Chapter 1

The Philosopher as Writer: Form and Content in Nietzsche

This book is intended for the placid reader [. . .]. Such a person has not yet forgotten how to think while he reads; he still understands the secret of how to read between the lines.


This dual series of experiences, this access to apparently separate worlds, is repeated in my nature in every respect—I am a Doppelgänger, I have a ‘second’ face in addition to the first. And perhaps also a third . . .

—Nietzsche, from a draft for Ecce Homo

MISUNDERSTANDING NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche’s writings have, from the very beginning, provoked misunderstanding among readers. His first book, The Birth of Tragedy, published in January 1872, was greeted with scornful silence by the philological community. Even Friedrich Ritschl, who three years earlier had recommended Nietzsche for a professorship in classical philology at Basel University with the greatest enthusiasm, could not bring himself to write to his former pupil and reveal his true feelings about the book. In private, however, Ritschl’s judgment was all too clear. In a diary entry recorded shortly after receiving an advance copy of The Birth of Tragedy, Ritschl describes it as a piece of “ingenious dissipation.” Nietzsche, quite shaken by the lack of positive response from Ritschl and others, confesses to his close friend Erwin Rohde to being “seized by a terrible seriousness . . . because in such voices I divine the future
of all that I have planned. This life will be very hard” (KSAB, 3/192).²

The failure of The Birth of Tragedy, which was openly ridiculed by some of Nietzsche’s contemporaries, was to confirm his worst fears for the future, and in the following years Nietzsche’s writings were to receive little, if any, positive attention. The silence was to continue almost without exception until the decade following Nietzsche’s breakdown, when his fame quickly began to spread. The change in fortune was so great that by 1936 Heidegger could speak of the “enormous and varied secondary literature surrounding Nietzsche” (N I, 19/ N 1, 10).

A glance at the secondary literature, which since Heidegger’s time has grown even more substantial, reveals a thinker whose work has been the subject of the most diverse interpretations imaginable. Rarely has a philosopher been read in such incompatible ways. As R. Hinton Thomas has documented in his study of Nietzsche’s influence on German politics and social thought from 1890–1918, Nietzsche was read by nationalist and anti-Semitic thinkers as well as by leading socialist and feminist activists.³ A similar split could be observed in Europe and the United States after the Second World War, between critics who viewed Nietzsche as a major intellectual force behind National Socialism and defenders who emphasized the potentially liberating aspects of Nietzschean thought. Even today, when scholars need not defend Nietzsche against the charge of being a fascist thinker, there is a surprising lack of agreement about the meaning of Nietzsche’s philosophy and just where his importance lies. An example among many of this phenomenon is the oftentimes polemical debate over Nietzsche’s relationship to poststructuralism which has taken place over the last decade.⁴ The disagreement surrounding Nietzsche is not only unusual with respect to the diversity and incompatibility of the interpretations essayed, but there is a genuine lack of consensus regarding basic methodological questions such as what importance should be accorded to Nietzsche’s unpublished writings, particularly the writings on language and rhetoric from the early 1870s, and whether a text such as The Will to Power, a posthumous collection of selections from Nietzsche’s notebooks, is to be considered “an integral part of Nietzsche’s literary and philosophical work”⁵ or a philologically corrupt text of little or no scholarly value.⁶ If Nietzsche’s writings are no longer provoking the shocked silence displayed by Ritschl, they are, so it appears, still the subject of much disagreement.

One reason for this has to do with the character and texture of Nietzsche’s writing. As has often been observed, anyone who has sat down with one of Nietzsche’s books knows that the usual set of assumptions which normally govern the reading of philosophical texts does not apply. To begin with, there is a general lack of an obvious organizing principle, thematic or text around which an interpretation of Nietzsche’s writings can be constructed.
Nietzsche’s books, as Danto has observed, “do not exhibit any special structure as a corpus” (19). Although there may be compelling reasons to reject the rather extreme conclusion Danto draws from this fact, namely, that Nietzsche’s “writings may be read in pretty much any order, without greatly impeding the comprehension of his ideas” (19), there can be little doubt that the question which, if any of Nietzsche’s texts can be considered the magnum opus around which the other texts in the corpus can be organized, has no clear answer. Even if we limit ourselves to the texts written after 1881, Nietzsche’s so-called mature period, the search for a central text raises more questions than it solves. The most obvious candidate to play such a role is Thus Spoke Zarathustra, which Nietzsche at one time thought of as the prolegomena to his mature philosophy. In a letter to his long time friend Franz Overbeck composed shortly after completing the third—and at that time final—part of Zarathustra, Nietzsche writes of his desire to undertake a wholesale revision of his “metaphysica” and “epistemological views.” “I must,” he writes,

go though a whole series of disciplines, step by step, for I have now decided to use the next five years to work out my ‘philosophy’ for which I have, through my Zarathustra, constructed a vestibule. (KSAB, 6/504).

However, the published text of Zarathustra bears only the most indirect relationship to the books which follow. Not only is it radically different in form from these texts, but two of the concepts at the heart of this text, the will to power and the eternal recurrence of the same, play a relatively minor role in subsequently published texts, while the figure of the Übermensch disappears completely from Nietzsche’s writings. Although Nietzsche was, in the years which follow, to continually refer to Zarathustra as his most important book—in Ecce Homo he calls it the “greatest gift that has yet been given to humanity”—there is no obvious path from this text to the writings of the late 1880s.

A further, albeit related problem is that Nietzsche continually revised and enlarged his texts in such a way as to make it difficult to judge where one text ends and another begins, and hence to understand how the individual books relate to one another. Consider the case of The Gay Science. First published in 1882, the text initially had four major subdivisions or books. When the second edition appeared almost five years later, the text had a substantially different appearance. Whereas the first edition was published without a preface, beginning instead with a poetic “Prelude in German Rhymes,” the second edition had both a preface and a new, concluding set of poems, the “Songs of Prince Vogelfrei.” More important than these changes, however, was the addition of a fifth book, which radically altered the structure of the entire text. The
dramatic denouement of book four, with its introduction of the idea of the eternal recurrence and the figure of Zarathustra in its concluding two sections (341–342), no longer serves as the end of the book itself. These changes raise important, though often unasked questions concerning how the second edition is to be read and the relationship between the new and old material. In addition to the internal changes the text underwent in this period, it is also important to consider external events, namely, the fact that in the roughly five-year period between the first and second editions, Nietzsche had published two additional books, Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883–1885) and Beyond Good and Evil (1886). This raises the following question: Should the fifth book of The Gay Science be read in conjunction with the first four books originally published in 1882, or is it perhaps better read in the context of Beyond Good and Evil, with which it is roughly contemporaneous? The situation is further complicated when we consider that the title page of the first edition of On the Genealogy of Morals, published in November 1887, contains a note asserting that the text is meant to “supplement and clarify my most recently published book, Beyond Good and Evil.”

The complicated textual history of The Gay Science is the rule rather than the exception. Rather than regarding his books as discrete works, Nietzsche seems to have considered them to be part of a larger, continuous project with no definite beginning or end. Returning to Zarathustra, we find that the “vestibule” of Nietzsche’s philosophy, had, as it were, a vestibule of its own. In the conclusion to the letter to Overbeck cited above, Nietzsche writes that while reading through The Dawn and The Gay Science I found that there is practically no line contained in these books that cannot serve as an introduction, preparation and commentary to the above named Zarathustra. It is a fact [eine Tatsache] that I wrote the commentary before the text— —.

In light of this, it comes as no surprise that turning to the individual texts themselves provides little comfort to the philosophically inclined reader. Rather than fitting neatly into one of the recognized categories of philosophical writing, with few notable exceptions Nietzsche’s texts appear to have little or no thematic continuity or purpose. Punctuated by rhymes, riddles, and irreverent asides and couched in a language which combines passages of great lyricism and irony, Nietzsche’s texts seem joyfully to mock the pretensions and expectations of his readers. Even a text such as On the Genealogy of Morals, which Walter Kaufmann has described as the book of Nietzsche’s that “comes closest, at least in form, to Anglo-American philosophy,”¹⁸ could hardly be called a work of ethics or moral theory in the way in which these terms are usually understood. Rather than seeking to defend a particular moral
theory, Nietzsche hopes to lay the groundwork for a critique of morality and of moral values in general. Such a task, Nietzsche says, requires a new kind of knowledge,

a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which [moral values] grew, under which they evolved and changed (morality as consequence, as symptom, as mask, as tartufferie, as illness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, as remedy, as stimulant, as restraint, as poison), a knowledge of a kind that has never existed or even been desired (GM, P.6).

In spite of the obvious cognitive aim of Nietzsche’s task, the three essays that make up the Genealogy contain little of the argument and demonstrative intent usually found in philosophical texts. Theses are advanced, but often not defended, and when arguments are mustered in defense of particular assertions, they are usually of the rhetorical, rather than logical, variety.

Consider, for example, Nietzsche’s analysis of the origin of bad conscience in the second essay. Having analyzed the relationship between punishment and the fundamental economic relationships of exchange and barter, which rest on the ability to assign a value to a particular ware or transgression, Nietzsche puts forth his own hypothesis as to how human beings first acquired the capacity to feel guilt:

I regard the bad conscience as the serious illness that human beings were bound to contract under the stress of the most fundamental change they ever experienced—that change which occurred when they found themselves finally enclosed within the walls of society and of peace. The situation that faced sea animals when they were compelled to become land animals or perish was the same as that which faced these semi-animals, well adapted to the wilderness, to war, to prowling, to adventure—suddenly all their instincts were devalued and ‘suspended.’ From now on they had to walk on their feet and ‘bear themselves’ whereas hitherto they had been borne by the water; a dreadful heaviness lay upon them. They felt unable to cope with the simplest undertakings; in this new world they no longer possessed their former guides, their regulating, unconscious and infallible drives—they were reduced to thinking, inferring, reckoning, coordinating cause and effect, these unfortunate creatures; they were reduced to their ‘consciousness,’ their weakest and most fallible organ! I believe there has never been such a feeling of misery on earth, such a leaden discomfit—and at the same time the old instincts had not suddenly ceased to make their usual demands! Only it was hardly or rarely possible to oblige them: as a rule
they had to seek new and, as it were, subterranean gratifications [...]. Those fearful bulwarks with which the political organization protected itself against the old instincts of freedom—punishments belong, first and foremost, among these bulwarks—brought about that all those instincts of the wild, free, prowling human being turned backward against human beings themselves. Hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change, in destruction—all this turned against the possessors of such instincts: that is the origin of the ‘bad conscience.’ (GM, II.16)

The argument Nietzsche makes in this passage on behalf of his hypothesis, that the origin of bad conscience can be found in the exigencies of socialization which forced the instincts of primordial human beings to turn against these creatures themselves, is clearly not a logical proof, but an allegorical argument. For there is no obvious way in which Nietzsche’s hypothesis can be proved, in the logical sense of the word, true or false, and because this point is so obvious, there is good reason to think that this hypothesis should not be read as an empirical claim at all, as a statement which avails itself of “proof” in the traditional sense. In this respect, one misreads the passage if the word hypothesis is taken too literally. To be sure, Nietzsche’s intent in this passage and in the text as a whole is a cognitive one: he aims to illuminate the foundations and origins of moral values, and insofar as this is the case a passage such as this one cannot be dismissed as mere “rhetoric.” However, both the manner in which Nietzsche’s presents his hypothesis and his claim that the kind of knowledge he seeks has never existed or even been sought before, suggest that texts such as this need to be approached otherwise than by means of the criteria which have governed and determined philosophical knowledge hitherto.

Nietzsche’s rejection of traditional philosophical methods and procedures finds expression in the eschewal of linear narrative structures. Rather than the first person narrative voice we find in texts such as Augustine’s Confessions and Descartes’ Meditations or the seemingly neutral, undeclared narrator characteristic of most other philosophical writing, in Nietzsche’s texts we are confronted with a variety of voices, personae and registers which, taken together, have the result of making it extraordinarily difficult to identify and definitively attribute any view to Nietzsche at all. Ironically enough, the one author Nietzsche most resembles in this respect is Plato, who never ‘speaks’ for himself, but only through the mouths of others. Nietzsche’s observation that Plato was forced “by sheer artistic necessity to create an art form that was intimately related to the existing art forms repudiated by him” (BT, 14), could be applied equally well to Nietzsche himself. One is left with the impression that reading Nietzsche the way one reads Aristotle or Kant is anal-
ogous to reading Shakespeare and asking whether a particular soliloquy is true or false; the text and the evaluative criteria being brought to bear upon it appear utterly at odds with one another.\textsuperscript{13}

In response to these challenges, recent scholarship, particularly in the United States, has focused on the possibility that paying sufficient attention to Nietzsche's style—seemingly one of the prime obstacles to understanding—is one way of making sense of his otherwise hermetic texts. Rather than viewing Nietzsche's style as something to be overcome, there is a growing consensus that his style is an integral part of his thought. In an introductory essay on Nietzsche written in 1988, Michael Gillespie and Tracy Strong describe how scholars have altered their approach to Nietzsche as a result of this recognition: "In the past decade, we have witnessed yet another rebirth of this apparently most protean of thinkers." Unlike previous approaches, this rebirth "does not start with the assumption that we should look first at the 'content' of what Nietzsche says ... [but] begins rather with the claim that we can best understand the meaning of what Nietzsche says by coming to terms with how he says it, that the meaning of Nietzsche's enigmatic utterances can best be understood by examining the style or structure of his thought."\textsuperscript{14} The recognition that style and content, like the face and obverse of a single coin, cannot be prised apart from one another has led to a greater appreciation of Nietzsche in the Anglophone world. The fact that some of the more inescrutable and politically charged aspects of Nietzsche's texts are now seen to be parts of conscious philosophical or rhetorical strategies, has allowed scholars to more easily and convincingly draw connections between Nietzsche's thought and conventional philosophical discourse and thus to integrate Nietzsche into the philosophical canon in a way that seemed unimaginable fifty years ago. An example of this is the popularity and influence of Alexander Nehamas' study *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, which has probably legitimated Nietzsche and the new approach to his writings more than any other recent work of scholarship. Another sign of Nietzsche's increasing legitimacy within the larger philosophical community is the number of recent studies authored by philosophers working within the Anglo-American tradition, who, historically speaking, have shown the greatest resistance to Nietzsche.\textsuperscript{15}

In spite of the obvious success and influence of the new approach described by Gillespie and Strong, doubts remain as to whether the emphasis on style has truly altered our understanding of Nietzsche. The question is important because of the implicit assumption that by attending to the intrinsic interconnectedness of style and content, the new approach achieves something missed by previous approaches, that, to cite Henry James, the question of style is the figure in Nietzsche's carpet, "the very string . . . that [his] pearls are strung on."\textsuperscript{15}
THE DISCOVERY OF STYLE

We have seen how the way in which Nietzsche composed his texts and his rejection of argumentative form and linear narrative structures force readers to self-consciously reflect upon the question of how these texts are to be read. This is a rare accomplishment, for unlike their literary counterparts, philosophers are generally inclined to view reading and interpretation as relatively perspicuous and unproblematic procedures. Before style became a significant concern for readers of Nietzsche, the most common reaction to the difficulties posed by Nietzsche’s texts was to assume that his thought could only be understood properly if it were in a certain respect abstracted from the texts in which it was expressed. Thus in his groundbreaking study of Nietzsche, first published in 1950, Kaufmann suggests that the inadequacies of Nietzsche’s presentation of his ideas can be overcome if we project them onto a larger, systematic whole. Although he offered “many fruitful hypotheses, Nietzsche failed to see that only a systematic attempt to substantiate them could establish an impressive probability in their favor.” The meaning of Nietzsche’s individual thoughts and concepts, Kaufmann continues, “cannot possibly be grasped except in terms of their place in Nietzsche’s whole philosophy.”

Kaufmann was well aware of Nietzsche’s aversion to systematic philosophy and any form of system building. In a well known passage cited by Kaufmann, Nietzsche writes “I mistrust all systematic thinkers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity” (TI, I.26). However, the openly unsystematic manner in which Nietzsche presented his thought possesses a dilemma for Kaufmann who wants to maintain that, all appearances to the contrary, Nietzsche’s thought constitutes a unity whose “coherence in organic” (91). Kaufmann’s solution to this problem is twofold: to explain the unsystematic and discontinuous quality of Nietzsche’s thought by means of an appeal to the deeply seated skeptical impulse in Nietzsche’s thought, and concurrently, to criticize Nietzsche for taking this skeptical attitude to such a length that it had a deleterious effect on his thought as a whole. The skeptical impulse in Nietzsche is reflected in his insistence that beliefs must continually be subjected to doubt and questioned. Beliefs which one has accepted and ceased to question become convictions, which have a restraining effect upon oneself: “convictions are prisons. A spirit who wants great things, who wants the means to them, is necessarily a skeptic. The freedom from every kind of conviction belongs to strength, the ability to see freely. . . .” (A, 54). For Kaufmann, the motility and protean character of Nietzsche’s thought are consequences of this need to continuously subject his beliefs to the most vigilant questioning. This method, which Kaufmann dubs Nietzsche’s “experimentalism,” is an attempt to “get to the bottom of problems” without being encum-
bered by the demands of systematization (87). Nietzsche's mistake, in Kaufmann's view, was to underestimate the extent to which "the insights which he tries to formulate in his aphorisms will have to be accounted for in any comprehensive explanatory system, just as an honest scientific experiment cannot be ignored by any comprehensive scientific system" (87). Nietzsche's experimentalism can only succeed, Kaufmann argues, if the results of previous experiments are codified and only questioned if they conflict with "new experiences and ideas. In this sense, a new insight in not exploited sufficiently, and the experiment is, as it were, stopped prematurely, if systematization is not eventually attempted" (94).

Similar presuppositions to these govern Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche. Like Kaufmann, Heidegger argues that Nietzsche's text must be read against the background of a systematic and coherent whole. As is well known, Heidegger locates this whole, Nietzsche's "philosophy proper," not in the published works, but in the notes, drafts and fragments left behind. In an infamous passage from the lecture course "The Will to Power as Art" offered in 1936, Heidegger writes that

Nietzsche's philosophy proper, the fundamental position on the basis of which he speaks in these and in all the writings he himself published, did not assume a final form and was not itself published in any book, neither in the decade between 1879 and 1889 nor during the years preceding. What Nietzsche himself published during his creative life was always foreground.... His philosophy proper [die eigentliche Philosophie] was left behind as posthumous, unpublished work. (N I, 17/ N I, 9)

In this lecture course Heidegger identifies Nietzsche's philosophy proper with the unity and coherence of the three concepts of eternal recurrence, will to power and revaluation of values. The task which Heidegger sets himself is to grasp "in a unified way the doctrines of eternal return of the same and will to power, and these two doctrines in their most intrinsic coherence as revaluation" (N I, 25/ N I, 17). In later lecture courses, when the problem of nihilism began to figure more prominently in Heidegger's thinking, the list of concepts grows to five. In the lecture course on "European Nihilism" offered in the fall of 1940, Heidegger asserts that the totality of Nietzsche's philosophy is captured in five fundamental concepts or rubrics: "The five rubrics "nihilism," "revaluation of all values hitherto," "will to power," "eternal recurrence of the same," and "Overman"—each portrays Nietzsche's metaphysics from just one perspective, although in each case it is a perspective that defines the whole. Thus Nietzsche's metaphysics is grasped only when what is named in these five headings can be thought... in its primordial and heretofore merely intimated conjunction" (N II, 40/ N 4, 9–10).
Although Kaufmann’s and Heidegger’s interpretations differ in important and substantial respects, they share a common conviction that Nietzsche’s thought can only be understood properly if it is abstracted from its context and read against the background of his philosophy as a whole. This leads both interpreters to regard Nietzsche’s writings as vehicles of communication, rather than as books requiring interpretation. However, if Heidegger and Kaufmann do not read Nietzsche’s texts as texts, it is not because they do not take Nietzsche seriously as a thinker, but rather because they fail to take him seriously as a writer, and in this respect they unquestioningly privilege content over form; the ‘what’ of Nietzsche’s writings is thoroughly divorced from the ‘how.’ The new approach to Nietzsche outlined above aims to remedy this situation by insisting that form and content cannot be separated in this way, that Nietzsche’s writing is, in a rather direct way, an integral part of his thought. If this characterization of the new approach to Nietzsche is correct, then one would expect that the interpretations essayed by the practitioners of the new approach would reflect a deeper appreciation of Nietzsche the writer, and that this would broaden our understanding of his philosophy as a whole. Rather than essaying a detailed survey of the recent scholarship, we might do well to briefly focus on an interpretation which perhaps best represents the potentials of the new approach, that of Alexander Nehamas.

Although he observes that one of Nietzsche’s achievements was to show “that writing is perhaps the most important part of thinking” (41), Nehamas has a rather traditional view of the ends of interpretation. The task of the interpreter is to understand what Nietzsche thought, “the content of his work . . . his view of the will to power, the eternal recurrence, the nature of the self and the immoral presuppositions of morality” (1). In order to accomplish this aim, one must also consider Nietzsche’s style, because his writing “puts the very effort to understand him, to offer an interpretation of his views . . . into question” (1). The dilemma that Nietzsche’s writing poses is that in his texts we find him putting forth views that he claims are not truths in the traditional sense of the word, but only interpretations. The problem with this is that it seems to undermine the possibility of ever distinguishing between competing interpretations, hence doing away with any reason for believing one view to be truer or more correct than any other. In Nehamas’ view, Nietzsche’s style is an attempt to get around this problem, to put forth views as interpretations that cannot then be said to be mere interpretations, no better or worse than any other:

Nietzsche uses his changing genres and styles in order to make his presence as an author literally unforgettable and in order to prevent his readers from overlooking the fact that his views necessarily originate with
him. He depends on many styles in order to suggest that there is no single, neutral language in which his views, or any other, can ever be presented. (37)

According to Nehamas, style and content are thus related in only the most general way. Style is constitutive of meaning merely in the rather abstract sense that it determines the general form of what is said, namely, that what is meant to be understood is a contingent interpretation rather than a kind of absolute truth. Accordingly, Nehamas is less concerned with the style or rhetoric of a particular passage or book, than he is with the stylistic variation Nietzsche employs from book to book. Although he allows that questions such as why Nietzsche employs a particular style in one text rather than another might be important, he states that his “interest in Nietzsche’s style is much more general and abstract . . . [and concerns] not the style of individual works or passages but the fact that he shifts styles and genres as often as he does” (19–20).

However, elevated to this level of abstraction, the question of style loses most of its significance. The assumption made by Nehamas, that the function of interpretation is to offer a coherent and plausible account of Nietzsche’s views, implies a privileging of content over style and begs the question of what role, if any, style plays in the production of Nietzsche’s texts. Like Gadamer, Nehamas insists that the rhetoric of a text, its manner of meaning, must remain subordinate to its semantic content, which is itself subject to the demands of the principle of coherence. For Nehamas, the question of style is of interest because it allows us to read Nietzsche in such a way that he is neither a philosophical dogmatist, who presents his views as universally true, nor a radical relativist, who gives us no reason to prefer one view to another. Accordingly, style can tell us very little about the content of Nietzsche’s views other than how they are to be understood with respect to dogmatism and relativism. The materiality of Nietzsche’s texts, the specificity of his writing, is of little or no importance, and it is because Nietzsche’s writing as such is overlooked that Nehamas is able to avoid the types of questions which threaten to undermine the distinction between content and style on which his interpretation depends.

One such question that has been raised by recent readings of Nietzsche concerns the relationship between intentionality and meaning. Simply put, the question can be formulated as follows: Is the meaning of a text determined by the intentions of the author or, in addition, by semantic and syntactic structures that are, in principle, beyond the control of a single speaker or author? Although this question might appear to have very little to do with the issues at hand, its importance becomes apparent if we consider that Nehamas’ interpretation of Nietzsche’s style as a self-conscious strategy, “one of his essen-
tial weapons in his effort to distinguish himself from the philosophical tradition... and to offer alternatives to it” (20), commits him to an intentionalist view of meaning. It is because Nehamas views meaning as the product of authorial intention that he can maintain a distinction between form and content, between Nietzsche’s views and the texts within which these views are expressed. If, however, style is viewed not as a self-conscious strategy but as one part of a larger, non-intentionalist textual economy, then the end of interpretation ceases to be the articulation and elucidation of an author’s views as such, but rather a reading of the texts themselves. Such a reading must begin with the factum of the texts as texts, rather than with a set of concepts that are said to represent Nietzsche’s views or the content of his work. The limitations of Nehamas’ view of Nietzsche’s style can be established more concretely if we consider one important element of his interpretation, namely, the relationship between writing and the self.

For Nehamas there is a clear relationship between the questions concerning the nature and constitution of the self and the question of style. If Nietzsche’s style is an integral part of his attempt to combat philosophical dogmatism, to present his views as interpretations rather than as truths, one of the ways his texts can accomplish this task is by making it clear to the reader that the views being expressed are not in any sense those of a neutral and objective narrator, but that there is an essential connection between what is being said and who is doing the saying: “Nietzsche uses his changing genres and styles in order to make his presence as an author literally unforgettable and in order to prevent his readers from overlooking the fact that his views necessarily originate with him” (37). However, more is at stake than simply locating the origin of the views one finds in Nietzsche’s texts, for Nehamas argues that there is an identification between the personality of the writer and his thought: “Nietzsche’s varying self-conscious writing enables the practical reader always to be aware of who it is whose views are being presented, what personality these views express and constitute” (37). Nietzsche’s writing “never lets his readers forget that the argument they are getting is always in more than one sense personal” (27).19

If Nietzsche’s writing is essentially personal, for Nehamas it is also true that the self is at root a construction of the text and the act of writing. Nehamas rightly sees Nietzsche’s critique of traditional philosophical conceptions of the self as an incorporeal, rational, thinking substance to be one of the central themes of his philosophy. However the sheer radicalness of Nietzsche’s critique seems to undermine the very possibility of talking about a subject in any sense at all. In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche criticizes the assertion, which is at the heart of the traditional, which is to say, Cartesian conception of the subject, that the existence of the self can be established by introspection as a mere consequence of the process of thought. “It is,” Nietzsche writes,
a falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject ‘I’ is the condition of the predicate ‘think.’ It thinks: but that this ‘it’ is precisely the famous old ‘ego’ is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion and assuredly not an ‘immediate certainty’. After all, one has even gone too far with this ‘it thinks’—even the ‘it’ contains an interpretation of the process and does not belong to the process itself (BGE, 17).20

However, if Nietzsche wants to do away with the traditional conception of the self as a rational substance, it does not follow from this that he rejects the concept of the self altogether. Earlier in the same text he writes that the critique of the traditional concept of the self opens the way “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” (BGE, 12).

In spite of the appeal of such hypotheses, it is not entirely clear that it makes much sense to talk of the self having done away with the idea that the self is a substance. For if the self is something which develops over time or is created, as this passage suggests, just precisely what is it that is created? How can one speak about the soul at all if there seems to be nothing substantial about which one is talking? The paradoxes inherent in Nietzsche’s critique of the subject are poignantly illustrated by his numerous references to the Pindarian idea that “you ought to become who you are” (GS, 270). As Nehamas observes, this expression leave us inexorably suspended between the concepts of being and becoming, between thinking of the self as something that exists over time and conceiving of the self as something whose existence is essentially temporal, being created in time: “We are therefore faced with the difficult problem of seeing how that self can be what one is before it comes into being itself, before it is itself something that is. Conversely, if that self is something that is, if it is what one already is, how is it possible for one to become that self?” (175)

As we suggested above, Nehamas’ solution to this paradox lies in the idea that the self is created gradually over time by a complicated process of action and integration: “the self-creation Nietzsche has in mind involves accepting everything that we have done and, in the ideal case, blending it into a perfectly coherent whole” (188–189). This is accomplished, in Nietzsche’s case, by means of writing. It is no mere coincidence, Nehamas suggests, that the subtitle to Nietzsche’s philosophical autobiography, Ecce Homo, is a variation of the Pindarian theme, one that is no longer couched in the imperative voice as the citation in the previous paragraph, but is both declarative and illustrative: “How One Becomes What One Is.” For it is in Ecce Homo that Nietzsche provides a demonstration, as it were, of just how one might go about become what one is:
One way, then, to become one thing, one’s own character, what one is, is, after having written all these other books, to write *Ecce Homo* and even to give it the subtitle “How One Becomes What One Is.” It is to write this self-referential book in which Nietzsche can be said with equal justice to invent or discover himself, and in which the character who speaks to us is the author who has created him and who is in turn a character created by or implicit in all the books that were written by the author who is writing this one. (196)

One of the cornerstones of Nehamas’ understanding of this process of self-creation that we have not explicitly remarked upon is the idea that, for Nietzsche, the self that is created in this way is necessarily coherent and unified. This is one of the most surprising parts of Nehamas’ interpretation of Nietzsche, but it is an idea which he expresses and defends with great vigor. We have already noted, in a passage cited in the previous paragraph, that Nehamas sees the Nietzschean process of self-creation ending, in the ideal case, in a “perfectly coherent whole.”21 It is important to emphasize that the unity which Nehamas has in mind is far removed from the conception of self-as-substance, which Nietzsche quite clearly rejects. Rather, the unity of the self Nehamas refers to develops over time and is produced by means of a conscious strategy of integration and synthesis:

> The unity of the self, which therefore also constitutes its identity, is not something given but something achieved, not a beginning but a goal. And of such unity... Nietzsche is *not at all suspicious*... [T]he process of dominating, and thus creating, the individual, the unity that concerns us, is a matter of incorporating more and more character traits under a constantly expanding and evolving rubric. (182–183; my italics)

On Nehamas’ reading, Nietzsche’s style is the complement to his theory of the self, which in turn is illustrated or exemplified by his writings.22 Just as the motivation behind Nietzsche’s multifarious styles is to emphasize the irreducibly personal character of his ideas, so the self which Nietzsche came to create is brought into being by his texts, the very last of which describes the process in retrospect and presents a model for others to follow, not by imitating his path, but by urging others to create themselves and their own way (234).

Nehamas substantiates his surprising claim that the self should, as far as possible, be a coherent, unified whole by referring to passages such as this one from *Zarathustra*:

> I walk among men as among the fragments of the future—that future which I envisage. And this is all my creating and striving, that I create
and carry together into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident. And how could I bear to be a man if man were not also a creator and guesser of riddles and redeemer of accidents? (Za, II.20)

More direct evidence that Nietzsche sees self-creation as a process of integration and unification can be found in the *Genealogy*, where we read the following:

For this alone is fitting for a philosopher. We have no right to isolated acts of any kind: we may not make isolated errors or hit upon isolated truths. Rather do our ideas, our values, our yeas and nays, our ifs and buts, grow out of us with the necessity with which a tree bears fruit—related and each with an affinity to each, and evidence of one will, one health, one soil, one sun.—

For Nehamas, passages such as these are an essential part of his attempt to demonstrate that the picture of Nietzsche as an advocate of polysemy and interpretative indeterminacy that one finds in poststructuralist readings is quite mistaken. Although Nietzsche was a radical and highly non-traditional thinker, his radicalness does not lead to a rejection of the concepts of unity, totality, and coherence, but rather consists in an effort to reinterpret these concepts in a fundamentally new way. Nietzsche’s thinking, like his conception of the self, has “a determinate structure, form [and] meaning” (20).

While the evidence cited by Nehamas appears to be rather decisive, there are reasons to believe that Nietzsche’s texts are less coherent and determinate than Nehamas suggests. Consider a third passage cited by Nehamas in support of his view that, for Nietzsche, the unity of the self is achieved and maintained by means of a conscious strategy of integrating one’s character traits into a coherent whole. Here Goethe is apparently held up as a model of one who has achieved true selfhood:

What he wanted was totality [Totalität]; he fought the mutual extraneousness of reason, senses, feeling, and will [. . .] he disciplined himself to wholeness [Ganzheit], he created himself. (TI, IX.49)

Near the end of the aphorism Nietzsche pays Goethe the highest compliment possible by describing him as ennobled with a Dionysian faith:

Such a spirit who has become free stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the faith that only the particular is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole—he does not negate anymore. . . . Such a faith, however, is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptized it with the name of Dionysus.—
Now it is fairly clear that the whole mentioned in this last passage is an existential rather than an individual totality, and the faith to which Nietzsche refers is none other than an acceptance of the eternal recurrence. This is made explicit in the penultimate section of *Twilight of the Idols*, where Nietzsche links the Dionysian, here once more characterized as a form of affirmation, of “saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems,” with the eternal recurrence by describing himself as “the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus ... the teacher of the eternal recurrence” (TI, X.5).

Yet what is striking about the characterization of Goethe as Dionysian is not the connection with the eternal recurrence as such, but rather with an earlier and somewhat different description of Dionysus that we find in the same chapter of *Twilight*. Here Nietzsche returns to the concepts of the Apollonian and the Dionysian introduced in *The Birth of Tragedy* and he gives the following account of the Dionysian:

In the Dionysian state ... the whole affective system is excited and enhanced: so that it discharges [entladet] all its means of expression at once and simultaneously emits [herausstreibt] the power of representation, imitation, transfiguration, transformation, and every kind of mimicking and acting. The essential feature here remains the ease of metamorphosis ... The Dionysian type ... enters into any skin, into any affect: he constantly transforms himself. (TI, IX.10)

By itself, of course, this passage is not incompatible with the view of subjectivity Nehamas attributes to Nietzsche. In the spirit of Nehamas' reading one could say that it is a sign of great and exemplary strength for one to be able to control and unify the disparate elements that constitute the Dionysian state as Nietzsche here describes it. Goethe would then be, as Walter Kaufmann has put it, “the passionate man who is the master of his passions” (363). Yet this passage also gives us reason to pause. For if the essential feature of the Dionysian type is an ease of metamorphosis and constant transformation, if he can enter into any skin, how is it that this most protean figure can claim any or all these personae as his own? Could it not be the case that in order to be himself the Dionysian man must transcend himself and become someone else?  

An answer to this question is suggested by Nietzsche’s description of the Dionysian type as an actor. This description is certainly not incidental, for the figure of the actor and the related themes of the mask and dissimulation achieve something like emblematic status in Nietzsche’s writings. In one of the more important of these texts, section 361 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche considers the “problem of the actor” which, he opines, might provide the only means of approaching the concept of the artist. It is a problem. Nietzsche says, that
has troubled me for the longest time. I felt unsure (and sometimes still do) whether it is not only from this angle that one can get at the dangerous concept of the ‘artist’—a concept that has so far been treated with unpardonable generosity. Falseness with a good conscience; the delight in simulation exploding [herausbrechend] as a power that pushes aside one’s so-called ‘character,’ flooding it and at times extinguishing it; the inner craving for a role and mask, for appearance [. . .] all of this is perhaps not only peculiar to the actor?²⁵

Read from the perspective provided by this passage, the initial description of Goethe takes on a different light. For if Goethe is a truly Dionysian figure, an artist and an actor, then the wholeness that he created for himself is at best a simulacrum for the kind of coherent, unitary subjectivity that Nehamas attributes to Nietzsche. The mechanical, impersonal, vocabulary of these passages underscores the extent to which one’s identity is hostage to forces and procedures not wholly under one’s conscious control: the affective system “discharges” its means of expression; the powers of representation and dissimulation are “emitted”; the delight in simulation “explodes,” flooding and extinguishing the character of the actor. An analogous structure underlies Nietzsche’s description of Dionysian rapture from The Birth of Tragedy, in which “everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness” (BT, 1). Dionysus is the symbol of the essentially fractured structure of identity and the prototypical actor and artist: “until Euripides [. . .] all the celebrated figures of the Greek stage—Prometheus, Oedipus, etc.—are mere masks for this original hero, Dionysus” (BT, 1). On the terms of Nietzsche’s text, the concept of identity functions as a synecdoche, in which a part of an essentially fragmentary and provisional self is taken for the whole. Rather than supporting Nehamas’ interpretation, these passages suggest that the concepts of wholeness and totality are at bottom nothing more than rhetorical masks.²⁶

Although the foregoing raises serious doubts that a close reading of Nietzsche’s texts can support the conclusion that he regards the self as a coherent and unified whole, it might be objected that we have ignored the most obvious piece of evidence in support of Nehamas’ interpretation, namely, the life and work of Nietzsche himself. For as we have already noted, Nehamas views Nietzsche’s writings as prime examples of how one can create oneself in a unified and coherent manner. One way of achieving the “perfect unity” which Nehamas regards as the ideal of self-creation might be to write a great number of very good books that exhibit great apparent inconsistencies among them but that can be seen to be deeply continuous with one another when they are read carefully and well.
Toward the end of this enterprise one can even write a book about these books that shows how they fit together, how a single figure emerges through them. (195)

The question which we must now pursue is whether a single figure, an *autos*, does emerge from these pages. Might it not be the case that, on the contrary, *Ecce Homo* is a book about the indeterminacy or suspension of identity which confirms, rather than contradicts, the reading of the self we have offered above? Nehamas’ interpretation leaves this question open because he does not undertake a reading of this or any other of Nietzsche’s books. Since the aim of his interpretation is to determine the “content” of Nietzsche’s thought, he is principally concerned with discovering thematic connections and continuities among Nietzsche’s writings, without attempting to take the texts on their own terms as texts.” In an effort to examine Nehamas’ claim that a single figure emerges out of Nietzsche’s texts, let us briefly turn to *Ecce Homo* itself.

**WRITING THE SELF**

At first glance, this short, rather striking book opens as one expects any autobiography to begin, namely, with a statement of the book’s subject. The opening words of the foreword attest to the seeming conventional character of Nietzsche’s undertaking: “Seeing that before long I must confront humanity with the most difficult demand ever made of it, it seems indispensable to me to say who I am.” The nature of Nietzsche’s demand requires that he tell us who he is; in order to understand it, we must first understand him. Nietzsche emphasizes this point at the end of the first section of the foreword with the following words: “Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else!” Nietzsche’s emphatic exhortation not to mistake him for another betrays a suspicion that the reader might be mislead, and like Nietzsche’s contemporaries, neither see nor hear him. Perhaps in an effort to forestall this possibility, Nietzsche inserts a short exergue between the foreword and the first chapter of the text. The exergue says that the story begins on a particular date, October 15, 1888, Nietzsche’s forty-fourth birthday, and that it will be both retrospective and proleptic: “I looked back, I looked forward, and never saw so many good things at once [. . .]. And so I tell my life to myself.” In what follows Nietzsche recounts the story of his life, beginning with the well-known description of his parents, his illness, his tastes in matters of literature, food, drink, climate, and peoples, followed by a consideration of his writings, including an account of each of his hitherto pub-
lished books. The last and shortest chapter, "Why I am a destiny," is principally prospective in character. Having told the reader who he is, Nietzsche then returns to the real matter at hand, the revaluation of values. In a text remarkable for its apocalyptic tone, Nietzsche claims that the destiny of humanity will have been his destiny as well: the wars waged in his writings are precisely those that will be waged on the spiritual battlefields of Europe in the coming century.28

Although the form of Nietzsche's text suggests that it adheres to the prescriptions governing the genre of philosophical autobiography, a genre whose history extends at least back to Augustine, a close reading of both the title and the subtitle of this text indicate that the situation is rather more complicated than it first appears. Most readers will recognize that the title, Ecce Homo, is a quotation from the New Testament. The source of the quotation is the Gospel of John, where we read that Pilate, having listened to Jesus' claim to be a king, turns to the largely Jewish audience and says "ecce homo," behold the man.29 In its original context, the expression is explicitly not auto-referential, but directs the reader's attention to someone other than the author himself. Written about oneself, therefore, the phrase ecce homo produces a paradoxical effect, and points to an internal duality or "contradicting duplicity,"30 which will be echoed throughout the book in pairs such as male/female, death/life, decadent/beginning and identifications with dualities, for example, father/mother, Nietzsche/Wagner, Nietzsche/Oedipus, and Nietzsche/Socrates. Nietzsche underscores this point in a letter to Meta von Salis when he writes: "I myself am this homo, the ecce included" (KSAB, 8/114). The duality suggested by the title is echoed in a series of identifications and counter-identifications which run throughout the entire book. The first of these is established by the title, which identifies Nietzsche with Pilate, the speaker of the phrase ecce homo. It is not a coincidence that Nietzsche should wish to identify himself with Pilate, since it was Pilate who, according to Nietzsche, enriched the New Testament "with the only saying that has value—one which is its criticism, even its annihilation: 'What is truth!'" (A, 46). And this is precisely what is at stake in the text of Ecce Homo itself, where Nietzsche, like Pilate, questions the value of all that has thus far been taken for the truth: "everything that has hitherto been called 'truth' has been recognized as the most harmful, insidious, and subterranean form of lie" (EH, IV.8).

The subtitle of the book, "How One Becomes What One Is," is also a quotation, namely, from Pindar's Second Pythian Ode.31 Although this phrase seems at first to run contrary to the sense of the title by emphasizing the unity and stasis of identity, of what one is, the juxtaposition of being and becoming in the subtitle actually produces the opposite effect. Echoing the duality implicit in the expression "ecce homo," the juxtaposition of being and
becoming deepens the attentive reader’s suspicions that rather than affirming the coherence of the author’s identity, the text’s title and subtitle serve to place this identity into question. The subtitle does not merely reiterate the duality hinted at in the title but actually sharpens it by attributing to this duality a specifically temporal character, namely, by suggesting that being, what one is, is inseparable from becoming, the process of how one becomes what one is. One way in which the implication of being in becoming manifests itself in Nietzsche’s text is in the assertion that one’s identity is something that can only be established retrospectively. The knowledge of what one is, is always in some sense deferred; self-knowledge is mediated by this temporal gap between being and becoming, present and past. One consequence of this is that self-knowledge is predicated on ignorance, on not knowing what one is. Nietzsche says precisely this in section 9 of the chapter entitled “Why I Am So Clever.” Yielding to the inevitable, Nietzsche admits that

the genuine answer to the question, how one becomes what one is, can no longer be avoided [...]. Assuming that the task, the fate [Bestimmung], the destiny of the task [Schicksal der Aufgabe] transcends the average very significantly, there would be no greater danger than catching sight of oneself with this task. That one becomes what one is, presupposes that one does not have the faintest notion what one is [dass man nicht im Entferntesten ahnt, was man ist].

To become what one is, one must forget and misunderstand oneself. Self-knowledge, Nietzsche suggests, is necessarily fragmentary and incoherent, because it rests on that which is other than itself, on ignorance, not having the faintest notion what one is. It is vain to hope that the fragmentary nature of self-knowledge can ever be overcome by introspection and greater efforts at self-integration, as if it were a matter of circumstance, rather than necessity, that one is constantly “in the dark” about one’s self.

Nietzsche is quite explicit that the ignorance that is imbricated within self-knowledge is there by necessity, not chance. In the opening section of the second essay of the Genealogy, Nietzsche argues that the phenomenon of self-consciousness presupposes the existence of an active and opposing force, namely, forgetfulness. Reversing the traditional negative valuation of forgetfulness as a passive force that produces an unintentional and unwanted lack of knowledge, Nietzsche claims that

it is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression that is responsible for the fact that what we experience and absorb
enters our consciousness as little while we are digesting it [...] as does the thousandfold process involved in physical nourishment, so-called ‘incorporation’ [...] so that it will be immediately obvious how there could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, no present [Gegenwart], without forgetfulness.

Here again we see that knowledge—of the external world and of ourselves—is only possible on the basis of ignorance or forgetting. Just as knowing what one is would prevent one from actually becoming what one is, so, too, if forgetfulness did not stand before consciousness as a filter, only letting a fraction of the stimuli confronting one actually be experienced, the very possibility of experience as such would be undermined. What one experiences of the world and of oneself is always mediated by the absence of that which is not filtered out, forgotten, repressed.

Elsewhere in the Genealogy, the dependence of knowledge on an active and antecedent faculty of forgetfulness described in this passage is generalized into a principle of identity, where self-identity is said to necessarily presuppose ignorance of just who and what one is:

as one divinely preoccupied and immersed in himself into whose ear the bell has just boomed with all its strength the twelve beats of noon suddenly starts up and asks himself: ‘what really was that which just struck?’ so we sometimes rub our ears afterward and ask, utterly surprised and disconcerted, ‘what really was that which we have just experienced?’ and moreover: ‘who are we really?’ and, afterward as afore-said, count the twelve trembling bell-strokes of our experience, our life, our being—and alas! miscount them.—So we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we have to misunderstand ourselves, for us the law ‘Each is furthest from himself’ applies to all eternity—we are not ‘men of knowledge’ with respect to ourselves. (GM, P. 1)

Ignorance about oneself is not a lack which can be fully remedied, but is a necessary condition of self-knowledge. To seek to bridge the gap between ignorance and knowledge is, like Oedipus, to run the risk of exchanging one form of blindness for another.24

Against the foregoing it might be argued that we have underestimated the importance which Nietzsche assigns to the unity of the self. If the aim of self-creation is to create a unified and coherent self, then perhaps these divisions can be reconciled by means of ever increasing efforts of integration? As we have seen, there is a certain amount of textual evidence to support this
claim. Recall Zarathustra’s statement that he strives to “create and carry together into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident” (Za, II.20). An example of how such a process of integration might proceed is provided in Ecce Homo, where Nietzsche reinterprets his youthful enthusiasm for Schopenhauer and Wagner as a necessary step on the way to becoming what he is. In his remarks on the Untimely Meditations Nietzsche claims that the two essays devoted to Wagner and Schopenhauer do not really concern them at all, but “at bottom speak only of me.” The names Wagner and Schopenhauer are signs for the name Nietzsche, employed “in order to to express something, in order to to have at hand a few more formulas, signs, means of language [. . .] in the same way that Plato used Socrates as a semiotic for Plato” (EH, ‘UM’.3). Nietzsche’s retrospective recognition that the names Wagner and Schopenhauer are figures for the name Nietzsche does not, however, imply a progressive pattern of self-identification that would yield a determinate, albeit postponed, subject or ‘I’. The logic of such a pattern in this text is undermined by Nietzsche’s multiple self-identifications which preclude the possibility of a direct substitution of names, one that would affirm that the meaning of the most proper of words, the proper name, remains delimited and determinate. Nietzsche precludes precisely this possibility in an earlier remark on “Richard Wagner in Bayreuth”:

A psychologist might still add that what I heard as a young man listening to Wagnerian music really had nothing to do with Wagner[. . . . In] my essay “Wagner in Bayreuth” [. . .] I alone am discussed—and one need not hesitate to put down my name or the the word ‘Zarathustra’ where the text has the word Wagner [man darf rücksichtlos meinen Namen oder das Wort ‘Zarathustra’ hinstellen, wo der Text das Wort Wagner gibt]. (EH, ‘BT’.4)

The name Wagner, Nietzsche says, can be exchanged at will for the name Nietzsche or Zarathustra. This means, however, that the substitution remains inextricably suspended between Nietzsche and Zarathustra, and if one exchange is possible, then the field of possible exchanges can never be closed. Hence the meaning of the proper name Nietzsche, under whose signature this book appears, must remain indeterminate, both proper, signifying that which belongs to Nietzsche and enables him to sign his texts, and improper, that which remains other and unrecognizable within the parameters of the classical definition and logic of “the proper.”

If the names Nietzsche or Zarathustra can be substituted for the name Wagner, it is because the identity of the author Nietzsche, the ecce and the homo of this text, is itself at bottom a duality, something divided from itself.
And if this is true of oneself, there is no reason to believe that it is not also true of one's texts. However this is something that can only be recognized if our understanding of style is finally divorced from intentionalist conceptions of meaning. Until this happens, the new approach to Nietzsche will remain barely distinguishable from the old.