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## Nietzsche's Early Years and the Break with Wagner

As far as Christianity is concerned, I hope you'll believe this much: in my heart I've never held it in contempt and, ever since childhood, have often struggled with myself on behalf of its ideals. . . . I no longer have the slightest idea which of my views do good, which harm.<sup>1</sup>

Who knows how many generations it will take to produce a few who can fully appreciate what I've done? But this is the torment of every great teacher of humankind: he knows that he has as much chance of becoming its curse as its blessing. But this loneliness, ever since childhood!<sup>2</sup>

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) was born in Röcken on the fifteenth of October at 10 a.m. "to the sound of the peals of bells rung by the parish in honour of the birthday of our reigning monarch King Friedrich Wilhelm IV"—according to his sister Elisabeth, who is known to have a flair for the sensational.<sup>3</sup>

Nietzsche was the son of Karl Ludwig Nietzsche, a Lutheran pastor, and Franziska Oehler, a Lutheran minister's daughter. When Nietzsche was two years old, his sister Elisabeth was born. Shortly before and after his fifth birthday, he experienced the first great tragedy of his life: his father, after suffering for almost a year from loss of appetite and migraines, died from what was later diagnosed as softening of the brain.<sup>4</sup> Eight months later, Nietzsche's younger brother Joseph died suddenly from teething convulsions a few days after his second birthday.

Nietzsche grew up in a pious Christian home consisting of his mother, his sister, his father's mother, and two maiden aunts. When he was nine he began experiencing headaches which caused him to miss a great deal of school; when he was twelve he began having serious trouble with his eyes as a result of inheriting myopia from his father. Fellow classmates often teased

Nietzsche calling him the “little pastor” or the “little Jesus” because of his fragile physical health, his precocious mind, and his pious and peculiar disposition. He was typically melancholy, shy, and reflective beyond his years, spending most of his time in solitude playing the piano, reading the Bible, and writing poetry. His classmates’ teasing further contributed to his reclusive tendencies and to his unusually close relationship with his sister. Elisabeth worshipped her brother, saved virtually everything he wrote, and regarded him as a saint.<sup>5</sup>

At age fourteen Nietzsche went away to Pforta, a classical Lutheran boarding school which he attended for six years. In an autobiographical essay which helped grant him a full tuition scholarship he wrote: “In all things God has led me safely as his father leads his weak little child. . . . I have firmly resolved to dedicate myself forever to his service. . . . All he gives I will accept joyfully—even death, which will one day unite us all in eternal joy and bliss.”<sup>6</sup>

His time at Pforta was generally unhappy; the school was a blend of militarism and classicism, it resembled a prison more than a school, and its educational philosophy was geared toward keeping young minds in the classical past—and out of the contemporary world. Pforta produced some remarkable people whose minds flourished, and Nietzsche’s admiration for the ancient Greeks, particularly the pre-Socratic philosophers, was cultivated there. His primary interest was still poetry, particularly Hölderlin (who was hardly known then) and Byron, both of whom Nietzsche admired for their rebellious tendencies and their roles as cultural critics.

Nietzsche was duly confirmed at the age of sixteen, and he took his profession of faith seriously. He began expressing doubts concerning the literalness of Christian doctrine, saying that the authority of the Bible and related issues were endlessly problematic. Darwinism particularly began to trouble Nietzsche during his teens, and continued to haunt him until his mental breakdown at age forty-four. An essay called “Fate and History” illustrates the struggle of the seventeen-year-old Christian who desired to adhere to traditional notions of creation that humans were made in the image of God:

[T]he doubt that power of habit, the drive towards the higher, the rejection of everything in existence . . . the doubt that humanity may have been led astray for two thousand years by a phantasm . . . —all these fight an indecisive battle until finally the pain of the experience, the sadness of the event drives our heart back into the old beliefs of childhood. But we scarcely even know whether humanity itself is only a step, a period in the universal, in evolution—whether it is not an arbitrary manifestation of God. . . . Is humanity only a means, or an end?<sup>7</sup>

This echoes Zarathustra's cry twenty-one years later: "If humanity still lacks a goal—is humanity not still lacking too?"<sup>8</sup>

Nietzsche wrote his thesis on Theognis of Megara and graduated from Pforta in September 1864 at the age of nineteen. When he, along with a group of others, was required to make a speech, he read a poem he had written for the occasion, "To the Unknown God": "Once more, before I wander on and turn my glance forward, I lift up my hands to you— . . . I have solemnly consecrated altars so that your voice might summon me again. . . . I want to know you, Unknown One . . . even serve you."<sup>9</sup> The pious tone of this poem however, substantially differs from one he had written the previous year, "Vor dem Kruzifix," which depicted a drunk throwing a bottle of Schnapps at a figure of Christ on the Cross.<sup>10</sup>

One month later Nietzsche was enrolled at the University of Bonn intending to focus on the philology of Gospel criticism and New Testament sources. Although his mother and sister expected Nietzsche to enter the ministry, by his twentieth year he refused to attend Easter services while home for the holidays. His mother wept and quarrelled with her son; his aunt intervened and explained to her that all great theologians go through periods of doubt. Because Elisabeth too was affected by her brother's questioning, Nietzsche's mother forbid them to discuss or to exchange letters concerning their Christian faith—to no avail. A few months later, Nietzsche wrote to his sister:<sup>11</sup>

Is it then a matter of acquiring the view of God, world, and atonement in which one can feel most comfortable? . . . Do we in our investigations, search for tranquility, peace, happiness? No—only truth, even if it were to be frightening and ugly.

One last remaining question. If we had believed since youth that salvation came not from Jesus, but from another—say Mohammed—would we not have enjoyed the same blessings? Here the ways of spirits divide. If you want to find peace of mind and happiness, then believe. If you want to be a disciple of truth, then search.

Between there are many halfway positions. But it all depends on the principal aim.<sup>12</sup>

This letter prompted Elisabeth to consult with two uncles who were pastors. It also anticipates Zarathustra's philosophy well over a decade later: "These young hearts have all become old already— . . . only weary, ordinary, and comfortable. They put it, 'We have become pious again.' . . . Were their ability different, their will would be different too. Those who are half-and-half spoil all that is whole."<sup>13</sup>

Darwinism, coupled with David Strauss' *The Life of Jesus*, in which Strauss argued that the gospels were myths and the historical Jesus was a ficti-

tious “superman” with divine attributes, were the primary reasons Nietzsche lost his Christian faith while studying theology and philology at the University of Bonn. After reading *The Life of Jesus*, Nietzsche, in a state of deep depression, dropped theology after only two semesters to concentrate solely on philology: “I craved something that would counterbalance my changing and restless proclivities, I craved an academic discipline that required aloof circumspection, logical coldness, the results of which would not instantly touch the heart.”<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche could no longer profess a belief in the existence of God. His aimlessness led him to the philosophy of Schopenhauer, which he came to out of “need,” “distress,” and “desire.”

A year later, when his teacher Friedrich Ritschl transferred to the University of Leipzig, Nietzsche was among the students who followed him. Nietzsche gained prominence among his contemporaries and was one of the founders of a University Classical Society in 1865. Two years later his student years were interrupted by a brief period of military service which resulted in a serious chest injury. After recuperating in Naumburg, he was back at the university in the fall of 1868 to continue his studies.

Nietzsche was recognized to be a brilliant student. After graduating at age twenty-four, upon Ritschl’s recommendation, he was appointed as an associate professor of philology at the University of Basle in Switzerland without writing the usually mandatory dissertation. A year later he was appointed as a full professor. This was the only regular employment that Nietzsche ever had.

The most significant events of Nietzsche’s life during this time period were twofold: he discovered the philosophy of Schopenhauer, and then several years later, the friendship of Richard Wagner. While a student at Leipzig, Nietzsche found Schopenhauer one day while browsing in a bookstore: “I trusted him at once and . . . though this is a foolish and immodest way of putting it, I understand him as though it were for me he had written.”<sup>15</sup>

Among other things, Nietzsche was attracted to Schopenhauer’s empathy toward the pain and suffering one experiences in this world, the struggle for existence, and the Buddhist notion that the satisfaction of desires was merely an escape from pain; pain quickly replenished by an endless cycle of unfilled desires and boredom. Schopenhauer held that all things were driven by the Cosmic Will, a blind nonrational force wreaking havoc on the Universe. Freedom for the individual essentially meant liberation from the Will by denying one’s desires. When one became aware of the illusory character of the phenomenal world, one could become more aware of one’s universal affinity with all things.<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche later rejected Schopenhauer’s cosmological Will and the related anthropological category of the will to existence as the primary life-force, substituting his own notion of the will to power. He adhered to Schopenhauer’s

conviction of the will as the primary life-force; however, he did not regard the Cosmic Will as a metaphysical principle beyond the universe, but as wholly within it.

In 1870 Nietzsche's professional career at Basle was interrupted by the Franco-Prussian War. He served as a medical orderly for three months; his service was curtailed when he contracted severe dysentery and diphtheria. Nietzsche's experience of war and suffering deeply distressed him. It strongly affected his outlook on Greek tragedy in relation to modern German culture and art, and also led to a growing restlessness with Wagner's optimism regarding the rise of the new *Reich* as an expression of Germanic health and strength.<sup>17</sup>

During his first month as an orderly, Nietzsche sent his mother "a souvenir of the terribly devastated battlefield, strewn with countless sad remains and smelling strongly of corpses";<sup>18</sup> a few months later while recovering he disclosed to his family that he was losing all sympathy for Germany's present war of conquest: "The future of German culture seems to me now more in danger than it ever was."<sup>19</sup>

Nietzsche returned to Basle in October. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) promoted a philology of the future and included a preface dedicated to Wagner. The work, in which Nietzsche celebrates Greek tragedy and compares the Apollonian and Dionysian with modern-day Schopenhauerism and Wagnerism is, as Nietzsche himself remarked, "badly written, embarrassing, and image confused," though its treatment of the relationship between art and science, Greek civilization and modernity, is often perceptive.<sup>20</sup> On the whole, it was unscholarly and contained no footnotes. Although the book moved Wagner to tears ("Dear friend! I have read nothing more beautiful" . . .); Ritschl first responded with silence and then "megalomania."<sup>21</sup> The work earned the young professor disrepute in academic circles who had eagerly anticipated the first publication from a philologist who had secured an academic chair without writing a dissertation.

Nietzsche's early *Untimely Meditations* (a collection of four essays published between the ages of twenty-nine and thirty-one), display his continued preoccupation with Darwinism, Christianity, Schopenhauer, and Wagner. The first essay, "David Strauss: The Confessor and the Writer," was a polemic against Strauss' new work, *The Old Faith and the New*. Nietzsche not only wrote the review because Wagner was publicly criticized by Strauss and he asked Nietzsche to retaliate on his behalf, but also because Nietzsche had a concern for the now deteriorating state of German culture and saw Strauss as contributing to it. Overall, Nietzsche had personal reasons for wanting to debunk Strauss; namely, Strauss' critique of Christ in *The Life of Jesus* had, years earlier, shattered Nietzsche's Christian faith to the point of no return.

According to Strauss, Jesus could no longer be an “object of worship”—even as a mere human being—because the gospels had been discolored to such an extent that the natural Jesus could never be restored. The only thing that could be known about Jesus was that he “expected to reappear . . . in order to inaugurate the kingdom of the Messiah as foretold by him.” Since this did not occur, Strauss concludes that Jesus was not the Son of God or divine. Moreover, a mere human being with such high expectations of himself must have been an “enthusiast.”<sup>23</sup>

Nietzsche attacked Strauss for making “a bitter mockery of the nameless sufferings of mankind” and for describing Jesus as “a visionary who would . . . hardly escape the madhouse.” He also blasted him for esteeming Darwin “as one of the greatest benefactors of mankind.”<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche argued that Darwinism, without an adequate ethical basis, was detrimental to the creation of culture. Moreover, whereas Strauss assumed that no creatures were exactly alike and that evolution depended upon the law of difference between individuals, he nonetheless admonished that individuals should behave as if no differences between them existed. Strauss’ philosophy of individuals, Nietzsche claimed, constituted nothing less than cultural nihilism: “Where has the moral teaching of Strauss-Darwin now gone, where has any courage whatever gone!”<sup>25</sup>

Nietzsche conceded that the Old Faith indeed was dying. But the New Faith, which demeaned Jesus Christ and consisted of little more than a fundamental piety toward the cosmos, was blasphemous: “Strauss . . . is not ashamed. We, however, turn aside for a moment to overcome our disgust.”<sup>26</sup> Strauss’ influence on Nietzsche remained intact throughout his life, as did Nietzsche’s contempt for him. In his last productive year, Nietzsche refers to Strauss in the *Antichrist* when touching upon the “psychology of the redeemer”: “The time is long past when I too, like every young scholar, slowly drew out the savor of the work of the incomparable Strauss. I was twenty years old then: now I am too serious for that. What do I care about the contradictions in the ‘tradition’?”<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche’s words are ironic; for the *Antichrist* is precisely concerned with severing Jesus from the tradition that he grew to abhor even more vehemently with time.

The point is that the young Nietzsche was torn between cultural Christianity and the historical Jesus; between Christianity’s view of creation and Darwinian evolution. On the one hand, he rejected creationism but regarded Jesus as an exemplary human being. On the other hand, he adopted the empirical truth of evolutionary theory, with the understanding that a new ethic and image of humanity *had* to be constructed in order to preserve the dignity and worth of individuals. In his second meditation, “On The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche writes:

If the doctrines of sovereign becoming, of the lack of any cardinal distinction between man and animal—doctrines which I consider true but deadly—are thrust upon the people for another generation . . . no one should be surprised if the people perishes of petty egoism, ossification and greed, falls apart and ceases to be a people; in its place systems of individualist egoism, brotherhoods for the rapacious exploitation of the non-brothers, and similar creations of utilitarian vulgarity may perhaps appear in the arena of the future. To prepare the way for these creations all one has to do is to go on writing history from the standpoint of the masses.<sup>28</sup>

According to Nietzsche, Christianity had hitherto been the power of history and the driving force moving the masses; however, to confuse power with greatness was to confuse quantity with quality. The “truest adherents of Christianity,” Nietzsche claims, “have always called into question its worldly success and power in history rather than promoted them: for they were accustomed to place themselves outside the ‘world’”:<sup>29</sup>

The noblest and most exalted things make no effect whatever on the masses; the historical success of Christianity, its power in history, its tenacity and durability, happily proves nothing with respect to the greatness of its founder, for if it did it would be evidence against him: between him and that historical success there lies a very dark and earthy stratum of passion, error, thirst for power and honour. . . . Greatness ought not to depend on success.<sup>30</sup>

Nietzsche affirmed Darwin's evolutionary theory but defied it by claiming that humans *could* rise above the beasts—precisely because they had the potential to overcome their natures. Though the instincts of humans were essentially no different from those of animals, the true representatives of humanity and culture were its “artists, saints and philosophers” who were “no longer animal” and whom nature created.<sup>31</sup> Rejecting Christian notions of eschatology which sought as the goal of humanity to be with God after death, Nietzsche, by age thirty, had formed a new theology which found the sacred in this life and an eschatology which located the sacred within history: “The goal of humanity cannot lie in its end, but only in its highest exemplars.”<sup>32</sup>

These exemplars were referred to as “free spirits” throughout Nietzsche's earlier and later writings. In *Zarathustra* they were called Overmen (*Übermenschen*), a term Nietzsche derived from several sources, including Goethe's *Faust*, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* by his colleague and mentor

Jacob Burckhardt, and the essay of his favorite American author, Emerson's "The Oversoul."<sup>33</sup>

Free spirits were regarded as exemplary ones that had "a courage without any desire for honors" and "a self-sufficiency that overflows and gives to men and things."<sup>34</sup> They sought knowledge without craving certainty; they possessed intellectual integrity; they were skeptics, but they also cheerfully welcomed criticism and contradiction from others—or from themselves—"in order to receive some hint about their own injustices" of which they were unaware.<sup>35</sup> They had a "new conscience for truths, new eyes for what is most distant," and "new ears for new music."<sup>36</sup> They were relentless questioners and non-conformists, unafraid of throwing out their old convictions in order to usher in the new and improved.

Free spirits have a passion that involves using a rare and singular standard "and almost a madness." They felt heat in things that felt cold to everyone else, they discovered values for which no scales had yet been invented, and they offered "sacrifices on altars . . . dedicated to an unknown god."<sup>37</sup> They were faithful to themselves, followed themselves, had reverence for self, and "unconditional freedom before oneself."<sup>38</sup> "He too," says Nietzsche, "knows the weekdays of bondage, dependence, and service. But from time to time he must get a Sunday of freedom."<sup>39</sup>

Free spirits were self-creators who molded their strengths and weaknesses "to give style to one's character."<sup>40</sup> They were honest with themselves "on matters of the spirit to the point of hardness";<sup>41</sup> they were "the new, the unique, the incomparable"<sup>42</sup>—the artists, saints, and philosophers. They were spirits Nietzsche made in his own ideal self-image:

Compared with the man who has tradition on his side . . . the free spirit is always weak, especially in his actions. . . . How does a strong spirit come into being? In one particular case this is how the genius is engendered. Where does the energy come from, the unbending strength, the endurance, with which one person, against all tradition, endeavors to acquire a quite individual understanding of the world?<sup>43</sup>

Appropriately, Zarathustra came crying in the wilderness—preparing the way for the *Übermensch*: the free spirit par excellence:

Once one said "God" when one gazed upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say "Overman. . . ."

Could you *create* a god?—So be silent about all gods! But you could surely create the overman. . . .



And you yourselves should create what you have hitherto called the world: the world will be formed in your image by your reason, your will, and your love! And truly, it will be to your happiness, you enlightened men!<sup>44</sup>

*Zarathustra* is also where Nietzsche articulated his concept of the eternal recurrence and initially announced that life itself was not, in contrast to Darwin, a struggle for existence. Nor was life, in contrast to Schopenhauer, driven by a will to existence: "For, what does not exist cannot will; but what is in existence, how could that still want existence?" Nietzsche concludes: "Only where there is life is there also will: not will to life but . . . will to power."<sup>45</sup>

By far the most profound influence on Nietzsche's early personal, religious, and intellectual development was Wagner, to whom he paid homage in his fourth meditation, "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth." In the work, Nietzsche contrasts the two enigmatic forces within Wagner, his "tyrannical will" and his "gentle spirit," esteeming Wagner as one in whom "the desire for supreme power is translated into artistic creativity."<sup>46</sup>

Nietzsche, who was a fan of *Tristan und Isolde* since the age of sixteen, met Wagner three years after his conversion to Schopenhauer, at the age of twenty-four. He greatly admired the score of *Die Meistersinger* for its unconventionality, and his enthusiasm for the composer's latest work was well-known throughout the University of Leipzig when Nietzsche was in his final year as a student. By happenstance, Wagner's sister lived in Leipzig and was friendly with Professor Ritschl and his wife; through this connection, Nietzsche was awarded a meeting with his cultural hero. The meeting changed Nietzsche's life. Not only was he impressed with the composer's charm and wit, he was also surprised and ecstatic to discover that Wagner was also a Schopenhauer enthusiast. Wagner, who was notoriously egotistical and who sought disciples, enjoyed the philologist's admiration and invited Nietzsche to visit him again to talk philosophy and music. A few months later, when Nietzsche took his professorial position at the University of Basle, which was only a short distance from Wagner's Swiss villa in Tribtschen, Nietzsche sought out Wagner's companionship.

Nietzsche quickly became an intimate of Wagner and his mistress Cosima (who married Wagner in 1870, but at this time was not yet divorced from composer Hans von Bülow), and became their regular house guest on weekends. The Tribtschen years were by far the happiest of Nietzsche's life and he usually spent Christmas and other holidays with this family to which he felt he belonged. Wagner, who was thirty-one years Nietzsche's senior, became a mentor and a father figure to him. In turn, throughout the course of their friendship, which lasted almost a decade, Nietzsche was assigned such tasks as doing

the family's Christmas shopping, editing Wagner's autobiography, buying Wagner's underclothes, and reporting to Wagner the intellectual currents within the academic community. Academicians were generally hostile towards the composer and his attempts to redeem German culture through his art.

Nietzsche's visits to the Wagner household were thoroughly enjoyed by both Richard and Cosima ("Certainly few people have so much feeling for our suffering and joys as he") and they regarded Nietzsche as Wagner's most loyal supporter.<sup>47</sup> This relationship was sparked by their common love for music (Nietzsche was an amateur composer and pianist) and intellectual conversations. Nietzsche often read his own essays to the Wagners, who in turn responded to and critiqued them. Moreover—at least on one occasion—Wagner read Nietzsche's essays to guests in his absence "somewhat to their dismay."<sup>48</sup>

It is clear that the Wagners recognized Nietzsche's exceptional intellect and had an interest in the young professor's work, but only to the degree that it was directly related to promoting their own ideas concerning the redemption of German culture. As Ernest Newman, Wagner's foremost biographer in the 1940s observes: "He [Nietzsche] was to be theirs and theirs alone, body and soul: a tight hand would have to be kept on the jesses lest the young hawk should take a flight on his own."<sup>49</sup> No one of Nietzsche's calibre, says Newman, "had ever come into such close relation with Wagner's intellectual life; yet towards no one else did he behave so imperiously."<sup>50</sup>

Wagner, who was excessively distrustful, became irate when Nietzsche did not accept invitations to visit. Wagner often interpreted Nietzsche's occasional absence as signs of defection, when, in fact, his overwhelming university obligations usually prevented him from fulfilling their frequent requests for his presence. Much of the first few years of their relationship consisted of Wagner presiding over Nietzsche and testing his disciple's loyalty ("My dear friend: Your silence surprises me. . . . I am beginning to have my suspicions about you"),<sup>51</sup> and Nietzsche's proving time and again his supreme allegiance to Wagner ("Most revered master! In the first onrush of the opening semester . . . nothing more stimulating could have happened to me than to receive a copy of your 'Beethoven'").<sup>52</sup> The young Nietzsche was enamored with the composer who possessed an artistic brilliance, a magnetic personality, and—to a large degree—Nietzsche himself. Nietzsche believed that Wagner and Schopenhauer were the greatest creative geniuses to surface in Europe after the life of Goethe.

The fourth meditation, "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth," was published in the spring of 1876 in honor of the Bayreuth opera house and festivals which were taking place there. The essay—although it has hostile undertones—was a piece of promotional propaganda paying homage to Wagner and his art. Even so, private observations recorded in Nietzsche's notebooks from 1874 onward

reveal Nietzsche's growing discontent with Wagnerian principles, and thus anticipate the infamous breakup with him that became evident publicly at the Bayreuth festival during the summer of '76 (when Nietzsche fled the festival). This split was finalized at the beginning of 1878. In particular, Nietzsche was concerned with Wagner's anti-French and anti-Jewish sentiments. He refers to Wagner in his notebooks as "the tyrant who suppresses all individuality other than his own and his followers'," and then adds: "This is Wagner's great danger, to refuse to accept Brahms, etc., or the Jews."<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere, Nietzsche writes that Wagner offended the Jews in Germany, who owned most of the money and the press: "To start with, it was done without cause or reason, later by way of revenge."<sup>54</sup> In an interesting note which is of further concern here, Nietzsche observes:

Wagner is a modern man, incapable of deriving encouragement or strength from a belief in God. He does not believe that he is in the safekeeping of a benevolent being but he believes in himself. Nobody who believes only in himself can be entirely honest. Wagner gets rid of his weaknesses by loading them on to his time and his enemies.<sup>55</sup>

Historically, much controversy has surrounded the breakup between Wagner and Nietzsche, particularly the reasons for it. Some insist that Nietzsche rejected Wagner because his mentor converted to Christianity (in 1876); others speculate that Nietzsche was secretly in love with Cosima, and that this caused the severance. Although these explanations may contain elements of truth, they are nonetheless superficial and are not adequate to explain Nietzsche's decision to end the friendship.

Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, who remained an enthusiastic admirer of Wagner throughout her life, states (1895; 1912) that Nietzsche anticipated leaving Wagner long before the festival and that he was reluctant to publish his fourth meditation because "he had lost his faith in Wagner's Art."<sup>56</sup> She claims that her brother fled Bayreuth because he was disappointed with the operas (and that Wagner's conversion to Christianity several months later was the main cause of the break). Newman (1946) resists Elisabeth's rendition. He demonstrates that Nietzsche had heard none of the first performances, but only a few "imperfect rehearsals," and concludes that she typically tells the story in a misleading way for the purpose of concealing that her brother was a "pitifully distempered man" who behaved like a "sick spoiled child" during his short stay in Bayreuth.<sup>57</sup>

Newman argues that the breakup was precipitated not by Nietzsche's discontent with Wagner's art, but by his own scientific freethinking, his "seemingly irresponsible changefulness" and the milieu of the Bayreuth festival

itself—not the performances.<sup>58</sup> He argues that Nietzsche's increasing ill-health, his disappointment over the types of people attending the festival (well-fed, bourgeois, beer drinking pseudo-intellectuals), and the strong egos of the two men made a severance inevitable. These were the primary reasons Nietzsche became what the Wagners' later referred to as an "apostate."<sup>59</sup>

Kaufmann (1950), who takes issue with Newman, stresses that Bayreuth was not the *cause* of the breach, but rather the *occasion* for it. Kaufmann (like Elisabeth) stresses that the break was gradual and that the key to understanding the termination lies in how Wagner appeared to Nietzsche at the time he broke from him. Newman, Kaufmann observes, is correct to describe Wagner as an "undisputed dictator" who "worked himself into a paroxysm over Bismarck's tolerance towards the Jews."<sup>60</sup> And he is also correct to perceive factual errors in Elisabeth's rendering of the account concerning the events taking place that summer.

However, in the midst of his minute attention to detail in refuting Elisabeth, and in his admiration for Wagner and his music, Newman (like Elisabeth) attaches no importance to the composer's prejudices. Newman fails to see that Nietzsche, while working on his pro-Wagner essay, realized how dangerous Wagner was. Nietzsche could tolerate Wagner's personal idiosyncracies within the confines of the household, but his public campaign and the widespread adoration and support he sought was another matter entirely. Moreover, as Kaufmann argues, Nietzsche was now heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideals and propagated the vision of the Good European (and the mixture of races), in opposition to Wagner's antisemitic German nationalism; hence, he could not reconcile his ideals with those of the Master.

While Elisabeth appeals to art (and then to Wagner's conversion), and Newman to Nietzsche's physical and temperamental disorders, Kaufmann approaches the matter from a different angle: "Bayreuth had become the Holy City of anti-Semitic Christian chauvinism."<sup>61</sup> The breach between Wagner and Nietzsche developed gradually, as Nietzsche became more aware that it was impossible to serve both Wagner and his own call. Instead of coming out in the open, Nietzsche's physical ailments, typified by chronic migraines and waves of nausea—although they were very real—were perhaps to a certain degree psychogenic. They were made more acute by his mental anguish and they served as an excuse to stay away from Wagner after he had moved to Bayreuth (in 1872).<sup>62</sup>

Kaufmann's interpretation is quite credible, agreeing both with the facts surrounding the breakup and with Nietzsche's own rendition of why he left Wagner. The best years of the Wagner-Nietzsche friendship were the first four years from 1868 to 1872, when Wagner moved from Tribschen to Bayreuth to prepare for the festivals. After that time, although Wagner often invited

Nietzsche to visit, he began to decline. Although the two men corresponded, they did not see each other from August 1874 to July 1876—much to Wagner's growing agitation ("O Friend: Why do you not come to us? . . . If you persist in doing this I can do nothing for you. Your room is ready").<sup>63</sup> In the summer of '76 Nietzsche attended the festival for a few days, fled to the mountains for ten days to work on *Human, all-too-Human*, and then returned again to the festival at his sister's request before going back to Basle with his Jewish friend and colleague, Dr. Paul Rée, and travelling companion, Edouard Schuré. Schuré writes: "When we left together, not a criticism escaped him, not a word of censure, but he showed the resigned sadness of a beaten man."<sup>64</sup>

The final meeting between Wagner and Nietzsche occurred a few months later. Nietzsche, Rée, and Malwida von Meysenbug (an active women's rights supporter who also played a mother role to younger intellectuals and artists) were staying in Sorrento wherein the three of them visited the Wagners at the end of October. On November first, Cosima wrote in her diary that Rée visited that same evening, and that his "cold and precise character does not appeal to us." She adds that "on closer inspection" she and Richard came "to the conclusion that he must be an Israelite."<sup>65</sup>

During that week Nietzsche visited the Wagners, which was the last time he ever saw them again. Wagner and Nietzsche took an evening walk during which Wagner allegedly raved about his new religious conversion, and also about *Parsifal*, a Christian opera he was currently working on.<sup>66</sup> Although a verbal dispute between the two apparently did not occur, a clash of ideals certainly did: it is clear that Nietzsche's friendship with Rée, and the Wagners' response to it, caused a further rift between them. Conversely, Wagner's sudden conversion to Christianity did not fare well with Nietzsche.<sup>67</sup>

Although Nietzsche continued sparse correspondence with the Wagners throughout that and the following year (the day before Christmas '76 they received a note from Nietzsche that he now rejected Schopenhauer's teachings), he nonetheless avoided personal contact with them.<sup>68</sup> The break was formally sealed in the winter and spring of 1878. Wagner sent Nietzsche his *Parsifal*, signing it "The Member of the High Consistory." A few months later, Nietzsche sent Wagner his new book, *Human, all-too-Human*, which was dedicated to Voltaire and included a whimsical salutation inscribed on the first page:

To the Master and the Mistress, a cheerful greeting from Friedrich Freemind in Basle, blessed with a new child. He desires that they with moved hearts examine the child to see whether it takes after the father. . . . Whatever its fate in its earthly wandering, it wants to be liked; not by many; fifteen at most; for others it will be mockery and

torment. But before we send it out in the world, may the Master's faithful eye gaze on it and bless it, and may the wise grace of the Mistress follow it for evermore.<sup>69</sup>

This was interpreted by the Wagners as a betrayal. The two would never meet, speak, or correspond again after this exchange.<sup>70</sup>

Many have accepted Elisabeth's tale that the break ultimately occurred because Wagner converted to Christianity, expressed in his *Parsifal*, and pagan Nietzsche could not bear to see Wagner become Christian. However, Nietzsche viewed Wagner's conversion as a travesty: "If Wagner was a Christian, then Liszt was perhaps a church father!"<sup>71</sup> Kaufmann correctly notes that Nietzsche took Christianity quite seriously, that Nietzsche saw Wagner's *Parsifal* as simply another occasion of religious hypocrisy, and that the break occurred long before Nietzsche received the Christian opera in 1878 with a note from Wagner. Kaufmann's observations, as well as mine, stand in accord with Nietzsche's own candid remarks on the matter (to which neither Newman or Förster-Nietzsche appeal):

By the summer of 1876, during the time of the first *Festspiele*, I had said goodbye in my heart to Wagner . . . he had condescended to everything I despise—even to anti-Semitism. It was indeed high time to say farewell: soon after, I received the proof. Richard Wagner, apparently most triumphant, but in truth a decaying and despairing decadent, suddenly sank down, helpless and broken, before the Christian cross. . . . As I proceeded alone I trembled. . . . I was henceforth sentenced to mistrust more profoundly . . . to be more profoundly *alone* than ever before. For I had had nobody except Richard Wagner.<sup>72</sup>

This passage reverberates in *Zarathustra*, in a section appropriately entitled "On Apostates":

Verily, many among them once lifted their legs like dancers. . . . Then they thought better of it. Just now I saw one groveling—crawling back to the cross. . . . Did their hearts perhaps grow faint because solitude swallowed me like a whale? . . . Alas, there are always a few who retain their courageous bearing. . . . The rest, however, are cowards.<sup>73</sup>

Historically, one should carefully note the political games surrounding interpretations of the break, which initially stem from Elisabeth's skewed biog-

raphy (and have continued to manifest themselves in countless forms to this very day). Elisabeth and Newman, although they disagree on minor specifics (art vs. Nietzsche's ill temperament), hide (or protect) Wagner's antisemitism and tend to implicate Nietzsche as somewhat "immoral" (or mentally imbalanced) for his anti-Christianity. Kaufmann exposes Wagner's antisemitism, stressing that one can be ethical without being Christian. In retrospect, from a religiopolitical standpoint, the stakes are high (especially now that Wagnerism is regarded by historians as the root of National Socialism): If the truth be known that a very sane Nietzsche indeed opposed Wagner because of his *anti-semitic Christianity*, not only Wagner, but Christianity itself, suffers an embarrassment at the hands of a "pagan philosopher" who opposed Christianity on ethical grounds. Thus, politically speaking, three main counterstrategies could solve the dilemma. First, Nietzsche could be dismissed as deranged or immoral for attacking Christianity, and his opposition to antisemitism could be ignored, suppressed, and even derided (enter Elisabeth and Newman). Second, which is most interesting, Nietzsche himself could be mythologized as an antisemite which would discredit him ethically, and would also serve to intimidate Jews (the Nazis, who were Wagnerites, used this tactic). And finally, negatively portraying Nietzsche as both a vicious anti-Christian *and* an antisemite would conceivably be the perfect solution (which, in fact, is the notorious image of Nietzsche that has lingered on in the popular consciousness for nearly a century—and even more so since the time of the Second World War!).

Regardless, it is clear that Nietzsche's break with Wagner was extremely painful and was caused by (1) Nietzsche's discontent with his friend's anti-Jewish prejudices and his conviction that Wagner's pro-nationalism, which was vigorously seeking public approval, was dangerous, (2) his realization that Wagnerian art was not fated nor suited to be the salvation of European culture, and that Wagner himself was not the redeemer, (3) the fact that Nietzsche, like Wagner, was egotistical, longed to be a free spirit and cultural savior, and thus believed he needed complete independence from his Master, and (4) Wagner's conversion to Christianity repulsed Nietzsche and sealed the breakup once and for all.

In the spring of '78 when Nietzsche sent out over twenty copies of *Human* to the Wagners and various friends, it caused great shock and upheaval within the Bayreuth circle. The book's derogatory remarks against "The Artist" and Christianity, coupled with a lengthy aphorism denouncing antisemitism and German nationalism (no. 475), resulted in Nietzsche's "grand excommunication" from the clique. Nietzsche, addressing Wagnerites, writes:

Every nation, every man has . . . dangerous characteristics, it is cruel to demand that the Jew should be an exception. Those characteris-

tics may even be . . . dangerous and frightful in him, and *perhaps* [emphasis mine] the youthful Jew of the stock exchange is the most repugnant invention of the whole human race. Nevertheless, I would like to know how much one must excuse in the overall accounting of a people which, not without guilt on all our parts, has had the most sorrowful history of all peoples, and to whom we owe the noblest human being (Christ), the purest philosopher (Spinoza), the mightiest book, and the most effective moral code in the world. Furthermore, in the darkest medieval times . . . it was the Jewish freethinkers, scholars, and doctors, who, under the harshest personal pressure, held fast to the banner of enlightenment and intellectual independence.<sup>74</sup>

Whereas Peter Gast, Rée, and Burckhardt applauded Nietzsche's book; Wagner, fuming in Bayreuth, blamed Rée for exerting a Semitic influence on his disciple. Richard and Cosima sensed the "guiding hand" of Rée to be the true cause of Nietzsche's apostasy. Cosima wrote to a friend: "In the end, Israel took over in the shape of a Dr. Rée, very slick, very cool, . . . representing the relationship of Judea to Germania. . . . It is the victory of evil over good."<sup>75</sup>

Elisabeth was unduly distressed by her brother's latest antics, for fear that her relationship with the Wagners would be ruined, which it was not. Cosima assured Elisabeth a place in their lives, while adamantly condemning Nietzsche's book as the product of a sick mind—or as Richard put it—"mental spasms."<sup>76</sup> Nietzsche, however, was quite clever in offending Wagner, as illustrated in aphorism 113: "When we hear the old bells ringing out on a Sunday morning, we ask ourselves: can it be possible? This is for a Jew, crucified two thousand years ago, who said he was the son of God. The proof for such a claim is wanting."<sup>77</sup> Wagner, who shunned institutional religion, nonetheless worshipped Jesus and fiercely insisted on his non-Judaic origins.<sup>78</sup>

During the fall of 1878, Wagner sniped at Nietzsche in the *Bayreuther Blätter* (without mentioning him by name); years later Nietzsche wrote two polemical works specifically directed against the composer ("Why did I never forgive Wagner? That he condescended to the Germans—that he became *reichsdeutsch*").<sup>79</sup> Even so, publicly and privately he continued to credit much of his early intellectual development to Wagner and spoke fondly of his memories at Tribtschen: "Certainly the time I spent with him in Tribtschen and enjoyed through him at Bayreuth (in 1872, not in 1876) is the happiest I have had in my whole life. . . . But the omnipotent violence of our tasks drove us asunder. . . . In any case I have had to pay dearly for my craze for Wagner."<sup>80</sup>

It is clear that Wagner, who served as a father figure to Nietzsche, was an object of worship who fulfilled Nietzsche's highly emotional need for a male mentor. Although Nietzsche's break with Wagner was due to ethical consider-



ations, it was also a break that was psychologically driven: Nietzsche believed that liberation and emotional detachment from others was essential for human growth.<sup>81</sup>

Nietzsche's tendency to liberate himself from "externals," including family, friends, mentors, society, religion, and God(s) was formulated during his early years and became even more excessive as time went on. Nietzsche's discomfort, as well as his intense desire, to create substantial intimate relationships perhaps arose from an overwhelming fear that significant persons would ultimately forsake him, as did his father. Interestingly, although Nietzsche facilitated the break with Wagner, in a personal letter to von Meysenbug years later he wrote: "Any news from the Wagners? It's three years now since I've heard from them. *They* abandoned me too." Here, Nietzsche's reversal of events perhaps displays his need for a self-fulfilling prophecy; the hallowed prediction that those he felt closest to and trusted would eventually leave and betray him: "I knew long ago that Wagner, as soon as he realized that our aims had diverged, would do just that."<sup>82</sup>

By the time of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche basically equates the notion of love with rejection, and thus regards the former as something to be resisted by "creators who must become hard": "What does he know of love who did not have to despise precisely what he loved!"<sup>83</sup> These sentiments are echoed when Zarathustra speaks of friendship ("You should be closest to him with your heart when you resist him"),<sup>84</sup> and of God ("I love him who chastens his god because he loves his god; for he must perish of the wrath of his god").<sup>85</sup> Nietzsche writes to Overbeck:

I think you know what Zarathustra's warning, "Be hard!" means in my own case. My idea that justice should be done to every particular person, and that I should in the last analysis treat precisely what is most hostile to me with the greatest gentleness . . . involves danger upon danger, not only for me but also for my task: it is here that the hardening is necessary and, with a view to educating others, an occasional cruelty. . . .

For my part, I mean to break off relations with everyone who sides with my sister; from now on, there can be no half-measures for me.<sup>86</sup>

According to Sigmund Freud (whose first great work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, was published the year Nietzsche died), the key to understanding Nietzsche was that he lost his father at an early age and grew up in a family of women who were pious Christians. Because Nietzsche fantasized about being Christ during puberty, and labeled himself an Antichrist at the end of his life,

Freud reasons that in his denial of God, Nietzsche was merely killing his father once again.

Nietzsche's personality traits fascinated Freud and his colleagues, who included Otto Rank and Alfred Adler. In 1908, Nietzsche's autobiographical work *Ecce Homo*, written only months before his mental collapse, was discussed at length at the meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. Among other things, the participants discussed Nietzsche's nature against the struggle of his own illness, his homosexual and narcissistic tendencies, and his paternal heritage. Many participants opined that Nietzsche displayed symptoms of severe neurosis. However, Freud and Rank dissented that neurosis was the correct diagnosis. Rank claimed that Nietzsche had a "sadistic disposition" which was accompanied by tremendous repression. And Freud diagnosed Nietzsche as a paretic. Although Freud agreed that there were indeed "disturbing elements" in Nietzsche's personality, these did not constitute a neurotic illness: "The degree of introspection achieved by Nietzsche had never been achieved by anyone. . . ." Even so, says Freud, Nietzsche forever remained the moralist: a major impediment to his personal growth was that he could not "free himself of the theologian."<sup>87</sup>

The influence of Wagner, Darwinism, Schopenhauer, the historical Jesus, and nineteenth-century German Christianity weighed heavily upon Nietzsche's philosophy. These forces shaped Nietzsche's psychology, theology, and philosophy. After his university retirement at age thirty-four, due to his deteriorating health, this philosophy began to flourish. As will be shown further, the echoes and responses to these influences resound in *Zarathustra*.

Nietzsche's early years were marked by a constant disillusionment with, and subsequent rejection of, personal, cultural, and spiritual gods. This is evidenced by his journey from Christianity to Schopenhauer to Wagner and beyond. As a fourteen-year-old, he believed that heaven would unite him with his father and his brother; at seventeen he wrote that the incarnation showed "that man is not to seek his bliss in eternity, but to found his heaven on earth."<sup>88</sup> At twenty-four Nietzsche professed that in Wagner's company he felt himself to be in the presence of "immaculate greatness";<sup>89</sup> then, a decade later he could find the sacred nowhere: not in Wagner, in Schopenhauer, or in the Christian religion. Even so, instead of grieving the death of God, humanity could now become its own creators, sustainers, and redeemers—there was no other hope: "Since man no longer believes that a God is guiding the destinies of the world as a whole . . . men must set themselves ecumenical goals, embracing the whole earth." "This," Nietzsche said, "is the enormous task of the great minds of the next century."<sup>90</sup>

Nietzsche's philosophy was consumed by efforts to establish human worth on the basis of self-affirmation and justification. It was diametrically opposed

to traditional Lutheran notions of justification by faith, and to notions that morality was grounded on principles of unegoistic or selfless actions, which he regarded as dangerous psychological illusions. His break from Wagner largely informed his view that humans must first affirm themselves as opposed to sacrificing themselves to or for another, a tenet Nietzsche saw as central to Christianity.<sup>91</sup> From Nietzsche's perspective, the concept of God as bestowing worth upon human life and directing humanity's destiny toward a metaphysical end, was over. Human worth was abolished with the advent of Darwinism; the predestined metaphysical end had to be abolished with Christianity and replaced with a new ethic. Hence, Nietzsche perceived his task as creating new values, meanings, and goals by which modernity could live:

What alone can be *our* doctrine. That no one *gives* man his qualities—neither God, nor society, nor his parents and ancestors, nor he himself. . . .

One is necessary, one is a piece of fatefulness, one belongs to the whole, one is in the whole; there is nothing which could judge, measure, compare, or sentence our being, for [it] would mean sentencing the whole. . . . That nobody is held responsible any longer . . . that the world does not form a unity either as a sensorium or as "spirit"—that alone is the great liberation; with this alone is the innocence of becoming restored. The concept of "God" was until now the greatest objection to existence. We deny God, we deny the responsibility in God: only thereby do we redeem the world.<sup>92</sup>