

**Book Review**

# Nietzsche and the “English”: The Influence of British and American Thought on His Philosophy

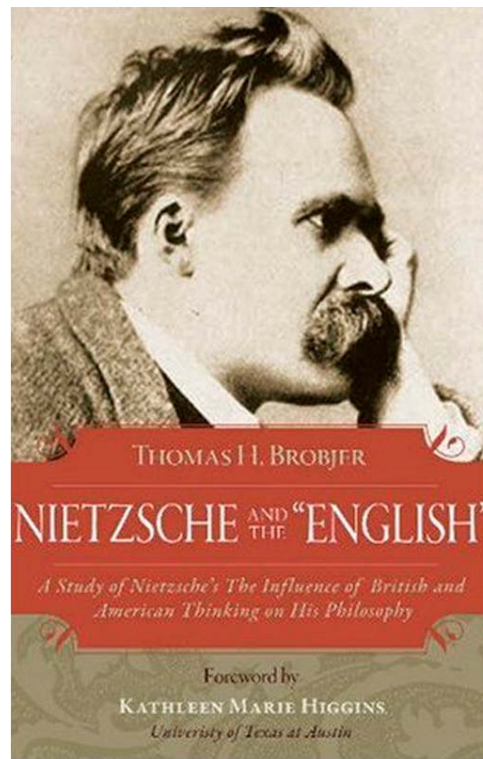
written by Thomas H. Brobjer (New York: Humanities Books, 2008)

reviewed by Martine Prange (University of Amsterdam & Maastricht University)

Nietzsche did not know English well and he never visited the British Isles. He accused ‘the small-spiritedness of England’ to be ‘now the great danger on Earth’ and he dismissed the English for being ‘no philosophical race’ (BGE 252). Nevertheless, in his new book *Nietzsche and the “English”* (which term refers to what we now call ‘Anglo-American’ philosophy and literature), Thomas Brobjer, associate professor in the History of Science and Ideas at the University of Uppsala, sets out to show that such statements conceal the fact that ‘many of Nietzsche’s favourite authors were British and American and during two extended periods of his life Nietzsche was enthusiastic about and highly interested in British and American thinking and literature, and read intensively works by and about British authors’ (12). He further claims that those readings had a much deeper impact on Nietzsche’s philosophy than recognized so far, in both negative and positive ways. On a more general level, he wants to reveal *how* Nietzsche worked and thought by focusing on his response to his readings. Thus, Brobjer researches what Nietzsche read, when he read it, how seriously he read it, and in which manner his readings influenced his thought.

Brobjer’s claims spur curiosity. Who exactly were those British and American authors that Nietzsche read so ‘intensively,’ besides the familiar ones—Shakespeare, Byron, Emerson, Sterne, Spencer and the Utilitarians? When exactly were those particular periods of enthusiasm and interest? More importantly, in what ways did those readings shape his philosophy? In other words, what new light does Brobjer’s book shed on Nietzsche? Does it lay bare fresh aspects of Nietzsche’s philosophy or add new dimensions to current interpretations?

Brobjer distinguishes two periods in which Nietzsche displayed particular interest in English literature and/or philosophy: first, 1858 until 1865 and, second, 1875 until 1880-1881. In the



first period, Nietzsche had yet to produce any philosophical work. In those years of his youth, he read Shakespeare and Byron, and Emerson in 1865. During the second period, Nietzsche traded his Schopenhauerian and Wagnerian ‘artistic metaphysics’ for the positivistic and scientific approach to philosophical problems offered by English scientists such as Lubbock, Spencer, and Darwin. As from 1882, however, Nietzsche considered British philosophy ‘moralistic,’ deeming it, despite its atheism, ‘puritanical in spirit.’ This plain hostility grew even bitterer from 1884 onwards under the influence of French critique, particularly Hippolyte Taine’s negative judgments about English philosophy (69-73, cf. 109). One could claim that this gives Nietzsche’s philosophy a *French* tinge rather than an *English* one, also because his turn to a more positivistic and scientific approach of philosophy was not only an ‘English’ thing, but certainly also the result of his fervent passion for French scientific (Descartes) and Enlightenment (Voltaire) thought—Brobjer’s claim that such ‘conventional explanations for why, when, and how this change occurred are not convincing’ (275) notwithstanding. Moreover, in order to determine whether Nietzsche’s thinking was principally influenced by *Greek, French, German* or *Anglo-American* literature and philosophy, a comparative analysis must be made, but that is not done in this book. Therefore, the question remains in which of Nietzsche’s ideas and methods we can distinguish *Anglo-American* rather than any other sources.

Before coming to the question of ‘English’ *influence*, however, in part two of the book, Brobjer delineates Nietzsche’s *knowledge* and *readings* of British and American philosophy and literature, making a geographical (Great Britain, USA) and stylistic division in genres (science, drama, prose, poetry), in part one. Here, Brobjer’s main objective is to argue against the general belief ‘that Nietzsche had a very sketchy and merely second-hand knowledge of British philosophy’ and to ‘show that Nietzsche’s reading of British and American literature and philosophy was ‘much more extensive than previously has been assumed’ (137), by examining which Anglo-American poets, prose writers, and playwrights Nietzsche read and how his reception of primary literature was influenced by secondary literature, particularly French critique. Brobjer quickly admits, however, that the philosopher’s interest in the ‘British’ was far greater than in ‘American’ philosophy and literature: ‘Nietzsche’s attitude and view of North America does *not* follow his view of “England”—there is no period of enthusiasm and none of profound hostility and contempt. In general, his attitude was one of critical disinterest or dismissiveness. Nietzsche’s knowledge of, and interest in, “England” was much greater than that of North America. He refers to Russia about as often as he does to North America’ (117). The exceptions are, as we know, Ralph Waldo Emerson and, much less influential, Mark Twain and Edgar Allen Poe.

Surprisingly, his knowledge of British poetry and prose is hardly more impressive, as Brobjer purports in the successive chapters, stating that Nietzsche had not read Coleridge, Pope, or Dickens, and never refers to Marlowe, Tennyson and Sheridan. This confines his reading and knowledge to Shakespeare, Sterne, Landor, Fielding, Eliot, Defoe, Scott, Johnson, Swift, and Milton. However, of them, Nietzsche only read Shakespeare, Sterne and Scott with more than

reviewed by:

**Martine Prange**

average interest. Of Swift and Fielding quite some works are contained in Nietzsche's library, but Nietzsche never refers to Fielding (96), only twice to Swift (106) and to Defoe he only refers three times in a very general manner (89). His reading of and interest in Milton is relatively broad, but mediated by Hippolyte Taine and his reading of Scott above all shows 'that Nietzsche became increasingly French oriented during the 1880s' (99), since his four or five references to Scott are drawn from Stendhal, Balzac, Custine, and the brothers Goncourt. A more prominent notice of British philosophy and science, as explored in chapter six, offsets this minimal interest in British literature (137-152). This chapter spells out Nietzsche's reading of British and American scholarly and scientific works, specifically in the fields of natural science, anthropology, cultural history, and history. The most remarkable names here are those of anthropologists and cultural historians such as John William Draper, W. Lecky, E.B. Tylor and John Lubbock, Walter Bagehot and historian Henry Thomas Buckle. The study of their works reinforced Nietzsche's new interest in anthropology and ethnology, in 1875, triggering his turn away from metaphysics and aesthetics to history (143).

It is from such references to now often forgotten names that part one derives its core value. Who knows the Scottish weaver and philosopher Alexander Bain? Yet, anyone who researches Nietzsche's 'will to power' should look into his reception of Alexander Bain, as Brobjer convincingly argues (58-61). It is interesting to read that Nietzsche's reception of English philosophy was fairly influenced by women and feminism, especially his mother and sister (who, in contrast to Nietzsche, loved George Eliot) and Helene Druscowitz (81-82). In addition, Brobjer reminds us of some noteworthy facts, for instance Nietzsche's lack of interest in Hobbes, and interesting yet overlooked references, such as his reference to Hume in HL, where Nietzsche speaks of return in history in a manner which seems to foreshadow his doctrine of the eternal return. This reference deserves further tracking, but unfortunately, Brobjer does not venture onto this deeper, philosophical track. Indeed, Brobjer does not always take his chances, which repeatedly results in the suggestion of possible influences rather than the disclosure of true, formerly unknown, influences. For example, we are told that Nietzsche never referred to Christopher Marlowe, although Nietzsche possessed a German copy of his *Doktor Faustus* (115). The paragraph ends with 'without further investigation, it is impossible to determine whether Nietzsche read the work or not.' However, exactly these kinds of investigations could be expected from the current book. One therefore hopes to receive more information regarding any unknown Anglo-American influence in part two, which discusses British and American *influences* on Nietzsche's philosophy.

Many chapters of part two, it must be said beforehand, contain numerous repetitions. This is mainly caused by Brobjer's method, which in the second part is very much like that of the first. The reconstruction of Nietzsche's knowledge and reading of certain articles and books based on what the Nietzsche-library contains today serves as the backbone *and* touchstone of claims concerning influences on Nietzsche's thought. And this is the main problem of the book. Because philosophical analysis (in terms of conceptual analysis and hermeneutical interpretation of both

primary and secondary sources) lacks in most chapters, Brobjer's argument for quite a few influences lack cogency. The empirical materials he has at his disposal, such as the 'hundreds of unpublished and undeciphered book-bills,' are indeed quite unique in current Nietzsche studies (as Brobjer himself often reminds the reader), but such material evidence only leads to *innovative* understandings of Nietzsche's philosophy, when combined with hermeneutical interpretation and philosophical reasoning. The problem is not so much caused by the method or the (strong) claims by itself as by the belief that these claims can be sustained based on this method. This inequity between method and claim infuses a large section of part two. Here, Brobjer thematizes 'Nietzsche's Debt to Emerson' (chapter 7), 'Nietzsche's Positivism and His Pro-British Period' (chapter 8), 'Nietzsche's Relation to Bentham, Mill, Spencer, and Utilitarianism' (chapter 9) and 'Nietzsche's Reading about, Knowledge of, and Relation to Darwinism' (chapter 10).

As a constant source of inspiration, Nietzsche called Ralph Waldo Emerson 'a twin-soul.' However, although 'the influence of Emerson on Nietzsche was enormous,' according to Brobjer, it is also 'difficult to determine with certainty the extent of the influence' (161). Nevertheless, Brobjer promises unknown, specific details, thanks to his research in Nietzsche's library: 'Many have commented on Emerson's importance for Nietzsche's thinking, but most of them have limited their discussions to generalities and have not examined Nietzsche's reading and library' (161). Then something strange happens, however. One expects a detailed account of textual analysis and interpretation of unknown sources from the library, but instead Brobjer sums up the general influence of Emerson on Nietzsche and states that he will limit his account of more particular influence to Emerson's impact on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. This particular account first summarizes the general view on the point of Emerson's influence on *Z* by reference to its main sources (e.g. Montinari), and concludes with the statement that not Emerson, but Friedrich von Hellwald was the source of Nietzsche's first reference to the figure of Zarathustra—a reference discovered previously by Paolo D'Iorio (see *Nietzsche-Studien* 1993). Brobjer concludes the chapter with these words: 'This discovery weakens the role of Emerson for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, but, in fact, it seems not unlikely that he, together with Hellwald, nonetheless played an important role in Nietzsche's discovery and conception of Zarathustra' (166).

What I would have liked to read here, though, is not an indication of which influence is likely or not, but a sustained and detailed account of how and where Emerson shaped Nietzsche's philosophy, corroborated by detailed textual and conceptual analysis, and then a conclusion, which would formulate how that affects our current reception of the Nietzsche-Emerson relationship and Nietzsche's philosophy. Brobjer seriously accuses other studies on Nietzsche and Emerson for being unreliable, because they offer 'overenthusiastic' rather than empirically evidenced interpretations. However, offering only some selection of empirical evidence, without hermeneutical and philosophical analysis, leaves the *philosophical* reader empty-handed.

Chapter 8 on 'Nietzsche's Positivism and His Pro-British Period' is more inspired and starts off in a far better fashion, drawing in textual evidence from Nietzsche in order to show

reviewed by:

Martine Prange

when and on the basis of which arguments ('there are no eternal facts just as there are no absolute truths,' 168) Nietzsche turned from metaphysical and idealist to historical philosophizing, to explain why 'the breach between the early and middle Nietzsche [...] lasted for a relatively long period of time' (171) and to show how British and American philosophy helped bring this breach about. Brobjer argues against the general view that situates the breach in August 1876 that 'the truth, however, is that the change in Nietzsche's thinking, and thus the most important part of the breach, had occurred during the spring and early summer of 1875, that is, *before* the writing and publication of *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*' (172). This is important for Brobjer, because this shows to him that 'neither the practical implications of Wagner's cultural reforms nor the influence of Paul Rée can have been the cause that led to the crisis and the change [...] Thus, we stand before the most important change in Nietzsche's thinking without a valid understanding of its cause or causes' (172-173). Surely, this is the most significant claim of the book. Unfortunately, we can only guess that British philosophy played a critical role in the transition from artistic metaphysics to scientific positivism: 'it is difficult to determine with any certainty what caused the change in Nietzsche's thinking during the first half of 1875' (173). But Brobjer points to Nietzsche's reading of Lewes, Draper, Lubbock, and Tylor to show that British scientific influence on Nietzsche preceded Paul Rée's role. Brobjer refers to notes which show a positive evaluation of science, and Enlightenment, while reflecting anew on Greek antiquity, also with respect to his teaching Democritus' materialism. In note KSA 8, 5[88] from 1875, for example, we witness an oscillation between historical philosophy and the methodology of the natural sciences, as 'all historical conclusions are very conditional and uncertain' (174). Nietzsche decides to educate himself in the natural sciences, and that Schulpforta was a serious lack in its sole focus on the Humanities (letter to Von Gersdorff, 21 July 1875). This is one of the most interesting and convincing parts of Brobjer's book, as in discussing in chronological and literary detail what is on Nietzsche's mind in the summer of 1875 and which sources he adduces to shape his thoughts, it offers the hermeneutical approach necessary to bring out the full value of empirical evidence for Nietzsche studies (and philosophy in general), thus showing carefully how Nietzsche returns to English literature (this time Walter Scott, Sterne and others), while simultaneously immersing himself in books as Eugen Dühring's positivistic *Der Werth des Lebens* and B. Stewart's book *Die Erhaltung der Energie*. Thus, while true influence is not established, this chapter gives many indications to support the claim that Nietzsche's philosophy was much more influenced by 'English' thought and in more diverse ways than generally acknowledged. (Incidentally, Brobjer does mention in this chapter that Nietzsche's successive interest in the English, as exposed between 1876 and 1881, was stirred by his close friendship with moral philosopher Paul Rée, but neglects the *causal* relation between their break in 1882 and Nietzsche's growing explicit hostility towards English moral philosophy from then on).

Chapter 9, 'Nietzsche's Relation to Bentham, Mill, Spencer, and Utilitarianism,' starts with a rather lengthy exploration of Nietzsche's relation to the French philosopher Helvétius

(Brobjer does not mention his nationality, full name, and days of birth and death), whom Brobjer regards as the precursor to Mill's and Bentham's Utilitarianism, which ends with the notion that 'it is difficult to say anything certain about Nietzsche's reading and knowledge of Helvétius (190). To Nietzsche's relation with Bentham, Brobjer devotes only one page, concluding 'that Nietzsche had some interest in reading Bentham, but that in the end he did not do so' (191). More substantial was Nietzsche's interest in Mill and Spencer. Brobjer here shows that Nietzsche did not bother to Mill's philosophy in a deeper fashion, but that he had thorough knowledge of him: 'he read much of Mill, and read it with great attention, some of it at least twice, and he read much about Mill' (193). This has primarily led to dramatic *ad hominem* statements about Mill, which are testimony to Nietzsche's rejection of his moral idealism, superficiality, Christian values and striving for equality and moreover, his mockery of Mill's lack of musicality. Nietzsche called Mill 'Frau John Stuart Mill,' suggesting weakness of spirit, blaming him for having a 'mediocre mind' and being 'vulgar,' a 'flathead,' and a 'goose.' At the bottom of such expressions, are, however, deeply philosophical and methodological objections to Mill: according to Nietzsche, Mill's reasoning is 'inconsistent,' 'circular,' and leading to 'fallacies.' Brobjer therefore remarks with good reason that 'for Nietzsche, such values [moral idealism, Christian ideals, equality] follow naturally from a superficial personality' (195) and 'this emphasis on the personal is part of his whole *ad hominem* approach to philosophy' (196). In this part on Nietzsche's relation to Mill, Brobjer offers his most extensive, careful, detailed, and philosophical account (192-219), evaluating Nietzsche's statements in the broader context of his ethics and philosophy of life. Needless to say, this part is also the best-written part of the whole book. An interesting point here is that Brobjer shows that Mill assessed people according to their 'utility,' whereas Nietzsche values them according to their 'inner value' (character, nobility). Thus understanding Napoleon wrongly, Mill loses a lot of credit with Nietzsche (197-198). Although explicit discussion with secondary literature on this topic is missing, Brobjer finally makes a more thorough, hermeneutical analysis of Nietzsche's relation with a British philosopher, while seeking to understand Nietzsche's method and moral philosophy in connection with it. He even makes a separate comparative analysis of Nietzsche's and Mill's ethics (202-219), showing that both Nietzsche and Mill's morality are naturalistic and goal oriented, although Mill's is act oriented and Nietzsche's strongly agent oriented (204), and that at the core of Nietzsche's ethics is a 'science of ethics,' which is all about *questioning* morality, forming a 'critique of moral values' (207), i.e. the *genealogy* of morals. The most fundamental difference between Mill's and Nietzsche's ethics is, admittedly, their view of the relation between pleasure and pain. To Mill, the promotion of pleasure implies the reduction of pain, while for Nietzsche pain and pleasure mutually qualify one another. I do not agree with Brobjer's statement that Nietzsche is hostile to 'any philosophy and theory of life that [...] is based on the primacy of pleasure and happiness' (209), because I think that Nietzsche valued aesthetic and tragic joy as the opposite of sheer pleasure as amusement highly. It might have helped here if Brobjer would have taken Nietzsche's aesthetics into account,

reviewed by:

Martine Prange

in order to distinguish, first, the reasons for Nietzsche to esteem pleasure positively, and, second, to distinguish between ‘pleasure’ (amusement, which is all about forgetting one’s pain and the horrible truth of life) and ‘joy’ (which includes the acknowledgement of the painful truth of life), which corresponds to the ‘poverty’ and ‘richness’ of experiences so important to both Nietzsche’s artistic metaphysics and his ‘gay science’ (compare GS 370). ‘Joy’ could then perhaps even be viewed as Nietzsche’s alternative to Mill’s utilitarian view of ‘happiness’ as directed at ‘all.’

Very promising is Brobjer’s indication that Nietzsche’s rejection of Mill’s ethics relies on three reasons: his problems with the (originally Christian, ‘herd instinct’) value of equality, a Machiavellian and an aristocratic objection to Mill’s practical wisdom (or, as Nietzsche also calls it in KSA 13, note 22[1], ‘English folly’). The latter concerns Mill’s alternation of equality and altruism, which Nietzsche always considered an ‘impossible moral imperative’ (213). Brobjer accurately notes that Nietzsche’s views of egoism and altruism are more complex than generally acclaimed. This certainly deserves (and needs) more explanation, which we shall hopefully encounter in Brobjer’s forthcoming *Nietzsche’s Knowledge of Philosophy*. While allotting much attention to Mill, Spencer is treated in a relatively meager fashion, despite the fact that he is by far the most referred British philosopher-scientist in Nietzsche’s work (48 times, of which 22 times are in notes).

Brobjer finishes with the most appealing narrative of the book, ‘Nietzsche’s Reading about, Knowledge of, and Relation to Darwinism’ (chapter 10). It is convincingly shown here that Nietzsche had a fair knowledge of Darwin, not only at the time of his friendship with Paul Rée (1876-1882), as is often thought, but already at least from 1873 onwards, when it played a major role in his assessment of David Strauss. Nietzsche’s main sources were Eduard von Hartmann’s *Philosophie des Unbewussten* as well as his *Das Unbewusste vom Standpunkt der Physiologie und Descendenztheorie* and Friedrich Lange’s *Geschichte des Materialismus* (344-345). Nietzsche read Lange as early as 1866 and frequently returned to Hartmann’s works in the years 1869-1873. Despite his, in the context of the rest of his readings, restricted interest in Darwin, he never finished reflecting on Darwin’s theory of natural selection and accepted his evolutionary biology. Brobjer here comes to his greatest achievement: he carefully exposes which elements Nietzsche reflected on, accepted, re-pondered and rejected and how these reflections influenced the development of Nietzsche’s philosophy from *Human all too Human* to *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Brobjer chooses the right citations and reveals the most remarkable aspect of Nietzsche’s relation to Darwin, when he states that, first, Nietzsche’s interest in Darwin is always from a *human* point of view rather than from a *biological* point of view and, second, that the ‘will to power’ is indeed an alternative to Darwin’s ‘struggle for survival’ (266). These views are some of the most exciting and provocative views advanced in the book, because here Brobjer allows himself to transform from the meticulous archival researcher that he is into a philosopher.

Indeed, throughout the book Brobjer notes as an archivist when Nietzsche read what and indicates what may have had at least some influence in which period and what can be excluded

for earlier periods, which he does quite well. Yet, while making the strong claim that Nietzsche's philosophy was much more shaped by English philosophy than hitherto acknowledged, he indicates rather than truly shows that this was indeed the case. In addition, his research often leads to the oppositional claim and confirmation of the general view Brobjer seeks to refute. Therefore, in gathering new information on Nietzsche's book possessions, times of acquisitions and readings and similar empirical evidence, Brobjer's book is of invaluable help in processes of falsifying and corroborating interpretational hypotheses concerning Nietzsche's philosophy—but these remain to be done in the future. The most remarkable aspect about his account is that, rather than showing Nietzsche's interest in the English, it underlines the major role of French literary criticism in his judgment of British positivism and the prominent position of German intellectual and literary fashions throughout his philosophy. Most daring and convincing are Brobjer's argument for Nietzsche's pre-Rée scientific positivism and his explanation of Nietzsche's relation to Mill and Darwin.

The book leaves three questions unaddressed. First, what was Nietzsche's knowledge of Anglo-American literary criticism, e.g. Matthew Arnold, a very influential 19<sup>th</sup>-century critic and Eneas Sweetland Dallas? Brobjer only discusses Matthew Arnold very briefly (88-89), but without any reference to *The Gay Science*, while Arnold advocated the marriage of art and science as 'gay science' in his public writings, and Dallas even published a book called *The Gay Science* in 1866. Second, does Nietzsche's library not offer more news regarding his readings, knowledge and reception of British aesthetics, Burke and Shaftesbury in particular? Brobjer focuses on positivism, psychology, and moral philosophy, but Nietzsche's materialism was never without aesthetic components, e.g. *Lust, Unlust* and the aesthetic translation of bodily powers into artistic *style*. Third, what about the Nietzsche-reception by 'English' philosophers, artists, writers, and psychologists today? One of the most vital streams in current Anglo-American moral philosophy is built around Nietzsche-interpretation: Anglo-American moral philosophers and pragmatists ranging from Nussbaum to Rorty and Foot to Leiter have discussed intensively Nietzsche's naturalism, moral philosophy, and *On the Genealogy of Morals* in the past fifteen years, and further developed his thought.

Further, Brobjer has a way of stating certain things with a sweeping gesture, which sometimes leads to self-righteousness and claims that are just wrong, as in the case of his assertion that 'Nietzsche's interest in drama has received little attention' (108) and that we did not know about Nietzsche's 'extensive annotations in his copies of Emerson's books' (274). In fact, we knew that already from the very first published register of Nietzsche's books, Max Oehler's *Nietzsche's Bibliothek* (1942) and Rudolf Steiner's testimony that he, while organizing Nietzsche's library in 1896 by order of Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche (listing on 227 pages 1077 books from Nietzsche's library in 19 groups as well as noting down the amount of annotations made by Nietzsche in them; this was the first list of Nietzsche's library ever made), was delighted to find '*ein ganz mit Randbemerkungen versehenes, alle Spuren hingebendster Durcharbeitung tragendes*

reviewed by:

Martine  
Prange



*ein Emerson'schen Buches* (Mein Lebensgang, 1925, GA 28, p. 254f.; cf. David Marc Hoffmann (1991), *Zur Geschichte des Nietzsche-Archivs: Chronik, Studien und Dokumente*. Berlin/ New York: Walter de Gruyter, 184).

Despite its shortcomings, this book will become an essential source for many Nietzsche researchers, if only for its lists of Nietzsche's readings and purchases (it contains some 140 pages of appendices). It would therefore have been a nice gesture to all its future readers, had the editor paid more attention to the writing style, taken out the many repetitions and added a bibliography with secondary literature (there are so many notes that it is impossible for the reader to retrace all references). But let me not complain. Although he does not exactly do what he promises in the subtitle, once again Brobjer has published a book that is vital for Nietzsche-scholars as a work of reference and a source of inspiration for further research, especially into John Stuart Mill's and Charles Darwin's influence on Nietzsche's philosophy.

Volume II – Issue II – July 2009

**Book  
Review**