Prologue

After Odysseus gets the better of Polyphemus by guile and violence in Book 9 of Homer’s epic poem, the great tactician and his men escape by ship as the blinded hulk raises a stone over his head to avenge himself, if he can, on the fleeing Greeks. With care to make no sound as they set to sea, the Trojan War veterans seem out of harm’s way. But Odysseus must have the last word. He narrates:

Again I began to taunt the Cyclops – men around me trying to check me, calm me, left and right:
‘So headstrong – why? Why rile the beast again?’
‘That rock he flung in the sea just now, hurling our ship to shore once more – we thought we’d die on the spot!’
‘If he’d caught a sound from one of us, just a moan, he would have crushed our heads and ship timbers with one heave of another flashing, jagged rock!’
‘Good god, the brute can throw!’ So they begged but they could not bring my fighting spirit round.
I called back with another burst of anger. ‘Cyclops – if any man on the face of the earth should ask you who blinded you, shamed you so – say Odysseus, raider of cities, he gouged out your eye, Laertes’ son who makes his home in Ithaca!’

And what about Ecce Homo? Does Nietzsche call to us as he sails away? And who are we?

Introduction

Pretend you know nothing of Nietzsche and imagine yourself in a deck chair with *Ecce Homo*. What would this book communicate to you? The author describes grand intellectual travails, and German pastry; reviews his own books that “overcome morality,” and celebrates the climate of Turin, Italy; purports to give reasons for the existence of his outstanding character traits and abilities, and recounts a miserable slew of blinding headaches and digestive ills. As passage reading, *Ecce Homo* may not seem very good – it lacks sex, plot, and intrigue, certainly. And for several generations it has failed to make good philosophy reading either. In addition to these accidental faults, the book has lacked a genre; it has lacked context. Consequently, it has lacked for good interpretation, let alone an explanation. Because the work was neither fiction, memoir, nor philosophy as even loosely defined, there was no entrée to understanding.

*Ecce Homo* has aged in the shadows, and its sorry life consists of neglect, misunderstanding, and disparagement. As far as I can tell, the last person to comprehend and gain merriment from its farragoform was its author, Friedrich Nietzsche. Instead of laughing at this cheerfully cynical book, a legion of grave scholars has found it oddly distressing at best and pathetic madness at worst. (Unless you count the worst as the view in all camps that the work has no good reason to be.) Roberto Calasso has written that the “great changes of madness unfold in the hidden chamber of this work, something mysterious haunts these pages, and the mystery is destined to remain such.”¹ With due deference to mystery, I beg to differ.

Nietzsche completed *Ecce Homo* (“Behold the Man”), sometimes called his autobiography, just weeks before his mental collapse of 3 January 1889. Yet his last original composition is no chronicle or confession; rather, it shows Nietzsche attempting to unify and understand his philosophical

work overall. Hence *Ecce Homo* provides a way to read Nietzsche on his own terms, but it does more than this by way of its form. I contend that *Ecce Homo* is a satire. As a trained classicist, Nietzsche was familiar with this ancient genre, and he wrote a parody of autobiography to skewer not only the inherent pretensions of self-reflection and unvarnished truth, but the larger historical pretensions of philosophy to procure timeless wisdom. Seen this way, Nietzsche wrote *Ecce Homo* to recast his entire corpus as a species of what I call philosophical satire: the comic attack by hyperbole on philosophy itself, the better to contrast Nietzsche’s own program of more modest truth-telling.

On the surface, *Ecce Homo* presents us with a collection of interpretive prefaces to Nietzsche’s previous ten works, book-ended by a glancing autobiography, exaggerated self-celebration (with explanatory accounts of his own virtues), considerations of weather, recreation, food, drink, thoughts about philosophical writing and interpretation, and predictions of immense future fame. What did Nietzsche hope to accomplish by offering up this mysterious mixture? And why have his readers run away from it in such haste?

Aside from *Ecce Homo*’s text, we must remember its source. Nietzsche the man suffered the early death of his father and brother, lost love, horrific health, and almost lifelong loneliness and isolation. How did he sustain himself? His pain was physical, incisive, emotional, and persistent. From the first to the last of his books, his interest in tragedy and responses to pain was not academic or abstract, but pressing and personal. What is the value of life lived painfully? Could prolonged suffering be overcome and transformed, or would his authorial output always stand in spite of it? *Ecce Homo* became Nietzsche’s last effort to transform enduring pain into something valuable, and to unify and communicate the essence of his philosophical corpus as he saw it. In my understanding of the book’s form, satire became the philosopher’s stone that turned the dark details of Nietzsche’s life and philosophy into the comic, and made them bearable, even enjoyable. Humor distanced Nietzsche from his own life just enough to face and embrace it – which makes his last book at turns honest and ridiculous by design.

*Ecce Homo*’s reception

*Ecce Homo*’s appearance and reception were troubled from the outset. Nietzsche was reviewing the editor’s final proofs for the completed *Ecce Homo* when his mental collapse occurred on 3 January 1889. Long-time friends Franz Overbeck and Heinrich Köselitz decided to delay the book’s
publication, in part because of what they considered the shrill madness and naked hostility of the book’s section on Nietzsche’s mother and sister (EH 1.3). After a torturous process that included the ignorant Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche taking control of her brother’s literary estate, Ecce Homo was finally published in 1908 – nearly twenty years after its composition, and eight years after its author’s death.

Ecce Homo has a long history of being mistaken – as damning evidence of insanity by Nietzsche’s foes, as bizarre and embarrassing by his sympathizers. Most have considered the book an obvious sign that Nietzsche’s mental illness preceded his final collapse, and others cite the book to suggest that his philosophy was always the product of a diseased mind. Even the more charitable interpretations contain their own kinds of incomprehension, bow to enigma or interpretive synecdoche, deem the book a mere annunciation for future (non-existent) works, or claim that Ecce Homo has nothing new or nothing much worth talking about from a philosophical point of view. The result? A work that had no official place in Nietzsche’s canon until 1969 and that, overall, has suffered “a prolonged and systematic marginalization.” Things are a bit better for Ecce Homo these days, but the wary and negative views still predominate: to most, the book is both scandalous and insignificant.

Ecce Homo has languished in Nietzsche’s corpus for several reasons, but chief among them is the book’s extreme immodesty and self-celebration. They have rarely been viewed as funny or ironic but, rather, as pathetic signs of megalomania or insanity. The book has defied expectations in genre


\[2\] These judgments cause many to dismiss the book out of hand, though the prejudice has long been resisted. Anthony Ludovici in 1911 writes: “To point, as many have done, to the proximity of all Nietzsche’s autumn work of the year 1888 to his breakdown at the beginning of 1889, and to argue that in all its main features it foetters the catastrophe that is imminent, seems a little too plausible, a little too obvious and simple to require refutation. That Nietzsche really was in a state which in medicine is known as euphoria – that is to say, that state of highest well-being and capacity which often precedes a complete breakdown, cannot, I suppose, be questioned; for his style, his penetrating vision, and his vigour, reach their zenith in the works written in this autumn of 1888; but the contention that the matter, the substance, of these works reveals any signs whatsoever of waning mental health... is best contradicted by the internal evidence itself” (“Translator’s Introduction,” in Friedrich Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, in The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. Oscar Levy, vol. xvi (New York: Macmillan, 1912), vii–xiv, at x). And in 1927 W. H. Wright writes: “There has long been a theory that his insanity was of gradual growth, that, in fact, he was unbalanced from birth. But there is no evidence to substantiate this theory. The statement that his books were those of a madman is entirely without foundation. His works were thought out in the most clarified manner... it is puerile to point to his state of mind during the last years of his life as a criticism of his philosophy. His books must stand or fall on internal evidence. Judged from that standpoint they are scrupulously sane” (“Introduction,” in Friedrich Nietzsche, The Philosophy of Nietzsche (New York: Modern Library, 1927), vii–xvii, at x).
terms, as also noted, leading to widespread confusion. Finally, *Ecce Homo* was so straightforward and insistent on the philosophical import of one’s physical environment that scholars have deemed it irrelevant for comprehending Nietzsche’s more traditional-looking doctrines. Whatever the cause, comparatively little has been written about Nietzsche’s last original composition, even though it provides an invaluable guide to understanding Nietzsche’s ends and means as a writer and thinking person. Still, a hardy few have engaged the work, so let us briefly discuss how scholars tend to approach Nietzsche and where *Ecce Homo* stands in the current conversation.

**Ways of reading Nietzsche**

When reflecting on how we approach someone as rich in thoughts, works and consequence as Nietzsche, it helps to observe where scholars stand on


For Rüdiger Safranski, *Ecce Homo* became Nietzsche’s “ultimate grandiose self-interpretation,” one that seems to show his thought “breaking free of its supports and drifting away” (*Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, trans. Shelley Frisch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 307, 312). For Curtis Cate, Nietzsche “yielded to his inner demon and indulged in exaggerations” that mar the otherwise “charming” and “rambling” *Ecce Homo* (*Friedrich Nietzsche: A Woodstock: Overlook Press, 2005), 541, 558). And fellow biographer Julian Young sees evidence of mental imbalance dating back to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, surveying three possibilities for the cause of Nietzsche’s mental condition: syphilis, a brain tumor, and a “purely psychiatric” case of “manic depression with late-developing psychotic features” (*Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 561). While *Ecce Homo*, he claims, contains “manifest delusions” (509), Young also argues that Nietzsche’s insanity crept upon him in “the final weeks of 1888” (523) – that is, after *Ecce Homo*’s composition – and that Nietzsche’s mental illness was “purely psychological” (562).

Aaron Ridley observes that we cannot know Nietzsche’s mental state at the time of composition. “Nor does it seem tremendously important to know. Incipient insanity may take the form of hyperbole, and what is exaggerated may be true, or interesting, even when pitched at a level that can seem deranged” (“Introduction,” in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, And Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge University Press, 2005), vii–xxiv, at ix).
four large-scale issues: (1) the importance of Nietzsche’s theories and doctrines in themselves, as against the context of his concerns and critiques pursued in particular books; (2) the philological status of his work and thus the objects of analysis; (3) the choice of interpretive method or style; and (4) allegiances to particular schools of thought or the attempt at independence from them. We will be in a better position to consider the secondary literature on Ecce Homo once we survey this landscape.

On the first issue, the relative importance of Nietzsche’s doctrines versus his books, consider the idea that we have two grand camps of Nietzsche scholars today; call them miners and holists. Miners often see Nietzsche as a philosopher in spite of his literary gifts or other designs; therefore, they extract the philosophical ore from the soil of his verdant prose. Such ore can be valuable, but procuring and refining it is different from understanding nature, its source. The second camp is more green, if you like, when it comes to reading Nietzsche. Holists attend to the multiple aspects of Nietzsche’s ideas, in particular to their specific contexts in specific books, on the plausible hypothesis that his thinking comprises an interrelated set of concerns that he unifies, at the very least, by the decision to treat them in particular works. This holist approach takes Nietzsche seriously, I suppose, when he makes fun of philosophers who “think they are doing a thing honor when they dehistoricize it, sub specie aeterni – when they make a mummy of it. All that philosophers have handled for millennia has been conceptual mummies; nothing actual has escaped from their hands alive” (TI 2.1). This admonition would seem to apply to those who isolate Nietzsche’s ideas and try to give them intrinsic, essentialist meanings.

On the second issue, the standing of books versus notes, the question involves how to weigh Nietzsche’s works prepared for publication in comparison to his notebooks. Thanks to the philological work of Giorgio Colli, Mazzino Montinari, and Marie-Luis Haase, we now see the great difference between Nietzsche’s intended books and the clearly fragmentary nature of his notes – notes that others often gave false shape and significance.\(^5\) Why some have privileged Nietzsche’s notes over his books makes for an interesting story, but the pendulum has swung: scholars today more often attend to Nietzsche’s considered public positions instead of his private jottings. And yet the hangover remains in the case of notes appearing in

\(^5\) This includes even their chronological ordering. I share Dirk R. Johnson’s view of the philological landscape as now clearly divided between fragmentary notes and finished works, due especially to the work of Marie-Luise Haase (Johnson, Nietzsche’s Anti-Darwinism (Cambridge University Press, 2010), ii–iii).
English under the title “Will to Power,” and more notebook material will be translated into English in the years to come. Thus we need to distinguish between what Bernd Magnus calls “lumpers” and “splitters” on this issue of Nietzsche’s Nachlaß.\(^6\) Lumpers draw heavily on the notebooks to establish their claims, sometimes in order to turn Nietzsche into a more traditional philosopher with a set of epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical doctrines, other times to accomplish any number of things that Nietzsche’s finished works do not plausibly support. Splitters privilege instead the texts Nietzsche wrote, compiled, edited, and approved for publication — as most authors I know of would urge readers to do, Nietzsche included.\(^7\)

On the third issue of concern to Nietzsche scholars, methods or styles of interpretation, I suggest a distinction between hot and cool interpreters. Hot interpreters excerpt phrases or striking metaphors in Nietzsche’s works and run with them on vibrant journeys of inference, association, ardor — or outrage. Argumentation, formally speaking, is less important than making pregnant suggestions and new, surprising, or dramatic connections between a Nietzschean phrase and other ideas. In contrast, cool interpreters ‘dispassionately’ contextualize Nietzsche’s ideas and make plodding, often internal connections to support theses about meaning. To them, understanding an author’s intention is more important than making impressive or novel claims about hidden significance. Cool interpreters pay respect to Nietzsche by attending to his stated intentions and the structure of his ideas. Hot interpreters pay respect to Nietzsche by demonstrating how fecund he is. We could say that cool interpreters note, hot ones connote.

On the fourth issue, allegiances to schools of thought, we might place Nietzsche scholars into five large groups: analytical, deconstructive, psychological, biographical, and reconstructive.\(^8\) The analytical school of Nietzsche scholars treats him as a philosopher who engages in philosophy ‘of the tradition’ as presently construed, consisting of canonical questions, the answers to which are possibly forthcoming — answers shaped by and consistent with empirical science. In this light Nietzsche offers theories and doctrines of language, knowledge, morality, art, ontology, truth, and so on, sometimes in poetic language that becomes translated or purged.

\(^6\) Bernd Magnus, Stanley Stewart, and Jean-Pierre Mileur, *Nietzsche’s Case: Philosophy as/and Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 35–37. (Nachlaß refers to Nietzsche’s fragmentary notes not prepared or intended by him for publication.)

\(^7\) Referring to his previous books, Nietzsche says in *Ecce Homo* that he really should not need to say who he is, because it is not as if he has left himself “without testimony” (EH Foreword i).

\(^8\) I have drawn upon and expanded a three-part division outlined by Bernd Magnus in “Nietzsche Today: A View from America,” *International Studies in Philosophy*, 15/2 (1983), 95–103, at 97.
The deconstructive school questions the analytical view of Nietzsche’s place in the tradition, often regarding Nietzsche as having pursued a skeptical dismantling of Western philosophy. Deconstructivists attend to Nietzsche’s emphasis on historical and critical methods, and are more likely to admire his literary art, considering it part and parcel of his rhetorical project. Deconstructivists also tend to view philosophy as an experimental and creative enterprise rather than a truth-seeking or quasi-scientific one.

Psychologically minded scholars treat Nietzsche’s writings and life as surface material for inferring the great hidden iceberg below – his psyche. Meanwhile, biographers of Nietzsche marshal concrete detail to construct a historical narrative more than to engage philosophical disputes about the meaning of his ideas, and, obviously, they lay weight upon the lived particularities of Nietzsche’s life in relation to his works.

Finally, the reconstructive school attempts to understand Nietzsche in a comprehensive way, ready to reckon with whatever he actually sought to give. In my view, the best scholars of this kind draw upon the strengths of the other four schools: the precision, argumentation, and care with language of the analytical school; the historical, critical, and literary considerations of the deconstructivist school; the attention to mental features, conditions, and complex motivations of the psychological school; and the narrative details of a particular human life pursued by biographers. Drawing upon and balancing these elements, the reconstructivist school strives to discern and communicate an understanding of Nietzsche’s views as clearly as possible. In this sense the reconstructivist scholar remains open to any approach that aims to think cogently about what the evidence presents.

The distinctions made above, naturally, should be taken as plastic, overlapping, and non-exhaustive, but I think it worth reflecting on our intellectual habits when we set out to consider another thinker’s work. These distinctions will make the following discussion of the secondary literature on Ecce Homo more intelligible as well. To my mind, all the schools of thought and ways of approaching a multifaceted thinker like Nietzsche comprise a set of tools – it is what we do with them that counts.

(Although the following section fulfills an important purpose and further sets the stage, some readers may prefer advancing to the last part of this Introduction, “Principles and structure of the present study.”)

Secondary literature on Ecce Homo

Ecce Homo is the enfant perdu of Nietzsche books, and the secondary literature partially reflects this unfortunate state of affairs. By considering
what others have said about *Ecce Homo* via the five schools outlined above, I hope to draw us nearer to an integrated approach, and thus situate and motivate the current study.

Because *Ecce Homo* does not appear to introduce any new doctrines or theories, the analytical school of Nietzsche scholars has offered no sustained treatment of the work. Instead, *Ecce Homo* is occasionally mined for a thought or two about Nietzsche’s other books or ideas.

*Ecce Homo* has attracted by far the most attention from deconstructivist readers, perhaps due to its marginalized status. As a rule, interpretations of this school emerge from philological lumping, and employ a hot interpretive style that unwinds linguistic connotations to identify semiotic fissures or unseen meanings in the text. A bevy of such article-length interpretations of *Ecce Homo* appeared in the 1980s, but their spirit can be traced, I think, to Pierre Klossowski’s 1969 book, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, and to the work of Jacques Derrida and the influence of Martin Heidegger.9

Klossowski takes Nietzsche’s thought to have “revolved around delirium as its axis,” and says that “lucid thought, delirium and the conspiracy form an indissoluble whole in Nietzsche.” For him, “because Nietzsche’s thought was lucid to the extreme, it took on the appearance of a delirious interpretation.”10 Moreover, “the incoherence that certain people thought could be found only in the final messages from Turin exists *at the start* of Nietzsche’s career,” he claims. He further believes that “Nietzsche’s collapse would never have occurred if the seduction exerted by Chaos – that is, by incoherence – had not still and always been present in Nietzsche.”11

Klossowski devotes a chapter in his book to an elaborate interpretation of *Ecce Homo*’s familial riddle of dual descent (*EH* 1.1), with inventive...

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9 Martin Heidegger locates any understanding of *Ecce Homo* away from the book itself. Indeed, he inaugurated a particular fascination with Nietzsche’s Nachlaß, and privileged the notes far above Nietzsche’s books. Heidegger claims that “Nietzsche’s philosophy proper, the fundamental position on the basis of which he speaks . . . did not assume a final form and was not itself published in any book,” and “what Nietzsche himself published during his creative life was always foreground.” Hence Heidegger strangely supposes that Nietzsche’s “philosophy proper was left behind as posthumous, unpublished work” (*Nietzsche*, vol. 1: *The Will to Power as Art*, ed. and trans. David F. Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 8–9). As to *Ecce Homo*, the book for him “must attain its significance from the context in which all of Nietzsche’s autobiographical observations belong; that is to say, from the task of his thought and the historical moment of that task.” According to Heidegger’s reading, derived primarily from Nietzsche’s notes, “that task alone is reality proper” – as Heidegger understands it, *natürlich* (*Nietzsche*, vol. 11: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, ed. and trans. David F. Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 9–10).


11 Ibid., 220.
10 Introduction

psychological use of Nietzsche’s juvenilia. In light of his reading, he writes that Nietzsche “had now become his own ‘propagandist’” in *Ecce Homo*, and that the work is a “*double* apologetical, which had to compensate for the sterile ageing of the mother he was to himself.”12 Here we see many of the features that distinguish the deconstructivist school, including textual lumping, a hot interpretive style, and a dose of psychology to suggest subterranean meanings.

Jacques Derrida likewise explores *Ecce Homo*’s family descent riddle and permutes signatures and names. He calls the book an “impossible transgression” of the dialectical logic of traditional metaphysics that, consequently, precludes any localization of Nietzsche’s autobiographical voice.13

The deconstructive interest in *Ecce Homo* reaches its watershed in Sarah Kofman’s two-volume work in French, *Explosion.*14 Her treatment makes a profusion of suggestive claims for the meaning of Nietzsche’s last original composition. In a section entitled “Otitis, Meta-Otitis,” she writes:

*Ecce Homo* was not intended to be Nietzsche’s last book. The correspondence of the period presents it as a threshold book, a ‘high noon,’ facing two ways: it closes one door and opens another. Once and for all it cuts the ‘umbilical cord’ connecting him to his past, tears him away and separates him from what he has been and what he has produced. It draws a line, takes a balance and settles accounts, keeping, reaping only what deserves to be kept and to return eternally. But the book also opens onto the future. It is the promise of a work that is ripening under the autumnal sun: the only work of

12 Ibid., 107, 189.
14 A few excerpts from her work have appeared as journal articles in English; see Bibliography.