Nietzsche's Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (review)


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In Print:

Section IV.

Section V.

Section VI.
Vol. 1. Also sprach Zarathustra 1883-1885 (1968), 412 pp. DM. 41

Section VIII.

Now in press:

Scheduled for 1972:
III, 2. Baseler Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente 1870-1874
V, 2. Die fröhliche Wissenschaft. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1881-1882
VII, 2. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1884

In 1959 two Italian scholars, Giorgio Colli (Piza) and Mazzino Montinari (Florence), decided to make a new Italian translation of Nietzsche's works. But the confusion surrounding the publication of the posthumous fragments, particularly in the wake of the Schlechta-Edition controversy, caused the two men to question existing German editions. Montinari's visit to the Nietzsche Archive in Weimar in 1961 confirmed their growing conviction that the only way to eliminate the inaccuracies and
omissions with respect to the late fragments was to work from the original manuscripts. Since they had to go to Weimar anyway, they reasoned, why not take the bull by the horns and attempt a truly critical German edition of all of Nietzsche's writings as well?

Now that nine of the planned thirty volumes of the German edition have been published, in particular IV, 4 (commentary to Section IV) and VIII, 2 (posthumous fragments of 1887-1888), it appears that the editors have an excellent chance of achieving not only a critical, but a definitive edition of Nietzsche's works.¹

Volumes IV, 4 and VIII, 2 are of special importance to our evaluation as, more than the other volumes published thus far, they reveal the critical and innovative features of the edition. It will pay to examine them in some detail.

The first thing we encounter in volume IV, 4 is a statement of editorial principles. We learn that with regard to works which Nietzsche himself had published, both first editions and later editions approved by Nietzsche were consulted—a double-check was needed since Nietzsche with his bad eyesight was a poor proofreader. In the case of obvious printing errors that were retained through all the printed editions, final manuscripts were also referred to; usually several, as the scribes occasionally misunderstood Nietzsche when he dictated to them.

The procedure is careful but it is also selective. What is to assure us that the editors made the right selection? This problem is dealt with in the 380 pages which collate all the variants found in the principal manuscripts and editions. Whenever possible, the reason for having variants is given. The explanation of the critical apparatus is a model of painstaking thoroughness.

So far authenticity and objectivity have been achieved to a high degree. However, a principal difficulty in editing Nietzsche's works is chronology, determining the order in which the fragments and manuscripts were written. How did the editors proceed here? There is a section eighteen pages long on manuscript chronology and genesis in which the editors detail their reasoning and conclusions. To back this up there are two additional sections: (1) a page-by-page inventory of every manuscript used, summarizing the content of each page and listing such facts as the designation number, the presumed scribe, the kind of ink and paper used; and (2) a chronicle of Nietzsche's life from 1875-1879—more detailed than its 90 pages would at first indicate, since a telegram-style is employed and explanatory material, such as letters, is printed in small type. 1875-1879 is of course the time of Nietzsche's estrangement from Wagner, and as we peruse the content, we find that the account is objective and thorough, introducing little known and new material such as pertinent letters from Cosima Wagner and Paul Rée.

We have been talking about aids to manuscript orientation. It is clear, however, that the editors were killing two birds with one stone, as much of the information they provide also facilitates a correct understanding of the content of the manuscripts. That this was indeed an additional goal is evident from the helpful index of personae for all individuals referred to in Section IV, with biographical data supplied for lesser known individuals, and from the effort made to name the authors of all passages quoted by Nietzsche.

¹ The edition will also appear in Italian, French and Japanese translation. Ten of the planned Italian twenty-one volumes are in print (Adelphi edizione; editors Colli and Montinaro). Six of the proposed fourteen French volumes have been published (Edition Gallimard; the editors are the well-known French Nietzsche scholars Gilles Deleuze and Maurice Gandillac). The French and Italian editions do not have separate commentary volumes but include pertinent commentary in each volume. An edition of the correspondence is also planned for each language. The German edition will have twenty volumes.
To establish the chronology of the posthumous fragments of 1875-1879 in IV, 4 was of no crucial significance and presented few difficulties. The fragments of 1887-1888 in VIII, 2 are another matter. When Nietzsche’s sister Elizabeth first published them she simply disregarded chronology in favor of a topical arrangement. Karl Schlechta proceeded more methodically. But in eliminating everything he felt Nietzsche had not intended to publish, he also withdrew from scrutiny much of Nietzsche’s late thinking. What to do?

The editors examined the manuscripts and hit upon a new and eminently sensible arrangement. In The Genealogy of Morals Nietzsche had mentioned that he was planning a philosophical treatise entitled Will to Power. An outline of 1888 bearing the same title organized 372 of the late aphorisms both by number and key-word. Although Nietzsche in a letter to Peter Gast clearly stated that this outline was not intended for publication, the editors determined to let it serve as their guide, in the justifiable assumption that here, nonetheless, was an arrangement that was truly Nietzsche’s, one that came as close as one could come to arranging the fragments as Nietzsche himself might ultimately have done. As for the remaining 100-odd fragments in the pertinent notebooks, which Nietzsche had not included in his outline, the editors decided to include them also, since their chronology was easy to establish and they were of interest despite their unpolished and incomplete form.

But does not such publication do Nietzsche a real injustice as Schlechta asserted? Are not the earlier selective editions superior? Although the editors obviously don’t think so, they have given the reader the opportunity to draw his own conclusions. To this end, they have compiled a concordance relating Nietzsche’s outline and their own edition with the other major editions of the late fragments, showing in each case which fragments were published and in what order.

The last 140 pages of VIII, 2 present unpublished fragments of the same period containing quotations and excerpts which Nietzsche had taken from his readings. Although again the principle of completeness was no doubt paramount in the decision to include these fragments, the editors feel that the excerpts from Tolstoi and Dostoyevski throw new light on the genesis of the Antichrist.

It is difficult in a few paragraphs to do justice to an edition containing thousands of pages. We have said nothing about the content or the attractive and functional format. We trust, however, that our limited comments have made it clear that this edition, whether in the original German or in the Italian, French, or Japanese translations, should be in every major library and in the hands of every Nietzsche scholar. It is to be hoped that the edition will soon be completed and that translations into English and Spanish will be undertaken also.

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It would be easy to take the view, on reading this book, that philosophical problems are never solved, people just tire of them. Ayer is at great pains to re-capture the sense of what philosophers in the earlier half of this century regarded as important issues, significant arguments and proper method. And indeed, he is so successful that one cannot help thinking from time to time that his book must have been written no later than the 1940’s. Perhaps that was his intent—to relive the philosophical atmosphere