

Nietzsche Reads Emerson: A Philological Approach

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Benedetta Zavatta, *Individuality and Beyond: Nietzsche Reads Emerson*, tr. Alexander Reynolds (Oxford University Press, 2019), 296 pp., \$105 hardcover, \$34.95 paperback.

In memory of Professor Tyler Roberts (1960-2021)

From 1879 to 1888, after resigning from his position as professor at the University of Basel, Friedrich Nietzsche traveled independently through Europe and wrote many of the works for which we still rightly admire him today; during this period, he turned time and time again to Ralph Waldo Emerson. In Nietzsche's personal, often portable library were heavily annotated translations of Emerson's *Essays* (1844), Emerson's *Letters and Social Aims* (1875), his *Historic Notes of Life and Letters in Massachusetts* (1883), two copies of *The Conduct of Life* (1860), and a copy of *Über Goethe und Shakespeare*, from "Representative Men" (1850). These last two volumes, Benedetta Zavatta relates in her worthy, thought-provoking, but flawed study, were lost during the war. The others are at the Nietzsche archives and library in Weimar, Germany.

Nietzsche and Emerson's philosophical breaks and continuities have ignited the curiosity of a number of significant thinkers, both in Germany and the United States. Stanley Cavell, the modernist stylist and philosopher, called Nietzsche one of Emerson's "best readers" and argued that Nietzsche should be seen as "recasting," through "a different temperament,"¹ Emerson's sentences—a claim this review essay will

return to. In Germany, Eduard Baumgarten, who fled the Third Reich for the United States, traced the Emerson-Nietzsche relation in a series of significant books and articles in the 1930s and 40s²; as other reviewers have suggested, Zavatta's study might usefully be read as a dialogue with, perhaps even a renewal of interest in, Baumgarten's work. More recent work by Stack (1992)³ and Mikics (2013)⁴ also seek to trace Emerson's influence in a more general way.

What makes Zavatta's study stand out is her systematic use of the Nietzsche archives in Weimar. Zavatta has deciphered, studied, and assembled Nietzsche's marginalia, annotations, and notes on Emerson; her monograph is the first to appear in English that aims to situate its interpretation "upon a solid philological basis."⁵ She focuses on the "traces left by Nietzsche's *actual* reading of Emerson and of the *specific* selection of excerpts that he made."⁶ Oxford University Press offers an online appendix to the book with scans of some of these annotations; reading them, I was grateful to Zavatta, and to Eduard Baumgarten before her, for deciphering Nietzsche's rough and scratchy penmanship and contextualizing it.

Armed with this philological approach, Zavatta measures Emerson's philosophical influence on Nietzsche along four interrelated axes, each of which is a central area of philosophical concern for both thinkers. These axes are also the subjects of her chapters: fate and freedom, agency and self-expression, egoism and compassion, and the concept of history. Within each of these four rich domains, she traces the theme of what I would call self-creation or self-fashioning, the idea "that Man's creative powers can be employed to transform himself and his own life."⁷ Both Emerson and Nietzsche observed in themselves and in their contemporaries a diurnal battle with mass-produced taste and mass-produced belief; and yet, both thinkers arrived at the view that there were no absolute values or absolute system of belief to adhere to, and that a kind of intersubjective historical void had opened up which dogmatic-religious systems of belief had previously filled. Both thinkers reread religious and philosophical history to pose fundamental questions about the roles such

absolute values and systems of belief played in Western history, what needs they satisfied, and why these totalizing belief systems decayed. As part of their engaged, lived response to these problems, both thinkers unfurled a practical, writerly project of self-creation and self-fashioning, at times highly individualistic, in dialogue with books, nature, and friends.⁸

For Emerson as for Nietzsche, perception and experience—in short, the life-worlds we inhabit—are poetic, creative, and in crucial ways dependent on us. Zavatta traces how Nietzsche reworks and “rewrites” this fundamental idea “in two main lines of thought”:

The first line leads in the direction of the development of the individual personality; the second leads in the direction of a surpassing—or, to use Nietzsche’s preferred term—an “overcoming”—of this very individual personality once it has been developed.⁹

Hence her title—*Individuality and Beyond*—refers to the Emersonian fashioning of individuality, but also the step *beyond* any given achievement to the next *refashioning*, or what in Nietzschean terms we know as “self-overcoming.” An indication of the depth of Emerson’s influence on Nietzsche on the general theme of self-fashioning can be seen in Zavatta’s comment:

Drawing inspiration from Emerson, Nietzsche envisages as bearers and personifications of his ethical program three principal imaginary figures: the “Schopenhauer as educator,” [...] the “free spirit,” [...] and Zarathustra, who personifies Nietzsche’s mature philosophical vision. Nietzsche conceived of those three figures at just those three moments of his life at which Emerson was most present to his mind: the period of the *Untimely Mediations* (1881-1883), that of *Human, All too Human*, and that of the conception of Zarathustra (1881-1883). The thesis I want to advance is that these three figures

embody three different manifestations of Emersonian self-reliance....¹⁰

Emersonian self-reliance, Zavatta argues, pervades both Nietzsche's and Emerson's work. But the claim that Emerson's texts and his concept of self-reliance in particular were on Nietzsche's desk as he penned the figures of Schopenhauer as educator, the free spirit, and Zarathustra—the figures we associate Nietzsche with most closely—may still surprise many readers. It will, in particular, of course, surprise those readers who do not think there is much philosophical weight to Emerson's writings.

The question of how to read Emerson philosophically was, for me, the site of the major shortcoming of Zavatta's often precise and thought-provoking study. Her explanation for the neglect of the Nietzsche-Emerson relation is, at best, only partial; she argues for a kind of mutual national distrust, both political and philosophical, between Germany and the United States.¹¹ But while of course Hitler's infamous appropriation of Nietzsche understandably made some readers in the United States gun-shy about absorbing Nietzsche's texts, the reason for the current paucity of interest in the Emerson-Nietzsche relation is surely more that Emerson is simply not read as a philosopher, or even as a writer whose texts are of much interest to philosophers, say like a novelist such as Coetzee or Sebald, who has come into fashion. And while this is not the place to argue for Emerson's admittedly entirely "implicit" and concealed philosophical depth, or rather to argue for the *kind* of philosophical itch he satisfies—which is obviously not the desire for exhaustive elaboration of an abstract concept—it was notable that Zavatta nowhere mentions the more or less dominant lack of interest in Emerson's writings from professional philosophers, in the United States and in Europe. The lack of attention to this fundamental issue severely detracts, I think, from Zavatta's reading of Emerson.

My approach to Emerson's texts is shaped by the thought of Stanley Cavell. Cavell argued for much of his career that Nietzsche was a delicate, regular reader of Emerson, and some of Cavell's best work traces the differences and similarities between the two figures. One aspect of reading

Emerson that Cavell emphasizes over and over again is that Emerson is a *writer*, something which surely is unmissable; but what this means is in short that Emerson has to be read on the sentence level, word for word, and line by line—like poetry.

Who has time for this? Well, Nietzsche apparently did. "The copy of *Versuche* [Emerson's *Essays*]" Zavatta explains, "stands out as a singular case":

Its pages are literally covered with various traces of Nietzsche's reading and rereading of them, ranging from underlinings, exclamation points, question marks and dog-eared pages right through to numerous annotations and philosophical comments written in the margins.¹²

There is also one of Nietzsche's notebooks, compiled in 1882 and also housed in the Weimar library, filled with excerpts from Emerson's *Versuche*. Regarding this particular "Emerson notebook," Zavatta comments:

Some [excerpts] are copied word for word, some summed up or slightly reformulated, others altered from the third into the first person, and yet others blended together with thoughts of Nietzsche's own.¹³

With some of Emerson's sentences "copied," others "summed up or slightly reformulated" and still others "blended together" with Nietzsche's own, Zavatta has to tell a story not only about Nietzsche's general interest in Emerson, which is obviously true, but of course also about the specific ways in which Emerson influenced Nietzsche's mature ideas of fate, freedom, traditional morality, etc., within each of which the general notion of self-creation and self-overcoming plays a significant role. In telling this story, Zavatta has many fascinating things to say; but she also sometimes caricatures, and sometimes wavers, on Emerson's exact views, which she often seems to do in the service of embellishing a difference between the two figures. In closing I will critically analyze just one specific way that Zavatta traces the theme of self-creation and self-overcoming from Emerson and Nietzsche, as she highlights their similarities and differences and, in the

process, embellishes and misrepresents a difference between the two thinkers; I hope in doing so to give the reader an indication of the nuance of Zavatta's fine study and the benefits of engaging critically with it.

The issue at hand is the nature of freedom and the philosophy of psychology. Zavatta concurs with Pippin (2009)¹⁴ that Nietzsche "is not so much interested in discussing the issue of determinism and free will from a theoretical point of view as in looking at these questions from a psychological perspective."¹⁵ In other words, Zavatta argues that Emerson, and later, Nietzsche, view freedom less as the issue of whether an action is undetermined or unconditioned by a prior event and more as the first-personal, ethical issue of whether an "action is performed deliberately, that is to say, through a process of reflective choice."¹⁶ The sense of having *chosen* is accompanied by an increase in power and sense of self, both Nietzsche and Emerson observe; this basic psychological observation underpins and motivates their respective thinking on freedom. Indeed, one might argue that this view parallels P.F. Strawson's position on free will, that the question of whether an action was "determined" by a prior event plays no direct role in evaluating whether one's action was in fact free.

One upshot of the psychological account is that the Emersonian-Nietzschean account of freedom does not pit fate and necessity—using those terms interchangeably for the time being—against freedom. "Fate is freedom," Emerson writes, reveling in the sense of contradiction; the idea is that there are always external and internal obstacles, many of which are unmovable; and we must make do with what must be, turning it to gold as best we can. "To identify and accept necessity is, for Emerson, the first and indispensable step toward a true development of one's own power," Zavatta writes. She argues that this key Emersonian idea deeply informed Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati*, the love of fate, as well as Zarathustra's determination to be an "ally of necessity." Her philological evidence is unmistakably compelling:

In a note written on the flip side of the title page of his copy of Emerson's *Essays* Nietzsche observed: "Be a

plate of gold—then things will inscribe themselves upon you in a golden script." He is paraphrasing here the following statement of Emerson's: "We are the photometers, we are the irritable gold-leaf and tinfoil that measure the accumulations of the subtle element."¹⁷

The idea is that *Stimmung* or disposition inescapably influences not only how we perceive but what is perceived; and that this is not a limit but a condition of human cognition. "A man is a method, a progressive arrangement; a selecting principle, gathering his like around him, wherever he goes," Emerson writes.¹⁸ Zavatta's thought, which seems correct to me, is that both Emerson and Nietzsche take this thought to heart deeply enough to see that, if we are an "instrument" or "selecting principle" in this sense, then we had better attend to the origin, nature, and to the practical activity of shaping this principle, since it shapes not only how but what in the world we see and incorporate.

From this rich meeting point in the philosophy of psychology, Zavatta tries to make a case that the theoretical positions of Emerson and Nietzsche on freedom are fundamentally, even diametrically opposed; I found her argument here to be unconvincing. "For both philosophers," she writes, "to feel free is not to feel unconditioned or undetermined but rather to feel powerful. In other words, the feeling of freedom coincides with a feeling of personal attainment and achievement."¹⁹ And yet, as distinct from this practical and psychological perspective, she maintains that "in the last analysis [...] Nietzsche's and Emerson's theoretical views are completely opposed to one another."²⁰ Emerson, she writes, held a "metaphysical" view of character (think "internal necessity,") *and* of the freedom of will—he conceives of the human will "as conditionally free because he assumed that thought does not at all belong to the same ontological realm as matter."²¹ Nietzsche, however, Zavatta writes, holds both character and what we call the will to be a function of the sub- or nonconscious level of our biological drives, appetite, physiology, as well as the luck of our external circumstances. She thus sets up an opposition between a metaphysical Emerson, who affirms a dualistic, deistic account of mind

and matter—with the free will and an internal human character being fundamentally good and of a different substance than matter—and a naturalistic, even biological Nietzsche who is opposed to such metaphysical theodicies. And this is not the only place where Zavatta sets up this sort of opposition.

But is this right? What gives me pause is not or not only the reading of Emerson, which given the way Emerson writes will surely be a function of expectation and interpretation (and is this not also true for Nietzsche?). There is a larger issue of perspective here. My question has to do with the use of these theoretical oppositions in Zavatta's study as a whole, or rather, with what might happen to our understanding of the Nietzsche-Emerson relationship if we resisted the temptation to form such oppositions. There are important differences, to be sure, between Emerson's hopeful jubilations at the possibility of harmony between mind and nature, and Nietzsche's dark ponderings about the abyss between mind and world. But is opposing their theoretical, metaphysical views the best way to capture this difference? My view on the particular question of free will and metaphysical freedom is that the heart of Nietzsche and Emerson's thinking on questions of free will is not theoretical—a position Zavatta would likely concede. But what this practical or psychological priority *means* to me is apparently something quite different: I read Emerson and Nietzsche's metaphysical speculation about freedom and character in the service of a practical and psychological project of emancipation and freedom; that is, as elements within philosophical attempts to regain freedom for themselves and their audience. What happens to theoretical claims about freedom when they are in the service of this practical, emancipatory project? How best to center these kinds of questions—of the priority of the practical over the theoretical—in a study of Emerson's influence on Nietzsche? That is another question, and Zavatta's book is a terrific spur to do so.

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Notes

¹ Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

² See Baumgarten, *Das Vorbild Emersons im Werk und Leben Nietzsches* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1957); "Emerson-Nietzsche," *Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehung* 8 (1936), 1-16; "Mitteilungen und Bemerkungen über den Einfluss Emerson auf Nietzsche," *Jahrbuch für Amerikanstudien* 1 (1956), 1-13.

³ George Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1992).

⁴ David Mikics, *The Romance of Individualism in Emerson and Nietzsche* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003).

⁵ Benetta Zavatta, *Individuality and Beyond: Nietzsche Reads Emerson*, trans. Alexander Reynolds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), xv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸ It should be added that the American Civil War drew Emerson into politics, and he devoted a considerable amount of his literary talents and philosophical acumen to both supporting the federal side and reflecting on the meanings and nature of the war, abolition, and race in America. This dimension of Emerson's thought gets no treatment in Zavatta's study, which of course need not seek to cover everything about Emerson's thought; but the book also does not contain any references to Emerson's abolitionism or his politics, despite their many connections to the rest of his philosophy. See *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁹ Zavatta, 195.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹ Zavatta, Ch. 1, "The Reception of the Emerson-Nietzsche Relationship."

¹² Zavatta, XIV.

¹³ *Ibid.*, XIV.

¹⁴ Robert Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Zavatta, 44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

