

*Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography*

By Thomas H. Brobjer

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(Reviewed by Daniel Blue)

Shortly after German reunification when the Nietzsche Archives in Weimar became readily available to scholars, Thomas Brobjer decided to examine Nietzsche's library, the collection of volumes which the philosopher had carried around Europe and which were retrieved after his collapse. Many of these books, Brobjer discovered, were marked with exclamations, underlines, and marginal notes. Such annotations, he recognized, could be valuable for Nietzsche studies, for they not only allowed scholarship to stipulate with varying degrees of confidence what Nietzsche read but how he responded at the moments of encounter.

His discoveries happened to coincide with a rising tide of research into Nietzsche's reading. At least since the early 1960's<sup>i</sup> scholars had been exploring the influence of Nietzsche's contemporaries on his work. Figures as diverse as Afrikan Spir, J.C.F. Zöllner, Eduard von Hartmann, Eugen Dühring, and others were examined, and a host of writers proved unexpectedly pivotal. Many of these investigations stressed the way Nietzsche shaped his ideas in response to the proposals of contemporaries. Others, more disquietingly, revealed that certain passages in his work were variants on -- and occasionally word-for-word transcriptions -- of texts that Nietzsche had read.

It was within this context that Brobjer began to publish his own discoveries. Because of his fascination with the extant volumes in Nietzsche's library, he was able to bring evidence to bear on matters that had hitherto been speculative. He revealed, for

example, that Nietzsche's schoolboy paper on Hölderlin, a work which many scholars had taken at face value and used as an index of Nietzsche's literary precocity, was largely taken from a book he had borrowed and that Nietzsche had almost certainly not read several key works praised in that essay. He also showed that, although we have no evidence that Nietzsche actually read books by Marx or Kierkegaard, he was aware of both figures and some of their views. (Among other annotations, he underlined their names.)

Despite such accomplishments and his exceptional productivity -- Brobjer has published dozens of articles as well as translations<sup>ii</sup> -- he has until recently issued only one book in English, *Nietzsche's Ethics of Character*, an academic dissertation which is out of print.<sup>iii</sup> In the past few months Brobjer has begun to compensate by publishing two volumes and indicating that others are planned. In one of the new books, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography*, he presents chronologically the works of philosophic import that Nietzsche read throughout his life. The key term in the title is "context," which is implicitly a play on words. Brobjer sees Nietzsche within the context of his era but also within the *texts* of his era, the books that inspired or otherwise stimulated him in his efforts to construct a philosophy of his own.

Most studies of contemporary influences on Nietzsche limit themselves either to one or two authors or to a specific period in the philosopher's life. Brobjer appears to be alone in citing the vast range of philosophic texts Nietzsche encountered and in attempting to survey the whole of his career from his days at Schulpforta to his final months of productivity. The only restriction he imposes in this endeavor is to confine himself to philosophic texts, discussing books on science, history, religion, the arts, or

philology only when they impinge directly on philosophic issues. Brobjer's book is also distinctive in the way it draws on his knowledge of the physical condition of Nietzsche's personal library. He usually knows not only which books Nietzsche bought and when -- he has examined the philosopher's book bills -- but he is also aware which volumes are dog-eared, which are "spotted" with stains or other physical indications that the book had been opened to a specific page, and above all he knows the extent and nature of Nietzsche's markings on the texts. He is thus in a position to present a comprehensive overview of Nietzsche's philosophic reading from authors famous (Schopenhauer, Strauss, Spencer, Mill) to the comparatively obscure (Drossbach, Plümacher).

Brobjer is also poised to challenge, not just the more speculative hypotheses of scholars, but Nietzsche's own account of his activities. For example, he quotes Nietzsche's claim in *Ecce Homo* that he had read nothing in the six months since his perusal of Victor Brochard and shows that during that period the philosopher in fact read eight books and very likely some fiction as well. Brobjer is also skeptical of Nietzsche's claim that "I take flight almost always to the same books, really a small number. . ." followed by a list of these "favorite readings." To this Brobjer dryly responds, "This listing is not particularly informative or reliable." He proceeds to show that Nietzsche was on the contrary a wide-ranging and inveterate reader all his life.

In support of his theses, Brobjer discusses the bookshops Nietzsche patronized, the libraries he consulted, and the patterns of purchase he followed. As for those marginal annotations, Brobjer observes that Nietzsche rarely marked his books during his early years but began to handle them more freely during the 1870's and annotated them copiously during the 1880's. During the latter decades he tended to read with pencils in

hand (often colored, red and blue), and he underlined words, scored paragraphs, or struck off comments in the margins, such as “N.B.” “gut!” “ja” “ecco” and (on occasion) “Esel” and “Vieh.” Nietzsche could be quite prolific in these responses. As Brobjer notes, “Many of the annotated books contain more than 10 annotations (mostly underlinings and marginal lines) per page for whole chapters.”<sup>iv</sup>

Having established the nature of Nietzsche’s reading habits in general, Brobjer embarks on a narrative of specific authors and books of philosophic interest that the philosopher read at various stages of his career. Here he follows the usual periodization of Nietzsche’s life, following a chapter on his childhood and youth with discussions of his so-called early, middle, and late periods. While he gives appropriate space to the central figures whom Nietzsche himself sometimes acknowledged as influences (Emerson, Strauss, Schopenhauer, Lange, the Pre-Socratics, Rée, and the French moralists), Brobjer also pays close attention to the dozens of less well-known authors whose writings contributed to Nietzsche’s philosophic thinking. To give an idea of the range included, we might mention (in addition to the authors cited above) books crucial for Nietzsche written in German by Fortlage, Radenhausen, Teichmüller, Mainländer, Hellwald, and Caspari. Then there are the French thinkers (Bourget, Brunetière, de Roberty) and the English (Spencer, Mill, Lecky, Buckle). Nietzsche read avidly writers on religion (Wellhausen, Jocolliot, Renan) and psychology (Höffding, Joly), not to mention critical positivists (Ernst Mach, Richard Avenarius). A plethora of names and titles fill every chapter, sometimes overwhelming the book artistically, yet undeniably building our appreciation for the constellations of authors that Nietzsche carried in his head and used to plot his own philosophical moves.

In a final chapter Brobjer touches obliquely on the question of the relevance and implication of all this cataloguing of Nietzsche's influences, and, most pressingly, what it is meant to imply about Nietzsche's susceptibility to influence. It might be noted that everybody reads, but creativity, the leap from what precedes oneself to a novel insight, cannot be explained by sources and arguably transcends them. No one except specialists looks at Shakespeare's sources. Why should we look at Nietzsche's?

Brobjer does not address this issue head-on, but he does propose less ambitious yet valid reasons for paying heed to Nietzsche's reading. First, he stresses that Nietzsche repeatedly read and was in dialogue with certain authors, such as Schopenhauer, Rée, and Dühring. To read only Nietzsche's side in the conversation, he argues, would be as short-sighted as reading only one party in an exchange of letters. To this one might reply that the "dialogues" Nietzsche had with authors were generally one-sided. He read and responded to these contemporaries, whereas they usually did not read or respond to him. Nonetheless, Brobjer does argue persuasively that Nietzsche's positions were often formulated in response to specific questions that framed the various issues for him. Without understanding those to whom he was replying and the ways they determined the nature of the debates in his own mind, we cannot fully understand Nietzsche's responses. Finally, Brobjer observes that Nietzsche's first encountered such terms as "*ressentiment*," "nihilism" and "*décadence*" in the books of others. He then used them in turn in his own annotations. (The first time he wrote the word "*ressentiment*" was, so far as we know, in the margins of a book by Dühring.) Clearly anyone hoping to understand the meaning of these concepts would be wise to investigate their origins and how Nietzsche used them *in situ*.

Having ended his book with these arguments and pleas, Brobjer follows with over seventy pages of notes, as well as an appendix of three tables and an index. Given the density of the text, many researchers will head directly for that index, looking up particular influences and thereby forgoing the admittedly heavy plodding of reading this book from cover to cover. Those who take such shortcuts will miss certain key insights of this book -- not just its citation of unexpected materials, but the general impression gleaned from immersion in its details. For a start, as Brobjer himself notes, Nietzsche appears to have given a misleading account of the authors who influenced him. While he was unquestionably versed in the work of Schopenhauer, his reading of books by Kant (as opposed to discussions in secondary sources) appears to be meager. As for Spinoza, Brobjer flatly states that he did not read him at all, his knowledge of this author being limited to secondary literature. Despite Nietzsche's praise for illustrious predecessors, Brobjer suggests, his preferred reading and the source of most of his inspirations came from secondary sources (in which, as Brobjer observes, he had "implicit trust") and from the admittedly inadequate but remarkably fecund speculations of his contemporaries.

Such a view may stimulate scholars to offer a variety of objections. Some of these will focus on individual claims, such as Brobjer's position that Nietzsche never actually read Spinoza. Others will dispute how literally Nietzsche meant readers to accept the claims about reading that he made in *Ecce Homo* and elsewhere. While these objections are important and should be argued, they do not address the central thrust of Brobjer's book, which is that the study of Nietzsche's reading and the books in his library can provide valuable assistance in understanding his work. As it happens, we do not have to rely solely on Brobjer on this point. As mentioned earlier, a host of scholars on the

Continent have been researching Nietzsche's reading for decades, and the benefits are beginning to become apparent.

To take just one example, Paolo D'Iorio, director of HyperNietzsche and a member of a team established to study Nietzsche's library, puzzled over the notebook in which Nietzsche first recorded his commitment to the principle of Eternal Recurrence.<sup>v</sup> The discovery itself is announced in a well-known entry which closes triumphantly, "6,000 feet above sea level and much higher above all things human! --."<sup>vi</sup> A mere two pages later, D'Iorio notes, appears a fragment, much of which was used in the opening lines of *The Gay Science* 109. This is the second aphorism in Book III and the one immediately following the discussion of Buddha's shadow, so its textual location alone testifies to its importance. In an attempt to puzzle out peculiarities in both the wording and meaning of the corresponding notebook entry, D'Iorio went to the books Nietzsche was reading at the time, and he turned specifically to the passages annotated in Nietzsche's library. In a work by Otto Caspari, he found discussion of an argument over whether the universe had a delimited beginning and end or was perduring. Such discussions, widespread at the time, tended to center on the first two laws of thermodynamics (particularly the second with its disquieting revelation of the implications of entropy) as well as Hartmann's contention that an eruption of Will led to the "world process." By consulting books by Caspari and Dühring, and in both volumes noting that Nietzsche had marked the passages at issue, D'Iorio was able to discover unexpected contemporary meaning and resonance in the opening of *GS* 109. Not only did Nietzsche use this aphorism tacitly to critique Dühring, Caspari, Hartmann, and William Thomson (each of whom took different positions in this debate), but he also touched

glancingly on his own theory of interaction in nature. Above all, D'Iorio's research shows that at this early date (and at this early point in *The Gay Science*) Nietzsche was already pondering the logical and causal issues posed by Eternal Recurrence, namely whether space and time were infinitely extended or delimited and what events could either extinguish the universe or cause it to be reborn. It is safe to say that anyone familiar with D'Iorio's discoveries will find it difficult to read GS 109 (or indeed any discussion of the role of Eternal Recurrence in *The Gay Science*) in quite the same way again. None of this could have been found without recourse to Nietzsche's books and the confirmation of his annotations.

It appears then that Brobjer's primary point is not merely buttressed but confirmed by the work of his associates. Yet he could also invoke even more distinguished support. When Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari began their edition of Nietzsche's works and *Nachlass*, many scholars in this country questioned both the feasibility and the usefulness of the enterprise. The two proceeded anyway, and few scholars today would fail to recognize the achievement and usefulness of the *KGW*. Brobjer and others are calling for Nietzsche scholars to extend that enterprise into another dimension, to the books and thereby the conceptual frames among which (and often against which) Nietzsche constructed his own views. This was an extension that Montinari encouraged, for he himself established the team of researchers that for decades has been performing the spadework in this endeavor.<sup>vii</sup> Until the work of this group (superintended by Giuliano Campioni) is complete and has been digested by scholars, interpretations created by armchair philosophers must be viewed as provisional possibilities that await adjudication by the facts. Brobjer's book serves as an admonition



and a voice of restraint. When dealing with a historical figure one must use the tools of history. To read Nietzsche without awareness of his contemporaneous background and philosophical context is to miss an invaluable dimension of his work and to run the risk of serious misinterpretation.

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<sup>i</sup> Giuliano Campioni traces an interest in Nietzsche *Quellenforschung* to the Wagnerians, who wanted to use them to discredit him. (See his essay, “Die ‘ideelle Bibliothek Nietzsches’: Von Charles Andler zu Mazzino Montinari,” in Michael Knoche, Justus H, Ulbricht, and Jürgen Weber, (ed.) *Zur unterirdischen Wirkung von Dynamit: Vom Umgang Nietzsches mit Büchern, zum Umgang mit Nietzsches Büchern* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006). To my knowledge, the field’s recent burgeoning began in 1962 with the publication of Karl Schlechta and Anni Anders’ book, *Friedrich Nietzsche: von den verborgenen Anfängen seines Philosophierens* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Fromann Verlag, 1962).

<sup>ii</sup> For more on Brobjer’s publications and the author himself, see the interview on this site, [http://www.nietzschemcircle.com/interview\\_brobjer.html](http://www.nietzschemcircle.com/interview_brobjer.html)

<sup>iii</sup> For Yunus Tuncel’s review of this book on this site see: <http://www.nietzschemcircle.com/review24.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Thomas Brobjer, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 16.

<sup>v</sup> Paolo D’Iorio, “Das Gespräch zwischen Büchern und Handschriften am Beispiel der ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen” in Michael Knoche, Justus H, Ulbricht, and Jürgen Weber, (ed.) *Zur unterirdischen Wirkung von Dynamit: Vom Umgang Nietzsches mit Büchern, zum Umgang mit Nietzsches Büchern* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 93-112. D’Iorio treats this topic more fully in “Cosmologie de l’*éternel retour*” in *Nietzsche-Studien* 24 (1995), 62-123. The later article, however, stresses the need to consult both manuscripts and library texts.

<sup>vi</sup> *KSA* 9 11[141], p. 494.

<sup>vii</sup> Giuliano Campioni, Paolo D’Iorio, Maria Cristina Fornari, Francesco Fronterotta, Andrea Orsucci, Renate Muller-Buck (ed.) *Nietzsches persönliche Bibliothek* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 8.