

*Nietzsche's Free Spirit Works:  
A Dialectical Reading*  
Matthew Meyer

Jordan Rodgers  
King's College

(Cambridge: Cambridge UP. xi + 277 pp, 2019. ISBN 978-1-108-47417-7)

We still don't know how to read Nietzsche's books. This bizarre fact is true of them to a degree unmatched by the works of any other major historical figure in modern philosophy, perhaps in all of the history of philosophy. Of course, we know how to read the words Nietzsche wrote, and get something – often, very many things – out of them. We know, as it were, how to read *in* Nietzsche's books. But the books themselves, as literary units, remain elusive. So much so, in fact, that earlier Anglophone commentators tended to throw up their hands. Arthur Danto suggested that Nietzsche's books "give the appearance of having been assembled rather than composed" (Danto 1965, 19). In a similar vein, Richard Schacht says that they "consist chiefly in assemblages of rather loosely connected notes" (Schacht 1983, ix).

While most contemporary scholars have been trained to be highly attentive to the context of individual aphorisms, and have found numerous and important connections between them, fundamental interpretive problems nevertheless persist. Even if some continuing trains of thought can be isolated in some of his books (most notably perhaps in his earlier essays, and in

---

the *Genealogy*), still the overall structure of almost all of them is difficult to ascertain. Even more distressingly, Nietzsche's work as a whole presents what can seem like very abrupt and insufficiently motivated changes of course, especially around the years 1876 and 1882. The time in between those dates is often referred to as Nietzsche's "middle" period, and the books he published then – the two volumes of *Human, All-too-Human*, *Daybreak*, and *The Gay Science* – present both problems in their most vexing form: they are, or at any rate seem to be, the least internally coherent of Nietzsche's works, and many of their claims stand in quite blatant contradiction to claims Nietzsche makes in books prior to 1876 and after 1882. Most strikingly, in works of his earlier and later periods, Nietzsche has a far more critical understanding of the limits of the value of science and truth-seeking generally, and a far more positive evaluation of the cultural importance of art, while in the middle (sometimes, "positivistic") works the roles are reversed – science is seen as the cultural savior, while artists are mostly critiqued for their dishonesty.

These books, and these problems, are the focus of Matthew Meyer's ambitious and exciting new book, *Nietzsche's Free Spirit Works: A Dialectical Reading*. It is not only the most illuminating study we now have of Nietzsche's middle period, but an important call to a very different way of approaching Nietzsche's whole *oeuvre*.

Meyer's interpretive thesis is bold enough to appear at first highly unlikely. He believes that the free spirit works of the middle period are "best understood as a consciously constructed dialectical *Bildungsroman*," through which Nietzsche himself undergoes a kind of self-educative project as a free spirit (3). The free spirit begins as an Enlightenment figure, ascetically committed to the value of science and truth and highly critical of the cultural role of art, and by a series of stages discovers that the project of truth seeking undermines itself (or undergoes a *Selbstaufhebung*<sup>1</sup>), thus necessitating a return to the kind of art that Nietzsche praised in early works like BT and (in Meyer's view) went on to compose in later works like Z. This "dialectical

---

<sup>1</sup>See GM III:27 for Nietzsche's use of this important philosophical term.

---

*Bildungsroman*” is “consciously constructed” because, though Nietzsche did not know all of the details of the three free spirit works before he began, he *did* plan out (at least by the time of the publication of HH in 1878) its main “plot points,” as it were – the ascetically motivated commitment to the will to truth begun in HH, a critique of moral prejudices set out in D, and a self-overcoming of a moralized conception of the will to truth in the final work (which in the end becomes the famous “death of God” passage in GS 125), and the subsequent need to return to tragic art.<sup>2</sup> Meyer’s long introduction (pp. 3–81) explains and lays out his argument for the position, and subsequent chapters present in detail his reading of each of Nietzsche’s middle period books.

The introduction is an interpretive *tour de force*, and in many ways the strongest part of the book. The appeal of his approach is clear – if Meyer is right, then the reading of a book like HH becomes considerably less confusing. Part of the struggle any reader of Nietzsche’s corpus must have had with that work is that the positions it espouses break sharply from ones Nietzsche took up earlier *and* later in his career; and yet one cannot simply dismiss it, because it takes but a moment to see that it is written with the same verve and incisiveness that mark all of Nietzsche’s other works.<sup>3</sup> What was needed, as now seems obvious in retrospect, was a way to capture Nietzsche’s ambivalent presence in the book. Meyer provides that – HH is the beginning of an educative project, but one where *Nietzsche himself* is the one being educated. He is present as the Nietzsche who consciously takes on an absolute commitment to truth-seeking in its modern form (i.e., by means of modern natural science, not transcendent metaphysics); but he is also present as the author of

---

<sup>2</sup>One of the more interesting and controversial theses of Meyer’s book is that the call is actually just as much to *comic* art as tragic, and that Nietzsche in fact responds to that call, too, in his works of 1888. I will not focus on that aspect of his thesis in this review, but interested readers should consult chapter 8, and Meyer 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Though, of course, some have tried. Laurence Lampert has suggested that Nietzsche in effect disowned HH in 1886 (see Lampert 2017). Meyer responds to Lampert (to my mind, persuasively) on pp. 24–26.

---

the free spirit project who knows already that such a commitment will prove to be self-undermining.

Meyer marshals an impressive array of circumstantial evidence, with the goal of showing that his approach is the best potential candidate for understanding the works. He appeals to three kinds of evidence – (1) *ex post* evidence from Nietzsche’s later works suggesting that he saw the contents of the free spirit works as unified and building to a *Selbstaufhebung* of the will to truth;<sup>4</sup> (2) *ex ante* evidence, showing that the stage of thought Nietzsche reached by the end of the free spirit works had already been sketched out in some detail in Nietzsche’s earlier works;<sup>5</sup> and finally, (3) contemporaneous evidence, especially from Nietzsche’s letters and unpublished drafts, plans, and sketches from the middle period, showing that Nietzsche wrote them rapidly, often conceiving of them as direct sequels or continuations of each other, and throughout with the plan that they would be written in some sense *for himself* rather than for others. The overall effect of the evidence is strong – Meyer’s approach allows him not just to tell a satisfying narrative of Nietzsche’s development from 1875–1882, but to do so in a way that makes philosophical (and not merely biographical) sense of the transition from the early to the middle period, and doesn’t simply dismiss Nietzsche’s later descriptions of that development, as scholars before him have tended to do. It is not a knock-down argument, and the evidence is all technically equivocal; Meyer himself admits that there is no smoking gun passage which proves that Nietzsche was, before the publication of HH, planning the project Meyer describes. But he nonetheless achieves his goal – his is clearly the most con-

---

<sup>4</sup>The most important passages are the sections in EH discussing the free spirit works, the prefaces added to the second editions of those works in 1886–7, and the discussion of the self-overcoming of Christian morality in GM III:27. Also important are two letters to Nietzsche’s publisher Fritzsche in 1886 (KSB 7:730 and 740).

<sup>5</sup>Here, the key passages are BT 18, the early unpublished essays TL and PTA (all three of which sketch versions of the idea of the self-undermining of the will to truth), and SE on the need for self-education.

---

vincing account available in the literature of how Nietzsche's middle period fits into his overall philosophical development.

The rest of Meyer's book (pp. 85—262) presents his reading of the free spirit works guided by the dialectical approach. Meyer gives a (necessarily) selective reading of HH, AOM, WS, D and GS. Meyer's through-line, from which he never strays very far, is the will to truth. He reads HH as taking up the experiment of understanding a free spirit as someone who is committed to the absolute value of the will to truth without an accompanying transcendent metaphysics or optimism about the meaning of life. Many of the consequences of this idea are explored for the first time, including a trenchant critique of the value of "convictions," which are here conceived as fetters on the free spirit's bold search for truth. The overall attitude toward life suggested by the free spirit's approach is, however, deeply ambivalent – the ultimate goal of all its knowledge-seeking is unclear, and Nietzsche even suggests a kind of suspension of judgment about the value of life (HH 34); the free spirit flits from belief to belief, as the truth leads, so that it feels like "a wanderer on earth" (HH 638). AOM and WS continue to deal with this latter problem, and move (especially in WS) in the direction of a more Epicurean response to the predicament (i.e., away from metaphysical questions about "first and last things" and toward consideration of the "closest things" of everyday life – diet, weather, social intercourse, etc.).<sup>6</sup> *Daybreak* sets out on the apparently quite different project of critiquing moral prejudices. But Meyer argues persuasively that this appearance is misleading – it is precisely these moral prejudices that can lead us to despair, when they are combined with the sobering deliverances of the will to truth the earlier books had outlined. A critique of them makes possible a new kind of boldness, what Nietzsche comes to call a "passion for knowledge" (D 429 and 482; cf. also GS 3, 107, and 123), which finds joy in the simple act of seeking knowledge and throws out

---

<sup>6</sup>These themes are the focus of another recent, and highly Epicurean, treatment of Nietzsche's middle works (Ansell-Pearson 2018, reviewed in this volume). Meyer's reading suggests that Ansell-Pearson's view is not as attentive as it should be to the further development of these themes in D and GS.

---

any caution about the consequences of this seeking for life more generally. It is this more intemperate passion, which could border on a kind of madness, that makes possible the infamous killing of God (described, naturally, by a "madman" [*tolle Mensch*]) in GS 125. Meyer takes the most important feature of God's death to be its undermining of the unconditional value of the will to truth; thus he speaks of Nietzsche as having "enacted" the *Selbstaufhebung* of the will to truth in book III of GS. Book IV of GS begins to suggest that, despite the misgivings about the cultural importance of art that the free spirit had had to develop when it was ascetically devoted to the will to truth (in HH), the response to the self-undermining of the will to truth will have to be artistic – we must "give style" to our character (GS 290), and the book ends with an "*incipit tragoedia*" (GS 342) that points to Nietzsche's own tragic response to the death of God, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

The virtue of Meyer's reading is that it stays very close to Nietzsche's texts and gives fruitful suggestions for how to read them as one continuing line of thought. Anyone who sits down to read these texts one after the other knows that they can be simply bewildering – so many short sections, on so many topics, in seemingly so many voices, often threatening to contradict each other. But Meyer's focus on the development of the will to truth and the changes in the importance of art allow the reader a baseline on which to focus attention, and to at least seek to somehow relate the rest of the material to it. And it often allows one to see the importance of individual aphorisms that might otherwise have gotten lost in the shuffle. Perhaps the best example of this is an aphorism titled "The Prisoners" (WS 84), which Meyer persuasively argues presents the "first portrayal of the death of God" (141), but which is often neglected by interpreters of GS 125. These chapters represent an important step forward in understanding how to read the free spirit works – they seem more approachable and potentially more interesting because of the work Meyer has done, and that is an important achievement.

However, the step forward is not as significant as it could have been. Meyer's focus on this particular line of philosophical thought is so diligent that much else goes by the wayside. Meyer makes much in his introduction

---

of the literary concept of a *Bildungsroman* in his introduction, and of the fact that Nietzsche thought the endpoint of the *Bildung* was a certain kind of artistic response. And yet, the fact that this is a story or novel of some kind (a “*Roman*”) doesn’t actually seem to carry much weight for Meyer, except that the writer seems to change his mind over time, and sometimes to look forward and back at his chain of thought. Aesthetic and stylistic considerations about the books seem in general to take a backseat. Surely one of the most striking features of all Nietzsche’s books from HH on is a playful yet curiously recurrent use of key metaphors, especially surrounding light/dark pairs (including shadows), biological/medical terms (sickness, health, etc.) and erotism (“passion” for knowledge, *amor fati*, etc.). Meyer doesn’t avoid these altogether, of course, but they are rarely his focus, and sometimes at key moments he passes by them quickly on the way to returning to his favored themes. Thus, for example, the image of the shadow obviously must be important to an understanding of WS, but Meyer’s approach apparently won’t help us to see how, since he is content to point out that its meaning is unclear and move on (133).<sup>7</sup>

And Meyer’s approach, which is so helpful in providing a kind of overview of the free spirit works, often falls flat in big moments. AOM, for instance, concludes with a bizarre and dramatic “descent into Hades,” in which Nietzsche finds “four pairs who did not refuse themselves to me” – Epicurus and Montaigne, Goethe and Spinoza, Plato and Rousseau, Pascal and Schopenhauer. Why these eight? Why paired like that? Meyer is right, of course, that “the meaning of this final aphorism is far from clear” (133), but the drama of the Odysseus comparison and the placement of the aphorism at the end of AOM clearly invites the reader to speculate. Meyer scrupulously turns down the opportunity, though. Arguably, he does so again in an even more important place, the all-important GS 125. This aphorism has generated so much commentary that Meyer could perhaps be forgiven for wanting to avoid con-

---

<sup>7</sup>For a more sustained attempt to grapple with some of Nietzsche’s central metaphors, especially those surrounding light and shadow, see Hough 1997.

---

troversies that are separate from his main concerns. But the death of God still plays an important role in his account, and yet he only devotes a single page to its analysis, treating it almost as if it is simply a plot point to be noted before moving on, rather than the mystifying, metaphor-rich, begging-to-be-speculated-about literary experiment that it is. He says that the madman’s claim that God is dead and we have killed him is “not something that refers to events in European culture happening independently of the free spirit project,” which if true might justify the short treatment (210). But that is still hardly very satisfying. It may be that free spirits have killed God with their uncompromising will to truth, as Meyer suggests, but that is surely only the beginning and not the end of a real account of what it means to have killed God, an account that would surely have a great deal to say about the course of events in late modern European culture. Meyer’s quick remark can leave the unfortunate (and surely unintentional) impression that perhaps the most intensely interesting aphorism of Nietzsche’s middle period works is really mostly a reference to greatest hits from the earlier works.

However, these complaints are expressions less of deep disagreement with Meyer’s overall approach than of hopeful expectation of its future fruitfulness. Meyer’s dialectical approach to the free spirit works is an elegant solution to a very real and pressing problem of Nietzsche interpretation, and should open up many new avenues for thinking about the development of Nietzsche’s philosophical thought more generally (and along with it, issues like the death of God in particular). It would of course be unfair to expect of Meyer’s own application of the approach that it follow up on all of those potential avenues. It is enough, more than enough, that his interpretation makes it possible to read Nietzsche more carefully and more comprehensively. Anyone who wants to do that will need to pay close attention to Meyer’s book.

## Works Cited

Ansell-Pearson, Keith. *Nietzsche’s Search for Philosophy: On the Middle Writings*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 2018.

---

Danto, Arthur. *Nietzsche as Philosopher*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1965.

Hough, Sheridan. *Nietzsche's Noontide Friend*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press. 1997.

Lampert, Laurence. *What a Philosopher Is: Becoming Nietzsche*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2017.

Meyer, Matthew. "The Divine Hanswurst: Nietzsche on Laughter and Comedy," in *Humor, Comedy, and Laughter in 19th Century Philosophy*, ed. L. L. Moland. New York: Springer. 2018.

Schacht, Richard. *Nietzsche*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1983.