

Revolt against Schopenhauer and Wagner?

An Insight into Nietzsche's Perspectivist Aesthetics

MARGUS VIHALEM

The article focuses on the basic assumptions of Nietzschean aesthetics, arguing that Nietzsche's aesthetics in his later period cannot be thoroughly understood outside of the context of the long-term conflict with romanticist ideals and without considering Arthur Schopenhauer's and Richard Wagner's aesthetic and metaphysical positions. Nietzsche's thinking on art and aesthetics is in fact inseparable from his philosophical standpoint, which complements and renders explicit the hidden meaning of his considerations on art. The article pays particular attention to Nietzsche's writings on Wagner and Wagnerism and attempts to show that the ideas expressed in these writings form the very basis of Nietzschean aesthetics and, to some extent, had a remarkable impact on his whole philosophy. The article also argues that Nietzsche's aesthetics may even be regarded, to a certain extent, as the cornerstone of his philosophical project.

Only aesthetically can the world be justified.
– Friedrich Nietzsche¹

I The background: Christianity, romanticism and Schopenhauer

Nietzsche undoubtedly stands as one of the most prominent figures of the anti-romanticist philosophy of art in the late nineteenth century, opposing to the romanticist vision of the future founded on feebleness the classic vision of the future based on forcefulness and simple beauty.² Nietzsche's influence can be seen extensively in very different realms of twentieth-century philosophical thinking on art, from philosophical aesthetics to particular art procedures and techniques. The specific approach he endorsed concerning matters of art and aesthetics is by

¹ F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 81.

² F. Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe (KSA)*. Vol. 2. *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999, p. 652.

no means the sole outcome of his concepts of the superman and the will to power, usually viewed as the main highlights of his theorising, but should be articulated in more specific terms of forces and values favourable or hostile to life, which were for him constituent features of any aesthetic standpoint.

His sceptical and later even cynical attitude towards the romanticist movement is well known, and this attitude is best manifested in the portrait he drew of the spirit of romanticism: characterised by exaltation, buffoonery and auto-hypnosis.³ Intrinsically, these attributes go hand in hand with the moralistic statement that romanticism explicitly combines the relatively naïve Rousseauist ideal of the essential goodness of the human being with the Christian idea of the basic binary opposition of good and evil and of the guilt related to these basic oppositions.⁴ The romanticist movement, together with Rousseauist and Christian premises, constituted the very framework of the nineteenth century – the era that for Nietzsche carried another essential characteristic: basically⁵ a century of bourgeois labour, which conferred on art a very peculiar task: distracting and entertaining the bourgeois of the emerging capitalist society. We can detect, in line with Nietzsche's thought, a serious conflict occurring between *le grand art* and *l'art mineur*. The rampant growth of minor art, destined to become an appropriate distraction for the rapidly growing middle class and gradually conquering the whole domain of art, sealed the fate not only of superior art, but also of the artist and art⁶, both doomed to disappear in the historical backstage of class struggles.

It is in the broader context of this critical attitude towards the romantic artist, identified as being 'made creative by his great displeasure with himself' and as operating out of 'dissatisfaction with the real'⁷, that we have to delineate the late Nietzsche's militant aversion to both Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner. Wagner was an artist and composer of musical drama who was also a widely acknowledged theoretician, and whose writings, composed in the aftermath of the romantic movement and in the vein of Schopenhauerian metaphysics (Nietzsche sarcastically presented Wagner as the most famous of Schopenhauer's followers⁸), represent a conceptual account of what he strove for in his art. This aesthetic dispute, of which Nietzsche was, in fact, the only active protagonist, was undeniably one of the most intriguing in the entire history of aesthetics, opposing two major figures of nineteenth century intellectual life. To some extent, this conflict has often been perceived, especially in popular interpretations, as potentially reducible to a clash involving two conflicting personalities or, what is worse, as a (natural) clash opposing two extraordinary geniuses. Such interpretations, emphasising personal

3 'Schwärmerei, Schauspielerei, Selbstbetrügerei' – F. Nietzsche, KSA. Vol. 12. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887, p. 441; (Nietzsche's critical German edition compiled by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari – Kritische Studienausgabe – has been used to refer to those posthumously published fragments that are not available in the English edition of Writings from the Late Notebooks).

4 F. Nietzsche, Writings from the Late Notebooks, p. 172.

5 F. Nietzsche, KSA. Vol. 2. Menschliches, Allzumenschliches, pp. 623–624.

6 F. Nietzsche, KSA. Vol. 9. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1880–1882, p. 25.

7 F. Nietzsche, Writings from the Late Notebooks, p. 82; The basis of this dissatisfaction with the real is to be found in our naïve propensity to privilege 'art for art's sake', a principle that Nietzsche explicitly rejects: 'it amounts to slandering reality' (p. 206).

8 F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 96.

differences of taste, are naïvely inadequate and tend to overlook the more constituent aspects of the meaning of the conflict, as well as the general ideas of Nietzsche's aesthetics. As Nietzsche stressed on several occasions, he never attacked individuals, but rather what they represented, i.e. their *ideas, ideals and idols*. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that there are some powerful subjective as well as philosophical and even political factors that may have paved the way to this conflict. Probably the most obvious of those factors is Nietzsche's vehement criticism of the merciless mediocratisation of European culture under the crushing weight of nihilist values, represented precisely by both Schopenhauer's pessimism and Wagner's progressive return to Christian values.⁹ This phenomenon, attacked by him throughout his whole work, undeniably determined the task to be fulfilled: to offer an extensive diagnosis which made it possible to disinfect culture, to help bring more air and light to new tendencies that displayed a greater abundance of power.¹⁰ The identification of Wagner as a nihilist artist and actor *par excellence* makes us ask: what precisely is this nihilist moment that Nietzsche believed existed to a suffocating degree in Wagner's art?

Nietzsche's aesthetic standpoint may be described as paying considerably more attention to the status of the artist and less to the status of arts and the role of the spectator or consumer.¹¹ Nietzsche himself explicitly indicated in various places¹² that he clearly privileged the viewpoint of the artist to the detriment of that of the spectator. His position grew out of the conviction that the artist's good health, necessarily embracing both mind and body, was the indispensable precondition for healthy art. Submitting the figure of the artist to closer scrutiny, one notices that Nietzsche's conception of aesthetics goes beyond the strict realm of aesthetic creation and values. As it tries to understand the process of creation and its psychological circumstances, aesthetics inevitably remain intertwined with psychology or, to use the terminology of his later texts, the psychology of the depths, or physiology.¹³ An illustration of this psychological determinacy is found in Nietzsche's statement that 'Music does *not* reveal the essence of the world and its 'will', as claimed by Schopenhauer ...: music only reveals our dear musicians! And they don't even know it! – And what a good thing, perhaps, that they don't know it!'¹⁴ A study of the artist's complex configuration of the instincts and values that underlie those instincts is indispensable. As in the realm of morality, in the realm of aesthetic values we must

9 'Richard Wagner, ostensibly the most triumphant creature alive; as a matter of fact, though, a cranky and desperate *décadent*, suddenly fell helpless and broken on his knees before the Christian cross.' – F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*. E-book. The Project Gutenberg, 2008, p. 70.

10 F. Nietzsche, *KSA*. Vol. 9. *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1880–1882*, p. 14.

11 Nevertheless, Nietzsche also sometimes adopted the point of view of the spectator, for instance in commenting on Wagner's or Bizet's influence on the listener (see for example *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 19).

12 For instance, in F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 81.

13 'Aesthetic is indeed nothing more than applied physiology' or 'My objections to Wagner's music are physiological objections'. – F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 59.

14 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 70.

also deal with a certain semiotics¹⁵ of values. To understand art means most of all 'to look at art through the prism of life.'¹⁶ How are we to understand this expression?

Before attempting to respond to this question, we have to take a short look at Nietzsche's first book, which is also one of the most controversial of his books – *The Birth of Tragedy* – where Nietzsche distinguishes between two fundamental drives or, as he calls them later, two '[f]undamental psychological experiences': the Apollonian world,

which designates the enraptured lingering before a fabricated, dreamed-up world of *beautiful illusion* as a redemption from *becoming*. Dionysos, on the other hand, stands namesake for a becoming which is actively grasped, subjectively experienced, as a raging voluptuousness of the creative man who also knows the wrath of the destroyer. Antagonism of these two experiences and the *desires* that underlie them: the first wants appearance *to be eternal*, and before it man becomes quiet, free of wishes, smooth as a still sea, healed, in agreement with himself and all existence; the second desire urges men towards becoming, towards the voluptuousness of making things become, i.e. of creating and annihilating.¹⁷

Dionysus, according to the terminology of his later works, is to be explained in terms of the will to power, this inner world of 'an insatiable craving to manifest power; or to employ, exercise power, as a creative drive, etc.'¹⁸ Any creative activity is related to pleasure, while to act means to surpass, to become master of something, and this becoming master of something necessarily implies the intensification of the feeling of power.¹⁹ The whole of *The Birth of Tragedy*, as Nietzsche indicated²⁰, not without a certain self-irony, in a preface written many years after the publication of the book, is about the fundamental conflict inherent in the artist's nature: the artist is depicted there as being inescapably torn apart between these incompatible forces and struggling to go beyond this very split. This is what Nietzsche called his own 'aesthetic justification' of the existence of the world: if the Apollonian desire for beauty and beautiful forms is a preliminary condition of this justification, the eternally creative, recognised in the figure of Dionysus, was a fundamental outcome in Nietzsche's eyes.²¹ The static Apollonian beauty is destroyed by the eternally destructive, the painful ugliness that gives new meaning to existence and life. Nietzsche succeeded in constructing a conception of tragic art that retains both Dionysian and Apollonian ways of experiencing; appearance and beauty are both affirmed and destroyed, and resignation is overcome by what is to come. There is

15 Nietzsche explicitly employed the term 'semiotics' (*Semiotik*) for example in his late book *Twilight of the Idols* (KSA. Vol. 6. Der Fall Wagner. Götzen-Dämmerung. Der Antichrist. Ecce homo. Dionysos-Dithyramben. Nietzsche contra Wagner, p. 98).

16 F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 5.

17 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, pp. 80–81.

18 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 26.

19 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 129.

20 F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 8.

21 F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 7.

no final peace to be envisaged, neither Apollo nor Dionysus ever really die, and the world is defined by its contradictory character.

As we later see, this fundamental conflict plays a crucial role in the explanation of the Nietzschean aesthetic judgement of the complexity of the Wagner phenomenon. Being of Dionysian character at the beginning, Wagner later became an Apollonian figure who, like Schopenhauer before him, aspired to beauty, quietness, healing and complete satisfaction, i.e. the annihilation of all desires. This is the path of decadence and decline: from being a restless revolutionary, Wagner became an anti-Dionysian who let his work be contaminated by the reactive values of the Christian doctrine

which is, and wants to be, *only* moral, and which, with its absolute criteria (its insistence on god's truthfulness, for example) banishes art, *all* art, to the realm of *lies*, and thus negates, damns and condemns it. Behind this way of thinking and evaluating, which is bound to be hostile to art if it is at all genuine, I had always felt its *hostility to life*, a furious, vengeful enmity towards life itself; for all life rests on semblance, art, deception, prismatic effects, the necessity of perspectivism and error.²²

Art is strictly dependent on life and its active forces; art that denigrates life denigrates itself and is therefore doomed to extinction. Both Schopenhauer and Wagner were portrayed by Nietzsche as poor and unhappy preachers of morality,²³ who had both made the same fundamental mistake that also finally pervaded their aesthetic insights: they became mystics and deniers of the world and they both worked against life, which Nietzsche explicitly acknowledged with increasing intensity.²⁴ Finally, by rejecting life and exchanging it for redemption, they both rejected pain as well as pleasure²⁵, basic affects that belong to the very heart of life.

By denigrating life and its active and creative forces, Schopenhauer and Wagner rejected the real world in favour of the imaginary and symbolic, constructing a passage from this world to another, presumably (at least one *might* hope) more real and less painful. Because when 'one separates an ideal from what's real, one casts down the real, impoverishes it, slanders it.'²⁶ Especially Schopenhauer came to the conclusion that the will, identified as the source of pleasures (including aesthetic pleasures), was the main source of pain and suffering as it is constituted on the basis of lack and craving. Nonetheless, Schopenhauer had in his *magnum opus* conferred on art a very special place, namely to repeat 'the eternal Ideas apprehended through pure contemplation, the essential and abiding element in all the

22 F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 9; Nietzsche later declared: Wagner 'flatters every form of Christianity, every religious expression of decadence.' (F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 48.)

23 The best account of Schopenhauer's position is to be found in *The Twilight of the Idols* (F. Nietzsche, KSA. Vol. 6. *Der Fall Wagner. Götzen-Dämmerung. Der Antichrist. Ecce homo. Dionysos-Dithyramben. Nietzsche contra Wagner*, pp. 94–95).

24 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 149.

25 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 31.

26 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 206.

phenomena of the world. According to the material in which it repeats, it is sculpture, painting, poetry, or music. Its only source is knowledge of the Ideas; its sole aim is communication of this knowledge.²⁷ Nevertheless, one has to admit that for Schopenhauer the function of art was only to repeat, not to create; his conception thus remained bound to Platonist metaphysics, which accomplishes the pious ascension to the absolute without dethroning and destroying it. On the one hand, he thus maintained the primacy of rationalistic insight in claiming that the Beautiful could only be grasped when one got rid of the will, the irrational element proper to man and to nature in general, and became entirely identical to reason (identified as pure objectivity), which is free from intentions and purposes.²⁸ This is the first (epistemological) implication of Schopenhauer's theory: the artist represents not some kind of subjective mode of cognising, but is the very incarnation of 'objective' knowledge, even if he himself is completely ignorant of it.²⁹ On the other hand, Schopenhauer, by identifying the will and its satisfaction as the source of suffering, explicitly negated happiness founded on sensory pleasures, and privileged pain and suffering as the only positive ways of existing. This means that art should not be conceived as providing pleasure in creating through (subjective) emotions and desires: art is not about satisfying one's desires, but about attempting not only to tame them but, even more, to eliminate them.³⁰ According to Schopenhauer's insight, a true artist must negate himself, as he must negate the world of will and desire; in order to be considered a genius, we must 'leave entirely out of sight our own interest, our willing, and our aims, and consequently to discard entirely our own personality for a time, in order to remain *pure knowing subject*, the clear eye of the world....'³¹ Wagner, in Nietzsche's eyes, became entrapped in Schopenhauer's confused teachings: 'The service which Wagner owes to Schopenhauer is incalculable. It was the *philosopher of decadence* who allowed the *artist of decadence* to find himself.'³² Schopenhauer had *saved* Wagner.

This unhappy art, this romantic art that finally seeks renunciation and self-denial, was replaced by Nietzsche with profoundly anti-romanticist art, which is Dionysian in character, art that is a product of a rich and powerful will, the will to power. An art that is able not only to walk, but to dance – something that Wagner presumably never managed to learn (Ludwig van Beethoven, on the contrary, as reported by Nietzsche³³, was able to compose while walking, and therefore his works expressed muscular, bodily power...). The value of music, but also of other arts, can be recognised in its capacity to make us dance, to move us, to make our bodies light and dynamic to the point where we no longer conceive of the body as a

27 A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. Vol. I. New York: Dover Publications, 1966, pp. 184–185.

28 A. Schopenhauer, *Esthétique et métaphysique*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1999, p. 164.

29 'That the Idea comes to us more easily from the work of art than directly from nature and from reality, arises solely from the fact that the artist, who knew only the Idea and not reality, clearly repeated in his work only the Idea, separated it out from reality, and omitted all disturbing contingencies.' (A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. Vol. I, p. 195.)

30 A. Schopenhauer, *Esthétique et métaphysique*, p. 166.

31 A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. Vol. I, p. 186.

32 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 26.

33 F. Nietzsche, *KSA*. Vol. 12. *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887*, p. 372.

burden. This is why Georges Bizet's *Carmen* so inexorably attracted Nietzsche: 'All that is good is easy, everything divine runs with light feet: this is the first principle of my aesthetics.'³⁴ And this is also why he so violently rejected Wagner's 'art': he had missed 'la gaya scienza; light feet, wit, fire, grave, grand logic, stellar dancing, wanton intellectuality, the vibrating light of the South, the calm sea – perfection.'³⁵ Nietzsche explicitly acknowledged the fact that his aesthetics was based mostly on physical, climatic, physiological criteria³⁶ and had as its guiding thread the body, that inalienable playground of both destructive and creative forces.

II Under the spell of Wagneromania

Nietzsche's lifelong struggle to understand the significance of Wagner's operas is well known and raises a straightforward question: what values do Wagner's operas stand for? Nietzsche's works abound in both positive and negative references to Wagner, to the degree that one has to admit that the Wagner phenomenon played an important, although by no means straightforward role in Nietzsche's aesthetics.³⁷ In one of his posthumously published notebooks, Nietzsche evoked the gloomy event of crossing Wagner (without explicitly mentioning his name), who at one point made him believe that all artists were in fact nothing but actors, a term that has a strong negative connotation in Nietzsche's terminology.³⁸ Nietzsche even went so far as to portray Wagner's art as a certain form of sickness³⁹ proper to modernity, leaving the question unanswered whether one is really able to overcome this sickness. Schopenhauer is mentioned because of his metaphysical drive for a moral justification of the world that Nietzsche, despite his clairvoyance, could not recognise as harmful, whereas Wagner's fault lay in his incurable romanticism, which led Nietzsche to recognise Wagner as the musician and aesthete of his time.⁴⁰ We will explore briefly the meaning of this declaration, in order to see why Nietzsche's rejection of both Schopenhauer and Wagner was so definitive.

Nietzsche began his first writing on Wagner – 'Wagner in Bayreuth'⁴¹ – with a simile⁴² that defined the central features of Wagner's aesthetic approach: assuming that aesthetics primarily deals with aesthetic events, two conditions must be

34 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 19.

35 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 42.

36 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 27.

37 See, for instance, Theodor Adorno's *In Search of Wagner* and Sarah Kofman's *L'imposture de la beauté et autres textes*.

38 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 1; Nietzsche also mentioned his naïve commitment to Schopenhauer's and Wagner's moralist romanticism in the preface to *Human, All Too Human*. Nietzsche confessed, even in 1885, that he had not 'recovered from the disappointment of summer 1876' which refers to the whole Wagner phenomenon... (*Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 13).

39 'Everything he touches he contaminates': F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 27; regarding Wagner's opera *Parsifal*, Nietzsche praised '[t]he subtlety with which beauty and disease are united here...': F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 48.

40 F. Nietzsche, *KSA. Vol. 2. Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, p. 14.

41 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 195–254.

42 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 197.

fulfilled for those specific events to take place: first there must be an artist great enough to conceive and to realise this event, and secondly there must a spectator or listener talented enough to apprehend this event and its full meaning. In short, he or she must necessarily be able to reach the same heights as the artist (of course not in the realm of artistic creation *strictu sensu*, but in the realm of intellectual *Nachahmung*), in order to be competent enough to grasp the full meaning of the *oeuvre-d'art* in question, both on the immanent level of its aesthetic value and also on the contextual level of its social and cultural value. A great artist, as well as a great artistic event, are thus the expression of something higher than the epoch in which they are born. Furthermore, as Nietzsche emphatically explained, Wagner, by circumnavigating the whole domain of fine arts, by joining them together, had not only discovered a new domain of art, but art itself⁴³, something that had never happened before and whose meaning would be revealed only in the future. Furthermore, in his early writings, Wagner represented the central figure of Nietzsche's vigorous attempt to illustrate the status of art in the age of its decline, which Nietzsche described in terms of thirst for amusement and pomposity, of greed for money and honours and of hazy judgement, all this forming 'the musty corrupted air of our world of art today.'⁴⁴ And it is in this diffuse world of corrupted and declining art that Nietzsche, in all his naïveté, believed he had discovered the true magic of Wagner's art, which served as a final promise to resurrect the Greek world of art and to renew the sense of our aesthetic values, centred on elements that were totally exterior to the real world of art. This notion of magic reappeared in Nietzsche's later writings⁴⁵ as the very opposite of the form it had taken in 'Wagner in Bayreuth': it served to portray Wagner's approach in radically negative terms as a failure to give birth to a better art: *le grand art*.

In order to better understand the meaning of Wagner's art, Nietzsche's method consisted of adopting the inner point of view proper to Wagner's art⁴⁶, although in his earlier texts, Nietzsche was still far from being able to properly detect its decadent nature. This immanent point of view is revealed, better than in his first book, in the pages of 'Wagner in Bayreuth', published in July 1876 and thought to coincide with the inauguration of the first Bayreuth festival. In this controversial essay, Nietzsche was still a good German⁴⁷, a good Wagnerian, and even a good and

43 'For such an undertaking as that at Bayreuth there were no warning signs, no transitional events, nothing intermediate; the long path to the goal, and the goal itself, none knew but Wagner. It is the first circumnavigation of the world in the domain of art: as a result of which, as it seems, there has been discovered not only a new art but art itself.' (F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, pp. 198-199.)

44 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 210.

45 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 22.

46 The general question concerning the value of the artist is asked with the utmost determination, for instance, in his late notebooks: 'One must take the artist himself, and his psychology (critique of the drive to play as a release of force, pleasure in change and in stamping one's own soul on something else, the absolute egoism of the artist, etc.). What drives does he sublimate?' (F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 130.)

47 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 205.

morally responsible thinker...⁴⁸ In his 'Wagner in Bayreuth', Nietzsche even went so far as to place Wagner above the great poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, seeing in Wagner a modern cultural monster *par excellence*, who was able to understand that it was 'quite impossible to produce the highest and purest effect of which the art [of the theatre] is capable without at the same time effecting innovations everywhere, in morality, and politics, in education and society.'⁴⁹ Wagner personified the 'rejuvenator of the simple drama, the discoverer of the place of the arts in a true human society, the poetic elucidator of past philosophies of life, the philosopher, the historian, the aesthician and critic, the master of language, the mythologist and mytho-poet'⁵⁰, having the inhuman power and talent to recognise and to represent the most significant events. For the early Nietzsche, Wagner was not only an artist, capable of providing powerful artistic symbols, but also a great revolutionary whose purpose was to realise 'to what extent the character of the world is unalterable: so as, once this question has been answered, to set about *improving that part of it recognized as alterable* with the most ruthless courage.'⁵¹ In his later writings, Nietzsche was even more radical: the artist, in order to create, should have the capacity to set the world into motion; he is the very explosive that engenders the becoming. The artist necessarily has to dictate becoming, and has to be a legislator.⁵² Was Wagner really such a legislator? As an artist, was he really able to impose his own law of becoming?

Even in his early 'Wagner in Bayreuth', anticipating one of the key concepts of his later works, Nietzsche attempted to offer a partly physiological account of Wagner's art⁵³, identifying in him two seemingly opposite drives that in spite of their incompatible nature had contributed to Wagner's development and fame. Similar to a doctor effecting a close auscultation of his patient, Nietzsche condemned Wagner's insatiable thirst for power and domination⁵⁴, suggesting that only the combination of this tyrannical drive with the good would probably have directed this drive to creation and art and not to some potentially fatal consequences, such as destruction. Something more powerful must have detoured these forces: the artist is not to be identified with his or her heroes, who may be said to be reflections or manifestations of his innermost drives – and it is by walking along this path that Nietzsche discovered the second of Wagner's two tyrannical drives: the moral drive, the drive to loyalty. The thirst for power and domination coupled with the utmost

48 It was only later that Nietzsche acknowledged the extent to which he was wrong concerning both Wagner and Schopenhauer: 'Around 1876 I had the terrible experience of seeing compromised everything I had previously willed, when I realised which way Wagner was going.... Around the same time I realised that my instinct was after the opposite of Schopenhauer's: it aspired to a justification of life, even in its most dreadful, ambiguous and mendacious forms – for this I had ready the formula, 'Dionysian'.' (Writings from the Late Notebooks, p. 149.)

49 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 210.

50 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 205.

51 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 208.

52 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 64.

53 This psychological character was paradoxically introduced by Wagner himself, through the definition that he offered of art: 'Art, by the very meaning of the term, is nothing but the fulfillment of a longing to know oneself in the likeness of an object of one's love or adoration, to find oneself again in the things of the outer world, thus conquered by their representation.' (R. Wagner, *Wagner on Music and Drama*. Trans. H. Ashton Ellis. New York: Dutton, 1964, p. 89.)

54 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 201.

inner necessity for moral ennoblement and even sanctity: this is where Nietzsche discovered Wagner's authentic nature. It is questionable whether Wagner was ever capable of overcoming this antagonism of forces. But it is even more important to note that Nietzsche spoke of Wagner's essential drives as if they were dependent on the degree of power and superiority that they might attain⁵⁵, thus prefiguring one of Nietzsche's own central concepts: the will to power.

Richard Wagner as an aesthetic phenomenon symbolised for the early Nietzsche the reuniting force that brought together the scattered pieces of the Greek world of art. Wagner is presented as a redeemer of modern man who suffers from the insufficiency and uncertainty of all knowledge, and this is where the need for art inextricably rises: we strive for something that provides us the opportunity to leave behind all these insufficient significations, for 'something sublime and significant'⁵⁶ that allows us finally to see our existence as complete and meaningful. Art should be primarily understood in terms of simplification and the creation of symbols, while '[t]he struggles it depicts are simplifications of the real struggles of life; its problems are abbreviations of the endlessly complex calculus of human action and desire. But the greatness and indispensability of art lie precisely in its being able to produce the *appearance* of a simpler world, a shorter solution of the riddle of life.'⁵⁷ The effect that art imposes on us can be similar to the effect that dreams impose on us, liberating us from the never-ending continuity of suffering and despair and indicating that, through this continuous suffering and despair, we are in fact able to see light at the end of the tunnel and understand that the individual is only a toy in the hands of some superhuman power. But isn't this vision analogous to the Christian idea of redemption? In Nietzsche's view, Wagner had been tempted and misled both by Schopenhauer⁵⁸ and by Christianity, exchanging his atheist and immoral (i.e. revolutionary) values for blatantly Christian ones.

Nietzsche's late writings about the Wagner phenomenon are radically inconsistent with Nietzsche's early works. Both *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* leave no place for uncertainty: Wagner's music, this 'endless melody', is the direct opposite of Georges Bizet's superb art, which gives us wings (being light, graceful and stylish) and makes us productive:⁵⁹ another positive value in Nietzsche's aesthetic terminology. Furthermore, Bizet's music is far superior to Wagner's music since it is cheerful, sensual, clear, and sub-tropical or even African in its spirit (comparable to the attribute 'Mediterranean'⁶⁰); it is full of impious, passionate, cruel and fatal love. There is no doubt that what fascinated Nietzsche was the unconditional, immoral, almost bodily passion that traverses Bizet's *chef-d'oeuvre*, based on Prosper Mérimée's text, and expresses a love for tragic fate.

55 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 203.

56 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 212.

57 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 213.

58 F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 96.

59 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 20.

60 'die Musik 'mediterranisieren': das ist meine Losung...': F. Nietzsche, *KSA*. Vol. 12. *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-1887*, p. 434.

From the very beginning, Nietzsche emphasised the dramatic and almost picturesque element in Wagner's art. We tend to forget that opera is not only music and poetry, but also involves sight. And when several arts collaborate, we might naturally tend to privilege sight, as a dramatic poet does, when dealing with music: opera music naturally addresses itself to sight, i.e. it guides and explains.⁶¹ That is why music, used in other arts to illustrate them, degenerates; it runs the risk of becoming an epiphenomenon of those arts. In his late, posthumously published notes, Nietzsche even goes so far as to ironically characterise Wagner's way of painting (in his opera *Parsifal*) as being far superior to that of any visual artists: 'Entirely exalted and moved – no painter has painted such an indescribably melancholy and tender gaze as Wagner'.⁶² The alliance of visual arts with music can enhance the capacity of music to depict the tragic character of becoming.

Wagner shed new light on the interaction of different arts by 'physically presenting to our eyes the things of life in their fullest spontaneity'.⁶³ In Nietzsche's view, he had introduced a new problem to the philosophical stage: that of an actor who also wants to be a philosopher, that of a magician who generously offers us a magnifying glass through which his art grows bigger, where 'even Wagner grows bigger'.⁶⁴ But the problem was Wagner's philosophy (and aesthetics), and here Nietzsche's verdict was harsh, describing it as an amateurish philosophy⁶⁵, that his whole art was 'paltry, awkward, and amateurish' and consisted of 'combining incompatible parts'.⁶⁶ As a dramatic composer, he thus became an actor and ceased to be a poet and philosopher, because once one becomes an actor, in the negative sense of only reproducing the ideals of others, one ceases to be a real poet and composer. He is condemned to remain an actor who unconsciously creates a 'transformation of art as a whole into histrionics'⁶⁷, in contrast to the artist who is able to go beyond the established canon of rationality and morality. Therefore, 'Wagner's art is diseased', this diagnosis taking into account the basic symptoms of his art: 'the convulsiveness of his emotions, his over-excited sensitiveness, his taste which demands ever sharper condimentation, his erraticness which he toggled out to look like principles, and, last but not least, his choice of heroes and heroines, considered as physiological types'.⁶⁸ Instead of cheerfulness, lightness and grace, Wagner's art emphasises all forms of morbidity and artificiality; instead of the elitist demand for the creation of beauty, it sets itself the task of moving the masses.

Nevertheless, one still has to bear in mind that Nietzsche's rejection of Wagner's aesthetics was not complete and unconditional; even in his later writings and notebooks, Nietzsche struggled to save Wagnerian art from base criticism by the mob, saying that the mob 'should not be permitted even to pronounce such a great name

61 F. Nietzsche, KSA. Vol. 9. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1880–1882, p. 82.

62 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 112.

63 R. Wagner, *Wagner on Music and Drama*, p. 189.

64 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 22.

65 'Das 'Philosophiren' Wagner's gehört zu den unerlaubtesten Arten der Dilettanterei': F. Nietzsche, KSA. Vol. 11. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1884–1885, p. 555.

66 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 33.

67 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 32.

68 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 28.

as Richard Wagner's, whether to praise or to object.⁶⁹ Nietzsche was even, to some extent, proud to declare that Wagner was by far the figure he admired the most and that Wagner was still for him 'the deepest and most audacious, as well as the most misunderstood of all these hard-to-understand men of today'⁷⁰, giving as the main reason of their dispute 'the bad taste – or the sad compulsion' that forced Wagner to bring into his masterpieces characters that were far too intolerable for Nietzsche's refined and aristocratic taste: Nietzsche felt that Wagner's art was devoid of happiness, vigour and health, whereas Nietzsche never ceased to emphasise the importance of good health. How much sickness can one take upon oneself and still overcome it?⁷¹ This is what the whole domain of aesthetics is about. It is 'inextricably bound up with these biological⁷² principles: there is decadent aesthetic, and classical aesthetic'⁷³, the first expressing and promoting the virtues of declining life, and the second having the form of the virtues of ascending life.

III Nietzsche's conception of artistic creation

Nietzsche's aesthetics, as pointed out, cannot be understood without putting art fundamentally on the same level as philosophy, but not in the traditional sense of slipping philosophical ideas and concepts into art. Art must necessarily become philosophy, as philosophy must become art: they both carry the function of giving life and actions 'the maximum of meaning and intensity.'⁷⁴ It is especially in his later works that art seems to enjoy a privileged status: on certain occasions, art may be the most effective instrument for transforming the world⁷⁵, for inaugurating and establishing new ways of seeing and thinking.

In fact, art may be said to stem fundamentally from the same source as other forms of cognition and feeling: from the complex interplay of instincts, drives, and hidden or unconscious affects. This is why Nietzsche could declare that art was philosophy and philosophy art: every creation of art, as every act of thinking or thought, is only a symptom of some deeper bodily state that necessarily includes mental (conscious) states, but takes these as superficial signs that are inseparable from bodily states in general. Furthermore, as a virulent critique of the concept of the subject, Nietzsche generally argued that the artist, exactly like the philosopher or the scientist, was a tool in the hands of essentially unconscious forces. As conscious beings, we are, in the strict sense, more like observers of what we think and create, as we are more or less unable to reach and account for the processes inherent

69 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 13.

70 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 70.

71 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 78; or: 'Sickness is a powerful stimulant – but one has to be healthy enough for it' (*Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 276). We find the identical formula in F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, pp. 27–28.

72 Barbara Stiegler outlines this concept more extensively in her *Nietzsche et la biologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001).

73 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 53.

74 F. Nietzsche, *KSA. Vol. 2. Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, p. 28.

75 F. Nietzsche, *KSA. Vol. 12. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887*, p. 367.

in the creation.⁷⁶ Nietzsche was increasingly convinced that art had mostly to do with forces and their expression: in Nietzsche's conception, the question concerns precisely the character of forces operative in the self, constructed on the basis of a multiplicity of forces that set the artistic becoming into motion.⁷⁷ The artist is not the medium of the will⁷⁸, as he or she is not the medium of transcendent forces or phenomena, but serves as an immanent playground for the forces that he or she is able to catch and transform. This is to say that art is not the expression of some kind of inner self, as this inner self is itself just a set or multiplicity of forces. Looking for the roots of art, one must ask: 'How far does *art* reach down into the essence of *force*?'⁷⁹ or, in other words: what forces have contributed to the creation of this or that *oeuvre-d'art*? What do they mean, and how can these forces be portrayed?

We encounter in art a multiplicity of different, quasi-biological drives that, according to Nietzsche's conception, include the sexual drive, intoxication and cruelty.⁸⁰ And each of them contributes, although indirectly, to the *aesthetic state*:

...when we encounter things that show this transfiguration and plenitude, our animal existence responds with an *arousal of the spheres* where all those states of pleasure have their seat – and the mixture of these very delicate nuances of animal well-being and desires is the *aesthetic state*. This state occurs only in natures capable of that generous and overflowing plenitude of bodily vigour; it's there the *primum mobile* is always to be found. The sober man, the weary man, the exhausted, the desiccated one (e.g., a scholar) can receive absolutely nothing of art.... Art reminds us of states of animal vigour; it's on the one hand a surplus and overflow of flourishing corporeality into the world of images and wishes; on the other a rousing of the animal function through images and wishes of intensified life – a heightening of the feeling of life, a stimulus for it.⁸¹

Art does not grow out of lack and weakness; one can deduce from what precedes that the beautiful is not an intellectual or cognitive category; rather, it is an evolutionary category or value, analogous to such categories as 'true', 'good' and 'reasonable', whose genealogy is described in detail in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*. The category of the beautiful bears a 'morally' inclined impact: it is the

76 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, pp. 34–35; This idea forms the guiding thread of the book *Beyond Good and Evil*.

77 Fiona Jenkins, interpreting Nietzsche's conception of the artistic subject, states that 'the self must be viewed as a product of artistic processes, which are, in turn, the effects, or rather, the expression of forces we do not control in advance, but embody and live' (F. Jenkins, *Performative Identity: Nietzsche on the Force of Art and Language*. – Nietzsche, *Philosophy and the Arts*. Eds. S. Kemal, I. Gaskell, D. W. Conway. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 223).

78 Our will being just another metaphysical abstraction, Nietzsche in fact refused to accept Schopenhauer's concept of will as something unitary or monadic, because 'there is no will: there are points of will constantly augmenting or losing their power' (F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 213); therefore an artist is just a multiplicity of antagonist forces, not a monadic consciousness. Nomadic vs. monadic!

79 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 84.

80 By cruelty, Nietzsche usually meant cruelty used against the degenerating forces that act against life: 'Life – that is: being cruel and inexorable against anything that is growing weak and old in us, and not just in us.' (F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 50.)

81 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 160.

product of a long development in the course of which more beautiful organisms dominate less beautiful ones for the simple reason that they are stronger.⁸² In this sense, the strict distinction between the beautiful and the ugly is no longer pertinent, as it turns out to be one more aesthetic dogma. The Dionysian artist goes beyond this distinction, excluding and eliminating any established canons of beauty. In any case, beauty is nothing but a human, genealogically established abstraction, an anthropomorphic super-value that we attribute to the world that we have created.⁸³ What we admire as objective aesthetic qualities, are in fact what we have created, and we have forgotten the fact that these are our own inventions.

Before becoming aesthetic beings in the strict sense of the word, we are aesthetic beings in the sense of creating our surroundings and interpreting them according to our own needs and desires. What we designate as the external world is nothing other than our external world because 'whatever is some being's 'external world', consists of a sum of valuations; that green, blue, red, hard, soft are inherited *valuations and their emblems*.'⁸⁴ Our world, as a total combination of sense perceptions, is thus also the reflection and expression of our aesthetic values, even a 'particular colour simultaneously expresses a value for us'.⁸⁵ There is no ultimate conflict between a theoretical and practical attitude, as Martha Nussbaum emphasises: 'cognitive activity is itself thoroughly practical, and can only be explained as answering to a practical need.'⁸⁶ But this also means that there are no pure, authentic sensory data accessible to us: all of the data are already in some way or other organised and categorised. And this is the cornerstone of Nietzsche's aesthetics: nothing enters our consciousness without already having previously been processed and trimmed. The basic lot of aesthetic values can be deduced from the organic creativity of every single organism or individual⁸⁷: we are above all creative beings who invent and fashion our environment, bringing along with us what we have inherited from our predecessors. As Nietzsche explains, we have some aesthetic preferences in common with other biological organisms, such as the pleasure taken in what is well organised, what constitutes a visual whole, or what has agreeable proportions.⁸⁸ Even more, the feelings of logical, arithmetical and geometrical satisfaction constitute the very basis of our aesthetic evaluations.

Both historically and psychologically, art does not arise from nowhere. In terms of the historical evolution of the arts, the arts are often seen as the sedimentation of inner feelings that take time to manifest themselves: the works of the Dutch masters, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven and Claude Lorrain – to mention Nietzsche's favourite examples – are deeper expressions of the spirit

82 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, pp. 50–51.

83 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 215.

84 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 15.

85 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 78.

86 M. Nussbaum, *The Transfigurations of Intoxication: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Dionysus*. – Nietzsche, *Philosophy and the Arts*, p. 53.

87 This is the meaning of Nietzsche's statement that our values stem from life itself: it is life itself that forces us to create values, to have a position... (KSA. Vol. 6. *Der Fall Wagner. Götzen-Dämmerung. Der Antichrist. Ecce homo. Dionysos-Dithyramben. Nietzsche contra Wagner*, p. 86.)

88 F. Nietzsche, KSA. Vol. 11. *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1884–1885*, pp. 509–510.

of time, often to be understood nostalgically, in hindsight, as swan songs of some past configuration of things.⁸⁹ On the psycho-physiological level, since art does not arise from nowhere, one might ask the fundamental question: what drive is it that makes us create? Is there any specific drive from which art stems? The first conception envisaged by Nietzsche has art deduce its power from the 'dissatisfaction with the real' (one may understand it better by seeing it as a reactive force), and the second conception has art deduce its creative force from 'gratitude for happiness enjoyed.'⁹⁰ Nietzsche identified the first conception with romanticism, and the second with dithyrambic art, which of course necessarily includes Nietzsche's own dithyrambs and especially his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: the art of apotheosis, as he phrased it, bringing together in one work art and philosophy.

Is the principle of '*l'art pour l'art*', 'art for art's sake', rendered incongruous and abolished by this move? The question of the purpose of art reappears here and there, for instance in *The Twilight of the Idols*,⁹¹ where Nietzsche explicitly suggests that in order to understand what art is one necessarily has to say good-bye to the moralist conception of art (art as a message and set of instructions) and adopt the psychological point of view, which is equally inconsistent with the principle 'art for art's sake'. Nevertheless, art is not without 'purpose': against Schopenhauer and his pessimistic view, which defines art as destined to liberate us from the will and desires, Nietzsche asserted that art is primarily at the service of life itself: 'Art is the great stimulant of life'⁹², i.e. the meaning of art cannot be anything else but life itself. How should we understand it? What is life? It is biological diversity, endless evolutionary becoming, which in its ascension traverses all forms of life. Life is not a means for something superior to life or beyond it, but an expression of forms of intensification of power⁹³ and, through life, 'a living thing wants to discharge its strength – life itself is will to power...'⁹⁴ Nietzsche's conception of art thus includes the (atheist) conception of the tragic artist who heroically triumphs over the reactive and negative powers of life: there is a clear congruence between an aesthetic position that rejects morbid forces and the master morality, which is 'rooted in a triumphant saying of yea to *one's self*, – it is the self-affirmation and self-glorification of life'.⁹⁵ However, not all art is active and full of power. Nietzsche's approach to art, especially in his later works, was radically anti-Platonist: art should not lead us away from real life, and should not force or seduce us to escape into some imaginary or symbolic after-world (as Wagner's art undeniably does). Such art convinces us that what we imagine can be better than what we live through, so it confers more

89 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 63.

90 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 82.

91 F. Nietzsche, *KSA. Vol. 6. Der Fall Wagner. Götzen-Dämmerung. Der Antichrist. Ecce homo. Dionysos-Dithyramben. Nietzsche contra Wagner*, pp. 127–128.

92 F. Nietzsche, *KSA. Vol. 6. Der Fall Wagner. Götzen-Dämmerung. Der Antichrist. Ecce homo. Dionysos-Dithyramben. Nietzsche contra Wagner*, pp. 127–128.

93 'das Leben selbst ist kein Mittel zu etwas; es ist der Ausdruck von Wachstumsformen der Macht' (F. Nietzsche, *KSA. Vol. 12. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887*, p. 345.)

94 F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002*, p. 15. (Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral. München: De Gruyter, 1999.)

95 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 55.

value to the imagined than to the real. Instead, art, being a stimulus for life, should lead us back to life; art is the very essence and measure of life.

Wasn't Nietzsche in this sense still following the Kantian intuition that reduces the world as we perceive it to a product of universal transcendental categories? No, because aesthetic creation is not only to be found in fine arts. There is no ultimate, ready-made reality in itself, posited behind what we perceive: this reality is already a product of our creative cognitive apparatus and we should not look for any 'more real' intelligible reality behind the reality provided and shaped by senses. Nietzsche's aesthetics remain tributary to his perspectivism: a theory according to which we have no direct, immediate access to the real itself, because any glimpse we have of the real is always just one perspective; it is impossible to gather all the perspectives in order to have a 'complete' view of the real. The same applies to strictly aesthetic activity: the real is not what presents itself to us, but what matters to us: 'Thus, we construe 'what is' as what exerts an effect on us, what proves itself by exerting its effect. [...] Supposing, though, we put certain values into things, then these values have effects back on us after we've forgotten we were the ones who put them in.'⁹⁶ One should not mix up the real with what appears as real to us. However, in the strictest sense, the real is what appears to us, and there is no escaping the perspectivist point of view, as every organism is determined by its perceptive and active capacities. This is what reality and artistic reality consist of: a play of Dionysian (i.e. both destructive and creative) forces⁹⁷ that permanently shape and reshape our perception of reality, according to the values that have gained dominance amongst these forces and thus contribute to the construction of reality. Every living organism, being a heterogeneous multiplicity, by definition cannot be reduced to some homogeneous intellect, soul or subject.

There is no creative 'essence' in human beings; it is important to recognise that organic life is by definition synonymous with creative activity, since '[i]n all perception, i.e., in the most original appropriation, what is essentially happening is an action, or more precisely: an imposition of shapes upon things - only the superficial talk of 'impressions.'⁹⁸ It is not that our intellect has some kind of transcendental creative capacity; it is the organic life in its multiplicity that creates new meaning and constantly reshapes our world: 'Only observe how our eye occupies itself as soon as it receives nothing more to see: it creates itself something to see.'⁹⁹ The whole world of sensory perception paradoxically obeys the law of artistic creation: we create and invent figures and rhythms as we invent thoughts and emotions. Aesthetic creation essentially follows the same organic rule; even Wagner's music creates what cannot be seen: a 'wealth of colour, of chiaroscuro, of the mystery of a

96 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 109.

97 Their natural form is 'drunkenness' (*der Rausch*), an indispensable physiological condition for any aesthetic creation and perception. (F. Nietzsche, *KSA*. Vol. 6. *Der Fall Wagner*. *Götzen-Dämmerung*. *Der Antichrist*. *Ecce homo*. *Dionysos-Dithyramben*. *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, p. 116.)

98 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 37.

99 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 37.

dying light'¹⁰⁰ – visual metaphors that Wagner's late work almost abusively exhibits. For Nietzsche, Wagner's work addressed itself to sight more than to hearing, because it was far better in dramatic and visual effects than in music. Hence the Nietzschean hypothesis of Wagner's true nature: what if he never was a real musician and composer¹⁰¹, but a visual, even theatrical genius, 'our *scenic artist par excellence*'?¹⁰² Even though Nietzsche's aesthetics never manage to get rid of Wagner's shadow, he was nevertheless able to turn away from Wagner's obscure desire to reconcile art with religion.

IV Conclusion

Throughout his works, Nietzsche's aesthetics remain bound to the initial division into Apollonian and Dionysian art. As he declares in various places, the Apollonian drive has as its means sight; it is bound to visual power, to surfaces.¹⁰³ It is in fact not the whole body, the whole nervous system that is stimulated in the process of Apollonian apprehension; this is why Nietzsche attributed this drive mostly to painters, sculptors and epic poets. Dionysian art, on the contrary, stimulates the whole affective system: it is impossible not to respond to the overwhelming stimulus. Music, as a perfect example of this Dionysian drive, leads to a total transformation; however, music as a stimulus is in decline, since its bodily expression has been devalued. Nietzsche seemed to have in mind a certain ritual type of music, where the whole being of the performer, as well as of the composer, listener and dancer, is at least momentarily transformed. But does not the fact of privileging music over other arts, which is the cornerstone of Nietzsche's aesthetics, lead him into the classical aesthetic trap of drawing a clear demarcation line not only between different domains of art, but also between different senses? Even if Nietzsche in his later period more or less abandoned the idea of the primacy of music, the question remains as to whether Nietzsche's aesthetics do not finally lose their generating power, being unable to properly understand the process of creation proper to all arts.

Nietzsche's diagnosis concerning the situation of the arts is both nostalgic and radical. What we need is a mischievous, light, fleeting art that is both serene and artificial¹⁰⁴, i.e. a childish, honest and powerful art capable of forging a new conception of what it is to create: a Dionysian art.¹⁰⁵ This new, supposedly anti-metaphysical comprehension of art has to possess a strong curative effect, and has to contribute to the attempt to re-evaluate our present decadent values, which denigrate

100 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 34; Nietzsche even said that Wagner 'paints frescos', meaning that he concentrated on small details and compressed too much meaning in them, so that the audience in the end felt completely exhausted.

101 In his early essay about Schopenhauer, Wagner had proclaimed the superiority of music over visual arts; see R. Wagner, *Wagner on Music and Drama*, pp. 179–186.

102 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 35.

103 F. Nietzsche, *KSA*. Vol. 6. *Der Fall Wagner. Götzen-Dämmerung. Der Antichrist. Ecce homo. Dionysos-Dithyramben. Nietzsche contra Wagner*, pp. 117–118.

104 F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 8.

105 F. Nietzsche, *KSA*. Vol. 11. *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1884–1885*, p. 548.

the body and underestimate the body's role in our thinking.¹⁰⁶ Art, like any other human production, is thus a series of symptoms that covertly reveal to us the state of our health and well-being: '[e]very art and every philosophy may be regarded either as a cure or as a stimulant to ascending or declining life'.¹⁰⁷ To the moralising and unhealthy condition of art, where reduced, intoxicated, spasmodic vitality is dominant, Nietzsche opposed the overflowing vitality characteristic of the values of the body. This new art is finally separated from moral premises, and presents itself as an essentially immoral way of understanding art. The artist's relationship with truth is by definition much more immoral than the philosopher's relationship with truth¹⁰⁸: the artist necessarily acknowledges that he never reaches the degree of objectivity proper to the scientist; his personality, i.e. his instincts and value judgements, is always involved in the affair. This conception is obviously in conflict with the Kantian concept of 'disinterestedness', which tends to underestimate the implication of the artist's affects in the work of art. Nietzsche's aesthetic psychology enabled him to bridge the gap between the artist and a work of art, and to ascertain the inherent connection between these multiplicities.

By rejecting the Schopenhauerian and Wagnerian decadent and conformist conception of art, Nietzsche's aesthetics not only systematically insists on the heroic and aristocratic conception of art, but also shines a light on the unconscious mechanisms through which aesthetic creation (as well as aesthetic judgements) actually proceeds. The role of the body becomes increasingly significant in this context: the psychosomatic study of the artist's motivation and his or her works enabled Nietzsche to discern the symptoms of decline and weakness in artists. Even though Nietzsche's radical anti-essentialism rejects any fixed essences, there is something utterly creative not only in human beings, but in all organic beings. This is where the originality of Nietzsche's aesthetics lies: we are not tools in the hands of some supernatural power, but in fact tools in the hands of our multiple forces, which together are the evidence of life in us. There is no mysterious entity that governs art and its creations; art is nothing else than life itself in its most tangible expressions. It is the philosopher's task, assumed by Nietzsche to the highest degree, to interpret the symptoms and provide a diagnosis. It is through the process of radical re-evaluation of aesthetic values that Nietzsche intended to regenerate art: 'if we convalescents require an art at all, it is *another* art – a mocking, nimble, volatile, divinely undisturbed, divinely artificial art, which blazes up like pure flame into a cloudless sky.'¹⁰⁹ This seems to be the inevitable prerequisite of the initial statement 'Only aesthetically can the world be justified.'¹¹⁰

106 We 'all of us, though we do not know it, involuntarily have values, words, formulae, and morals on our bodies, which are quite *antagonistic* in their origin – regarded from a physiological standpoint, we are *false*...' (F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 56); This should be compared with a similar point made earlier in F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 5.

107 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 64.

108 F. Nietzsche, *KSA. Vol. 2. Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, p. 142.

109 F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, p. 76.

110 F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, p. 81.