

Book Review

On the Seventh Solitude:

Endless Becoming and Eternal Return in the Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche

by Rohit Sharma (Peter Lang Publishing, 2006)

reviewed by Katrina Mitcheson

Rohit Sharma, in his book *On the Seventh Solitude; Endless Becoming and Eternal Return in the Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, sets out to demonstrate “that Nietzsche’s poetry is also his philosophy” (p. 26). By providing a detailed reading of Nietzsche’s poetry, from his adolescent years through to the *Dionysian Dythrambs* of 1888, Sharma hopes to show that key Nietzschean themes, such as the ongoing movement of becoming and the Eternal Return, are not only present in Nietzsche’s poetry, both published and unpublished, but appear in poetic form prior to their development in his prose.

To illustrate that Nietzsche’s poetry is his philosophy, Sharma provides detailed interpretations, poem by poem. To convince the reader of this primary hypothesis he must show both that the poems have philosophical content and that that the expression of this content depends on, or is at least enhanced by, the poetic form. Sharma also hopes to convince us of the particular interpretations he offers; the overarching theme that he draws across the poems is the role of movement, or endless becoming. He also points to the feminine and the role of the poet as recurrent themes. Of the various concepts and key words Sharma locates in Nietzsche’s poetry he makes the boldest claim for the “Seventh Solitude”. His professed aim is to show that all the key terms in Nietzsche’s corpus can, in some sense, be ‘subsumed’ under this notion.

In terms of his meta-aim, illustrating the philosophical character of Nietzsche’s poetry, Sharma is at least partially successful. He certainly brings to attention the presence of key themes within the often neglected poems, and makes a case that these themes are elaborated within the poems in ways that elucidate their meaning. The primary value of this book is to provide an opening to the interpretation of Nietzsche’s poetry and demonstrate that the poems are relevant to



wider Nietzsche scholarship. Notably, Sharma, whilst exploring the poems' philosophical implications, does not ignore their character as poems; taking account of the role of form and structure, philological and metaphorical resonances, and literary references. If we are to bring Nietzsche's poetic writings to bear on our interpretation of his philosophy as a whole we need to approach them as philosophical *poetry*, not simply cherry pick lines to justify a reading derived entirely from his prose. Sharma makes a significant contribution to such a project.

Ultimately, however, the extent to which we are convinced by this book of the philosophical nature of the poems, and their importance for philosophical Nietzsche scholarship, depends on how convincing we find Sharma's particular interpretations of their philosophical content. In terms of the rigour of interpretation the book is unfortunately patchy. Engaging with Sharma's analysis also assumes a reading knowledge of German, as all poems and quotations from Nietzsche's corpus are reprinted in the original without translations, which may limit the readership for the book.

Where Sharma is most successful is in illustrating how the poetic form lends itself to the expression of movement; movement in Nietzsche's own thought, and the endless movement of becoming itself. Sharma shows how the poet's expression navigates the limitations of language, which fixates. Nietzsche uses the poetic form to convey the movement of becoming within these linguistic confines and employs parody and irony to communicate ambivalence concerning the poet's attempt to express truths within language's strictures.

Sharma identifies within the poems various, key themes that operate throughout Nietzsche's thought. That the discussion in *Rimus Remedium* of time and eternity is an allusion to the Eternal Return certainly merits attention. Sharma presents an interesting case for the relevance of this, and other poems, in elucidating this elusive concept. Given, however, the expression Eternal Return [*ewige Wiederkunft*] does not in fact appear in the poem, Sharma's contention that this is its subject relies on a prior understanding of what the Eternal Return is, which he never argues for. The poem can only contribute to an interpretation of the Eternal Return on the basis of a pre-existing interpretation which allows the poem to be connected to this concept. This requires argument and textual evidence that is lacking in Sharma's account. Equally Sharma offers an interesting exploration of the poet's ambivalent relation to truth in *Nur Narr! Nur Dichter!*, but fails to situate this in terms of the different ways in which Nietzsche uses the term truth.

A serious weakness in Sharma's approach is the use of central Nietzschean concepts such as truth, the Eternal Return and the Overman without an adequate recognition of their contested meanings. Sharma employs them without sufficiently clarifying them, or arguing for the reading he assumes. He may be attempting to allow for a multiplicity of possible meanings but takes up these terms in ways that do make assumptions that are far from uncontroversial. For example, Sharma introduces the Overman, claiming it to be synonymous with the *Künstler-Philosoph*, without any reference to debates in the secondary literature or how and where the term appears in Nietzsche's work (p. 85). Sharma also states that Nietzsche often included Goethe amongst

those he ‘characterised as “Übermenschen”’ (p. 96), without offering any textual evidence for this claim, and squarely ignoring Nietzsche’s insistence that there has never yet been an Overman (Z II: 4, KSA 10: p.374, 376, 471).

Sharma’s close textual analysis of the poems yields some interesting insights. The suggestion, in discussing *Ruhm und Ewigkeit*, that the Basilisk, as a mythical creature that can turn one to stone, connects with the concern that language petrifies is a stimulating one. However, there is a problem with Sharma’s interpretations which is perhaps symptomatic of a difficulty in the entire project. For every plausible reading that Sharma offers there are a multitude of other possibilities available and there is thus an incompleteness, or looseness, in the justification of any given reading. For instance, concerning *Lied eines theokritischen Ziegenhirten* he suggests that “‘shepherd’ is a strong Christian motif, and by characterising the shepherd as “theocritical” Nietzsche assigns it a certain amount of irony’ (p. 106). This relies, however, on a rather idiosyncratic interpretation of *Ziegenhirten*, which would normally be rendered as Goatherd, and is not the German biblical term for shepherd. Its overtones are, rather, Greek and pre-Christian. Sharma also ignores the connection to the pastoral poet Theocritus and thus its pastoral character; an alternative avenue of interpretative exploration.¹

That there is more than one possible interpretation is of course true of various Nietzsche passages but his prose is generally more explicit in its subject, even as it employs metaphor. Sharma has thus set himself a hard task in justifying his particular readings of the philosophical import of Nietzsche’s poems and he often falls short of meeting the standards of justification required by a philosophical audience.

In particular the “Seventh Solitude”, which Sharma identifies as the main site of originality in the detail of his interpretation, remains obscure and the significance he wants to assign to it is ultimately unjustified. The lack of frequency with which it occurs, or an explicit delineation of its meaning, in Nietzsche’s *oeuvre* do not militate against its importance; the same could be said of the Eternal Return or the Overman. The onus still rests on Sharma, however, to interpret what he thinks Nietzsche intended its meaning to be, and the conceptual role it plays in Nietzsche’s philosophy, but he leaves us with a thin concept that fails to satisfy. The nearest Sharma comes to filling out the term or backing up his claim that the “Seventh Solitude” ‘qualifies as *the* Nietzschean keyword’ is its association with other Nietzschean keywords (p. 219). It would seem however, that this topography could be played out with a number of terms in operation in Nietzsche’s thought and its alleged centrality hangs rather on the role it plays; a role that is not fully mapped out by Sharma. A starting point to fill out this role would be to offer a complete typology of the term solitude for Nietzsche and mine the richness of signification that solitude plays in his thinking, an opportunity Sharma fails to seize.

In offering some convincing philosophical interpretations of the poems Sharma does

1 Adrian Del Caro’s translation renders the title *Song of a Theocritical Goatherd*, and draws attention to the reference to Theocritus. *Gay Science: with a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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enough to show that they merit serious interpretation in philosophical terms which at the same time respects their poetic form. He opens up an important project. The lack of philosophical argument to justify his reading of key and contested Nietzschean concepts, however, leaves the specifics of his interpretations provisional, and many of them unconvincing. For the poems to become central to Nietzsche interpretation requires that they be integrated more precisely with detailed attention to Nietzsche's prose, which, after all, still forms the overwhelming majority of Nietzsche's philosophical expressions. This is a task yet to be fulfilled.

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