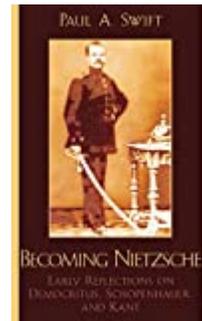




**Paul A. Swift.** *Becoming Nietzsche: Early Reflections on Democritus, Schopenhauer, and Kant.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005. xii + 134 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0981-6.



**Reviewed by** Nicholas Martin (Department of German Studies, University of Birmingham)

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## Being Friedrich Nietzsche

Despite the deliberately ambiguous title of Paul A. Swift's study, which suggests both moving toward an endpoint and a state of permanent flux, and its introduction entitled "How One Becomes What One Is" (the subtitle of Nietzsche's auto-encomium, *Ecce homo* [1888-89]), *Becoming Nietzsche* is less of an engagement with the idea of "becoming" in Nietzsche's philosophy than a study in the history of his thought. The author explores "some of the important philosophical thinkers [Democritus, Schopenhauer and Kant] who ... contributed to the shaping of Nietzsche's development as a young philosopher" (p. 119). Swift investigates Nietzsche's reading of and response to these figures in the period 1866-68, while Nietzsche was still a student at Leipzig. Crucially, in Swift's view, this approach permits a study of Nietzsche's ideas before he met Richard Wagner (in November 1868) or encountered the work of Eduard von Hartmann. As Swift rightly asserts, this 1866-68 period constitutes "a neglected dimension" (p. 1) in Nietzsche's philosophical development, although the author does not appear to have taken into account the important recent work by Christopher Janaway on Nietzsche's reception of Schopenhauer before 1869.[1]

At no stage of his philosophical career did Nietzsche's ideas spring spontaneously and fully formed onto the page; and, as Swift demonstrates, this pattern is nowhere more evident than in his largely autodidactic engagements with three great philosophical predecessors in the mid-1860s. Swift does not engage in naive theorizing about "influence." Nietzsche was not a *tabula rasa*, a blank sheet, onto which philosophical ideas were transcribed. All too often the impression is created that ideas were transmitted to him, and indeed from him, in the way kinetic energy is transferred from one ball to another on a billiard table. The transmitting figure is viewed as an active agent, the receiving figure as a passive absorber.[2] Swift, by contrast, takes careful account both of the role played by active engagement with his philosophical sources on Nietzsche's part and also the impact of the young philologist's own intellectual and academic environment in shaping his response to any given idea. Swift's approach is also refreshingly non-reductive; he acknowledges that, while "tracking down Nietzsche's early mentors can never adequately clarify [his] creative synthesis," it can nevertheless elucidate how the themes Nietzsche chooses to investigate form "part of a continu-

ing historical philosophic dialogue” (p. 119).

The monograph deals with its subject matter in an admirably methodical manner. Democritus, Schopenhauer and Kant stand out from Nietzsche’s philosophical notebooks of 1866 to 1868, and the three central chapters of Swift’s book tackle Nietzsche’s engagements with each of these thinkers in turn. The chapters are accompanied by original translations of relevant notes or short essays by Nietzsche on each of these three figures. Swift argues that a set of overlapping philosophical concerns emerges from these encounters. Prompted to a large extent by his reading of Friedrich Lange’s *Geschichte des Materialismus* (1865), Nietzsche used the writings of Democritus, Schopenhauer and Kant as sounding boards for a critique of teleological principles. The nature, origin and function of ethical judgments also move to the fore in each of these engagements, together with a growing sense of the disjunction between philosophy (particularly as practiced by Democritus and Schopenhauer) and philology (as practiced within the nineteenth-century German academy). A related concern is Nietzsche’s growing preoccupation with the nature of aesthetic judgments and experience, which in turn contains the germ, Swift suggests, not only of his attempt in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872) to practice both philology and philosophy as poetic endeavors but also of his much later doctrine of aesthetic “perspectivism.” According to Swift, Democritus’s rejection of teleology and Kant’s analysis of reflective judgment directly influenced the formation in the 1860s of Nietzsche’s understanding of aesthetic perspectivism.

The philosophical investigations of the young Nietzsche are united even at this early stage, Swift argues, by a guiding concern with the perceived uses and disadvantages to Life of reason, teleology, tragedy, physics, ethics and Socratic-Platonic idealism. Swift’s argument would be strengthened, however, by further evidence of the tension Nietzsche experienced at this time between the philosophy (or philosophers) he was reading and the philology he was expected to practice. A comment by Nietzsche in 1870 underlines this tension, which is hinted at but not fully explored by Swift: “Wissenschaft Kunst und Philosophie wachsen jetzt so sehr

in mir zusammen, dass ich jedenfalls einmal Centauren gebären werde.”[3] Equally, the lucid discussion of Democritus’s significance to the young philologist would be enhanced by more detailed explanation than Swift provides of the importance to Nietzsche’s development of other pre-Platonic thinkers, especially Heraclitus, who was to remain a constant philosophical companion. The book would also have benefited from more careful copy-editing. Numerous typographical errors in the text do not make life any easier for the reader grappling with already difficult subject matter.

Swift concludes that the study of this 1866-68 phase in Nietzsche’s development “must be considered [in order] to assess accurately how original [he] is as a thinker” (p. 123). However, if we take Nietzsche’s originality as read, as the product of a vast, creative and synthetic engagement with a bewildering array of impulses and ideas, both ancient and modern, Swift has nevertheless done Nietzsche studies a great service. The dust jacket states, “*Becoming Nietzsche* is an essential book for understanding Nietzsche’s philosophical genealogy from 1866-1868.” In fact, Swift’s monograph makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Nietzsche’s philosophical genealogy *tout court*. Swift demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt the importance to Nietzsche’s later philosophical campaigns of this early period in his development.

#### Notes

[1]. See Christopher Janaway, “Schopenhauer as Nietzsche’s Educator,” in *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche’s Educator*, ed. Christopher Janaway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 13-36. The volume also contains Janaway’s translation of Nietzsche’s notes “On Schopenhauer” of 1868 (pp. 258-265).

[2]. See Robert C. Holub, “Nietzsche and the Paradigm of Influence Studies: A Review Article,” *Modern Language Review* 100 (2005): pp. 1043-1053.

[3]. Letter to Erwin Rohde, late January 1870, in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1975ff.), vol. II.1, p. 93.

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