

Beyond Good and Evil

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By Reviewed Peter Berkowitz

August 18, 2002

NIETZSCHE

A Philosophical Biography

By Ru{dier}diger Safranski

Translated from the German

By Shelley Frisch

Norton. 412 pp. \$29.95

ZARATHUSTRA'S SECRET

The Interior Life of Friedrich Nietzsche

By Joachim Ko{dier}hler

Translated from the German

By Ronald Taylor

Yale Univ. 278 pp. \$29.95

It is a tribute to Nietzsche that the interpretation of his books seems to present to each new generation of readers a defining temptation and test. Indeed, there may have been as many major interpretations of Nietzsche since he slipped into insanity at age 44 in the winter of 1889 as there have been generations who have sought to understand him.

As he lay wasting away in the 1890s, first in Naumburg under the care of his mother, and then in Weimar under the care of his unscrupulous sister (who helped lay the groundwork for what became the Nazi version of his thought), Nietzsche's fame as a teacher of Lebensphilosophie, which sought to liberate life from the stifling clutches of convention, began to grow in Germany; it continued to do so after his death in 1900. In World War I, German soldiers read Thus Spake Zarathustra in the trenches for inspiration. Later, notwithstanding the withering attacks on German nationalism and the refined praises of Judaism scattered liberally throughout his books, philosophy professors scoured Nietzsche's

writings for fragments to show that he was a spiritual father of National Socialism. Meanwhile, as the Third Reich rose and fell, Martin Heidegger, lecturing in isolation from the awful events reverberating around him, developed an influential account of Nietzsche as "the last metaphysician of the West."

In the 1950s, Walter Kaufmann, a young German-Jewish émigré, introduced to the United States a high-spirited Nietzsche who was an appealing mix of Socratic questioner, Goethean man of controlled passion, and existentialist philosopher courageously seeking meaning in a world that no longer had any place for God. In the 1970s, a new Nietzsche emerged in France and soon migrated across the Atlantic to find a home in literature departments in the United States. This was an aesthetic or postmodern Nietzsche who rejected morality and politics in the name of the endless play of self-creation. The 1990s witnessed the arrival, particularly among professional political theorists, of a new, new Nietzsche, one who was somehow both a postmodern relativist and a teacher of a radically democratic politics.

In their newly translated books on the philosopher, German scholars Rüdiger Safranski and Joachim Kehler offer interpretations of Nietzsche that differ from the dominant ones as well as from each other while sharing a common method. Both Safranski's book, which originally appeared in 2000, and Kehler's, which originally appeared in 1989, seek to understand Nietzsche's philosophy by exploring the connections between his thought and his life. But while both employ the biographical approach to useful effect, they rely on Nietzsche's life in different ways and to different degrees.

Safranski stresses Nietzsche's thought rather than his life or, more precisely, chronicles only as much of Nietzsche's life as is necessary to illuminate his thought; for Kehler on the other hand, Nietzsche's life provides the key to the understanding of his philosophy. In the end, neither cracks the riddle of Nietzsche's philosophical explorations. This is due in part to the limitations of the biographical approach, which focuses on the origin and development of a thought as opposed to its coherence and claim to truth. And it is also due to the nature of Nietzsche's philosophy, which is at once playful, intrepid and aiming for the highest and hardest goals.

Safranski is an independent writer whose impeccable reputation in Germany has only been enhanced by his philosophical biography of Nietzsche. Rich in fine phrases, deftly adduced details and striking observations, his book examines the many stages in the development of Nietzsche's thinking, and the full range of his writings, giving pride of place, as is entirely appropriate, to the examination of his published books.

In keeping with what was uppermost in Nietzsche's thinking, Safranski places much more emphasis than is common these days on the philosopher's life-long quest to understand the world's true character. From early on, Nietzsche believed he grasped the reality of the underlying chaos or void; that God was dead; that nihilism, the process by which "the highest

values devalue themselves" (The Will to Power), was upon us. As Safranski shows, all of Nietzsche's philosophical explorations can be understood as an examination of the alleged discovery that moral standards and transcendent values were altogether lacking, and to determine in what way it was still possible, in the face of this truth that Nietzsche regarded as devastating, to live life nobly. Ultimately, and harking back to an older interpretation, Safranski sees Nietzsche as teaching that redemption from the harshness of the human condition, if it is to be had at all, must come through art.

Contrary to Safranski, Ko{dier}hler believes that redemption for Nietzsche would have consisted in the satisfaction, largely denied him in life, of his homosexual desires. In fact, Ko{dier}hler has assembled ample and fascinating evidence -- from Nietzsche's letters and diaries, from the reconstruction of events in his life, from intricate interpretations of his philosophical writings -- to show that from his teenage years he was subject to largely repressed homoerotic yearnings. But what of it? Ko{dier}hler fails to demonstrate that these yearnings were more important to the development of Nietzsche's thought than his openly and eloquently expressed longings for nobility, justice and, above all, truth. To take the example that Ko{dier}hler himself suggests is decisive, he does not come close to persuading the reader that, in the figure of Zarathustra's superman, Nietzsche described his image of an ideal male beloved. One huge impediment to Ko{dier}hler's interpretation, which he does not squarely confront, is that Nietzsche chose to personify the goods that stir Zarathustra's greatest passions and toward which he directs his quest to transform himself into a superman -- life, wisdom, eternity -- as mysterious and ravishing women.

What is lacking, even in Safranski's book, is a willingness to wrestle with Nietzsche's thought, to go beyond unearthing and expounding the tensions and conflicts and subterranean forces that drive his thinking to take the measure of them. Safranski's book brings you to the threshold but does not itself pursue the great questions Nietzsche's books pose. For example: Is seeking excellence in a world in which God is dead an expression of strength or of weakness, of clear-sightedness or of a confused lapse into the very religious spirit from which Nietzsche was seeking to break free? Can one embrace Nietzsche's exaltation of art and, with a clean conscience, still hold fast to the moral claims of liberal democracy? Can Nietzsche's contention that the great tradition of philosophy has been refuted and disgraced beyond repair withstand the very free-spirited scrutiny to which he subjects the positions of other thinkers?

To pose such questions is neither an impertinence nor a luxury for one who is tempted to test himself by Nietzsche's thought. In fact, it is just what Nietzsche wished for in his own readers and what his thought generously rewards. For it is a feature of Nietzsche's philosophy that you must question it energetically in order to understand what is truly questionable about it.

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Friedrich Nietzsche in 1861 (left) and in 1887, a few years after "Thus Spake Zarathustra" was published