

Individuality and Beyond: Nietzsche Reads Emerson

Benedetta Zavatta

Reviewed by Laura Langone

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In this book, Benedetta Zavatta aims to reconstruct Emerson's influence on Nietzsche's philosophy throughout his works. Her central contention is that Emerson was always an important point of reference for Nietzsche, from his youth to his mature thought. The book is made up of 6 parts.

In Chapter 1 *The Reception of the Emerson-Nietzsche Relation*, Zavatta shows how the Emerson-Nietzsche relationship was ignored for almost a century by the scholars. Emerson and Nietzsche were long considered as cultural icons, and as specifically great autonomous thinkers in their respective countries, the United States and Germany, which prevented a thorough study on the subject. The first English monograph on this, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity*, was published just in 1992 by George Stack, and, as the following studies on the relationships between Nietzsche and Emerson,

did not ask the question Zavatta aims to answer in her monograph. What is in her eyes crucial for "a systematic interpretation of Nietzsche's reception of Emerson" is "the question of exactly what Nietzsche had read and of exactly how he had received and interpreted it" (*The Reception of the Emerson-Nietzsche Relation*, 15).

Chapter 2 *The Struggle Against Fate* principally deals with the young Nietzsche's view of fate. In his 1861 autobiographical essay *The Course of My Life*, Nietzsche conceives of fate as a sort of higher being which has determined the affairs of this world for all eternity. Everything, our lives included, are governed by strict necessity, and we are not free to change this. In this essay, for Nietzsche there is no space for freedom, everything is determined *ab aeterno*. Hence, freedom and necessity are mutually exclusive.

However, in the following year, in the short essays *Fate and History* and *Freedom of the Will and Fate*, Nietzsche takes a radically different position. In the meantime, Nietzsche had read Emerson's essay *Fate* in the collection *The Conduct of Life*, which led him to change his mind. In this text, Emerson embraces a view of fate as temperament, namely as one's own natural tendencies and dispositions.

Temperament represents our necessity, something given once and for all by nature that cannot be modified. But we are free to develop our character, our personality by putting our natural dispositions to the service of our own goals. Fate for Emerson means taking advantage of necessity rather than succumbing to it. In this respect, necessity and freedom are not mutually exclusive but necessity involves freedom.

In his 1862 essays, Nietzsche also considers freedom as the capacity to take advantage of necessity so as to accomplish our goals. If the year before he had regarded fate as a higher being who had established the course of our lives once and for all, after having read Emerson, he suggests a view of fate as a power internal to us rather than external.

In the same way as Emerson, for Nietzsche we are free to channel our natural inclinations into our own purposes, and thus to shape our personality. This means that also for Nietzsche necessity involves freedom: our natural inclinations are the material necessarily given to us upon which we can freely build our personality. Here is how Nietzsche reverses his opinion held in the 1861 autobiographical essay, where freedom and necessity appeared mutually exclusive. According to Zavatta, from 1862 on, Emerson's essay *Fate* instills in Nietzsche the concepts of creating oneself and self-mastery, which play a key role in Nietzsche's mature thought.

The third chapter, *Self-Reliance*, further explores both concepts as they relate to Emerson's notion of self-reliance, and its impact on Nietzsche's thought. For Emerson, self-reliance is the desire to express oneself, one's potential against any external interference. It is the capacity to free oneself from the influence of social values and act according to one's own values. For Zavatta, these are some of the characteristics Nietzsche then attributes to the figure of the free spirit. The free spirit is he who has the virtue of self-reliance.

In Emerson's eyes, self-reliance involves the attitude he calls "intellectual nomadism", i.e. the attitude of constant experimentation of values, which starts from the awareness of the partiality of every perspective. "This means that the "intellectual nomad" loves to encounter and confront people different from himself, to experience new ways of life and to make these new ways of life, if only for a time, his own" (*Self-Reliance*, 27). Nietzsche indeed uses Emerson's very expression "intellectual nomadism" to describe the free spirit: "What, however, we may call ourselves in all seriousness (and without being in any way defiant) is 'free-ranging spirits', because we feel the tug towards freedom as the strongest drive of our spirit and, in antithesis to the fettered and firm-rooted intellects, see our ideal almost in a spiritual nomadism" (*AOM* 211).

Yet there are important ways in which Emerson's self-reliant man and Nietzsche's free spirit do not completely overlap. Emerson's self-reliant man does not possess the genealogical method, which actually allows the free spirit access to a particular mode of self-reliance. Genealogy is utilised as a means of liberating oneself from external influences as an expression of one's own personality.

This is because the genealogical method shows the supposed eternal truths of society as human, all too human constructions, and, for this reason, supposed truths can be put into question through experimentation. The free spirit can experiment with the values of mankind insofar as they turn out to be nothing eternal, but historically constructed values.

On Zavatta's account, self-reliance is the criterion upon which Nietzsche bases his transvaluation of values:

I shall moreover assume, concurring here with the majority of Nietzsche scholars, that this ethical model of Nietzsche's concerns not the question of (p. 75) "what to do" but rather that of "how to do it," or, in other words, not the content but rather the form of the values in question. In other words, I hold that the ethical model proposed by Nietzsche describes the conditions that values must fulfill if they are truly to be said to be "one's own values." To say that values are "our own values" is tantamount to saying that in our actions we express our own selves. [...] Nietzsche considers every value to be acceptable provided that it proceeds out of the consciousness of one's own conditions of existence and out of the will to assert and to develop oneself—or, in other words, proceeds out of "self-reliance" (*Self-Reliance*, 8).

Then, in the fourth chapter *Society or Solitude*, Zavatta focuses on a particular value Nietzsche in her opinion transvalues: that of altruism. “Nietzsche is critical of compassion and of pity inasmuch as these moral attitudes denote a will to flee from one’s own self or, in other words, denote a lack of self-reliance” (*Society or Solitude*, 2).

Zavatta’s argument is that, with regard to social relationships, Nietzsche suggests an alternative model of friendship or fellow rejoicing in place of compassion or fellow suffering adopted by Christianity. In this respect, he again draws from Emerson.

According to Emerson, friendship does not involve taking another’s suffering upon oneself as Christian compassion prescribes, but encouraging them so that they will be able to overcome their problems in virtue of their own efforts. In this way, the sufferers will be able to fulfill their potential on their own. In Emerson’s eyes, everyone can unfold their potential: “Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in their demands and influence, and need not to be flattered but to be schooled. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to tame, drill, divide, and break them up, and draw individuals out of them (CL, 132; FL, 173)” (*Society or Solitude?*, 39).

Nietzsche adopts this model of friendship but, while for Emerson one must help as many people as possible express their potential, in Nietzsche’s view one must assist only one’s circle of friends:

Live in seclusion so that you are able to live for yourself. Live in ignorance of what seems most important to your age! . . . And let the clamor of today, the noise of wars and revolutions, be but a murmur to you. You will also want to help—but only those whose distress you properly understand because they share with you one suffering

and one hope—your friends—and only in the way you help yourself: I want to make them braver, more persevering, simpler, more full of gaiety. I want to teach them what is today understood by so few, least of all by these preachers of compassion [*Mitleiden*]: to share not pain, but joy [*Mitfreude*]! (GS 338, *Society or Solitude?*, 29)

Helping friends fulfill their individuality for both Nietzsche and Emerson means helping them develop their self-reliance. The latter is also the precondition for wisely reading history for both. The last chapter, *Making History and Writing History*, focuses on Emerson’s and Nietzsche’s respective conception of history.

Here Zavatta aims to show that there is a shift in Nietzsche’s approach to history from the *Untimely Meditations* to his later thought, and that this is due to Emerson’s growing influence on him on this front. Emerson suggests an empathetic and active reading of history: “A reading in which one seeks to actually identify with the events narrated and to live them as things that might have befallen one’s own self” (*Making History and Writing History*, 7). For Emerson, history functions as applied and prospective biography: one must try to learn as many lessons as one can from history and then apply them to one’s own life.

In the *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche instead affirms that human beings cannot assimilate the entirety of history, as Emerson maintains, and that they have a limited horizon of the information they can actually incorporate. Therefore, they must focus only on the events of which they can make actual use in their lives, while the rest must be forgotten.

However, Nietzsche goes on to reverse his opinion. In the middle period of his philosophy, he no longer thinks that one must limit one’s horizon to the information one can assimilate, but rather must try to incorporate as much information as possible in order not to limit the power one can draw from history:

Not to see the new greatness above oneself, not to see it outside of oneself, rather to make of it a new function to one's self. We are the ocean into which all rivers of greatness must flow. How dangerous it is when our faith in the universality of our Self is lacking! A plurality of faiths is required (NL 1881 13[19], KSA 9: 621; see also NL 1881–1882 16[9], KSA 9: 660, *Making History and Writing History*, 35–36).

But for Nietzsche only those who possess a well disposed set of drives or a sufficiently strong personality can embrace the entirety of history. While constantly making efforts to show how many of Nietzsche's key concepts were inspired by Emerson, on the other hand Zavatta acutely addresses what she considers the fundamental differences between the two thinkers. In her view, Emerson sustains an essentialist account of the human being, for which humans have a true essence established once and for all, which they should bring to its full potential. For Emerson, our character, our potential is something already present within us, but it needs to be fulfilled.

Zavatta affirms that, for Nietzsche, by contrast, “the process of formation of one's character does not presuppose the eventual achievement of a “final state” which would coincide with drawing upon some preexisting metaphysical core of one's own personality. Nietzsche's position is rather that the process of development of our character is one that never ceases” (*The Struggle Against Fate*, 20).

Therefore, the main difference between Nietzsche and Emerson would be that, while Emerson believes in a fixed metaphysical essence present in each of us, for Nietzsche our being is something continuously changing and thus something that can be perpetually developed.

For Nietzsche there is no fixed essence to be fulfilled. For example, according to Zavatta, Nietzsche's well-known sentence “become who you are” must be interpreted in an anti-metaphysical sense, i.e. with the meaning “live according to one's self-chosen or self-created values” (*Self-Reliance*, 3).

However, Zavatta is not always consistent in sustaining Nietzsche's alleged anti-metaphysical conception of the human being. Sometimes, she seems to affirm the opposite, attributing the essentialist view to Nietzsche. For example, she affirms that, in Nietzsche's view, only an individual with a fortunate set of drives would be able to put into practice the self-reliant virtue of intellectual nomadism. While for Emerson intellectual nomadism is a matter of choice, in the sense that one is free to decide whether to practice it or not, for Nietzsche not everyone is able to do so, but only strong individuals gifted by nature with a fortunate set of drives.

On Zavatta's account, for Nietzsche only those who have a fortunate set of drives are to be considered higher types, strong enough to be able to conduct a life of experimentation. The possession of a fortunate set of drives seems to us to point to an established essence, which would make Nietzsche an essentialist thinker in the same way as Emerson. As such, it is not always clear to what extent Nietzsche is anti-essentialist, compared to Emerson.

In conclusion, the book offers a systematic treatment of the relationships between Nietzsche and Emerson, illustrating many innovative comparisons between the two. It convincingly shows how the development of Nietzsche's philosophy cannot be understood without reference to a pervasive conceptual affinity with Emerson, who accompanied him throughout his works. Important Nietzsche's tropes like “become who you are”, self-mastery, and other central tenets of the free spirit philosophy would be unthinkable without Emerson's influence. This book has the merit of unveiling the biography of these concepts by showing the role Emerson played on their development.