Nietzsche's Rejection of Wagner: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics

William F. Byrne
The Catholic University of America

Nietzsche's late anti-Wagner tracts receive little attention from political scientists, yet they offer important insights into Nietzsche's philosophical thought and into the relationship of art to political behavior. For Nietzsche, both the romantic and the 'Christian' elements of Wagner's operas embody the 'slave morality' that is characteristic of modernity. 'Decadent' art like Wagner's tends to deaden the listener to the moral demands of real life, and instead promotes a longing for a transfigured exterior world. This can be manifested politically in the form of ideological movements that aim to destroy the old order and erect a new utopian order in its place. In these writings Nietzsche positions himself against expansive romanticism and nihilism, and emerges as a surprisingly strong classicist, albeit an unconventional one.

Relationships between great minds are always of interest to scholars, and that between Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Wagner is of more interest than most because it was so intense, so well documented, and marked by such a dramatic reversal. While as a young man Nietzsche practically worshipped Wagner, he later came to despise the man and his romantic operas. Nietzsche not only included derogatory remarks about Wagner in several of his later works, but also took the extraordinary step of writing two polemical pieces directed specifically against Wagner, his operas, and his influence: *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. While a considerable body of literature exists on the Nietzsche-Wagner relationship, relatively little serious philosophical attention has been devoted to these two late works. However, an analysis of them reveals that despite their polemical style, their lack of structure, and their narrow focus on Wagner, these short books are rich in philosophical content. Indeed, because they are directed at the specific "concrete" problem of Wagner in considerable detail, they provide a unique window into Nietzsche's thought that complements his broader philosophical writings.

Political theorists in particular (and, in fact, political scientists generally) can benefit from the study of these two neglected works because in them Nietzsche offers important insights into the relationship of aesthetics to ethics and politics. Nietzsche believed that Wagner's work embodied a particular form of morality characteristic of modernity, and that the moral framework fostered in part by his influence tended to shape society and politics in particular ways. Specifically, Nietzsche seems to

have seen in Wagner's work, and in modern romantic and sentimental art generally, the seeds of the kinds of ideological mass movements that would arise in the early twentieth century. This is not because he believed that these works expressed specific political or ideological views, but because they somehow embodied a "decadent" morality that would encourage individuals to embrace particular types of politics. Nietzsche's understanding of how art can serve as a kind of driver for morality and, consequently, for political behavior, has enduring value and demands the attention of political theorists today.

To develop a better understanding of Nietzsche's views on art, morality, and politics, this article will explore some of the philosophical content of *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. (Although the latter was billed as a compilation of remarks from various earlier works, it actually incorporates a considerable amount of new or modified material.) Preceding this examination will be a brief treatment of Nietzsche's early pro-Wagner views as expressed in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*. The purpose of reviewing these works is not to offer anything like a full treatment of Nietzsche's early aesthetic views but to provide a context for the rejection of Wagner that was to follow. Nietzsche's treatments of Wagner are as unsystematic as his more expressly philosophical works, but it will become evident that despite some noteworthy tensions Nietzsche remains reasonably consistent philosophically throughout his praise and condemnation of Wagner, although some maturation, refinement, and clarification of his thought are apparent.

The bulk of Nietzsche's anti-Wagner remarks may be grouped into two broad areas: a narrower group of criticisms that directly reflect Nietzsche's rejection of Christianity and that focus on 'Christian' elements in Wagner's operas, and a broader grouping of criticisms that focus on the romantic dimensions of Wagner's work. It will be demonstrated that Nietzsche not only saw a very close relationship between romantic art and the "slave morality" he associated with Christianity, but that he was keenly aware of the political dangers which could arise from this type of 'romantic' morality. The Nietzsche that emerges here is a 'classicist' of a sort, and the peculiar brand of classicism that is so strongly evident in these anti-Wagner works can be seen to permeate Nietzsche's philosophical thought.

Nietzsche's Embrace and Rejection of Wagner

Most good biographical and general historical/philosophical works on Nietzsche provide some treatment of his relationship with Richard Wagner. As a young man Nietzsche became captivated with Wagner's music, and upon meeting Wagner he became captivated with the man as well and grew very close to him. While the literature suggests that per-

sonalities were probably the most important factor in the intensity of their relationship, it is also clear that a philosophical dimension was present from the beginning. For one thing, when they met both men were very interested in Schopenhauer, although Nietzsche would soon begin to move away from him. More importantly, Wagner's music and librettos sparked Nietzsche's interest in the moral, philosophical, and psychological dimensions of art, and Nietzsche found Wagner's writings on aesthetics useful (Hollingdale 1965, 60). As for Nietzsche's later rejection of Wagner, much of the scholarly speculation has focused on Nietzsche's later psychological state and on various aspects of his personal relationships with Wagner and his wife. In addition, some scholars such as Walter Kaufmann point to alarm on Nietzsche's part at Wagner's increasingly public role in promoting anti-Semitism and German imperialism, although Nietzsche mentions these concerns only in passing (Kaufmann 1974, 38). In Nietzsche's own view, however, the basis for his rejection of Wagner was largely philosophical. The biographer R.J. Hollingdale argues that Wagner's influence had essentially led Nietzsche astray and contributed to some confusion in his early philosophy, and that in rejecting Wagner Nietzsche was coming into his own (Hollingdale 1965, 78). Thus, an exploration of some of the philosophical bases for Nietzsche's reversal highlights important aspects of his mature thought.

In *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* Nietzsche heaps praise upon Wagner and closely associates his operas with the best of classical Greek tragedy. Nietzsche had already dedicated to Wagner his early work *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which he attempts to explain the nature and value of Greek tragedy. In that book Nietzsche identifies and describes the two elements that he believes characterize great tragic works, the "Apollonian" and "Dionysian," and he associates these elements with "dream and intoxication" respectively (Nietzsche 1872, 19). The Apollonian is associated with visual imagery, symbols, an elevating sense of order: ". . . Apollo himself may be regarded as the marvelous divine image of the *principium individuationis*, whose looks and gestures radiate the full delight, wisdom, and beauty of 'illusion'" (Nietzsche 1872, 22). In contrast, the Dionysian element shatters the *principium individuationis* in an ecstatic awareness of life: "So stirred, the individual forgets himself completely" (Nietzsche 1872, 22). The Dionysian dimension reflects the fact that one has seen, and in a sense one has embraced and been swept up in, all of life, including violence and the inevitability of one's own death. According to Tracy Strong, "'Dionysian' appears to be identified not with the chaos, but rather with knowledge . . . of the chaos and of the artifice of human life and importance," and it "sees through the illusion that provides form and definition of the culture" (Strong 1975, 140-141). The Dionysian offers vitality to the Apollonian element; it represents reality

in a way that the concepts evoked by Apollonian "dream" and "illusion" cannot. The Apollonian makes possible individuation, order, and the creation of beauty, and provides a kind of counter-balance to the Dionysian. For Nietzsche, all art, to be great, must possess properly developed Apollonian and Dionysian elements, in proper balance. Although the two elements are equally important, what is most often missing in what passes for 'art' today is the Dionysian element. While Nietzsche does not quite explicitly use the Apollonian-Dionysian formula in his pro-Wagner *Bayreuth* essay, it is plainly evident that he finds both elements to be properly present in Wagnerian opera. The libretto and staging are primarily associated with the Apollonian dimension, while the most crucial element, Wagner's music, represents the Dionysian.

Nietzsche recognizes man's existence as inevitably tragic. One commentator explains that

> the knowledge that we need to know the essence the permanent thing-in-itself "behind" the appearances—to make life intelligible and meaningful to us and the concomitant knowledge that we cannot possibly know such an essence make our existence contradictory and therefore tragic. Resignation and Dionysian pessimism are the only two possible responses to this existential tension of the human condition, once it is recognized. The latter is an artistic affirmation in tragic music and drama of the transient and ultimately unknowable character of life, but also of its beauty and power. (Heilke 1998, 56)

The young Nietzsche finds that, like Greek tragedy, Wagner's operas feature great heroes involved in deeds and events that strike at the core of one's life, and that in Wagnerian opera one is able to recognize oneself as a tragic character and thereby become ennobled. In the *Bayreuth* essay Nietzsche describes the effect of the "tragic" element that makes Wagner's work so valuable:

> With him we ascend to the topmost rung of sensibility and only there do we fancy we have returned to free nature and the realm of freedom; from this height we behold, as though in immense air-drawn reflections, our struggles, victories and defeats as something sublime and significant; we have delight in the rhythm of passion and in its victim, with every mighty step the hero takes we hear the dull echo of death and in its proximity we sense the supreme stimulus to life:—thus transformed into tragic men we return to life in a strangely consoled mood, with a new feeling of security . . . and in any event even nobler than we were before . . . . (Nietzsche 1876, 225)

Tragedy elevates humanity by sharpening the struggles of life, giving them new meaning and allowing them to be seen from a fresh perspec-

tive. The manner in that tragedy helps one to move through and beyond the struggles of existence, without rejecting them, suggests something of Nietzsche's later "overman" who continually "overcomes himself" and "creates beyond himself." By transforming us into "tragic men" Wagnerian opera and classical Greek tragedy provide a kind of energizing effect, since through our experience of the Dionysian and our vicarious encounter with death we "sense the supreme stimulus to life." The stimulus we receive, moreover, is of the sort that connects us to life and helps us to act in the world. As Nietzsche explains it, "the soul of music . . . seeks its path through all of you to visibility in movement, deed, structure and morality" (Nietzsche 1876, 217)!

For Nietzsche, different kinds of art promote different types of character. The right kind of art encourages us and enables us to take on the world. Nietzsche sharply contrasts this effect with that of typical "modern art," that aims at "stupefaction or delirium! To put to sleep or to intoxicate! To silence the conscience, by one means or the other" (Nietzsche 1876, 220)! Instead of helping us become morally acute and ready for action, most nineteenth century art leads us away from authenticity and away from action. It helps us to shut out the hard realities of life and to hide from ourselves and from any serious sense of responsibility; it represents an escape. This contrast between two kinds of aesthetics is an important part of Nietzsche's thought and it dominates all three of his essays on Wagner. Indeed, it becomes the pivot point for his reversal on the question of the merit of Wagner's operas. Over time Nietzsche's conception of these two types of art changes only subtly in the abstract, but what happens in the process is that he reclassifies Wagner from the 'good art' to the 'bad art' category.

In *Nietzsche contra Wagner* Nietzsche explains that he had previously mistaken Wagner's music "as the expression of a Dionysian powerfulness of soul" when in fact it was something very different. Using language similar to that that he had used in *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, he describes once again the two kinds of aesthetics, this time grouping Wagner with the 'wrong' kind of art:

> Every art, every philosophy may be regarded as a medicine and a helping expedient of advancing or decaying life: they always presuppose suffering and sufferers. But there are two kinds of sufferers: on the one hand those suffering from the *superabundance* of life, who want a Dionysian art and similarly a tragic insight and prospect with regard to life,—and on the other hand those suffering from the *impoverishment* of life, who desire repose, stillness, smooth sea, *or else* ecstasy, convulsion, intoxication furnished by art and philosophy. (Nietzsche 1895, 72)

Nietzsche has decided that Wagner's art is "intoxicating," not)ionysian. But on what basis has Nietzsche made this decision? And /hat, in fact, is the difference between the two concepts? We have seen ıat in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche explicitly associated the Dionysian lement with "intoxication." Now intoxication appears to be exactly what .e is arguing against; is he reversing himself? Nietzsche is perhaps not ctually reversing himself, but a subtle shift has indeed occurred. He is mploying greater caution; he has become more keenly aware that all hat is "intoxicating" is not Dionysian. In fact, Nietzsche has discovered hat more often than not, that which is "intoxicating" produces an effect 'ery different from the kind that he desires. One can, and indeed one nust, become intoxicated *with* life, but in most cases intoxication actu- ılly represents a flight from life. Nietzsche therefore no longer under- tands Wagner as an example of the best that art can offer, energizing ınd equipping us for life. Instead, Wagner's opera becomes the supreme :xample of "decadent" art, seducing us in the manner of an "opiate," leadening us to life. The remainder of this article will be devoted to :xploring philosophical dimensions of the distinctions Nietzsche makes)etween these two kinds of art, as well as their moral and political impli- :ations, while addressing the question of precisely why Nietzsche feels :ompelled to reject Wagner so vehemently.

Rejecting Wagnerian Christianity

For Nietzsche, the flight from life that is characteristic of modern culture manifests itself in Wagner's operas in various ways. One of the more obvious ways is in a fascination with the supernatural, and, more generally, in Wagner's expression of "Christianity." The extent to which Wagner's work is actually "Christian," as opposed to representing a misuse or perversion of Christianity, is open to question but is not a matter for discussion here; neither is the accuracy of Nietzsche's understanding of Christianity itself, as opposed to his treatment of what is offered by Wagner. What is important here is that the "Christian" dimension of Wagner's work is something that Nietzsche seizes upon repeatedly, and it is Wagner's last and most blatantly Christian work, *Parsifal*, that provokes the strongest reaction from him: "I despise everyone who does not regard *Parsifal* as an outrage on morals" (Nietzsche 1895, 80). Indeed, Nietzsche's final philosophical break with Wagner may have been precipitated by the appearance of this last opera. *Parsifal* stands out since, while almost all of Wagner's operas incorporate some sort of a supernatural element, it is focused on in *Parsifal* in a new way, as a conscious external force directing and controlling the action.

The legendary title character may seem like an admirable hero; he

certainly performs worthy deeds. His name, however, means "pure fool." This fool performs feats that other men have been unable to accomplish, bringing salvation and relief to others. It had been foretold that only one with exceptional innocence would be able to accomplish the task, and Parsifal fits the bill. When Parsifal first appears he actually comes across as almost an idiot, displaying little comprehension of what is going on around him. Over the course of the opera, however, he becomes "wise through compassion" as foretold, resists temptation, and, with some supernatural assistance, performs noble deeds (Wagner 1938, 429-430). Although Parsifal demonstrates a certain amount of bravery and steadfastness, one can see why he would be a particularly distasteful hero from Nietzsche's standpoint. For Parsifal begins his adventure as a fool, and achieves what he does in large part because he is a pawn of supernatural forces. A voice from the Holy Grail foretelling the arrival of Parsifal refers to him as "my chosen tool" (Wagner 1938, 441). Instead of ennobling man, the story of Parsifal degrades man by highlighting his smallness and impotence in the face of the supernatural and by belittling his achievements. The greatest man cannot do deeds as great as those of a tool chosen by God. By thus erasing the differences between men, *Parsifal* drags man down and appeals to the *ressentiment* that is characteristic of modern inverted morality. Indeed, it is the supernatural, and not Parsifal himself, that dominates the opera. The Holy Grail is featured prominently, blindingly illuminated; a "halo of glory pours down over all" (Wagner 1938, 470); the Sacred Spear hovers magically; a castle collapses; a white dove descends. At times the performers seem almost insignificant in comparison with the supernatural imagery.

A flight to the supernatural is associated by Nietzsche with an abdication of one's responsibility to live one's own life heroically in a world in which God is dead, and one can see in the elevation of the idiot Parsifal a demonstration of the inverted "Christian morality" or "slave morality" that Nietzsche opposes. Parsifal gains wisdom only through compassion, and an emphasis on compassion in place of other virtues is of course associated by Nietzsche with slave morality. It is particularly significant that Parsifal's primary assets are his natural innocence, chastity, and purity; this amounts for Nietzsche to a rejection of life. He maintains that "*Parsifal* is a work of cunning, of revengefulness, of secret poison-brewing, hostile to the pre-requisites of life; a *bad* work. —The preaching of chastity is an incitement to anti-naturalness." (Nietzsche 1895, 80). If Parsifal's good qualities are supposed to be natural, why does the opera represent an "incitement to anti-naturalness"? Because in Nietzsche's view such "Christian" virtues are not "natural." As will be discussed later, despite his own occasional praise of the "natural" Nietzsche was opposed to the romantic idealization of nature and to what it implies.

The language Nietzsche uses to denounce *Parsifal* sets up obvious tensions with elements of Nietzsche's earlier praise of Wagner. For example, the young Nietzsche had remarked:

> In the *Ring des Nibelungen* I discover the most moral music I know, for example when Brunnhilde is awoken by Siegfried; here he attains to an elevation and sanctity of mood that makes us think of the glowing ice-and snow-covered peaks of the Alps, so pure, solitary, inaccessible, chaste and bathed in the light of love does nature appear here; clouds and storms, even the sublime itself, are beneath it. (Nietzsche 1876, 202)

Here Nietzsche embraced the "pure" and "chaste"; why does he now deride it? He has become more sensitive to the fact that purity and chastity come in different forms. A kind of 'purity' and 'chastity' can exist in the overman who has embraced life to the fullest; they become a part of his nature. More often, however, purity and chastity represent a kind of denial of life, and are something externally imposed against one's nature. It is significant that it is Wagner's *preaching* of chastity to which Nietzsche takes exception; to him this reflects a form of hypocrisy or bad faith. Moreover, the innocence of Parsifal may be contrasted with the 'innocence' of Nietzsche's overman. To achieve the overman's kind of innocence one must first confront a world without absolutes and take on complete responsibility for one's life. That is, one must in a sense overcome both one's own impulses and the world's conventions and move through it all to a new kind of innocence. As Zarathustra says, one must become a camel and a lion and *then* a child (Nietzsche 1883-1892, 55). In contrast, Parsifal was never anything but a child, and his innocence, like that of a child, is the innocence of one who has never assumed real responsibility and is incapable of doing so. In celebrating the innocence of Parsifal, Wagner is celebrating an unthinking, unreflective kind of existence. This is not the life of the overman but that of Nietzsche's "last man."

A tension in Nietzsche's thought is also highlighted by his explicit rejection of Wagner's focus on the "transcendent" or on anything external to oneself. The earlier Nietzsche of *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* maintained that if tragedy is to serve its function of helping one to achieve a new perspective and overcome oneself, it must help one look beyond oneself:

> The individual must be consecrated to something higher than himself—that is the meaning of tragedy; he must be free of the terrible anxiety which death and time evoke in the individual: for at any moment, in the briefest atom of his life's course, he may encounter something holy that endlessly outweighs all his struggle and all his distress—this is what it means

> to have a *sense for the tragic*; all the ennoblement of mankind is enclosed in this supreme task . . . . (Nietzsche 1876, 213)

Clearly Nietzsche here sees a dedication to something beyond oneself, that is, a kind of reverence, as a path to ennoblement. In this work he seizes upon the theme of "selfless loyalty" as fulfilling this function. Devotion to something, in this case loyalty, so complete that one may be willing to sacrifice one's life or hopes, serves to help one to overcome oneself in a way that is vaguely like that of the later overman; it is ennobling. Something almost religious appears to be going on here. Indeed, Nietzsche states approvingly that loyalty "is the most personal primal event that Wagner experiences and reveres like a religious mystery" (Nietzsche 1876, 203). Even at this stage Nietzsche rejects a supernatural reality and he is leery of "transcendence" or of reified abstract concepts of any kind; consequently, he seizes on loyalty as an uplifting theme in Wagner. This is somewhat defensible since although 'loyalty' itself may be an abstract concept, loyalty to a particular person is not; it is something that is expressed in concrete meaningful action. Nevertheless, the almost religious dimension of the devotion to loyalty, expressed with such words as "holy" and "consecrated," seems like something that should make Nietzsche uncomfortable. How the later Nietzsche thought about this particular issue is unclear, for he does not discuss it in his anti-Wagner tracts. Instead he focuses there on criticizing more explicit references to some kind of "Absolute." However, it is clear that despite Nietzsche's rejection of the supernatural he never seems to relinquish the belief in the necessity for a sense of "something holy." After all, although Zarathustra believes that God is dead, he is "the most pious of all those who do not believe in God" (Nietzsche 1883-1892, 272). Zarathustra is a friend to the unemployed pope, for he loves all pious men. Nietzsche does not intend his piety, however, to be directed toward a reified external Absolute; one might say that it reflects an awesome reverence for man's responsibility and for the power of life. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche maintains, "the noble soul has reverence for itself" (Nietzsche 1886, 256). In contrast, the piety of Wagner comes to be perceived by Nietzsche as directing one toward something external and away from life. Zarathustra's piety is the sort that highlights one's own responsibility, while Wagner's represents a flight away from responsibility.

Another "Christian" element that is particularly prominent in *Parsifal* is the theme of salvation. Indeed, Wagner takes pains to highlight connections between the title character and Christ. Nietzsche, however, discovers salvation to be a dominant theme not just in *Parsifal* but also in every one of Wagner's operas. Often, "salvation" takes on its religious, supernatural form, but that is not always the case. In many operas various characters must be 'saved' in much more mundane ways, but for Nietzsche

this is no better than a focus on Christian salvation. For him any belief that one must be saved is a reflection of the life-denying slave morality:

> The need of *salvation* . . . is the sincerest form of expression of *decadence*, the most convinced and most painful affirmation of it in sublime symbols and practices. The Christian wishes to get *loose* from himself. . . . Noble morality, master morality, has, reversely, its roots in a triumphing *self*-affirmation, —it is the self-affirming, the self-glorifying of life; it equally needs sublime symbols and practices, but only "because its heart is too full." (Nietzsche 1888, 56)

If one desires to be saved, one desires to escape one's present life through the action of another. This is true whether the salvation involves one's immortal soul or whether it involves more mundane aspects of one's life. Such a desire signals an unwillingness to embrace life as it actually exists or to take full responsibility for leading one's own life; it is a kind of giving up, a surrender to an escapist mentality. A better understanding of Nietzsche's view of this mentality, and why he believes it to be present in some forms of art and not in others, will be pursued in the next section. The political significance of this mentality will be discussed in the section thereafter.

Rejecting Wagnerian Romanticism

In *The Case of Wagner* Nietzsche returns to the discussion of the two types of art, explaining that

> every age has in its quantum of energy, a quantum determining what virtues are permitted to it, what virtues are proscribed. It has either the virtues of *ascending* life, . . . or it is itself an epoch of descending life, and then it requires the virtues of decline, then it hates all that justifies itself solely by plenitude, by superabundance of strength. Aesthetics is indissolubly bound up with these biological presuppositions: there is a *decadence* aesthetics, and there is *classical* aesthetics . . . . In the narrower sphere of so-called moral values there is no greater contrast than that of *master morality* and morality according to *Christian* valuation . . . . The former communicates to things out of its fulness—it glorifies, it embellishes, it *rationalises* the world, the latter impoverishes, blanches, and mars the value of things, it *denies* the world. (Nietzsche 1888, 54-55)

This passage, similar to a passage that appears in the "What is Romanticism?" aphorism of *The Gay Science*, is particularly important because it clearly links Nietzsche's views on aesthetics with his critique of Christian morality. The contrast between Christian morality and

Nietzsche's own morality is seen by Nietzsche as essentially a special case of the contrast between the modern aesthetics of Wagnerian romanticism (here called "decadence aesthetics") and classical aesthetics. In *Nietzsche contra Wagner* the Christian is in fact identified as a "species of Epicurean" that Nietzsche sees as the antithesis of a "Dionysian Greek" (Nietzsche 1895, 73). For Nietzsche, ethics and aesthetics are of course intimately related and could even be considered indistinguishable. Therefore it should not be surprising that Nietzsche's condemnation of the "slave morality" present in Wagner's work is manifest in large part in attacks on Wagner's brand of romantic aesthetics. In the process of making these attacks Nietzsche appears to embrace classical aesthetics to a degree that may seem surprising, given what one may consider to be its restrictive and limiting nature. One might think that it would be classical aesthetics that Nietzsche would associate with Christian morality and with the denial of life, and that he would associate expansive Wagnerian romanticism with a "superabundance of strength" and with that which "glorifies" and "embellishes" the world. But in his anti-Wagner essays Nietzsche paints pictures of Wagner's art that at times read like the most hard-core classicist's disparagement of romanticism:

> French Romanticism and Richard Wagner are very closely connected. . . . altogether fanatics of *expression*, great discoverer in the domain of the sublime, also of the loathsome and the shocking, still greater discoverer in effect, in display, . . . with dismal access to everything that seduces, allures, forces, or upsets, born enemies of logic and the straight line, covetous of the foreign, the exotic, the monstrous, and all opiates of the senses and understanding. On the whole, a rashly-venturing, magnificently violent, high-flying, and high up-pulling kind of artists . . . . (Nietzsche 1895, 76-77)

Like a good classicist, Nietzsche complains that Wagner's music possesses "*chaos* in place of rhythm" and "just *seeks* to break up all symmetry of measure and intensity" (Nietzsche 1895, 68). Wagner promotes "an ever greater indifference to all severe, noble conscientious training in the service of art; the belief in genius substituted for it . . ." (Nietzsche 1888, 44-45). Wagner's style, like most of modern culture, is "decadent"; this decadence is characterized in part by a lack of harmonious order; "the whole has ceased to live together" (Nietzsche 1888, 25). Wagner has demonstrated that he is not a true musician by "abandoning all lawfulness and—to speak more definitively—all style in music . . ." (Nietzsche 1888, 29).

Is there a sound philosophical basis for Nietzsche's embrace of classical aesthetics and rejection of romanticism, or does he turn to the classic-versus-romantic argument just because Wagner is a romantic and this

line of argument is therefore an easy way to denigrate him? While Nietzsche's personal feelings toward Wagner may be partly responsible for the intensity of his rush to classicism, Nietzsche's classicism is also integral to his philosophical thought. For, as other commentators on romanticism have observed, classical aesthetics can have the effect of anchoring one in reality and equipping one for action in the world, while romanticism often tends to take one out of the world and to hinder moral action (Babbitt 1919). If there is one thing to which Nietzsche is opposed it is to such a disconnection. Contrasting Wagner with Bizet, Nietzsche says "Bizet makes me productive. All that is good makes me productive. I have no other . . . *proof* of what is good" (Nietzsche 1888, 7).

An appreciation of Nietzsche's embrace of classicism becomes particularly important when one considers his conception of the overman. The "self-overcoming" of the overman is in Nietzsche's view something very different from romantic expansiveness or unleashed passion. It is true that the overman does not embrace conventions and that in a sense he makes his own morality. However, the overman is also something of a well-ordered soul in the classical tradition, and he is keenly aware of his responsibility for 'moral' action of a sort. Since the overman is the opposite of a slave, he certainly cannot be a slave to his passions any more than he can be a slave to other men. He does not reject his instincts, urges, and passions, but he accepts them in such a manner in which they constitute him without controlling him. Only a well-ordered soul has a hope of doing this, and becoming a well-ordered soul is accomplished in part through a dose of classical restraint. This means that, even though one does not become a slave to convention, one makes the spirit of the classical tradition one's own. Citing two passages contained in *The Will to Power*, Kaufmann observes that

> Nietzsche is not exhorting the mass of men to renounce traditional restraints. He denounces what he considers Wagner's typically romantic libertinism . . . and he writes: ". . . *there is nothing romantic about greatness of soul.*" "Greatness of soul" is a translation of Aristotle's *megalopsychia.* And . . . Aristotle's conception apparently made a tremendous impression on Nietzsche, whose opposition to Christianity can scarcely be seen in proper perspective apart from Aristotle's ethics. (Kaufmann 1974, 382)

As the literary scholar Irving Babbitt describes it, the classicist embraces decorum since "decorum is for the classicist the grand master-piece to observe because it is only thus he can show that he has a genuine centre set above his own ego" (Babbitt 1919, 265). This may help explain classicism's attraction for Nietzsche. Even though he emphatically rejects any focus on the supernatural or other externals, Nietzsche seems to

believe that one still needs some kind of a "genuine centre set above his own ego." This can be seen in his early interest in a devotion to "selfless loyalty," in the "pious" nature of Zarathustra, and in the contrast between the overman and the "last man," who may be seen as characterized in part by a profound lack of piety or reverence toward anything. Nietzsche was, of course, a classical philologist by training and profession, and he may have seen in the classical embrace of decorum a path toward order, self-discipline, and a kind of 'elevation' of life in the face of the abyss. He must reject the romantic Wagnerian approach since it rejects decorum and leaves one without any sound basis for ordering one's life.

While Nietzsche's expressed anti-romanticism is undeniable, the extent to which he can be considered a classicist may be subject to debate. Nietzsche himself declined to label himself a classicist, but his reasons do not appear to reflect major differences in approach. In *The Gay Science*, after identifying and denouncing "romantic pessimism," he adds this parenthetical note: "That there still *could* be an altogether different kind of pessimism, a classical type; . . . only the word "classical" offends my ears, it is far too trite and has become round and indistinct. I call this pessimism of the future . . . *Dionysian* pessimism" (Nietzsche 1882, par. 370). The term "classicism" had become "trite" and "indistinct" because of the prevalence of various forms of neoclassicism that represented either a rigid, formal adherence to the external forms of Greek classicism, or a kind of romanticism that looked back to classical Greece in a manner similar to that in which romanticism looks back to the Middle Ages. In either case the truly classical spirit in the best sense was missing. Nietzsche did not reject this spirit but embraced it; he rejected the term 'classical' only because he could not abide its misuse. Of course, Nietzsche's 'classicism' is by no means identical with traditional classicism as it is usually understood, for Nietzsche rejects any ontological or metaphysical framework that presumes the existence of an ordered cosmos. One could perhaps say that to a significant degree Nietzsche's overall project represents an attempt to capture the best of the classical spirit and to derive its soul-ordering benefits without reference to an ordered universe.

How exactly for Nietzsche does the conflict between Wagnerian romantic aesthetics and classical aesthetics tie to that between "Christian" slave morality and master morality? Nietzsche tells us that Wagner

> flatters every nihilistic (Buddhistic) instinct and disguises it in music . . . . [E]verything that has grown up on the soil of *impoverished* life, the entire false coinage of transcendence and another world, has in Wagner's art its sublimest advocate—*not* in formulae (Wagner is too prudent to use formulae) but in its persuasion of sensuality, which, in its turn, again makes the mind tender and fatigued. (Nietzsche 1888, 46)

Nietzsche understands that art may in fact be more effective than explicit doctrines or philosophical arguments in promoting a particular type of morality. The 'escapist' quality of religion, expressed by Wagner in the "false coinage of transcendence and another world," is mirrored by the escapist quality of "decadent" modern romanticism in general. The very "sensuality" of Wagner's work represents such escapism. According to Nietzsche, "Wagner never calculates as a musician from any kind of musical conscience; he wants effect, he wants nothing but effect" (Nietzsche 1888, 29). As a result, "Wagner's music is never true" (Nietzsche 1888, 30). Why is Wagner's music not "true"? Because in striving for "effect" Wagner is pursuing appearance rather than substance; he ends up mixing noble imagery with "slave morality." His sensuality is not the sort that connects one with life or helps one to experience reality, but that serves as a diversion, a tonic. In contrast, Nietzsche argues that when he listens to Bizet's *Carmen* "I become a better man" because Bizet's work is straightforward and "without counterfeit coinage;" it avoids cheap sentimentality and "takes the auditor for an intelligent being" (Nietzsche 1888, 6). With Wagner, one does not need to confront the facts of life. One need only experience pleasant, thrilling, or uplifting sensations and thereby escape from the realities of life. Therefore, the "decadent" sensualist ultimately denies the world just as much as does one who looks to the transcendent.

Since Nietzsche criticizes Wagner's work for the manner in which his opera takes one out of the real world, it is not surprising that he speaks derisively of its 'uplifting' quality: "Let us walk above the clouds, let us harangue the infinite, let us surround ourselves with grand symbols" (Nietzsche 1888, 22)! Of course, it has already been shown that in his earlier pro-Wagner essay Nietzsche had used similar language to sing Wagner's praises. At that time Nietzsche praised Wagner because the elevating and sanctifying of man (or at least of some men) was what Nietzsche was fighting for. The later Nietzsche is still, in a sense, fighting for this. He has, however, realized that what Wagner offered was not really a path to humanity's ennoblement. What changed was Nietzsche's realization that the "elevation and sanctity of mood" offered by Wagner was, in fact, nothing but that: a "mood." While the characters and deeds of the Scandinavian legends may be noble in themselves, Wagner does not present them in a manner that is particularly conducive to their use as models for noble action in the real world. The emphasis is placed so strongly on feeling rather than on action that the opera is more likely to become an "opiate" that actually impairs one's ability to act in the world. In the *Bayreuth* essay Nietzsche recognized that Wagner's operas took one away from the mundane difficulties and trivialities of one's daily life, but he believed then that one returned energized for action, trans-

formed into a "tragic man" with a fresh perspective on one's own struggles. When Nietzsche rejects Wagner he decides that most men (and women, even more so!) return with a longing to recapture the way they felt during the performance but not with a will to truly heroic behavior themselves. Thus Nietzsche says of Wagner, "to look enviously towards master morality, *noble* morality . . . and at the same time to have in his mouth the contrary doctrine, the "Gospel of the Lowly," the *need* of salvation! . . ." (Nietzsche 1888, 55-56). Those who return from Wagner's operas do not want to plunge into their lives but to be *saved from* them, deadened to them. In its effect, "Wagner's influence is like a continuous use of alcohol" (Nietzsche 1888, 47).

Nietzsche originally took Wagner's operas to be something like Greek tragedy in part because the heroic, the beautiful, and the ugly can be seen in both. Why does Nietzsche later come to believe that the effects of Greek tragedy and Wagnerian romanticism are so different? In *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche remarks, "*What does the tragic artist communicate of himself?* Does he not display precisely the condition of *fearlessness* in the face of the fearsome and questionable?" (Nietzsche 1889, 92). Wagner's art fails to promote "fearlessness" because it is unwilling to confront honestly "the fearsome and questionable" in life; one does not gaze into the abyss. Instead there is flight either to an "Absolute," which may be either explicit or vague, or to a kind of mindless sensation, or to some muddy combination of the two. In any case the result is a kind of 'good feeling' that is unreflective, unearned, and empty. Of course, we have seen that the flight to an Absolute and to unreflective sensation or feeling are for Nietzsche essentially the same thing. He observes that

> it is *not* with music that Wagner has won the youth over to himself, it is with the "Idea": it is the mysteriousness of his art, its game of hide-and-seek among a hundred symbols, its polychromy of the ideal, which has led and allured these youths to Wagner! It is Wagner's genius for forming clouds . . . . They hear with trembling how in his art the *sublime symbols* become audible with gentle thunder out of the cloudy distance . . . . (Nietzsche 1888, 37-38)

Nietzsche refers to Wagner as Hegel's heir. He tells us that Wagner learned like Hegel that Germans love "'the Idea', that is to say, something obscure, uncertain, mysterious; that among Germans clearness is an objection, and logic a disproof" (Nietzsche 1888, 36-37). God may be dead, but Wagner is offering his followers the 'Absolute' on the cheap. Nothing need be clearly defined or understandable, but only a *sense* need be evoked of transcendence, of something beyond one's everyday concrete world. The flight to such a sense is for Nietzsche as morally dishonest as the flight to God, and it is perhaps even more dishonest intel-

lectually since it depends upon obscurity to function. Wagner "is possessed of every ambiguity, every equivocation, everything, in fact, which persuades the undecided, without making them conscious *what* they are persuaded to" (Nietzsche 1888, 45). This deliberate ambiguity contrasts with the master morality that "*rationalises* the world."

The unreflective and anti-intellectual quality of Wagner's work is an element repeatedly seized upon by Nietzsche. He remarks of Wagner: "How he humours every cowardice of modern soul with Siren tones!—There was never such a *mortal hatred* of knowledge" (Nietzsche 1888, 47)! The kind of "knowledge" that Wagner shirks is that required for moral honesty; if one keeps things fuzzy, one need not be pinned down. In criticizing Wagner's lack of clarity Nietzsche places himself on dangerous ground, for his early discussions of aesthetics emphasized the importance of the inarticulate, non-rational dimensions of art. Nietzsche had in fact praised Wagner with these words:

> Now, if the gods and heroes of such mythological dramas as Wagner writes are to communicate also in words, there is no greater danger than that this *spoken language* will awaken the theoretical man in us and thereby heave us over into the other, non-mythical sphere: so that in the end we should not through the employment of words have understood more clearly what is taking place before us but, on the contrary, have failed to understand it at all. That is why Wagner has forced language back to a primordial state in which it hardly yet thinks in concepts and in which it is itself still poetry, image and feeling. (Nietzsche 1876, 237)

Likewise, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche denounces "Socratism," that is, the theoretical, metaphysical, logical, abstract focus that emerged in Greek philosophy. He is particularly critical of the Greek philosophers' emphasis on reason and of their equation of virtue with knowledge (Nietzsche 1872, 92-95). Of course, when Nietzsche later criticizes Wagner's ambiguity he is not actually advocating a movement to a highly conceptual "Socratism" but is simply urging a return to something more like Greek tragedy, which did not disingenuously mix noble imagery with slave morality, which did not use ambiguity to hide an Absolute, and which did not emphasize "feeling" and "effect" to the point that they came to obliterate any connection to concrete reality. Nevertheless, a certain tension is evident between Nietzsche's later criticisms of Wagner and his earlier views. Nietzsche had always embraced the spirit of Greek tragedy, but in rejecting Wagner he also seems, in some ways, to have edged a little closer to the Greek philosophers whom he had once criticized. One may speculate that when Nietzsche realized that the perfect blending of the Apollonian and Dionysian which he thought he had found

in Wagner was in fact something very different, and when he became attuned to the dangerous effects of "decadent" romanticism, he became more circumspect about extolling the virtues of the non-rational and inarticulate over the rational and conceptual.

Political Implications

What is the effect of Wagner's art on one who is raised on it? "The youth becomes a moon-calf—an 'idealist'" (Nietzsche 1888, 47). Romantic idealism and an inability to take constructive action tend to go hand-in-hand, and both are symptoms of Wagnerian romanticism's tendency to disconnect one from real life. Interestingly, while romantic idealism may impair one's ability to act effectively on a personal level, it may at the same time be a spur to another kind of action. Nietzsche sums up the Wagnerian spirit at one point as "*Let us be idealists!* . . . Let us . . . make mankind better!—one thereby becomes good . . ." (Nietzsche 1888, 22-23). In abandoning classical morality the emphasis of Wagnerian romanticism becomes an "idealism" that is externally rather than internally oriented. That is, instead of focusing on the ordering of one's own soul, one focuses on making mankind as a whole better. And, since romanticism involves a rejection of standards, and romantic idealism encourages the view that something is radically wrong with the existing world, a distinctive politics results. Nietzsche describes such modern politics in *The Case of Wagner*:

> "Whence comes all the evil in the world?" Wagner asks himself. From "old conventions" he answered, like every revolutionary ideologist. That means from customs, laws, morals, and institutions, from all that the old world, old society rest on. "How does one do away with old society?" Only by declaring war against "conventions" (traditional usage and morality). *That is what Siegfried does.* (Nietzsche 1888, 14)

Here Nietzsche actually places himself in the position of defending old "customs, laws, morals, and institutions" against Wagner's desire to destroy them. While this may seem out of character, one can see how Nietzsche might find value in old customs, morals, etc., at least for those of us who cannot live the life of a full-blown overman. In his early works he observed that "in order to act we require the veil of illusion" (Nietzsche 1872, 51), and that "a living thing can be healthy, strong and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon" (Nietzsche 1874, 63). The necessary "illusion" contributing to one's horizon is of course represented by the Apollonian "dream" element that comes to be incorporated into Nietzsche's concept of the "Dionysian." Some classicists and traditionalists share with Nietzsche recognition of the importance of this "dream"

element. For example, Babbitt observed that "to say that the classicist . . . gets at his reality with the aid of the imagination is but another way of saying that he perceives his reality only through a veil of illusion" (Babbitt 1919, 102). Nietzsche found that Greek tragedy and culture once helped to provide the right kind of "illusion" or "horizon." Today we have much less to draw upon, but old customs, morals, traditions, and institutions can still play a role in promoting order and in equipping one for action, just as for Edmund Burke they made up the "wardrobe of a moral imagination" (Burke 1790, 67).

Nietzsche sees that in rejecting old ways Wagner is effectively rejecting standards. Nietzsche can criticize Wagner for this because he believes that Wagner does not reject standards in the manner of a true overman who has gazed into the abyss. Instead, Wagner's blanket rejection of standards amounts to a denial of the need to work on the ordering of one's own soul. Without the demands imposed on the self by classical standards, virtue loses the meaning it had held in the Greek world and becomes redefined as sympathy for the plight of mankind. Thus, Nietzsche rejects Wagner's "idealistic falsity and softening of conscience" (Nietzsche 1895, 81). Wagner, Nietzsche believes, is not calling for a critical examination of established ways but for their wholesale rejection as the cause of mankind's troubles. With such a rejection Wagner is essentially trying to negate the world and to avoid the hard task of actually living in it. Wagner's idealistic dreaming of a new, wholly different world is simply another manifestation of romantic escapism. Nietzsche's recognition of this dynamic is in fact also a key element behind his condemnation of Rousseau. The imagination by Rousseau and certain other romantics of an idealized "nature," which they oppose to our corrupting culture, represents to Nietzsche a flight from reality essentially the same as that which he finds in Christianity, and is another manifestation of slave morality. Nietzsche clearly recognized that this phenomenon assumes a political form. According to Adrian Del Caro,

> the quarrel is with social and political visionaries, types Nietzsche considered to be modern and therefore decadent. They share the belief, which smacks of Rousseau's "superstition," that if only the existing order can be brought down, then the nobleness and pride of humanity would rise up. The superstition is this: the original, wondrous nature of man—his innate goodness—is buried under the corruption in institutions . . . . (Del Caro 1989, 105-106)

While Nietzsche himself sometimes praises the "natural" and denounces much of modern culture, Strong agrees with Del Caro that, unlike Rousseau, Nietzsche does not believe that a "natural and happy man" would emerge if civilized morality were thrown off (Strong 1975, 49).

Once more a contrast is presented between a spirit that embraces life and one that denies it. Instead of undertaking the hard work of improving oneself and one's actions, one simply rejects this world and seeks to bring another world into being. In the case of Rousseau, Del Caro finds that "his own shortcomings were his inspiration, insofar as his personal experience was the basis for his blaming society for the decline of culture. Rousseau, according to Nietzsche, would cure himself by curing society" (Del Caro 1989, 101). Of course, such a project cannot be successful. What is the ultimate result as portrayed by Wagner himself in the Ring series? In the final version, it ends on a dark note. As Nietzsche puts it, "Everything goes wrong, everything goes to ruin, the new world is as bad as the old. . . . Brunnhilde, who according to the earlier design had to take leave with a song in honour of free love, solacing the world in anticipation of a Socialistic Utopia in which 'all will be well,' now has something else to do. She first has to study Schopenhauer . . ." (Nietzsche 1888, 15-16).

This unhappy ending is a manifestation of what has been called the "manic-depressive" nature of certain types of romanticism (Ryn 1997). The romantic is unwilling to embrace the world as it is and focus on ordering himself; he dreams instead of a new exterior world. Since this dream is hopeless the romantic may become morose and embittered. This is why so much romanticism has a dark side. In the case of Wagner, "Everything he touches he makes morbid—*he has made music morbid*" (Nietzsche 1888, 16). His romantic dreams ultimately lead not to happiness but to a despairing kind of pessimism or nihilism. This phenomenon, labeled by Nietzsche "romantic pessimism," most clearly shows the linkage between romanticism and *ressentiment*. According to Nietzsche,

> the desire for *destruction*, change, and becoming can be an expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with future (my term for this is, as is known, "Dionysian,"); but it can also be the hatred of the ill-constituted, disinherited, and underprivileged, who destroy, *must* destroy, because what exists, indeed all existence, all being, outrages and provokes them. To understand this feeling, consider our anarchists closely. (Nietzsche 1882, par. 370)

Conclusion

For Nietzsche, Wagnerian opera came to exemplify some of the worst characteristics of "decadent" modern culture. The kind of sentimental "Christianity" and "decadent" romanticism that it embraced represented a particular moral outlook and frame of mind. This outlook incorporated the *ressentiment* that is characteristic of inverted "slave morality,"

and, even more importantly, it encouraged dreams of a new, idealistic world. Both the sensuality and quasi-religious feeling present in Wagner's work acted as "opiates" to take the listener away from the concerns of the real world, and fostered an unwillingness to assume full responsibility for one's own life or to engage in the ordering of oneself. As a result, devotees of Wagner (and, to degree, all who are influenced by the "decadent" aspects of modern Western culture) are for Nietzsche operating under a kind of moral impairment. They are not equipped to act in the world in a truly correct manner. Instead, their desire to be "saved" from the real world and to be "uplifted" without personal moral effort sets up a particular political dynamic that may perhaps be best characterized as a kind of 'salvific' politics. Such politics, seen by Nietzsche as characteristic of modernity, tend to foster a shift of responsibility away from the individual and toward the kind of bourgeois state that Nietzsche held in contempt. In its fully developed form this dynamic manifests itself as the revolutionary ideological politics that blossomed in the early twentieth century. Such politics embody an unfulfillable desire to completely abolish the existing order and traditional standards and to erect in their place a new, idealized, uplifting political and social order, the "Socialistic Utopia" of which Nietzsche speaks.

In taking a stand against Wagnerian romanticism Nietzsche emerges as a strong 'classicist' of a sort. Objections may be raised that the highly 'classicist' Nietzsche presented here does not represent the whole of Nietzsche; this is undeniably true. Nevertheless, the Nietzsche that appears in these anti-Wagner works should not be ignored when considering Nietzsche's philosophy as a whole. For example, it becomes clear that what Nietzsche is aiming for with his overman (whether he achieves it or not) is something quite different from romantic expansiveness, simple ego-worship, or surrender to base impulses. The overman incorporates, among other things, a form of discipline, and bears a vague resemblance to the well-ordered soul of the Greek philosophers. The Nietzsche of these particular works is in a special sense highly 'moral' in that he emphasizes personal responsibility and rejects approaches that direct man's energies toward control of the exterior world as a method of betterment.

Although significant tensions exist, Nietzsche remains for the most part philosophically consistent throughout his pro- and anti-Wagner writings. While personal issues no doubt played a role, Nietzsche's reversal of opinion on Wagner may be attributed in significant part to the maturation of his thought and to his improved perception over time of the effect of Wagner's work on the public. Ultimately it is Nietzsche's rejection of Wagner, not his early enamorment with him, which appears to be most in keeping with his philosophical views. One may in fact suggest that some clarification of Nietzsche's thought occurred once he

no longer felt compelled to accommodate Wagner's music favorably within it. Nonetheless, Nietzsche's ability to classify Wagnerian opera first as the best manifestation of master morality and then as the worst manifestation of slave morality highlights a problem with the vague and 'slippery' nature of his philosophy. If Nietzsche himself cannot be certain of what he means by such terms as "Dionysian," how can we? Nevertheless, by wrestling with the practical problem of Wagner Nietzsche helps us to get a better idea of what he means, or at least of what he does *not* mean, by some of the terms and concepts he uses.

Today it is all the rage in political science to talk about the importance of culture. It is also a commonplace that the maintenance of a particular kind of political order (such as liberal democracy) requires a citizenry with a particular kind of character. However, the precise nature of the linkage between cultural elements, individual character, and political behavior is not always well understood. While it is not uncommon for political scientists to look for relationships between artistic works and politics, most look only for explicit political or ideological content in a work. Nietzsche displays a more subtle understanding of how art incorporates in itself an ethical dimension that can shape individuals' personal, social, and political behavior. Nietzsche's analysis of Wagnerian opera is particularly valuable to us today because of the insight it offers into how the politics of the modern world may have been influenced — and may continue to be influenced — by cultural elements such as theater, music, art, or literature.

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