand thesis of the *Tragedy* book that "the world could only be justified as an aesthetical phenomenon"<sup>23 24</sup>. Wagner, the composer-artist with metaphysical aspirations was the man who had the keys to this dark, but essential side of the world, and Nietzsche, his friend, felt he was close to him with regard to a common metaphysical mission: an unconditional commitment to the true world, the world-in-itself beyond its appearances.

Soon Nietzsche, however, would change his perspective on the role of music whereas Wagner continued to think, write and compose 'Schopenhauerian' until his death.

### III. Nietzsche's Deconstruction of Wagner's Schopenhauer

First (1) I am listing a particular strain of Nietzsche's thoughts reflecting an ambivalent side of Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; then (2) I present his critique of Wagner's moral character by decoding the composer's ideological concept of art as his personal ambitions.

#### 1. Wagner's Nietzsche

Let us trace back the ambiguities in Nietzsche's notes in which he tried to defend his mentor with arguments he no longer believed himself<sup>25</sup>. During autumn 1875 he interrupted his work only to continue

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 13.

<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 104.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 47.

<sup>24</sup> Liessmann comprehensively elaborates this point.

<sup>25</sup> I am following the notes which Nietzsche made during summer 1875 when he began to work on his *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*. They are more drastic, unprotected and spontaneous; they provide a clearer insight into what was going on in the mind of the young professor who gradually felt that he was too much involved in matters which were no longer his concern. Thoughts of 'apostasy' were in his mind already in 1873, for instance in

it shortly before the rehearsals for the opening of the festival began. *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* was finished in June 1876; it has eleven chapters, the last three ones were written in late spring of 1876, rather reluctantly, as the comments at that time reveal. “No word about this book, just taking a deep breath”, he wrote to his friend Rohde on July 7, 1876.

One of the main foundational ideas of the Bayreuth festival was, as briefly mentioned above, to establish a cultural bond among the audience through grand forms of performing art at a remote place away from the frenzies of the day. Bayreuth should be open, in principle, to all people regardless their social status; it was designed to oppose ‘modern’ forms of cultural consumption by which a wealthy audience is entertained according to conventional *haute gout*. It was also meant to oppose the “character of the modern culture which had pure rationality as its fundament and utility as its soul... Utility cannibalizes [bestialisiert] and rationality [Wissen] mummifies”<sup>26</sup>. The Bayreuth performances of the *Ring*, both agreed, should set the paradigm of the artwork of the future.

Socialist ideas greatly influenced Wagner’s first conceptions of the *Ring* during the late 1840s, according to which he wished to perform that gigantic opus as a huge ‘democratic feast’, as a revolutionary theater to be established as the ‘artwork of the future’ for all people. Nietzsche remembered this program in summer 1875: “That art is not the fruit of the luxury of social classes or individuals, but of a society freed from luxury is the new thought. How such a society is supposed to be designed is demonstrated by Wagner in his *Nibelung*...”<sup>27</sup>.

The social revolutionary turned Schopenhauerian, metamorphosing his initial concern for exploited social classes into the ‘mercy’ for the cosmic plight of all humanity genuinely longing for redemption: Wagner the revolutionary had become the composer of redemption. The project ‘Bayreuth’, unlike its original social motivation in the late 1840s, had now metaphysical priorities.

In early 1875 Nietzsche saw in Wagner’s Bayreuth project still both sides at work, the social one and the contemplative and redemptive one, respectively, which as he thought would complement each other when performed under Bayreuth conditions. Here an example of how Nietzsche’s interpretation of the music dramas tried to reconcile them: the tragic hero resists the logic of modern (thus alienating) institutions which are before him in the form of “law, tradition, contract, power, cap-

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a letter to his friend Gersdorff of March 2 of that year, in which he wrote that he needed more ‘freedom’ from Wagner ‘in order to keep a higher kind of fidelity’ towards himself. Calling the break with the “greatest genius and greatest human being of his time” (letter to P. Deussen on August 25, 1869), whom he – as he wrote in 1885, had “loved and nobody else” (Nietzsche, op. cit., 506) an act of *highest fidelity* towards this very person, points to a morality *beyond good and evil*.

<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 190.

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 220.

ital; the individual could not choose a better life if it did not mature in his fight to become ready for death, thus sacrificing himself”<sup>28</sup>. This refers to the Wagner of the late 1840s. Then, a few lines later in that same note, a Schopenhauerian tune<sup>29</sup> suddenly prevails: “Art is the dream in the sleep of the fighter, the refreshing dream for the refreshing sleep of the fighter.” Changing the mind instead of changing the world when the hero of the drama experiences an existential mutation? The revolutionary impulse, translated into Schopenhauer, now offers a personal experience which others may or may not share; ideally, it would result in a complete disregard of the material world – golden bracelets within the realm of the Nirvana are quite useless. The dream-world, from where – once having it experienced – one wishes to ‘never return to the flat land’<sup>30</sup> of the modern state with the material desires of its modern people, reminds us that ‘there are people who fight for the suffering against the suppressing elements of an urge toward luxury.’

With these last lines Nietzsche is back for a mission within the real world: redemption is for him to be achieved from the deficiencies of the world dominated by money and greed. Another few sentences later Nietzsche continues: “One cannot be happy as long as everything around us suffers: one cannot lead an ethical [sittlich] life as long as the course of the world is still determined by power and violence and injustice ... Everywhere the individual finds deficiencies: how could the present situation be endured without perceiving something sublime and meaningful in its fight and struggle and fall?” Is this ‘sublime’ and ‘meaningful’ the Greek ‘tragic ethos’ [*tragische Gesinnung*], or the Schopenhauerian redemption?

The tragic ethos, as Nietzsche knew, does not allow any compromise between the world and the self: “Rather dying than being unfaithful towards our most inner self and our passion of which we are apt manifestations”<sup>31</sup>. There is no redemption in Greek tragedies. Nietzsche knew this very well. The loyal classic philologist endowed with a ‘tragic ethos’ cannot follow Schopenhauer unconditionally in this question despite strong temptations via Wagner to do so. The ultimate alternative for Nietzsche was to either remain a philosopher whose intellectual basis remained the ancient Greek world, or to become a disciple of the master of art whose (Schopenhauerian) world would be dominated by the meta-physical concept of music of which Wagner was the master indeed?

In 1874 Nietzsche still tried to square the circle. He attempted to ‘save’ the *person* Wagner – unconvincingly - when he related his ‘basic ethical character’ to the high moral standards of the main characters of

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<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 206.

<sup>29</sup> It’s the tune, but not the substance which is Schopenhauerian in this quote; hence only conditional support Nietzsche’s for Schopenhauer. For the latter we need to be redeemed from the (false) dream-world of appearances, whereas for Nietzsche it is such a world which enables us to endure our ‘tragic insight’.

<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 210.

<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 207.



his operas – as he would do later, with much more critical intentions. Authentic action, that is, unconditionally pursuing one's ideas in the world is the 'primal secret' (*Urgeheimnis*), 'the most inner angst of the soul' (*innerste Seelenangst*) – and this is exactly what Wagner's opera characters stand for: That both, will and rationality (Intellekt), "remain faithful to each other is the grand necessity, the one thing, that needs to be done, and through which he remains a person of integrity as he becomes aware of the horrific dangers of infidelity and of the seductions"<sup>32</sup>. Nietzsche mentions Bruennhilde's authentic action of faith – she remained essentially faithful to Wotan (Walkuere, Act II) by acting against his (false) rational will at the same time –, connecting it with Wagner's own view and stance against his enemies. Such personal authenticity, as further dramatized in Bruennhilde's demise when she later, in the *Goetterdaemmerung*, had to testify against her great love *Siegfried* for the sake of faithfulness towards herself, has accompanied, so Nietzsche, all of Wagner's life: "His [Wagner's] own life went through similar constellations and has been so far one of the most challenging lives that one could ever live"<sup>33</sup>.

Did he? Nietzsche did not believe his own words at the time he wrote those lines. The unpublished notes criticizing Wagner's hypocrite character are frequent, even dominating his 'real', his 'true' opinion about his (now former) mentor.

## 2. Nietzsche's Wagner

*Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* is mostly free of the critical remarks which Nietzsche wrote down when preparing the book. It is indeed a *Festschrift* for the composer, 'purified' from obvious thoughts and insinuations that might have been compromising for the genius Wagner - and for his friendship with him. Wagner himself, however, seemed to have 'smelled' that something peculiar went on in the mind of his young professor-friend. Wagner, after having received a copy of the book, undertook several essays to go thoroughly through it, but never succeeded to finish it; he was too busy with the Bayreuth business.

As we just saw there are quite a few critical remarks on Wagner in the unpublished notes. Nietzsche had gradually become aware of a reactionary, i.e. a rather conservative, un-revolutionary side of the reformer. What apparently also happened with Wagner was for Nietzsche that his ideas had been increasingly occupied by realities that were less and less under his (= Wagner's) control. For Nietzsche that meant: the former idealist and now turned opportunist is no longer a philosopher pursuing an authentic life, but acts instead as an actor or jester (*Schauspieler*) just *pretending* to follow truths and subsequently performs 'them' for those who pay to see the those 'truths' on stage in Bayreuth; he just plays a game, truth-game. The *person* 'Wagner' has changed: Life and art, culture and politics, person and mission – all the 'ands' that the young

<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 215.

<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 216.

Wagner (and the young Nietzsche) pursued as inseparable virtues of a true life, have now fallen again, as manifested for Nietzsche in the life and behavior of the Richard Wagner of 1876! Wagner had become an opportunist who betrayed not only his own ideals, but also the ideals of his friend and follower – Nietzsche himself<sup>34</sup>.

The genuine ethos of the ancient Greek – life equals deeds *according to* thoughts -, idealized by the young Nietzsche and projected into the person ‘Wagner’ as its carnal manifestation – was the opposite of what he perceived in the Wagner of 1875: “Dangerous tendencies in Wagner: the immoderate [das Maasslose], ... his inclination towards pomp and luxury, ... his jealousy, ... guile and the art of deception..”<sup>35</sup>. In another fragment he wrote down the titles of planned chapters<sup>36</sup> including this one: “The people in Bayreuth and their contradiction; the dangerous element in Wagner”<sup>37</sup>. Some pages earlier one can read: “A passionate demand for luxury and pomp in Wagner..”<sup>38</sup>. One of Nietzsche’s biographers wrote that his early precautions against Wagner and the distance he tried to keep despite the frequent invitations to Bayreuth had a ‘sanitary’ function, protecting him against his own bitter insight that Wagner as the “founder of his religion proclaimed a Gospel which he himself didn’t follow”<sup>39</sup>.

Bayreuth had become in Nietzsche’s eyes a common place for common performances designed for common people. A note from the period between summer/end of September 1876, evidently written during or after the festival, reads: “The audience [in Bayreuth] has been judged by Wagner in another way than I originally thought”<sup>40</sup>. Also: “This is a revolution that now happens in Bayreuth, the constitution of a new power that is far away from being aesthetical. From a deeper point of view there is nothing revolutionary...”<sup>41</sup>.

Nietzsche’s attack against Wagner was increasingly aiming at his character, his personality, and his (im)moral stance. He began to realize that all the metaphysical justifications for ‘their’ cause could be easily misused if the person and the metaphysical values the person stands for do not coincide. Such ‘metaphysics’ should be replaced by a truer and more authentic life by which the real artist or philosopher would no longer function, as he later wrote, “as a kind of mouth-piece of the things-in-themselves, as a telephone of the beyond”<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> M. Montinari: *Friedrich Nietzsche: Eine Einführung*, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 1991, 68.

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 191.

<sup>36</sup> See the comments in R. Görner: *Annäherung an einen Denkartisten*, Frankfurt am Main und Leipzig: Insel Taschenbuch 2000, 171.

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 247.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 242.

<sup>39</sup> W. Ross: *Der ängstliche Adler*, München 1994, 373.

<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 246.

<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 248-249.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 345.

Authentic life is in no need of a beyond; neither is it in need of comfort or of a convenient life. In spring 1875, as if he had received a call from the beyond, Nietzsche wrote: "This is what will happen to me, to utter opinions which are considered to be shameful for the person who has them; accordingly, friends and acquaintances will become shy and fearful. But I have to go also through this fire. Then I would be myself more and more"<sup>43</sup>. Nietzsche no longer accepted any compromise between life and thought, as his biography proves.

Wagner had not principally changed his 'life philosophy'; but he changed the direction *within* his principles<sup>44</sup>. For Nietzsche, he literally 'metaphysicized' his individual, rather personal stance, with an intention, disguising it as the transcendental world-will which he somehow controlled through his music. Here is an example of how he applied this critical point. In his writings Wagner often used the terms 'rein Menschliches'<sup>45</sup> (*the pure humane*) or 'die wahre menschliche Natur'<sup>46</sup> (*the true human nature*), expressing with them the 'pure nature' in human beings that could be evoked in case of its social or political suppression. The evocation of this 'pure' humane element was an essential part of Wagner's integrated reform program since the 1840ies; he thought it lost in modern life. Whereas, however, Wagner had indexed the '*rein Menschliche*' with the pursuit of an authentic life in freedom as personified by Sigmund and Siegfried in his *Ring*, a new life paradigm re-substantiating the '*rein Menschliches*' had come to the foreground for the later Wagner. This new paradigm, evoked now in the form of compassion and love including the renunciation of carnal lust, ideally expressed later in the hero's *story* of his last opera, *Parsifal* - a mélange of Schopenhauerianisms with Christian elements -, was the representation of what cannot be represented in our empirical world: the world-will beyond its worldly manifestations. How is this possible? Not as a story that is built upon visual - worldly - elements; the 'true' realization of the new paradigm, so Nietzsche critically, is, therefore, meant to happen through the music of Wagner as its 'true' purpose: Wagner's last opera is genuinely an opera about Wagner, as much as the Bayreuth *Ring*-performance are; the metaphysical substance is literally produced by the composer in the *form of the opera itself, as the event of its performance*. From this meta-'metaphysical' position Wagner re-interpreted his *Ring* indeed in the direction of Schopenhauer, but now by placing the main 'event' of the performance of his operas into a personal dimension, featuring as the invisible main character Wagner himself who manipulates the audience by 'doing' the business of redemption<sup>47</sup>. The more the audience

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<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 94.

<sup>44</sup> S. Sorgner: *Wagner und Nietzsche. Kultur-Werk-Wirkung*, Berlin: Rowohlt Verlag 2008, 199.

<sup>45</sup> R. Wagner: *Oper und Drama*, in K. Kropfinger, Stuttgart: Reclam 1984, 243.

<sup>46</sup> R. Wagner: *Dichtungen und Schriften. 10 Volumes*, Frankfurt/M.: Insel 1983, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Mayer stresses this point; but he does not mention the reinterpreted

gets redeemed from the world, the more worldly power is accumulated by the self-appointed redeemer. This change of paradigm was for Nietzsche nothing but a ‘Taschenspielertrick’ – a cheap trick performed by an actor who claims to be after metaphysical truths.

From this perspective it is not difficult to interpret such a metaphysically inspired concept of theatrical performances as a world event with a very personal agenda<sup>48</sup>. More than ten years later, in his *Der Fall Wagner*, it would become the leitmotif of Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner. But he knew ‘it’ already earlier. In the final paragraph of *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* he poses a rhetorical question to his contemporaries after referring to Wotan’s ‘delight of his own defeat’ when he says he wants nothing but the end: that he has now become free from the travails of the material world. The question Nietzsche poses after letting Wotan observe with ‘joy and compassion’ [*Mitfreude und Mitleid*] Siegfried’s rise and fall: “Where are the men among you who are able to interpret the divine image of Wotan in the light of their own lives, and who can become ever greater while, like him, retreating? Who among you would renounce power, knowing and having learned that power is evil? ... where are the Siegfrieds among you?”<sup>49</sup>.

The ‘Siegfrieds’ are those who would, to quote again, “rather die than being unfaithful towards our most inner selves”<sup>50</sup>. And Wotan, in the final *Ring* version, is not just retreating; he is doomed like his grandson Siegfried – and Nietzsche knows it: “... [Wotan] now can die”<sup>51</sup> and enter the Schopenhauerian Nirvana, no longer to be engaged with a material world. Both, Nietzsche and Wotan share ‘disgust for power’ [*Ekel vor der Macht*]<sup>52</sup>. But Wagner the person is not included in the Nietzsche-Wotan coalition against the temptations of power. According to Nietzsche, the opposite had been the case. Wagner had increased his worldly powers in various ways, first as a large-scale entertainer who attends to emperors, kings and other influential bourgeoisies; and, second, as a magician, or, in Nietzsche’s words, as an ‘actor’, who assumed power over the minds of the people (“he wants effect, nothing but effect”<sup>53</sup> by (mis) using Schopenhauer’s philosophy for the sake of promoting (or, maybe better: marketing) his own artwork. A bourgeois audience falls prey to the ‘actor’ to whom they get helplessly addicted and from whom they demand redemption: “...they long for Wagner just like the long for opi-

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Schopenhauerian element. H. Mayer: *Anmerkungen zu Richard Wagner*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1977.

<sup>48</sup> I have tried to do this with ‘Tristan und Isolde’ in H. Hanreich: *Tristan’s Silence, Philosophically // NTU [National Taiwan University] Studies in Literature and Language*, 26 (2011), 73-101.

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 509.

<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 207.

<sup>51</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 273.

<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 273.

<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 31.

ates – they forget themselves, they get rid of themselves for a moment... What do I say! Five to six hours!“<sup>54</sup>.

The metaphysical contemplation or deed à la Schopenhauer does not happen for the audience in the dark Bayreuth festival building when attending a performance of the *Ring*. What happens is that Wagner *claimed* that this would happen. For that purpose he “translated the *Ring* into Schopenhauerian philosophy”<sup>55</sup>. But despite the fact that it was conceived as a drama of redemption, “it was this time Wagner who was being redeemed”<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 325.

<sup>55</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 20.

<sup>56</sup> Nietzsche, op. cit., 19.