



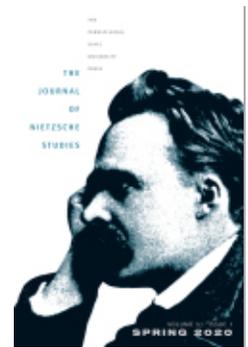
PROJECT MUSE®

Nietzsche's Search for Philosophy: On the Middle Writings
by Keith Ansell-Pearson, and: *Nietzsche's Free Spirit*
Works: A Dialectical Reading by Matthew Meyer (review)

Paul Franco

The Journal of Nietzsche Studies, Volume 52, Issue 1, Spring 2020, pp. 139-144
(Review)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/751029>

‘forgiveness’” (N VI 1, p. 117). The underlying point is the same: ready forgiveness is not an option for “profound” people. Colli and Montinari give this as a letter in *KSB* 6:301–02, but the link with 4[91] is hidden, as it is for readers of this volume, and that seems to me a loss.

Still, such points are minor compared to the benefit of having Nietzsche’s *Nachlass* of this period in a well-presented English edition. Readers will look forward to the promised sequel, taking them beyond *Z* to the groundwork of *BGE*. Also in store are the even more interesting 1881–82 fragments, which the publisher tells us will be combined with a new translation of *GS* in a single mammoth volume. Meanwhile, Nietzsche scholars have many reasons to be grateful to Paul S. Loeb and David F. Tinsley: for their meticulous scholarship, their literary skill, and, not least, their exemplary consideration for the reader. Their work in this volume sets a benchmark for future English translations of Nietzsche’s writing.

Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Nietzsche’s Search for Philosophy:
On the Middle Writings.*

London: Bloomsbury, 2018. xi + 181 pp.

ISBN: 978-147425469-4 (Hardcover); 978-1474254700 (Paper). Hardcover, £65.00; Paper, £21.99.

Matthew Meyer, *Nietzsche’s Free Spirit Works: A Dialectical
Reading.*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xi + 275 pp.

ISBN: 9781108474177. Hardcover, \$99.99.

Reviewed by Paul Franco, Bowdoin College

There was a time in the not too distant past when one would be obliged to begin a review like this with a comment about the relative neglect of Nietzsche’s middle works, *HH*, *D*, and *GS*. That time now seems to be

well behind us. In recent years, there has been a spate of scholarly books (not to mention articles) devoted to these works, including Ruth Abbey's *Nietzsche's Middle Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Michael Ure's *Nietzsche's Therapy: Self-Cultivation in the Middle Works* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2008), Jonathan Cohen's *Science, Culture, and Free Spirits: A Study of Nietzsche's Human, All Too Human* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2010), Monika Langer's *Nietzsche's Gay Science* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), and my own *Nietzsche's Enlightenment: The Free-Spirit Trilogy of the Middle Period* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). The two books under review here are welcome additions to this growing list of books on Nietzsche's middle period, and both shed fresh light on it. At the same time, they reflect two very different approaches to the interpretation of Nietzsche's notoriously elusive texts.

Let me start with Ansell-Pearson's *Nietzsche's Search for Philosophy*. A prolific scholar of Nietzsche's philosophy, Ansell-Pearson argues that Nietzsche's middle writings are of particular interest because they are "less dogmatic and essentialist" than his later writings" (1), and because they contain some of the "richest moments and insights" in Nietzsche's search for philosophy (14). Ansell-Pearson's specific claim is that "an ethos of Epicurean enlightenment pervades Nietzsche's middle writings," an ethos that deploys the tools of reason to enable human beings to cultivate worthwhile lives and deliver them from irrational fears and anxieties (3–4). An important source for Ansell-Pearson's interpretation comes from *WS*, where Nietzsche speaks favorably of Epicurus as the inventor of a "heroic-idyllic mode of philosophizing" that finds visual expression in Poussin's classical landscapes, in which there is "nothing of desire or expectation, no looking before and behind" (*WS* 295).

HH and its two supplements, *AOM* and *WS*, provide perhaps the strongest evidence for Ansell-Pearson's Epicurean interpretation of Nietzsche's middle writings. It is in these works that Nietzsche extols the moderation that comes from the free-spirited quest for knowledge, maintaining that "under the influence of purifying knowledge," the free spirit would "live among men [. . .] as in nature, without praising, blaming, contending, gazing contentedly, as though at a spectacle, upon many things for which one formerly felt only fear" (*HH* 34; see also *HH* 107). This quote comes from the original, 1878 *HH*, a work that Ansell-Pearson sees as heavily informed by scientific positivism and that he sharply distinguishes from the later supplements, in which the "ethical project of seeking 'spiritual-physical health and maturity'" becomes

more prominent (8, 17–18). I'm not sure the distinction Ansell-Pearson draws here is quite as clear-cut as he suggests. *HH* is only crudely described as a positivistic work, and it is animated—as the quote above suggests—by profoundly ethical, spiritual, and cultural concerns. No doubt there is development from *HH* to *AOM* and *WS*—after all, Nietzsche is experimenting with a whole new way of thinking and writing—but this development is much messier and more complicated than Ansell-Pearson makes it out to be.

Ansell-Pearson continues his investigation of Nietzsche's middle-period search for a renovated Epicurean philosophy with an analysis of *D*, which he describes as a “path-breaking work and an exercise in modern emancipation” as well as the “most neglected text in Nietzsche's corpus” (10). His analysis focuses on the themes of experimentation, the passion for knowledge, and Nietzsche's ethics of the care of the self (with comparisons to Foucault). It is not always clear, however, how all this connects with the Epicurean theme of Ansell-Pearson's interpretation. He claims that Epicurus is one of the heroes of *D* (69), but there is only one substantive reference to Epicurus in the book, and the emphasis on the passion and tragedy of knowledge in *D* seems to have little in common with Epicurean *ataraxia*. This is not to say that Ansell-Pearson does not have many insightful things to say about *D*, only that it is hard to connect them with his larger thesis about the ethos of Epicurean enlightenment that allegedly pervades Nietzsche's middle writings.

This problem becomes even more acute when he turns his attention to *GS*, a work in which science is intimately bound up with pain (see, e.g., *GS* 12), and the free spirit's quest for knowledge culminates in the death of God. In the chapters he devotes to this work, Ansell-Pearson is concerned to unpack the meaning of Nietzsche's cheerfulness and explore the “rich conceptions of pleasure and happiness” found there (135). He also wants to tie all of this back to the master theme of Epicurean enlightenment. To this end, he not surprisingly offers a detailed analysis of the aphorism titled “Epicurus.” In this aphorism, Nietzsche begins by stating that he is proud that he experiences “the character of Epicurus quite differently from perhaps everybody else”—a signal that he understands his “Epicureanism” to be radically different from anything that conventionally goes by that name. He then goes on to say that the happiness Epicurus experiences while gazing at the sea “could only be invented by a man who was suffering continually” (*GS* 45). Ansell-Pearson interprets this aphorism in conventional Epicurean terms, arguing that what Epicurus is suffering from is the anxiety of

existence and that the task of philosophy is to conquer this anxiety in order to achieve the serene contentment of *ataraxia*. This seems to me to underestimate the role of suffering in Nietzsche's conception of Epicurean happiness. The suffering of the free-spirited knower is not something to be conquered or escaped; rather, it is continually experienced by the philosopher as part of the quest for knowledge, allowing—and perhaps even demanding—from time to time momentary respites in which he delights at the surface of things (but see *GS* 107 and *P*:4).

There are few instances of such sustained analysis of individual aphorisms in Ansell-Pearson's book, and there is virtually no attempt to connect the individual aphorisms of each text into larger patterns of meaning—what Nietzsche referred to as *Gedanken-Kette* or “chains of thought” (*KSB* 6:223; *KSA* 11:37[5]). This contrasts sharply with Matthew Meyer's interpretive approach in *Nietzsche's Free Spirit Works*. Meyer not only sees the individual aphorisms of each of Nietzsche's texts from the middle period as forming a coherent whole, but also sees the texts themselves, taken together, as forming a single literary unit. The thesis he defends throughout his book is that the five works (counting the original *HH* and its two supplements as three different works) that compose Nietzsche's middle period “are best understood as a consciously constructed dialectical *Bildungsroman*” (3). Contrary to the developmental approach to the free spirit works (which Meyer associates with my book), which sees Nietzsche as gradually working out the position he finally arrives at in *GS* without foreseeing it from the outset, Meyer argues that Nietzsche knew when he wrote *HH* exactly where he was going to end up and adopted erroneous positions on his way to that fore-known conclusion as part of a consciously designed dialectic. This dialectic consists essentially of the self-overcoming (*Selbstaufhebung*) of the will to truth, in which Nietzsche moves from the ascetic quest for scientific truth in *HH* to the aesthetic justification of existence in Book IV of *GS*.

This is obviously a bold thesis, and Meyer defends it ingeniously. He is well aware that especially the “consciously constructed” aspect of his thesis will strike many readers as implausible from the get-go, and therefore he summons an impressive battery of evidence—from the compositional history of the free spirit works to Nietzsche's retrospective comments on them—to render it less strange. Perhaps the most important piece of evidence for his interpretation—and from my point of view the most questionable—is the claim that the dialectical self-overcoming of truth described in the free spirit works had already been anticipated in *BT* and

Nietzsche's other early writings. According to Meyer, "*The Birth of Tragedy* contains the basic framework for much of Nietzsche's later philosophy and so it is the *sine qua non* for understanding Nietzsche's larger project" (12). In other words, not only do the five works of the middle period constitute a single literary unit, but all of Nietzsche's works from *BT* through *Z* form a single chain centered on the aesthetic justification of existence and the rebirth of tragedy. To do justice to such a grand claim would require many more pages than this short review allows, but I would suggest that it problematically conflates Nietzsche's position on the relationship between art and science in *BT* with that found in *GS*, not to mention *Z*. Whereas in the former work a Kantian self-critique of scientific knowledge leads to the restoration of the supremacy of tragic art, in *GS* Nietzsche envisages a blending of artistic energies and scientific thinking "to form a higher organic system in relation to which scholars, physicians, artists, and legislators—as we know them at present—would have to look like paltry relics" (*GS* 113).

Clearly, the ultimate test of Meyer's thesis lies in his readings of the free spirit works themselves. He begins with *HH*, which, like Ansell-Pearson, he distinguishes sharply from its two supplements. According to Meyer, the original *HH* is animated by an unrestrained and absolute will to truth that is reflected in its rejection of any sort of significant role for art. In this respect, *HH* conflicts with both Nietzsche's earlier and later writings. What redeems the work in Meyer's eyes is that it represents a consciously adopted erroneous position that is destined to be overcome in the unfolding dialectic of the free spirit works. A shift can already be discerned in *AOM*, which begins to question the absolute value of truth and to resuscitate the value of art. This trend continues in *WS*, which concerns itself with the "closest things" rather than the "first and last things" of *HH*.

As with Ansell-Pearson, I find this sharp distinction between the original *HH* and its two supplements problematic for several reasons. In the first place, it rests on an overly simplified reading of *HH* that attributes to it an absolute and uncritical commitment to the value of truth as well as a denial of any positive role for error and subjectivity. Here it suffices to refer to the title of one aphorism from the text: "Error regarding life necessary to life" (*HH* 33; see also 16, 20 29–32, 251). Second, there are numerous echoes of the original *HH* in the two supplements: for example, with respect to the metaphysical belief in opposite values, the egoistic basis of action, the error of free will, and the detrimental effects of Christianity, romantic–Wagnerian art, revolutionary politics, and nationalism. Third, I do not see any conflict

between Nietzsche's critique of the metaphysical preoccupation with "first and last things" in *HH* and his turn to the "closest things" in *WS*. Again, this is not to say there is no development going on between these three writings, especially with respect to Nietzsche's conception of art, but it is not nearly as neat and nonporous as Meyer's dialectical reading requires.

AOM and *WS* represent only the beginning of the dialectical over-coming of the will to truth in the free spirit works, according to Meyer. This dialectic is carried further in *D* and consummated in *GS*. In *D* and the first three books of *GS*, the free spirit adopts the role of the no-saying, dragon-slaying lion, the second of the three metamorphoses of the spirit laid out in *Z*. Here we find Nietzsche's critique of moral prejudices—which, as we know, was inaugurated in *HH*—and the beginning of his revaluation of values. This stage of the free spirit dialectic comes to a climax with the madman's announcement of the death of God in the third book of *GS*. The free spirit has still not entirely emancipated itself from the ascetic quest for truth, however. Meyer argues that this occurs only in Book IV of *GS*, in which art once again triumphs over science, paving the way for the tragedy of *Z* and the comedy of the post-*Z* works. Here again, it would be difficult to do justice to the complexity of Meyer's argument and the ambition of his claims. I can only reiterate that by having Nietzsche come back at the end of his career to the aesthetic justification of existence he first articulated in *BT* seems to underestimate the crucial role of knowledge, truth, and science in his mature outlook. It makes Nietzsche seem more like a conventional romantic thinker than the philosopher who, in his final work, praised Zarathustra for being "more truthful than any other thinker" and for positing "truthfulness as the highest virtue" (*EH* "Destiny" 3).

My reservations about some of Meyer's and Ansell-Pearson's specific arguments in no way suggest that they have not written genuinely thought-provoking books; indeed, just the opposite. I have no doubt that these books will stimulate productive discussions about the meaning and significance of Nietzsche's middle works for many years to come.