

Keith Ansell-Pearson. *Nietzsche's Earthbound Wisdom: The Philosopher, the Poet, and the Sage.* The University of Chicago Press 2025. 288 pp. \$45.00 USD (Hardcover 9780226839257); \$44.99 USD (eBook 9780226839264).

The purpose of *Nietzsche's Earthbound Wisdom: The Philosopher, The Poet, and the Sage* is a new interpretation of Nietzsche's character as a poet-philosopher and his philosophy of the future. Ansell-Pearson focuses on Nietzsche's texts from the middle (1872-1882) to demonstrate an influence on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and on the late period (1886-1888). We encounter Nietzsche as "philosophically mature" and as abandoning the metaphysical-artistic view of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Ansell-Pearson's study of middle and late texts indicates a substantial career of reflecting on the German philosopher. With this high degree of analysis, Ansell-Pearson's interpretative arguments contest the conventional clean break between middle to late Nietzsche.

The text's arguments unfold as follows: the "constructive project" that characterizes the middle period of Nietzsche's texts deeply informs later writings such as the construction of *Zarathustra* (1883-1885) and post-*Zarathustra* books (1886-1888). These late books are not destructive in their aim but are meant to carry out "implementing the philosophical project" of Nietzsche's middle period. From this position, we cast new light on *Zarathustra* and after, as uncovered here is a preparatory debt to Nietzsche's middle writings.

Nietzsche's middle period, then, takes up the bulk of the analysis of the book. This is done to show "an anticipation and a preparation" for the teaching of *Zarathustra*, which is commented on in the latter part. Ansell-Pearson avoids distorting Nietzsche to "domesticate his philosophizing," by asserting dialogue with philosophers and literary figures whom Nietzsche finds important or whom, by detailing their influence, enrich Nietzsche's "intellectual character and ideas" (4). By incorporating this thread throughout the book, Nietzsche is demonstrated as an unconventional philosopher with the "full range of experience," avoiding banal philosophizing with its authority in theological, metaphysical, and moral traditions. Rather, Nietzsche, through Ansell-Pearson's reading, invokes a philosophy of "high-spirited freedom" and heterodoxy, which is displayed in how Nietzsche reads texts slowly, carefully, and cheerfully. Nietzsche's bombastic aphoristic style of writing is explained by this manner of reading and its literary nexus. There is a deeper layer to Nietzsche, as he is not a conventional essayist, writing in a conventional manner. Protean abyss-thinking is not traditional theorizing; Nietzsche's philosophy searches for meaning to confront the death of God. Morality, theology, and metaphysics, and their correlate rationalities, no longer provide horizons, so Nietzsche provokes a "creative positing," or poetical artistic construction to address the directionless void.

Ansell-Pearson has remarkable submersion in Nietzsche literature, and admirably takes on many notable interpretations. Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that *Zarathustra* is a literary work and not representative of Nietzsche the philosopher, misses the importance of Nietzsche's mature philosophizing (132). Nietzsche, for Leo Strauss, is following the modern tradition but radicalizes it to assert the moral tradition of virtue as the "inseparable kinship between highest and lowest" (100). While Ansell-Pearson accepts part of this interpretation, he departs on Nietzsche's



sublimation while connecting it to Freud. Each chapter of the book grapples with Nietzsche's foremost commentators, such as Martin Heidegger, Walter Kaufmann, Paul Loeb, Karl Löwith, Laurence Lampert, Michel Foucault, and Carl Jung to justify Nietzsche's middle period's philosophical and literary contributions and how these are foundational for his mature philosophy.

Ansell-Pearson's claim that scholarship overlooks Nietzsche as poet and sage, or his "earthbound" wisdom, is provocative. Undoubtedly, the objective of the book is met by presenting the heterodox thinking of Nietzsche. Any reader with an interest in Nietzsche will enjoy the author's insightful and reflective connections to literary or psychological thought, especially those inclined to Nietzsche's existentialism of breaking molds, unsettling grounds, opening potential futural possibilities, or disrupting tradition.

Implicit in Ansell-Pearson's argument is Nietzsche's experiential philosophy as wholly good for posterity, but the book avoids normative language to make this claim. Due to emphasis on poetical commander or sage in Ansell-Pearson's diagnosis of Nietzsche as beyond all localization but as imparting sublimity, recent studies on the political philosophy of Nietzsche's thought are not considered. Nietzsche's politics are evidently vague at best, but this does not occlude practical consequences drawn from his ideas. Regarding a passage from *Ecce Homo* where Nietzsche suggests politics will dissolve into a spiritual war, Ansell-Pearson interprets: "The notion of great politics that is being invoked here refers to a politics that thinks beyond the petty politics of nation, class, and race, and it is meant to capture the idea of planetary governance and so is not a politics in any conventional sense" (192).

Michael Gillespie's *Nietzsche's Final Teaching* (2017), Ronald Beiner's *Dangerous Minds* (2018), and Waller Newell's *Tyranny and Revolution* (2022) are not cited in *Nietzsche's Earthbound Wisdom*, as these establish proceeding cautiously when reading late Nietzsche to not dismiss practical, revolutionary, or political intimations. These studies find a Nietzsche that is no friend of liberalism nor of liberation. In response, Ansell-Pearson's Nietzsche is not a thinker advocating revolution but is one that ventures "new modes of perception" and provides pathways to the sublime (193). As the ancient philosophers are the "spiritual tyrants" that found states, the time of the "tyrants of spirit is over" (183). The author believes Nietzsche's thought cannot concretize practically, so we find passages rendering political intimations irrelevant: "liberal institutions cease to be liberal once they have been established" (188). Ignored is a passage from *Twilight of the Idols* where cultural norms need to be "anti-liberal to the point of malice." Ansell-Pearson, by stating "the transformation Nietzsche wants us to imagine is an existential one, and he writes as an existential pioneer" (194), or by questioning if it matters whether Nietzsche's eternal recurrence is true (160), presents a respite-philosopher-poet, a true visionary of human longings. Does this disruptive poet-sage have practical consequences in the call for warrior-tyrants or artistic legislators, in the hostility to liberalism, or in the potential to overthrow bourgeois society? Ansell-Pearson answers no.

This book softens the blow of Nietzsche's punch, casting him more as a literary Dostoyevsky than a nihilistic propaedeutic, to be read as an existentialist liberator of suppressed passions. Despite hesitance to denote a practical project, besides a tangential existential one, Ansell-Pearson

maintains Nietzsche is a “Caesar-inspired cultural dynamo” (190) remaining in the heterodox standpoint of expired horizons. By claiming Nietzsche’s Caesar is “not advocating political Caesarism,” Ansell-Pearson repudiates Camus’s reading in *The Rebel* where Nietzsche’s philosopher-poet has a murderously tyrannical role (189). As absent is any note of caution, Nietzsche is in no way inimical but wholly beneficial for modernity to progress forward into sublime abyss, to overcome stultification and overindulgence, for Ansell-Pearson. This is the task of the philosopher: to “create values, and to attain this he will have to pass through the range of human values and feelings...being at different turns critic, skeptic, historian, poet, and solver of riddles” (187).

Instead of proving Nietzsche’s philosophy as independent and not as dogmatist and fanatic (185), it might be beneficial to demonstrate how and why Nietzsche is so heterodox. Why does Nietzsche criticize the vacuous moral tradition, or why despair at Enlightenment secular spiritual bankruptcy if the sage is against piety as a profound atheist? Do these have anything to do with the creation of *Zarathustra* and the fallen tightrope walker? Having these questions excavated from the aphoristic style would add to the claim of Nietzsche as unconventional philosopher—as much as it would engage with his late period’s philosophical project of the future: in short, should or should not Nietzsche, the earthbound sage, cultivate followers? In contesting a clean break from the middle to late period of Nietzsche’s thinking, one cannot help but wonder Nietzsche’s intent in being presently misunderstood for the future’s benefit. Ansell-Pearson goes to great length to uncover this intent: Nietzsche “warns the thinker, however, against canonizing himself and turning himself into a binding institution for the future of humankind, and he advises us not to become fools of piety with respect to the teachings of the sage and not to be damagers of knowledge” (7); Nietzsche presents himself as “a solitary spirit with a hermit’s conscience. In his late writings, he is keen to lay bare what he sees as the general malaise and weakness of modern culture” (163); the philosopher-poet’s words must be received as both “ominous and hopeful and as those of a true singing master of the longing of our earthly souls” (191). Quite acrimonious is it to assume that future ears hearing the siren song of the singing master will not try to whistle the same tune. When studying Nietzsche, we must weigh his monumental creative intellectualism with its potentially destructive practical import, even if arguing against it.

It is one thing if Nietzsche opens pathways previously occluded by the metaphysics of moral philosophers which cannot reify into actual institutions, thereby disassembling illusory premises not to be followed. Quite another is to claim oneself a prophetic sage to cultivate, through intoxicating destruction, a futural following of philosophical-poetical artist warriors, whose purpose is to overcome slavish, egalitarian-herd morality to enact the new dawn of the superhuman, by overthrowing modern freedom and equality for the creative passions, hitherto subterranean, to be truly free.

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