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## REVIEW

**Daniel T. O'Hara, *The Art of Reading as a Way of Life: On Nietzsche's Truth* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009), ISBN: 978-0810126220**

Nietzsche's work leaves itself open to the possibility for wild interpretation and manipulation. The literature on Nietzsche reveals that a large number of scholars have done just that. According to Foucault his own use of many of Nietzsche's methods and techniques means that he was not loyal to the work of Nietzsche but rather inspired by it, saying in an interview that "the only valid tribute to thought such as Nietzsche's is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest. And if the commentators say that I am being unfaithful to Nietzsche, that is absolutely of no interest."<sup>1</sup> This is a much disputed assertion and concerns the question on how we should approach Nietzsche's work: Should it be done along the lines of conventional scholarship, or rather in a postmodern fashion according to which the reader is a kind of "hermeneutic guerrilla" who seeks more than just the meaning of the text? What makes this debate so interesting is that the content and form of Nietzsche's work seems to leave itself open to interpretation of a kind that differs from the way in which most philosophical texts are interpreted. However, there is a dilemma with regards to the interpretation of Nietzsche's work and it is thus: To undertake normal scholarship can lead one to become dogmatic and overly faithful to Nietzsche's text, which almost certainly is not what the spirit of his work would expect of us; on the other hand, to engage in the so-called guerrilla warfare that is characteristic of postmodern interpretation can lead one to simply search for fodder in Nietzsche's work that supports one's own arguments and standpoints, resulting in a gross misinterpretation of his work. Foucault seems to opt for the second extreme in his approach to Nietzsche's work.

In light of the above debate we are left with the question as to how to go about reading Nietzsche (as well as what exactly it means to be faithful or not to Nietzsche). This then is the focus of Daniel T. O'Hara's book entitled *The Art of Reading as a Way of Life*, and he reveals that this question expands into the general question of how to go about the practice of reading itself. O'Hara addresses these questions by undertaking a close and careful yet experimental reading of certain key texts written by Nietzsche. O'Hara provides an instance of the straightforward scholarship mentioned above in chapter 2 of his book ("Experiments in

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "Prison Talk," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*, edited by Colin Gordon (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press), 53-54.

Creative Reading: The Cambridge Nietzsche”) before he launches into a careful but experimental reading of Nietzsche in later chapters. O’Hara is critical of the way in which Nietzsche’s works are introduced in the recently published series of Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (17), which he sees as characteristic of the manner in which Nietzsche is approached in much of the Anglo-American tradition (mainly through an analytic lens). O’Hara says that such scholarship can provide interesting commentaries but that it often results in mere apologies for the “unphilosophical” nature of Nietzsche’s work. These apologies skirt around some of the key characteristics of Nietzsche’s work, namely its invitation to experiment with interpretation and its sheer untranslatable nature, which O’Hara argues for in the case of certain texts such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. (66)

O’Hara reveals in his reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that a combination of careful scholarship and experimental interpretation can be incorporated in reading Nietzsche’s works. This combination reveals the intricacies attached to reading Nietzsche’s texts, which in some cases also seem to be a reading of the persona of Nietzsche himself, i.e., to read Nietzsche through the lens of Nietzsche. O’Hara says that “Nietzsche... can be seen as being the best reader of Nietzsche” (16) and therefore we should enlist Nietzsche’s own methods and techniques when we engage with his texts. What interestingly comes to the fore here is that Nietzsche was a close reader of his own life, which O’Hara demonstrates in a number of readings of texts in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in chapter 4 (“Nietzsche’s Book for All and None: The Singularity of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*”). The imagery and emotions of events from Nietzsche’s own life found its way into *the book*. These events that appear in *it* show how truth comes to manifest itself in life in a moment of revelation, i.e., the so-called truth-event that Badiou speaks of. O’Hara makes use of this idea of Badiou to show that the identity of Zarathustra, and thus also Nietzsche, remains an open question (72). The core of the figure of Zarathustra is to show that certain events in life are experienced but not understood because they are singular in their nature, and therefore it is up to us to interpret what they *could* mean.

O’Hara reveals in a similar vein in chapter 3 (“Nietzsche’s Passion in *The Gay Science*: An Experiment in Creative Reading”) and chapter 5 (“*Ecce Homo*: Nietzsche’s Two Natures”) that a reading of Nietzsche can be done both in the close fashion of scholarship and the more experimental mode of postmodern interpretation. In this manner one finds a creative reading of Nietzsche’s work bringing to the fore new insights and meanings not just about the text, but also about Nietzsche and indeed about the reader him- or herself. O’Hara invites us to this kind of reading when he says that “Nietzsche is both his own guinea pig and, potentially, depending on how we read him as he puts at risk his intellectual life, ours.” (38) This gives us an idea of what is at work in O’Hara’s book: He attempts to demonstrate that Nietzsche invites us to a creative as well as experimental reading when we approach his works. However, this invitation could even be further extended and we could use *ourselves* as guinea pigs in creative reading in two ways: firstly, in the way that we go about reading texts, and secondly in the way we go about reading our own lives.

The question as to how we need to read our own lives is one of the driving points behind Nietzsche's work and indeed that of O'Hara's book, namely the problem of the modern subject. The modern subject is a complex and sometimes unknown figure to us. This figure has arisen from what O'Hara refers to as the modern post-Enlightenment "culture of representation" in which one finds all differences reduced "to measurable, calculable, and marketable ones, under the global hegemony of late capitalism." (52) This culture of representation demands many questions of our desires, which provides for an interesting situation because in Nietzsche's view the human body already is such a complex of competing drives and forces (as pointed out by O'Hara on a number of occasions, 14-15, 20-22, 38). The problem of the modern subject is thus: Either one becomes overly subjectivized in face of all the pressures from the culture of representation (therefore a singular mix of different influences and cultures), or one becomes strangely without identity because the complex of competing drives and forces (that the body is) finds itself confused. The result of this is a kind of madness and it reveals how critical identity formation is in the modern world. This problem underlies the "dialectic of enlightenment" that Adorno and Horkheimer proclaimed: Techno-science and administrative bureaucracy brings progress at the cost of our own humanity. This is a problem that many after Nietzsche have wrestled with, such as Foucault, but also Marcel, Sartre, Levinas and many others. We find ourselves faced with a dilemma in everyday life: Form an identity based on what the culture of representation provides but at the cost of our own individuality, or resist this culture at the cost of becoming mad (or at least being abnormal in the view of society). The figure of Zarathustra as an enigma is representative of the figure of the modern subject, which is part of what O'Hara calls "the meta-historical and global drama of modern theoretical man." (96) We have all the tools at our disposal to come to know ourselves and yet at bottom our identities remain open to question and crisis. To revert to the famous assertion of Nietzsche, "we are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge."<sup>2</sup> Or as O'Hara puts it following Nietzsche, "we work in the dark, largely, and do what we can, if we are smart; the art of reading as a way of life is our passion, and our passion at times is too difficult to tell from madness."(9)

O'Hara reveals how reading is also knowing and says that "reading is an act of knowing that is the result of a contest of drives in, between, and among the writer, the text unconsciously expressing the drives, and the reader." (39) This is a key insight and reveals that our reading of texts, of ourselves and of life is a delicate process and should be both careful and experimental. The need for creative and experimental reading is great but this kind of reading can so easily result in madness, hence the need for a careful and measured reading. However, in face of the "death of God" (so key to Nietzsche's work) and the consequent "death of Man" (so influential in Foucault's work) knowledge is all we have at our disposal in coming to know ourselves, and hence reading (as knowing) becomes an important and crucial "way of life" because it is at the heart of our lives as modern subjects. This must be said with a certain amount of trepidation, for O'Hara points out that "the art of criticism, of reading and self-

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*. Translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 15.

reading, what I am calling ‘the art of reading as a way of life,’ can hardly flourish” in the conditions of modern society where even the academic profession is subject to the “late capitalistic game of the bottom line ... [and] the measure of [numeric] value.” (5) Therefore, what O’Hara is saying is that we must face the double-bind of theoretical knowledge (the keystone of modernity), both static and progressive at the same time (80), which provides us with the tools (or “technologies of the self,” as Foucault refers to it) with which to better know ourselves, whilst yet disallowing creative usages of these tools. O’Hara leaves us with this task in the sixth and final chapter of his book (“Nietzsche’s Critical Vortex: On the Global Tragedy of Theoretical Man”) with a reading of texts from *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Anti-Christ*, two works that bookend Nietzsche’s intellectual career: O’Hara shows that what we need to do is to find new ways of reading our own lives whilst averting the peculiar madness that can arise from theoretically knowing the self in late-capitalist society where satisfaction of desire is the name of the game. This game always puts pressure on our bodies, an organic complex of forces and desires seen through the lens of (inorganic and mechanistic) knowledge. O’Hara highlights this tension between the organic and inorganic that is found in Nietzsche’s work. (80) Our most important task is to see to it that our organic bodies remain of our own making in the modern world and its inorganic (i.e., artificial and mechanistic) culture of representation. We must especially guard against the intense specialization that is expected of us by this world, which turns us into what Nietzsche calls “inverse cripples” that sacrifices “the good of the whole body ... to the specialization of one function or talent.” (56) To those working in academia this might sound all too familiar. The problem in the end (and this is what the drama of modern theoretical man is all about) is that we are damned because we come to know ourselves theoretically, but we are also damned if we don’t. As O’Hara puts it, “there can be little wonder that so many people, so very often, continue to wish the impossible – that... theory really could be dead: once and for all...” (106)

To conclude, I strongly recommend O’Hara’s book to any reader of Nietzsche’s corpus, either novice or expert. O’Hara brings to the fore why Nietzsche’s work is philosophical after all (despite the plenitude of arguments to the contrary) and how a reading of his texts results in a reading of ourselves, which is something quite rare in the landscape of philosophy. O’Hara is an expert Nietzsche scholar and (to return to the assertion by Foucault with which this review began) he shows that faithfulness to Nietzsche’s thought lies in following his *way* of reading (and also writing) rather than coming to the same conclusions that Nietzsche did in his own work.

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