

THE CASE OF NIETZSCHE: A WAGNERIAN RIPOSTE

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“Noble morality, master morality, conversely, is rooted in a triumphant Yes said to oneself- it is self-affirmation, self- glorification of life; it also requires sublime symbols and practices, but only because “its heart is too full”. All of *beautiful*, all of *great* art belongs here: the essence of both is gratitude.”¹ Thus does Friedrich Nietzsche encapsulate the positive aspect of his ethical outlook in *The Case of Wagner*, his ferocious polemic against the composer of *Tristan*, *Parsifal* and the *Ring* cycle. This polemic is part and parcel of Nietzsche’s attack on Christianity and Platonism. Of course, Nietzsche’s relation to these two traditions is complex and not at all easy to define. Still, whatever is the case with Nietzsche the *deep thinker*, Nietzsche the *conscious polemicist* identifies Christianity and Platonism with asceticism, self-denial founded not in the will to a higher life beyond the immediacy of passion but rather in simple negativity: a resentful turning of life against itself in loathing and self hatred. This self hatred issues in modern liberalism and utilitarianism (with its misguided notions of sympathy and compassion) and in the spirit of modern science, which carries forward the ascetic outlook of Christian-Platonism even as it pretends to attack it. Thus does Nietzsche diagnose the sickness that saps modern civilization of its life and robs it of the joyous affirmation of its will to power. What is more, he finds in the operas of Richard Wagner a dangerous and corrupting expression of this malaise.

In the following paper I wish to examine the complex relationship that Nietzsche had to the art of Richard Wagner. For Nietzsche, Wagner came to typify the arch-ascetic: the very embodiment of the world and life denying will expressed in Christianity, Platonism and modernity.² Ironically, this is for the exact same features as drew Nietzsche to Wagner in the first place. There is a self-overcoming in Wagner that the young Nietzsche takes for Dionysian and naturalistic self-forgetting but that the older Nietzsche rejects as ascetical. How can Wagner’s operas ground such disparate perceptions? Indeed, what actually happens in those operas apart from Nietzsche’s polemic against them? Wagner’s most passionately erotic opera, *Tristan*, does seem (at first glance) to bear out something of Nietzsche’s critique for it involves an apparent valorization of the death instinct over life ; ironically, this is the Wagnerian music drama most praised by Nietzsche in his pro-Wagner phase and least damned in his

¹Nietzsche, Friedrich *The Case of Wagner* trans. W. Kaufmann (Random House, Toronto 1967) p. 191

²This is, at least, is his general point though he has more immediate objections as well. Wagner is, according to Nietzsche, incapable of large scale musical form. (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 170-171) He cannot let go of an intense moment of passion but stretches it to absurdity. (Nietzsche, p. 172) He is incapable of melody and cannot be danced to. (Nietzsche, p. 168) He is as impotent to construct a dramatic crisis as he is to resolve one. (Nietzsche, p. 175) He is an actor who became a musician and had his revenge on music by subordinating it to text. (Nietzsche, p. 174-1750) One can go on and on. I will not be addressing such objections in this paper both because they strike me, by and large, as unpersuasive and because I do not think they really reflect what Nietzsche is angry about. Nor will I be addressing casual jibes, such as the (textually inaccurate) observation that Wagner’s heroines are never pregnant (unlike Nietzsche’s beloved Carmen?). (Nietzsche, p. 176) This latter though, is indicative of a note of anti-feminism that is a persistent undercurrent in Nietzsche’s diatribe. That said I will try to concentrate in this essay on what I take to be Nietzsche’s philosophical objections to Wagner.

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anti-Wagner phase. *Parisfal*, however, is offered as evidence of Wagner's full surrender to asceticism, pessimism, Schopenhauer, Roman Catholicism and indeed just about any other term of abuse in Nietzsche's vocabulary. Wagner, one is not surprised to learn, is even a Hegelian! Again, this is ironic for of all Wagner's operas it is the least susceptible to the charge of being anti-nature or anti-life as we shall see below.

Clearly Nietzsche had a fraught relationship with Wagner both personally and philosophically: so much so that he seems to have had great difficulty in articulating the nature and grounds of their break. Certainly, *The Case of Wagner* scarcely passes muster as serious music criticism: it is maddeningly general as a whole and sometimes surprisingly shoddy when it does descend to details; so much so that the admirer of Wagner (the present author is one) may be taxed to find something positive to say about it. Indeed, commentators not inclined to Nietzsche worship have found it puzzling or simply meretricious. Michael Tanner considers Nietzsche's critique of *Parsifal* 'inane' and suggests that the work was simply too complex and demanding for him to come to grips with.³ Lucy Beckett finds Nietzsche confused about the difference between ideas and art, mistaking the exigencies of philosophic truth for the 'emotion and intuition' which drives the artist.⁴ Ronald Gray finds Nietzsche's criticisms sadly "unspecific" but suggests they are grounded in a rejection of "...what in modern parlance would be called camp- the detached enjoyment of something to which you are not devoted".⁵ He also suggests that Nietzsche found Wagner's music dramas too "detached from bodily experience" and never "truly incarnate" in that social and biological realities are never allowed to intrude.⁶

There is perhaps some merit in these views though none seems entirely adequate to account for the uneven quality of Nietzsche's books against Wagner, which display both flashes of brilliance and much that is simply slapdash. Nor am I convinced that the authors mentioned above have quite articulated the real ground of Nietzsche's break with Wagner. Still, as it seems quite un-Nietzschean to me to affect the dispassionate tone of the 'scholar' I will not hide my own view that the *Case of Wagner* is a hatchet job on the master of Bayreuth. To put it briefly: while I am willing to admit that there is something troubling and perhaps even repellent about Wagner I think the critics who try to say that this something is the *music* are simply wrong. This leaves as one alternative a criticism and rejection of the Wagnerian myths yet here Nietzsche seems to me not to make a completely compelling case (for reasons we shall see below). However, I believe that Nietzsche's polemic does reveal some fascinating tensions in his own thought. Moreover, I believe there are issues of philosophic substance between Nietzsche and Wagner and that, however wayward its details, Nietzsche's screed does (in the end) succeed in defining what these are: briefly, I hold that Nietzsche has correctly seen that Wagner's art, in spite of its pagan Germanic trappings, is ultimately committed to a form of Christian humanism summed up in *Parsifal*, a creed Nietzsche could hardly accept.

In this spirit, I will venture the following on Nietzsche's behalf: *Tristan* represents, at one and the same time all that is most attractive and most repugnant in Wagner; it is the Wagnerian music drama *par excellence*. So much so that the *synthesis* of bodily nature and life with the free movement of love offered in *Parsifal* is not noted by Nietzsche as a synthesis at all. *Parsifal* is read, quite falsely I will

³ Tanner, Michael. "The Total Work of Art" in *The Wagner Companion* (Cambridge university Press, Cambridge, 1979) pp. 211-218

⁴ Beckett, Lucy. "Wagner and his Critics" in *The Wagner Companion* pp.381-382

⁵ Gray, Ronald "The German Intellectual Background" in *The Wagner Companion* p.53

⁶ Ibid. p. 55

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argue, as a rejection of intellect and as a screed against sex. It is read as though it were a pale attenuation of *Tristan* rather than a deepening of it; a softening of the powerful and seductive eroticism of the former work into a soppy Pre-Raphaelite exercise in fake medievalism. Really though, the synthesis of nature and spirit offered by Wagner is not recognized, one suspects, because it is not one that Nietzsche would accept even if he *did* explicitly recognize it. Wagner's solution to the problem of asceticism is inescapably a liberal Christian one founded in 19th century humanism and its ethic of benevolence. Simply put, *Parsifal* is ascetical not because it is anti-body and anti-sex, these are red herrings behind which the *polemical* Nietzsche hides his real point, but because of its affinities with the humanistic and liberal culture of the 19th century; it dramatizes compassion to the sick and the outcast in a way that at least one prominent strain in Nietzsche could not accept. For Nietzsche, the ugliness and brutality of the world is to be affirmed with all else; it is not to be redeemed and Wagner's art is above all else an art of redemption.

However, to see how Nietzsche came to view Wagner the way he did we must pause and consider some of his general views on opera. In the *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche denounces the flourishing of opera in the 16th century as representing a kind of decadence: opera, he tells us puts an optimistic and humanistic gloss on the original Dionysian spirit of archaic Greek tragedy. It gives us an edenic picture of man in his archetypal purity; a man of the golden age whose speech has the potency and expression of song, who reconciles the objectivity of conceptual thought and language with the spirit of music by a rigorous subordination of the latter to the demands of the former.⁷ Indeed, it presents man, humanistic man as substantial in his own right. It is an Alexandrian-Socratic art, a triumph of the critical intellect over the original archaic energies revealed to us by the chorus of Aeschylean Tragedy.⁸ This is entirely consonant with the sensational 'emotionalism' we usually associate with opera. As Nietzsche argues in his discussion of Euripides the reign of Socratic reason leads to an externalization of feeling as willed representation; the actor and playwright now *cultivate* sentiment because they no longer simply *are* feeling.⁹ The screen of self-consciousness now intervenes between thought and representation: Man is nothing but what he consciously knows and wills.¹⁰ From Nietzsche's anti-humanist standpoint, then, opera represents the decadence of a rationalist tradition which destroyed the original vitality and healthfulness of the archaic Greeks. Nonetheless, Nietzsche finds in his own day the hope of a revival within German music and art of the Dionysian spirit.¹¹ Indeed, the concluding chapters of this work are an encomium to Wagner, with *Tristan* cited again and again as an example of the Apollonian/Dionysian balance in art (where the Apollonian serves as the necessary occasion for the Dionysian to manifest itself).

However, as essays like the *Case of Wagner* (and the later *Contra Wagner*) show, Nietzsche came later to reject Wagner, especially his employment of the grail mythology in works like *Parsifal*. Nietzsche holds the true Dionysian spirit to be a naturalistic one; the 'primordial unity' which begets its image in the forms of Apollonian dreaming is the 'spirit' of nature itself. It is not a transcendent principle above or beyond becoming, as say in Plotinus, but the One naturalized as life. From this perspective, the appropriation of medieval grail mythology by Wagner might easily be interpreted as

⁷ Nietzsche , 1967 p.115-116

⁸ Nietzsche , p.114

⁹ Nietzsche, p. 83

¹⁰ Nietzsche, p.84

¹¹ Nietzsche, p.123

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surrender to ‘Christianity’. The Wagnerian myth at the end of the day can seem anti-natural and the free appropriation of Christian symbols in Wagner’s final work the inevitable culmination of its inherent decadence. Wagner’s operas are devoted to preaching a religion of love. However, it is a religion of redemption not of celebration or affirmation: love, it seems, redeems us *from* nature. This is why (seemingly) it expresses itself as fully in the ‘love-death’ of Isolde as in the innocence and ‘chastity’ of Parsifal. It is nature overcome by a contrary spirit and as such, it is for Nietzsche corrupted by the spirit of asceticism and *ressentiment*: it can only be a kind of substitute for failed drives of a more basic kind.

Ironies abound here however. It is interesting to compare what Nietzsche says with another stern critic of Wagner. In his well known book *Love in the Western World*, Denis De Rougement attacks Wagner for reasons similar to Nietzsche’s. Wagner, he tells us, preaches a world denying negative mysticism that alienates us from the demands of society and the natural goods of marriage, family and procreation.¹² De Rougement, however, does not have the same name as Nietzsche for Wagner’s error. In a historical *tour de force* he associates Wagner, and indeed, the whole tradition of Romantic love in the west with the dualistic heresy of Catharism. The negative mysticism of Wagner and the medieval troubadours manifests the *Gnostic Spirit* which invaded Christianity in the second century and has shadowed it ever since.¹³ This is a tradition (for De Rougement) that denies the incarnation and hence the reality of life and the body. It is a religion of escape which seeks to flee the world for a hypostasized ‘spiritual realm’ of pure light.¹⁴ For De Rougement *Eros* is the longing of the soul for its original freedom prior to and beyond the world. It is the principle of an anti-Christian religious standpoint that denies the value of creation and seeks to flee the body.¹⁵ His entire work is an attack on it and on Wagner as its high priest.

De Rougement’s positive point may tolerably be summed up this way: “There is no necessary opposition between sensuality and chastity; every good marriage, every love affair, that comes from the heart is beyond this opposition.” Yet here is where things get interesting for this plain bit of Christian wisdom comes from Nietzsche¹⁶ and not Pastor De Rougement. Wagner is attacked as a Christian sentimentalist by Nietzsche and as an anti-Christian Gnostic by De Rougement for the exact same thing: his religion of redemption through love which is interpreted as ascetic and Gnostic hatred of the body. The deep question this raises of course is whether this Gnostic asceticism is, as for Nietzsche, the true ‘essence of Christianity’ or, as De Rougement would have it, a fundamentally ‘pagan’ infection of which the religion of the incarnation must be purified. It is no part of my intention to resolve this question here (if it ever could be resolved) and this is just as well for I find the characterization of Wagner by both these authors inadequate. Wagner is, as far I can see, neither ‘ascetic’ nor ‘Gnostic’, though he can easily be misunderstood as such. Wagner may indeed have *consciously* appropriated aspects of Schopenhauer’s pessimism and melded it with Medieval and Celtic symbols of an ascetical cast, but, as Nietzsche knew better than anyone, the relation between music and discursive thought is complex: music does not simply illustrate the discursive thoughts of the composer. Words are a kind of

¹² De Rougement, Denis. *Love in the Western World* (Harper Colophon, Toronto, 1976) pp. 227-231: 283-286.

¹³ De Rougement, pp.228-229

¹⁴ De Rougement, pp. 79-81

¹⁵ De Rougement, pp. 81-82

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Contra Wagner* in *The Portable Nietzsche* trans. W. Kaufmann (Viking Press, New York 1982) p.673

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frame, a distancing device through which the underlying will of the music expresses itself. In the case of *Tristan* Nietzsche seems to see that the music conveys something at odds with what the text seems (discursively) to say: in spite of the apparent triumph of the ‘death instinct’ in this opera the music itself is surpassingly vital and enacts a ‘craving for existence’ rather than a will to annihilation. *Parsifal*, however, is the centerpiece of Nietzsche’s case *contra* Wagner and it, I will argue below, is clearly not Gnostic or ascetical in intent if we take these words as implying a rejection of nature or bodily life.

I will begin with *Tristan*. Though Wagner is better known for his use of Nordic and Germanic myth in the *Ring*, his use of Celtic and especially grail mythology is just as evident. Early and not entirely satisfactory works such as *Tannhauser* and *Lohengrin* deal with the grail legend as does the late *Parsifal*. Part of the attraction of these traditions for Wagner lies in the ease with which they can be made to express the pessimism of Schopenhauer. Life, self-assertive individuated profane life is the disease of which we are cured by art, love, and religious ecstasy. The goal of liberation is a cessation or suspension of willing, a cessation of life in a moment of transcendent self overcoming. *Parsifal* becomes a hero by *not* succumbing to the wiles of Kundry. *Tannhauser* is redeemed by the love of Elizabeth *from* the delights of Venusburg. Indeed, the notoriously lecherous Wagner had a lifelong fascination with ideals of chastity. Yes to the freedom of the spirit seems, on its face, a kind of no to natural and biological life. *Tristan*, with its notorious sensuality would seem an exception to this. What is ‘chaste’ about an adulterous affair of such volcanic intensity? One could watch *Tristan* several times over and (such is the eroticism of the music) completely miss the fact that Tristan and Isolde do not and could not want to consummate their relationship. Only death can prolong the spiritual ecstasy of love into eternity and physical sex would simply dissipate it. That is why the orgasmic release of erotic tension comes only at the end (with the resolution of the opening chord) in Isolde’s death scene. Sexual satisfaction is not achieved naturally or even physically but against and beyond nature in death (or so the text suggests; as we shall see below, it is problematic to say that this is what *Tristan* means).¹⁷

A brief consideration of the physical symbolism of the opera will make this clear. In keeping perhaps with De Rougment’s identification of Wagner with the Gnostic/Manichean tradition the basic symbolism is dualistic. There are night and day. The realm of day is Apollonian. It is also isolating and oppressive. Here Wagner’s Celtic sources serve him well for he can use the imagery and language of Feudalism, with its blood feuds, its codes of honor and its horse trading of brides to symbolize all that is wrong with the ‘light’. In the realm of ‘day’ humans are alienated from themselves and each other by relations of property and obligations of marriage. In the realm of day Isolde is obligated to avenge her honor and the life of her fiance Morold by killing Tristan.¹⁸ In the realm of ‘day’ Tristan is obligated to deliver the woman he loves to his decrepit uncle in order to cement an alliance between Ireland and

¹⁷ This is a point even able commentators miss: Jacques Barzun in his book *Darwin, Marx, Wagner* (Doubleday Anchor Books, New York, 1958) claims that “...it may be doubted whether Tristan’s drama has anything whatever to do with so-called romantic love. It is rather with biological love that the catastrophe is concerned.” (Barzun, p. 236). In spite of the erotic suggestiveness of the music I find this reading impossible to sustain; if Tristan and Isolde are supposed to want ‘biological’ love only why don’t they just get to it? Is Act II so brief they lack the time? Clearly, their physical passion is completely sublimated in a kind of spiritual ecstasy that forgoes even the notion of physical fulfillment and seeks to prolong itself indefinitely (so that time, even the drawn out time of one of the longest acts in the history of opera, becomes their enemy).

¹⁸ Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde* Wagner, Richard. *Tristan und Isolde* http://www.impresario.ch/libretto/libwagtri_e.htm) Act I, Scene 3

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Cornwall.¹⁹ Day, here, may stand in for the life of the individual in all its complex web of social, familial, political and economic ties. It may indeed stand in for bourgeois society as such. The lovers experience this realm of determinate identity as false and alienating: “what could death destroy but what impedes us, that hinders Tristan from loving Isolde forever and forever living but for her.”²⁰ Against this stands the realm of night: the realm of ecstatic passion, of fusion, identity, of the loss and death of self through its dissolution in the higher life of universal spirit.

If there are agents in any sense in this opera they are day and night: one might almost read the story as a kind of *theomachy* between the two with night scoring his ultimate triumph over day by means of the ruse of the love potion. Night seeks to return all to its original identity and triumphs through the medium of fatal love. The potion is the crucial moment of this for though there is an incipient attraction between Tristan and Isolde they cannot give expression to it without suppressing their conscious inhibitions. Dissolution in the realm of night cannot be a choice or a free positing of the spirit. This would *affirm* the existence of the individual for him or herself. One can only be *rapt* into the realm of night by a power beyond the conscious self. Indeed, Isolde’s conscious intention in Act I is suicide.²¹ It is Brangane who substitutes the love potion for the death draught²² but by a deft irony (a kind of cunning of *un-reason*) there is a double substitution: it is the love potion that seals the fate of the lovers and brings about their death. Death and death alone has the ultimate intentionality and realizes itself through the lovers and the love that binds them. Thus, at the moment of Isolde’s arrival in act III, Tristan tears at his own wound that it may bleed more freely.²³

Yet at the moment of (near) death the lovers achieve what is beyond death: the universality of life in and through the other where the ego-consciousness of the one becomes melded with the other such that they can exchange names in their rapture: “You Tristan, I Isolde, no more Tristan! You Isolde, I Tristan, no more Isolde!”²⁴ The cessation of biological life is death yet this death is transfiguration in a higher spiritual life in which subject and object are identical and the universal is the particular and vice-versa. In a sense then, the power that works through love and uses the deathly-love-potion to achieve the end of death is, in its negation of physical life the manifestation of a higher life and consciousness prior to nature. Thus, this most aggressively sensual of operas might be taken as a monument to a peculiarly Wagnerian sort of chastity: the apotheosis of human sexual desire through its non-fulfillment and deferral on the natural plane and its completion on a spiritual plane at the moment of the passing of nature into the sheer identity of the universal through death. It is easy perhaps to see why the young Nietzsche should have hailed all this as the triumphant rise of a new Dionysian art. It is indeed dedicated to the overcoming of the Apollonian dream of determinate form in the single original will to redemption that lies behind it. Yet at the same time it does not seem to celebrate a natural vitalism but (in the wake of Schopenhauer) an aggressively anti-naturalistic one.

¹⁹ Wagner, *Tristan*, I, 2

²⁰ Wagner, *Tristan*, 2, 2

²¹ Wagner, *Tristan*, I, 3

²² Wagner, *Tristan*, I, 5

²³ Wagner, *Tristan*, 3, 2

²⁴ Wagner, *Tristan*, 2, 2

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What happens though when we turn to *Parsifal*? If any work of Wagner's drew Nietzsche's ire and scorn it was this one. Nietzsche treats it as a virtual parody of Schopenhaurian ideals. Parsifal, the holy fool, is a relic of decrepit medievalism, a figure who represents the acme of the ascetic ideal, anti-intellect and anti-sex. Thus, Parsifal's innocence is a denigration of mind and knowledge while his rejection of Kundry's wiles is grounded in a horror and contempt of the body and its life. It is Wagner's great no to life, particularly as its main figure embodies the very 'virtue' which has corrupted modern life, compassion and pity. As Nietzsche so memorably puts it "...for what would *Parsifal* amount to if intended as a *serious* piece? Must we really see in it...."the abortion gone mad of a hatred of knowledge, spirit and sensuality"? A curse on the senses and the spirit in a single hatred and breath? An apostasy and reversion to sickly Christian and obscurantist ideals?"²⁵ Later in the same passage Nietzsche sums up his assessment of *Parsifal* as follows: "For *Parsifal* is a work of perfidy, of vindictiveness, of a secret attempt to poison the presuppositions of life- a *bad* work. The preaching of chastity remains an incitement to anti-nature: I despise everyone who does not experience *Parsifal* as an attempted assassination of basic ethics."²⁶

One can be swept away by Nietzsche's rhetoric here and never notice at all that the 'chaste' Parsifal is in fact his own invention. Parsifal, we know from the legend, is the *father* of Lohengrin, a fact Nietzsche recognizes but, perhaps deliberately ludicrously, treats as a slip on Wagner's part.²⁷ He is not a celibate nor does Wagner ever present him as such. The word 'chaste' occurs exactly once in the entire opera when Kundry applies it mockingly to the villain Klingsor.²⁸ Nor is *Parsifal* a hymn to Schopenhaur's world denying asceticism: quite pointedly it ends with a vision of redeemed and transfigured nature.²⁹ Parsifal is indeed a 'fool' if by this one means that he is (at first) oblivious to many of the demands of ordinary life and does not comprehend the arcane rituals of the brotherhood of the grail. However, he exercises plenty of reflective intelligence and grows in self-knowledge as the work progresses.³⁰ What could have offended Nietzsche so deeply about this work that he should get even its most basic features wrong?

To the extent that Nietzsche's savaging of *Parsifal* represents more than personal spite directed at its composer I would claim that the answer lies again in Wagner's 'non-naturalism'. By this I do not mean that the work is Gnostic in De Rougement's sense. It quite evidently is not and Nietzsche was mistaken to present it that way. I mean that Wagner seems to present the natural as sustained by a principle distinct from it though in some sense also deeply cognate with it. This principle might alternately be described as Christian charity or Buddhist compassion and *Parsifal* is a hymn to its power and operation. In short, it is dedicated to a humanistic religion of love. This perhaps takes a bit of unpacking. The central image of the opera, the Grail, represents life's bounty. It is an image of fecundity to be sure but not simply on the level of animal life (though it includes this as well). It is also the higher life of communion and fellowship, the mutual co-inherence of each person in each and each

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Contra Wagner* p.675

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner* p.176)

²⁸ Wagner, Richard. *Parsifal* (<http://www.testament.co.uk/libretti/SBT41455libretto.pdf>), p.27

²⁹ Wagner, *Parsifal*, p.61

³⁰ on this point see Tanner, pp. 213-214

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in the whole.³¹ Amfortas, the keeper of the grail is the natural son of his predecessor (so much for celibacy) but the life giving power of the grail has prolonged their spiritual bond past its natural term even while it does not suppress it in its natural dimension. Titurel, the father, lives within his tomb.³² Life and death, nature and super-nature are fused in the spiritual bond of love. So far so good: however, all is not well in the order of the Grail. Particularly, the sexual instinct introduces a division between individual and community. This breeds two destructive reactions; that of the wizard Klingsor who seeks to simply suppress the side of nature by castrating himself³³ and that of Amfortas, who is seduced by Kundry and is wounded by his own spear.³⁴ It is clear that this dialectic of ‘chastity’ and ‘lust’ is presented by Wagner as one sided and destructive. Amfortas’ wound (his sensuality) will bleed whenever he reveals the grail in a kind of parody of the shedding of Christ’s blood.³⁵

The most powerful image of this in the opera is Kundry: she is cursed (for scorning the suffering Christ) to play the role of seductress, to be the feminine embodiment of temptation employed by the wizard Klingsor to lead the grail knights to ruin. She may be taken as a sort of Magdalene figure who projects externally the conflict between nature and spirit that divides Amfortas and Klingsor: her sexuality is exploited as a tool by the monstrous, power mad asceticism of the latter and mindlessly surrendered to by the former. She is an outcast on whom the knights of the grail project their own disordered desires so that they can spurn her (and them!) with contempt or, at best, regard her as the knight Gurnemanz does with a patronizing form of ‘pity’.³⁶ Her sexuality is not free or life giving but the mirror image of that of the men; she embodies their deepest loathing of themselves and their bodily natures and acts out the role (seductress and temptress) they project upon her. This they do in spite of the fact that the spirit of the grail order commits them to regard the natural as sacred: as Kundry pointedly replies to the taunting of the knights “are not beasts holy here?”³⁷ Thus, Amfortas, Kundry and Klingsor all represent the conflict between spirit and nature but one in which these two things (intrinsically one) have been set against each other by human pride and false self-reliance. It is these ‘mind-forged manacles’ that the ‘holy fool’ (whose innocence is in fact a unitary consciousness prior to the self-conscious divisions that plague the other characters) must break to restore the fellowship of love and naturalize spirit even as he spiritualizes nature.

It is Parsifal who effects this restoration. In a scene that brings to mind the relation of Socrates and Alcibiades in the *Symposium* he liberates Kundry from the curse that binds her by spurning her attempt to seduce him.³⁸ Contra Nietzsche this scene has nothing whatever to do with celibacy. Kundry is acting out the false and oppressive dichotomies that have been imposed on her by others and Parsifal’s rejection of her *unfree* offer of sexual gratification (symbolized by the curse) is a profoundly

³¹ Wagner, *Parsifal*, pp.24-25

³² Wagner, *Parsifal*, pp. 21-22

³³ Wagner, *Parsifal*, pp.10-11

³⁴ Wagner, *Parsifal*, p.9

³⁵ Wagner, *Parsifal*, pp.22-23

³⁶ Wagner, *Parsifal*, pp.8-9

³⁷ Wagner, *Parsifal*, p.7

³⁸ Wagner, *Parsifal*, pp.49-50

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liberating act; Parsifal realizes the moral necessity of treating Kundry as an *end* or person in her own right and not simply as an extension of either his own desires or of his fear and loathing of those desires. Parsifal's 'innocence' (so mocked by Nietzsche) is crucial to this: the 'redeemer' must be free of the puritanical constructions of the grail knights according to which Kundry is an object (she is called a 'beast' by the knights) to be shunned when she is not to be used. He must be a 'pure fool' in other words. More than this though, he must grow in the knowledge of human suffering: to heal Amfortas he must feel the inner division of nature and spirit within the keeper of the grail.³⁹ He must know in himself (through Kundry's kiss) the fall from grace in order to redeem others and indeed himself for there is a dangerous insouciance in Parsifal's original innocence symbolized by the killing of the swan and his forgetting of his own mother; he is too 'pure' to know the distinction of self and other in a robust way and so at first cannot recognize the 'rights' of otherness.

One might conclude then that *Parsifal* represents a rather different Wagner than *Tristan*. The world transcending possibilities of love have become the world redeeming possibilities of love because love has become first and foremost compassion, which can unite self and other in their objective difference (rather than merging them in ecstasy). Though there is a radical identification with the condition of the other in compassion, it is for the sake of liberating the other as other rather than submerging all finite identity in the universal life-principle. It has also become a principle deeply immanent in nature (the opera abounds in natural imagery). The most striking figure of this is Parsifal himself, who is the Christ figure fully and deeply humanized and naturalized; so much so that there is almost no mention of a creator God in the entire work. The human and natural is the locus of any meaningful talk of divinity and though compassionate love is not a simple reflex of nature (it is freedom and so in a sense beyond the natural) the world is the sphere of its activity. Indeed, humanity in this work is both subject and object of salvation: the redeemer is himself redeemed.⁴⁰ Thus, far from being a reversion to 'medievalism' or 'Roman Catholicism' (as in Nietzsche's mocking verses in *Beyond Good and Evil*) *Parsifal* can be taken as a expression of a liberal Protestant humanism having affinities with figures like D.F. Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach, though one might legitimately say that this is a protestant humanism open to Catholic imagery and indeed to Eastern thought as well (as understood through Schopenhauer). However, in his attempt to assimilate the latter Wagner's superb tact may for once have failed him: Kundry longs for and is given 'annihilation' in the Buddhist sense and this is dramatically satisfying (she has lived many times over!). Unfortunately, it does not quite fit with the overall message of the opera that she should be 'extinguished' while human nature in Amfortas is elevated and fully healed.

What then are we to make of Nietzsche's attack on Wagner? Given our beginning statement of 'master morality' it seems clear enough that *Tristan* commends to our attention, though it is ridiculous to speak of it as either 'criticizing' or 'espousing', a form of erotic passion in which physical, biological life is *negated* by a higher spiritual life. There is ecstatic loss of self, which is why Nietzsche hails *Tristan* in the *Birth of Tragedy*, but not by participation in archaic nature worship. From Nietzsche's later perspective this would seem, quite logically, a willing of death and nothingness and so must be a symptom of life that has turned against itself. It must, to use two of Nietzsche's favorite value categories, be a manifestation of sickness and not health. It is perhaps only poor physiognomy and bad digestion that could lead the Tristan and Isolde to trade their inhibited biological life for a spurious pseudo-life of 'pure spiritual love'! It would seem that if Nietzsche wished to show Wagner to be an ascetic *Tristan* would take center stage.

³⁹ Wagner, *Parsifal*, p.46

⁴⁰ Wagner, *Parsifal*, p.66

In truth, it is easy for the critic of Wagner's *Tristan* to take the tack that it makes a fetish of death and is thus gloomy, obsessive and anti-life. Indeed, if he or she is feeling ambitious the critic can link this 'death-cult' to German militarism and Nazism. If *Tristan* is taken as telling us *how to live* this has some bite. Here, however, the listener has to call time out on the philosopher and ask the following simple question: why is this ascetic, gloomy, anti-life, pessimistic work loved by people who are not ascetic, gloomy, anti-life pessimists? Why do I (and many others) leave a performance exhilarated rather than suicidal? Because what the work *does* is not what the work *says*. The critics of *Tristan* are overrating its discursive component. What anyone who actually listens to the work *feels* is its overwhelming, restless, churning *vitality* for which the 'death-fantasy' on stage is only an icon or image. Death here is a metaphor for extreme intensity of feeling; the passing beyond an isolated and finite self-consciousness into a feeling of unity with the all. Mysticism and erotic poetry have long used the metaphor of death to convey this passing away of the limits of consciousness. This is what the music, as opposed to simply the text, enacts and one would expect Nietzsche, of all people, to know this. I suspect he does know this which is why even in his later attacks on Wagner there is only the odd snide glance at *Tristan*. Certainly, he comes close to recognizing what I have said here in one rhapsodic passage in *The Birth of Tragedy*: "To these genuine musicians I direct the question whether they can imagine a human being who would be able to perceive the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*, without any aid of word and image, purely as a tremendous symphonic movement, without expiring in a spasmodic un-harnessing of all the wings of the soul? ...suppose a human being has thus put his ear, as it were, to the heart chamber of the world will and felt the roaring desire for existence pouring from there into all the veins of the world...how could he fail to break suddenly?"⁴¹ The music of *Tristan*, he suggests, effects a triumph over the Apollonian construct of word, image and action, dissolving all in to a vision of the 'unconscious will' the 'true reality' at the heart of the world.⁴² The Apollonian illusion that is the external trapping of the music drama falls away to reveal the Dionysian core: "And thus the Apollonian illusion reveals itself as what it really is- the veiling during the performance of the tragedy of the real Dionysian effect..."⁴³ We might conclude then, that however 'Schopenhaurian' the text might be, the young Nietzsche at least heard a powerful Dionysian affirmation in its music.

With *Parsifal* things are more difficult because the work Wagner wrote is scarcely recognizable from Nietzsche's critique of it. However, we can give Nietzsche credit for sniffing something out even if many of his specific criticisms can be dismissed as inept. *Parsifal* is an opera whose central images are ones of healing, psychological and spiritual healing for Kundry and physical healing for Amfortas. Even the healer himself, Parsifal, is healed of the destructive side of his own innocence. Thus, the master images of the opera are iatric in nature. Love is beyond good and evil to be sure (love and do what you will says Augustine) but in *Parsifal* it dissolves a binary much closer to Nietzsche's heart, that between sickness and health. It is an old accusation against Christianity that its doctrine of divine compassion for sinners marks the end of civilized moral values. Instructive on this point is Kant and his reservations about the Christian doctrine of grace in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.⁴⁴ Similarly, though moral categories are naturalized, sometimes even biologized in Nietzsche, the

⁴¹Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p.127

⁴² Nietzsche, pp. 128-129

⁴³ Nietzsche, p.130

⁴⁴ Kant, Immanuel. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Harper Torchbooks, La Salle, 1960) pp.47-49

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accusation remains that Christian notions of *agape* and of universal fellowship (which are celebrated in *Parsifal*) undermine the notion of *standards*; with Christianity we can no longer maintain the distinction of good and bad in terms of health, vigor, vitality and their opposites. Thus, Nietzsche tells us (in words that are surely addressed to *Parsifal*) “Conversely, those who suffer most and are poorest in life would need mildness, peacefulness, and goodness most-what is today called humanness- in thought as well as in deed, and, if possible, a god who would be truly a god for the sick, a healer and savior.”⁴⁵ This issue of retaining the ‘objectivity’ of principles is broached directly by Nietzsche: “What alone should be resisted is that falseness, that deceitfulness of instinct which refuses to see these opposites as opposites...to make eyes at master morality, at noble morality...while mouthing the counter doctrine , that of the “gospel of the lowly”, of the *need* for redemption!”⁴⁶ Accordingly, it would seem that compassion practiced in a Christian and humanitarian way makes an idol or fetish of sickness and failure as such so as to poison our capacity to value health and strength. The desire to bring redemption to the wretched of the earth makes us sentimental and inclined to see a special purity and innocence in the mere fact of suffering and weakness. We may even be inclined to think that the oppressed and weak are in some sense *the good* and desire to cut the healthy and strong down to satisfy their resentment and desire for revenge. For Nietzsche however, pity (of the liberal humanitarian sort) cannot accept the fact, the *necessity*, of suffering as the source of human greatness. Greatness, Nietzsche argues, heroic self assertion, entails *distance* and the holding apart of extremes.⁴⁷ Benevolence or magnanimity may well be practiced from a height or an assumed position of mastery but Christian charity of the sort celebrated in *Parsifal* erases the distinction between master and slave, strong and weak, by identifying the two (i.e. Christ takes on the condition of fallen humanity).

Moreover there is a deeper issue. There are, Nietzsche tells us, two kinds of sufferers: “...those who suffer from the *over-fullness* of life, and want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic insight and outlook on life- and those who suffer from *impoverishment* of life and demand of art and philosophy calm, stillness, smooth seas, or, on the other hand, frenzy, convulsion and anesthesia.”⁴⁸ Moreover: “He that is richest in the fullness of life, the Dionysian god and man, can afford not only the *sight* of the terrible and questionable but even the terrible deed and any luxury of destruction...”⁴⁹ Here perhaps is the real issue between Nietzsche and Wagner: Wagner accepts the need for salvation and liberation, whether conceived in Christian or Buddhist terms, thus dividing us from immediate unity with life in both its creative and destructive aspects. For Nietzsche's Dionysian religiosity whatever is must be open to affirmation, so much so that our highest goal is to will the eternal repetition of all that is.⁵⁰ There is no salvation for there is nothing from which to be saved. Wagner's apparent affirmation of the need for *agape* to redeem human life and even inform and illuminate nature thus seems ascetic in spirit after all.

There is then something in Wagner to which Nietzsche could never say yes however wayward and unfair his critique of him may be: the notion that life and nature might be the *occasion* for the

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Contra Wagner*, p.607

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, p. 191

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, pp.538-540

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Contra Wagner*, pp.669- 670

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, p.670

⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, p.435

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manifestation of a higher spirit that elevates and fulfills it. Not of course that Nietzsche is of one mind on this: the ascetic spirit itself must be a manifestation of life and he is sometimes constrained to admit that it cannot (therefore) be simply a negative thing. How does *division* arise in the bosom of an absolute and all-sufficient principle of life? How can life turn against life?⁵¹ Nor can he help himself from reaching for the language of redemption at crucial points of his own argument: “Grant me from time to time – if there are diving goddesses in the realm beyond good and evil- grant me the sight , but one glance of something perfect, wholly achieved, happy...of a man who justifies man ...of a man who justifies man...for the sake of which one may still believe in man!”⁵² It seems, after all, that suffering and negativity cannot go on just for their own sake but must be redeemed by someone or something who makes all of it meaningful and worthwhile.

Still, there is perhaps no point in taxing so protean a thinker with inconsistency. We can admit that Nietzsche's aim is an affirmation of natural bodily life as an all-sufficient totality and that from this standpoint Wagner's view of it as a stepping stone to the manifestation of a higher spirit is an insuperable obstacle. We can admit as well that the ferocity and unfairness of Nietzsche's assault is grounded in deep attraction. We know for a fact that Nietzsche was deeply moved by the first excerpts of *Parsifal* he heard.⁵³ No one polemicizes so persistently and vigorously against what he simply despises. Any great polemic is in part the product of an author's argument with himself so we need not be surprised to find Nietzsche condemning in Wagner themes that find (from time to time) an echo in his own writing.

In conclusion, we can say that Nietzsche may well have correctly judged the vitalistic impulse behind the music of *Tristan* however 'world-denying' the discursive content of the libretto may have been. For this reason (perhaps) *Tristan* does not figure prominently in Nietzsche's later polemics against Wagner. On one level (however) Nietzsche profoundly misjudged *Parsifal*. It is no part of Wagner's intent in that work to deny corporeality or sexuality or to denigrate critical intelligence. Wagner's aim in that work is not the negation of the natural but its transformation and elevation through compassion. However, even on an amended reading there are elements in this opera that do not go well with Nietzsche's broader outlook. The opera *does* endorse a Christian (or Buddhist) conception of human life and nature as requiring redemption and this is contrary to Nietzsche's demand that *all* of life be affirmed in its negativity and destructiveness as much as in its creativity and beneficence. This for Nietzsche is the tragic Dionysian wisdom present (in some sense) in *Tristan* but negated in Wagner's later work. What is more, Nietzsche at more than one point clearly states the issue as such. Thus, while Nietzsche may well, as Tanner thinks⁵⁴, be flailing to find effective criticisms of Wagner he does highlight a genuine issue. However, part of the eccentricity of Nietzsche's critique may well stem from the fact that he is far closer to aspects of Wagner's vision than he himself is comfortable admitting. Still, Nietzsche could not have accepted the ethic of compassion at the heart of that vision, at least in the form Wagner expressed it : as Charles Taylor puts it “Nietzsche wins through to his total yea-saying

⁵¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Genealogy of Morals* trans W. Kaufmann (Modern Library, New York, 1992) pp. 556-57

⁵² Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, p. 480

⁵³ Tanner, p.207

⁵⁴ Tanner, p. 218

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precisely by jettisoning the ethic of benevolence, which is inextricably linked in his view with self-negating morality. He presents us with a cruel dilemma. Is it one we have to face?"⁵⁵

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⁵⁵ Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1989) p. 455