

***Agon* and Politics: What Nietzsche Learned from Wagner**

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I. Introduction

The guiding question of this paper is: What does Nietzsche's relationship with Wagner reveal to us about Nietzsche's view of politics and about the political dimension of his thinking? More pointedly: How do the opposing positions that Nietzsche takes (often within the span of several paragraphs or pages) help us articulate the historically, culturally, and socially conditioned vantage points from which we, ourselves, engage in politics? I argue in this paper that Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner and of the self-aggrandizing, if not nationalistic, sentiments that Wagner's music incites in individual and communal life become, for Nietzsche, a way to covertly express his concerns about the incendiary elements of his own thinking. In the first half of the paper, I establish the relevance that Nietzsche's friendship with Wagner has to Nietzsche's compositional style and polemical philosophizing about politics. To do this, I articulate how Nietzsche's insistence on the re-evaluation of values calls for the sustainment of the same conceptual tension that Wagner introduces into his music dramas. At the beginning of their friendship (the two met in 1868 and remained friends until 1876), Nietzsche admires Wagner's music, which holds in tension the expressive (dramatic) and the formal (rhythmic) aspects of melody; Nietzsche sees in it, at first, an art worthy of imitation.

Later, Nietzsche distances himself from Wagner, who holds back neither his anti-Semitic views, nor his pro-German politics. Nietzsche's break with Wagner and his art can be summarily attributed to the fact that, in Nietzsche's understanding, Wagner's music issues a call for its listener to live a life that—on the surface—promises eternity and glory, but that—at bottom—undermines itself. In the second half, I turn to one of the recurrent ideas in Nietzsche's thinking—the mask—in order to explain that the positive political value of Nietzsche's writing rests upon our analysis of the relevance of Nietzsche's own prejudiced (i.e. on the basis of his overtly nationalistic and misogynistic) or preferential remarks. These masks that Nietzsche wears and that he offers for our consideration reflect back on the thinker. They suggest that only from a distance or from underneath a mask does Nietzsche spy the life-negating tendencies of his own aesthetic and political affinities. Nietzsche, the polemicist, not only learns from, but needs Wagner, who marks the history of musical composition with the 'unresolved', call it agonistic, chord. Nietzsche's philosophical style, whereby opposing points reevaluate and accent, but do not dissolve each other, is much like the music of the man who, for all of his faults, or perhaps because of these, played a formative role in Nietzsche's thinking and his life.

Unlike Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, the composer's friendship with Friedrich Nietzsche has no third act and thus no resolution. The claim that Nietzsche is Wagner's champion does not stand up to Nietzsche's own criticisms of Wagner.¹ However, to take an opposing view—that Nietzsche pins down the real problem with Wagner's art—is to miss the central insight common to both men.² I claim that the relationship

¹ Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff propounds the view that Nietzsche is an ardent supporter of Wagner and mocks Nietzsche's predilection for Wagner's art. See *Der Streit um Nietzsches "Geburt der Tragödie": Die Schriften von E. Rhode, R. Wagner und U. v. Wilamowitz-Möllendorff*, ed. by Karlfried Gründer (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1969), pp. 27–55.

² Gary Shapiro's 1989 study of the *Nietzschean Narratives* (henceforth *NN*) presents Nietzsche as being largely critical of Wagner and portrays him as opposing 'Wagner's

between Nietzsche and Wagner is to remain unresolved. In Wagner's music, Nietzsche sees, at first, an artistic call to arms; a sublime power of transfiguration.³ Nietzsche's abandonment of these elated sentiments about Wagner and the ensuing criticism of Wagner's music as a world-negating art point beyond aesthetics and get at the heart of political questions. Critical Nietzsche espies in Wagner—and this is my claim—a sentimental idealism, which plagues our political aptitude as readily as it dulls our spiritual mettle.

At the beginning of their relationship, Nietzsche extols Wagner as a perfect 'picture [of a] [...] genius'.⁴ In his later works, printed after Wagner's death, Nietzsche characterizes Wagner as someone who has given up the self-mastery and self-governance that are essential in true art.⁵ According to Nietzsche, Wagner composes for the sake of the pedagogical and the *sensual* effects of artistic production. As Nietzsche, the critic, sees

universalistic aspirations' (p. 67). Gary Shapiro, *Nietzschean Narratives* (Indiana University Press, 1989).

³ Find a rich and focused list of scholarly sources on Nietzsche and Music as well as, more specifically, on Nietzsche and Wagner, in Babette Babich, 'Nietzsche and Music: A Selective Bibliography', *New Nietzsche Studies*, 1(1/2), (1996), pp. 64–78.

⁴ Nietzsche offers this praise of Wagner in a letter to Carl von Gersdorff (*Friedrich Nietzsche Sämtliche Briefe Kritische Studienausgabe*, Band III.35. April 1869 – Mai 1872, ed. by Colli, G. & Montinari, M., (Berlin: De Gruyter Deutsche Taschenbuch, 1975), (author's translation). See, further, Thomas Baumeister, 'Stationen von Nietzsches Wagnerrezeption und Wagnerkritik', *Nietzsche Studien*, 16(1), (1978), pp. 288–309.

⁵ See *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* (1895, henceforth *NCW*), *The Case of Wagner* (1888, henceforth *CW*), and 'An Attempt at Self-Criticism' that accompanies the 1886 edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* (henceforth *BT*). Nietzsche met Wagner in 1868 and the two had 'maintained the friendship for almost ten years' (Kaufmann, 'Translator's Introduction', *CW, Basic Writings of Nietzsche* [New York: Random House Publishing, 2000], p. 604). Henceforth *BWN*. The relationship was decidedly undone with the arrival of *Parsifal*. Katherine Fry dates 'Nietzsche's "break" from Wagner [...] from the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876' ('Nietzsche, *Tristan und Isolde*, and the Analysis of Wagnerian Rhythm'. *The Opera Quarterly* 29(3 – 4), (2013), pp. 257–276, p. 253). (Henceforth 'NTI').

it, Wagner's music is anything but life-affirming. Instead, Wagner, unlike the 'artist who writes for himself' is plagued by a 'weakness of one who needs an audience'.⁶ However, as I see it, rather than being a careful appraisal of Wagner's art, Nietzsche's invectives against Wagner as a composer of the time of '*decadence*' are a mark of Nietzsche's struggle not only with Wagner and his music, but also with himself and his own ideas.⁷ To defend this thesis, I first study the affinity between Wagner's compositional style and Nietzsche's polemical philosophizing (Sect. II). I, then, analyze Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner's music and the way in which it qualifies Nietzsche's own ideas (Sect. III).

II. A Common Idea: Nietzsche's 'Dionysian Art' in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*

James J. Winchester, in his discussion of the case that Nietzsche makes against Wagner, identifies the site of the disagreement as the 'conjunction of the phenomenon of Wagner and the richness of Nietzsche's soul'.⁸ I agree with Winchester, whose assessment of the relationship between Nietzsche and Wagner implies that Nietzsche's remarks about the

⁶ Shapiro, *NN* p. 39.

⁷ For Nietzsche's remarks about Wagner and decadence see, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, trans. by Struge, K., Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge, UK), p. 275. (Henceforth *LN*). The notion of decadence, as Nietzsche applies it to Wagner, as well as to himself, is not univocal. Consult Fry, who lodges her discussion of '*décadence*' within Nietzsche's interest in 'French literary culture' ('NTI', pp. 268 ff). See, further, David Krell's discussion of Nietzsche, where Krell concludes that Nietzsche thinks himself to be 'both decadent and antidecadent at once' (*Infectious Nietzsche* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 209). (Henceforth *IN*). Consult, also, Jacqueline Scott, who argues that Nietzsche is a 'strong decadent' in 'Nietzsche and Decadence: The Revaluation of Morality', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 31(1), (1998), pp. 57–78.

⁸ James J. Winchester, *Nietzsche's Aesthetic Turn: Reading Nietzsche after Heidegger, Deleuze, and Derrida* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. ix.

composer shed light on Nietzsche and his philosophizing just as well as they indicate possible problems with Wagner's art. If one is to philosophize artfully, then, as Nietzsche himself advises, one must not only learn to formulate questions with precision, but also to be at ease where all is undifferentiated and formless. We find indications of this advice in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, where Nietzsche is 'in a dialogue [with] [...] Richard Wagner'.⁹ Nietzsche comments on the work after his break with Wagner, but he does not condemn it, nor does he take back the two forces and the 'tremendous opposition' out of which Attic tragedy is born: the formative effect of art (the Apollonian drive) and the expression of excess that breaks through the form (the Dionysian drive).¹⁰ The Apollonian, although not always referred to by the same name, is displayed in Nietzsche's later writings as the self-formative and self-searching impulse.¹¹ 'The Dionysian art', in *The Gay Science*, is set against 'all Romanticism in art' and, conspicuously, against Richard Wagner, whom Nietzsche claims to have '*misunderstood* at that time', (i.e. at the time of *BT*).¹² According to the new understanding, Wagner's music—in its very form—spells dissolution of a recognizable whole of self and life.¹³ And yet, Nietzsche's description of the Dionysian drive as the 'desire for

⁹ 'Attempt at Self-Criticism', *BWN* p. 19 and *BT* Sect. 2. I compare Kaufmann's translation against the German text of *Die Geburt der Tragödie oder Griechenthum und Pessimismus* (Leipzig: C. G. Naumann, 1894). I also consult *Die Geburt der Tragödie Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen I-IV Nachgelassene Schriften 1870-1873 Kritische Studienausgabe* Herausgegeben, ed. by Colli, G. and Montinari, M. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988). Where the English translation differs from Kaufmann's in *BWN*, it is my own.

¹⁰ *BT* Sect. 1, *BWN* p. 33 and ff.

¹¹ See, for example, *Beyond Good and Evil (BGE)* Part I. Sect. 31, 44, and *The Gay Science with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix in Songs*, trans. by Kaufmann, W. (New York, NY: Random House Publishing, 1974), 'Preface for the Second Edition', and Sect. 2. (Henceforth *GS*).

¹² *GS*, Bk. V. Sect. 370, p. 328.

¹³ See *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. by Middleton, C. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing), p. 233.

destruction, change, and becoming [as an] [...] expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with the future' affirms the possibility of dissipation of individuality.¹⁴ Nietzsche, in his own writings, advocates a form of disintegration of the accepted and familiar strictures of the world, while condemning a similar drive in Wagner's music. Why?

As an artful thinker, by Nietzsche's own account, one not only forms ideas, but also undergoes a disassociation from ideation and from oneself. One becomes not-self, one lets individuality go and is transposed into the all-encompassing 'Dionysian state with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence'.¹⁵ As if uttering Nietzsche's own idea, the voices of lovers in *Tristan und Isolde* yearn for an undifferentiated being in which the self and the world are one (*selbst dann, bin ich die Welt/Wonne hehrstes Weben*. Then, I myself, am the world/in the web of highest bliss).¹⁶ In this supreme bliss, one is conscious of one's dream—of the truth that all human life is but a dream—and affirms it (*wahnlos hold bewusster Wunsch*. The sweetly conscious undeluded wish).¹⁷ The two do not wish for a life in the other world, but for a life in death (*Nie wieder erwachens*. Never again to awaken).¹⁸ The love duet exposes and accentuates the tension of life and death; the inevitability of one following upon the other.

¹⁴ *GS*, Bk. V. Sect. 370, p. 329.

¹⁵ *BT* Sect. 7, *BWN* p. 59. See, also, David Allison, who analyzes the connection between the tonal power of music, Nietzsche's understanding of drives, and the Dionysian dissipation of individuality in 'Some Remarks on Nietzsche's Essay of 1871, "On Music and Words"'. *New Nietzsche Studies*, 1(1/2), (1996), pp. 15 – 41 (p. 32 and p. 39 nt. 49). Henceforth 'SRN'. See further, John Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), Chapter Two, pp. 54–55 and nt. 11, where Sallis discusses the difference that Nietzsche draws between the principle of individual and the universalizing force of Dionysian self-abandonment.

¹⁶ *The Opera Libretto Library: The Authentic Texts of the German, French, and Italian Operas with Music of the Principal Airs* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 1980), Vol. 1, p. 331.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

As if in rebellion against this inescapable truth, Wagner's music intensifies, instead of dissolving, the opposition and the essential belonging of the two. The libretto reiterates the musical resolve to, somehow, unite life and death. The Christian salvation, to which the *Parsifal* calls, promises life *after* death. *Tristan und Isolde*, by contrast, evokes a state in which life is together with death. Nietzsche himself describes the opera as a 'drama of the strictest austerity of form . . . befitting the enigma about which it speaks: being dead as the living body, being united as duality'.¹⁹ However, this unity, albeit essential (because it holds in tension life and death—the two moments definitive of the ensouled and, therefore human being) is impossible to sustain.

The opposing and mutually defining elements in Wagner's composition formally correspond to the polemical character of Nietzsche's writing. Nietzsche sets up contrasting points of view, such as his remarks about masks (read *GS* V. Sect. 356 with *GS* V. Sect. 361 and *BGE* II. Sect. 40, IX. Sect. 270, and IX. Sect. 289) and experimentation (read *GS* V. Sect. 356 with *BGE* II. Sect. 42). These contrasts problematize each other, but do not resolve into some third position that debunks and invalidates the opposed ideas.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche treads close to Wagner's analyses of music, when he hails himself as a thinker of the 'Dionysian music [with its] . . . emotional power of the tone . . . uniform flow of the melody, and the utterly incomprehensible world of harmony'.²⁰ Nietzsche draws on Wagner's music and, particularly, his *Tristan und Isolde*, to explain what he means by the 'Dionysian'. He commemorates it, in *The Birth of*

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*. ed. by Colli, G. & Montinari, M. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), I.480, author's translation. (Henceforth *KSA*).

²⁰ *BT* Sect. 2, *BWN* p. 40. See, further, Allison's discussion of Nietzsche's understanding of tone in 'SRN', pp. 26, 30. Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*. trans. by Scott, T. J., *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. Vol. 7. (Lebanon, NH: New England University Press, 1998), p. 331.

Tragedy, as a work that has ‘monstrous’ potential. Even as an admirer of Wagner, Nietzsche does not offer a simply glowing assessment of the opera. Instead, he wonders whether there is a ‘human being, who would be able to perceive, the third act of *Tristan und Isolde* without any help from word and image, as one monstrous symphonic passage, and not suffocate in a spasmodic unhinging of all of the wings of the soul?’²¹ Is this not an intimation of a supremely pleasurable, but volatile state—a wondrous ecstasy and a Dionysian rapture? Although Wagner’s music and, especially, *Tristan und Isolde* leave a vivid impression on Nietzsche,²² he is far from being Wagner’s tireless champion.²³

In *Parsifal*, as Strong quips, Nietzsche sees ‘Wagner’s ultimate solution’, and with this the thinker’s understanding of Wagner is refigured.²⁴ He now examines *Tristan und Isolde* under the same heading as *Parsifal*; as one of the ‘redemption’ pieces. Nietzsche’s tone in the appraisal of the redemption theme is sarcastic. He probes its purity and the motive behind the plot, jesting ‘[w]ho if not Wagner would teach us that ... married women, too, enjoy being redeemed by a knight (the case of *Isolde*)’.²⁵ Although ‘Nietzsche did not take Christianity lightly’, neither Wagner’s atheism, nor the composer’s use of sensualized and sensationalized Christian ideals, is the taciturn core of the disagreement

²¹ *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, KSA I.21, (author’s translation).

²² Fry studies Nietzsche’s interest in Wagner and concludes that his treatment of *Tristan und Isolde* in *The Birth of Tragedy* ‘constitutes Nietzsche’s most extended discussion of a single work by Wagner; it is also one of the few moments in the book where he elaborates his theory of musical tragedy through reference to a specific example’ (‘NTI’, p. 254).

²³ Babich, ‘Querying Nietzsche’s Influence and Meaning Today’. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Heritage and Prospects*, ed. by Polyakova, E. & Sienokaya, Y., Фридрих Ницше: наследие и проект. М.: Культурная революция. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Heritage and Prospects* (Moscow, Russia: Cultural Revolution, 2018), pp. 391–406 (p. 392).

²⁴ Tracy Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1975), p. 230. (Henceforth *FNPT*)

²⁵ *CW* Sect. 3, *BWN* p. 616.

between the two.²⁶ It is, rather, the power of Wagner's music that can revive just as readily as it can dissipate the spirit; the music that can heal, but that can also injure.

Nietzsche's tirade against Wagner zeroes in on the deleterious effects and, thereby, betrays the psychological state of the philosopher. As if offering a toast '[t]o *the artist of decadence*', Nietzsche indicates that with this moniker, attributed to Wagner, Nietzsche's own 'seriousness begins'.²⁷ Nietzsche's condemnation is striking in its identification of the composer with the influence that his music can have and that Nietzsche experiences as he examines Wagner's pieces. 'I am far from looking on guilelessly while this decadent corrupts our health—and music as well. Is Wagner a human being at all? Isn't he rather a sickness? He makes sick whatever he touches—*he has made music sick*'.²⁸ Surely, Wagner, as a friend, and his music, as art, has touched Nietzsche, who having made this condemning pronouncement, asserts, forthwith, that '[s]ickness itself can be a stimulant to life: only one has to be healthy enough for this stimulant'.²⁹ By his own admission, is Nietzsche too sick to hear the call to the love and affirmation of life in Wagner's music? This question is answered in the negative by David Krell, who looks to the end of Nietzsche's writing career and finds that in 'Why I Am So Clever' Nietzsche 'praises Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* as the great poison and the great antidote (*Gegengift*) of his life'.³⁰

If Nietzsche has been revived, then why the sustained criticism of Wagner's corpus as a 'series of strong scenes, one stronger than the other—and in between much *shrewd* stupidity' and of Wagner, himself, as '*no* dramatist', but merely a lover of the 'word "drama"', that is, as a lover of

²⁶ CW 'Translator's Introduction', BWN p. 605.

²⁷ CW Sect. 5, BWN p. 620.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 621.

³⁰ IN p. 209.

‘pretty words’?³¹ Does Nietzsche seek to absolve himself of the former friendship and of all else that Wagner stands for (e.g., anti-Semitism, pro-German sentiments, and support of imperial projects, as illustrated by Wagner’s ‘extravagant expectations for a German cultural renaissance with its capital at Bayreuth’) or does Nietzsche see in Wagner’s music the danger that he sees, but is less willing to account for, in his own thought?³² I am referring not so much to Nietzsche’s own remarks about Jews, priesthood, women, and the weak, because these always have to be understood in context of a given piece, but to the power of Nietzsche’s self-proclaimed *polemical*, that is, oppositional and provocative philosophical style. Nietzsche’s thought nearly always holds opposing views in tension which, on a careful reading, fail to resolve into either. Like Wagner’s music, Nietzsche’s writings exhibit the indissoluble tension from which arises the very possibility of thinking carefully, reevaluating, and questioning not only other ideas, ways of life, and people’s motivations, but oneself. Although it holds ‘beautiful possibilities’, this sort of powerful examination, especially when it probes into and, as Nietzsche says, ‘experiments’ on oneself, is liable to tear the person’s sense of self asunder.³³ It spells not a rebirth of an individuality, but madness. It is this possibility that troubles Nietzsche about Wagner and which Nietzsche has to live through, despite or, maybe, because of all the thought that he gives to it.

III. *Agon*—Nietzsche’s and Wagner’s Masks

Nietzsche accuses Wagner, explicitly, of being infatuated with stage drama; of being ‘essentially ... a man of the theater and an actor, the most enthusiastic mimomaniac’.³⁴ The implicit accusation is that Wagner’s art is

³¹ *CW* Sect. 9, *BWN* p. 631.

³² Shapiro, *NN* p. 14.

³³ *BGE* I. Sect. 10, *BWN* p. 206 and *BGE* II. Sect. 42, *BWN* p. 242 respectively.

³⁴ *NCW* ‘Where I Offer Objections’, *The Portable Nietzsche: Selected and Translated with an Introduction, Prefaces, and Notes by Walter Kaufmann*, trans. by Kaufmann, W. (New York, NY: Penguin Books Publishing, 1976), p. 665. (Henceforth *PN*).

self-serving. The adoration of the opera-lovers is not merely a welcome accompaniment to the intrinsic artfulness of Wagner's music, but rather the main goal of Wagner's work. Wagner's musical dramas please and excite the audience, who in their turn celebrate the composer. However, Nietzsche is emphatic when he disagrees with the idea that the end of great art is fame of the artist. Nietzsche is singularly critical of Wagner because, in Nietzsche's eyes, the musician squanders his talent and himself: but not for any worthy aim. Wagner could have been the man 'who composed the most unique music that has ever existed'.³⁵ However, next to this true artist, there is, in Nietzsche's eyes, also a Wagner of theatrical effects. This assessment denigrates Wagner's art, because, as Nietzsche sees it, 'no one brings along the finest senses of his art to the theatre, least of all the artist who works for the theatre—solitude is lacking; . . . In the theatre one becomes people, herd, female, pharisee, voting cattle, patron, idiot—*Wagnerian*'.³⁶

On this interpretation, Wagner turns to the power of drama to sway the fickle attention of the public and to win their praise, but in so doing his work ceases to be artful and becomes, rather, unduly accentuated and effected; in short, it becomes theatrical. Seen in this light, Wagner is no great dramatist, an artist who seeks to 'experiment' on himself mercilessly and even at the expense of public adoration. Wagner lacks the 'good courage for errors [and] . . . experiments'.³⁷ Nietzsche tells us that Wagner has the 'commanding instincts of a great actor in absolutely everything'³⁸ and that is no compliment, because as a masterful actor, the 'individual becomes convinced that he can do just about everything and *can manage*

³⁵ KSA 6, NCW; (author's translation).

³⁶ NCW 'Where I Offer Objections', PN pp. 665–666.

³⁷ *The Dawn of Day: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* V. 501, KSA 3; Nietzsche uses both 'Versuchen' and 'experimentiren' for 'experiment' in the 'Mortal Souls'.

³⁸ GS V. Sect. 368, p. 325. The section, which in the GS is entitled 'The Cynic Speaks', is the same as the text as in NCW, 'Where I Offer Objections', but the later, NCW text has several important additions and deletions.

almost any role'.³⁹ It is bad enough when a mask that one wears—the mask of a 'friendly man', for example—sticks as a person ceases to appear friendly and takes on an affectation as an essence, becoming thoroughly, but for that matter no more honestly, 'benevolent'.⁴⁰ Benevolence that develops out of politeness, out of a social nicety and a culturally conditioned inclination, does not make for a substantial or, as Nietzsche puts it, 'tested' way of life.⁴¹ The latter does not abide by norms or mores or prescriptions, but evaluates, experiments with, and questions all of these. This kind of hard-won knowledge lets us see past the masks we wear and reach the experiences, impulses, and drives that congeal into particular masks. In Wagner's case, if we trust Nietzsche's assessment of it, we do not have a single disposition or appearance—a single mask—that took over, but rather a ceaseless masquerade of masterfully executed roles or affects, as Nietzsche calls them, which are 'interesting',⁴² but insubstantial. Substantial art requires that the talent of an artist is not made to serve the predilections of the audience, and by extension the artist's ego, but is expended on the most precise articulation—in whatever medium—of that life, which courses through and seeks expression at the artist's hands. The mettle of Wagner's genius, the power of his art, give way to theatricality; his 'drama [becomes] a mere occasion for many interesting poses'⁴³—effects that please the audience and reinforce the poor tastes of the mob, instead of elevating and sculpting people's aesthetic sentiments.⁴⁴

Nietzsche's disappointment with Wagner's art goes hand in hand with Nietzsche's rejection of the associations and ideas that the composer

³⁹ *GS* V. Sect. 356, p. 303.

⁴⁰ *Human All Too Human* 'Of the First and Last Things', 51; *KSA* 2. (Henceforth *HH*).

⁴¹ In this context, consider Nietzsche's analyses of examined life and the pursuit or, rather, search of knowledge in *BGE* IX. Sect. 270, IX. Sect. 290 in *BWN* pp. 410–411 and p. 419; *GS* Preface 2, 3, and *GS* V. Sect. 351.

⁴² *NCW* 'Where I Offer Objections', *BWN* p. 665.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Nietzsche juxtaposes theatre and acting to architecture in *GS* V. Sect. 356.

developed in Bayreuth.⁴⁵ Nietzsche uses the same language to criticise the theatre-goers as he does the society in Bayreuth. In fact, Nietzsche simply substitutes ‘Bayreuth’ for ‘theatre’ in the later text, published in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*. The initial lines, which first appeared in the *Gay Science*, read: “Do be a little more honest with yourself!” After all, we are not in the theatre [Bayreuth]. In the theatre [Bayreuth] one is honest only in the mass; as an individual one lies, one lies to oneself”.⁴⁶ As the audience of theatrical dramas, which we should not confuse with the dramatic art in its thought-provoking or aesthetically masterful form, we turn into cattle ruled by our affects. Our excitation is real and in so far as it is, it is honest. It can manifest as a zeal to strain for the attainment of a promised, otherworldly salvation in lieu of facing and appreciating—in their own right—the trials and demands of earthly life. It can be a call of the desire to escape into the world of passions, which Nietzsche defines as the desire to ‘steadily drug’ ourselves, as ‘our “friends of art” are wont to do’.⁴⁷ As we languish in these passionate affects, we seek an ever-lasting forgetting of the world and of ourselves in the endless sea of sensual excitation. There an individual is not reborn, but undone. A mass intoxication ensues.

As with theatrical illusion, set into motion by the impassioned dramas, so also with political ideals, that come alive as we succumb to the sensational rhetoric, when under their spell, we become ‘common people, audience, herd ... voting cattle, democrat, ... fellow man; there even the most personal conscience is vanquished by the levelling magic of the great number; there stupidity has the effect of lasciviousness and contagion’.⁴⁸ Nietzsche spies in Wagner’s audience, infatuated with the idealistic sentiment of his music dramas, the overzealousness which lies at bottom of the impetus to dominate the political arena in one’s country or in the world. This is the world-negating tendency that Wagner’s operas excite and that his political affinities confirm.

⁴⁵ *NCW* ‘Where I Offer Objections’, *BWN* p. 665.

⁴⁶ *GS* V. Sect. 368, p. 325.

⁴⁷ Richard Wagner in Bayreuth V; henceforth *RWB*; *KSA* 7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

In his political writings, Wagner issues a revolutionary call, whereby a human being must oppose and overcome the shackles of the retrograde society. The spirit of this struggle, as Wagner understands the task at hand, is already alive and shows itself in the revolutionary movements in France and the pressures that these demands (e.g. for the freedom of the press and parliamentary system of government) put on the state apparatus in England.⁴⁹ On Wagner's account, this fight for the dignity of a human being extends through Austria, Prussia, and the rest of Germany, but it does not welcome all. There is a European spirit and it has met its opportune time, but the European and, especially, German spirituality, as Wagner argues, wishes to have 'nothing in common' with another, 'foreign nationality'.⁵⁰ These other people, against whom Wagner weighs the German nation—and therefore, to whom the Europeans and the Germans are juxtaposed—are the Jews. According to Wagner, the Jews are missing out, his language is '*wir wünschen unwillkürlich mit einem so aussehenden Menschen Nichts gemein zu haben. Dies mußte bisher als ein Unglück für den Juden gelten*',⁵¹ that is, 'we wish, albeit unwillingly, to have nothing in common with such human beings and this must certainly bode misfortune for the Jews'. However, Wagner's judgment, which he pronounces immediately thereafter, is that the Jews are quite content with their untoward luck.⁵² Note that the reason that Wagner gives for his dissatisfaction with the Jewish people and their incompatibility with the European way of life is that 'as we all know, the Jew hogs his God' or, in Wagner's rather more polite German, '*der Jude ... bekanntlich einen Gott ganz für sich hat*'.⁵³

Germanic mythology and the pagan religious spirit of the German

⁴⁹ 'Der Mensch und die bestehende Gesellschaft', *Die Kunst und die Revolution: und weitere Traktate aus der Revolutionszeit* (Berlin: Verlag der Contumax, 2015), pp. 61–63. The text first appeared in 1849.

⁵⁰ *Das Judentum in der Musik*, which Wagner wrote in 1850. I am translating the text from page 13 of the 1869 edition (Leipzig: Weber Verlag). (Henceforth *JM*).

⁵¹ *JM* p. 13.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

people is one of the prominent themes in the music dramas, which Wagner composes in his later years (beginning 1851). The radiant essence of *Parsifal* (1882) is pronouncedly a Christian story of self-abnegating transfiguration. Wagner's artistic production confirms his concern with the question of a common God, whose worship serves to divide, unless the belief in the same God is shared. As Nietzsche avers, 'for us, Bayreuth is the consecration of the dawn of the combat. No greater injustice could be done to us than to suppose that we are concerned with art alone'.⁵⁴ Neither Wagner, nor Nietzsche, it appears, 'are concerned with art alone'. Wagner's nationalistic fervour flies high and (this is Nietzsche's warning) it enflames—through the impassionate dramas that Wagner stages—the spirit of his audience. The theatregoers may not understand what is being awakened in them, but—and this another criticism that Nietzsche mounts against the composer—Wagner has to understand the effect of his work and should guard against evoking those dangerous sentiments, which have the power to negate not only imaginary worlds, but also real lives, worlds, and cultures. Does Nietzsche's writing answer this demand and show evidence of such self-aware examination?

The mixed (*GS* V. Sect. 348) and the questionable (*GS* V. Sect. 357, *HH* Sect. 475) remarks about the Jewish spirit are offset by Nietzsche's wholly laudatory expositions in and the elevated celebration of the 'Jewish Old Testament, the book of divine justice' conceived on such an 'immense scale that Greek and Indian literature has nothing to compare with it'.⁵⁵ The Jewish invention of the 'reversal of values', the famous '*Umkehrung der Werthe*', as Nietzsche pinpoints this fateful historical moment, is the time from which we count the 'slave rebellion in morals'.⁵⁶ The slave morality terminates in the less attractive features of Christianity and the appearance

⁵⁴ *RWB* V; *KSA* 7. See Michael Allen Gillespie's analyses of Nietzsche's 'Musical Politics' in *Nietzsche's New Seas: Explorations in Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics*, ed. by Gillespie, A. M. and Strong, B. T. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988, 1997), pp.117–152.

⁵⁵ *BGE* III. Sect. 52, *BWN* p. 255.

⁵⁶ *BGE* V. Sect. 195, *BWN* p. 298.

of the ascetic priest. This figure is plagued with twisted attitudes to life, which are nonetheless necessary because they forestall the dark ennui and the resultant psychological demise of the weak-spirited and sick congregation. The initial appearance of the priestly caste and its positive effect, as Nietzsche sees it, is that the priestly values have a special relationship to the soul. The soul becomes deep under the influence of the new valuations and that depth makes the human being interesting.⁵⁷

In terms of the variegated nature of his content and in his more careful analysis, as that which he carries out with respect to the Jews, for instance, Nietzsche is much more artful than Wagner in expressing his politically charged ideas. His accounts are nuanced and his invectives, when taken in tandem with his praise and genealogical analyses, do not commit him to stringent anti-Semitism. Whereas Wagner stakes out the ground of his nationalistic affinities, we cannot square Nietzsche's meandering polemics with any such prevalent political views.

Nietzsche follows his own advice, which bids that one has to subject oneself to one's own tests.⁵⁸ He re-evaluates the moral and political commitments that he posits. The locus of Nietzsche's nationalistic (*BGE* VI. Sect. 204, 208) or prejudiced remarks about Jews (*GS* V. Sect. 348, V. Sect. 357, V. Sect. 361) and women (*GS* II. Sect. 60, II. Sect. 63, II. Sect. 64, V. Sect. 361 and throughout *Zarathustra*, but especially I. Sect. 13 – 14 and I. Sect. 18) is not Nietzsche. He writes the caustic lines—this is our argument—for the sake of pivoting his own and, also, our viewpoint on such sensitive matters as gender, culture, religion, and politics. Nietzsche's polemical style allows him to argue from various and often opposing positions, but in a way that makes him seem committed only to a given view. This shines the light on the particularity of certain universally held beliefs. Our predilections for either liberal or conservative parties, for instance, are particular instantiations of a universally valid state of affairs

⁵⁷ *Genealogy of Morals* Sect. 6. *BWN* pp. 467–469. I am indebted to Jacqueline Scott for stressing the importance of this pivotal transformation of the human being and soul.

⁵⁸ *BGE* II. Sect. 41.

in which we cannot help but be partial to a certain political arrangement; no matter how weakly or how strongly we commit to it. Although we, as thinkers, and especially as thinkers after Nietzsche, can examine our opinions about matters of religion, politics, gender, etc., this analytical frame of mind suspends our practical engagement in the world only temporarily. We can examine our beliefs and their grounds, but we cannot not have any.

The relationship between our opinions and the need to examine even the ones we hold most dear, which means to seriously consider the possibility of divorcing ourselves from those deep-seated beliefs, may well be the reason why Nietzsche speaks about masks. Nietzsche expresses the relationship between thinking and masking when he describes a hidden nature, which ‘instinctively needs speech for silence and for burial in silence.’⁵⁹ For Nietzsche, a human being possessed of such a nature “is inexhaustible in his evasion of communication, [he] *wants* and sees to it that a mask of him roams in his place in the hearts and heads of his friends’.⁶⁰ Although we, who read Nietzsche, may not insist on being such deep natures, we venture to interpret Nietzsche’s meaning here as a commentary on what it means to see past the ingrained and customary ways of looking at things. If we follow Nietzsche, an examination of political environment is not merely a study of trends, historical developments, and structures of a given state. If it is to be a careful study, it must include a questioning of one’s own relationship to the defining nexuses that make up a given political climate, and if it is to be fruitful, it must dislodge the axes of one’s own committed views. Nietzsche recommends that in order to carry out this sort of an analysis successfully, we must adopt a view to which we commit on the surface, superficially; as if to a role. In this way, underneath a mask of a given political opinion, we can both question and be questioned *as if* we were fully committed to an expressed view. We can also take off that mask and scrutinize it.

We grant this point to Nietzsche and agree that he succeeds where

⁵⁹ *BGE* II. Sect. 40.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Wagner fails; i.e. that Nietzsche only takes the many views that he expresses about women, nationalistic politics, and the Jews to be the many masks, but not unquestionable truths. Nietzsche's method is sound and consistent. Nonetheless, Nietzsche's examination of this method is lacking. It is the case that Nietzsche constantly re-evaluates the content of his own beliefs, of those held by the many, and that he teaches us how to question ours. However, the process by which he engages in this exercise of probing and re-evaluating thought—polemical or agonistic philosophizing—is left unthematized.

Perhaps, if Nietzsche gave more credit to Wagner, even after their falling out, then Nietzsche's re-evaluation of Wagner's art would not have been carried out solely through the prism of post-Bayreuth Wagner and the composer's nationalistic fervour. Although Nietzsche correctly diagnoses the problem with the tenor of Wagner's political views as well as their possible manifestations in Wagner's later music dramas, he does not give due credit to Wagner's method, which as we explained, greatly influenced his own philosophical style. Thus, Nietzsche sees in Wagner—as if in a mask that Nietzsche, himself, at times wears—the danger of nationalistic and the anti-Semitic moods. Nietzsche reinterprets all of Wagner on the basis of this dissatisfaction, coming to understand him as being both aesthetically vapid and politically frightening. However, that is not all there is to Wagner, and because this characterization does not present the artist as a whole, it must be considered a mask, one which sticks because it serves Nietzsche's own interest in re-evaluating, examining, and experimenting on himself. In order to carry out such a self-searching experimentation one must have others, made to look like what the self could be. The unity of the self is thus preserved in another, in a reflection that becomes a mask, even while one is undergoing a transformation, while one is not a self and not even 'one'—and is, instead, a Dionysian non-individuality.⁶¹ In his final critical analyses Nietzsche equates Wagner's art and method with the mask—with the hollow, albeit dangerous, affectation that enflames the

⁶¹ On Dionysian intoxication, revelry, and dissolution of the self, see, for example, *BT* Sect. 1–2.

audience in order to reach a self-serving end of fame. Instead of re-evaluating Wagner's art, this assessment devalues it. Nietzsche's final view of Wagner gives him no reason to see in Wagner's composition a serious reflection on his own texts and yet, as we assert, such a parallelism exists.

To Nietzsche's accusation against Wagner, which claims that his music has 'lost the law to rule itself', we answer that the lawfulness of Wagner's music, as well as its infinitely rich artfulness, is in the unity of an opposition between the question and the answer as it is announced by the dissonant structure of Wagner's musical phrasing.⁶² We find example of this unity in the *Tristan Chord*, which only resolves when Isolde expires and the opera ends.⁶³ The piece presents a rhythmic tension which makes resolution by means of an analytic examination impossible.⁶⁴ Whereas analysis breaks the union into its constitutive components and resolves the question by substituting it with an answer, Wagner's art plays up both elements: the challenge and the response. The two define each other

⁶² LN p. 275.

⁶³ A survey of the predecessors from whom Wagner draws inspiration for the Tristan Chord can be found in Barry Millington, *The New Grove Guide to Wagner and His Operas* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 74. Derrick Everett offers a study of the structure of Tristan Chord and its appearances in the *Tristan und Isolde* as well as its echoes in other operas by Wagner. See Derrick Everett's 'Tristan Chord', *Monsalvat*. www.monsalvat.no/tristanchord.htm. [Accessed on 5 January 2018].

⁶⁴ Fry lays out in detail both Wagner's and Nietzsche's work on rhythm ('NTI'). The article fruitfully compares Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner's reinterpretation of the rhythmic structure of music, which Nietzsche takes to be a sign of decadence and decline, with Nietzsche's own study of the 'rhythmic sensibility of ancient Greek *mousike*' (pp. 260, 270). Nietzsche juxtaposes the latter to the 'principles of modern rhythm and meter' (p. 260). As Fry observes, when Nietzsche studies *Tristan und Isolde*, he finds in it a 'significant departure from classical conventions of metric stability and regular phrase rhythm. Clearly it was this innovative treatment of rhythm that was of particular interest to the early Nietzsche' (p. 261). Nietzsche's consequent evaluations of Wagner as the composer whose works destabilize the spirit through their ambiguously rhythmic phrasing (e.g. 'Wagner as Danger' in *NCW*) should be studied in the light of what Nietzsche initially sees and appreciates in Wagner's work.

without cancelling each other out. Wagner calls this union ‘Drama’.⁶⁵ Wagner unites the melodic expressivity of music with the spoken expression of drama. However, Nietzsche insists on marking a difference between the two (at least as far as respective temporalities of the musical and the spoken art are concerned). Nietzsche sees the ‘verbal drama [as being] . . . ruled by that power which needs most time, the concept. . . . The musician needs quite different times and, strictly, cannot be prescribed any laws: an emotion once triggered may be long in one musician, short in another’.⁶⁶ Wagner, contrarily, contends that

Drama, at the moment of its actual scenic representation, arouses in the beholder such an intimate and instant interest in an action borrowed faithfully from life itself, at least in its possibilities, that man’s sympathetic Feeling already passes into that ecstatic state where it yields itself, in utmost excitement, to the guidance of those new laws whereby Music makes herself so wondrously intelligible and—in a profounder sense—supplies withal the only fitting answer to that “Why”?⁶⁷

To give an answer that is derived from what one already presupposes or opines is altogether to miss the question that the ‘Why?’ of Wagner’s music poses. A person must be an artful, or as Nietzsche puts it, an ‘aesthetic listener’.⁶⁸ Only then the rigid and the outmoded laws of the common world ease their grip. One must become an apprentice, as Wagner summons, to the ‘guidance of those new laws whereby Music makes herself . . . intelligible’.⁶⁹ Wagner’s invocation—to hearken to the self-forming character of music, which actualizes its intelligibility not from some

⁶⁵ ‘Zukunftsmusik’, *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, trans. by Kegan, P. (London, UK: Trübner & Co. Publishers, 1892), p. 320. (Henceforth *RWPW*).

⁶⁶ *Writings from Early Notebooks*, trans. by Ladislaus, L. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, 2003), p. 194.

⁶⁷ ‘Zukunftsmusik’, *RWPW* p. 320.

⁶⁸ *BT* Sect. 22, *BWN* p. 133.

⁶⁹ ‘Zukunftsmusik’, *RWPW* p. 320.

superimposed outside, but as music unfolds and acts upon the sensibility of those who listen—qualifies Tracy Strong’s assessment. In his view, Nietzsche estimates Wagner’s art ‘perhaps more accurately’ when he detects the following problem: Wagner ‘begins to make his form (text, action) call up his music. [...] Now Wagner separates form and meaning and ... begins to write music to make effects. ... For Nietzsche’, as Strong sees the matter, ‘this leads to theatricality’.⁷⁰ However, Wagner unambiguously says about drama and poetry that they are inseparable from the expressive power of the musical voice, i.e. melody. Strong may be correct in his interpretation of Nietzsche’s complaint about Wagner. However, this does not mean that we should acquiesce to the opinion that there is a separation between poetry and melody in Wagner and that one dominates the other. Nietzsche’s own analysis is not altogether accurate. As Frederick R. Love notes, ‘in virtually every case in which a decisive judgment of music was made it is possible to demonstrate that Nietzsche was more dependent on extra-musical factors than on critical appreciation of music itself’.⁷¹

IV. Conclusion

Wagner’s music dramas express the agonistic tension that is at the heart of Nietzsche’s thought. Like the Tristan chord, Nietzsche’s polemical thinking insists on remaining unresolved; uncontained; uncategorized, but alive with the tension that does not allow us to dissolve the world—be it the world of culture or of politics—into clear cut oppositions, like ‘them’ and ‘us’. Although this tension does require that we make such valuations.

⁷⁰ *FNPT* pp. 142–43.

⁷¹ ‘Nietzsche, Music and Madness’ *Music & Letters* (1979) 60(2): pp. 186–203, (p. 187). Also, according to Fry, ‘Nietzsche, in line with Wagner, [...] regards the technique of recitative as an artificial rhetoric of the passions: it subordinates melody and counterpoint to the listener’s demand to understand the words’ (‘NTI’), p. 256. Thus, when Nietzsche deems Wagner’s melodies to be subordinate to the poetic words, he contradicts Wagner’s own understanding of the co-determination to which poetry and melody attain in the musical art.

We must make them, if we follow Nietzsche's thinking, only to re-evaluate what the 'us' owes to the 'them' or how 'I' am beholden to the 'other' and why 'you' live through 'me', despite the palpable appearances to the contrary. If Nietzsche saw that his method expresses the same dynamic as Wagner's compositional technique, if he re-evaluated not only the content, but also the very living shape that his thought embodies, then he may have been alerted to the corrupting possibility of his own art. We mean here the incendiary and inflammatory rhetoric that arose out of prejudiced appropriations wrung from Nietzsche's texts. But maybe such a vigilance is inappropriate in the context of Nietzsche's project, which is no system of thought and no categorizing chart of methodologies. Perhaps, the other meaning that we can glean from Nietzsche's relationship with Wagner—and the influences that both men had on each other's lives and work—is encapsulated in the unstated hiatuses, which hold up thought in much the same way, to borrow a phrase from another composer, as the silent pauses ground the thrusting play of music. Nietzsche expresses the power of negativity that shapes what lives through the unsaid, unseen, and the undesirable when he tells us that 'every profound spirit needs a mask; nay, more, around every profound spirit there continually grows a mask, owing to the constantly false, that is to say, superficial interpretation of every word he utters, every step he takes, every sign of life he manifests'.⁷²

⁷² *BGE* II. Sect. 40, *BWN* p. 241. On 'negativity' and Nietzsche's style, see Babette E. Babich, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Science: Reflecting Science on the Ground of Life and Art* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 19–34 (p. 20).