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Book Review

Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography, Rüdiger Safranski. Translated by Shelley Frisch. London and New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002. 409pp.

Maybe we did not need another book on Nietzsche. The philosopher who famously despised scholarship and scholars has been the occasion of more ink spilled by academics than perhaps any other thinker of the modern period. And although much of the recent work on Nietzsche should be counted among the best books yet written on his thought—I am thinking of Kathleen Higgins' *Comic Relief* (2000), for example, and Brian Leiter's *Nietzsche on Morality* (2002)—one sometimes wonders if there is anything original left to say about what already has been so over-wrought.

But then along comes a book like Safranski's *Nietzsche* and the great German iconoclast (that's Nietzsche, not Safranski) is fresh for us again. Safranski is good at this: his well-received biographies of Schopenhauer and Heidegger were similarly refreshing books to read, tying together the life and thought of those two figures in a way that no one had successfully done before (indeed, when speaking of either Schopenhauer or Heidegger, one tends to avoid discussing their lives—especially in Heidegger's case). And although it is true that we have several good and—in the work of Curt Paul Janz, for example—even excellent biographies of Nietzsche, Safranski is the first to tease the strange and often shocking philosophical ideas of Nietzsche out of his rather comparatively mild and conservative life.

There is an old idea that still holds sway in most departments of literature and art history that the interpretation of a thinker's work should be sharply divided from that thinker's life. In philosophy, we hardly ever discuss the evolution of a philosopher's thought in the context of his biography. Ask yourself, how much do you know about the life of Hume, for example? Do you teach your students about his life when discussing his arguments against causality? One is tempted to say, of course not, but it is just that presumption that Safranski throws into doubt. The approach is particularly appropriate in the case of Nietzsche who, we recall, wrote that "every philosophy is in fact the more or less unconscious biography of its author," and who towards the end of his career wrote both brilliant and detailed "self-criticisms," and that curious, bombastic and widely-misunderstood autobiography, *Ecce Homo*.

Safranski's central idea is that Nietzsche's thought is fundamentally driven by his love for music: "Music is so attuned to the colossal power that it helps us endure everything. Colossal power became Nietzsche's lifelong theme"(24). He develops this *leitmotif* chronologically throughout the book, beginning with Nietzsche's childhood and carrying us all the way to the sad and mysterious "Finale in Turin," in chapter 13. The book concludes with a helpful epilogue, "Europe Discovers Nietzsche," where Safranski discusses some early interpretations of Nietzsche's thought (Mann, Bertram, Baeumler), the often-mentioned fact of the distribution of 150,000 copies of *This Spoke Zarathustra* to World War I German

foot-soldiers (along with the Bible and Goethe's *Faust*), and Nietzsche's influence on several great European minds of the twentieth century (Bergson, Jaspers, Heidegger, Adorno/Horkheimer, and Foucault).

Philosophically speaking, there is not much news to report from Safranski's book. The central ideas of Nietzsche's philosophy are all here: the importance of individual creativity; "the will to power in its dual version as politics on a grand scale and the individual art of living"(305); the infamous "eternal recurrence" understood as an affirmation of life independent of some trans-human teleology; the immoral foundations of Christianity and established moral codes; the demystification of religion and art. Safranski does not surprise us with controversial interpretations of any of Nietzsche's so-called "doctrines," but that is not his purpose. He does not propose to offer a new interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy (and he very sensibly stays altogether away from that most overworked of Nietzsche's "doctrines," perspectivism). Rather, he gives us a sensitive and compelling portrait—he would prefer, song-cycle—showing how Nietzsche's thought evolved as his life progressed. And so he traces Nietzsche's attack on Socrates to his break with Wagner (chapter 6), and the inspiration for *Zarathustra* to his "alleged...homosexual inclinations" and his failed "quest for [heterosexual] intimacy" with the brilliant young Lou Salomé (chapter 11).

Perhaps the best work in the book is done in chapter 8, "The Bicameral System of Culture." Here, in a discussion of *Human, All too Human* and *Daybreak* (my initial remarks notwithstanding, two works of Nietzsche's that are somewhat under-discussed in the secondary literature), Safranski argues the thesis that Nietzsche's defines the self as a cultural product which manages a group of "drives" through a historically developed system of "customs". Safranski develops the idea that was, I believe, first argued in English by Alexander Nehamas in his *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (1985), namely, that Nietzsche's characterization of the self and society are importantly parallel. The self is metaphorically understood as a political system, the product of a cultural and historical process; but society is in turn understood as an expression of the various structures and drives of the self. For Safranski, the "two rooms" of the self and society are ultimately expressed, for the early Nietzsche, in the poles of art (where the drives occur) and science (where the structures of reason regulate those drives). In his development of Nietzsche's novel and exciting idea Safranski offers deep insights on the "fictionality" of science, the relationship between religion, myth and entertainment (he asks, eg., "Was the extremism of early Christianity a solution to a monumental degree of boredom?"[193]), and the importance of emotion to artistic creation.

Safranski remarks at the close of chapter 8 that when "the bicameral system...vanishes" from Nietzsche's work, it is "much to the detriment of his philosophy", and that "had [Nietzsche] held to it, he might well have spared himself some of his mad visions of grand politics and the will to power"(200), and here I would like to take issue with Safranski. He is right to remark that Nietzsche's political model of the self is one of the genuine contributions of his philosophy, but that idea does not vanish: we see it appearing forcefully in his *Nachlass*. all the way into 1888, just months before his collapse. What Nietzsche does reject—and this rejection is what Safranski means to lament—is the notion that there are two distinct and fundamentally opposed components of the human character and it's inquiry: the scientific and the artistic, the rational and the passionate. But Nietzsche rejects that distinction for good reasons (by the time of *Zarathustra* and the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche is suspicious of most dualisms, and tends to reject them): he comes to recognize that science, too, is a human product and is no more "true" or "rational" and no less "passionate" or "natural" than art. This, it seems to me, is a deep philosophical insight that philosophy of science is slowly coming to explore and hesitantly tending to accept (as in, eg., Ludwik Fleck's *Genesis*

and Development of a Scientific Fact [1976] or the work of Thomas Kuhn). I also think Safranski, like Heidegger before him, places far too much emphasis on "the will to power" as a Nietzschean thesis. For better or worse (and probably the latter) Nietzsche was fond of slogans, and the "will to power" is one more of them; the philosophical work done by the idea is not much more than his idea that values of "life-affirmation" are to be chosen over "life-denying" values, that this familiar world of the senses is to be preferred to the fake spirit world of Platonists, Christians and other metaphysicians.

But that said, the book is a pleasure to read: smart, deeply engaged with Nietzsche's thought, and highly accessible to the non-specialist. And it has the charming and too rare quality of *not* trying to save Nietzsche from himself, of *not* turning this sometimes rabid thinker into another scholarly lapdog. Nietzsche wants to be controversial, and Safranski lets him be; Nietzsche wants to be provocative, engaging, shocking, upsetting, dramatic, offensive, wild, and breathtaking. It is to Safranski's credit that the Nietzsche he offers us is all these things.

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