

## ***Ecce Homo: Nietzsche's Aesthetic Autobiography***

Friedrich Nietzsche is perhaps best known for his bold declarations of the death of God and the death of the subject—the idea of an essential, unchanging “self” or “ego” at the center of a human being. These declarations are, of course, the roots of the deconstructionist and postmodern philosophies that endure in academia and beyond today. The death of the self has most especially resonated within studies of autobiography, for obvious reasons. Philippe Lejeune in his seminal essay “The Autobiographical Pact” defines autobiography as a “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). The ramifications of Nietzsche’s declaration cause Paul John Eakin to question just what the nature of “a real person” is within this definition (*Lives* 2), and inspire Michael Sprinker to proclaim the “end of autobiography” (342). Yet I think that it is significant to an understanding of contemporary “selves” and “self-stories” that the man who declared self-hood a “fundamental false observation” (*WTP* 294) actually wrote an autobiography himself.

What is an autobiography if “self”-hood is a fiction? This question is an important one for contemporary scholars and writers of autobiography, but also for any dwellers in a post-self world. How does one’s life unfold and have purpose without an essential “I” who is in charge? Nietzsche was one of the first to ask this question, and therefore his own self-story is quite significant. However, before we explore the “self” of Nietzsche’s autobiography, it is crucial to understand Nietzsche’s attitude toward the death of the self. For while he believes the essential “self” to be a fiction, he also

believes that the exploration of what it means to be an individual human is a vital activity in human life. Here is his famous declaration in more specific terms from *Beyond Good and Evil*: "...the belief which regards the soul as something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, as a monad, as an atomon: this belief ought to be expelled from science!"

(20).<sup>1</sup> Here, Nietzsche throws out both a religious understanding of "soul" or "self" as an eternal entity that lives on after the body, as well as a more secular scientific understanding of it as a kind of homunculus or Cartesian "cogito" guiding all actions and choices separate from the body. But he continues,

Between ourselves, it is not at all necessary to get rid of 'the soul' at the same time. ...[T]he way is open for new versions and refinements of the soul-hypothesis; and such conceptions as 'mortal soul,' and 'soul as subjective multiplicity,' and 'soul as social structure of the drives and affects,' want henceforth to have citizens' rights in science. (20)

Nietzsche therefore views the death of the self not as a closing-off of discussion about what constitutes individual existence, an end to self-stories, but as an opening-up of new discussions and interpretations of that constitution and those stories. Nietzsche doesn't leave the discussion wide open, however. He offers new hypotheses for understanding "self"-hood as mortal, multiplicitous, changing, and embodied. It is the manifestation of these new definitions of self-hood, I will argue, that Nietzsche's autobiography works to reveal.

The autobiography entitled *Ecce Homo* was completed in 1888, just before Nietzsche's mental collapse. (It was published posthumously in 1908.) The book offers no traditional chronological progression of Nietzsche's life story beginning with

childhood. In fact, it often reads more like a self-description than a self-story, highlighting Nietzsche's personal preferences and touching at times on some of the people that most influenced him. It is divided into chapters entitled "Why I Am So Wise," "Why I Am So Clever," "Why I Write Such Good Books," and "Why I Am a Destiny." After the "Good Books" chapter, Nietzsche includes a chronological interpretation of each of his works. Thus *Ecce Homo* is, on the surface, Nietzsche on Nietzsche, interpreting his significance and his books for his present detractors and for future generations of thinkers.

Because of the proximity of the book to his breakdown and some of the megalomaniacal and mysterious pronouncements within the book, such as his false references to Polish noble ancestry and his rather vainglorious chapter titles, the autobiography is often ignored or misunderstood. Richard Samuel questions whether it is an autobiography at all, and points out many of the historical discrepancies between Nietzsche's tale and "What *really* happened" (217).<sup>2</sup> However, Nietzsche's own understanding of an autobiography's task is tricky, as is evidenced by an aphorism in *The Gay Science* entitled "Caution."

As is well known, Alfieri<sup>3</sup> told a great many lies when he told his surprised contemporaries the story of his life. What prompted these lies was the same despotic attitude toward himself that he also manifested in the way in which he created his own language and tyrannically forced himself to become a poet: he had finally found a severe form of sublimity into which he then pressed his life and his memory. No doubt, there was much agony in all this. –I also would not

believe a biography of Plato, written by himself—any more than Rousseau's or the *Vita Nuova* of Dante. (145)

On the one hand, Nietzsche seems to be critiquing the “lies” told by these autobiographers. He is certainly critical of Plato who used the historical name of his mentor Socrates as a character in his dialogues to deliver his own doctrines. And Rousseau's *Confessions* represents a kind of Romantic notion of essential self-hood that Nietzsche finds fundamentally false.<sup>4</sup> He is thus hyper-aware of the problems connected with any kind of life-writing. Biographers construct their subjects as characters, creating an incomplete or even false portrait. Autobiographers, too, construct false visions of themselves that they as well as their readers accept as “truths.”

On the other hand, this critique of lies and false self-interpretations seems disingenuous, as Nietzsche made a reevaluation of “lying” one of the central tenets of his philosophy. In his famous early essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (1873), Nietzsche espouses the now-familiar argument that the “truths” and concepts that the intellect surmises about the world are always already constructed by language—they are an army of petrified and coagulated metaphors or dissimulations—lies (86). So what then is the “correct perception” (86)? He writes, “Between two absolutely different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no correctness, and no expression; there is, at most, an *aesthetic* relation” (86). Therefore a dweller in the world is always fundamentally an “*artistically creating* subject” according to Nietzsche (86). This pronouncement is difficult enough when considering a subject's relationship to objects in the world, but what happens when the “object” of a subject's scrutiny is her own subjectivity? Nietzsche's answer seems to be the same. If one could “escape the

prison walls of this faith” in the truths of language, then “‘self-consciousness’ would be immediately destroyed” (86). Self-hood is a fiction—it is a metaphor used to describe the multiplicity of experiences that make up an individual. Consequently, the relationship between that multiplicity and that coagulated metaphor cannot be directly causal, or “correct” or “false.”

Yet Nietzsche does acknowledge a relational interaction between an individual and the world, between that multiplicity and that coagulated metaphor, and it is an aesthetic relation (*ein aesthetisches Verhalten* is more literally translated as an aesthetic “behavior,” “attitude,” or “disposition,” according to Breazeale [86n]). The seemingly disconnected nature of this relationship does not necessitate that we throw up our hands in the face of a kind of miasma of nominalism, however. The “lies” of language are obviously necessary for human beings to function in the world. Nietzsche explains that “the drive toward the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive” (88). Human beings have an inherently “aesthetic disposition.” Thus, the aesthetic behavior that Nietzsche advocates in “Truth and Lies” is that we try out new metaphors that are not petrified into “truths,” and he views “art” and “myth” as important realms in which this behavior takes place (89). The metaphors one comes up with are no less fictional, but by trying out many different new metaphors, one comes closer to the ultimately unattainable “reality as it is” (*EH* 331).

It is in the context of this one aspect of “the aesthetic” that Nietzsche’s critique of autobiographical “lies” should be understood. For his description of Alfieri’s life-story in *The Gay Science* can be read as a helpful model for what Nietzsche accomplishes in his own autobiography—a model of existence for an “artistically creating subject.”

Obviously, this aesthetic orientation is not at all easy, involving a “despotic attitude” toward oneself and “much agony.” And it is not so simple or relative as it may sound (“It’s aesthetically pleasing to me to murder, rape, and pillage”). Nietzsche seems to return to the origins of the term “aesthetic” in his use of the word, which is from the Greek *aisqhtik-oj*, meaning “of or pertaining to...things perceptible by the senses, things material (as opposed to *nohta*, things thinkable or immaterial)” (OED). The aesthetic orientation he advocates is not based solely on individual perspectives on what is beautiful, but more importantly on an individual’s perception of and attention to the material world. In *The Will to Power* it is thus possible for him to warn that in the process of self-creation, “it could be useful and important for one’s activity to interpret oneself *falsely*” (272). So while Nietzsche throws universals of “truth” and “falsehood” out the window in “On Truth and Lies,” he still wants to argue for a kind of aesthetic authenticity for each individual, an authenticity which he finds in the “despotic attitude” of *amor fati* (love of fate) and in the attention of an individual to his or her own body and its interaction with the material world. The task of *Ecce Homo* is therefore to reveal the creating and unfolding of a “self” written and lived as an aesthetic phenomenon, a creating and unfolding that is inextricable from an individual’s embodied location in the world.<sup>5</sup>

Nietzsche’s title *Ecce Homo* echoes Pilate’s famous introduction of Jesus to the crowds before his crucifixion, and does so quite deliberately, of course, emphasizing Nietzsche’s own vision of himself as the “Antichrist.” However, this title is also interesting from an autobiographical standpoint. The Latin *ecce homo* means “Behold, *the man*,” but also, “Behold *a man*.” Read with these two different articles, Nietzsche’s

title can imply both “Behold, the story of me, Friedrich Nietzsche, in all of my glory” (a reading the aforementioned chapter titles certainly support), or just “Behold, the story of a man.” The first reading reveals Nietzsche offering his autobiography as a “model of identity,” in the vein of Rousseau’s autobiography, which Paul John Eakin describes as a “curiously anti-model kind of model” in which he offers his uniqueness as a model for others to emulate (*Touching* 74). Nietzsche’s preface supports this reading as he reveals his purpose is to assert his identity and the meaning of his *oeuvre* in the face of the “smallness of [his] contemporaries” who misinterpret him and his work: “*Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else*” (217). Yet the second reading of the title as the more understated “Behold, *a man*” is also supported in the autobiography. Nietzsche cites the above bold declaration as a duty “against which my habits, even more the pride of my instincts, revolt at bottom” (217). He goes on to assert that he does *not* want to be revered as a model for others: “The last thing *I* should promise would be to ‘improve’ mankind. No new idols are erected by me” (217). *Ecce Homo* is clearly a book wrought out of contradictory instincts and one can trace Nietzsche’s struggle with resentment of his “‘educated’” (217) misinterpreters throughout the book.<sup>6</sup>

But the man who touted freedom from resentment as the highest goal humankind can achieve certainly did not write an autobiography out of this instinct alone. By the end of the Preface, Nietzsche arrives at the instinct out of which he hopes the book is written, which is to create his own “curiously anti-model kind of model” for willing humans. He quotes his *Zarathustra*:

You had not yet sought yourselves; and you found me. Thus do all believers; therefore all faith amounts to so little.

Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only *when you have all denied me* will I return to you. (220)

Although his language certainly reflects some of Christ's "Seek and ye shall find" exhortations, Zarathustra, "the anti-Christ," does not set himself up as a "world-redeemer" (220) whose model all should follow to salvation. The Preface ends here with the admonition to "den[y] me" and "find yourselves." But it is significant that this is how Nietzsche *begins* his autobiography. It implies that while the book that follows is not a direct model for emulation, it is still a pedagogical document offering the tools, if not the path, for "finding oneself." Nietzsche's subtitle underscores this anti-model kind of model: "How one becomes what one is." The "model of identity" that *Ecce Homo* represents is ultimately a model of a process of self-discovery and creation that will look very different for each individual, a model of an aesthetic disposition.

Nietzsche then begins his anti-model after the Preface with an epigram that is free from resentment. He looks back on his life at the time of his forty-fourth birthday and sees good things: "*How could I fail to be grateful to my whole life?*—and so I tell my life to myself" (221). This instinct of *amor fati* (love of fate) is an essential element to Nietzsche's philosophy as well as his understanding of the self as an aesthetic phenomenon.

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what

is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but *love* it. (258)

Nietzsche's "self"-portraits in *Ecce Homo* often exemplify this attitude. The first chapter "Why I Am So Wise," begins with several sections devoted to Nietzsche's struggle with debilitating illness: "the torments that go with an uninterrupted three-day migraine, accompanied by laborious vomitings of phlegm" (222). He certainly does not "conceal" from his readers any of his afflictions here. Yet neither do these sections devolve into a model of mere self-pitying perseverance. Amazingly enough, Nietzsche finds a way to express a kind of necessity and even "love" for the presence of this suffering in his life. He explains that these times of decadence within the life of an overall healthy individual (224) are what granted him a kind of "dialectician's clarity" (222), which allowed him the ability to "*reverse perspectives*": "Looking from the perspective of the sick toward *healthier* concepts and values and, conversely, looking again from the fullness and self-assurance of a *rich* life down into the secret work of the instinct of decadence" (223). According to Nietzsche, then, this experience with physical decadence enabled him to become the great re-evaluator of all values. Similarly, he later cites his terrible vision as the saving grace that put an end to his studies in philology, creating the space for him to become a philosopher: "for years I did not read a thing—the greatest benefit I ever conferred on myself" (287).

Clearly this attitude of *amor fati* is an interpretive act by a "self," but a similar sufferer who views his afflictions as a curse of God or who becomes a nihilist is also making an interpretive act. What is it about *amor fati* that makes it an *aesthetic* act? Nietzsche's answer is that one not only interprets one's life, but one also *embraces* it—all

of the pain, the ugliness, the mistakes, the “side roads and wrong roads” that one takes—as part of an aesthetic whole. In a passage reminiscent of Walt Whitman’s work, Nietzsche asserts, “Nothing in existence may be subtracted, nothing is dispensable” (272). Nietzsche admits that this kind of attitude is not easy: “To comprehend this requires courage and, as a condition of that, an excess of strength” (272). A helpful model for this connection between the aesthetic and love of fate lies in Greek tragedy for Nietzsche, who called himself “the first *tragic philosopher*” (273). Think of the story of King Oedipus driven to uncover the truth of his past even after he realizes that it would lead to his downfall, which carries with it great tragic wisdom and beauty. Nietzsche explains that Aristotle had tragedy all wrong—it’s not about purging terror and pity, but about being “oneself the eternal joy of becoming...which includes even joy in destroying” (273), a perfect definition of *amor fati*. One must have joy in destroying because it opens up the space for becoming what one is, just as Nietzsche describes his blindness as the event that got him back on the correct path. This “joy of becoming” (including the becoming that is destruction) is vital to Nietzsche’s notion of the self as an aesthetic phenomenon. For authentic “self”-hood does not involve stagnation, mere “Being,” for Nietzsche. Such an approach to “self”-hood might lead to what he warns us of elsewhere in *Ecce Homo*: “Beware of all picturesque men!” (257). The self that Nietzsche is exploring is a self in motion, a self, like that of Oedipus, that embraces its fate and shifts with the tide of instinct and destiny.

Nietzsche’s subtitle “How one becomes what one is” strikes a delicate, seemingly contradictory balance between these ideas of “Being” and “Becoming.” If one already “is” something, how can self-hood be a non-essential process of becoming as Nietzsche

describes? How can one avoid being one of those “picturesque men”? His answer is that “what one is,” like “reality as it is,” remains unknown to one. Nietzsche explains that the “self” (in a passage that anticipates Freud) lies beneath the “surface of consciousness,” and that it is dangerous if “the instinct comes too soon to ‘understand itself’” (254).

To become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion *what* one is. From this point of view even the *blunders* of life have their own meaning and value—the occasional side roads and wrong roads, the delays, “modesties,” seriousness wasted on tasks that are remote from *the* task. All this can express a great prudence, even the supreme prudence: where *nosce te ipsum* [Know thyself] would be the recipe for ruin, forgetting oneself, *misunderstanding* oneself... become reason itself. (254)

Again, Nietzsche is the great re-evaluator of values. Traditional maxims such as “Know thyself” and “To thine own self be true,” which are perhaps even more revered in contemporary Western culture than they were in Nietzsche’s day, lead to *ruin*. Like Wallace Stevens placing a “jar in Tennessee,” an imposition of a static notion of self-hood onto one’s life thwarts its organic unfolding and one becomes static, “picturesque.” Thus, “becoming what one is” involves an attitude of *amor fati* toward the blunders and mistakes of life, as well as an acceptance of the unfathomableness of self-hood. And I think he would also argue that “what one is” is not exactly predetermined either. He describes it as an “organizing ‘idea’ that is destined to rule,” but that “idea,” too, is changing and “*growing* deep down” (254, emphasis mine).<sup>7</sup> One might argue that the action of writing an autobiography certainly is an aesthetic imposition of order onto one’s life; however, it is a backward rather than a forward imposition in time, and an

interpretation of a process. Nietzsche represents the seemingly static idea of “What one is” in *Ecce Homo* by interpreting his own “task” of discovery and becoming.

Yet this process of discovery and this attitude of *amor fati* are neither as gloomy and depressing nor as chaotic as they may seem at first. Nietzsche writes, “I do not know any other way of associating with great tasks than *play*: as a sign of greatness, this is an essential presupposition” (258). The German term *spiel* carries implications similar to the English term *play*, implying both motion, as in the “play” of light, as well as a cheerful, frolicsome activity. The task of “becoming what one is” (certainly a “great task” for Nietzsche) therefore necessitates both a willingness to allow that “self” to shift and change, and an attitude of joy and recreation in the process. But as Jim Hans reminds in his book *The Play of the World*, the word *play* (for Nietzsche and others) is not merely a substitute for ideas like “process” and “flux.” “It is a structuring activity, the activity out of which understanding comes. Play is at one and the same time the location where we question our structures of understanding and the location where we develop them” (Hans x).<sup>8</sup>

A playful orientation toward “becoming what one is” does not mean merely joyfully stirring up the chaos in one’s life. Play is also the fundamental structuring activity behind art, the aesthetic.<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche seems to describe this playful aesthetic orientation when he writes of his approach to his own multiplicitous and even contradictory capacities: “to mix nothing, to ‘reconcile’ nothing; a tremendous variety that is nevertheless the opposite of chaos” (254). The creation described here sounds much like the postmodern art of pastiche, but the self for Nietzsche is a pastiche with purpose, even if one doesn’t know what that purpose is. Consequently, the process of

“becoming what one is” is certainly not a passive one in which the individual in the throes of the tragic “joy of becoming” is merely battered about by the storms of fate, embracing whatever pain or delight, failure or success, may come her way. A playful orientation to self-creation involves *actively* questioning old structures and interpretations and developing and trying on new ones out of the multiplicitous and contradictory capacities that is a human being.

“Play” is an important structuring activity in the process of “becoming what one is,” but it is not the only one. The most significant structure in the life of an individual according to Nietzsche is his or her own *body* and its *instincts*. Nietzsche certainly embraces his choice of becoming a professor of philology at age twenty-four as a necessary step toward the tragic philosopher he would become: “It shows my prudence that I was many things and in many places in order to be able to become one thing—to be able to attain one thing. I *had* to be a scholar, too, for some time” (282). But after several years at the university, he notes a “total aberration of my instincts”: “Ten years lay behind me in which the nourishment of my spirit had really come to a stop; I had not learned anything new that was useful; I had forgotten an absurd amount for the sake of scholarly gewgaws.... It stirred my compassion to see myself utterly emaciated, utterly starved....” (286). Nietzsche advocates attention to instinct over the dulling power of inertia. He explains that his instinct made “its inexorable decision” (287) to overcome his starvation, and that decision mixed with his debilitating blindness and sickness allowed him to rediscover his “vocation” (286).

Nietzsche seems to define fate and “becoming what one is” here as a complex process of embracing fortuitous circumstances along with some playful assertive action

taken by the individual in harmony with her instinct. Yet it is important to note that the term “instinct” is also inextricably connected to the aesthetic for Nietzsche as well, as he attributes the playful structuring of his multiplicitous capacities to “the long, secret work and artistry of my instinct” (254). Thus, even the inner workings of the body and its desires are driven by an aesthetic disposition according to Nietzsche (the implications of which I explore later). By embracing the “artistry of his instinct” at this juncture in his life, Nietzsche explains that his “nethermost self” which had “been buried and grown silent,” begins to awaken and speak again (287).

However, attention to another kind of bodily instinct is just as important to the artistry of “becoming what one is” according to Nietzsche, and that is “the masterpiece of the art of self-preservation—of *selfishness*” (253). In order to be fully attentive to the dictates of one’s instincts and to allow for the full potential of a playful orientation toward one’s task, one must learn to say “No,” according to Nietzsche (252). This art of self-defense perhaps seems contradictory to Nietzsche’s great “Yes”-saying in the attitude of *amor fati*. It is important to note, however, that the attitude of *amor fati*, while certainly involving an embrace of the suffering and pain of life, does not require that one *dwell upon* these negative elements of the past. Right after Nietzsche’s famous proclamation of the well-turned-out individual, “what does not kill him makes him stronger,” he says of the same man, “he is a principle of selection, he discards much” (224). Just as he explains in his early essay “On the Use and Abuse of History” that a people must “forget” some of the trauma of the past in order not to lose themselves and to heal themselves, he advocates forgetting and discarding as a vital part of an aesthetic

existence. This “No-saying” reflects a kind of “joy in destroying,” in which negation opens up the space for aesthetic creation and play.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche explains that one must work to be in a position to say “No” “*as rarely as possible*,” for such “warding off, not letting things come close, involves an expenditure” (252), an expenditure of energy better spent upon aesthetic creation. As an example, he uses scholars who read so many books that they “spend all of their energies on saying Yes and No, on criticism of what others have thought—they themselves no longer think” (253). For Nietzsche, reading a book is a potentially “depraved” act, especially when one is “spiritually pregnant”: “Should I permit an *alien* thought to scale the wall secretly?—and that is what reading would mean” (242). This instinct of selfishness should not be misunderstood as a kind of arrogant imposition of “self” upon the rest of the world at the exclusion of all else—an individual must not know what she is in order to become who she is, and therefore she must be attentive to the push of the world around her, as well as to the push of her own instinct. What is most important to Nietzsche is that the saying of “yes” and “no” not interfere with the aesthetic “saying” and unfolding of the individual’s governing task.

The examples given thus far of Nietzsche’s notion of “instinct” seem to color it as an intellectual entity acting upon its environment—one feels intellectually starved and takes a new path or one must ward off the invasive potential of other “selves” found in books. But instinct and the process of self-construction are inextricably and centrally linked to *embodiment* for Nietzsche, an embodiment that is constantly shaped and influenced by its surrounding material environment. Perhaps Nietzsche’s most surprising pronouncement is his answer to “the salvation of humanity” (237). In the place of

“God,” “redemption,” and the “beyond” (236) he offers “the question of *nutrition*” (237). Nietzsche goes on to outline his own version of the “garbage in, garbage out” adage, as he speaks out against overcooked and overly rich foods. He continues with observations such as, “Alcohol is bad for me” (except, it seems, “in *strong* doses” which gives him “fortitude”) (238), and “No meals between meals, no coffee: coffee spreads darkness” (239). A platitude like “take care of your body” sounds simplistic and perhaps jaded to a twenty-first century culture in which body and body image are so emphasized. However, Nietzsche’s definition of “self”-hood here in his own historical context is quite surprising, and also offers a much more complex understanding of attention to embodiment than current pop cultural maxims. Forget the idea that your self is some transcendent soul with an essential meaning—your self is a complex mortal body. Thus the “[anti]-model of identity” that Nietzsche offers in his autobiography is not only a model for an intellectual approach to understanding and constructing an existence, but also an almost prescriptive model for how to pay attention to and care for one’s body.

These two models are inextricably connected, as Nietzsche breaks down Descartes’ mind/body split. His admonitions about one’s body directly parallel the apotropaic instinct of a kind of “selfish” “warding off” of distractions and negative energies in one’s intellectual life mentioned above. He advises, “Sit as little as possible; give no credence to any thought that was not born outdoors while one moved about freely—in which the muscles are not celebrating a feast, too” (239-40). Free and happy muscles make for a happy body, which then allows for freedom of movement and creativity of the mind.

Yet the connection between mind and body does not stop at the skin for Nietzsche. One's muscles cannot celebrate a feast in just any venue. Nietzsche therefore adds to *nutrition* and exercise the importance of *place* and *climate* in relation to "becoming what one is." He explains, "a mistaken choice of place and climate can not only estrange a man from his task but can actually keep him from it" (240), and thus one's body becomes "a very subtle and reliable instrument" (241) for determining the beneficence of a particular climate or place. He offers examples from his own experience (mostly in Germany) of "so many disastrous places for my physiology" (241), and lists places ("Paris, Provence, Florence, Jerusalem, Athens") with "excellent dry air" "where genius found its home" for so many great men (241).<sup>10</sup> Another vital physiological choice according to Nietzsche is that of "recreation" (242). The German term *Erholung* carries playful connotations similar to the English term *recreation*; however, it also implies recuperation and healing. For Nietzsche, then, one must not only "ward off" malignant energies, but also pursue salubrious ones. Nietzsche's own choice of "*Erholung*" is reading books, because it "liberate[s]" him from himself (242).<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche recognizes that even in the great and serious task of self-construction, one needs a break, an escape from one's own seriousness (242) to become rejuvenated for continuing the task.

Ultimately, the thrust of his argument is that place, climate, and recreation can have a powerful influence on what he calls the "tempo" of one's metabolism, and thus the "tempo" of one's creative energies and unfolding "self"-hood. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he characterizes the tensions created between people who live and think in different tempos. "It is hard to be understood, especially when one thinks and lives

*gangasrotagati* [as the current of the Ganges moves], among men who think and live differently—namely, *kurmagati* [as the tortoise moves], or at best ‘the way frogs walk,’ *mandukagati*” (39).<sup>12</sup> This characterization dramatizes Nietzsche’s explanation in *Ecce Homo* that “the ‘spirit’ itself is after all merely an aspect of [the tempo of] this metabolism” (240). If one’s metabolism is slow like a tortoise, then one tends to think and live in this way. While this statement is perhaps not scientifically provable in all cases, one can certainly think of examples that support Nietzsche’s claim. Because of this imbrication of “spirit” or “self” and “metabolism,” attention to the “tempo” of one’s body and how it is affected and changed by the material world is vital to an aesthetic existence.

But what exactly is the connection between bodily “tempo” and the aesthetic? Nietzsche uses the term “tempo” elsewhere in his works to characterize the style of one’s character and of one’s writing. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he explains that the tempo of the style of a certain language “has its basis in...the average *tempo* of its metabolism” (40). In *Ecce Homo* he writes more specifically of his own works that the meaning of their style arises from the “tempo” of his “inward states,” and the multiplicity of his inward states allows for his “multifarious art of style” (265). A definition of the term “artistry of instinct” here becomes clearer. The tempo of an aesthetic style is born out of the tempo of one’s metabolism. Therefore, for Nietzsche, “giving style to one’s character” (*GS* 232), “becoming what one is,” emerges from the same metabolic origin as giving style to one’s writing.

Nowhere in *Ecce Homo* is this connection between the aesthetic phenomenon of composition and the aesthetic phenomenon of existence clearer than in Nietzsche’s

discussion of the process of writing his *Zarathustra*, a process he is tempted to describe as “inspiration”:

...[O]ne could hardly reject altogether the idea that one is merely incarnation, merely mouthpiece, merely a medium of overpowering forces.... One hears, one does not seek; one accepts, one does not ask who gives; like lightning, a thought flashes up, with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form—I never had any choice. (300)

This description offers an almost Romantic understanding of being in-spired, breathed into by the gods as a medium for supernatural forces seeking translation in the material world. This is certainly the way writing his most famous work *felt* for Nietzsche:

“something becomes *visible*, audible, something that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down—that merely describes the facts” (300). But this segment begins with a big “If”: “If one had the slightest residue of superstition left in one’s system....” then this is certainly how one would explain it. Yet Nietzsche spent his entire career denouncing superstition as “nonsense,” a “religious neurosis” (*BGE* 61). With no “residue of superstition” left in his system, how does Nietzsche account for this experience of the inspiration of his aesthetic act? The answer is that inspiration is an *embodied* experience with bodily origins for Nietzsche, more of an *ex*-spiration. “The *body* is inspired,” he writes, “let us keep the ‘soul’ out of it” (302). Notice that *Zarathustra* was something that filtered through his senses—it became “visible, audible,” and shook him down. But a bodily origin does not mean an origin in a Cartesian *cogito*. Nietzsche describes the experience as a “rapture,” “one is altogether beside oneself” (300). This embodied ex-

spiration is not a self-centered experience; in fact, a central, governing “self” would get in the way.

This passage’s connection to Nietzsche’s process of “self”-construction now becomes clear. An aesthetic existence is “inspired” in the individual, just like the texts he creates. Again, the writer or artist remains not passive, but open to the play of the energies of the material world about and within her. The language is even quite similar to Nietzsche’s approach to self-creation (“to become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion *what* one is” [254]) when he speaks of the “involuntariness of image and metaphor”: “one no longer has any notion of what is an image or metaphor: everything offers itself as the nearest, most obvious, simplest expression” (301). Again, the process of creation involves an attitude of *amor fati*, as Nietzsche describes the experience as “a depth of happiness in which even what is most painful and gloomy does not seem something opposite but rather conditioned, provoked, a *necessary* color” (300). Again, this act of aesthetic creation is linked inextricably to embodiment and its instincts. And again, Nietzsche describes this link in terms of “tempo”: “Now the pace quickens involuntarily, now it becomes slow” (300).

One must be open to the “play” of this rapture, but one must also take a playful approach to one’s material, as Nietzsche describes earlier of his *Zarathustra*: “the tempo of these speeches is a tender adagio” (219). “Adagio,” of course, is defined as a slow, even loafing tempo. And again, Nietzsche uses the same impersonal pronoun “one” to describe this experience. As his subtitle “becoming what one is” implies, this section offers a kind of anti-model of creative inspiration. On the one hand this is an intensely personal experience for Nietzsche; he ends the section by saying “This is *my* experience

of inspiration” (303), and he explains the context of this experience in the next section as the occasion for his writing the first part of *Zarathustra*. But on the other hand, this information is kept out of the inspiration section itself. By using “one,” he implies that this experience is not unprecedented or radically individual. Again, Nietzsche offers the readers of his autobiography the tools for creating and understanding texts (as well as self-hood), rather than offering himself as a model for emulation.

Nietzsche goes on to expand his notion of “tempo” in this section in relation to his written texts. He describes it as “an instinct for rhythmic relationships that arches over wide spaces of forms—length, the need for a rhythm with wide arches, is almost the measure of the force of inspiration, a kind of compensation for its pressure and tension” (300). One almost needs to draw a sketch of the relationships in this sentence to grasp it. In the German, the terms “arches over,” “wide arches,” and “tension,” are *uberspannt*, *weitgespannt*, and *Spannung*, all sharing the same root (Kaufmann’s note 300). In the English, the relationship is not as clear that the rhythmic instinct arching over wide spaces of forms is what creates the pressure and tension of inspiration. The further this instinct stretches, the more taut and tense it becomes, and the more force it contains. This is why “length” is the “measure of the force of inspiration.” This sentence offers an explanation for Nietzsche’s own play with a multiplicity of literary forms in his writing, including the essay, aphorism, poetry, even the form of autobiography itself—each with its own rhythms and lengths. By playing within the rhythms of so many forms, his instinct is allowed multiple ways to manifest itself. This formulation also applies to self-construction. For one certainly has a sense that one’s body is inspired with an “involuntary” (300) task that must be accomplished, and one must not be self-centered,

but “beside oneself” for it to do so. However, one must also be actively playing (remember, a structuring activity) with different rhythms and forms for that task, that “self”-hood, that life story to unfold.

Thus, the man who killed off the “self” in turn offers us an aesthetic definition of “self”-hood. Perhaps Nietzsche, after a life-long play with other forms and rhythms, chose the form of autobiography to model what a life looks like that is lived without the centering, organizing, and stultifying ideas of a Romantic “self”-hood or God. And *Ecce Homo*’s anti-model of becoming offers not a new center or “idol,” but rather points to the human structures that remain in the attitude of *amor fati*, in the activity of play, and in the instincts of an individual body—all vital elements in an aesthetic orientation to existence, as I have shown. Through his attention to embodiment and the structuring activity of play, Nietzsche also anticipates and answers some of the questions of a kind of radical or naïve postmodernism, in which the “aesthetic” and notions of identity and self-construction become kind of free-for-all, radically relativistic ideas, or in which any discussion of “self”-hood is brushed aside as naively nostalgic or obsolete. Even without a God or an essential “self,” a person can construct a life authentic to the structures of her own bodily instincts and aesthetic disposition. By declaring the “death of the self,” Nietzsche has far from put an end to the genre and form of autobiography, nor to discussions about what it means to be an individual human, as his own autobiography reveals. Instead, this act of destroying opens up the space for becoming, the space for new metaphors and formulations for “self”-hood, and new living as well as textual manifestations of an aesthetic existence.

Jessica Lewis Luck  
Indiana University

## Works Cited

- Eakin, Paul John. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999.
- . *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.
- Fichtelberg, Joseph. "Varieties of Self: The Case of Friedrich Nietzsche." *The Complex Image: Faith and Method in American Autobiography*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1989.
- Freadman, Richard. *Threads of Life: Autobiography and the Will*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001.
- Hans, James S. *The Play of the World*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1981.
- Harrison, Margot. "Pathological Honesty: Truth and Self in Rousseau and Nietzsche." *Qui Parle* 8.2 (1995): 20-53.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "The Autobiographical Pact." *On Autobiography*. Trans. Katherine Leary. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. 3-30.
- Nehamas, Alexander. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- . *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
- . *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- . "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*. Ed. and Trans. Daniel Breazeale. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities P International, 1979. 79-97.

---. *The Will to Power*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books, 1968.

Samuel, Richard. "Friedrich Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*: An Autobiography?" *Deutung und Bedeutung: Studies in German and Comparative Literature Presented to Karl-Werner Maurer*. Eds. Brigitte Schludermann, Victor G. Doerksen, Robert J. Glendinning, and Evelyn Scherabon Firchow. The Hague: Mouton, 1973. 210-27.

Sprinker, Michael. "Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography." *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. 321-42.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche uses the term "soul" here rather than "self," but given his antipathies to any metaphysics, the distinction is not significant in this context.

<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Samuel determines that Nietzsche's insanity had set in at the point of writing *Ecce Homo*, and for this reason he sounds a note of caution concerning this work and every work written by Nietzsche after 1882, including *Zarathustra* (226, 227). The point of my paper is not to argue whether Nietzsche was sane or insane at the point of writing *Ecce Homo*. Certainly evidence exists in the book and in his letters at the time that would suggest a mind that is slipping. However, the portrait painted of Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo* is a beautiful and important one, and I have to agree with Kaufmann that "even if what might be interpreted as signs of madness do occasionally flicker in a passage, that does not mean that the portrait can therefore be ignored" (202).

<sup>3</sup> "Count Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803), Italian dramatist. The *Memoirs of his Life* were published posthumously" (Kaufmann's footnote 145).

<sup>4</sup> Although Margot Harrison points out several similarities between *Ecce Homo* and *The Confessions*, including their opening requests to "not mistake me for someone else" and their explorations of the rhetoric of truth in the texts (24).

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Nehamas in his book *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* describes Nietzsche's notion of an aesthetic existence and "giving style to one's character" as turning one's life into a literary text. While I find this formulation helpful to a certain extent, it does not sufficiently account for the centrality of the body in the creation of an aesthetic existence.

<sup>6</sup> While I agree with Richard Freadman that Nietzsche's conception of self-hood does not allow for "the kind of effective introspection that we habitually associate with autobiography" (60), *Ecce Homo* is replete with self-evaluation. Nietzsche is unique among many autobiographers I think in his "coming clean" about his own personal shortcomings and the shortcomings of his autobiography right in the Preface. It shows a striking sense of painful self-awareness that itself could be a part of his model for "becoming what one is."

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Fichtelberg usefully describes Nietzsche's idea of "self" as a kind of *typos*—both "that which imparts form" and "that which receives form" (17).

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that while play is a structuring activity, its process and the structures it creates and destroys cannot be described as "rational" as the term "structure" might imply. Nietzsche writes that "'Rationality' at any price [is] a dangerous force that undermines life" (271). He certainly does not deny a place for scientific inquiry and reason here, he denies only the employment of rationality "*at any price*" in

---

all aspects of one's life. Clearly he finds the anti-rational, playful orientation to be more conducive to an aesthetically constructed existence.

<sup>9</sup> See Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

<sup>10</sup> For a fascinating look at some of the more beneficent climates in which Nietzsche gave birth to his own works of genius, see David Farrell Krell's *The Good European: Nietzsche's Work Sites in Word and Image*.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche argues that reading a book while "spiritually pregnant" is "depraved," but enjoys reading as a "recreational" activity (242), but he only chooses to read a small number of books that are "proved" to him (243).

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Nietzsche would ascribe this difference in individual tempo of living and thinking as the cause of his being so misunderstood in his own day.