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Nietzsche's Passage from Germany to Europe: The Three 'Deaths' of the Higher Cultural Unity¹

Should we say that Nietzsche's early philosophy was foremost addressed to the Germans? The fact that Nietzsche in his early writings so often used variations of the phrase "we, the Germans of today" in a way compels us to reply affirmatively: at least some sort of additional attention was clearly devoted to the German public in Nietzsche's early texts. However, this does not imply that the early Nietzsche spoke only of topics and problems that concerned Germans alone.

As a matter of fact, all of the predominant themes of Nietzsche's early philosophy – the Greeks, the critique of historicism, and his treatises on Schopenhauer and Wagner – are in themselves universal; that is to say, each of these themes is equally addressed to everyone. But at the same time, Nietzsche indeed saw each of these universal topics as internally related to what he, at that time, considered the central scope of his intellectual endeavours: namely, to envisage and propagate the ideal of "German unity in the highest sense."

[L]et me say expressly that it is for *German unity* in the highest sense that we strive, and strive more ardently than we do for political reunification, *the unity of the German spirit and life after the abolition of the antithesis of form and content, of inwardness and convention.*²

We can immediately notice that Nietzsche introduced the concept of "German unity in the highest sense" in very clear opposition to the, by then, already established fact of the political reunification of Germany.

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¹ This article is a result of the research project J6–8264 "Europe as a Philosophical Idea and Political Subject" and the research programme P6–0014 "Conditions and Problems of Contemporary philosophy", which are funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 82.

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In contrast to reunification, which was essentially a political event, Nietzsche saw “German unity in the highest sense” as the unique possibility of a deeper, more radical cultural metamorphosis of German society. And this cultural reinvention was closely related to each of the universal topics discussed by Nietzsche at the time: Greek civilisation, which was, according to Nietzsche, the only civilisation in history to have already reached the highest degree of cultural unity, represented the model that the Germans would need to follow; Wagner’s genius was seen by Nietzsche as the driving force behind the German cultural transformation; and finally, the critique of historicism was perceived by Nietzsche as a remedy for the staunchest ‘disease’ that the Germans still needed to overcome if they were ever to reach their ultimate unity. Namely, Nietzsche was firmly convinced that the Germans in particular, more than any other nation, suffered from what he called an “overabundance of history.” To put this in the simplest possible way: German belief – that everything was driven by “historical necessity” – ultimately made the Germans forget how to act or participate in the unfolding events. Furthermore, their belief in historical necessity made the Germans blind to the essentially new perspectives introduced by the events. In fact, what made Nietzsche so critical towards objective historical thinking was his conviction that the overabundance of historicism necessarily leads to the belief that *history itself was already over*. And the Germans, who saw themselves as the inventors of historical thinking, were more prone to this notably complacent belief than any other nation.

However, the decisive difference between the two forms of German unity lies, for Nietzsche, on the ontological level: the political reunification of Germany itself – that is, political unity without the further addition of the higher cultural unity of the German people – was, for Nietzsche, ontologically void, without “either sense, substance or goal.” In other words, despite the fact that the political reunification resulted in the emergence of the German State, this, by itself, was for Nietzsche not sufficient to allow one to say that Germany had already attained its proper Being.

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This immediately brings us to the following observation with regard to our primary question: the specific addressing of the Germans, which was clearly at work in Nietzsche’s early texts, was, first of all, of course, addressed to the name of Germany, but at the same time it was also addressed *against the falsehood of the belief in its existence*. The specific message that Nietzsche was trying to con-

vey to the Germans was that they need to become aware that political unity in itself was not enough, and that an additional step towards a higher cultural unity was still needed if the true existence of Germany was ever to be achieved. In his famous article "History and Mimesis", Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe thus even claimed that the entire political dimension of Nietzsche's early philosophy can in fact be comprised in this single sentence: "Germany does not exist."³

Perhaps even more importantly: the two types of German unity – the already achieved political unity and the cultural unity that was still missing – were also not seen by Nietzsche as forming any sort of continuity in the sense that political unity provided some sort of solid, necessary grounds for a higher cultural unity. Quite the contrary, Nietzsche appeared more and more convinced that the relation between the two was in fact antagonistic in nature, and that it was *the success of political reunification*, the emergence of the German State, that eventually destroyed all hope of a higher cultural unity.

There were, I think, two main reasons why Nietzsche increasingly held this belief. First of all, especially later on, he observed that the sheer blunt political euphoria that accompanied the emergence of the German State simply brushed aside or even "swallowed up" the spiritually refined forces that were needed to attain a higher cultural unity. For instance, in the chapter of *Twilight of the Idols* tellingly entitled "What the Germans Are Missing" Nietzsche wrote the following:

The Germans – they were once called the nation of thinkers: are they still thinking today at all? – The Germans are bored with the spirit now, the Germans mistrust the spirit now, politics swallows up all seriousness about really spiritual things. – *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*: I'm afraid that was the end of German philosophy ... "Are there German philosophers? Are there German poets? Are there any good German books?" I'm asked when I go abroad. I blush, but with the bravery that's typical of me even in hopeless cases, I answer: "Yes: Bismarck!"⁴

³ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "History and Mimesis," in: Laurence A. Rickels (ed.), *Looking after Nietzsche*, State University of New York Press, New York 1990, p. 216.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1997, p. 43.

Among those spiritual forces that were engulfed by the nationalist political euphoria there is one in particular that needs to be brought to attention – and that is, of course, the Wagnerite movement, in which Nietzsche himself was intensely involved. To say the least: at the time when Nietzsche still believed in the ideal of “German unity in the highest sense,” he saw the Wagnerite movement as the leading force in the forthcoming process of turning this ideal into reality. Albeit unusual, Nietzsche’s conviction – that an elite group of opera devotees was to play the decisive role in the unification of Germany – can hardly be regarded as surprising, as the ideal of cultural unity itself, in many respects, comprised reflections of what Nietzsche perceived as the “unifying genius” of Wagner’s art. As a matter of fact, this connection between Wagner and the ideal of higher unity was so important to Nietzsche that the moment he saw Wagner (among other things) falling under the influence of vulgar nationalism Nietzsche felt compelled to declare his entire vision of German higher unity a disastrous mistake.

The other reason why Nietzsche felt that the possibility of true German unity had eventually succumbed to Germany’s political unification was significantly different. This second line of Nietzsche’s reflections was not so much directed against the nationalist unrest that surrounded the establishment of the German State, but rather against the reinstatement of the State as such.

In his Foreword to *The Birth of Tragedy* written in 1886, where he listed a number of mistakes he had made in his earliest work, Nietzsche, among other things, wrote the following:

But there is something far worse in this book [...]. That, on the basis of our latter-day German music, I began to fable about the “spirit of Teutonism,” as if it were on the point of discovering and returning to itself, – ay, at the very time that the German spirit which not so very long before had had the will to the lordship over Europe, the strength to lead and govern Europe, testamentarily and conclusively resigned and, under the pompous pretence of empire-founding [*Reichs-Begründung*], effected its transition to mediocrity, democracy, and “modern ideas.”⁵

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This passage is obviously important for a number of reasons. But the first thing we must notice is that Nietzsche here directly states that the founding of the

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, The Macmillan Company, New York 1910, p. 12.

German State was nothing but a “pompous” cover-up for what he calls the “transition to the mediocritisation” of the German spirit.

The passage consists of three key statements:

1. Nietzsche clearly admits that there actually was a certain recent period in time when some sort of ‘passage to greatness’ opened up for the German spirit, “which not so long before had had the will to the lordship over Europe, the strength to lead and govern Europe.”
2. Once the decision had been made by the Germans to form their national State, to invest all their spiritual forces into the founding of the State, this period of greatness of the German spirit, effectively entered into its ending, self-destructive sequence. The decision to form the State marks the moment when this strong and potent German spirit “testamentarily and conclusively resigned and, under the pompous pretence of empire-founding [*Reichs-Be-gründung*], effected its transition to mediocritisation.”
3. What Nietzsche reproaches himself for is that, at the time, he failed to recognise this. Or, to be more precise: what Nietzsche reproaches his younger self for is that he did not recognise, or at least he did not recognise well enough, that, at that point, the German spirit had already begun to undermine its own greatness. And because he failed to recognise this, he somewhat clumsily started to fable about “the German being” (*deutschen Wesen*) precisely at the point when any sort of discussion on Germany had become pointless.

What makes it so difficult to grasp the precise meaning of this passage is that Nietzsche leaves us clueless with respect to what exactly he had in mind while speaking of the recent greatness of the German spirit. Was he referring to the age of the great German philosophers who clearly put their stamp on Europeans’ way of thinking? So, was this “strength to lead and govern Europe” of the German spirit envisioned by Nietzsche as some sort of intellectual power?

Or was he referring to the actual beginning of the political unrest, which ultimately led to reunification? In which case, the greatness of the German spirit must have been measured by Nietzsche against the, by now, infamous German efficiency in raising and organising themselves into an efficient military power. Nietzsche certainly never ceased to appreciate this particular aspect of the German spirit, which displays “virtues more manly than any other European

country can show. A lot of fortitude and self-respect, a lot of sureness in social interaction and in the reciprocity of duties, a lot of diligence, a lot of endurance – and an inherited restraint which needs to be goaded rather than braked. Let me add that here one still obeys without being humiliated by obedience.”⁶ However, if Nietzsche’s statement regarding the recent display of the strength of the German spirit were truly aimed at the German national uprising that eventually led to reunification – then how can we reconcile this with the fact that Nietzsche saw its actual result, that is, the political reunification of Germany, as the German spirit’s testamentary failure?

So, first of all: what does Nietzsche mean by saying that the actual reinstatement of the State effected the German spirit’s final transition to mediocracy? Why was he convinced that the unified State had such a detrimental effect on the spirit of the nation? The following passage from *Human, All Too Human* is important for two reasons: it not only provides a partial answer to this question, but its significance also lies in the fact that this passage represents the first of Nietzsche’s ‘political’ statements from the period right after he had ceased to believe in the ideal of higher German unity. The entire chapter is entitled “A Glance at the State”:

Permission to speak! – The demagogic character and the intention to appeal to the masses is at present common to all political parties: on account of this intention they are all compelled to transform their principles into great *al fresco* stupidities and thus to paint them on the wall. This is no longer alterable, indeed it would be pointless to raise so much as a finger against it; for in this domain there apply the words of Voltaire: *quand la populace se mêle de raisonnaire, tout est perdu!* Since this has happened one has to accommodate oneself to the new conditions as one accommodates oneself when an earthquake has displaced the former boundaries and contours of the ground and altered the value of one’s property. Moreover, if the purpose of all politics is to make life as endurable for as many as possible, then these as-many-as-possible are entitled to determine what they understand by an endurable life; if they trust to their intellect also to discover the right means for this goal, what good is there in doubting it? They want for once to forge for themselves their own fortunes and misfortunes; and if this feeling of self-determination, pride in the five or six ideas their head contains and brings forth, in

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 43.

fact renders their life so pleasant to them they are happy to bear the calamitous consequences of their narrowmindedness, there is little to be objected to, always presupposing that this narrowmindedness does not go so far as to demand that *everything* should become politics in this sense, that *everyone* should live according to such a standard. For a few must first of all be allowed, now more than ever, to refrain from politics and step aside: they too are prompted to this by pleasure in self-determination; and there also may be a degree of pride attached to staying silent when too many, or even just many, are speaking.⁷

The reinstatement of the State marks the moment when the political turmoil that had led to its establishment was put firmly back on the tracks of the 'ordinary' pursuit of modern politics. And this ordinary pursuit of modern politics was, according to Nietzsche, essentially determined by populism and demagogy – such was, as Nietzsche saw it, the direct impact of the continued process of democratisation. However, Nietzsche's critique of populism was not directed against the "people". On the contrary, Nietzsche was convinced that populism itself was directed against the people. Nietzsche saw populism as a destructive power that separates the people (as such) from their true (cultural, civilization-al) collective potentials. Of course, populism tries to "appeal to the masses"; however, its true target is not the 'collective subject' as such: the true target of populist appeal is the "small individual" within this 'collective subject' whose needs, welfare, and the right to self-determination are proclaimed by populism to exceed the actual importance of the collective's higher aspirations. In a certain sense, one could say that populism is, for Nietzsche, in effect a cloaked version of the "small man's" individualism. Hence, the appeal of populism raises the "masses" to act against the true potentials of the people, and its final effect consists in the dissipation of the nation's spirit.

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Now, the political unrest that led to reunification was, of course, something entirely different: the actual national uprising displayed the will of the nation to reach a common goal. And this was still seen by Nietzsche as a sign of the strength of the German spirit. However, since pursuing this common goal led Germans to reinstate State-related politics, and thereby to the dissipation of the people's spirit caused by the populist appeal to the "small man", Nietzsche also

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 161.

saw this extraordinary period of German history as a tragic involuntary suicide of the German spirit.

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By the time he commenced writing *Human, All Too Human*, the ideal of “German unity in the highest sense” was dead for Nietzsche. As a matter of fact, this ideal, in a very short period of time, died in at least two separate ways:

Firstly, the ideal of a higher unity was dead because Nietzsche no longer saw it as attainable in the historical sense. By that time, Nietzsche was already convinced that the German spirit had fallen apart completely and irreparably: First, the higher spiritual forces were either swept aside or consumed by the nationalist political euphoria; and then this political unrest itself – still seen by Nietzsche as the last signal of the strength of the German spirit – fell to the domesticating effect of the power of the State, which effected its final transition to mediocracy. Once this happened, there was no turning back.

And secondly, the ideal of higher unity was dead, because – by the time Nietzsche began writing *Human, All Too Human* – his philosophy had taken a radically new course that would not allow for further sustainment of any such ideal. Nietzsche himself described this radical change of direction within his philosophy as the commencement of his critique of Idealism. And, not surprisingly, the first step Nietzsche took to effectuate his new approach to philosophy was to purge his own way of thinking of any remnant of idealist thought:

Human, all-too-Human, with its two sequels, is the memorial of a crisis. It is called a book for free spirits: almost every sentence in it is the expression of a triumph – by means of it I purged myself of everything in me which was foreign to my nature. Idealism was foreign to me: the title of the book means: “Where ye see ideal things I see – human, alas! all-too-human things! [...] Looking into this book a little more closely, you perceive a pitiless spirit who knows all the secret hiding-places in which ideals are wont to skulk – where they find their dungeons, and, as it were, their last refuge. With a torch in my hand, the light of which is not by any means a flickering one, I illuminate this nether world with beams that cut like blades. It is war, but war without powder or smoke, without warlike attitudes,

without pathos and contorted limbs – all these things would still be “idealism”.
One error after another is quickly laid upon ice; the ideal is not refuted – it freezes.⁸

So, the ideal of “German unity in the highest sense” was dead, both historically and conceptually. What remains to be seen is how these two ‘deaths’ affected each other. Can we say that it was in fact the historical ‘death’ of the ideal of German higher unity that triggered Nietzsche’s general critique of idealism? And if so – in what precise way? But we will return to the question of how these two ‘deaths’ influenced each other later on. What is currently more important is namely the following:

Once the German spirit had died its two ‘deaths’, Nietzsche also ceased to address his philosophy to Germans. And this has to be taken quite literally: his constant use of the phrase “we, the Germans of today,” which was so typical of his early period, disappeared from his texts.

As a matter of fact, Nietzsche appeared to have found new audiences to whom he could address his newly reinvented philosophy. First to appear were “the free spirits” to whom he dedicated *Human, All Too Human*. Only subsequently did there appear “the future Europeans.” However, even though “the Europeans” were not the first to succeed the Germans, Nietzsche certainly announced their arrival in a very strong voice:

But the struggle against Plato, or, to use a clear and “popular” idiom, the struggle against the Christian-ecclesiastical pressure of millennia – since Christianity is Platonism for the “people” – has created a magnificent tension of spirit in Europe, the likes of which the earth has never known: with such a tension in our bow we can now shoot at the furthest goals. Granted, the European experiences this tension as a crisis or state of need; and twice already there have been attempts, in a grand fashion, to unbend the bow, once through Jesuitism, and the second time through the democratic Enlightenment: – which, with the help of freedom of the press and circulation of newspapers, might really insure that spirit does not experience itself so readily as “need”! (Germans invented gunpowder – all honors due! But they made up for it – they invented the press.) But we, who are neither Jesuits nor democrats, nor even German enough, we *good Europeans* and free, *very free*

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, The Macmillan Company, New York 1911, pp. 82, 83.

spirits – we still have it, the whole need of spirit and the whole tension of its bow!
And perhaps the arrow too, the task, and – who knows? the *goal* ...⁹

First of all, the readdressing of Nietzsche's philosophy to "the Europeans" clearly marks a real and significant change. From that point on, it was in fact Europe, and not Germany, that became the focal point of Nietzsche's philosophical investigations. This does not mean that Germany completely disappears from Nietzsche's vocabulary; it does not. But the central point of cultural reference is no longer Germany but Europe. As a matter of fact, Germany usually appears in Nietzsche's later texts merely as a negative counterexample to those rare developments within European history that Nietzsche observed as life-affirming or culturally progressive.

But what is Europe? Nietzsche's answer to this question is: Europe, the contemporary Europe, is precisely this tension that, according to Nietzsche, sprung out of the millennial silent struggle against Platonism and Christianity. We can immediately notice that by defining Europe in this way Nietzsche makes an attempt to grasp Europe in one single stroke, both *historically* and in *its present state*: the essential history of Europe is this silent struggle against Platonism and Christianity; Europe's current state, on the other hand, consists in the fact that this struggle is starting to emerge out of its silenced anonymity. Furthermore, this tension that has been building up for such a long period now constitutes what Nietzsche clearly perceives as contemporary Europe's spiritual strength. So, from this point of view, it makes sense that Nietzsche was now addressing his philosophy to "the Europeans," that is, to the actual heirs of the millennial tension that now started to reveal Europe's intellectual and other potentials.

⁹⁰ But who are "the Europeans"? It is here that things become more complicated. Let us take another look at Nietzsche's actual addressing of "the good Europeans":

But we, who are neither Jesuits nor democrats, nor even German enough, we *good Europeans* and free, *very* free spirits – we still have it, the whole need of spirit

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 4.

and the whole tension of its bow! And perhaps the arrow too, the task, and – who knows? the *goal* ...

What Nietzsche appears to propose here is a formula that seems to state: 'being a good European equals not being German enough'. Obviously, a number of questions can immediately arise around this equation: Are, after all, only the Germans – albeit, only the 'deficient' Germans – the true heirs to the potential of Europe's millennial struggle against Christianity? Is Nietzsche, after all, still addressing the Germans? Teaching them that they would have to 'emancipate' themselves from being Germans – in order to regain their place at the top of the European spiritual hierarchy?

What has to be noticed here first is that Nietzsche was not trying to make a universal statement – in reality he was speaking of one person alone, and this person he was speaking of was – Nietzsche himself: the only *already existing* European:

Thus when I needed to I once also *invented* for myself the 'free spirits' to whom this melancholy-valiant book entitled *Human All To Human* is dedicated: 'free spirits' of this kind do not exist, did not exist – but, as I have said, I had need of them at that time if I was to keep in good spirits while surrounded by ills [...]. That free spirits of this kind *could* one day exist, that our Europe *will* have such active and audacious fellows among its sons [...] I should wish to be the last to doubt it. I see them already *coming*, slowly, slowly; and perhaps I shall do something to speed their coming if I describe in advance under what vicissitudes, upon what paths, I see them coming?¹⁰

Nietzsche clearly did not "invent" the Europeans in precisely the same way as he invented the "free spirits" to comfort him in his loneliness. But at the same time, it is also very clear that the number of "good Europeans" – who already fully comprehended the task ahead that Europe's millennial struggle bestowed upon them – amounted to one person alone, and that person was, of course, Nietzsche himself.

This ultimately leads us to the following comparison:

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 6, 7.

The problem of Germany consisted of the fact that Germany, according to Nietzsche, never truly commenced to exist: since the Germans had squandered their opportunity to reach a higher cultural unity, Nietzsche, from that point onwards, observed Germany merely as a place populated by Germans that was rapidly changing into a cultural and civilisational black-hole. Europe, on the other hand, clearly existed; that is to say: Europe did attain to its proper Being that, according to Nietzsche, sprung out of the millennial struggle against Platonism and Christianity, and was, at that precise moment in time, even observed by Nietzsche as taking the shape of a unique creative intellectual tension, such as had never existed before. However – even though Europe, in contrast to Germany, existed, and despite the fact that the Being of Europe, according to Nietzsche, was, at that precise moment, already assuming the shape of an authentic life-force that took possession of the power of those same forces that once oppressed it –, Europe too had a problem to face that can only be described as an ‘existential crisis’. Namely, even though Europe did attain to its proper Being, “the Europeans” themselves were not there quite yet. And, as a matter of fact, the only reason why Nietzsche was so confident of their forthcoming arrival consisted of the fact that *he himself was there already*.

This shows very clearly that Nietzsche must have devised his addressing of “the Europeans” in order to perform an entirely different task in comparison to the scope of his earlier addressing of the Germans:

Nietzsche’s addressing of the Germans was obviously directed at an already existent, particular audience, that is, it was addressed to the German people. And while he was addressing the Germans, Nietzsche clearly attempted to confer on the Germans the content of his thoughts. In fact, he was trying to convey to them the message that they should rise up against the complacency of the belief that ‘Germany’ was already an accomplished fact.

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Nietzsche’s addressing of the Europeans consists of an entirely different logic and strategy. First of all, at the exact moment he was addressing “the Europeans” Nietzsche was not addressing an already constituted subject. No such thing as ‘the European people’ existed at the time (nor probably will it ever). As a matter of fact, at that precise moment Nietzsche was, as it were, speaking to the void: “the Europeans” he was addressing were not yet there to immediately receive

his message. Nietzsche was essentially sending a letter from *their* future to *the future* (in which the Europeans would appear to recover the letter).

Hence, the primary mission of Nietzsche's addressing of "the Europeans" was not simply to deliver a message to its proper recipient, who at that precise moment did not yet even exist; the primary mission of such addressing of specifically them was rather to devise this message in such a way that it could 'create' its own audience. The message was not sent by Nietzsche to a specific address in order to reach its proper recipient; rather, this message was sent out there in the open, in order to invoke or speed up the proper recipient's arrival; in a certain sense, it was meant to *become* the proper address of its addressee.

On one hand, Nietzsche's task was clearly that of mobilisation; he had to convey a message that could accelerate the process of the metamorphosis of the already existing European individuals into properly 'European subjects' – to put this in a slightly Badiouian way. And, as a matter of fact, Nietzsche was firmly convinced that his philosophy was already performing this task successfully. Since the present Being of Europe, according to Nietzsche, consisted of Europe's millennial silent struggle against Idealism bursting out into an open tension – this, for Nietzsche, meant that to become a true European, a true free spirit, amounted to the same thing as to get rid of Christian moral values. In other words, the task of invoking "Europeans" could be, according to Nietzsche, accomplished by what he famously called "the transvaluation of values" – and one thing is certain: Nietzsche was firmly convinced that his entire philosophy, from its earliest beginnings onwards, had been almost spontaneously serving that purpose: he was convinced that his philosophy had always excelled in producing what he called "immoralists":

I have been told often enough, and always with an expression of great surprise, that all my writings, from the *Birth of Tragedy* to the most recently published *Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, have something that distinguishes them and unites them together: they all of them, I have been given to understand, contain snares and nets for unwary birds and effect a persistent invitation to the overturning of habitual evaluations and valued habits.¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Thus, insofar as the ‘mobilisational aspect’ of his addressing of “the Europeans” was concerned, Nietzsche believed that it was already making progress. Certainly, this process was still far from being accomplished, but it had begun. However, this invoking of Europe’s “audacious sons” was not the only task that Nietzsche’s addressing of “the Europeans” had to perform. There was also the problem of selection.

Namely, Nietzsche was becoming increasingly concerned about *whom* his thoughts in general might reach. What worried Nietzsche in this respect was not so much the fact that philosophical thoughts can easily be misapprehended. Nietzsche’s concern must be perceived in the much more direct sense of his growing belief that the wrong choice of audience can directly cause the destruction of the very essence of a thought – but not necessarily by means of misapprehension. As a matter of fact, Nietzsche was more afraid of being ‘correctly’ understood by the ‘wrong’ audience, or even of being ‘correctly’ understood at the ‘wrong moment’, than he was afraid of being misapprehended. This became most apparent in his treatment of his most revered thought – the “thought of the eternal recurrence of the same,” which he deliberately surrounded with deceptive interpretations in order to keep it safe (clearly not from misapprehension, which he deliberately tried to infuse).

Now, why is Nietzsche’s growing concern with being understood by the ‘wrong’ audience, or at an ‘inappropriate’ time, so important in the context of our discussion?

Nietzsche was utterly convinced that the actual *Death* – the precise moment of its passing away – of the German spirit ultimately occurred *as a result of one such wrong choice of audience*. This wrong choice was, not surprisingly, made by Richard Wagner – the artist whose unique genius made the entire project of “German unity in the highest sense” attainable in the first place. So, let us first take a look at Nietzsche’s description of the German spirit’s ‘final moments’:

This book [*Human All Too Human*] was begun during the first musical festival at Bayreuth; a feeling of profound strangeness towards everything that surrounded me there, is one of its first conditions. He who has any notion of the visions which even at that time had flitted across my path, will be able to guess what I felt when one day I came to my senses in Bayreuth. It was just as if I had been dream-

ing. Where on Earth was I? I recognized nothing that I saw; I scarcely recognized Wagner. It was in vain that I called up reminiscences. Tribschen – remote island of bliss: not a shadow of resemblance! The incomparable days devoted to laying of the first stone, the small group of the initiated who celebrated them, and who were far from lacking fingers for the handling of delicate things: not the shadow of resemblance. *What had happened?* – Wagner had been translated into German! The Wagnerite had become master of Wagner! – *German art!* the German master! German beer!... We who know only too well the kind of refined artists and cosmopolitanism in taste, to which alone Wagner's art can appeal, were besides ourselves at the sight of Wagner bedecked with German virtues. I think I know the Wagnerite, I have experienced three generations of them, from Brendel of blessed memory, who confounded Wagner with Hegel, to the idealists of the *Bayreuth Gazette*, who confound Wagner with themselves [...]. There was not a single abortion that was lacking among them – no, not even the anti-Semite. – Poor Wagner! Into whose hands had he fallen! If only he had gone into a herd of swine! But among Germans! Some day, for the education of posterity, one ought really to have the genuine Bayreuthian stuffed, or better still, preserved in spirit – for it is precisely spirit that is lacking in this quarter, – with the inscription at the foot of the jar: “A sample of the spirit whereon the ‘German Empire’ was founded.”¹²

So, the Wagnerite movement, and with it the entire project of the cultural unity that the movement was supposed to carry on, collapsed once “the Wagnerite had become master of Wagner.” But what precisely was Nietzsche in this passage reproaching Wagner himself for?

What Nietzsche perhaps foremost reproached Wagner for was that he had ceased relying on “the small group of the initiated [...] who were far from lacking fingers for the handling of delicate things,” and that he, instead, began relying on the ever-growing number of Wagnerites who joined the movement for all the wrong reasons – predominantly because of Wagner's growing fame and popularity in Germany.

Nietzsche was in fact convinced, from the beginning on, that this “small group of the initiated” was the key to the success of the entire colossal enterprise that was supposed to bring the Germans to a higher cultural unity:

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, pp. 84, 85.

[W]hile he [Wagner] quietly pushed ahead with his greatest work, completing one score after another, something occurred that made him stop and take notice: *friends* arrived, announcing to him an underground movement of many hearts – it was by no means the “common people” that moved here and announced itself, but perhaps the kernel and first life-giving source of a true human society to be realized in a distant future.¹³

So, this small “underground movement” that reached out to Wagner during the period when he was still largely unrecognized as an artist was, according to Nietzsche, not merely a group of admirers of Wagner’s music, who truly and deeply appreciated Wagner’s art. This “underground movement” that approached Wagner with a message for him constituted the “kernel” of the future culturally transformed Germany – it represented the “first life-giving source of a true human society to be realized in a distant future.”

Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why Nietzsche so firmly believed that – once Wagner ceased to relate to this nucleus of the *future* Germany, in order to start addressing the existing Germans, the German *petit-bourgeois* society – the true scope of Wagnerism had already dissipated. By becoming a ‘German’ himself, that is, by becoming a revered member of this existing German society, Wagner severed the vein that connected him to the Germany of the future.

And thusly we can also at least start comprehending Nietzsche’s growing concern with ‘being understood’ by the ‘wrong’ crowd, or, prematurely. Nietzsche was determined not to repeat Wagner’s mistake, which ultimately consisted of addressing the essential message to the wrong audience.

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Therefore, once it was his turn to address “the Europeans”, Nietzsche was not only faced with the problem of how to accelerate their arrival; quite paradoxically, he was also confronted with the apparently opposite problem of how to slow down time. Nietzsche needed to buy time, so that his enciphered message could reach those few individuals that could comprehend the task ahead of them well enough, to slowly re-emerge as the new “first life-giving source of a true human society to be realized in a distant future.”

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, p. 304.