Introduction

CHAPTER 1

Interpreting Nietzsche's Free Spirit Works

This is a book about what scholars have called Nietzsche's "middle period" or what Nietzsche calls the free spirit works: *Human, All Too Human* (1878), *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* (1879), *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (1880), *Daybreak* (1881), and *The Gay Science* (1882).[1] The primary aim of this book is to advocate for a paradigm shift in the way we interpret the free spirit works that may have consequences for how we understand Nietzsche's larger oeuvre. Whereas many scholars approach the free spirit works as collections of isolated aphorisms that express views the mature Nietzsche eventually rejects, I argue that these works are best understood as a consciously constructed dialectical *Bildungsroman* in which Nietzsche walks himself and his readers through a series of philosophical stages that begins with a quest for truth through the natural sciences in *Human* and culminates in the rebirth of tragedy in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885). On this reading, the free spirit works do include ideas that Nietzsche eventually surpasses in his later publications. However, the steps he takes to reach what many consider his mature views are an essential part of telling the story of how he becomes a free spirit and eventually who he is.

The claim that the free spirit works are best understood as a consciously constructed dialectical *Bildungsroman* will surprise many. Although scholars are now paying more attention to Nietzsche's books, many still approach Nietzsche's published and unpublished writings as collections of independent thought experiments. For instance, so-called analytical readers of Nietzsche often follow Arthur Danto in trying to construct a set of coherent philosophical ideas from the seeming hodgepodge of

[1] Nietzsche republished each of these works in 1886 and 1887 with new prefaces. In so doing, he made *Assorted Opinions* and *The Wanderer* into the second volume of *Human*, and he added a fifth chapter to *The Gay Science*. Although a brief analysis of the fifth chapter of *The Gay Science* is included in this study, the primary focus of this study ends with the 1882 edition and so the first four chapters of *The Gay Science*.

statements Nietzsche puts forth in his writings. In contrast, so-called postmodern readers have been quick to argue that the fragmentary and contradictory character of Nietzsche's writings openly resists the analytic quest for coherence and systematicity and that his use of a variety of stylistic and literary techniques – including the aphoristic form of the free spirit works – shows that the meanings of his texts are fluid and thus allow for infinite interpretations.

Despite the potential role they may have played in shaping this image of Nietzsche's corpus, the fate of the free spirit works has been one of relative neglect. Although a small handful of books on the free spirit works have appeared in recent years in Anglo-American scholarship,[2] this pales in comparison with the attention lavished on a work such as *On the Genealogy of Morals*. At best, only *The Gay Science* has received the kind of attention that is comparable to Nietzsche's later works, and this is because many believe that *The Gay Science* transitions to Nietzsche's mature thinking.[3] Although *The Gay Science* does transition to Nietzsche's later works, the problem with this approach is that *The Gay Science* itself cannot be properly understood separately from the free spirit works that precede it.

The claim that the free spirit works constitute a dialectical *Bildungsroman* implies that they must be understood as a single unit. This is because the claim is not that each free spirit work constitutes a separate *Bildungsroman*. Instead, it is that the five free spirit works, when taken together, constitute a *Bildungsroman*. This claim also implies that these works are about the education or the *Bildung* of the free spirit, and this implies that these works, as a *Roman*, tell a story about the education of the free spirit. Although there is no fictional hero that inhabits the free spirit works, the prefaces Nietzsche adds to these works in 1886–1887 indicate that there is an unfolding story in these texts about Nietzsche's own development as a free spirit that moves from sickness to health, immaturity to maturity, bondage to freedom. At the same time, Nietzsche presents his own education as the advancement of human culture, and so he endows these works with a world-historical dimension. Thus, the purpose of the free spirit project is not only to show how Nietzsche carries forward the banner of the Enlightenment by educating himself (HH 26), but also to

[2] See Abbey (2000), Franco (2011), and Ansell-Pearson (2018). There are, of course, other studies on individual works of the free spirit project such as Higgins (2000), Cohen (2010), and Langer (2010).
[3] Most recently, Jenkins (2018: 41). Also see Schacht (1983: xiii), Poellner (1995: 1), and Richardson (1996: 9).

advance human culture by inviting the reader to participate in this quest for freedom.

Despite the numerous differences between Nietzsche and Hegel, there is undoubtedly some resonance between this reading of Nietzsche's free spirit works and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Not only does Hegel attribute to philosophy and philosophical development a world-historical dimension, the *Phenomenology* itself has been labeled a *Bildungsroman* (Speight 2001: 12). Such a resemblance between Nietzsche and Hegel is strengthened by my claim that the free spirit works are best understood as a dialectical *Bildungsroman*. Specifically, Nietzsche moves from the rejection of art in the name of scientific truth seeking in *Human* to a project of self-creation and the aesthetic justification of existence at the end of *The Gay Science* in which the natural sciences are assigned an instrumental and so subordinate role. Thus, the free spirit works tell a dialectical story of how the privileging of science over art in Enlightenment thinking is eventually inverted and how the initial opposition between these two is then reconciled in what Nietzsche calls a gay science.

There is a second reason for thinking of the transformations that take place in the free spirit works as having a dialectical character of the Hegelian sort. In the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche gives an account of what he calls the *Selbstaufhebung* or the self-overcoming of the will to truth (GM III 27), and he links this event to the death of God. The death of God occurs in the third chapter of *The Gay Science* and so it is a central event in the free spirit works. In the following chapters, I argue that the free spirit works execute this *Selbstaufhebung* of the will to truth. Such a reading makes sense of the dialectical interplay between the natural sciences and art in these works. Whereas Nietzsche's commitment to the natural sciences in *Human* goes hand in hand with a will to truth that leads to a corresponding rejection of art, the death of God in *The Gay Science* represents the overcoming of the idea that truth has an absolute value, and the overcoming of this idea makes it possible for Nietzsche to re-embrace, in the final sections of *The Gay Science*, forms of art that he associates with falsification and lies.

In addition to evidence from Nietzsche's later writings that attests to the dialectical reading I propose, there is also contemporaneous evidence from Nietzsche's notes during this time showing that he thought of the death of God in terms of the self-overcoming of morality and the morality of truth, which I understand to be the idea that we have an obligation to pursue truth at all costs. We also know that Nietzsche was thinking in terms of a dialectical self-overcoming of the Socratic quest for truth and the eventual

liberation of art as early as *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). This not only shows that Nietzsche already had such a dynamic in mind before writing the free spirit works, it also suggests a certain continuity between Nietzsche's earliest writings and his free spirit works. Whereas Nietzsche describes a dialectical progression in *The Birth of Tragedy* in which the Socratic quest for truth bites itself in the tail and makes possible a rebirth of tragic art (BT 15), Nietzsche executes this dialectic in his free spirit works, one that culminates in the rebirth of tragedy in *Zarathustra*.

Perhaps the most controversial element of my thesis is that these works do not just happen to constitute a dialectical *Bildungsroman*. Instead, the claim is stronger: The free spirit works are best understood as having been consciously constructed to execute this dynamic. That is, we can best make sense of these works by holding that Nietzsche planned, with the release of *Human* in 1878, to publish a series of works in which the quest for truth initiated in *Human* would result in the self-overcoming of the will to truth and the eventual liberation of art. In what follows I devote much space to defending this aspect of my thesis, and although we have no set of notes from the time Nietzsche was composing *Human* that show he was planning such a progression, there are a number of features of the free spirit works that are best explained by this aspect of my dialectical reading. This, then, is why I think the free spirit works are *best understood* as a consciously constructed dialectical *Bildungsroman*.

This is all by way of introduction, and in the following sections of this first chapter, I show how my reading of the free spirit works can be situated within Nietzsche's larger corpus, go into more detail about my thesis, and explain why my reading provides a better understanding of the free spirit works than other approaches currently on offer in Anglo-American secondary literature. In the next chapter, I then develop three types of evidence that support the dialectical reading: *ex post* evidence from Nietzsche's later writings; *ex ante* evidence from Nietzsche's works prior to the free spirit project; and contemporaneous evidence gleaned from Nietzsche's notes and letters as he was working on the free spirit project as well as from the free spirit works themselves.

One of the pieces of *ex post* evidence for the dialectical reading is Zarathustra's first speech, "On the Three Metamorphoses." As I have argued elsewhere (Meyer 2006) and will further document here, the three metamorphoses that Zarathustra describes can be mapped onto the free spirit works, and I have titled the three sections of this book, each of which consists of two chapters, accordingly. The first part of this book, which provides a reading of *Human* and its two appendices, *Assorted Opinions* and

The Wanderer, is labeled "The Ascetic Camel." The second part, which provides an account of *Daybreak* and the first three chapters of *The Gay Science*, is called "The Dragon-Slaying Lion." Finally, the third part, which provides an account of the fourth and fifth chapters of *The Gay Science* and their potential relationship to Nietzsche's later writings, is called "The Dionysian Child."[4]

In Part I, and so Chapters 3 and 4, I begin with an account of the ascetic quest for truth that initiates the free spirit project in *Human*. Here, Nietzsche attaches the free spirit project to the Enlightenment and embraces an ethos of scientific inquiry that – in a manner reminiscent of Descartes' *Meditations* – enables him to liberate his mind from false beliefs. The program executed in *Human* is ascetic because it is based on the idea that truth has an absolute value – and so it is more valuable than life – and it strives for an objectivity that eliminates the all-too-human illusions – those created by metaphysics, morality, religion, and art – that have shaped our respective life-worlds. It can be associated with the camel because the truths Nietzsche *qua* free spirit discovers – most notably truths that destroy a metaphysical tradition that had hitherto given meaning to human existence – reveal that suffering is essential to life and so force the free spirit to bear the burden of these discoveries. *Human* can also be associated with the camel because the latter half of the text consists of Nietzsche detaching himself, *qua* free spirit, from personal relationships and society. Thus, like the camel, Nietzsche finds himself at the end of the work a wanderer alone in the desert of knowledge (HH 638).

In the two appendices to *Human*, Nietzsche *qua* free spirit takes some small steps to confront and even ameliorate this suffering and despair in ways that nevertheless accept the critique of metaphysics executed in *Human*, and in Chapter 4 I document these transitions in the free spirit project. In *Assorted Opinions*, Nietzsche sketches and even affirms forms of art that align with, rather than oppose, the Enlightenment project he initiated in *Human*. In *The Wanderer*, Nietzsche adopts an Epicurean indifference toward metaphysical questions and instead turns his attention to a series of life-preserving strategies that focus on basics such as food, clothing, and shelter. In both cases, Nietzsche is thinking about art and life in ways that accept the results of *Human* and yet provide glimpses of

[4] The application of these metamorphoses to the free spirit works does not amount to a separate thesis. Instead, it is – assuming the association is right – supposed to be a helpful way to think about the transformations in the free spirit works. Thus, my thesis can still be true even if I am wrong to make this association.

a full-fledged return to art and the affirmation of life at the end of *The Gay Science*.

At the end of *The Wanderer*, Nietzsche declares that the free spirit stands in the midst of removing the chains of morality, religion, and metaphysics and curing the sickness they have caused (WS 350), and in Part II (Chapters 5 and 6) I look at how Nietzsche endeavors to remove these chains by way of his lion-like attack on the prejudices of morality in subsequent stages of the free spirit project. This attack begins in *Daybreak* and continues into the first three chapters of *The Gay Science*. In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche sets out to liberate the free spirit from a morality of custom that demands obedience and a Christian morality that praises selfless compassion for others. In so doing, he begins to speak of the free spirit's heroism and passion for knowledge. It is this passionate, heroic condition that sets the stage for the killing of God and so the slaying of the dragon of all values in the third chapter of *The Gay Science*. The death of God and the elimination of his shadow is a significant moment in these works because it liberates the free spirit from the morality of truth and so makes possible a rebirth of the life-affirming arts associated with Dionysus in the final stages of the free spirit project and beyond.

In Part III (Chapters 7 and 8) I show how the final two chapters of *The Gay Science* transition to two art forms associated with Dionysus, tragedy and comedy. The original 1882 edition of *The Gay Science* consisted of only four chapters, and so the final aphorism, which bears the title, "*incipit tragoedia*" or "let the tragedy begin," of the 1882 edition introduces the character Zarathustra and provides the opening lines of Nietzsche's next work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (GS 342). In contrast, the fifth chapter of *The Gay Science* was added to the 1887 edition of the work, and rather than transitioning to the tragedy of *Zarathustra*, there is reason to think – or so I suggest – that Nietzsche intends this second ending of *The Gay Science* to transition to the other mask of Dionysian theater, namely, comedy. This is because both the 1887 preface added to the work – the final preface of all the prefaces added to the free spirit works – and the final aphorisms of chapter five point not to "*incipit trageodia*" and so tragedy but rather to "*incipit parodia*" and so comedy (GS P 1). So understood, the 1887 edition of *The Gay Science* has a double ending that transitions to tragedy and comedy respectively.

Thus, what we find at the end of Nietzsche's dialectical *Bildungsroman* is not a rigorous system of theoretical philosophy, but rather the liberation of the "Dionysian" or "artistic" child and so the third of the three metamorphoses. Nietzsche had already given the figure of the child a central

place in his philosophy as early as *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT 24) and *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (PTAG 7), and so the free spirit works not only enact a dialectic between the quest for truth and the artistic affirmation of life that can already be found in *The Birth of Tragedy*, they also culminate in the emergence of a figure central to Nietzsche's earliest writings. The fact that Nietzsche returns at the end of the free spirit works to many of the positions he developed in his earliest writings is one good reason for reading the free spirit works as a consciously constructed dialectical *Bildungsroman*, and, as I explain in the next section, this approach can help make better sense of the relationship between Nietzsche's earliest writings and his later works.

The Free Spirit Works and Nietzsche's Oeuvre

Much of the scholarship over the past 50 years on Nietzsche in the Anglo-American context has been done with an eye to justifying his work to contemporary philosophers and the general public. Whereas Walter Kaufmann (1974) devoted his efforts to reaching the latter audience, disassociating Nietzsche from National Socialism in the Anglo-American context, more recent scholars have turned their attention to the former, endeavoring to show that Nietzsche has a number of theories that may be of interest to those working on contemporary philosophical issues. Although such work is important and can be philosophically fruitful, this approach puts aside various interpretive issues that surround Nietzsche's texts including, but not limited to, questions about their internal structure and the way in which they may or may not relate to each other.

This way of approaching Nietzsche's corpus has a long history and comes from diverse sources. In the German reception of Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger applied this method primarily to Nietzsche's unpublished notes or *Nachlass*, which, according to Heidegger, is the source of Nietzsche's true philosophy. In the Anglo-American reception, Danto began his work, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, with the following statement:

> Nietzsche's books give the appearance of having been assembled rather than composed. They are made up, in the main, of short, pointed aphorisms, and of essays seldom more than a few pages long; each volume is more like a treasury of the author's selections than like a book in its own right. Any given aphorism or essay might as easily have been placed in one volume as in another without much affecting the unity or structure of either. And the books themselves, except for their chronological ordering, do not exhibit any special structure as a corpus. (1965: 19)

By adopting this understanding of Nietzsche's texts, Danto effectively frees the interpreter from having to investigate the internal structure of a given work and the potential role it might play within Nietzsche's larger oeuvre, and this paves the way for what he thinks is the real task of the interpreter: making up for Nietzsche's "lack of architectonic talent" by constructing coherent philosophical theories from the otherwise chaotic collection of aphorisms, essays, and verse (1965: 22). Thus, in the work of both Danto and Richard Schacht (1983), we are presented with a series of chapters dedicated to explaining Nietzsche's views on topics such as philosophy, truth, knowledge, and morality.

This approach also presupposes that the interpreter comes to Nietzsche's texts with a set of questions or topics that she finds interesting. That is, the questions brought to Nietzsche's texts are often taken from contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, and Nietzsche's writings are read through such concerns. It is this point that links the Danto approach to the interpretations of Nietzsche offered more recently by scholars such as Brian Leiter (2002) and Maudemarie Clark (1990) which, in contrast to the efforts of Danto and Schacht, focuses more on Nietzsche's published works. Because Leiter is primarily (but not exclusively) interested in understanding Nietzsche's view of morality, he develops a reading of Nietzsche by focusing on what is arguably Nietzsche's *Hauptwerk* on this topic, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Because Clark is primarily (but not exclusively) interested in Nietzsche's views on truth, she begins her interpretation by using Nietzsche's early, unpublished essay "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" to generate a theoretical framework through which the rest of Nietzsche's published works and his development can be understood.[5]

Common to Danto and Schacht, on the one hand, and Clark and Leiter, on the other hand, is the view that our interests, not Nietzsche's, guide the selection of relevant passages and texts for interpretation. It is because *we* are interested in theories of morality that the *Genealogy* takes on such significance – Nietzsche himself has very little to say about the *Genealogy* in *Ecce Homo*. Similarly, it is because *we* are interested in Nietzsche's views on truth that "On Truth and Lies" takes on such significance, even though Nietzsche never published the work and rarely mentions it in his later writings. In this spirit, Clark (1990) has used the

[5] Clark's most recent study (co-authored with Dudrick [2012]) of *Beyond Good and Evil* further attests to her interest in focusing on Nietzsche's published texts.