

Friedrich Nietzsche. *Writings from the Late Notebooks*. Edited by Rüdiger Bittner and translated by Kate Sturge. Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. xliii + 286. ISBN: 0521008875.

As so often with his published texts, the experience of reading Nietzsche's notebooks is at once mesmerising and infuriating. One is in the presence of a thinker who, on the one hand, meditates deeply on fundamental issues in philosophy and psychology but who, on the other, refuses to be pinned down. The fact that Nietzsche's style is so elusive can account for the enormously disparate interpretations of his work and it is no surprise that his notebooks have been read in the most extreme fashion. The notebooks have a chequered history having been variously touted as the crowning achievement of his philosophy, and as not repaying the effort of reading.

Both of these views have had their day. By now it *should* be a commonplace that although the notebooks are flawed, they do provide the reader with an insight into Nietzsche's mature thought. Whilst a great deal of the material is fragmentary and obscure, there is much here that sheds light on the work that Nietzsche *did* decide to publish. Thus a new English translation of the notebooks is welcome to anybody seriously interested in understanding Nietzsche. Until now, the English speaking world has had to remain content with *The Will to Power*; a selection from the notebooks translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. The primary defect of *The Will to Power* is its somewhat arbitrary rearrangement of some of Nietzsche's notes. Whilst *The Will to Power* organises the notes thematically, *Writings from the Late Notebooks (WLN)* stays truer to the original texts, the arrangement being strictly chronological. But this raises a difficulty. The editor presents us with no easy method of cross-referencing between the two editions. This is a shame, since it effectively prevents us from being able to compare translations of specific passages. Furthermore, whilst there is material printed in *WLN* that does not appear in *The Will to Power*, the converse is also true. As a result, *WLN* cannot be seen as a replacement of the earlier translation. One last quibble with the editor. The material in *WLN* has been selected according to its "philosophical import", and this apparently means, "neglecting a number of themes to which Nietzsche devoted some attention in his writing, like that of men and women, or of 'peoples and fatherlands' ... To the best of

my understanding, Nietzsche had nothing of interest to say on either of these matters...His views on women and on Germans, say, suffer from reckless generalising; to be more precise they are chauvinist. As such they may yield some interest for the historian of ideas, showing how deep these prejudices go in the late nineteenth century, even in an individual of so critical a cast of mind as Nietzsche. For someone interested in the topics themselves, Nietzsche's writings offer no enlightenment" (p.xv). But, of course, one of Nietzsche's main objectives is to undermine our right to the kind of liberal moralising that drives this suppression of material; to "subject moral valuations themselves to a critique" 2[191]. As such, the Introduction betrays a curious misunderstanding of Nietzsche's attack on western morality.

What, then, can we learn from reading *WLN*? We are presented with notes on a wide variety of subjects, but there are certain recurrent themes. A familiar theme concerns the relationship between Christianity, Western morality and what is natural (see, for example, 2[13], 10[191] and 9[86]). Another is Nietzsche's extreme scepticism towards the concepts of *self*, *identity*, and *cause* and *effect* (See 35[35], 40[15] and 2[139] respectively). Of particular interest are Nietzsche's views on nihilism and the future of European culture (see 9[35] and 11[99]). As is expected, Nietzsche subjects the virtues to a relentless critique. His attitude towards, for instance, modesty (7[6]) and altruism (14[29]) are not surprising, perhaps more so is his discussion of love (14[120]) which is, at times, almost rhapsodic. The theme about which I would like to offer a few minor comments, however, is that thorny question concerning Nietzsche's remarks on *truth*.

Nietzsche is sometimes interpreted as having a pragmatic account of truth. In support of this view one might point to passages such as, "the criterion of truth lies in the increase of the feeling of power" 34[264]. But this view is only ambiguously supported in the notebooks. Nietzsche frequently gives voice to an opposing standpoint, "something can be a condition of life and *nevertheless be false*" 35[35]. Indeed, there is at least one note in which it seems that Nietzsche is genuinely undecided, "'However strongly something is believed, that is not a criterion of truth.' But what is truth? Perhaps a kind of belief which has become a condition of life? In that case, its strength would indeed be a criterion." 40[15].

Nietzsche is also sometimes interpreted as claiming that there is no such thing as truth, that there are only interpretations. On the other hand, Nietzsche seems to be perfectly happy to make truth claims, regardless of his ‘denial of truth’. A great deal of effort has been expended, by analytically minded Nietzsche scholars, to make good this apparent inconsistency; one which looms large in *WLN*. For example, in support of the ‘denial of truth’ view, we find statements such as, “*The tempter*. There are many different eyes. The sphinx too has eyes: and consequently there are many different truths, and consequently there is no truth.” 34[230] or, “The concept of truth is *absurd*” 14[122]. On the other hand, Nietzsche often freely uses the concept of truth, “All questions of *strength*:...how far to approach *truth* and contemplate its most dubious aspects?” 10[87]. Indeed, a thoroughgoing denial of truth would appear to be self-undermining – if nothing is true, neither is the claim that nothing is true. I suggest that we can make a limited sense of this situation by taking seriously Nietzsche’s deeply ambivalent view as regards nihilism. Sometimes Nietzsche speaks as a nihilist, sometimes as an opponent of nihilism. We understand something of his complex view of truth when we read that, “A philosopher finds recreation differently and in different things: he finds recreation, for example, in nihilism. The belief that truth does not exist, the nihilists’ belief, is a great stretching of the limbs for someone who, as a warrior of knowledge, is constantly at struggle with so many ugly truths. For the truth is ugly.” 11[108].