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## Nietzsche and His Friends: Richard Wagner and Jakob Burckhardt

Meredith A. Butler

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

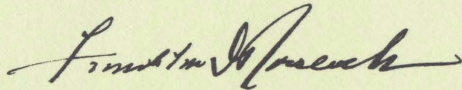
January 29, 1944.

Dear Paul:

I am glad your resignation, effective at the close of business Monday, January thirty-first, tendered in your letter of January twenty-first does not entail your retirement from the public service. I accept it, therefore, effective as of the date indicated.

You have done such good work as Under Secretary of Agriculture that I have the fullest confidence you will meet every requirement of your new responsibilities as Assistant Director of the Bureau of the Budget.

Very sincerely yours,



Honorable Paul H. Appleby,  
Under Secretary of Agriculture,  
Washington, D. C.

Letter to Paul H. Appleby from President Roosevelt on the occasion of Appleby's resignation as Under Secretary of Agriculture to accept the post of Assistant Director of the Bureau of the Budget. From Syracuse University Archives.

# THE COURIER

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# *Nietzsche and His Friends: Richard Wagner and Jakob Burckhardt*

by Meredith A. Butler

From November 1 to 10, 1972, Syracuse University's new Bird Library was host to a unique exhibition of books, manuscript materials, photographs, and original graphics by and about Friedrich Nietzsche. The exhibition was part of the three-day international Nietzsche Symposium titled "Friedrich Nietzsche's Impact on Western Thought," sponsored by various academic departments of Syracuse University and attended by many eminent scholars in the increasingly important field of Nietzsche research. The interdisciplinary approach to the topic of the symposium was the guiding principle of the exhibition, which attempted to represent visually Nietzsche's impact on the fields of philosophy, religion (especially the "death of God" movement), psychology and literature, and his influence on such diverse figures as Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Freud, Thomas Mann, Rilke, Stefan George, and Herman Hesse.

The section of the exhibition which was of particular interest to Syracuse University Libraries, however, was the section subtitled "Nietzsche and Friends," in which books and photographs of those people who had greatly influenced Nietzsche's personal development or the development of his thought were exhibited. Here the George Arents Research Library displayed materials from its collection of works of two men who had considerable influence on Nietzsche: Richard Wagner and Jakob Burckhardt.

Richard Wagner, some thirty-one years older than Nietzsche, had an extremely important influence on the young man who met him in November, 1868. Wagner's friendship was eagerly sought after and highly prized by the ambitious scholar who was attracted by Wagner's genius and the revolutionary character of his music. As Walter Kaufmann stated in his *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*: "It was Wagner's presence that convinced Nietzsche that greatness and genuine creation were still possible, and it was Wagner who inspired him with the persistent longing first to equal and then to outdo his friend."<sup>1</sup>

One of the most beautiful items in the Nietzsche Exhibition from the Arents Library was a facsimile of a holograph score for Wagner's *Tristan and*

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Mrs. Butler, who holds the M.A. in German from Ohio State University and the M.S. in Library Science from Syracuse, is a bibliographer in the Humanities Department of the Library.

<sup>1</sup>Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. 3rd rev. and enlarged edition, N.Y., Vintage, 1968, p. 30.

*Isolde*. Number 15 of a limited edition of 15, it was published by the Drei Masken Verlag for Siegfried Wagner and presented to his friend John McCormack in 1924. *Tristan*, a favorite opera of Nietzsche's, represented Wagner's highly successful attempt to incorporate his own musical genius with his passion for Schopenhauer's philosophy. The early Nietzsche shared Wagner's passion and it was the echo of Schopenhauer's philosophy in Wagner's *Tristan* which suggested some of the ideas of Greek culture and drama that Nietzsche put forth in his unique and original interpretation of that subject in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

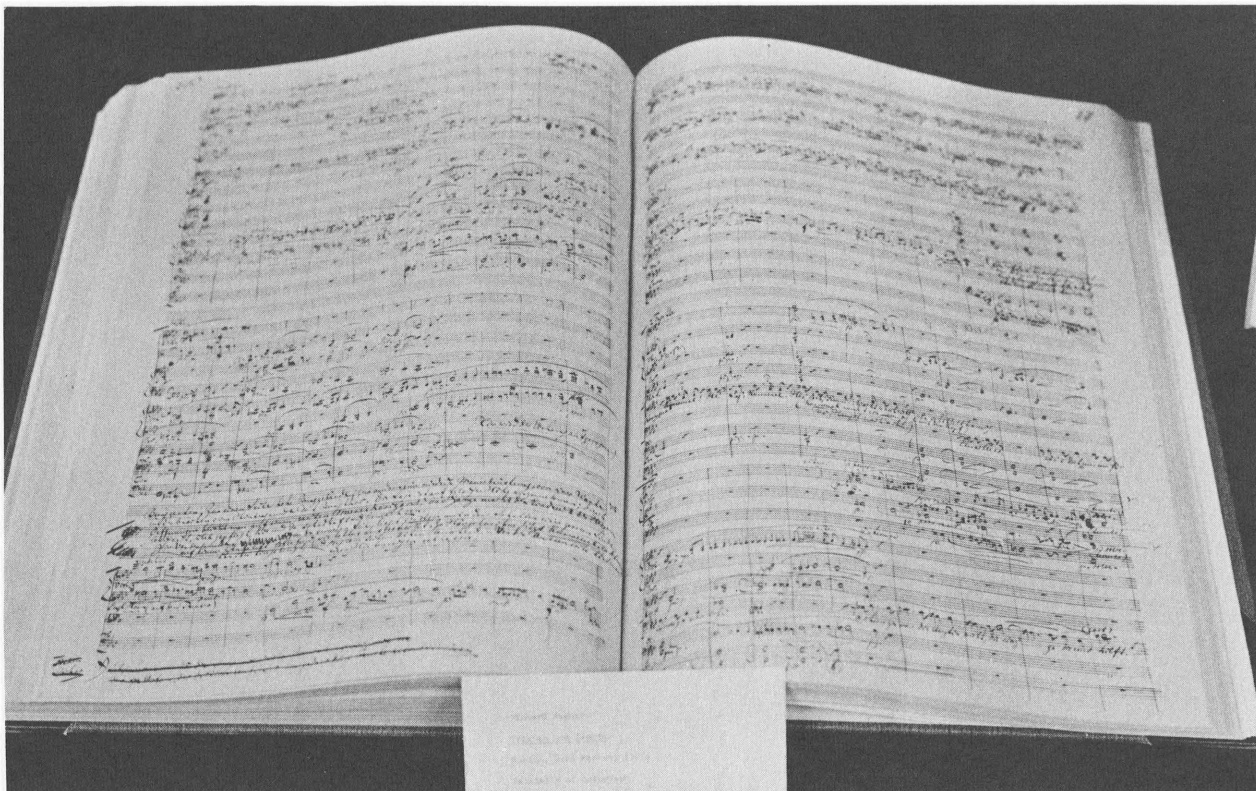
Nietzsche eventually outgrew his friendship with and dependence on Wagner. The breach developed gradually but the outcome was inevitable. Two men of such genius and independence of mind could not continue to be friends without one mind becoming dominant and the other submissive. As Nietzsche became increasingly aware of his own mental gifts and the goals he wished to pursue, he realized that the Nibelungen Ring and the Bayreuth festivals, in short, everything that the aging Wagner represented, were anathema to all he believed in.

A brief study of the facsimile scores with accompanying color plate illustrations of Wagner's later operas in the Arents Library will make obvious the changes in Wagner's music and work which resulted in Nietzsche's repudiation of his once beloved and respected friend's genius. Gone are the Schopenhauerian strivings of the will, the ecstatic abandonment and drunken frenzy of the ancient Greek cults. Instead we find a twilight world of German mythology and Christian mysticism, a combination of bigotry, Germanomania, and political propaganda, all this in a setting which was quickly becoming a major cultural force much despised by Nietzsche.

Thus we see that, although Wagner had great influence on the early Nietzsche, his influence did not last. Nietzsche realized that he could not fully develop his genius until he broke with Wagner and that break was very painful indeed. The second painful break was to come in his relationship with Jakob Burckhardt, another older man who had considerable influence on Nietzsche.

Burckhardt was a senior professor at the University of Basel and a scholar of considerable reputation when Nietzsche was appointed to the University's faculty in 1869. Many of Burckhardt's colleagues in the narrow world of German academia, with its rigid standards, were surprised at Nietzsche's appointment to the rank of associate professor because of his youth (he was twenty-four) and his lack of a doctoral thesis or dissertation. But Burckhardt recognized Nietzsche's genius and at first was a sympathetic if somewhat reserved supporter of the young Professor of Classical Philology.

Reserve was probably one of Burckhardt's most outstanding personal characteristics. His outward sober calm and dignity and his Olympian restraint were reminiscent of the old Goethe and, like Goethe, he had little



Facsimile of holograph score of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, No. 15 of a limited edition of 15, published by Drei Masken Verlag for Siegfried Wagner in 1924. From the Rare Book unit of the George Arents Research Library.

patience with the enthusiasms and passions of young men. Perhaps his attitude resulted from memories of his own stormy and passionate youth.

Burckhardt, a native of Basel, was the son of a Protestant minister, and he began his university education as a student of theology. But, just like Nietzsche at a later time, Burckhardt soon lost his faith in orthodox Christianity, rejected his family heritage, and turned his attentions to other subjects, namely history and art. He spent part of his formative years in liberal circles in Germany at the universities of Bonn and Berlin, and at the latter studied under Leopold von Ranke, for whom he had great respect but not much affection. Ranke probably had the most potent and lasting influence on Burckhardt's future career as an historian and it was in Ranke's seminar that Burckhardt learned how to use and be critical of source materials.

Burckhardt returned to Switzerland in the 1840s and taught briefly at the Zurich Polytechnical School. At first he took an active role in the political and religious dissensions raging in Switzerland at the time, but he quickly lost interest in politics when harsh words precipitated acts of violence and the Swiss cantons erupted in political and religious strife. Having, in his own words, "given up political activity forever," he retired to Italy and to the study of art history. Later he returned to his native city of Basel and to a position as Professor of Cultural and Art History at the University of Basel, where he dedicated himself to his academic pursuits of teaching and lecturing, research and publication.

The corpus of Burckhardt's writings was published in entirety before he was fifty. *The Age of Constantine the Great* (1852), *Cicerone* (1855), *The Renaissance of Italy* (1860), and *The History of the Renaissance* (1867) are his most important publications, and they established his reputation as the cultural historian *par excellence* of his day.

All of these books are to be found in the original German in the excellent collection of Burckhardt items in the George Arents Research Library. In addition to the fourteen-volume collected works and the six-volume collected letters, the collection contains many notable Burckhardt first editions as well as many editions published during the author's lifetime. A few of these books are part of the original von Ranke collection acquired by Syracuse University in 1887, but most of them have come from the library of George Leyh, acquired by the University in 1965. Supplementing the primary works, there is a wealth of secondary materials on Burckhardt, including two books which specifically deal with his relationship to Nietzsche<sup>2</sup> and a collection of forty-three miscellaneous items: manuscripts, letters, newspaper clippings, photostats, etc., all relating to Burckhardt.

In addition to his major works, Burckhardt left notes for a number of

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred W. O. Martin, *Nietzsche und Burckhardt; zwei geistige Welten im Dialog*, 2nd rev. & 3rd rev. and enlarged edition, Ernst Reinhardt, 1942, 1945; and Edgar Salin, *Jakob Burckhardt und Nietzsche*, Basel, Verlag der Universitätsbibliothek, 1938.



lectures given between 1868 and 1871 which were published posthumously under the title *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (Reflections on World History). These notes are a gold mine for the Burckhardt scholar because they contain many analyses of contemporary trends, and subtle personal observations on the purpose of the study of history and on the theoretical problems historiography poses.

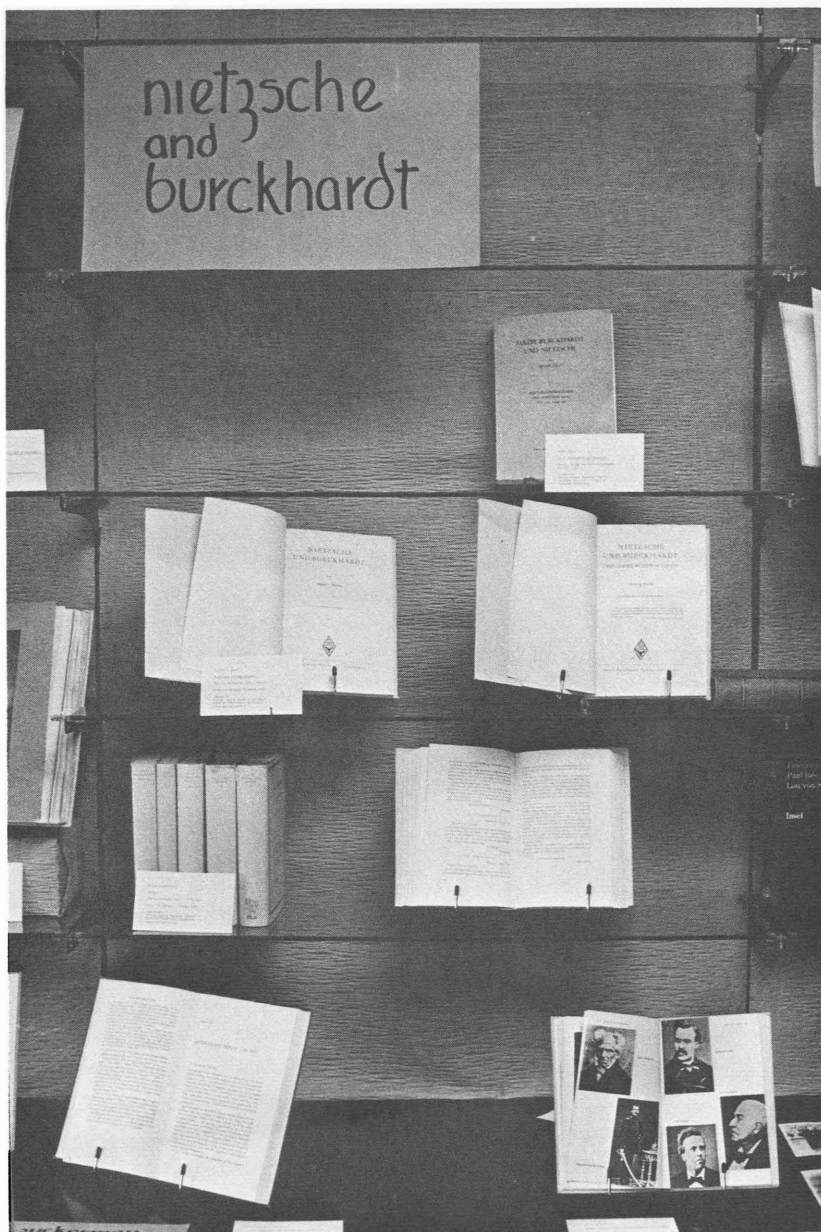
History, for Burckhardt, was not simply a matter of recording facts or listing events in chronological order. Rather, he believed that the historian should capture the “spirit” of the age he is investigating, the quality of man’s life at a given point in time. Just as the artist creates in his medium, so too does the historian “create” a history of culture (as distinct from political history) by intelligence, industry, intuition, and sensibility.

For this creative activity, the cultural historian’s imagination and intelligence are to be stimulated by contact with original source materials, both literary and plastic, for both mediums “represent” the literal events of history in concrete images. Because he was just as concerned with represented history as he was with literal history, Burckhardt had little use for abstract concepts and the type of academic pedantry which forces accumulated facts into systems of ideas. He believed that the specialization in trifles, the passion for facts, numbers, and statistics reduced experience to an abstract notion of measurable data and destroyed its essence or spirit. He was profoundly skeptical and very critical of schemes which attempted to systematize the events of man’s history into rationally ordered patterns. Burckhardt aimed for a comprehensiveness of vision, and he saw this as a creative act of the historian who must use facts and imagination to retell history.

Like Wagner, Burckhardt was greatly influenced by the philosophy of Schopenhauer, and it was their mutual interest in Schopenhauer which brought Burckhardt and Nietzsche together. Neither thinker believed in the Hegelian concept of history as the record of man’s progress. Rather, both believed history to be a record of what “is” and never develops. The center of history for Burckhardt was man and the story of his struggles to survive on earth.

Burckhardt’s emphasis on the role of man in history, his profoundly humanistic creed, greatly influenced the development of Nietzsche’s early thought. In his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche had written much with which Burckhardt agreed. They had discovered the congruence of their aesthetic ideas as a result of their related views of antiquity. The influence of Burckhardt’s lectures on history, which Nietzsche attended, can be seen clearly in the development of Nietzsche’s thought from *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which he placed primary emphasis on aesthetic principles, to the later *Untimely Meditations*, where man and his role in history take on increasing importance. Nietzsche’s vision of the great artist changed under Burckhardt’s influence to the vision of the great man. Nietzsche’s historical studies, especially those on Greek and Renaissance culture, also show Burckhardt’s





The Burckhardt section of the Bird Library exhibit of books, manuscript materials, photographs and original graphics by and about Nietzsche, November 1972.

influence. Like Nietzsche, Burckhardt had lost his faith in God and his belief in man's salvation, but, unlike Nietzsche, Burckhardt was not disturbed in the core of his being by this loss of faith. Nietzsche believed Burckhardt's humanity, his cheerful pessimism, his stoicism in the face of the abyss, and his resigned serenity to be a pose, but Nietzsche probably was wrong.

To Burckhardt, Nietzsche's nihilism was repugnant and his despair self-indulgent. His original sympathy and affection for the young Professor of Philology quickly disappeared as Nietzsche's publications became increasingly strident, visionary, and nihilistic. For Nietzsche's objectives and concerns were not those of Burckhardt, who summed up his aim in life in a letter to Nietzsche written February 25, 1874:

I had to furnish the people I taught with that framework which they could not do without for their future studies if all was not to be left hanging in the air. I have done everything possible to guide them to their own appropriation of the past — an appropriation of any sort — and the same (everything possible) not to mislead them. I wished that they might, from their own strength, learn to pluck the fruits; I also never thought about elevating the teacher and pupil in the narrow sense; on the contrary, I hoped that each listener might form for himself the conviction and desire: one could and ought to make that part of the past which appeals to everybody individually, something of oneself, and there could be something gratifying in that.<sup>3</sup>

Burckhardt's aloofness was as painful to Nietzsche as, earlier, Wagner's betrayal of his own genius had been. But even in his last moments of sanity Nietzsche's respect for Burckhardt did not waver. In his last letter to Burckhardt, written during his final collapse, Nietzsche wrote, "Now you are our great — our greatest teacher."<sup>4</sup>

These, then — Wagner and Burckhardt — were the two men in Nietzsche's life whom intellectually he abandoned in the process of discovering himself and his own message. In the end, he was alone in his madness.

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<sup>3</sup>Jakob Burckhardt, *Briefe*, 6 vol., Basel, Benno Schwabe & Co., 1949. Vol. 5, p. 222-223.

<sup>4</sup>Nietzsche's letter to Burckhardt, January 6, 1889. First published in Salin (see footnote 2).

