

## Book Reviews

Martine Béland, *Kulturkritik et philosophie thérapeutique chez le jeune Nietzsche*

Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2012. 404 pp. ISBN: 978-2-7606-2289-0. Paperback, \$34.95/€31.00.

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Martine Béland's *Kulturkritik et philosophie thérapeutique chez le jeune Nietzsche* is an important contribution to the scholarly literature on Nietzsche in at least two respects. First, it exposes the therapeutic dimension of Nietzsche's thought, which, despite recent interest (see especially Michael Ure, *Nietzsche's Therapy: Self-Cultivation in the Middle Works* [New York: Lexington Books, 2008] and Horst Hutter and Eli Friedland, eds., *Nietzsche's Therapeutic Teaching* [London: Bloomsbury, 2013]), is a topic that remains largely unexplored. Second, it focuses on Nietzsche's earliest writings (the Basel period, 1869–79), which tend to be—with the notable exception of *The Birth of Tragedy*—the least widely read of his texts and those least commented on in Nietzsche scholarship.

The stated aim of the book is to unify and contextualize Nietzsche's early work within a central therapeutic concern with the culture of his time. Connecting it with the Hellenistic conception of philosophy as medicine for the soul, Béland claims that Nietzsche's early philosophical project can be identified as a "médecine philosophique pour la civilisation allemande" (19). According to Béland, this project takes the form of a *Kulturkritik*, oriented toward the domains of education, literature, art, and knowledge in general and aimed at a "transvaluation de la modernité" (20). Completely at odds with the conception of philosophy practiced at the academy, this project generated a conflict between Nietzsche's job and his vocation, which

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Martine Béland's *Kulturkritik et philosophie thérapeutique chez le jeune Nietzsche* is an important contribution to the scholarly literature on Nietzsche in at least two regards. First, it exposes the therapeutic dimension of Nietzsche's thought, which, despite recent interest,<sup>1</sup> is a topic that remains largely unexplored. Second, it focuses on Nietzsche's earliest writings (the Basel period, 1869-1879), which tend to be – with the notable exception of *The Birth of Tragedy* – the least widely read of his texts and those least commented on in Nietzsche scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Michael Ure, *Nietzsche's Therapy – Self-Cultivation in the Middle Works*, New York, Lexington Books, 2008 and Horst Hutter & Eli Friedland (ed.), *Nietzsche's Therapeutic Teaching*, London/ New Delhi/ New York, Sydney, Bloomsbury, 2013.

The volume is divided into four main parts, followed by an epilogue, each of which corresponds to different levels of analysis of Nietzsche's activity as a "philosophical physician". Part I, "Nietzsche à Bâle", focuses on the medical metaphor itself and seeks to describe it and contextualize it within the texts written in Basel. It offers illuminating conceptual and philological analysis not only of the expression "physician of culture" but also of key interrelated concepts, such as *Kultur*, *Bildung* and *Civilization* (chapter 1). To these conceptual considerations Béland adds information on the biographical and historical background that helps to clarify the progressive development, orientation and definition of Nietzsche's practice as a philosopher during his early years in Basel (chapter 2).

The second part of the book, "Symptomatologie", is devoted to the "descriptive level" ["plan descriptif"] of Nietzsche's project and describes the methodology, diagnosis and prognosis at its core. Focusing on the texts from 1869-1876, Béland begins by analyzing Nietzsche's "auscultation" of culture, singling out the philological (interpretative) and the philosophical (normative) methods and stressing the similarity between Nietzsche's approach and the ancient Greek model (chapter 3). The three following chapters are dedicated to the exposition of Nietzsche's diagnosed symptomatology at the level of politics (chapter 4), education (chapter 5), and literature/language (chapter 6). According to Béland, each set of symptoms manifests a certain imbalance of natural drives in the body of culture, the role of the medical philosopher being to restore them to a healthy equilibrium. A final chapter anachronistically unifies the above symptoms under the diagnosis of nihilism and presents the first steps of Nietzsche's struggle for the constitution of a new tragic and artistic culture (chapter 7).

The descriptive level is followed by the normative level ["plan normatif"] in part III, "Thérapie", where Béland rightly emphasizes the active dimension of Nietzsche's early philosophy. The three chapters in this part aim to clarify Nietzsche's therapeutic and combative practice on three different fronts. The first is the philological front, where Nietzsche is presented as struggling for the regeneration of German culture through Greek Antiquity (chapter 8). On a second (musical) front, Nietzsche joins Wagner to support the renovation of tragic art in Germany (chapter 9). Finally, Nietzsche is said to act on a pedagogical front by encouraging thorough reform of the education system with the aim of restoring

and promoting the humanistic ideal of the classical model of education (chapter 10). The expected prophylactic effect of these measures is, according to Béland, to equilibrate the forces between knowledge and creation and to allow for the rebirth of German spirit, and thus of authentic German culture.

The last part of the book, “Comment vivre en philosophe”, exposes the reflexive level [“plan réflexif”] of Nietzsche’s work in Basel by retracing the process through which Nietzsche came to question the efficacy of his early project, which ultimately led to a turning point in his philosophy. The first chapter deals with several withdrawals that mark Nietzsche’s career in Basel: the withdrawal from classical philology, from the polemics surrounding his first writings, from the Wagnerian project, and finally from the university (chapter 11). The second chapter exposes the two main conflicts with which Nietzsche was confronted during his years in Basel: on the one hand, the contrast between his job and his vocation (or between public and private activity) and, on the other, the antagonism between different types of philosophy (chapter 12). According to Béland, Nietzsche’s ultimate dismissal of his professional and institutional activity in 1879 shows not only that the public dimension of his early therapeutic project had failed, but also that he had put into practice the ancient Greek conception of philosophy as a practice directed towards knowledge and therapy – not of culture, but of one’s own self: “*le philosophe ne peut être le médecin de la civilisation (...) le philosophe doit plutôt se faire d’abord médecin de soi*” (p. 366).

In the Epilogue, Béland tries to ground this final thesis by reflecting on the later development of Nietzsche’s thought in the 1880s. According to Béland, this decade is shaped by Nietzsche’s progressive detachment from the problem of culture in favor of a reorientation towards himself as a primary object of study: if the young Nietzsche in Basel was concerned with the collective body of culture, the mature Nietzsche used philosophy as a means of restoring health to his own private body (p. 372). The philosopher’s concentration on his own self might be a first precondition of his having an effective philosophical impact on culture, but Béland notes that another characteristic of Nietzsche’s mature thought is a growing disbelief in the possibility that Western culture might recover. According to Béland, even though a certain tension between an aesthetic (contemplative, private) and political (active, public) orientation persists throughout Nietzsche’s

entire productive life, his early therapeutic project was definitely abandoned once he left his public career in Basel.

This conclusion is not as convincing as the rest of the book, since it is not at all clear that Nietzsche ever abandoned his therapeutic plans regarding culture. It is true that Nietzsche retreated from institutional and openly public activity, that he understood the inefficacy of his early *Kulturkritik* for the recovery of German culture, that he was disappointed by the negative reception of his first work (and generally by the lack of good readers throughout his life), and that his awareness of the difficulty of his task grew exponentially following his first years in Basel. As a consequence, the nature of his writings and philosophical activity does indeed also change throughout the years, becoming more independent, personal, itinerant and, to some extent, private. But the fact that the specific means and form of this project changed doesn't imply that its therapeutic aim changed as well. In fact, most of the philological elements that Béland presents to support her attribution of a therapeutic project to the young Nietzsche – the metaphor of the cultural physician, his concern for the sickness of culture, the medical imagery centered on the pair sickness/health, the closeness of his project to the Hellenistic therapeutic model of philosophy,<sup>2</sup> his diagnosis of “nihilism”, the idea of a “transvaluation of modernity”, among others – are rather developed and intensified in Nietzsche's mature thought. Indeed, the scope of Nietzsche's therapeutic project seems to be widened rather than narrowed with the development of his thought: the target is no longer Germany but Western culture as a whole; the field of intervention is no longer limited to specific domains, such as art, language and education, but encompasses the whole system of values and beliefs – and the reorientation toward the philosopher's own body seems to serve as a means (of diagnosis, experimentation, overcoming<sup>3</sup>) rather than an end in itself.

Thus, what Béland interprets as a tension in Nietzsche's mature thought is no tension at all if one thinks of its aesthetic and political dimensions as complementary rather than contradictory, as in fact they should be, considering

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<sup>2</sup> Especially in the middle period of his work. See Michael Ure, *op. cit*; Keith Ansell Pearson, “For Mortal Souls: Philosophy and Therapeia in Nietzsche's *Dawn*”, in: J. Ganeri, Jonardon & C. Carlisle (eds.), *Philosophy as Therapeia*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, 66, 2010, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Jessica N. Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See Pierre Montebello, *Vie et Maladie chez Nietzsche*, Paris, Ellipses, 2001.

Nietzsche's own expectations of future philosophy. In a famous passage from *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche, referring to "the redeeming man", clearly explains the correlation between them: "solitude will be misunderstood by the people as though it were flight *from* reality -: whereas it is just his way of being absorbed, buried and immersed in reality so that from it, when he emerges into the light again, he can return with the *redemption* of this reality" (GM, II, 24). Nietzsche's conception of the "new philosophers" doesn't seem far from this ideal, and the fact that Nietzsche preserved his prophylactic and revolutionary plans regarding culture is proven by "the most comprehensive responsibility" (BGE, 61) which Nietzsche ascribes to them in *Beyond Good and Evil*, as Béland herself recognizes towards the end of the book, although she interprets it as part of the conflict that she detects in Nietzsche's late philosophy. It may be that Nietzsche's conception of philosophy remained more stable than Béland suggests, and his "great politics", together with the "transvaluation of all values", is simply the final and ultimate form of his lifelong therapeutic project, the roots of which Béland so acutely identifies and illuminates.

These reservations about Béland's reading of the further development of Nietzsche's mature thought aside, the book is certainly worth reading and studying; it is written with a high level of rigor, clarity and mastery of the sources and provides an erudite account of their historical and cultural background. All in all, the book certainly fills an important gap in Nietzsche studies and will hopefully encourage further research on the topic.