
Rüdiger Safranski. *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*. Trans. Shelley Frisch. NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002. 412p.

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Given the glut of Nietzsche studies that have filled bookshelves over the years, one cannot help but ask the question: why yet another book on the most written-about philosopher in the twentieth century? Granted, Nietzsche's multifarious ideas and styles naturally invite a host of interpretations, whether from a philosophical, literary, political, or—as has been the case in recent decades—poststructuralist perspective. Nietzsche's life, as amply demonstrated by several (psycho-)biographies, was no less rich in complexity and detail: he was an accomplished philologist, mediocre composer, not to mention philosopher out of season; he traveled incessantly, suffered from various physical ailments before his final collapse into madness, had personal contact with key intellectual figures of the nineteenth century (e.g. Wagner, Burckhardt, Lou Andreas-Salomé); and in terms of his sexuality (a hot topic of late), he was a complete enigma—even to Freud. It is safe to say that nearly every aspect of Nietzsche's life and work has been chronicled and explicated by scholars, philosophers, and literary theorists of all camps. So the question remains: why another book on Nietzsche?

In his concluding remarks, author Rüdiger Safranski offers an indirect answer: "Nietzsche's philosophical biography is a story without an end and will need to continue being written" (349). This notion of "philosophical biography" is central to the conception of the book, which delves into Nietzsche's life only insofar as it informs his thought. As Safranski points out, Nietzsche's "life was a testing ground for his thinking" (28) and hence cannot be treated separately from his work. Safranski has already proven himself a master of this philosophical-biographical genre, having written similarly constructed studies of Schopenhauer and Heidegger (available in English as *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy* and *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*). In his latest effort, planned to coincide with the centennial of Nietzsche's death (the original German version appeared in 2000), Safranski relies not only on texts published during the philosopher's lifetime but gives equal interpretive weight to posthumously released fragments, letters, and journals. Through this multi-textual approach, Safranski effectively illuminates the existential urgency of Nietzsche's ideas, which were after all conceived more in artistic passion than philosophic contemplation.

The overall strength of Safranski's *Nietzsche* lies in its near perfect mesh of analytic and synthetic observations. The author, in other words, deftly breaks down

Nietzschean concepts for even the lay reader's understanding and places them within the broader cultural framework of nineteenth-century Europe. Moreover, a third narrative strand often enters the mix: Safranski traces the genesis of important notions (e.g., the will to power, eternal recurrence, and the *Übermensch*) from their first to final appearance in Nietzsche's writings. This three-pronged approach—analytic, synthetic, and genetic—helps create a more totalized vision of Nietzsche than can be found in most other full-length studies.

As for its specific content, Safranski's book explores numerous issues that preoccupied Nietzsche throughout his short-lived yet highly productive writing career: morality, Hellenism, the Dionysian, art vs. science, self-configuration, decadence, the death of God, will to power, etc. The author also devotes a great deal of attention to figures who influenced Nietzsche's thought, foremost among them Socrates, Democritus, Schopenhauer, and Wagner. These discussions, though highly informative for the non-specialist, rarely shed new scholarly light on Nietzsche's philosophical conceptions and their sources. This is not to say that Safranski is lacking in novel insights. He gives fascinating accounts of Nietzsche's so-called "dividualism," "bicameral system of culture," and analyses of consciousness that paved the way for phenomenology in the twentieth century. Most important for the underlying theme of the book is Nietzsche's notion of "incorporation." According to this principle, we ought to internalize our ideas about the world and live by them as if they were our deepest convictions. Ultimately, the question whether Nietzsche himself fully succeeded in this existential endeavor remains open to speculation, but Safranski leaves no doubt that the lines between Nietzsche's life and work, biography and philosophy, are often blurred.

If there is a problem with Safranski's book, it lies precisely in a crucial dilemma facing all Nietzsche scholarship: on what grounds is a new study of Nietzsche justified? Must it always serve up fresh findings and conclusions, or does a unique manner of presentation suffice? Safranski has in a sense capitalized on a new genre of sorts, namely the "philosophical biography" mentioned above. A work of this kind eschews such scholarly and potentially pedantic conventions as footnotes and continuous appraisals of secondary studies. Instead, it reaches out to a wider audience through its organization and style. The main body, at just over 300 pages, is divided into manageable chapters which, not unlike a baroque novel, feature headings previewing the topics to be covered. This lends an almost aphoristic and of course Nietzschean structure to the text: the contents of each chapter are broken down into smaller units, no paragraph exceeds its limit, and the reader moves briskly along. With regard to style, Safranski's narration is free of theoretical jargon and agendas; as an exceptionally knowledgeable scholar of philosophy, he sim-

ply seeks to give the fullest picture possible of Nietzsche and his times. The prose, much like Nietzsche's own, is lucid and vigorous. Shelley Frisch deserves credit for her outstanding translations from the German—both of Safranski's text and the countless Nietzsche citations that she has rendered into English herself.

Due to its stylistic and conceptual clarity, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* is an immensely enjoyable read and recommended for specialists and newcomers alike. The former will devour it in one or two sittings, undoubtedly gaining some new angles on Nietzsche's thought. The latter will find a superb introduction to the life and work of perhaps the most misunderstood and controversial philosopher of all time. Both groups of readers should appreciate the concluding chapter, which provides a convenient overview of Nietzsche's widespread influence in the twentieth century, from the life philosophy of Bergson and Simmel to Foucault. The final pages contain an outline of Nietzsche's life as well as a bibliography of primary and secondary works available in English. Given the vital role that Nietzsche has come to play in literary studies, the curious reader cannot afford to miss Rüdiger Safranski's philosophical biography, which is as readable as it is instructive. ✨