

Foucault Studies

© Stéphanie Martens

ISSN: 1832-5203

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.vi30.6258>

Foucault Studies, No. 30, 101-105, June 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

REVIEW

Michael Ure, *Nietzsche's The Gay Science: An Introduction*. Cambridge Introductions to Key Philosophical Texts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. 273. ISBN: 9780521760904 (hardback), ISBN: 9780521144834 (paperback).

Michael Ure's *Nietzsche's The Gay Science: an Introduction* is the second instalment devoted to Nietzsche, after Lawrence Hatab's *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: an Introduction* (2008) in the series "Cambridge Introductions to Key Philosophical Texts." Ure's name will be familiar to readers interested in the influence ancient philosophies have exerted on Nietzsche's intellectual development and his very conception of philosophy and life.¹ In his new book, Ure proposes a thorough commentary of the prose material from *The Gay Science* (abbreviated afterwards GS), that is: Books I to IV from the 1882 edition, and Book V and the "Saturnalia" preface, added to the 1887 edition.

Ure approaches GS not simply as a philosophy book—albeit an important one—but also as a "deeply personal" and "philosophical autobiography" (i): quoting Nietzsche's own preface, GS is described as a "strange book of experiences" written by a decidedly "untimely and unconventional philosopher" (7). In the introductory chapter, Ure stresses two complementary aspects of GS: as a critique, it is "one of the most compelling and influential accounts of the modern crisis of values that [Nietzsche] later called nihilism," and as a project, it calls for a "new art of living" addressed to "the so-called free spirits among his readers" (4). Ure approaches GS as part of the free-spirit trilogy (with *Daybreak* and *Human All Too Human*) and as a corner stone of Nietzsche's "philosophical therapy"—a therapy through which Nietzsche "does not simply recycle the ancient model of philosophy but rather (...) develops a rival, post-classical philosophical therapy" (12). The key distinction between ancient philosophical therapies and Nietzsche's own, Ure argues, lies in "affirming rather than simply enduring life" (14). Each chapter, following GS's original order, is organized so as to reinforce this overarching interpretation. Each key moment in GS, "the death of God, the exercise of eternal recurrence, and the ideal of self-fashioning" (i) is reread through the lens of philosophical therapy—the book itself becoming a 'spiritual exercise' for free spirits. Ure's deliberate focus is well-advised, providing a fairly

¹ See Michael Ure, *Nietzsche's Therapy: Self-Cultivation in the Middle Works* (2008).

thorough coverage of GS—as thorough as one can be when Nietzsche’s texts are concerned.

Both Chapter 1 "Nietzsche’s Tragicomedy" and Chapter 2 "Nietzsche’s New Nobility" cover Book I. This book opens with an acerbic critique of modern science and scientists. Ure offers insights on the intellectual context informing Nietzsche’s attacks on "moral teachers" (Schopenhauer, utilitarianism, but also the Stoics) and their "negative definition of happiness" (GS P 2). Political theorists will appreciate the insistence on Nietzsche’s critique of expediency and utility (25-27), and the role it played in shaping his political views, against modern liberal values and equality in particular—a theme that will be taken up again in Book V.

Chapter 3 "Redeeming Art" concerns Book II of GS and starts exploring the role of ‘art’ and that of the ‘artist’ in Nietzsche’s affirmation of life. Ure interprets this book as a preparation towards rebirth and a new "art of the self" (107-109): "Nietzsche now suggests that we can bear existence if we turn ourselves into aesthetic phenomenon. Free spirits must conceive their lives as tragic works of art." (111) Nietzsche’s stance is explained by contrasting it to Schopenhauer’s and by referring to his earlier changes of mind in *Human All Too Human*, as well as his complex relation to Wagnerian music.

Chapter 4 "Shadows of God" analyses Book III and notably the infamous passages on "the death of God" (s. 108, 125), so often misquoted and misunderstood in popular culture. Ure explains:

(...) Nietzsche once again frames the central issue of GS. It suggests that we have arrived at [a] pivotal point in our history: we must confront the tragedy of tragedies that follows from the fact that we have created ourselves as a fantastic or metaphysical animal that has a need for morality or purpose. (144)

Reading Nietzsche still in terms of philosophical therapy, Ure places the emphasis on his prescriptions and ‘life lessons’—calling upon free spirits to cultivate ever intensely joy and happiness. Book IV’s devastating critique of late 19th century Christianity and European culture is also covered, focusing on the broader role of "moral errors" in late Western Judeo-Christian cultures (115).

Chapters 5 and 6 both analyze "Book IV: Sanctus Januarius." Chapter 5 focusses on artistic self-fashioning, while Chapter 6 focusses on *amor fati* and eternal recurrence. Yet, both chapters function together and provide us with the heart of Nietzsche’s critical and therapeutic enterprise. Through his explanation of "artistic self-fashioning" (184), Ure manages to tie elegantly together *amor fati*, eternal recurrence, ‘free-spiritedness’, art, aesthetic education, the affirmation of life and higher human beings, as well as the earlier theme of Dionysian life (187-188) and the critique of all types of ascetic ideals.

Chapter 7, "Dionysian Pessimism" is devoted to "Book V: We, Fearless Ones," while the concluding chapter focusses on the Preface added to the 1887 edition. These two closing chapters remind readers of the political implications of GS. As Ure insists, Nietzsche’s denunciation of "the marketplace sirens" and refusal to fall for the democratic egalitarianism of the "most humane, mildest, most righteous world" (GS 377) is not simply political in aim; this unapologetic "aristocratic radicalism" (230) is also his most vibrant call to free

spirits: "Nietzsche sees his gay wisdom, his mocking of European morality, as the opportunity for a new tragic teaching, a new purpose of existence." (232)

Overall, all chapters serve well Ure's interpretation of GS as 'affirmative philosophical therapy'. They also provide important contextual information, explaining for instance Nietzsche's 'moves' in relation to Schopenhauer or Kant, and comparing his therapeutic advice and prescriptions to ancient, more familiar, ones. Whereas, in Nietzsche's own prose, the approach is decidedly critical, undermining relentlessly all modern values (from the Christian ascetic ideal to the modern will to truth), Ure insists, expectedly so, on the positive aspects of therapy, on the work on oneself, on the various prescriptions addressed to 'would-be' free spirits. Ure often comments on Nietzsche's rhetorical strategies as well, highlighting once again his classical training and indebtedness to ancient authors.

The interpretations proposed are original and convincing, well supported, and the book overall undoubtedly provides the reader with a better, more subtle and grounded, understanding of GS. This style of 'introduction,' however, seems more fitting for graduate students and fellow academics rather than for those encountering Nietzsche's thought and ideas for the first time, or "without prior philosophical knowledge" (as suggested by the Cambridge series description). This more 'serious' approach also contrasts with Nietzsche's personal and idiosyncratic style: his irony and irreverence, stubborn contrarianism, and constant refusal to be systematized or reconciled. Commentaries more faithful in style than content, by contrast, could be exemplified by Foucault's own 'use' of Nietzsche, and, for this reason, a more specific assessment, geared towards Foucauldian readers of Nietzsche, is in order.

Ure has explored in previous publications the connections between Foucault and Nietzsche.² Despite Foucault being quoted only a few times, Ure's *Introduction* will be of utmost interest to Foucauldian scholars not just on the issue of Greek 'philosophical therapies' but also more unexpectedly on the issue of the aesthetic retreat from the political—a criticism often addressed to both Nietzsche and Foucault. At this level too, Ure's book, especially chapters 4 and 5, are especially instructive and thought-provoking. Using a non-specialist lexicon, faithful to Nietzsche's own wording and imagery, Ure proposes illuminating variations on proverbial injunctions to 'see beauty in this world'. Nietzsche, according to Ure, still conceives the artist as a "spectator," (140) not a disinterested one, but an engaged one, responsible for "mak[ing] necessity appear beautiful" (166). From this perspective, 'beauty' is almost equivalent to 'meaning' and both are "our own artefact(s) or creation(s)." (168) Free spirits are thus artists-spectators with a specific skill—one that requires education and repetition. This special skill must be learned: "we can learn to 'see' or make beauty." (173) In Nietzsche's own words: "Love, too, must be learned." (GS 399)

From this perspective, Nietzsche's call to "become an artist" challenges the very dichotomy aesthetics-politics often levelled against Nietzsche and Foucault. Ure shows how the

² See, Michael Ure and Federico Testa, "Foucault and Nietzsche: Sisyphus and Dionysus," in *Foucault and Nietzsche: A Critical Encounter*, ed. Alan Rosenberg and Joseph Westfall (2018); see Michael Ure, "Senecan Moods: Foucault and Nietzsche on the Art of the Self," *Foucault Studies* 4 (2007), 19–52.

aestheticization of life, far from being a retreat, is a genuine socio-political engagement: the opposition between aesthetics as 'retreat' and politics as 'engagement' does not hold. Self-fashioning or even "becoming who [you] are" does not point towards promethean tasks, such as the complete making or remaking of oneself as a work of art, but rather suggest alternative and unique receptive stances. Rather than retreat away from society, this suggests a selective and imaginative engagement with society. This 'artistic living' is not necessarily reserved to a few 'gifted' artists and creators: one does not need to produce and leave an oeuvre nor narcissistically 'care for the self' to the detriment of social and political engagement —on the contrary, it is a mode of being genuinely *in* and *with* the world. This capacity and skill is fragile and rare, and may require certain innate dispositions, yet, more importantly, it requires education and cultivation. Reading through these chapters, one cannot help but think that a lot of misunderstandings and unproductive debates could be avoided in Foucauldian scholarship if one applied a similar understanding of art and politics to Foucault's "attitude to modernity," "philosophical ethos" or "elaboration of the self."³

Of course, Michael Ure's goal in this careful study is not to provide a Foucauldian reading of GS, nor is it to adjudicate between competing interpretations. Rather, it is to highlight the philosophical importance of GS, relatively understudied and underestimated in comparison to later texts, and its key role in establishing Nietzsche as a unique "philosophical therapist." This is indeed where the book is most successful. But, its association with a series meant for introductory texts may be misleading in terms of audience. Sufficient familiarity with ancient philosophy and 19th century German philosophy is needed to grasp the subtleties of Ure's interpretation and to benefit from his cross-textual analyses and historical contextualization of GS—within the history of philosophy and within Nietzsche's own intellectual trajectory.

In a later text, Nietzsche would mock Flaubert for suggesting that "one can't think and write unless one is seated."⁴ Yet, Ure's 'introduction' to GS encourages us to sit down and think carefully with Nietzsche—against his own advice. GS's original text, for better or worse, with all its sardonic quips and *bons mots*, its carefree or rather careless *légèreté d'esprit* (both witty and superficial lightness of spirit), remains one of Nietzsche's most seductive invitation to *dance*: here is his "misunderstood song," to the music of "simple, rustic, bagpipes," offered to "impatient friends," so that *we* "hear more clearly," so that *we* also, "dance that much better"—if that is our will...⁵

References

Foucault, Michel, "What Is Enlightenment?" [1983], in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, 32–50. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

³ Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1984), 32–50.

⁴ "On ne peut penser et écrire qu'assis [...] (Gustave Flaubert).—Now I've got you, you nihilist! Assiduity is the *sin* against the Holy Spirit. Only thoughts that come by *walking* have any value." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer* (1997).

⁵ Adapted from the epilog of Book V. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1974), V 383, p. 348.

- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science* [1884]. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Twilight of the Idols or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer* [1889]. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004.
- Ure, Michael, "Senecan Moods: Foucault and Nietzsche on the Art of the Self," *Foucault Studies* 4 (2007), 19–52.
- Ure, Michael, *Nietzsche's Therapy: Self-Cultivation in the Middle Works*. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008.
- Ure, Michael and Federico Testa, "Foucault and Nietzsche: Sisyphus and Dionysus," in *Foucault and Nietzsche: A Critical Encounter*, ed. Alan Rosenberg and Joseph Westfall. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

Author info

Stéphanie B. Martens
smartens@laurentian.ca
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario
Canada