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Behind Nietzsche's Anti-Christianity: Wagner, Tragedy and the Greeks

Stephen N. Williams

SUMMARY

In this article, the author discusses the background to Nietzsche's anti-Christianity before he published his first outspokenly anti-Christian work, *Human, All Too Human*. Attention is drawn to three features of his thought and formation. The first was the attraction of Greek civilization, which he came to see as far superior to anything offered by Christianity. The second was the influence of Wagner, who found much in Christianity

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distasteful. The third was his hope for the renewal of German cultural life in connection with the 'birth of tragedy'. The aim of the article is descriptive, but it also notes how Nietzsche's dislike of Christianity is representative of much in our contemporary culture. The author points out that Christianity is much more than a scheme of sin and redemption; it allows full enjoyment in a world pronounced 'good' by its creator, and believes in and affirms life both before and after death.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur présente ici l'arrière-plan de l'opposition de Nietzsche au christianisme avant la publication de son premier ouvrage explicitement anti-chrétien, *Humain, bien trop humain*. Trois facteurs dans sa pensée et sa formation retiennent l'attention. Premièrement, son attirance pour la civilisation grecque, qu'il en est venu à considérer comme étant de loin supérieure à ce que le christianisme peut offrir. Deuxièmement, l'influence de Wagner qui avait en aversion bien des aspects du chris-

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tianisme. Troisièmement, son espoir d'un renouveau de la vie culturelle germanique avec la « naissance de la tragédie ». L'article se veut descriptif, mais l'auteur montre comment le rejet du christianisme chez Nietzsche est en grande partie typique de notre culture contemporaine. Il souligne que le christianisme comporte bien plus que le schème péché – rédemption : il encourage à jouir du monde que son créateur a déclaré « bon » et il croit en la vie, à la fois avant et après la mort, et en affirme l'importance.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In diesem Artikel diskutiert der Autor den Hintergrund von Nietzsches Antichristentum, bevor jener sein erstes, unverblümt antichristliches Werk „Menschliches, allzu Menschliches“ veröffentlichte. Drei Charakteristika seines Denkens und Schaffens ziehen dabei die Aufmerksamkeit auf sich: Das erste geht um die Anziehungskraft griechischer Zivilisation, die Nietzsche allem, was das Christentum zu bieten vermochte, als weit überlegen ansah. Das zweite bezieht sich auf den Einfluss Wagners, der vieles an der Christenheit widerwärtig

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fand. Das dritte stellt Nietzsches Hoffnung dar auf die Erneuerung deutschen kulturellen Lebens im Zusammenhang mit der „Geburt der Tragödie“.

Der Artikel ist beschreibend in seiner Zielrichtung, stellt jedoch gleichfalls fest, wie Nietzsches Verachtung des Christentums stellvertretend für viele Züge unserer zeitgenössischen Kultur steht. Der Autor erläutert, dass der christliche Glaube weitaus mehr als ein Schema von Sünde und Vergebung ausmacht; er gestattet vielmehr volle Genüge in einer Welt, die von ihrem Schöpfer als für „gut“ befunden wurde, und bestätigt ein Leben vor und nach dem Tod.

An extraordinary amount has been written on the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and the production rolls on. Nietzsche scholarship probes every aspect of his work, but

those who are not well acquainted either with the subject or the scholarship probably associate Nietzsche particularly with language, the death of God and postmodernity. His ruminations on

metaphor, truth and perspective in a post-theistic world are widely regarded as heralding postmodernity and his anti-Christianity apparently owes something to an anti-realist view of truth and of language. We might wonder to what extent being anti-realist entails being anti-Christian, and which might be the cause, which the consequence, of the other. Whatever we conclude, it seems that in Nietzsche's thought the death of God is logically allied to the breakdown of a view that holds together language, meaning and truth in some sort of schematic correspondence. Many who are unfamiliar with his work probably assume that part of Nietzsche's reason for rejecting Christianity lies in his rejection of a belief in objective truth and that this rejection, in turn, is accounted for by his view of language.

I have no wish to contest this account at such a level of generality; in fact, I shall not be addressing it at all. But there is a background to Nietzsche's anti-Christianity that we need to bring to the foreground if we want to understand it correctly. Nietzsche was born in 1844 into a fairly conventionally pious Lutheran family, as far as we can tell. He lost his father, a Lutheran pastor, of whom he was very fond, before he was five years old and other deaths followed in the household. He seems to have been an extraordinarily sensitive soul. During his teenage years he began to drift away from his inherited faith. Why this happened is a matter for some debate, although there is nothing mysterious about it, given the intellectual climate in Nietzsche's day. We can not be sure at what point we should begin to talk of him as an atheist but such a description is applicable, if not during his school and teen years, at least very early in his university years. After completing his academic studies, he was appointed very young, and without having attained statutory professional qualifications, to a chair in Classical philology in Basle, but he was pensioned off in 1879, after ten years, on grounds of ill-health. The next ten years were spent wandering from place to place in Europe. Early in 1889, he suffered a mental collapse from which he never recovered and he died in 1900. It was during that last decade that, unknown to him, his fame began to spread dramatically.¹

In one of his last published works, Nietzsche proclaimed himself *The Antichrist*, a designation preferable, I think, to 'the anti-Christian', although this too is a possible translation of the German *Der Antichrist*. Linguistically, this is an adversarial and apparently negative self-description. But it would

be wrong to understand Nietzsche's anti-Christianity as negative, at least in its earliest roots. He was immensely attracted by the Classical, especially Greek, world to which he was exposed as a schoolboy. In this connection, I want to survey briefly the constellation of elements mentioned in the title of this article: Wagner, tragedy and the Greeks. I hope to indicate how and why they drew Nietzsche away from Christianity to the point of antipathy or virtual antipathy *before* his explicit and celebrated anti-Christian writings were written, starting with *Human, All Too Human* in 1878. In conclusion, I will make some brief remarks on the significance of this account.²

The Greeks

This is how the philosopher Hegel (1770-1831) spoke when he was a head teacher in Nuremberg in the days before he rose to philosophical fame:

The foundation of higher study must be and remain Greek literature in the first place, Roman in the second. The perfection and glory of those masterpieces must be the spiritual bath, the secular baptism that first and indelibly attunes and tinctures the soul in respect of taste and knowledge... A general, perfunctory acquaintance with the ancients is not sufficient; we must take up our lodging with them so that we can breathe their air, absorb their ideas, their manners... and become at home in this world – the fairest that ever has been... where the human spirit emerges like a bride from her chamber, endowed with a fairer naturalness, with freedom, depth and serenity... The works of the ancients contain the most noble food in the most noble form: golden apples in silver bowls. They are incomparably richer than all the works of any other nation and of any other time.³

Greece so fascinated intellectual Germany in the latter part of the eighteenth and in the nineteenth centuries that Eliza Marian Butler was inspired to write a superb characterization of this phenomenon under the title of *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (1935).⁴ Eighteenth century Germans, in the century before Bismarck forged the nation as a unified political entity, were often in search of an identity or a statement of identity. England had political freedoms and France a superior cultural style; but what did Germans have? Well, perhaps they had an affinity with a people and a culture that was historically peerless: the Greeks. Let the

Romans make their mark on the rest of Europe, which they have, but let Germany intellectually excavate Greece.⁵ So folk began to think. And they began to research. And they began to dream.

Nietzsche was initiated into this Graeco-German world in his schooldays in the celebrated school of Pforta in Prussian Saxony. What a world and what a loss! Of course, he read the poet Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) though I am not sure if he read at that time Schiller's lament in 'The Gods of Greece':

Art thou, fair world, no more?
Return, thou virgin-bloom on Nature's face.
Ah, only on the Minstrel's magic shore,
Can we the footstep of sweet Fable trace!
The meadows mourn for the old hallowing life;
Vainly we search the earth of gods bereft
And where the image with such warmth was
rife,
A shade alone is left!⁶

Overall, Schiller's position on Christianity is not one of straightforward antagonism, but listen to how he goes on:

Cold from the North, has gone
Over the flowers the blast that kill'd their May;
And, to enrich the worship of the One,
A universe of gods must pass away!
Mourning, I search on yonder starry steeps,
But thee no more, Selene,⁷ there I see!
And through the woods I call, and o'er the
deeps,
No voice replies to me!

The poem contains a multitude of other equally poignant and insistent stanzas. But the person and the piece that most illuminate the attraction of Greece for Nietzsche in these early years is Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), author of *Hyperion*. 'Nowhere has the longing for Greece been revealed in purer tones', Nietzsche wrote at the age of 17, referring to Holderlin's *Hyperion*, written just before the close of the eighteenth century.⁸ In 1885, aged 40, less than four years before his mental collapse, Nietzsche wrote: 'One is no longer at home anywhere; at last one longs back for that place in which alone one can be at home, because it is the only place in which one would want to be at home: the Greek world'.⁹ Those who know Hölderlin's poetry (as I do not) testify to its extraordinary power. A work like *Hyperion*, which is broadly poetic even if its genre is more technically something like a 'lyrical novella', exhibits a haunting power even in English translation.¹⁰ It is

bathed in the atmosphere of nostalgia. The character, Hyperion, forms a friendship with Alabanda, with apparent overtones of a platonic homosexual relationship. Christians are supposed to love one another in Christ; Hyperion and Alabanda love one another in Greece, i.e., within the embrace of Greece and in the bond of longing for Greece. They read Plato arm in arm.

Plato's *Symposium* is an important source for interpreting *Hyperion*. While the question of Nietzsche's own homosexuality naturally arises at this point, I am not pursuing it, significant as it may be in terms of his rejection of Christianity.¹¹ Diotima is the figure who forges the interesting connection between Plato's *Symposium* and Holderlin's *Hyperion*. In the *Symposium*, Diotima is the wise teacher of Socrates who instructs him on the nature of love and the supremacy of beauty. In Hölderlin's work, the eponymous Hyperion, after a painful break with his friend Alabanda, wanders over to Greece, the thought taking shape in his mind that he might fight for its liberation. Perhaps victory might lead to the birth of a new civilization, one that bathes in the light of ancient Greece, even though the ancient culture itself can never be reproduced. Anyway, Hyperion wanders into the arms of Diotima. She is a lovely woman, to put it mildly, at the very least an ideal of womanhood and of love. They love. But within Hyperion there is a force that will not allow her to detain him. He must go to fight for Greece. So they part in sorrow. After disillusionment following an unsuccessful war and a period of convalescence from his wounds (there is a happy reunion with Alabanda in the course of all this) Hyperion tries to return to Diotima. But she is gone. In mystical sorrow, she has etherealized and merged into that deeper unity, into the One, which Hyperion himself is basically seeking.

So what has he got left? Answer: the Germans. This is the bottom of the barrel. The mood of *Hyperion* changes as it reaches this conclusion. Hyperion has longed for Greece with the deepest spiritual longing that anyone can feel. Now he looks around at contemporary German culture. What does he find?

Barbarians from the remotest past, whom industry and science and even religion have made yet more barbarous, profoundly incapable of any divine emotion...offensive to every well-conditioned soul through the whole range from pretence to pettiness, hollow and tune-

less, like the shards of a discarded pot...It is a hard saying, and yet I speak it because it is the truth: I can think of no people more at odds with themselves than the Germans. You see artisans, but no men, thinkers, but no men, priests, but no men, masters and servants, but no men, minors and adults, but no men – is this not like a battlefield on which hacked-off hands and arms and every other member are scattered about, while the life-blood flows from them to vanish in the sand?¹²

Nietzsche read this in school and began to feel the same. Later in his life, now an author himself, if there was any subject that adduced his hatred as much as Christianity, it was contemporary Germanness. Hölderlin's *Hyperion* is extremely tame in its indictment compared to Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, it is Christianity that has ruined Germany. As he builds up to a furious crescendo in *The Antichrist*, many years later, Nietzsche pounds away:

The Germans have robbed Europe of the last great cultural harvest Europe had to bring home – the harvest of Renaissance...Oh these Germans, what they have already cost us!¹³

The Renaissance is not the same as Greece, to be sure, and is doubtless closer to Rome, but it could have turned Germans in the right direction. What attraction does Greece hold for Nietzsche? Prosaically speaking, it is the ideal of free, sensuous, autonomous humanity realized in a culture. Greece is loved and interpreted from a male and an aristocratic point of view. Greek art and Greek religion, its beauty and its gods, nourish and shelter that ideal. Nietzsche soon comes to regard Christianity as their logical and historical antipodes.

But why should the Greek simply be an ideal? Can we do nothing about it today, in Nietzsche's day? Chipping away at Christianity is both futile and negative; an explosion is needed and a reconstruction. What is possible, not only for an individual such as Nietzsche, but for the culture of his day? Enter the Saviour. Name: Richard Wagner.

Wagner

The year is 1876 and 1876 might swing history just as much as the year of Christ's alleged birth or resurrection. At least, so one individual (the composer Richard Wagner, 1813-1883) probably thought to himself and a few others probably felt much the same. Not Nietzsche, however. Before 1876 he had decided that 1876 was not going to

be such a good thing, but he waited for the year to arrive before making a public move. What are we talking about? 1876 was the year of the opening of the *Festspielhaus*, Wagner's opera-house in Bayreuth. This was Wagner's big year and the big year for Wagnerians. Nietzsche, who had previously affirmed the Wagnerian enterprise, decided instead that the age of decadence, which had dawned long ago, was prolonging itself.

I am not mocking Wagner. His impact has been far too great and serious to be mocked. I am adopting his point of view. Wagner is a colossal modern phenomenon. Has anyone in the arts so succeeded in transforming fantasy into reality? Wagner dreamt of a new world, a new culture rooted in his own work. And he began to create it. Fresh thinking about music and drama; fresh writing of opera – we are in the throes of cultural regeneration. So Wagner thought, wrote and composed. The 'holy German art' is burgeoning.¹⁴ Plunging back into the past, more into medieval Germany than into classical Greece, Wagner came up with figures and stories that featured love and death, adultery and sacrifice – the whole romantic bundle. Poring over the music and the scores, more than one major composer wondered just how good this stuff was. You couldn't tell. But something immense was going on when the operas got on stage: Tchaikovsky, unsure how to estimate Wagner from a strictly musical point of view, had no doubt that something has got off the ground at Bayreuth that future generations would talk about.¹⁵ The story of the Bayreuth project rumbles on into our own day.¹⁶ Wagner lives.¹⁷

Wagner designed his project as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the plaiting together of the arts, especially musical and dramatic, in a project to renew German cultural life. What has this to do with Nietzsche? At one stage, he was captivated by Wagner's ambition. When he first heard Wagner's music, Nietzsche was not especially drawn by it. Then it hit him, including the famous Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde* of 1865. One of Wagner's biographers observes that

...its contemporary impact, its influence on the development of music, the powerful spell it exerted on literature and the visual arts, even its effects upon human thought and behaviour, were of an order achieved by few other single works in the history of art.¹⁸

What does it portend? Let us be prosaic again: longing, yearning, *Sehnen* is the spirit's aspira-

tion. In the course of elucidating the novelty of this work, Ronald Taylor remarked that ‘Wagner’s *Tristan* split the musical world on the day of its first performance, and has done to ever since’.¹⁹ After conducting a performance of *Tristan and Isolde* one night, a famous conductor turned to his companion, walking home with him, and said: ‘That is just not music any more’.²⁰ The companion was none other than Thomas Mann, a man who pondered at length both the Wagner and the Nietzsche phenomena.

How does this illuminate Nietzsche’s anti-Christianity? In musical and operatic terms, *Tristan and Isolde* is a searching Romantic exploration of the great themes of human life, those that ravage and beautify the soul, those in which religion was expert – until Wagner came along. He did not entirely displace religion, but he effectively displaced Christianity. Wagner was more or less an opponent of Christianity, at least in his earlier years. Christianity, said Wagner in *Art and Revolution*

...adjusts the ills of an honourless, useless and sorrowful existence of mankind on earth, by the miraculous love of God; who had not – as the noble Greek supposed – created man for a happy and self-conscious life upon this earth, but had imprisoned him in a loathsome dungeon; so as, in reward for the self-contempt that poisoned him therein, to prepare him for a posthumous state of endless comfort and inactive ecstasy. Man was therefore bound to remain in his deepest and unmanliest degradation...this accursed life was...the world of the devil, i.e., of the senses...²¹

What Nietzsche later wrote was greatly in accord with this. By the time Nietzsche met Wagner, Wagner had moved on intellectually from his earlier writings, but Nietzsche appreciated them. He appreciated something else even more: Wagner was determined to renew the cultural life of Germany and his works were to be the instruments of renewal.

Nietzsche came under Wagner’s spell as he entered upon his academic career in Basle. No period in his life was happier than the days when he visited Wagner’s home, not too far away, where he lived with Cosima, daughter of Franz Liszt, whom he had relieved of her husband, the conductor Hans von Bülow. Nietzsche was a frequent visitor; he and Wagner became very close. (Wagner was born in the same year as Nietzsche’s father.)

Nietzsche came to be so wholeheartedly in favour of the Wagnerian project that he appears to have seriously considered abandoning his professorship in Basle in order to devote his time to developing it. Wagner’s fantasy of cultural renewal looked set for realisation when he came under the patronage of King Ludwig II of Bavaria. In 1872, the cornerstone of the *Festspielhaus* was laid in Bayreuth (Nietzsche was there) and it was opened in 1876, the year that Nietzsche broke away. In his very fine study, James Treadwell describes the building Wagner erected and its operatic logic, the place where you went not just to watch Wagner’s operas but to participate in the redemption enacted on stage in word and music. It is an eucharistic experience, particularly in the case of *Parsifal*, the last opera.²²

Parsifal! It sickened Nietzsche, but the music haunted him. It sickened him because he saw that Wagner had more than gestured in the direction of the Cross, that ‘worst of all trees’.²³ But all this was later. For now, in the early 1870s, Wagner’s enterprise promised deliverance. So said Nietzsche, in his first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*.²⁴ To this we now turn.

The Birth of Tragedy

When Nietzsche produced *BT* early in 1872, he appeared to seal his fate as a Classical scholar. Those contemporaries who took notice of it were usually critical. It departed from standard ways of approaching the subject. The merits of this work are not my concern.²⁵ In this context, ‘tragedy’ refers particularly to the tragic drama associated with the great Greek tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides) and the tragic impulses that lie behind their work and constitute them as ‘tragedy’. Nietzsche proposed a scholarly revision of existing notions of the birth of Greek tragedy. He argued that the key to getting the picture right is the identification of two drives that have a physiological basis. One is a drive towards illusion, exemplified by the dream; the other drive is exemplified by the state of intoxication, which produces ecstasy. This is symbolised by the god Dionysus. Apollonian art veils a world whose reality is, in fact, tragic. The Greeks knew all about the horror of existence and treated it as tragedy. Suffering marks existence. What Greek tragedy accomplished was a union of Apollonian and Dionysiac elements. The state of intoxication is rooted in tragic awareness; that is what constitutes the Dionysian instinct. Diony-

sus embraces suffering in the mode of tragic joy, affirming it and being reconciled to the reality of suffering existence which binds together man and nature, man and woman, man and beast. Reality has pain at its heart, but you can behold reality in the transfiguring mirror of art. Tragic drama, the product of Apollonian craftsmanship, is such a mirror.

What I have given here is a broad account of one of the strands in Nietzsche's argument, which he elaborates in a specific thesis about the tragic musical chorus. The entire argument is wrapped up fairly quickly in *BT* because Nietzsche wants to move on to develop two theses.

One is about the historical demise of tragedy. A major part of the fault here lies with Socrates. Socrates enfolds existence in the cloak of rationality. According to Socrates, the exercise of reason leads to virtue and the exercise of virtue to happiness. Thus Socrates subjects existence to rational and moral measure. Tragic life is consequently not appropriated and suffered as our lot. An idealised world, to which humans should aspire, is woven and this is now overlaid on the tapestry of that reality to which tragedy bears authentic witness. Eventually, through the European centuries, a post-tragic scientific culture set in, optimistically masking the stark reality of tragic existence.

The other thesis is about contemporary culture and this is where Wagner comes in. Although contemporary culture is the product of misguided Socratism, there is hope of rejuvenation. Nietzsche gets lyrical at this prospect. The Dionysian spirit is again awakening in and with Wagner. The German spirit is revealed as Dionysian in its depths. Wagner's aesthetic achievement exposes tragic existence in its true light.

My friends, believe as I do in Dionysian life and in the rebirth of tragedy. The time of Socratic man is past. Put on wreaths of ivy, take up the *thyrsus* and do not be surprised if tigers and panthers lie down, purring and curling around your legs. Now you must only dare to be tragic human beings, for you will be released and redeemed. You will accompany the festive procession of Dionysos from India to Greece! Put on your armour for a hard fight, but believe in the miracles of your god! (*BT* section 20)

To put it prosaically, we might reduce Nietzsche's thesis here, as he does, to the claim that the 'Dionysian, with the primal pleasure it perceives even in pain, is the common womb from which both

music and the tragic myth are born' (*BT* 24). If we do not want to put it prosaically, we shall summon to mind his picture of the German knight dreaming his Dionysian dreams, now awakening and stirring as if towards resuscitation or resurrection.

Nietzsche's hopes were high. His life and hope were largely invested in the Wagnerian prospect and project at this stage of his life. What will happen if the hopes come crashing down? They did. Nietzsche came to see Wagner's world and project as *maya*, illusion, although he does not formulate it that way in any major published writing. There was more than one reason for the break with Wagner and personalities had a lot to do with it, as was almost bound to be the case where the colourful and domineering Wagner was concerned. But, fundamentally, Nietzsche came to believe that Wagner's work was a flight from life, a denial of life, a grubbing around in the search for some kind of redemption. That means making the Christian mistake all over again. The music itself testifies to this: it is a decadent 'sheer persuasion of the nerves'.²⁶ It is music made sick. In *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, Nietzsche looks back on his Wagnerian period:

I interpreted Wagner's music as an expression of a Dionysian power of the soul; I believed I heard in it the earthquake with which a primordial force of life, damned up from time immemorial, finally vents itself, indifferent to the possibility that everything that calls itself culture today might start tottering.²⁷

He had misunderstood.

And so he turned away from Wagner. He took a more hard-headed line and plunged back into the chilling waters of eighteenth century rationalism and scientism, particularly into their more anti-Christian currents. He began to attack Christianity (and Wagner) bitterly. Christianity is not only intellectual nonsense. Spiritually, it makes you vomit. It teaches you to regard yourself as a worm that needs a sick Jehovah to redeem you, leaving you as a submissive wimp grovelling in tear-stained gratitude for deliverance from your miserable little sins.²⁸ And what is sin? Well, when you think of it, what Christians call sin are the sheer impulses of life. When life just flows along in its own course, in its sexual nature, in its aggressions and in sheer natural expression of the will-to-power, what does Christianity do? It condemns it. Accordingly, Nietzsche condemns Christianity:

Wherever there are walls I shall inscribe this

eternal accusation against Christianity upon them – I can write in letters which make even the blind see... I call Christianity the *one* great curse, the *one* great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct for revenge for which no expedient is sufficiently poisonous, secret, subterranean, *petty* – I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind.²⁹

In *BT*, Dionysus is opposed to Apollo. At the end of his life, Dionysus is opposed to the Crucified. Dionysus is the principle of Anti-christ. Dionysus is Nietzsche.

In the streets of Turin, on the morning of January 3, in the Piazza Carlo Alberto, Nietzsche witnessed a horse being beaten by its driver. It broke him. Sobbing, he collapsed, arms around the neck of the horse – Nietzsche, the man who despised the virtue of compassion (*Mitleid*) and denied it positive moral status. It was an amazing real-life imitation of a scene from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, which Nietzsche knew (he greatly admired Dostoevsky), where a dream is recorded in which a little boy does much the same with a horse thrashed to death in the public place.³⁰ Nietzsche never recovered sane consciousness. But he still wrote the occasional letter. And sometimes he signed himself: 'the Crucified'.

Conclusion

Is all this simply of historical interest? It is certainly of some enduring psychological interest. For Nietzsche, Wagner, the Greeks and the tragic view of life had replaced the Christianity of his childhood. He had, as it were, exchanged his loves. When a second love is disappointed, it can heighten revulsion towards the first love, that for which it was the substitute. You are certainly not going to go back; you cannot go home again. Nietzsche's view of Christianity in *BT* is not entirely straightforward. Surveying his own work at what turned out to be the end of his days, he referred to the 'profound hostile silence' towards Christianity everywhere evident in that work, although he does say other things too and his retrospective interpretation of *BT* may be called into question.³¹ Certainly he has positive things to say in *BT* about Luther's chorale and its relation to the German Reformation, and we might speculate that nothing said in this work would have disabled Nietzsche from ending up where Wagner ended up, with some sort of positive appreciation of Christian symbols. But

this is to multiply speculation uselessly; the nature of Wagner's own development is, in any case, a matter of controversy.

However, our account should be more than historically and psychologically instructive. Nietzsche glosses his own position, that of his culture and, to a large extent, that of ours, in a telling sentence in *The Gay Science*. 'It is no longer our reasons that are decisive against Christianity; it is our taste'.³² For Nietzsche, Christianity was distasteful and not just mistaken. It is the enemy of life and of the senses. His reaction to Christianity was in part generated and in part heightened when he found a practical alternative to it. When that alternative fails, it is spiritually devastating. You have glimpsed greatness, that is, the possibility of a cultural renewal based on the uninhibited and, in a way, sanctified elevation of the senses. We are our senses. We are body. We are the biological life and constellation of bodily drives that we manifest. That is selfhood. So Nietzsche believed. Christianity destroys it by denying it. It is twice hateful, for it is philosophically bad and culturally corrupting.

The elements that I have picked out here motor a great deal of Western opposition to Christianity today. Christianity is more than an intellectual failure; it is the profoundest existential assault. Think of how it spoils a good night out. You turn up to watch a piece of Wagnerian or non-Wagnerian opera in a state of theatrical excitement. You watch and judge the aesthetic wonder of the production, sucked into its music and drama, exiting afterwards with your companion for a good meal and discussion of redemption, love and death, with some good sex to follow. What can beat that? But Christianity frowns upon it. So who on earth wants Christianity after that? To put it less crudely and with rather more profound dignity: from a psychological point of view, how can you regress from the free, rational, autonomous, beautiful, aristocratic, male Greek back toward God and Christianity? I have indicated that behind Nietzsche's anti-Christianity lies his engagement with Wagner, tragedy and the Greeks and it should not be forgotten if we are to take the proper measure of his opposition to it. Does it not sound quite contemporaneous, in the case of the cultured?

Yet Christianity is a funny business, is it not? According to Christianity, sensual enjoyment at its highest is only possible because God has set up a world in which you can get that enjoyment; indeed, he did not only set up the world, he pronounced it good. Nietzsche regarded Christianity

as a scheme of sin and redemption, as did Schopenhauer and Wagner, generally speaking. But Christianity speaks of creation before it speaks of sin. And if it teaches you not to spend your life at a Wagnerian opera, one reason is because you have a neighbour down your street or in the next country who is barely going to make it and perhaps will not make it until tomorrow. If it exhorts you to beware of exaggerating reason and make space for faith, it is on account of an empirical foundation to its testimony – a story about some crude and hysterical females babbling about bodies not being in the tomb where dead bodies really ought to stay, once they are safely dead. Christian arithmetic puts together an affirmation of the created order plus an affirmation of the suffering neighbour plus an affirmation of a vacant tomb into the proposition that it might be good to get your soul right with God. The eyes that we train on ancient Greece and the ears that we train to appreciate the strings in the prelude of *Tristan and Isolde* are lodged in a body and bodily existence created by God, and that body and bodily existence must take on board that whole set of affirmations.

Of course, I have omitted something central in Christianity. So I leave virtually the last word to Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). His haunting story, 'The Gospel according to Mark', includes this line: 'It also occurred to him that throughout history, humankind has told two stories: the story of a lost ship sailing the Mediterranean seas in quest of a beloved isle, and the story of a god who allows himself to be crucified on Golgotha.'³³ A glance at what lay behind Nietzsche's anti-Christianity renews our sense of how these stories have collided more than colluded in the formation of modern European culture.

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Notes

- 1 There are several biographies of Nietzsche. Reginald J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: the Man and His Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) is good.
- 2 Greater detail in Stephen N. Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist: Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).
- 3 G.W.F.Hegel, 'On Classical Studies' in his *Early Theological Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) 325-336.

- 4 E.M.Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany: a Study of the Influence Exercised by Greek Art and Poetry over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935).
- 5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer comments on the significance of this in *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 105-108.
- 6 This is from E.B.Lytton's translated edition of F. von Schiller, *Poems and Ballads* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1852).
- 7 Selene was the goddess of the moon.
- 8 *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), October 9, 1861.
- 9 Although I have quoted here from Walter Kaufmann's edition of Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1968) section 419, note the 'Introduction' to Rudiger Bittner's edition of Nietzsche's *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) for the use of this material.
- 10 F. Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, ed. E.L. Santner (New York: Continuum, 1994).
- 11 See Joachim Köhler, *Nietzsche's Secret: the interior life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002). In connection with Greece, one question that arises here is about Nietzsche's attraction toward the culture of the beautiful naked male.
- 12 *Hyperion*, 128.
- 13 Nietzsche, *The Antichrist in The Twilight of the Idols and The Antichrist* (New York and London: Penguin, 1990) section 61.
- 14 This phrase appears, for instance, in what I understand is the first German comic opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.
- 15 'One thing is certain, that something has happened at Bayreuth...which our children and great-grandchildren will remember': quoted in B.Millington, ed., *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992) 381.
- 16 See Nike Wagner – Richard's great-granddaughter – *The Wagners: the Dramas of a Musical Dynasty* (London: Phoenix, 2001).
- 17 Whether readers of the *European Journal of Theology* will live to attend the annual Bayreuth Festival, unless they have tickets, is another matter. Book now, and you may have to wait as much as ten years to attend.
- 18 Derek Watson, *Richard Wagner: a Biography* (London: Dent, 1979) 235.
- 19 Ronald Taylor, *Richard Wagner: His Life, Art and Thought* (London: Elek, 1979) 173.
- 20 Taylor, *Richard Wagner*, 140.
- 21 Wagner, 'Art and Revolution': see Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist*, 54-55.

- 22 James Treadwell, *Interpreting Wagner* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2003). You are meant to have such an experience only in Bayreuth; when the New York Metropolitan hosted a performance in 1903, many European Wagnerians were outraged: Treadwell, *Interpreting Wagner*, 234.
- 23 Nietzsche, 'Of Old And New Law Tables', section 12 in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: Penguin, 1969).
- 24 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy And Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). From now on this is abbreviated as BT.
- 25 Nor do I have the competence to make an assessment. M. Silk and J.P. Stern leave hardly any stone unturned in their detailed study *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- 26 Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner in The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner* (New York: Random House, 1996) section 7.
- 27 'We Antipodes' in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* in W. Kaufmann ed., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1954).
- 28 This line is first opened out by Nietzsche in *Human, All Too Human: a Book for Free Spirits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), e.g., section 114.
- 29 *The Antichrist*, section 62.
- 30 I follow here a standard biographical account (although the connection with Dostoevsky is usually not made), but perhaps one can not be confident about it: see Curtis Cate, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Hutchinson, 2002) chapter 38.
- 31 Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy' section 1 in *Ecce Homo* (London: Penguin, 1979). See too the 1886 'Attempt at Self-Criticism' in BT.
- 32 *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) section 132.
- 33 J.L. Borges, *Collected Fictions* (New York and London: Penguin, 1998) 400.