

THE BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS. Friedrich Nietzsche on Trial. Prelude.

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**"The strange thing is that I, who of course always placed myself on Nietzsche's side, have now on re-reading learned to see through Nietzsche's cunning and even dishonesty towards Wagner. His first writing about Wagner in Bayreuth is full of so called praise which are actually subtle insults, it is brilliantly done but somehow also deplorable because he did not dare to be straightforward with the man he saw a bit as a father figure. And the parricide in Der Fall Wagner is actually hysterical, incoherent, unworthy of a philosopher of his caliber. He knew this himself; the mental breakdown in Turin from which he never recovered, manifested itself a few days after he sent the manuscript of Nietzsche contra Wagner to the publisher after a long hesitation. In his last years in which he often sat dozing, on hearing the name Wagner he raised his head and mumbled, Den habe ich sehr geliebt. Tragically so."
(STEFAN HERTMANS, Vlaamse Opera Nu 21, 2013)**

Friedrich Nietzsche's friendship with Richard Wagner is among the most fascinating in cultural history because it ends with a rupture and then seeks words of loathing. But Nietzsche's aversion to Wagner is a fascinated aversion, a kind of reverse love. Even in his most malevolent pieces, the voice of the exalted lover resonates, a lover whose temperature changes from icy cold to glowing heat. It is the history of an unhappy love from which both suffered, and Nietzsche undeniably the most. As a result, he became increasingly isolated and lonelier than he had ever been, a loneliness that will finally culminate in his complete mental collapse.

Wagner is present as a common thread throughout Nietzsche's oeuvre, from 'Die Geburt der Tragödie' up to and including his ultimate pamphlet 'Nietzsche contra Wagner'. That he found it necessary to have 'Der Fall Wagner', written in the spring of 1888, and followed by 'Ecce Homo' in October/November of the same year, followed by 'Nietzsche Contra Wagner', surely points to a certain obsession, a compulsive reckoning so close to his mental collapse. If his collapse was, one suspects, due to a post-syphilitic, progressive paralysis, the tearing feud with Wagner must also have left its mark on him.

How does one usually first learn about the split between Nietzsche and Wagner? By reading 'Der Fall Wagner', 'Ecce Homo' and 'Wagner contra Nietzsche', three booklets that are still available in every bookstore. They are very well written and therefore alone they command respect. They are

invariably accompanied by an introduction written by an enthusiastic Nietzschean. We know from Nietzscheans that they usually have no idea what Wagner stands for. A Wagner rebuttal does not exist. Nietzsche was cunning enough to present his reckoning after the composer had laid down his head. And so Nietzsche has the unsuspecting reader right where he wants him : as a spectator at a struggle of two titanic minds, looking through his glasses. Nietzsche has never admitted the real reasons for his break with Wagner. His own analysis is a cover-up in which he uses his rhetorical talent to crown his apostasy with the gloss and halo of a philosophical act through mystifications and rationalizations, one that manages to deceive the unsuspecting reader to this day. In short, when the game begins the scoreboard is already at 1-0 for Nietzsche.

To the outside world Nietzsche shows himself to be a good loser but in the facts he is exactly the opposite. Ignoring Nietzsche's personal motives is part of the etiquette of the right-minded Nietzschean who considers it reprehensible to descend from the philosophical cloud to the parterre of the human, all-too-human. Nietzscheans like to dismiss these facts as "la petite histoire" because it makes their hero look a whole lot smaller in the eyes of the world. Hans Driessen, for instance, writes in the postscript to his translation of 'Nietzsche contra Wagner': "When we realize that Nietzsche had to turn away from Wagner in order to come to himself, in order to free himself, it seems all too simple, not to say misleading and concealing, to look for incidents on the biographical level that would explain the break. This, by the way, has been done frequently in the voluminous literature that exists on Nietzsche and Wagner. For example, Nietzsche is said to have broken with Wagner out of rancor over the fact that the latter did not recognize him as a musician: Nietzsche as the flawed Musician. People are also not ashamed to blame all sorts of sexual entanglements for the breakup. According to some would-be Freudians, Nietzsche harbored a more than platonic love for the great maestro: Nietzsche as the flawed homosexual. Still others believe that Nietzsche was secretly in love with Cosima Wagner: Nietzsche as the failed lover. In this sexual sphere also belongs the recurring story of the "deadly insult." At one point Wagner writes a letter to Nietzsche's doctor, suggesting that Nietzsche's illness could be the result of his excessive masturbating. Nietzsche learns of this letter through an indiscretion and understandably feels aggrieved. When Nietzsche in his later work and in his later letters repeatedly mentions a "deadly insult" added by Richard Wagner, he would be referring to this letter. Recent research into Nietzsche's correspondence, however, shows that by this "deadly insult" he means a much less tawdry incident, namely Wagner's kneeling before the Cross, his slow and surreptitious crawl back into the mother's womb of the Church."

Once you have decided, like Hans Driessen, to conceive of the rupture as a philosophical act - Nietzsche's intention! - then you very quickly run into trouble: Nietzsche often blows cold and hot at the same time; you never know when the real Nietzsche is speaking. The contradictions produced

seem inexplicable and even after the publication of 'Der Fall Wagner' they continue unabated. Until you start analyzing them from the biographical point of view!

That is exactly what Manfred Eger does in his nearly 600-page chronicle "Nietzsches Bayreuther Passion." Eger is a philologist and art critic. For twenty years he headed the Richard Wagner Museum (1973 - 1993). His book was silenced in the press, had only one printing and today can only be found in antiquarian bookshops. This possibly says something about the power play between Nietzscheans and Wagnerians within the publishing world. After all, Nietzsche does not come out of this unscathed. Eger's chronicle cuts uncompromisingly through the barren undergrowth of false tradition, sloppily researched facts, and traditional prejudices. Nietzsche's behavior toward Wagner often plays out deep in the basement of his level as a thinker, Eger remarks quite rightly. His research is thorough, he evaluates a mountain of source material, and considers it a requirement of honesty and sincerity to put his finger on all sorts of falsifications in Nietzsche literature. Even Mazzino Montinari does not come away unscathed. "Whoever denounces Nietzsche's distortions and slanders, which have caused Bayreuth lasting damage, must endure being discriminated against as a snitch. It is as if a truth that rehabilitates Wagner must be suppressed if it could tarnish Nietzsche's image", Eger writes.

In short, Eger's thesis is the following : for his dislike of Wagner, Nietzsche has invented a whole series of contradictory motives. He sucked almost all of them out of his thumb. The true cause, on the other hand, he managed to consistently conceal. Thus, an essential chapter of his biography has been greatly underexposed particularly the history and fiasco of his passion for Bayreuth. Indeed, in the run-up to the first Bayreuth Festival, Nietzsche came to have great personal expectations. Gradually, he came to see himself as a partner, an educational officer, and an heir to Wagner. He even saw himself standing on Wagner's shoulders in his own Forum. The experience of 1876 completely undermines this illusion and therefore hits him like a shock. This shock, intensified by some hurtful mockery of Wagner, is the actual cause of the break and the direct trigger for 'Menschliches, Allzumenschliches'. The veiled but unmistakable hurtful remarks toward the Wagners that one finds in it are at the same time revenge for another 'faux pas': the so-called "deadly insult." Eger leaves no doubt that this does not refer to the disagreement about Parsifal, as Nietzschean Giorgio Colli has tried to prove, but to Wagner's well-intentioned indiscretion to Dr. Eiser about his onany. After Wagner's death Nietzsche expects to be summoned by his widow to direct the Bayreuth Festival. When Cosima responds stone-cold, he knows he can put his Bayreuth ambitions on hold for good. What follows is the pure reckoning : in 'Der Fall Wagner', a fanatical destruction pamphlet by a petty revanchist, he makes no secret of his desire to destroy Wagner. And when he praises 'Tristan und Isolde' to the skies, the key lies with Georg

Brandes, the influential literary critic and admirer of 'Tristan und Isolde', who has suddenly begun to show interest in his work.

No doubt Wagner's disregard and ridicule of Nietzsche's musical talent was a decisive influence on the maturation of Nietzsche's enmity. The philosopher's grotesque self-aggrandizement as a composer and his hallucinatory incompetence as a music critic even Herman Van Campenhout admits in "Die bezaubernde Katastrophe" : "Nietzsche was much more interesting as a music philosopher than as a music critic or musician: he sometimes overestimated his compositional skills immoderately, his knowledge of the repertoire was astonishingly limited, and perhaps so was his taste. That is why his music-critical invectives of Wagner actually belong to the 'petite histoire'". It is no coincidence that his Wagner pamphlet 'Der Fall Wagner' bears the subtitle 'A Musician's Problem' ! One will also often recognize the pen of Eduard Hanslick in Nietzsche's music aesthetic Wagner criticism.

In the light of these reflections, all contradictions in Nietzsche's behavior toward Wagner evaporate like snow in the sun. THAT is the evidential value of "Nietzsches Bayreuther Passion". The objective of this series of articles is therefore to show how Nietzsche behaved like a vindictive revanchist towards Wagner, an artist who, we must not forget, suffered a lot for his art and accomplished a gigantic artistic project. To that icon of willpower and perseverance Nietzsche sought to warm himself and, once frustrated in his personal expectations, he presents Wagner with the bill. No doubt Nietzsche initially saw a father figure in the 31 years older man. Wagner was born the same year as Nietzsche's father but the latter died when his son was barely 4 years old. Why couldn't Nietzsche treat the older friend with the regards befitting his age, his experience, and his status? Instead, Nietzsche displays a malice rarely seen. Was he maybe the owner of "a very mean and low character" as psychoanalyst Lou von Salomé once put it ?

This criticism of Nietzsche does not diminish his rhetorical talent nor his importance as a philosopher of modernity. It only seeks to expose the lies and mystifications. When two great minds no longer understand each other, they part and leave each other alone. That is precisely what Wagner did; Nietzsche, on the other hand, set in motion nothing less than a fanatical campaign of destruction. Alain Badiou rightly observes: "It must be said that Nietzsche was so passionate about Wagner that he is the source of all the negative things ever said about him." Nietzsche's legends, more than anything else, have contributed to the development and permanent imprinting of a distorted, negative image of Wagner. It is up to you, the reader, to pass judgment on this at the end of this article series.