

The Making of Friedrich Nietzsche: The Quest for Identity, 1844-1869—Daniel Blue

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp. 344, 2016.
ISBN: 9781107134867)

Dirk R. Johnson

The life of Friedrich Nietzsche has been excruciatingly well documented, perhaps more so than that of any other major philosopher in the modern era. Countless personal letters, documents as well as testimonies from friends, acquaintances and individuals encountered on his wanderings (see, for example, Sander Gilman, ed., *Conversations with Nietzsche*, 1987) allow us to follow Nietzsche's actions in great detail. Such accounts can on occasion open, if ever so slightly, a window onto his inner life. Yet, despite an abundance of materials (or perhaps partly because of them), the contours of the man "Nietzsche" remain, somehow, mysteriously out of view.

There is a general imbalance in assessing the philosopher's life and career. We tend to know more about the broad strokes of Nietzsche's maturity—his friendship and split with Richard Wagner, his failed courtship of Lou-Andreas Salomé, his final breakdown in Turin—than we do about the formative years he spent with his family and with friends in school (Schulpforta) and at university (Bonn, Leipzig). Daniel Blue's biography sets out to reveal Nietzsche's struggle, from childhood to early manhood, to forge a unique identity and sense of personal mission, in particular during a period of great social, political, and cultural upheaval in German (and European) history.

The novelty of Blue's own biographical account, as he states, rests on his reliance on "scholarship untouched by any biographies written in English" (11). Groundbreaking work on Nietzsche's early years by Martin Pernet, Johann Figl, Klaus Goch, and Hermann Josef Schmidt, among others, has appeared in German, as has a scholarly examination of Nietzsche's library (*Nietzsches persönliche Bibliothek*, 2003) under the editorial supervision of Giuliano Campioni. Blue also praises the work of Thomas Brobjer, who provided additional valuable information on books that Nietzsche read and consulted. Brobjer awakened him to "the possibility of constructing a biography based on facts rather than memoirs" (11). Finally, Blue cites a "significant debt" to Carl Pletsch. His

THE AGONIST

monograph, *Young Nietzsche: becoming a genius* (1991), follows a similar arc in Nietzsche's early spiritual development, though with perhaps too great a focus on the idea of "genius" (12).

Blue mentions two major objectives of his study. One is to challenge the influence of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche's memoirs of her brother's youth. Förster-Nietzsche's reputation and credibility have (rightly) suffered irreparably: how she distorted her brother's writings and promoted a "sanitized" Nietzsche along with a doctored version of his philosophy now receives common assent. Though she has been effectively discredited, many biographers still trust and work with her memoir and the anecdotes related to her brother's early life, based on the assumption that Elisabeth was in the best position to know intimate family history: "If one has read any biography of Nietzsche, one is probably reading one that implicitly follows her vision," as biographers generally take her account as their "template and model" (7). Blue rejects that view. His goal: "to seize control of [Nietzsche's] narrative from Förster-Nietzsche's hands and to rescue it to the custody of her brother" (8).

Blue's second major objective will allow him to do that—namely, to turn to Nietzsche's youthful autobiographical writings to shed light on his spiritual development (2-3). Nietzsche was unique in his efforts to reflect on and shape his sense of self by reexamining his own personal development and recognizing in it something fateful. This approach points to an interesting feature of his mature philosophy—that even early in childhood Nietzsche recognized the importance of discovering and cultivating certain tendencies in his personality that he deemed both necessary and beneficial for his personal destiny. Rather than judging or shying away from aspects of his personality (Nietzsche rarely censured his own actions, but rather regarded negative consequences as misfortunes or signs of temporary weakness [159]), Nietzsche would seek to understand them and to use them to gain a better awareness of his surroundings—and how to navigate around them. This response makes it difficult to locate the "true" Nietzsche: the "Nietzsche" we think we know and study was never a fixed psychic entity but always a work-in-progress, a sense of self that became apparent in the thick of events. The process accords with Nietzsche's dictum: becoming what one is means that one has not the slightest clue *what* one is.

More than half of the study focuses on Nietzsche's early family life and his schooling through Schulpforta. Here, Blue draws from the numerous sources mentioned in his introduction to provide a fresh take on significant details of Nietzsche's childhood. In part, Blue corrects some versions of events inherited from Elisabeth, which give the child an early precociousness and singularity. Among the legends: the supposed mythic stature of Nietzsche's father in his life

and the sister's attempt to downplay the influence of their mother's family. Blue does not over-interpret or mythologize his childhood but rather treats it as fairly conventional. One of the strengths of the work is the way in which it embeds the biography in its contemporary context, illuminating the historical and social contours of Nietzsche's world. An example of this technique is Blue's depiction of Naumburg, the small town where Nietzsche grew up. He corrects the impression that his childhood life there was only stifling and oppressive. It also had its singular charms: "Insofar as I gained living friends here," Nietzsche wrote, "my stay here has also become precious to me, and it would be very painful for me to have to leave" (88).

Blue uses these same skills to bring to life Nietzsche's boarding school, Schulpforta. He provides amusing and insightful anecdotes about Nietzsche's friends and instructors; relating the history of the renowned school and its place in German educational history, while succeeding in giving the reader the flavor of the daily routines and quality of life Nietzsche must have encountered during his stay. Though features of this narrative might already be known, one often encounters new biographical details that flesh out his environment. One such notable anecdote, new to this reader, introduces the roué former Schulpforta pupil, Ernst Ortlepp. The down-and-out poet lived in Naumburg, and Nietzsche no doubt must have crossed his path during his time at Schulpforta. Ortlepp's unorthodox life and intellectual interests must have stuck out in the petty-bourgeois social world of Naumburg, and he probably exerted a strong influence on the poetically inclined adolescent, whose mind was already being drawn to larger-than-life figures outside the conventional norms. (143-4)

The impression one receives of Nietzsche's boarding school years is that he was not a promising academic star, as is often assumed, but a pupil who had strengths and weaknesses, like others, and who did not always perform to his potential. The myth of Nietzsche's precociousness, recognized and nurtured further in Bonn and Leipzig, is only partly true. Clearly, the adolescent had many talents, a strong sense of his own inner worth, and ambition. But those attributes alone did not distinguish him from other classmates. We must refrain from projecting qualities into his younger years that at the time had no hidden significance. The example of Ortlepp shows what might have happened to an older Nietzsche, and there were other pupils at the school, such as Nietzsche's friend Paul Deussen, who may have exhibited greater scholastic aptitude and promise. In short, Nietzsche's school years give little determinate sense of a budding "genius." Rather, it is the story of a typical boarding school pupil, pulled in several directions—social, academic, familial—whose main distinguishing

THE AGONIST

feature was his need to process emotional tensions through self-referential literary production—also fairly standard. No sign yet of the “Nietzsche” to come.

The second half of Blue’s study is dedicated to Nietzsche’s university years in Bonn and Leipzig; it closes with his first academic calling in Basel. Blue succeeds not only in animating the experiences of the young student—his friendships, excursions, fraternity experience, for example—but in contextualizing the university and its faculty within larger developments in Germany. He brings to life the key players in Nietzsche’s scholarly environment—Friedrich Ritschl and Otto Jahn—and shows how their encouragement and gentle prodding helped Nietzsche to identify with a new academic calling and to find a temporary outlet for his restless talents. One particularly enriching section details the notorious infighting and backbiting at the university (some things never change), where his two illustrious mentors, Ritschl and Jahn, squared off against each other. The episode illustrates how Nietzsche was often caught in the crosshairs of personal and political animosities over which he had little control.

Another excellent excursus is Blue’s discussion of *Wissenschaft*. Loosely translated as science or scholarship, *Wissenschaft* was undergoing a seismic transition during Nietzsche’s university years. His mentor Ritschl was still reverential toward the virtues of philology. Nietzsche, however, was being exposed to newer developments within the university, which was beginning to appropriate the methods of the exact sciences. As member of a “second generation” of philologists, Ritschl could still straddle the two trends: he could engage in cutting-edge philological research on ancient Greek and Latin texts, encouraging his fledgling students to do the same, while still believing, as a *Bildung* traditionalist, that the endeavor in itself was worthy and ennobling. Nietzsche could no longer afford that luxury: the new scientific methodologies nurtured a foundational skepticism and undercut belief and enthusiasm for the cause itself. “*Bildung* in the neo-humanist sense was much more difficult to pursue in this new world of learning” (259). Aside from presenting an issue that still resonates today (the value and meaning of humanistic studies within a scientific, technocratic culture), Blue’s discussion goes to the heart of Nietzsche’s future dilemma—his efforts to establish and affirm a “whole” identity within a fracturing and increasingly specialized age.

Prior to this awareness, of course, Nietzsche had read Schopenhauer after his first arrival in Leipzig in 1865, and the effects of that reading on him are well known and documented (215-224). Among other things, Schopenhauer and his philosophy could temporarily provide him with a sympathetic metaphysical refuge, one that incorporated an aesthetic dimension and appreciation while he came to terms with the scholarly demands and pressures of his new chosen field

of philology. After 1865, “the spiritual security that [Schopenhauer] gave assured that [Nietzsche’s] first term in Leipzig would be far more satisfying and productive than his dissipated year in Bonn” (224).

But soon, Nietzsche would encounter another decisive intellectual influence, one that was in some ways even more influential than the high-profile impact of Schopenhauer—namely, his discovery of the neo-Kantian philosopher Friedrich Albert Lange. The book that Nietzsche so highly valued and to which he repeatedly returned was fully entitled, *The history of materialism and critique of its meaning for the present* (1866). There were two main ways this book impacted Nietzsche: one more direct, the other more subtle—and longer lasting. At the surface level, Lange separated out the field of precise experimental research, or *Wissenschaft*, from a search for higher meaning in non-scientific, artistic endeavors (*Kunst*). While he also valued the latter, Lange demanded that scholars be dedicated to empiricism and the *Wissenschaften*, “which deserved respect because they delivered sustainable, if qualified, propositional truths” (242). From this perspective, Lange offered Nietzsche a sense of vocation and purpose in the pursuit of scientific truth in his field of philology. But he could continue to appreciate the arts, as did Lange, though from a differentiated aesthetic point of view. “You see,” Nietzsche wrote to Carl Gersdorff, “even within this strict, critical standpoint, our Schopenhauer remains standing, means almost more to us” (241).

But at a deeper level, Lange perhaps provided Nietzsche with the basis, and motivation, for a more foundational skepticism, one that would carry over to his final musings on the subject of “science” (most prominently in GM III). Lange’s book, as its full title suggests, was also directed against the false promises and simplifications of crude scientific materialism. While Lange, on the one hand, discredited all overreaching metaphysical systems, devaluing their intrinsic claim toward “higher” truth, he equally targeted a new form of “metaphysics” that was entering into “scientific” programs and offering complete views of the world in reductionist scientific terms, above all in the guise of a facile materialism: “Human beings should recognize that any ontology which claims to hold universally and for all reality cannot be sustained, and this includes materialism with its assumption that reality is composed of matter and force” (240). This side of Lange, and its influence on Nietzsche, is less emphasized, even now, when attempts to identify Nietzsche with a reductive “naturalism” and materialism have again entered contemporary scholarship. Indeed, Nietzsche clearly sides with Lange on his critique of materialism. His mature philosophy would take him to push this insight even further—to its final, radical conclusion beyond Lange’s

THE AGONIST

starting point. At that later stage, “science,” too, would become just another manifestation of the “ascetic ideal.”

In this second half of the study, Blue suggests another interesting dimension of Nietzsche’s early development—one redolent of his experience at boarding school: despite the fact that certain well-meaning individuals along the way may have recognized his talents, it was still not clear, even as late as at university, that Nietzsche was the “genius” he was to become. Again, our retrospective perceptions are that he was already a brilliant, rising philologist, recognized and promoted as such by his mentor Ritschl and offered, most likely for that reason, his first academic posting at Basel at the remarkably young age of twenty-four. Part of that is true. But it is important to remember that Nietzsche remained ambivalent, never inwardly identifying with his new academic vocation: “His ‘calling’ was not a ‘life’s task’, but a substitute for one, a pose that he tried to make good” (253).

Indeed, Nietzsche, *faute de mieux*, slipped into the profession, because of his continued uncertainty about his *true* vocation and because he was vulnerable, as most students his age are, to encouraging influential patrons offering blandishments: “[Ritschl’s] praise and support rescued Nietzsche from his momentary bewilderment, but it also led him down a path that was neither consonant with his temperament nor of genuine interest to him” (227). In other words, Nietzsche did not become who he was, because he continued to develop his (admittedly) incisive talents in the field of philology; he became that “genius,” because he realized, through deep, unrelenting self-questioning, that his choice of profession was actually peripheral to who he felt he was or wanted to become. And this brings me to the final point concerning Blue’s study. Blue recognizes that Nietzsche was forever preoccupied with self-analysis and his inner life, getting to the root of his intrinsic talents and strengths. The rest he would (in his mind at least) ruthlessly shuck off—be they individuals, belief systems, or values. Over time, that meant any form of knowledge, legacy, stated wisdom, affiliation, or philosophy that stood in the way of his inner flourishing. His quest: to ferret out what would fit for him and play to his natural strengths and interests. Along the way, and in public view, he may have adopted temporary habits (for example, the habitus of scholar and philologist), but they never penetrated his inner core.

At the same time, Nietzsche would remain painfully aware of the consequences of that fierce honesty and self-actualization—what it meant in terms of personal relationships, of friends and loved ones offended and slighted. It is in that sense that Nietzsche, always sensitive to people’s perceptions, wished not to disappoint the high expectations of his cherished mentor Ritschl, though he harbored misgivings. (This pattern of distancing, after proximity, would recur

repeatedly—with Wagner, his Basel friends, Rohde.) Here are the origins of the later “Nietzsche” that was to emerge over time: the one who set out to find and affirm the side of himself that he felt he was meant to be, while remaining aware of the high personal cost of self-liberation. It was the man who would always remain ambivalent about when to apply the hammer and when the tuning-fork.

Works Cited

- Brobjer, Thomas. “An undiscovered short published autobiographical presentation by Nietzsche from 1872.” *Nietzsche Studien* 27, 1998, 446-447.
- . “Nietzsche’s education at the Naumburger Domgymnasium 1855-1858.” *Nietzsche Studien* 28, 1999, 302-322.
- . “Nietzsche’ forgotten book: the index to the *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*.” *New Nietzsche Studies* 4 (1, 2), 2000, 157-161.
- . “A discussion and source of Hölderlin’s influence on Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s use of William Neumann’s *Hölderlin*.” *Nietzsche Studien* 30, 2001, 397-412.
- . “Why did Nietzsche receive a scholarship to study at Schulpforta?” *Nietzsche Studien* 30, 2001, 322-328.
- . *Nietzsche’s philosophical context: an intellectual biography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Campioni, Giuliano, D’Iorio, Paolo / Fornari, Maria Christina / Fronterotta, Francesco / Orsucci, Andrea eds: *Nietzsches persönliche Bibliothek*, in collaboration with Müller-Buck, Renate, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011.
- Figl, Johann. *Dialektik der Gewalt: Nietzsches hermeneutische Religionsphilosophie mit Berücksichtigung unveröffentlichter Manuskripte*. Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1984.
- . „Die Abteilung I im Kontext der kritischen Gesamtausgabe der Werke Nietzsches.“ *Nietzsche Studien* 24, 1995, 315-323.
- . “Geburtstag und Totenkult: zur Religiosität des Kindes Nietzsche.“ *Nietzscheforschung* 2, 1995, 21-34.
- . „Das religiös-pädagogische Kindheitsmilieu Nietzsche. Eine biographisch-philosophische Interpretation früherer Aufzeichnungen,“ in: *Entdecken und Verraten: Zu Leben und Werk Friedrich Nietzsches*. Andreas Schirmer and Rüdiger Schmidt, eds. Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1999, 24-36.
- . *Nietzsche und die Religionen: Transkulturelle Perspektiven seines Bildungs- und Denkweges*. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007.
- Gilman, Sander ed., *Conversations with Nietzsche: A Life in the Words of his Contemporaries*, translated by David J. Parent, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Goch, Klaus. *Franziska Nietzsche: ein biographisches Porträt*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1994.

THE AGONIST

- . „Franziska Nietzsche in Röcken. Ein Blick auf die deutsch-protestantische Pfarrhauskultur.“ *Nietzscherforschung* 2, 1995, 107-140.
- . „Lyrischer Familienkosmos: Bemerkungen zu Nietzsche poetischer Kindheitserfahrung.“ *Nietzscherforschung* 3, 1995, 103-125.
- . *Nietzsches Vater oder die Katastrophe des deutschen Protestantismus: Eine Biographie*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000.
- Pernet, Martin. *Das Christentum im Leben des jungen Friedrich Nietzsche*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989.
- . „Friedrich Nietzsche über Gustav Krug, seinen ältesten Freund und Bruder in Arte Musica‘: Aus dem Nachlass der Familie Krug.“ *Nietzsche Studien* 19, 1990, 488-518.
- Pletsch, Carl, *Young Nietzsche: Becoming a Genius*, New York: The Free Press, 1991
- Förster-Nietzsche, Elisabeth . *Das Leben Friedrich Nietzsche's*. Vol. I. Leipzig: C. G. Naumann, 1895.
- Lange, Friedrich Albert, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* 1866, Iserlohn: J. Baedeker. First translated in English as: *The History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Importance*, translated by Ernest Chester Thomas, London: Trübner & Company 1877–1881
- Schmidt, Hermann Josef. *Nietzsche absconditus oder Spurenlesen bei Nietzsche*. 4 vols. Berlin/Aschaffenburg: IBDK Verlag, 1991-1994.
- . *Der alte Ortlepp war's wohl doch, oder? Für mehr Mut, Kompetenz und Redlichkeit in der Nietzscheinterpretation*. Aschaffenburg: A. Libri Verlag, 2001.