



1978

Nietzsche's Gift (Book Review)

Gary Shapiro

University of Richmond, gshapiro@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/philosophy-faculty-publications>

Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Gary. Review of *Nietzsche's Gift*, by Harold Alderman. *Philosophy and Literature* 2, no. 2 (1978): 272-275.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Nietzsche's Gift, by Harold Alderman; pp. 184. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1977, \$13.50 cloth, \$5.50 paper.

This is one of the first books in English (if not the only one) to take Nietzsche's mode of writing as a serious key to his philosophical enterprise. The usual approach has been to describe Nietzsche alternately as an aphoristic or bombastic writer from whose confused texts we may abstract a number of provocative philosophical theses. Alderman's perspective rightly begins with the realization that Nietzsche's writings issue from a complex reflection on the problematics of philosophical communication itself. *Nietzsche's Gift* is mainly about what Nietzsche described in *Ecce Homo* as the greatest gift mankind has yet received— Thus Spoke Zarathustra. Alderman offers an analysis designed to show that "Zarathustra is . . . the teacher who teaches the need to explore the full range of the human voice" (p. 173). This emphasis on the "human voice" suggests both the strengths and limitations of his study. For Alderman, Zarathustra is one whose speech explores the many modalities of speech—discourse sober and drunk, dialogue, soliloquy, comedy and silence—in order to show us the possibility of a human articulation of the philosophical spirit.

Zarathustra's commitment to a genuine plurality of discursive modes is appropriate, given Nietzsche's skepticism about the possibility of an absolute and infallible speech. From this perspective, Alderman develops a number of close and illuminating readings of parts of Zarathustra. To my mind the best of these are the careful treatments of the Vorrede in which Zarathustra is searching for a philosophical voice, and of Part IV in which Nietzsche stages a "comedy of affirmation." Nietzsche himself expressed the desire to be read as carefully as philologists read their favorite texts, and in these analyses Alderman not only comes close to Nietzsche's ideal, but also succeeds in conveying the drama of ideas in a remarkably lucid style, free of the jargon of any particular school of interpretation. He wears his scholarship with ease in correctly taking issue with Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche (based on the *Nachlass*) as the last blind protagonist in the tragic history of Western metaphysics. Instead he recognizes that Nietzsche is already beyond this tradition, playfully celebrating his release from it. (Perhaps only Harold Bloom could do justice to Heidegger's passion to turn Nietzsche into a mere precursor and escape the threat of his mastery.)

Yet it seems to me that Alderman's emphasis on the "human voice" in Zarathustra gives us a partial and somewhat tamed reading of Nietzsche's greatest work. By suggesting that Nietzsche is ultimately interested in the possibility of a fully integrated human existence, this reading downplays some of the deliberately paradoxical dimensions of Zarathustra. Let me briefly outline an alternative. The doctrine of eternal recurrence is not only a metaphysical paradox (combining the one and the many, fate and free will, being and becoming, and so on) but involves the psychological paradox suggested by Zarathustra's animals when they say that Zarathustra would say (on the point of death), "I spoke my teaching, I broke of my teaching." The thought of the recurrence is "abysmal" for many reasons, but among them is its incompatibility with any thought of a self or soul with continuous identity and freedom. This dissolution of the self-consequent on the thought of recurrence is dramatized in Part IV, where Zarathustra is continually splitting from fragments of himself (not only the higher men, but his own animals whom he must desert by a ruse at the beginning of that part). One might reach a similar perspective by meditating on Zarathustra's often-intoned "man is something that must be overcome." Alderman's emphasis on the integrity of the self is closely connected with the priority he ascribes to voice, as in the "spoke" of the book's title. But the subtitle "A Book for All

and None" implies that voice must be qualified or characterized by writing. Nietzsche's own privileged literary categories for his writing are not only those used by Alderman—voice, comedy, drama—but text and interpretation, manuscript and emendation. One indication of this switch of critical categories: almost everywhere that Alderman sees drama, one might just as well see narrative. Similarly, Alderman's relatively uncritical adoption of the literary critic's quest for an "overall Gestalt" (p. 15) could be countered by an emphasis on the ambiguity and fragmentation of the text. As Derrida has suggested, there is an intimate link in Nietzsche between the idea of writing as always referring back to an earlier writing and the suggestion that the self is to be conceived as a rhythm in a complex series of signs rather than as a center of intelligibility. Even though my own inclination would be to develop the latter suggestions, Alderman's book is consistently interesting and offers one of the only sustained and plausible poetic and rhetorical readings of Nietzsche.

University of Kansas, Gary Shapiro