

Monika M. Langer

Nietzsche's Gay Science: Dancing Coherence.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010.

275 pages

US\$33.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-230-58068-8)

US\$90.00 (paper ISBN 978-0-230-50869-5)

This book offers a close reading of the entirety of *The Gay Science* [GS]. A distinguishing feature of Langer's approach is an insistence on the book's unity and coherence. She rejects any suggestion that it is a disconnected miscellany (xii-xiii), but freely acknowledges that other commentators on this text, including myself, have questioned the idea that Nietzsche's so-called aphoristic writings are disjointed (xii), and Kathleen Higgins in particular has written a book about GS exclusively (entitled *Comic Relief*) (xi). Langer sets her approach apart from these others in two related ways. First, no other works are exhaustive: others interpret particular excerpts rather than going through GS serially, section by section, as Langer does. Secondly, other approaches are partial rather than exhaustive because they are thematic, tracing key concerns across the text (xii, xiv). Langer, by contrast, works sedulously through GS from start to end, endorsing Walter Kaufmann's claim that reading each component of the text as part of its larger context elicits more meaning than taking each component in isolation from its surroundings. 'To comprehend it [GS], one must pay close attention to its intricate coherence' (xiv).

Yet having distinguished her own approach from those who pursue the text's themes, Langer identifies three main themes in GS: de-deification, naturalization and beautification. She suggests that much of GS concerns itself with impediments to these processes (xv). De-deification refers not just to the death of god but also to the collapse of moralities and epistemologies founded on theism (xv). De-deification also deprives humans of any superior status over animals and is thus connected to naturalization. This latter impulse rejects the mind / body separation and reconnects humans with nature. Beautification encourages humans to see their lives in aesthetic terms and to strive to make them more attractive. She admits that the explicit appearance of these three central themes in the text itself is rare. She even speculates that Nietzsche deliberately chose not to articulate these concerns too openly, preferring to let them emerge indirectly (xv, cf. 1). The only support she offers for this reading is her belief that eschewing abstraction formed part of his quest to avoid the pitfalls of traditional philosophy (xv). Nietzsche's ambition to distance himself from traditional philosophy is, indeed, another of Langer's persistent themes. While these themes provide a fruitful way of interpreting GS, they also reduce the distance between Langer's project and others: it is not so much that other approaches are thematic while hers is not, but that she advances different themes. But it must be noted that Langer does not organize her discussion around these themes; instead, as indicated above, the book starts at the start of GS and ends at its end.

That said, here it is noteworthy that Langer works with the second edition of GS, which appeared in mid-1887, five years after the first edition, with a Preface, Book V and Appendix added. Five years is a relatively long time in Nietzsche's compressed productive life: after the first edition of GS appeared (mid-1882), he wrote such major books as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. Langer notes in passing the differences between the two editions (xii, xiv) but neither defends nor even discusses her choice to treat the second as definitive. This could be defended on the grounds that this is how most people now read the book, or on the grounds that this is how Nietzsche retrospectively wanted it to be read. But the failure to address or justify treating the second edition as a cohesive whole creates anomalies, for Langer talks about the Preface as if it predated Books I-IV, when it really postdated them. Another anomaly appears with the end of Book IV, which concluded the first edition. Its final section, 'Incipit tragoedia' (#342) paved the way for its successor work by introducing its protagonist in terms almost identical to Part 1 of *Zarathustra*'s Prologue. But when Nietzsche added a fifth book, this original bridge between the two books lost that meaning.

Another important but unaddressed aspect of Langer's approach is the rationale for breaking up her chapters by GS book number. This is a fairly obvious strategy, but she then further divides them into sections for no obvious reason. While Langer concedes that 'no definitive, canonical grouping of the sections' (xvii) exists, knowing the reasons for her choices would have helped. This organizational-cum-hermeneutic decision bears upon her insistence on the book's coherence, for carving up sections one way rather than another can contribute to, or mitigate, a sense of its coherence.

By underscoring the book's unity and coherence, Langer risks implying that the only context for understanding GS's ideas is GS. But many of the concerns she identifies pre-date this work. She deems, for example, 'Nietzsche's explicit turn to psychology' (4) to be noteworthy, but this is traceable back to *Human, All Too Human*. Nietzsche's insistence that 'from the species' perspective, qualities commonly judged harmful might be useful' (33) also predates GS. There are occasional references to Nietzsche's earlier works, but they are few and far between. Her treatment of Wagner is illustrative: a number of passages about art, culture, and music cry out for contextualization by reference to Nietzsche's earlier friendship with, admiration for, and writing about, Wagner. But Wagner is not mentioned until 100 pages into her discussion (103 n2, 105-8 and passim.). More generally, I found the work to lack biographical context, which is odd given Langer's repeated insistence on the highly personal nature of Nietzsche's philosophy (see, e.g., 4). Instead of referring to Nietzsche's earlier works or life to shed light on GS, Langer tends—curiously, in my view—to explain some of its ideas by reference to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (46, 92, 149). Explaining the contents of one book by reference to a later one strikes me as a strangely backward (in terms of time) process of illumination in any case, but here it casts doubt upon Langer's emphasis on GS's coherence. If it is coherent it can, presumably, be understood and explained in its own terms, rather than in terms of later—or earlier, in the case of Book V—work.

A detailed reading of a single one of Nietzsche's books is a project to which, *prima facie*, I am very sympathetic. I also applaud Langer's close attention to the German original (see, for example, 77) and the many cases where she pulls Kaufmann up on his 1974 translation of GS, and sometimes even for his punctuation (see, for example, 73, 104n6, 135). However, Langer needs to do more to show the benefits of her hermeneutical approach for understanding Nietzsche. She could contrast her particular interpretations with those of others who have used the book in a less holistic way. At one point she compares her discussion of Nietzsche's views on women with that of Kathleen Higgins (86-9). But much more of this sort of comparison is required for Langer to vindicate her approach. Nietzsche's attitudes toward women is, in fact, a topic raised repeatedly across the book. But this also left me wondering about Langer's method: why not group Nietzsche's scattered comments on this topic together rather than deal with them serially as they arise in the text? What is the benefit of the more linear and interrupted approach Langer takes when it comes to this issue?

Another of the concerns of GS Langer notes is friendship (45). I (and others) have written on this without taking a holistic approach. It would be valuable to be shown in specific ways the greater payoff that comes from reading GS in Langer's way. What does her hermeneutical method reveal that cannot be achieved using other means? More generally, although Langer touches upon a number of themes discussed in the secondary literature—e.g. Nietzsche's stance toward democracy, his supposed anti-semitism, his perspectivism—she engages little secondary literature. When she does engage, she does not explain how her approach yields greater insight into Nietzsche's ideas. One exception to this trend of neglecting most of the secondary literature comes in her repeated references to Kaufmann: on Nietzsche's relationship to Wagner and Schopenhauer, for example, she cites only him (112 n1). So as both translator and interpreter of Nietzsche, Kaufmann seems to be Langer's major interlocutor. This limited engagement with the secondary literature limits the book's value for Nietzsche scholars.

Nietzsche's Gay Science: Dancing Coherence is, however, a useful resource for newcomers in providing an introduction to some of Nietzsche's key concerns and being written in a clear and accessible way. An earlier work by Langer for the same publisher was *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A Guide and Commentary*. That provides a way of thinking about this book: it is a guide to and commentary on *The Gay Science*. For a work that offers a close reading of Nietzsche's text, I found Langer's reluctance to quote his text at any length unusual. Perhaps she assumes that readers will have a copy of GS close to hand when reading her book. If so, this reinforces my inference that this book is best thought of as a guide to and commentary on GS.

Ruth Abbey

University of Notre Dame