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978-1-107-13486-7 - The Making of Friedrich Nietzsche: The Quest For Identity, 1844–1869

Daniel Blue

Excerpt

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## Introduction

*The product of the philosopher is his life (first, before his works). That is his work of art.*<sup>1</sup>

### I

This biography of Friedrich Nietzsche is traditional in the sense that it provides a narrative account of his early years, beginning before he was born and chronicling his development up to the age of twenty-four. It also embeds that life within larger intellectual, social, and political contexts, showing how these shaped and sometimes obstructed his progress in ways of which he was not always aware. While the treatment here is significantly larger in scale than previous attempts, the intent itself is also traditional. Many biographers have recognized the importance of Nietzsche's environment and sought to do it justice.

What makes this book new is that it takes a distinctive and practically unnoticed ambition of the early Nietzsche and seeks to give it a prominence commensurate with the value he assigned it himself. From at least the age of thirteen he sought to direct his own development, and he did so with a steadiness of purpose and flexibility of intellectual insight which might be difficult to believe if it were not documented by texts. Fortunately, Nietzsche was an inveterate archivist in the sense that he wrote so much down. The private progress of his intellect and psyche is recorded in five volumes of juvenilia and three volumes of early letters – four, if one counts the commentaries – which chronicle his life up to the age of twenty-four. This was a particularly fraught and fecund era in his development, and when one examines the record, a remarkably complete and coherent process of self-education comes into view. As these writings attest, he did not become the Nietzsche known today “naturally,”

<sup>1</sup> KSA VII: 712.

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through the graceful maturation of some inborn character. He engaged rather in a self-conducted and self-conscious campaign to follow his own guidance, in the process cultivating the critical capacities and personal vision which figure so strikingly in his books. As a result, Nietzsche's published works are steeped in values that he discovered and internalized long before he mobilized their results. Indeed, one could argue that the first work which he authored was not a book at all but the persona who wrote them. In his notebooks and letters one can watch this somewhat artificial figure being constructed, action by action, as the developing boy and youth defined positions *vis-à-vis* family, friends, authorities, and on occasion himself.

## 2

Although Nietzsche practiced many literary genres, this book will often focus on the one which poses the most direct challenge to the biographer, the autobiographies which he wrote up through the age of twenty-four. These were not just journalistic narrations of facts, although they provide a great deal of data which can be used to fill in biographical gaps. Rather they functioned as strategic instruments through which he tried to understand a certain concept of the self – to present through self-portraiture his psychology and values, and sometimes to decide what he should do next.

To be more specific, between the ages of thirteen and twenty-four Nietzsche produced at least six autobiographies, depending on how one counts them:<sup>2</sup>

- (1) "From my life," composed in August 1858 (KGW I-1: 281–311);
- (2) "The course of my life," three attempts to address the influence of environment, composed in the spring of 1861 (KGW I-2: 255–263);
- (3) "My life," written in September 1863 (KGW I-3: 189–192);
- (4) "Farewell" (also called "My life"), Nietzsche's goodbye to Schulpforte, which dates to October 1864 (KGW I-3: 417–419);

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche actually wrote more than six autobiographies between 1858 and 1869. (Sommer 2013: 325, counts ten.) Some go unconsidered here because they offer no new information and seem largely parasitic on earlier attempts (KGW I-2: 3–4, for example). In other cases when several sketches were composed at the same time and run parallel to one another, they are construed as one. Thus, the three accounts written in 1861 (all called "The course of my life") are considered a unit, as are the several sketches made in 1869. It should be noted that Nietzsche probably wrote a seventh autobiography, covering his stay at Bonn. If so, it has been lost. See Chapter 10, Section 1.

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- (5) “Retrospect of my two years at Leipzig,” written in late summer / early autumn, 1867 (KGW I-4: 506–530); and
- (6) the preliminary versions of Nietzsche’s curriculum vitae, January 1869 (KGW I-5: 40–42, 44–50, 52–54).<sup>3</sup>

Each such autobiography was distinctive, not only in content but in the problems addressed; and sometimes they differed in form. He issued these with remarkable regularity, composing them at the ages of thirteen, sixteen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty-two, and twenty-four, that is, at two- to three-year intervals throughout his adolescence and youth. Their approach was not just narrative but conceptual. In addition to describing his life they proposed psychological and even philosophical positions vital to the enactment of his youthful ambitions. Unlike his memoranda – the sundry lists and brief accounts which populate his notebooks – these attempted an overview, a bid to plot the course of his existence, not just as a series of incidents, but as the sequent development of an autonomous self.<sup>4</sup>

Nietzsche took these narratives seriously. While some were created on demand and to meet external requirements (at least two were written for school and one provided the basis for a curriculum vitae) the two longest and most comprehensive were composed for himself alone, and he put several to explicit use. Sometimes he seems to have treated autobiography as a kind of report card, to assess his progress. On other occasions he employed them to draw up a balance sheet of his proclivities when confronting a major decision. At least one led him into the abysses of a philosophic problem that it took nearly a year to resolve. All allowed him to sketch a somewhat objective representation of himself, an externalized portrait, and thereby to see himself as a figure deployed against (and to an extent intrinsically different from) the world in which he lived.

As the very fact that they had uses indicates, Nietzsche’s autobiographies were not theoretical treatises, to be considered apart from the life they described. They were maps in progress, sketches of psychical terrain that allowed him to advance a bit further, then to reconstruct his views in the light of further experience. This book accordingly will locate Nietzsche’s autobiographies within the contexts in which they first appeared, as

<sup>3</sup> The final version (KGW I-5: 55–57, also given in KSAB II: 366–368) is so discreet as to be of inferior interest.

<sup>4</sup> While this approach to Nietzsche’s life was begun and largely developed independently, it was later influenced by Schmidt’s and Kjaer’s insistence that Nietzsche’s early work performs an emancipatory function in his struggle with the forces of socialization. Hödl calls this Nietzsche’s “*Bildungsprogramm*” and contrasts it with the “exterior” *Bildung* (education) he received in school and elsewhere. See Schmidt 1991–1994, Kjaer 1990, and Hödl 2009: 132–133.

engagements within his battle with his environment. It will also show how his fascination with the self and the course of its development forced him to confront psychological and philosophical issues that might otherwise have gone unobserved. The autobiographies proper are sometimes surrounded by satellite entries which examine these insights through the non-narrative means of philosophical analysis. As will be shown, Nietzsche's first extant philosophical essays, "Fate and history" and "Freedom of the will and fate," as well as "On moods" and "Self-observation" can usefully be interpreted as extensions of his autobiographical enterprise.

Despite their inherent interest, it is not the autobiographies themselves but rather the ongoing project they embody which underwrites this book. Some will be only fleetingly mentioned, for their importance here lies less in what they say than in what they represent, yet another attempt by the philosopher to examine the terms by which he lived. Further, as will be explained in the text, Nietzsche considered autobiography important, not for its overt content and certainly not for individual instances that he composed, but for what he believed that these revealed: that he had a latent self, construed along Humboldtian lines as a complex of drives and talents, and beyond this a native character not to be accounted for by his environment and in some ways beyond his personal control.<sup>5</sup> From his earliest attempt he saw autobiography as a mirror (his term) through which that unseen personage emerged into view.<sup>6</sup> He did recount his deeds, but only because these actions were manifestations – sometimes inscrutable – of a hidden self; and autobiography served as a record of its mysterious development. Autobiography might meet other needs as well, as mentioned earlier, but this sense of involuntary revelation was always present and sometimes primary. Autobiography was a book which he wrote in order to see who he was.

Although Nietzsche made his first such attempt at this genre somewhat spontaneously, his later attempts were composed under the influence of various ideologies and theories. As will be seen, the Humboldtian notion of *Bildung*, a spiritual underpinning of the Prussian educational system, would foster this vision and provide the boy with a metaphysic of discovery

<sup>5</sup> The qualifier "believed" is introduced because "self" is philosophically a problematic term. This book does not seek either to endorse or to critique Nietzsche's vocabulary and the metaphysical and psychological worlds he envisioned. He was capable of criticizing these on his own, as will appear as the book proceeds. See particularly Afterword, Section 2.

<sup>6</sup> For Nietzsche's mirror analogy, see Chapter 4, Section 5. As late as his final lucid year he could conceive a work entitled, "The Mirror / Attempt / at a self-valuation." KSA XIII: 633, cited in Hödl 2009: 166.

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that would allow him to deepen his appreciation of his new powers and inspire him to direct them in new directions, notably toward scholarship.<sup>7</sup>

During adolescence Nietzsche made two new discoveries concerning the self and its manifestations. The first occurred at the age of seventeen and was composed in the wake of two anthropological essays that stressed the importance of environment for the emergence of various peoples. He applied this same approach to himself and was alarmed by the implication that the influence of one's habitat could inhibit and even warp the expression of a supposedly autonomous self. For the first time he considered the possibility that he might be a mere puppet of the world in which he lived. This scenario troubled him and initiated one of his first visceral encounters with philosophic issues, an effort considerably eased by his reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

If Emerson provided a balm for Nietzsche's anxieties, he deepened the latter's appreciation for an aspect of self-revelation of which he was already aware. The self tended to operate beyond the reach of consciousness. It did not lay itself open to introspection or make itself available to deliberate examination. It could only be tracked through its expressions, that is, *post facto*, through its actions. All the young Nietzsche could consciously do was to run after his deeds like an eager reporter, noting what had happened and occasionally surmising what it meant. As the Afterword will suggest, he eventually entertained doubts concerning even this oblique approach and in the process grew skeptical of self-knowledge altogether. Possibly as a result, he ceased writing self-portraits of this kind after 1869. He would continue to evoke his past and even write narratives which could be construed as autobiographies. These later efforts, however, were different – less factually oriented, less suitable for use in self-formation, and directed to other uses than the accounts produced in his youth.

Having said all this, one must issue a qualification. Nietzsche's autobiographical project plays a large role in this book. However, it is not itself the book's center. That would be to intellectualize an inherently factual exercise and to make the biography tendentious. Neither lives nor history lend themselves to intellectual simplification. To propose Nietzsche's use of autobiography as a universal, pan-explanatory theory would falsify the way he in fact negotiated the world.

It would also misrepresent the scope of his ambition. Ultimately, as will be seen, Nietzsche was interested in the self, not just because it was his, but because of what he could do with it. Once he had identified his distinctive

<sup>7</sup> The Humboldtian notion of *Bildung* will figure in Chapters 5, 12, and 13.

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abilities and interests, he wanted to develop these and display them in the world. Autobiography might show the nature of such capabilities; it could not of itself animate or apply them. Accordingly, after every revelation, a period of gestation and response followed, as he drew out the implications of his findings and put them to work. Such generative ruminations were at least as important as the initial process of self-discovery, but they are far more difficult to categorize and describe because they were implemented ad hoc – within the strictures of specific circumstances and under the impress of immediate needs.

For these reasons, the topics of self-discovery and autobiography will surface only intermittently in this book and even then amid a welter of other material. Nonetheless, such themes are pivotal, for they provide the interpretive principles Nietzsche himself used to understand his actions and to direct his life. They permit this book to depict his development as he himself saw it, or at least according to principles which he would recognize and approve. To that extent this book aspires to be the biography Nietzsche himself might have composed if he had possessed the inclination and the time.

## 3

If Nietzsche's own account of his life, as recovered here, may be described as his lost biography, there exists a second *Urbiographie* of Nietzsche which this book aspires to dislodge, that of his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. This is not the place to describe in detail the weaknesses of her two presentations of his life, although her unreliability is well known.<sup>8</sup> It need only be noted that she was not herself a scholar and that she actively ignored scholarship when it threatened her preconceptions.<sup>9</sup> She further deployed the narration and the character descriptions given in the biographies for personal ends: first, to glamorize her brother and increase his public, and second, to downplay the contributions and malign the characters of people she disliked, which included virtually everybody who might rival her claim to be her brother's closest confidante. As Renate Müller-Buck has argued, she sought in particular to discredit those who might reveal the deterioration of her relations with her brother during his

<sup>8</sup> See Podach 1932: 7–8; Blunck 1953: 32; Schlechta 1956 III: 1408 ff; Janz 1972: 60; 17–20; 63–101, 151; Pernet 1989: 27, 51. For more global arraignments see Müller-Buck 1998 and Niemeyer 2014. (Paul Loeb brought the final article to my attention.)

<sup>9</sup> See her response to Hans von Müller's evidence that Nietzsche had no Polish ancestors. Müller 2001: 260–264, 266–268.

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final productive years, that is, her mother, Franz Overbeck, and Lou Andreas-Salomé.<sup>10</sup> Her books are further replete with questionable anecdotes, which would have to be examined individually to show their implausibility and common imaginary features. The interested reader is directed to read the accusations made by Karl Schlechta and Curt Paul Janz or the summary of charges contained in Renate Müller-Buck's article from 1998.<sup>11</sup> Or, they can simply turn to a remark by Carol Diethe, Förster-Nietzsche's principal biographer in English: "one can never take a quotation from the pen of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche at face value."<sup>12</sup>

Most readers will think this disclaimer unnecessary, for they have never read Förster-Nietzsche's biographies and have no intention of doing so. Yet virtually all non-specialized biographies of Nietzsche are indebted to her work in two ways. First, they cite many of her statements and stories as uncontroversial facts. Sometimes they will not even bother to attribute them to her, so that the reader does not know the problematic source of their assertions.<sup>13</sup> In other cases they cite Förster-Nietzsche's books in the footnotes as though her claims carried the same weight as those of conscientious scholars, an equivalence which cannot be sustained. Yet if biographers err in accepting Förster-Nietzsche as a factual resource, they compound the damage by taking her account in general as their template and model. If one has read any biography of Nietzsche, one is probably reading one that implicitly follows her vision.<sup>14</sup> Biographers do not do this deliberately, of course. Each brings individual interpretations to bear and consults a variety of sources. However, it takes a good deal of deliberate work to escape the seductions of a powerful and established paradigm, and few biographers have mustered the resources or even seen the necessity of eluding this wily precursor.<sup>15</sup> As a result and regardless of personal intent, virtually all stress the figures that Förster-Nietzsche stressed (Nietzsche's

<sup>10</sup> Müller-Buck 1998: 322.

<sup>11</sup> See n. 8. See also Däuble 1976: 325–326, 328. Most of these criticisms are directed against her editions of the letters and her misuse of documentation. However, they apply the more forcefully against the biographies which with rare exceptions are backed by no documentary evidence whatsoever.

<sup>12</sup> Diethe 2003: 24.

<sup>13</sup> The entirety of Hayman's paragraph beginning, "Fritz was sent," is drawn from Förster-Nietzsche. Hayman 1980: 20. Cate gives Förster-Nietzsche's account of Nietzsche's education without citation. Cate 2002: 11. Young's paragraph at the base of p. 13 is largely derived from Förster-Nietzsche. Young 2010: 13.

<sup>14</sup> Two biographers who largely sidestepped Förster-Nietzsche are Blunck 1953 (subsequently incorporated with minor changes into Janz 1978) and Ross 1980. Specialized biographies such as Bergmann 1987 and Parkes 1994 use her more sparingly.

<sup>15</sup> Compare Janz 1972: 151. "Elisabeth could carry out her office only through the most massive fabrications, and what she did in this arrogated office had the most fatal consequences."

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“saintly” father, paternal grandmother, maternal grandfather); recirculate the characterizations she made (the helpful grandmother, the happy household in Naumburg, the cultural homogeneity of Naumburg and Schulpforte); and they downplay the persons she either sidelined or overlooked (Nietzsche’s mother, Friedrich Ritschl, the Mushacke family). The same anecdotes are repeated, the same explanations accepted, and the same events that she stresses are stressed by them as well. They can and do supplement her account, but they do not alter it fundamentally. This book aspires to end all that. It does not intend merely to correct previous versions of Nietzsche’s biography but to reconsider it on a fresh basis. If its first goal is to reframe his biography in Nietzsche’s own image, its second is to seize control of its narrative from Förster-Nietzsche’s hands and to restore it to the custody of her brother, using his autobiographies for guidance.

After that proud claim, a concession must be made. Förster-Nietzsche has often been cited in Nietzsche biographies for the very good reason that she is the sole family member to record impressions of Nietzsche’s early life.<sup>16</sup> This is not an accident. She broke relations with family members who criticized her own account,<sup>17</sup> and her appetite for lawsuits (in which she enjoyed extraordinary success) soon stilled those who might offer doubts or protests.<sup>18</sup> This book accordingly has little recourse but occasionally to resort to her stories. In no case, however, has she simply been listed in the footnotes as though she merited the same deference as scholars. Rather, the main text always explicitly acknowledges that a statement comes from her so that the reader knows to exercise caution. One can only hope that in the future some ingenious researcher will be able to circumvent her entirely. In the meantime, Nietzsche’s life has been fundamentally reconsidered and ordered according to principles which certainly do not derive from Förster-Nietzsche. These would include reliance on Nietzsche’s own notions of self-development and autobiography; an effort to restore credit to persons previously neglected, especially Franziska Nietzsche; and a stress on contingencies that Förster-Nietzsche never considered, such as the financial situation of the Nietzsche household,

<sup>16</sup> Her mother wrote an account of her own girlhood but never published it and brought it to a close with her wedding. Goch 1994: 32–64.

<sup>17</sup> For Förster-Nietzsche’s rejection of the Schenkel family, see Franziska Nietzsche 1984: 51, 85; for her quarrel with Oscar Oehler and the Lachauers, Franziska Nietzsche 1984: 81, 85.

<sup>18</sup> Müller-Buck 1998: 321, 322. “It would be valuable to study the lawsuit documents in order to understand how it was possible that Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche could win practically all suits, especially those in which everything spoke against her.”



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educational assumptions of the time, and the ways Nietzsche's study of philology affected his attitudes and modes of thought.

## 4

Despite his many notes on his surroundings, Friedrich Nietzsche's own words are insufficient to ground an account of his life. At a minimum some control is needed to assess the accuracy of his own claims, not to mention the truth of statements made by his sister and other memoirists. This book is therefore at pains to specify the historical world which Nietzsche inhabited and the customs, attitudes, and constraints operative when he lived. He did not grow up in a vacuum; and if he sought to disengage himself from local attitudes, it is important to know what these were and why they might oppress him. Before he could transcend his time, he had first to address it and, further, to communicate his findings in terms that his contemporaries could understand. This book accordingly calls upon the resources of history and social sciences to fill in some of the blanks and to discern what Nietzsche never thought to record and sometimes may not have recognized, namely, the dynamics and limits of the world he inhabited. Regardless whether he saw these factors as hostile or helpful, they were part of his ecology and inevitably inflected his personality and his views.

If this book includes more historical background than is customary in biographies of Nietzsche, it also lays greater stress on his actual writing. Readers sometimes complain that biographies of artists and thinkers depict the human being in their everyday activities but not that second self, the paradoxically mute creature whose hand moves silently over the page. This biography aspires to display both and, further, to show how the two beings intertwined and affected one another. It presents the shy and obedient son who pursued his studies and frequented small, choice collections of friends. It also depicts the brooding poet and thinker, hunched over his manuscripts. While we cannot call these creatures different, they are not quite the same either; and this book attempts not only to do justice to both but to show how each required the other, how the boy and youth encountered puzzles in his life that he took to creative means to resolve; and how the writer and composer produced works with implications which were then carried back to his life away from the desk. One might call this "the double aspect of Friedrich Nietzsche," and it lies at the heart of this book.

Nietzsche's life is so rich and the current knowledge of it so extensive, that any account must discipline itself through limiting parameters and principles. This book accordingly confines its time frame to the years

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before 1869, and it centers on the interplay between Nietzsche's ambitions and the world within which he developed, between the cultural legacy that he received and the ways he turned this to his own uses. The book could have concentrated on his music, but others have done this;<sup>19</sup> and it could have paid greater attention to his writing in general, but Hermann Josef Schmidt has devoted four large volumes to this project, even if he stops just before Nietzsche reaches the age of twenty.<sup>20</sup> This biography could have covered his philosophic development in much more detail, an invaluable approach which was envisioned by an earlier version. However, that would require a book in itself, and it seemed better here to adhere to the focus most germane to biography. The ordering topic of this volume is accordingly Nietzsche's attempt to direct his own life and thereby to develop and display his own character. Once he explicitly begins this process (in his thirteenth year), other themes will be considered largely as they bear upon this quest.

This book ends with Nietzsche's twenty-fourth year for three reasons. First, at that age the philosopher was involuntarily plucked from post-graduate studies, awarded a doctorate, and installed in an academic position in another country far from home. His life thenceforward was radically different. Second, upon turning twenty-four he was emancipated from the supervision of his guardian, allowed to administer his own finances, and to that extent accorded the dignity of adulthood. Finally, and most importantly given the focus of this book, Nietzsche considered the age of twenty-four climactic since by then one's character had received its fundamental impressions. It might develop further and produce the works distinctive of itself. However, by twenty-four it had defined the kind of self it was and would not radically change.<sup>21</sup> In his view, "Friedrich Nietzsche" was decisively in place.

Some readers will be disconcerted by the occasional use of German words when it would seem English would do. I insist on using "*Bildung*" and "*Wissenschaft*," among others, because these words are so enmeshed in the assumptions of the culture that produced them that they cannot be translated, and it is misleading to replace them with an English simulacrum. Worse, any pseudo-translation will not communicate the *changes* in meaning that these terms underwent over the course of the nineteenth century, transformations which influenced Nietzsche's own shifts in attitude.

<sup>19</sup> See Love 1963; Janz 1972: 113–142; Janz 1976. See also Liébert 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Schmidt 1991–1994.

<sup>21</sup> KGW I-5: 45. See Chapter 14, Section 1.