BECOMING WHAT ONE IS: TRAUMA AS A PRECONDITION FOR AUTHENTICITY

Ryan Wasser

Department of Philosophy, West Chester University

DATE

**Preliminary Statements**

Despite the contentiousness of the "dead white men" who populate the various canons of academia, it would not be unreasonable to argue that Friedrich Nietzsche—because of the sheer fecundity of his works as an influence on philosophy and the world at large—is somewhat, if not entirely above reproach. And while *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and *Beyond Good and Evil* are frequently (although not universally) lauded as some of his most important texts,[[1]](#footnote-1) it is the profound candor of *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche's autobiography, that distinguishes it from the rest of his oeuvre and discloses, in no uncertain terms, a topic of vital importance that has remained a central concern of the cultural zeitgeist especially as a reaction to various events of the 21st century: *trauma*. *Trauma* [*τραῦμα*], a Grecian term that traditionally refers to "a wound," underpins much of Nietzsche's writing, and is present in observations of his own lived experience, those of notable décadents such as Socrates and Wagner, and even his discussions of ethics and morality.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nietzsche's willingness to engage with his trauma—what he might refer as a Dionysian affirmation of being—is precisely what allows him to stand head and shoulders above other thinkers in terms of unadulterated authenticity. The relationship between trauma and authenticity is, if nothing else, a well-documented if not understated occurrence both in texts of antiquity as well as contemporary scholarship, therefore understanding trauma as a precondition for the authentic individuation of ek-sisting beings is a concern of uncommon consequence. In order to understand trauma in this regard, it becomes necessary to examine it within the context of its manifestations, in this instance the life and works of Nietzsche, as well as on its own terms as a phenomenon

The exact details of the "torments" that forced Nietzsche to vacate his Basil professorship are nebulous to say the least, and scholars continue to speculate about them even today as there are many disparate symptoms related to his overall condition that require special deliberation.[[3]](#footnote-3) While his later years would be hallmarked by depression, dementia, and possible epileptic seizures responsible for second-order conditions such as disturbances in his speech and facial paresis,[[4]](#footnote-4) Nietzsche's primary concern—at least in the early chapters of *Ecce Homo* where he addresses such things—were bouts of severe dyspepsia, migraines, and eyesight problems he describes as "dangerously close to blindness,"[[5]](#footnote-5) that, in many instances, incapacitated him to such a degree that he resorted to using newly invented technology such as the typewriter[[6]](#footnote-6) or dictating his thoughts to former students in order to continue producing his works.[[7]](#footnote-7) To say that Nietzsche was keenly aware of how the presumable trauma of his situation impacted him would be a profound understatement: in his own words, "it was in the years of my lowest vitality that I *ceased* to be a pessimist," and that in those years "the instinct for self-recovery *forbade* to me [the] philosophy of indigence and discouragement" that characterized the culture that surrounded him.[[8]](#footnote-8) Similar sentiments about the positive impact malady has on one's existential condition were voiced earlier in *The Gay Science*,[[9]](#footnote-9) a conclusion, one might suggest, that could only have been arrived after a "long succession of years"[[10]](#footnote-10) that afforded Nietzsche the "opportunity" to ruminate on such matters.

While the necessity of such meaningful contemplation—what I refer to as *thinking-about* [*um-denken*]—is of paramount importance to our overarching discussion about authenticity, we will need content ourselves with revisiting the issue at a later point as it is crucial that we first determine the nature of the condition that led to Nietzsche's extreme development in perspective both toward the world and his own particular being-as-such. The simplest and most obvious approach moving forward would be to examine the "end result" first, and infer motivation afterwards, but that would offer, at best, cursory explanations for either phenomenon in question. In order to arrive at a deeper understanding of trauma, authenticity, and the relationship that connects them, we must pursue the long way about; only after a phenomenology of trauma is established can the centerpiece of our interest be brought into adequate clarity.

**Section I: A Short Phenomenology of Trauma**

It was previously established in the preliminary remarks that the Greek term trauma [*τραῦμα*] is specifically considered a reference to "a wound,"[[11]](#footnote-11) however, it is not apparent that there has ever been a sufficiently rigorous observance of such a phenomenon outside of occasional phenomenological examinations such as those conducted by Janice Beitz and Earl Goldberg,[[12]](#footnote-12) which are, if nothing else, more ontical in consideration than ontological; they do not strike to the heart of the issue, nor do they address the hint that points to it. To proceed would necessitate a dogged search for the word's wellspring, but be that as it may, this shall prove difficult as such endeavors are delimited by the fundamental flaw of all hermeneutics, that being that any attempt to wreste a word from within a language outside of one's father-tongue presents a risk of distorting, or worse, perverting the essential tiding such utterances bear. This is an unavoidable consequence of the essential character of human-being; "one does not inhabit a country; one inhabits a language"[[13]](#footnote-13) and as such we are at a significant disadvantage when we venture beyond the borders of our homeland. Having paid heed to such concerns and with little other recourse, we must now begin to grope, however impotently, at the obscured ground that rests before us.

Whether it be the ancestral Proto-Germanic *\*wuntho* or its younger, Old English variant *wund*, both understandings of a wound are specific in that, while they clearly implicate "injury" as a decisive element in the word's meaning, they equally recognize the notion of a "sore,"[[14]](#footnote-14) or more specifically an "ulcer" as well,[[15]](#footnote-15) and it is precisely the distinction between that which is an ulcer and a mere injury that characterizes the essence of "a wound." For instance, a mere injury, while irritating, presents little challenge to the individual besides that of momentary discomfort. The fact that my corporeal encasement has sustained some modicum of damage when I papercut myself handling a letter has no profound or lasting impact on my Self. An ulcer, on the other hand, is an altogether different matter. According to Stephanie Gardner, ulcers are characterized, not just by pain and inflammation, but by swelling and a propensity toward tissue friability and breakdown. When one has an ulcer, they have sustained an injury that stays *open*. We understand open here as *being-unresolved*; a wound does not heal properly. Furthermore, the cause of such wounds are often some form of chronic, external pressure, not necessarily immediate instances of damage although the two things frequently go hand-and-hand.[[16]](#footnote-16) When a body builder sustains a "wound" such as a hernia or even a herniated disc for that matter, one might be inclined to believe that the initial event of injury is the wound itself, but given our understanding of the phenomenon thus far that cannot be farther from the case. A wound precedes the injury historically and projects itself forward as profound self-consciousness of how one comports oneself in the moment. As it pertains to our bodybuilder, the manifestation of the wound is not the result of one poorly executed movement but that of hundreds of repetitions of the same movement executed again and again and again under profound duress.

Wounds, as a result, are injuries that are a long time coming; injuries that are obfuscated in their unassumingness until they dramatically erupt. Therefore, the nature of a wound extends beyond simple severity into longevity. Such a phenomenon *endures*; it persists and as such remains open, a cleft that continually reminds the bearer of its presence. On these grounds we tentatively define "a wound"—trauma—as the enduring, oft-concealed rift that lays claim to and calls into question the sufficiency of one's state.[[17]](#footnote-17) While undoubtedly imperfect, our current position prepares us to ask the following question: where and of what nature is the trauma that precipitated Nietzsche's profound authenticity?

The first indication of Nietzsche's trauma occurs in the third section of his second essay when he states:

When I was almost done for, *because* I was almost done for, I began to reflect on this fundamental irrationality of my life—'idealism'. It was only *sickness* that brought me to reason.[[18]](#footnote-18)

We must ask ourselves, where precisely is the trauma in this statement? The most obvious answer would be to point to Nietzsche's ailments—the manifold collection of bodily signs—as the source of his wound, but, as we have already established, mere injury, in this instance malady or ailment, does not satisfy the prerequisite set forth in our previous discussion about trauma. That being said, in their own way Nietzsche's maladies act as a signifier for a wound yet to be disclosed. Malady, in this instance, is sign of things to come. The issue of signs and signification is no trivial matter, and it would be beneficial to clarify what one means when one says that something acts as a sign for another thing. Here we understand a "sign" as a contingent thing that indicates or "points toward" another thing entirely. Hence, signs hinge their being on the being of some other phenomenon or entity. The "sign-ness" of the sign, its essential quality, is being-referential, and this applies to signs whether they be manmade, such as the signs we encounter when we walk down the street, or natural, such as the aposematic coloring of animals in the wild. In this regard signs, according to Gadamer, "[are] nothing but what [their] function requires."[[19]](#footnote-19) So in the former instance the "Stop Sign" one encounters on the street gestures that one oughtto halt their vehicular advance in that particular location, and little if nothing more than that. Although it is likely there will be objections to such a moniker, for the purposes of this examination we will refer to this type of sign as *external*, as in, external to the body.

The question, moving forward, is whether *bodily signs*—a term typically reserved for and relegated to colloquial, pop culture rhetoric—are signs in the same way as the previously discussed external signs, or if there is something that distinct about them that requires deeper investigation. Indeed, there must be, because even the notion of that which is bodily smacks of the representational; the symbolic. Although phenomenologies of "the body” have become *en vogue* as a topic of discussion in contemporary academia,[[20]](#footnote-20) the most thoughtful consideration of the matter remains a distinction of Martin Heidegger's, a distinction, unfortunately, that will have to be summarized succinctly in order to maintain heading for the present set of concerns. During the "Zollikon Seminars," a series of lectures held at the home of Medard Boss between 1959 and 1969 that aimed to establish an Daseinanalytic model of psychotherapy, Heidegger explicitly asserts that

the body is not a thing, nor is it a corporeal thing, but each body that is, the body as body, is in each case my body. The *bodying forth* [*Leiben*] *of the body* is determined by my way of being.[[21]](#footnote-21)

A more interesting realization of this notion is provided by Heidegger moments earlier in the meeting's transcript when he notes that by pointing to something, in that particular instance the crossbar of a window on the opposite side of the room, "[he as body] does not end at [his] fingertips," throwing the unity of the corporeal thing and body into question by delimiting the latter's ''reach," in many ways indefinitely.[[22]](#footnote-22) This in itself discloses a primary characteristic of the body: it is not contingent on some other phenomenon, corporeality, for its presence and meaning. The body, therefore, always extends outward, projecting as it were, toward something else, but at the same time bringing it into nearness, a symbolic act in the truest sense. After all, *what else would the tacit acknowledgement of that-which-is-other through consciousness of that-which-is-present be if not symbolism in its most originary formulation*?

A wound is a body's gesturing toward something beyond the immediacy of its Self. Levinas might refer to this as the experience of engagement with what he regards as the "face" of the Other, with the face being understood as the "way in which the Other presents himself" that "[exceeds] *the idea of the other in me*."[[23]](#footnote-23) For Gadamer, it is the hermeneutic priority of the question.[[24]](#footnote-24) Similar (albeit arguably different) sentiments are voiced by Kierkegaard about the nature of faith as an individual's standing in absolute relation to the Absolute.[[25]](#footnote-25) *Wound*, *face*, *question*, *faith*—like a menagerie of Northern Lights, each phenomenon is a point of contact, a form of relation, says Deleuze,[[26]](#footnote-26) between one thing and something else; between the "I" and the "Other"; between the horizons of two or more interlocutors; between an individual and their god. Relations-as-such are the open possibility to a particular claim laid upon the Self by something that lay waiting beyond its immanent and fragmentary nature. Given this understanding, we can no longer avoid the question which dares to be asked: what is it that trauma gestures toward?

In order to answer this question, it becomes necessary to circle back around on our previous thinking-about trauma and wounds. Trauma, as defined, is the enduring, oft-concealed rift that lays claim to and calls into question one's state. Assuming all other aspects of this definition have been sufficiently addressed, we must immediately demand an explanation as to what the phrase "one's state" refers to, since its meaning cannot be presumed given the discussion thus far. The initial impulse would be to suggest that a "state" is little more than the immediately present conditions of any particular individual—in the case of Nietzsche, dyspepsia, migraines, and notable eyesight problems. Admittedly, it would be easy to acquiesce to such a desire as few people, in my opinion, would debate the profundity of Nietzsche's maladies, but given that it has already been determined that his individual ailments cannot be the source of his trauma, but instead *represent*, as bodily signs, the source of Nietzsche's trauma, this line of thinking, with the exception of one word, "condition," must be brought to a close. The reason condition has been isolated in this way is because its roots release an essential clue to the puzzle at hand: a condition is "a particular mode of being."[[27]](#footnote-27) Accordingly a "state" must be an essentially ontological expression. The source of trauma is Being itself, or more appropriately Being that is insufficient or lacking. What traumatizes us; what wounds a human most prolifically is its *finitude*.

**Untitled Section II: Nietzsche and Authenticity**

To accept oneself as a fate, not to desire oneself 'different'—in such conditions this is great rationality itself.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Bibliography

Beitz, Janice M., and Goldberg, Earl. "The Lived Experience of having a Chronic Wound." *MEDSURG Nursing* 14, no. 1 (2005): 51-82. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx ?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=ccm&AN=106608157&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Carr, Nicholas. "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic*, July 2008. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/.

Cate, Curtis. *Friedrich Nietzsche*. London: Hutchinson, 2006. eBook. https://archive.org/details/friedrichnietzsc00curt/page/n743/mode/2up.

Cioran, E.M. *Anathemas and Admirations*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012.

"Condition." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Accessed December 18, 2020. https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=condition.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Thomlinson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Stephanie S. Gardner. "What is a Skin Ulcer?" *MedicineNet*, November 5, 2019. https://www.medicinenet.com/skin\_ulcer/article.htm.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2103.

Heidegger, Martin. *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols—Conversations—Letters*. Edited by Medard Boss, Translated by Franz Mayr and Richard Askay. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001.

Hemelsoet, Dmitri, Hemelsoet, Karen, and Devreese, D. "The Neurological Illness of Friedrich Nietzsche." *Acta Neurologica Belgica* 108 (2008): 9-16. www.researchgate.net/publication/5279485.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*. Edited by C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, Translated by Sylvia Walsh. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 2004.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Edited by Bernard Williams, Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

"Trauma." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, Accessed December 4, 2020. https://www.etymonline.com/word/trauma#etymonline\_v\_16912.

Tsirmpas, Evangelos. "5 Essential Texts by Friedrich Nietzsche You Should Read." *Culture Trip*, March 29, 2018. https://theculturetrip.com/europe/germany/articles/the-best-books-by-friedrich-nietzsche-you-should-read/.

(u/B0ulderer). "Best Book to Start with Nietzsche." Reddit, Accessed December 4, 2020. https://www.reddit.com/r/askphilosophy/comments/2yztfr/best\_book\_to\_start\_with\_nietzsche/.

we are not in a position—and even if we are, it is so rare and so limited in degree—

Abstract:

Ecce Homo, Nietzsche's autobiography, is distinguished it the rest of his oeuvre and discloses, in no uncertain terms, by its profound candor in bringing to question a topic of vital importance that has remained a central concern of the cultural zeitgeist especially as a reaction to various events of the 21st century: trauma. Trauma [τραῦμα], a Grecian term that traditionally refers to "a wound," underpins much of Nietzsche's writing, and is present in observations of his own lived experience, those of notable décadents such as Socrates and Wagner, and even his discussions of ethics and morality. Nietzsche's willingness to engage with his personal trauma—what he might refer as a Dionysian affirmation of being—is precisely what allows him to stand head and shoulders above other thinkers in terms of unadulterated authenticity. The relationship between trauma and authenticity is, if nothing else, a well-documented if not understated occurrence both in texts of antiquity as well as contemporary scholarship, therefore understanding trauma as a precondition for the authentic individuation of ek-sisting beings is a concern of uncommon consequence. In order to understand trauma in this regard, it becomes necessary to examine it within the context of its manifestations, in this instance the life and works of Nietzsche, as well as on its own terms as a phenomenon.

1. *see* Evangelos Tsirmpas, "5 Essential Texts by Friedrich Nietzsche You Should Read," *Culture Trip*, March 29, 2018, https://theculturetrip.com/europe/germany/articles/the-best-books-by-friedrich-nietzsche-you-should-read/.

   *see* (u/B0ulderer), "Best Book to Start with Nietzsche," Reddit, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/askphilosophy/comments/2yztfr/best\_book\_to\_start\_with\_nietzsche/.  
    [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "Trauma," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed December 4, 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/word/trauma#etymonline\_v\_16912. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 8-9.  
    [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dmitri Hemelsoet, Karen Hemelsoet, and D. Devreese, "The Neurological Illness of Friedrich Nietzsche," *Acta Neurologica Belgica* 108 (2008): 11, www.researchgate.net/publication/5279485. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nietzsche, 9.   
    [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?," *The Atlantic*, July 2008, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/.  
    [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Curtis Cate, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Hutchinson, 2006), 211, eBook, https://archive.org/details/friedrichnietzsc00curt/page/n743/mode/2up.  
    [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 10.  
    [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.  
    "Finally, lest what is most important remain unsaid: from such abysses, from such severe illness, also from the illness of severe suspicion, one returns newborn, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a more tender tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, joyful with a more dangerous second innocence, more childlike, and at the same time a hundred times subtler than one had ever been before." [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nietzsche, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Trauma," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed December 4, 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/word/trauma#etymonline\_v\_16912. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Janice M. Beitz, and Earl Goldberg, "The Lived Experience of having a Chronic Wound," *MEDSURG Nursing* 14, no. 1 (2005): 51-82, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx ?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=ccm&AN=106608157&site=eds-live&scope=site. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. E.M. Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012), 12.  
     [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mary Lynch Johnson, "Wund," *The Old English Dictionary*, accessed December 13, 2020, http://www.old-engli.sh/dictionary.php.  
     [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. "Wound," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed December 13, 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/word/wound#etymonline\_v\_10862.  
     [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Stephanie S. Gardner, "What is a Skin Ulcer?," *MedicineNet*, accessed December 14, 2020, https://www.medicinenet.com/skin\_ulcer/article.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. From this point forward, the two terms—trauma and wound—ought to be considered synonymous and thus interchangeable. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2103), 152.  
     [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press: 2006).  
     [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols—Conversations—Letters*, ed. Medard Boss, trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Heidegger, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 50.   
     [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2103), 370. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Thomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. "Condition," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed December 18, 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=condition. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)