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**Sue Prideaux. *I Am Dynamite!: A Life of Nietzsche*.  
New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018. 452 pp., illus.**

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That Friedrich Nietzsche once toyed with the genre of autobiography is perhaps significant when considering any biography of the great philosopher. To take on a subject who once declared himself both wise and clever enough to be considered “a Destiny” might seem an act of hubris. Trying to contain someone whose life was dedicated to unconventionality in so conventional a form as a biography is nearly an insult, the fettering—to use Nietzschean language—of a life to one particular interpretation. Such straightforward clarity seems anathema to Nietzsche’s own aphoristic, evocative style. Yet Nietzsche finds himself the subject of this new biography by Sue Prideaux, which usefully takes as its starting point (according to its own descriptors) the Nietzschean recognition that “all philosophy...was autobiography” (242). If Nietzsche’s philosophy is his autobiography, Prideaux’s book implicitly argues, then there is arguably much to be understood of his often-opaque philosophy through a thorough understanding of his biography. That this biography includes the beginnings of a new system of philosophy accompanied by an intriguing and potentially scandalous madness only serves to make the project even more compelling.

Prideaux’s respect for Nietzsche is apparent from the opening pages, which cut a dashing portrait of her subject in his earliest encounter with the composer Wagner. As Wagner would figure prominently in Nietzsche’s life and philosophy, this is clearly a watershed moment, and Prideaux’s lucid prose brings the encounter to life in a thrilling manner that captures both the energy of the time and the importance of this meeting. From this she effortlessly takes us backwards, to Nietzsche’s family history and upbringing, before returning to the meeting of the world-famous composer and the as-yet-unknown philosopher (who, at the time, was not yet even a philosopher at all). Interspersed throughout the narrative are extended quotes from Nietzsche’s own writings, providing color to the significance of the events, showing us in his own words how he perceived his childhood and his family, and most importantly, intertwining the biographical elements with the autobiographical. In this opening chapter Prideaux’s presence is that of a guide through Nietzsche’s world, comprised of his culture, his family, and his own passionate thoughts. The passages from Nietzsche’s journals are often lengthy paragraphs, or several longer quotations mixed in with commentary and guidance from Prideaux, aiding the impression that this biography is being built right alongside Nietzsche’s own musings and recollections, an approach that is remarkably engaging, particularly in the book’s early chapters that focus on formative events and relationships in Nietzsche’s life.

Where the book gets lost, however, is in its engagement with Nietzsche’s actual philosophical developments. Though emphasizing the importance of biographical elements to the practice and formation of philosophy, Prideaux quotes liberally from

Nietzsche's work, and offers few actual explanations of many major concepts from his works. The famous and infamous statement "God is dead" (191), from *The Gay Science* is quoted at length, and the enigmatic "eternal recurrence" is mentioned several times, but concepts like the will to power are given only cursory explanations. Often, Nietzsche's ideas are most elucidated upon when they are being defended against their later bastardization by Hitler and the Third Reich. In this vein, Prideaux provides ample justification for Nietzsche's use of the character of the "blond beast" in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, for instance, and elaborates at length on the development of Nietzsche's almost multicultural bent in stark contrast to his sister's raging anti-Semitism. These tendencies sometimes turn the book into an attempt to clear the air around some of the more controversial elements of Nietzsche's life. The syphilitic theory regarding his eventual madness is addressed and dispelled early on, and the story is again identified as myth in the closing chapters; rumors surrounding Nietzsche's eventual break with Wagner are cleared up (there was no great row or fight, as Nietzsche's sister Elisabeth would later claim—Wagner had written to a doctor friend that he thought Nietzsche might be a compulsive masturbator, an accusation Nietzsche was naturally quite insulted by); and the genealogy of how Nietzsche's works and words were twisted and controlled by his sister is given ample coverage so as to distance the philosopher from much of the racial conflict surrounding his name. Curiously, Prideaux very fairly presents Nietzsche's history and opinions on Jesus and the religion of Christianity, as if defending Nietzsche from unjust attacks by the Christian faith, but fails to address any questions regarding accusations of nihilism with which his name has also been associated.

In one sense, this book's tendencies can be explained by the book's subtitle: *A Life of Nietzsche*, making such a concentrated focus on the chronological and relational events of Nietzsche's life more understandable. In this sense, the book announces its intentions as clearly as does Julian Young's *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*. But this is all problematic in light of the book's own stated understanding of the importance of autobiography and philosophy, and even more frustrating when the figure under examination is Nietzsche, whose activities and relationships were of a generally mundane character in stark contrast to the radical nature of his thoughts. While Nietzsche's fits of creativity are mentioned, as is his tendency to walk for long distances and scrawl nearly illegibly in little notebooks, Prideaux's prose sometimes lapses into generalities that fail to capture the paradigm-shifting genius of Nietzsche's "concept-quakes." One prime example is that in the book's pages of illustrations is one photograph of the author at Sils-Maria, "the rock where Nietzsche experienced the Zarathustra revelation" (458). This revelation is mentioned in the main text of the book,

yes, but recounted with none of the feeling or intensity that one would usually ascribe to something labeled as a “revelation.” The riveting prose style that opens the book seems to fade over time, so that the story of Nietzsche’s life becomes a mundane list of his activities, walks, and social relationships, generally devoid of any real character or flair. Little separates Prideaux’s description of Nietzsche’s characteristics and behavior from any of the other intellectuals and socialites with whom he associated, so that Nietzsche—whose philosophy champions self-determination and a disregard for the fetters of society, and who saw himself as emblematic of or at the very least a precursor to such free-spirited behavior—comes across as not so different than most of his contemporaries, save for the rapid onset of his career-ending mania. The radical philosopher is actually lost in the effort to understand the vagaries of his life.

Ultimately this is a biography rather than a philosophical survey. There is much to be said for Prideaux’s careful defenses of Nietzsche’s life and behavior, and even material from friends and contemporaries of Nietzsche that can be of use to scholars in understanding and explaining the inscrutable thinker. In this sense, the book accomplishes its aim of illuminating at least some of Nietzsche’s philosophy through exploring his life. But it feels as if the book can never quite get out from under Nietzsche’s widespread fame and influence. It attempts to walk the line between discussing his life and his work and never strikes an ideal balance, to the point that it seems unable to satisfy either the scholar of Nietzsche or a newcomer to his philosophy. For the first audience there is little depth to be found in philosophical discussion; for the second this same vagueness serves as a poor introduction to all but the most basic of Nietzsche’s ideas.

One could easily argue that the book flounders because striking a balance between philosophical rigor and biographical enthusiasm simply is not possible. And if the notion of philosophy as autobiography that Nietzsche clung to means that the two ideas are entirely inseparable, then making any attempt to choose one or the other side is doomed from the start. Fully committing to one’s philosophy was the quality that Nietzsche admired most in the thinkers he saw himself in opposition to, Socrates and Jesus, and was a standard that he set for himself and to which he strongly adhered. Prideaux’s book has much in the way of information and style going for it but falls short in capturing this sensational quality to Nietzsche’s work, life, and words.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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