

BOOKS

Cold light fails to illuminate the truth

Euny Hong-Koral finds that the more we learn about Nietzsche's interior life, the less clear are the links with his philosophy

ZARATHUSTRA'S SECRET: The Interior Life of Friedrich Nietzsche

by Joachim Köhler
trans. Ronald Taylor

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Until the second world war, philosophers approached their discipline as a series of self-contained, internally logical systems. Only dilettantes would bother to learn about the lives of the philosophers. But in the wake of the Holocaust, it seemed that philosophy had failed in its task of making sense of the world.

Worse still, the likes of Kant and Nietzsche were evoked repeatedly in the Nuremberg trials, by both defence and prosecution, as possible causes for the rise of National Socialism. The philosophy community faced a choice: evolve, or be proven useless. One legacy of this sober self-chastening is the philosophical biography.

The problem with this type of scholarship is that it is neither fish nor fowl. It is not philosophy, nor is it strictly biography. Determining what constitutes valid proof for such a work becomes a hairy matter – the standards of evidence used in historiography are different from those used to make a psychological diagnosis of a philosopher, and both these are, in turn,

different from the requirements of a philosophical argument. The author must overcome the temptation to dodge conveniently behind whichever of these three beasts seem best able to protect him.

Joachim Köhler makes little attempt to avoid this pitfall. His central tenet – the “secret” referred to in the book’s title – is that Nietzsche adopted the alter

ego of a priapic, exuberant Zarathustra as a way to express his own repressed homosexuality. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in other words, presented not a philosophical system, but a map of Nietzsche’s unconscious.

Köhler writes: “Hiding behind the elevated biblical diction lies the reality of the physical experience. Nietzsche strove to convert the experiences of his tortured body into a cogent doctrine.” Yet he fails to demonstrate why his subject’s demons are of especial interest, or how they gave rise to his ideas. The more he tells us about Nietzsche’s interior life, the less clear he makes the links to Nietzsche’s philosophy.

Nietzsche always claimed, not entirely facetiously, that he was possessed – used as an earthly vessel – by Zarathustra (or

Zoroaster), the prophet for whom the ancient Persian religion is named. The text of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in fact, is supposedly a gospel dictation of this holy encounter.

The book’s early promise to use homosexuality as an interpretive key quickly wears thin, and the episodes of Nietzsche’s life relating to his homosexuality fail to rise above mere gossip. One example is Köhler’s speculation about the “real” reason for the infamous falling-out between Nietzsche and the Wagners. The commonly accepted lore among philosophers and opera fans alike is that Nietzsche objected to Wagner’s *Parsifal*, deeming the ending too feebly moralistic. Not so, claims Köhler. The true story is that the Wagners wanted Nietzsche to sever ties with the

latter’s Jewish mentor, Paul Rée.

When Nietzsche refused, Wagner sent a letter to Nietzsche’s physician, voicing his suspicion that Nietzsche was a masturbator (in those days, synonymous with

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homosexuality and paedophilia). Köhler is clearly tickled with his own theory. “How does one recognise a pervert? Did Nietzsche have stains on his trousers?” he asks.

The book culminates in an

exposition of the theory of eternal recurrence, which Nietzsche had borrowed from the Greeks. In *Zarathustra*, the concept is explained using an opaque metaphor of a snake falling asleep in someone’s mouth, but a clearer definition appears in one of Nietzsche’s earlier works, *The Gay Science* (1882): “What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence.’”

The theory might also be

dubbed “The Unbearable Heaviness of Being”. All actions, no matter how trivial, should be undertaken as though of cosmic import.

Köhler offers a beacon of hope in the final chapter, proclaiming what the reader has been thinking all along: “There is an unbridgeable gulf between a sudden vision and an idea that has to stand up to scrutiny in the cold light of day.” But instead of providing the “cold light” he has promised, he hides behind additional layers of symbols. Nietzsche, he explains, had a lifelong captivation with Achilles’ shield, described by Homer in the *Iliad* as a weapon “five layers thick” and bedecked with all the constellations in the sky, symbolising the cycles of life. Lovely image, but what of it?

Köhler’s manifesto: “It was not the recurrence as depicted on the shield that persuaded [Nietzsche of eternal recurrence], but the recurrence of the shield itself.” Put differently, Zarathustra’s secret is not so much a matter of eternal recurrence as a case of repetition-compulsion.

Awkward squad finds god

This story of key

At a debate in London last week, the writer and journalist Christopher



NEW IN PAPERBACK

Pawn in their game

When Marie Antoinette was guillotined in 1793, public reaction was joyful. “It is fallen at last, the head of the haughty Austrian woman gorged with the blood of the people,” read one of the many congratulatory petitions sent to the Revolutionary Tribunal. The hatred of the former queen had reached such a pitch that anything, no matter how lurid, was believed of her: that she sexually abused her son and took part in drunken orgies, that she conspired with foreign powers and so on.

Antoinette gave birth to her first child she did so in front of various nosy onlookers.

Another feature of the court was its rigidly hierarchical nature. Everyone was assigned a position according to status, even when it came to such mundane activities as dressing the queen. On one occasion she was left shivering naked while grandees solemnly passed her clothing to each other en route to the regal body. The French political system was similarly sclerotic, although disaffection was generally