

Julian Young

Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography.

Cambridge University Press 2010.

681 pages

US\$45.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-521-87117-4)

This is the longest and most thorough account of Nietzsche's life available in English. It might also be the best. It uses Nietzsche's letters to good effect along with generous helpings of the existing correspondence from his acquaintances. The pace is crisp and the writing is situated in the present day, often drawing parallels with contemporary events, objects and characters. There are 32 black and white photos, 28 chapters, a Chronology, Notes, a Bibliography and an Index. Young discusses several musical compositions by Nietzsche, recordings of which can be listened to free of charge at the Cambridge University Press Web Site, where further commentary can be found as well.

The belief that Nietzsche's life is crucial to understanding his thought has been far more common than its contrary. There are several biographies in English, and many commentaries on his works include synoptic treatments of his life. Thus the story Young wants to tell is familiar to many readers. Nevertheless, his version of the tale feels fresh. He spends a good deal of effort on Nietzsche's earliest years. Many details from this period were new to me, including information about the parsonage where Nietzsche's father preached, about the house in Naumburg to which the family moved after his father died, and about his teachers, classmates and amusements. Young investigates Nietzsche's attitudes toward life and religion in this period more than any author I have read.

Another virtue of this book is the light it sheds on Nietzsche's various associates, including their lives away from the spotlight of the philosopher's activities. Much of this material was new to me, and some of it was truly memorable. For example, I had never heard that Paul Ree, an outstanding author with whom Nietzsche was close until they had a falling out, had drowned in circumstances suggesting suicide. This sort of information made the book rewarding in unexpected ways. There is even a twenty page chapter on Nietzsche's circle of women friends, all of them pioneering feminist intellectuals, such as Helen Zimmern and Malwida von Meysenberg. Young's investigation of Nietzsche's relations with women will be remembered as a signature of the work. His treatment of the Lou Salome affair is penetrating without approaching any degree of over-interpretation.

Unlike many writers, Young sharply distinguishes Nietzsche's works from his biography, an effect achieved using italics in the titles of chapters and subsections that discuss the works. Young has prior biographers in mind when he does this, as he does again in occasionally emphasizing how his biographical interpretation differs from theirs. Thus, his Nietzsche is not as sickly or as neurotic as the most influential English biographer's; nor is his Nietzsche the traveling homosexual rake conjured by the most

sensational and speculative German biography.

Scholars will not likely remember this biography for its treatment of Nietzsche's works. The entire book, including its interpretation of the Nietzsche's works, targets a novice audience. Young's Nietzsche moves from early romanticism into positivism in the 1870s, but then breaks 'the shackles of doctrinaire positivism' in the 1880s, leaving him with the problem of 'how to recover the religious attitude to life' (351). This is resolved by creating a 'synthesis' of the two (243). Meanwhile, Richard Wagner remains a literary and cultural influence that Nietzsche never escapes (218). Much of this is rather weak tea for experienced Nietzsche readers. However, there are some unique interpretive maneuvers, including generous selections from several contemporary reviews of *Beyond Good and Evil* that have never appeared in English. Young also makes use of Nietzsche's letters on several occasions, adding more spice to his literary excavations.

Every biography of Nietzsche is expected to examine the final years in great detail as they were the most productive and important years of his life, and also the most controversial. After a chapter on the *Genealogy of Morals*, Young devotes a very worthwhile chapter to Nietzsche's final year of productive activity (1888). It is punctuated by subsections on the works of that year, including the musical works, each titled in italics. This is followed by a brief chapter, 'Catastrophe', which briefly chronicles Nietzsche's collapse in Turin in early January of 1889. Next come a chapter about *The Will to Power* as a corrupt work and a chapter on Nietzsche's death and funeral, and lastly a chapter titled 'Nietzsche's Madness'. In this final installment, Young attempts to overturn the thesis that Nietzsche's collapse was conditioned by non-mental factors, and to replace it with his own view that it was 'a *purely* psychiatric one' (561f). Arguing by elimination, he advances three possibilities: syphilitic infection, brain tumor, and psychiatric illness. There are surely others, and thus the premise of this argument is probably false. Nevertheless, while the syphilis theory is easily refuted, the tumor theory is not, though Young treats it as though it is. His reasoning is that the tumor would have grown too swiftly to have been the cause of Nietzsche's ailments throughout his life, and that it would have disfigured his right eye more than the evidence reveals. However, even if those assumptions are correct, the fact remains that the thesis of a 'purely psychiatric' collapse does nothing to explain the headaches, nausea and disfigurement of the right pupil and eyeball that the evidence does include. Indeed, the thesis that Nietzsche's psychological condition was caused by a purely psychiatric condition explains nothing at all. The brain tumor theory, postulated by Dr. Leonard Sax, remains the only plausible theory because it is the only one that can explain evidence from childhood (the right pupil was enlarged by age 5), adulthood and postmortem (the right eye could not be fully shut in the coffin). No psychiatric condition has ever been known to distort eyeballs. While Young's is a very good book, it ends on a very bad argument.

Bryan Finken

University of Colorado at Denver