

# INTERVIEW: THOMAS BROBJER

conducted by Daniel Blue



Thomas H. Brobjer was born in Linköping, Sweden, and has earned doctorates in Chemistry/Physics (University of Sussex) and The History of Ideas (University of Uppsala). He is currently a member of the Department of Intellectual History at the University of Uppsala in Sweden. He has been remarkably prolific over the past decade, publishing over 50 articles in 3 languages and presenting papers at over 25 conferences and workshops. This does not include numerous book reviews, radio appearances, and works for which he has served as editor.

Dr. Brobjer is also the co-editor of five volumes in a 10-volume collection of Nietzsche's *Collected Writings* in Swedish. In addition, he has translated *The Twilight of the Idols* and *The Antichrist* into that language. He is also the author of *Nietzsche's Ethics of Character: A Study of Nietzsche's Ethics and its Place in the History of Moral Thinking* (Uppsala University Press, 1995) and the co-editor with Gregory Moore of *Nietzsche and Science* (Ashgate Press, 2004). The University of Illinois Press will shortly publish a book with the title, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography* in its International Nietzsche Studies series. In addition, Dr. Brobjer's book, *Nietzsche and the 'English': The Influence of British and American Thinking on His Philosophy*, is scheduled to be published in June 2007 by Prometheus Press.

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Dr. Brobjer is particularly well-known for his researches into Nietzsche's reading, a project which has shed light on the philosopher's interests, background knowledge, and occasionally, the veracity of his literary claims. When not immersed in Nietzsche studies, Dr. Brobjer likes to spend much of his spare time outdoors, hiking in the summer and skiing and long-distance skating in winter. When he was phoned, he was resting after having fallen out of a canoe while white-watering the day before.

*Almost all your many publications center on Friedrich Nietzsche. How did you become interested in his work?*

When I was about twenty and living in England, I bought a copy of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. At the time I had probably heard of Nietzsche but was not fully aware of him, but that very day when I came home I heard a discussion about him on the radio. This spurred me to begin the book, which I found profoundly interesting -- so much so, that I did not permit myself to read it quickly but limited myself to a chapter a day. I kept that up for a long time, reading before I went to bed, and afterward I found it hard to sleep. Not that I slept badly. But it definitely made me think and I would often lie in bed considering for an hour or so before falling asleep.

I don't remember for sure, but at the time I think it appealed to certain issues I was interested in: what view of the world do we have, how does this correspond with what the natural sciences tell us, and what values are these related to. In particular I considered myself an atheist but had not really questioned what that meant, beyond saying, "I don't really believe in the existence of God." It did have other consequences, however, and Nietzsche made me consider them.

That's how it started, me reading *Zarathustra*. After that, nothing happened for a long time, although I thought that it would be great to have more time to read Nietzsche more carefully and to have time to think more and to read more about him. And eventually I arranged to do just that.

*Have you found your sense of Nietzsche changing over the years? Has there been a radical change in the way you view him or view his work?*

There probably is a radical change, although I don't fully feel it that way. When I became an intellectual historian and wrote my doctoral dissertation on Nietzsche, I became more professional in my orientation and gained a slightly more detached view of Nietzsche. I developed -- maybe not so much an independent view -- but I was able to criticize in a very different sense than I had previously. At the same time to this day I tend to be slightly disappointed when reading other philosophers -- they are not as interesting as I expected. Nietzsche still has that draw.

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*Are there other philosophers that intrigue you or that you could compare with Nietzsche, either negatively or positively? Is there someone you particularly read a good deal of?*

As an intellectual historian I work very much with the history of philosophy, although not as a philosopher but as an intellectual historian, so I read a lot about quite a number of philosophers, and the ones that come to mind are ancient philosophers. I have read and enjoyed both Plato and Aristotle a good deal but have never had a personal relationship with them the way I had with Nietzsche -- they never touched me personally quite the way that Nietzsche does. And the Sophists -- we have only fragments -- but for me they were quite important, perhaps more reading about them than reading them themselves.

*You've written a lot about Nietzsche and the Sophists, actually.*

That's right, but that's much more professional. Nietzsche and the Sophists were separate interests that I mixed together. However, my conclusion was basically that Nietzsche was not very much influenced by them. And I think that conclusion is correct but for that reason not very interesting. As separate things I find them interesting, but putting them together doesn't make them all that more interesting.

Of the modern philosophers I think Søren Kierkegaard is the one that I most like and enjoy but I have not gone into his thinking in depth and I also avoid the religious part of his thinking.

*I know that you wrote an essay on Nietzsche's awareness of Kierkegaard.*

Right. Again, a contrived combination of two interests to some extent. Although, that was slightly different. There is very little Kierkegaard in that article. While I've read and occasionally teach him to students a bit, it is strictly on the surface level. I enjoy him very much and could imagine working much more with him. But he is the modern philosopher aside from Nietzsche that I most read and sympathize with.

Of course, there's a similarity in both being existentialists, I think that is an important aspect. Even today when teaching a class, I want the students to involve themselves, so I think I have a fundamental sympathy with a basic existentialist perspective, an old-fashioned, pre-Sartrean existentialist perspective.

*You just mentioned having a more immediate reference to your own life with the existentialists, and you, of course, are one of the few people who both explore Nietzsche from a strictly philosophical point of view yet at the same time bring in facts in his life. I think that is very rare -- to combine intellectual analysis with research-oriented occupations such as the time you spend in the archives. Maybe that's not so unusual in Europe or in Sweden, but in the United States it seems very exceptional. How did you start doing that?*

I think you're right. That's rare not only in the United States but also in Britain, and even on the continent. I do it for two reasons. First, I tend to share Nietzsche's view that one's

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philosophy is also an expression of personality, that they are related and the relation is often -- not always -- interesting and relevant. Also, I did my doctoral degree in and remain in a department of intellectual history or a history of ideas and science, so it seems fairly natural to blend intellectual studies with history. My study of Nietzsche's reading helped to win over some skeptical professors. They were suspicious of studying Nietzsche's life but could not argue that Nietzsche's reading was non-intellectual history.

On the other hand, I think that was less important than it sounds. It was more relevant that I went down to Germany shortly after the *Wende* -- I think it was in 1991 -- and specifically to Weimar. First, I visited Naumburg where Nietzsche was raised and went to school. I then proceeded to Weimar, only a half hour farther by train, and there more or less by chance I went into the *Schloss* -- I don't know quite how I found out about it, but they had Nietzsche's library. I even had the opportunity to look it over. I had already been interested in Nietzsche's relation to Utilitarianism and John Stuart Mill, and there I could look at the copies of those books, and I found them *filled* with annotations, and of course I got completely hooked by this. And that was the beginning of my interest. I had obviously come upon something fascinating and which didn't seem to have been explored before. In fact, in '91 I could find basically *no* information about his reading generally, and particularly nothing which indicated that he made lots of comments and interesting markings in his books. So I worked to improve my German and went down there a fairly large number of times to look and examine this in further detail.

Ultimately, I collected so much material and worked so intensely because I found here in Nietzsche -- surely one of the most written about philosophers of all times -- quantities of new and valuable information. I was very surprised to find this and therefore researched with lots of enthusiasm. In the early days I was simply overwhelmed with great pleasure, a real sense of discovery: "Look at this!"

*And that chance discovery has arguably altered the landscape of Nietzsche studies, because people can no longer simply claim, Oh, Nietzsche read so-and-so. Now they have to look at the facts.*

Exactly. I think that was another thing which reinforced me. I saw so many erroneous statements, writers either assuming that Nietzsche had not read certain books or assuming that he had. They simply stated things, often without argument or citation of evidence. And those assumptions did not seem obvious to me in many cases. The fact that people so often stated things without evidence made it even more fun to examine or to argue a case. Beyond this, of course, I think such matters seem genuinely relevant and provide new context for our understanding of Nietzsche. From that perspective, I think this work is important.

By the way, in order to protect them, the books in Nietzsche's library are never completely open to the public or even to researchers. They were (and I believe still are) kept as part of the Anna Amalia Bibliothek in the Castle in Weimar, in a separate room, open only to a small number of employees. Each book has been placed in a separate and individually made box, and only by special permission, rarely granted, can one handle the

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actual books. This has been done in the interests of preservation, but as a result one does not get an impression of the library in the general sense. However, all the books have been microfilmed, and these are available to researchers in a reading room in Weimar. Also, I believe two further copies of all the microfilms are kept at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC and in Salt Lake City.

*At least they are available, if only in microfilm. In the past, of course, it had been difficult for people to consult the archives. They had been frozen virtually from the beginning, first through Elisabeth, then the Nazis, then through the East German government for whom Nietzsche was persona non grata. So it wasn't until the Wende that people really had a chance to get down and take a look at them.*

I think you're right. There may have been a few people who got permission before that but not many and they didn't have this feeling of "Wow, here's something very important."

*And for that reason it is possible that Nietzsche studies are about to take a fairly big leap forward.*

I think we are in the process of this moving forward. That's what I believe too.

*Along those lines, what do you think of the current state of Nietzsche studies, and where do you think they need to go?*

[Long pause and sigh.] It's a very good and very reasonable question. I don't want to be too defensive, but I find this difficult to answer because during the past year I haven't worked quite so much on Nietzsche. I've started a different project, dealing with the modern physical *Weltanschauung*, in a manner which has almost no connection with Nietzsche, but is more concerned with questions like, What view of the world does modern science give us? To return to Nietzsche, however, the best current work is, I think, being done in Germany and Italy, the latter related to the sort of continuation of the Montinari group by Giuliano Campioni. I would include people like Paolo d'Iorio and Marco Brusotti, or Andrea Orsucci. There are also many Germans producing good work, especially Salaquarda and Müller-Lauter, both recently dead, unfortunately. I was at a conference entitled "Nietzsche und Frankreich, Frankreich und Nietzsche" in Naumburg last week. It dealt with Nietzsche and France and French interpretations of Nietzsche, and I talked with a number of younger Ph.D. students who seemed to strike a good balance between having knowledge about Nietzsche's life, about his reading, and a sense of philosophic orientation. And there is much good work being done on Nietzsche in Great Britain and the United States as well. So I'm optimistic that work where one mixes knowledge about his life or intellectual context and yet tries to make philosophical points is on the rise. For the Anglo-Saxon world, I would possibly also argue that apart from philosophical discussions, we need more works which provide commentaries on individual books or specific problems -- books which deal with specific problems that Nietzsche dealt with. There are a fairly large number of general introductions to

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Nietzsche. That's not surprising, since that probably what the man on the street wants. But they tend to be so similar that they don't bring in much that is new.

*I'm now going to switch subjects a bit and ask about discoveries you've made in the process of working with Nietzsche -- not so much scholarly discoveries but less tangible awarenesses you've developed through sustained exposure to his work. For example, you have translated both *The Twilight of the Idols* and *The Antichrist* into Swedish. What did you find to be the biggest difficulties in transposing Nietzsche's German into another language? More generally, what did you learn from this intimate immersion in Nietzsche's actual words? After all, when you translate, you inhabit the actual language.*

That's right. On the other hand, my own feeling was one of disappointment. I found while translating that so much language and so little content and ideas came into play that I felt that I did not come much closer to the text, as I had expected. With both books, however, and parallel to the translations, I produced commentaries, and from them I gained important insights. But the translations themselves were sort of a language work where ideas played a lesser role, and I felt that translating did not greatly increase my understanding of Nietzsche and certainly not of these two works. Perhaps I am a bad translator, and that may be part of the explanation, but I don't think that is the true answer. I think in a sense there is a significant difference between being a translator and being a scholar.

Incidentally, I find it very difficult to translate Nietzsche into English, as I occasionally have to do for my articles. I very much dislike doing that and try to avoid it, often striking out such passages or leaving them in German in the footnotes. But translating from German to Swedish is significantly easier. It's simply half a translation because Swedish and German are so closely related, as opposed to German and English.

*How did you learn your English? Obviously, you speak it very fluently.*

I feel that I speak it with great hesitation, but that's because I used to speak it very fluently and now I don't use it so frequently. So I compare my current skills with those I had in the past. Actually, I went to high school for a year in the United States (in Walpole, Massachusetts) as an exchange student, and have great memories from that time. Later, I resided in England for nearly five years and wrote a doctoral dissertation at the University of Sussex in Brighton. Afterward I lived a great deal in Germany and spoke and even wrote in German, and I noticed that my English was deteriorating. I decided I needed to go to an English-speaking country again simply to immerse myself in English, so in 2000 I spent a semester as a visiting professor at Austin, Texas.

*How long have you lived in Germany altogether? You seem to have been quite the traveler.*

I suppose so. I've never added it up but it's somewhere less than four full years. In the beginning I went there for one- or two-month periods. Later I lived there for about half the year. I resided in Berlin in that fashion for several years and had an apartment there,

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borrowing books, then going to Weimar to collect information. But I definitely didn't want to be in Germany during the winter season since I love winter skiing, long-distance skating, and then I want to be in Sweden. I was always here in Sweden during winter.

*From our emails I gather that you spend a great deal of time outdoors.*

Yes, I kind of like doing that.

*How are you feeling after the canoe...?*

Just before you telephoned [laughing] I was sitting here reading a book on how to better whitewater canoe. Basically I feel fine, but I'm a bit stiff all over. That's not so much due to falling out but from simply sitting. I've done quite a lot of two-man canoeing, but I'd never before used one of those Canadian one-man canoes where one sits alone in the middle. My muscles ache from keeping that sitting position and paddling hard for six or seven hours. But the falling out didn't bother me so much.

*To return one last time to languages and in particular to English, I assume you're very fluent in German as well as English. Why do you happen to write in English? While you occasionally publish in German, it seems like the most significant articles are in English.*

You're right. That's definitely so, and for two reasons. First, my English is significantly better than my German. Basically, I can compose something in English, then send it off without checking for mistakes. With German that is not the case.

The other aspect is that, since I've lived in both the United States and Britain I feel in some sense a part of that tradition, and at first I hoped to communicate some of the research being done in continental Europe to the English-speaking world. When I first went to Weimar, you may recall, it was to investigate Nietzsche's relationship to Utilitarianism. I thought I would come up with some fresh interpretations by applying a more Anglo-Saxon perspective to Nietzsche. But when I discovered his library, I found lots of new information that was also relevant to the Germans. And they have followed my work. At Naumburg I found a fairly large number of Ph.D. students -- many of them in the former East Germany who often have a poor grasp of English -- yet they not only knew of it but seemed acquainted even with the content of a number of my articles. So I think that articles in English will be read by Germans doing active research on Nietzsche, whereas if I write in German, the Anglo-Saxon world will simply not get it.

*You mentioned how important you felt was the work being done in Italy is. Is your Italian really good?*

No, no. Almost nonexistent.

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*Because I was in despair, thinking, my Italian is terrible. I just could not imagine reading all the authors you mentioned.*

Many of them actually publish almost the way I do -- not in English -- but they publish in German. Campioni has a number of articles in German. I respect him a great deal, and we know one another and communicate with each other although often we have language problems. When he phones he speaks only Italian, and [laughing] there I sit trying to understand and speaking back to him in German or English. It's always a bit uncertain if we have understood each other.

But nowadays I have a graduate student in Sweden who speaks fluent Italian -- Tobias Dahlkvist, whose doctoral dissertation on Nietzsche and pessimism, written in English, will be finished next year. He was with the Campioni Italian group for five months last year, so he knows many of them, and serves as a translator and intermediary between us.

*Let's turn very briefly to your working habits. You've obviously sifted through a variety of materials and in the process must have accumulated a great deal of disparate information, such as book receipts, grade school progress reports, and so on. How do you keep it together and organized? Do you find that problem?*

[Long sigh.] It is a problem for me, and I have never found a really good solution. Good solutions do exist, and I think I would have done it much better today, but I've been doing this work over a long period and have collected data on many, many visits to Germany and Berlin. I eventually got a highly portable computer, so that much of my information is stored in computers and in photocopies. Nonetheless, I collected a great deal of information at the beginning, some of it perhaps superfluous, and now it's scattered around my apartment, filling one of my rooms, a library, with piles of photocopies, etc. These days when I collect data, I usually assemble it with a definite aim or article in mind. Files brought home at the beginning, however, can be difficult to find. I might know that I have information about a time schedule or something somewhere, but it can be difficult to locate.

*I don't want to leave without talking about your forthcoming books. I believe two are shortly to be published in the American press.*

Yes, I have two books that should be coming out, probably in a year. But I hesitate to talk about this, because the timelines can be so slow, and in one case we had trouble finding a suitable title. We have at last agreed upon *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography*. That will be coming out through Illinois University Press in their International Nietzsche Studies series, edited by Richard Schacht.

*Publication there should be significant. At a minimum it means that all the libraries will receive a copy.*

Yes, and hopefully it is a good book, although it was originally much longer. It was simply too big and had to be split into two. The first part of the original book, which has

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as subtitle, “An Intellectual Biography,” is a chronological investigation of Nietzsche’s reading with continual references to his life. It consists of a discussion of his philosophical reading, connecting it continually to his life, and occasionally using arguments to show that some things assumed have been misinterpretations or that his reading offers explanation for certain views, etc.

I hope that it will be of use to writers with a more philosophical perspective who still want to know something about context. They can open this book and find fairly rapidly what philosophical works Nietzsche was reading at any given time.

*What about the second half? Is that going to be published?*

Not soon, I am afraid. It has not yet been finally decided if it will be published as a second volume by Illinois University Press or if I should hand it to a different publisher. Whereas the first part of the original book followed his life and reading chronologically, the second part is more thematic. Basically it is a sort of handbook of Nietzsche’s reading of French, German, and British philosophers.

*What about the other book which is shortly to be published in this country?*

That is *Nietzsche and the 'English': The Influence of British and American Thinking on His Philosophy*, which is scheduled to be published by Prometheus Press in June next year. You may recall that when I first went down to Weimar, I tried to work principally with things related to the English. And this book summarizes everything in Nietzsche’s library that relates to English and American thinking. For example, he read a great deal of Mark Twain, which is not at all obvious, since he does not refer to it in his notes or published writings.

*He mentions Tom Sawyer once in a letter.*

Yes. That’s right. But he read at least six books by Twain over a number of years, and said, “The American way of laughing does me good.” And there were also other authors than Twain who attracted him.

*Americans would find that fascinating.*

Yes, that’s what I thought, and there was a good deal of that sort of thing that one does not find even in a very thorough reading and which is present in no biography of him. It is far from obvious, but when studying in the library one notices such things and then is able to interpret some of the very vague remarks he makes in his letters and is able to say “Aha! that’s what he’s doing.”

However, my book does not only discuss new relatively minor details, such as Twain, or his view of the wild West and of American Indians, but also deals comprehensively with many major topics of his thinking such as his relation to Darwinism, to Mill and

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Utilitarianism, to Emerson, and it points out that Nietzsche for a period was fairly pro-British (contrary to most readers' expectations) and discusses the consequences of this and why he becomes increasingly critical during the 1880s. It also contains detailed discussions of Nietzsche's view of British and American literature and society more generally. In tables at the end of the book all known works by British-American authors that he read (or that are present in his library) are listed in chronological and alphabetical order.

*Returning to the subject of Nietzsche's reading and the context it provides, I find that he often paraphrases books he has read in his letters and even in his works. So if you know the texts he's invoking, you have a basis for interpretation and exploration that is not otherwise available.*

Yes, I agree fully with that. However, it is very difficult to completely use that. It is always difficult to have both a detailed philological knowledge, where one is aware of this background, and at the same time a philosophical perspective, particularly when more than one author is involved. Many people can do this with a single author -- one knows that in a certain period he read Lange or someone else, and investigates with that in mind. But in fact, Nietzsche had perhaps a hundred books or authors in the back of his mind during any given period (say, one or two years) and they are there in the background, and in some way he keeps up a dialogue with many of these books, particularly in the last ten years of his life when he did not have such an active social life. It is his writing of letters and readings of books that constitutes very much what he responds to when he writes many of his works. In practice, however, it is very difficult to keep this context fully clear and to be aware of this.

By the way, we have not yet mentioned that I have published a book together with Greg Moore.

*Oh yes. Nietzsche and Science. That was full of useful essays. I found its discussions of the actual scientific literature of the time and the way Nietzsche assimilated such works particularly helpful.*

Thank you. Also, I got a book today, called *Zur unterirdischen Wirkung von Dynamit: Die Umgang Nietzsches mit Büchern und zum Umgang mit Nietzsches Büchern* (Harrassowitz Verlag). It's actually a sort of conference book, but it includes an article by me about Nietzsche's reading of women authors (very few indeed), and numerous other contributions, including, among others, one by Campioni, "Die 'Ideelle Bibliothek Nietzsches.'"

*While we're talking about all your books, we should mention Nietzsche's Ethics of Character, which appeared in 1995. It's very difficult to find a copy in this country. Is that being republished?*

Unfortunately not. As is frequently the case with Swedish dissertations, it was published and internationally distributed, both to libraries and other venues. Unlike many such

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works, which are usually written in Swedish, however, mine sold out very rapidly. I tried to interest a couple of university presses in reissuing it, and both gave it strong consideration but passed. However, if I ever find a publisher or a response that is positive, I will try to bring that forth because I think still the ethics of character aspect is something that is both philosophically interesting and philologically interesting.

*Perhaps when your new books are published in the United States, they will lead to the republication of this work and the appearance of many more. It's just a matter of you being properly introduced, and I hope that the publication of your book on Nietzsche's reading will make you as prominent and esteemed an authority here as you already are on the Continent.*