



Becoming Who You Are: Nietzsche Reads Emerson

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Abstract

The theme of character and character formation in Nietzsche is probably the one on which the influence of his reading of Emerson is most strongly felt. This author acts for Nietzsche as a counterbalance to Schopenhauer's influence. While Schopenhauer preaches a doctrine of character as immutable, Emerson views individual personality as involved in a process of continuous development, aiming and straining always to achieve higher and higher degrees of power. Nietzsche shares this model and makes it his own, while distancing himself from Emerson for a number of important reasons.

Keywords

character, character-formation, self-reliance, determinism, individualism

Résumé

Le thème du caractère et de la formation du caractère chez Nietzsche est probablement celui sur lequel l'influence de sa lecture d'Emerson est la plus sensible. Cet auteur agit pour Nietzsche comme un contrepois à l'influence de Schopenhauer. Alors que Schopenhauer prêche une doctrine du caractère immuable, Emerson considère la personnalité individuelle comme impliquée dans un processus de développement continu, visant et s'efforçant toujours d'atteindre des degrés de puissance de plus en plus élevés. Nietzsche partage ce modèle et le fait sien, tout en se distançant d'Emerson pour un certain nombre de raisons importantes.

Mots-clés

caractère, formation du caractère, autonomie, déterminisme, individualisme

1. Nietzsche as a reader of Emerson

Charles Andler, the first scholar to carry out a systematic study of Nietzsche's sources, secured for Emerson, already in the 1920s, a recognized place as one of Nietzsche's « *précurseurs* ». He shed light on how important a role the reading of Emerson played in the maturation of the young Nietzsche's sense of a philosophical vocation. In this period, says Andler, Emerson was for Nietzsche « un de ces auteurs aimés, dont Nietzsche a absorbé la pensée jusqu'à ne plus toujours la distinguer de la sienne¹ ». But Andler was of the view that Emerson's influence on Nietzsche was basically restricted to the latter's youth. He considered that when Nietzsche, from 1876 on, began to adopt positions opposed to German Romanticism, this meant that he rejected Emerson's philosophy as well. This assumption is easily refuted by examining Nietzsche's work and Nachlass in its entirety: in fact, the years between 1878 and 1883 are certainly those in which the majority of quotations (implicit and explicit) from Emerson and comments on him are recorded. Andler, in short, believed that the American Emerson, an enthusiastic reader of the German Romantic philosophers, had merely allowed Nietzsche to draw once again on this tradition strong in Nietzsche's own native land. This judgment of Andler's is perfectly in line with the general reception accorded to Emerson in Europe. Emerson was indeed looked upon, in Germany and other European nations, as "the American Goethe". That is to say, he was received and appreciated only to the extent that his philosophy recalled the philosophies of figures who played important roles in German Romanticism : Goethe himself, indeed, but also Schelling and Novalis². Inversely to the general reception of Emerson in Germany, Nietzsche praised rather the distinctively American traits in Emerson's thought and deplored German philosophy's influence on him as harmful. In a note from 1881 he wrote: « Of all our present century's authors, the richest in ideas [*der gedankenreichste Autor dieses Jahrhunderts*] has been an American (though his thought too was dimmed and obscured [*verdunkelt*] by German philosophy – Milk glass [*Milchglas*]³)⁴ ».

To understand the reasons behind this judgment, it is essential to consider that Nietzsche actually came directly into contact with the "second" Emerson, mainly with the collection of essays *The Conduct of Life*, and the *Essays: First and Second Series* (1841–1844). This fact is of decisive importance for understanding the profound satisfaction that Nietzsche found in Emerson's work. The "first" Emerson—that is to say, the Nature-transfiguring mystic whose credo is stated most fully and clearly

¹ ANDLER (C.), *Nietzsche, sa vie et sa pensée. Vol. 1 Les précurseurs de Nietzsche*, Paris, Bossard, 1920, p. 228. More recent and accurate accounts of Nietzsche's reception of Emerson can be found in CAVELL (S.), *Philosophical Passages*. Cambridge, UK, Blackwell, 1995 and LOPEZ (M.), « Emerson and Nietzsche: An Introduction », in « Emerson/Nietzsche », Special Issue of *ESQ: A Journal of American Renaissance*, pp. 1-36.

² Many of the earliest comparisons between Nietzsche and Emerson were drawn on the basis of this stereotypical understanding of Emerson as a typical Romantic. Régis Michaud, for example, in his 1910 book on Emerson, speaks of him as the theoretician of a superior type of man, a type of man guided by an « *raison intuitive et affective, la raison du Coeur* », and suggests that Nietzsche might have drawn from this Emersonian "superman" inspiration for his own Übermensch (MICHAUD (R.), *Autor d'Emerson*, Paris, Bossard, (1910) 1924, p. 23).

³ The « milk glass » referred to here was a kind of glass made in Venice, very fashionable at the time, characterized by an opaque, milky-white tint obtained by the addition of an opacifying powder tin.

⁴ NIETZSCHE (F.), *Nachlass 1880-1882*, henceforth abbreviated to *NL*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe Werke*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1999, henceforth abbreviated to *KSA*, vol.9, p. 602, 12[151].

in the essay *Nature* from 1836—remained a figure entirely unknown to Nietzsche. As we can clearly notice from his marginal comments to *Essays: First and Second Series*, Nietzsche strongly opposed the metaphysical ideas which still persist in this book⁵.

Among the distinctive features of Emerson's thought that favorably impressed Nietzsche certainly stand out are his antidogmatism and skepticism. In *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche portrays Emerson as « enlightened, wandering, multifaceted ». He « absolutely does not know how old he is already and how young he will still be – he could say of himself, in the words of Lope de Vega: *Yo me sucedo a mi mismo*⁶ ». Nietzsche appreciates in Emerson's philosophy the exhortation not to remain attached to the past, to old beliefs and values, and to continually transcend them. What outwardly may appear to be inconsistency is in reality the highest fidelity to oneself, which is expressed by satisfying one's spirit's need to grow continually. Emerson was known among his contemporaries to eschew any kind of classification. « I am not the man you take me for », he used to say to anyone who tried to define him⁷. Nietzsche also acknowledges to himself the ability to constantly renew himself, punctually disregarding the expectations of others. In a letter to Carl Fuchs in 1887, as well as in an 1887 note, Nietzsche applies to himself the expression from Lope de Vega that he had used for Emerson:

For all these last years the vehemence of my internal oscillations has been terrifying; now that I must pass into a new and higher form, I need first of all a new estrangement, an even greater depersonalization. What is essential in this process is who and what I still have left. How old am I? I do not know; nor do I know how young I shall still be⁸.

It is exemplary from this letter how Emerson represents a spirit extremely akin to Nietzsche's: this was precisely Nietzsche's perception when, in a letter to Overbeck, he calls Emerson his « *Bruder-Seele*⁹ ».

⁵ It was in fact this « second » Emerson who was to become the subject of the « Emerson renaissance » that made itself felt from the 1980s onward and is still developing today (see BUELL (L.) « The Emerson Industry in the 1980's: A Survey of Trends and Achievements » In « Emerson/Nietzsche » Special issue of *ESQ: A Journal of American Renaissance* 43, 1984, pp. 117–136 and WILSON (E.), « From Metaphysical Poverty to Practical Power: Emerson's Embrace of the Physical World » in « Emerson/Nietzsche » Special issue of *ESQ: A Journal of American Renaissance* 43, 1997, pp. 295–321). We can state therefore that Nietzsche was one of the subtlest and most acute interpreters of Emerson, surely the best at his times.

⁶ This is a quotation from Lope de Vega's play *¡Si no vieran las mujeres!* (1637), act I, sc. XI., quoted second-hand from an article by Victor Cherbuliez, aka Valbert, on Spanish political life. « Si l'Espagne est éternellement gaie, c'est qu'elle est éternellement jeune, et ceci est encore un miracle », wrote Cherbuliez, « Lope de Vega nous montre un empereur rencontrant dans les bois un paysan à la tête blanche, mais si vif et si vert qu'on ne sait quel âge lui donner. "N'avez-vous jamais vu, répond le paysan à cet empereur qui s'étonne, un arbre antique dont le tronc, quoique ridé, se couronne de verts rejetons ? Voilà où j'en suis ; le temps passe, et je me succède à moi-même". Yo me sucedo á mi mismo » (Valbert, pseudonym of Victor CHERBULIEZ, « L'Espagne politique : Première partie. Le caractère espagnol et la monarchie constitutionnelle », *Revue des deux mondes*, vol. 107, 1873, pp. 5-38, p. 13).

⁷ PORTE (J.) and MORRIS (S.) (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. xiii.

⁸ NIETZSCHE (F.), *Sämtliche Briefe in Kritische Studienausgabe Briefe*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1974-84, henceforth abbreviated to *KSB*, vol. 8, p. 209 n. 963 ; see also *NL* 1887-1888 11 [22], *KSA* 13.14)

⁹ NIETZSCHE (F.), *KSB* 6, n. 477).

Even in the section of the preparatory manuscript of *Ecce Homo* (October 1888) in which Nietzsche recalls his teachers, he extols of Emerson precisely the skepticism, that is, the aptitude for questioning all values and opinions, including his own: « Emerson, with his essays has always been a good friend to me and has cheered me up even in black moments. He has so much skepticism, so many “possibilities” in himself that in him even virtue becomes witty [*geistreich*] [...]. A unique case [...], even as a boy I listened to him willingly¹⁰ ». These biographical observations become important when we decide to explore the role Emerson’s reading played in the development of Nietzsche’s thought regarding character formation and becoming oneself. As we shall see in the following pages, this process implies for both authors the ability to renew and change. Since Nietzsche dialogues polemically with Schopenhauer on this subject, it will first be necessary to illustrate the thought of the Danzig philosopher. Next, I will proceed to highlight Nietzsche’s criticisms of him and how Emerson is crucial to the maturation of Nietzsche’s original vision.¹¹

2. Nietzsche’s theory of character between Schopenhauer and Emerson

In his essay *On the Freedom of the Will* (1841), Schopenhauer states, endorsing a view of Kant’s, that every object of experience as such is embedded in a net of causal relations that entirely determines it. He distinguishes three types of causes: mechanical causes, which determine physical changes in inanimate objects according to Newton’s laws of motion; stimuli, which determine the behavior of organisms devoid of knowledge, such as plants; and motivation, which is causality filtered through a knowing mind. While animal behavior is characterized by immediate and uncontrolled reaction, moved by representations of immediately present objects, human beings act in accordance with abstract representations, formed through reasoning. In other words, human beings are capable of deliberation; that is, they can develop arguments and draw inferences to orient their actions. This, however, does not mean that human beings are free to choose between different courses of action. The intellect does no more than form ideas of possible motives for action, that is to say, possible aims or goals to be pursued. These ideas exert effects, in their turn, upon the character, and it is the character, reacting to these effects, that initiates actual action.

Schopenhauer defines character as the essence or the nature of every existing thing or, in other words, as its « inner moving force », or « internal mechanism ». The human character, specifically, he sees as a mixture of « three basic incentives [of human action], namely, egoism [*Egoismus*], compassion [*Mitleid*], and malice [*Bosheit*]¹² ». This mixture, however, is different for each individual ; indeed it is this that renders each individual unique. This is what distinguishes humankind from the animals :

¹⁰ NIETZSCHE (F.), *KSA*, 14, pp. 476-477.

¹¹ The following broadly summarizes some of the contents of Chapter 2.2 of my book *Individuality and Beyond. Nietzsche Reads Emerson*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, entitled *The Freedom of the Human Mind and Scientific Determinism*, pp. 30-39.

¹² ATWELL (J.), *Schopenhauer. The Human Character*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1990, p. 38.

animals have only the character of their species. This means that all the members of a particular animal species will react in the same way to the same stimulus. Since human character, however, is in each case individual character, each human being, when exposed to the same « motive force » will react in a unique individual way, slightly differently from every other human being.

But even if the way that each human being reacts to a stimulus will tend never to be entirely identical with the way another human being reacts to it, each human individual's way of reacting will tend nonetheless to remain « identical with itself », since character, according to Schopenhauer, is innate and immutable : « Beneath the changeable mantle of his years, his relationships, even of his knowledge and outlook, there lurks, like a crab in its shell, the identical and intrinsic human being, wholly unalterable and always the same¹³ ».

Schopenhauer's position can ultimately be defined as strictly determinist, in as much as he holds that if one knows every internal and external detail of the situation in which an individual is called upon to act, then one will be able to predict with absolute certainty the way the individual in question will behave in that situation. By the time he wrote *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche had also come to share this position.

If one were all-knowing, one would be able to calculate every individual action, likewise every advance in knowledge, every error, every piece of wickedness. The actor himself, to be sure, is fixed in the illusion of free will; if for one moment the wheel of the world were to stand still, and there were an all-knowing, calculating intelligence there to make use of this pause, it could narrate the future of every creature to the remotest ages and describe every track along which this wheel had yet to roll. The actor's deception regarding himself, the assumption of free-will, is itself part of the mechanism it would have to compute¹⁴.

In this aphorism, Nietzsche adopts as his own the hypothesis of an absolutely deterministic universe. His philosophical stance recalls that of the 18th-century French philosophers whose works counted among Nietzsche's main reading matter in this period—for example, that of Laplace, who had famously argued that, were there to exist an intellect knowing all there is to know about the world as it exists at this present moment, this intellect would, by this same token, also be able to predict with absolute precision the future of every being, regardless of whether it be inanimate or animate. As Nietzsche states, however, this gigantic “machine” of necessary causes determining necessary effects comprises, as one of its cogs, precisely humankind's belief that our “free will” lifts us safely beyond the sway of any such mechanistic necessity. He considers it, therefore, to be one of Schopenhauer's great merits and distinctions as a philosopher that he rejected this commonly held belief and insisted that the actions

¹³ SCHOPENHAUER (A.), “On the Freedom of the Will.” In *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*, edited by Christopher Janaway, 31–112, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, (1841) 2009, p. 70.

¹⁴ NIETZSCHE (F.), *Human, All Too Human*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, henceforth abbreviated to *HH*, aph. 106, p. 57.

of an individual follow always from his or her character with absolute necessity and predictability: « The insight into the strict necessity of human actions is the boundary line which divides *philosophical* heads from *the others*¹⁵ ».

Nietzsche criticizes Schopenhauer, however, for having failed to draw from this insight what is, in fact, the sole conclusion that it is possible to draw from it, namely, that people cannot be held morally responsible for their own actions. To avoid drawing this conclusion Schopenhauer has recourse to a frankly metaphysical notion: that of an “intelligible character.” Schopenhauer, following Kant, maintains that the character of an individual can be considered in each case from two different perspectives. If we direct our attention to a « the common feature of the entire series of [one’s] actions », what we are considering is the individual’s « empirical character », which is, for its part, entirely causally determined¹⁶. But if, on the other hand, we direct our attention to the inward mechanism of these actions in the sense of their internal governing law, abstracting from the effects that these actions may produce in the empirical world, what we find ourselves considering in this case is the individual’s “intelligible character.” The intelligible character plays in Schopenhauer’s philosophy, as it had in Kant’s, the role of a *prima causa*, or “free cause”, that escapes natural determinism. And to this “free cause” that is the “intelligible character” there can legitimately be imputed a responsibility for the individual’s having the “empirical character” that he or she has. In the last analysis, Schopenhauer holds the individual to be responsible not for what he or she does but for what he or she is – that is to say, for his or her own “empirical character.”

Nietzsche, however, dismisses this Kantian-Schopenhauerian notion of an “intelligible character” as nothing but a « fable¹⁷ ». He holds, even against his once-revered Schopenhauer, firmly to the view that from the premise of the absolutely necessary nature of all human actions it is possible to draw but one conclusion: that « man can be made accountable for nothing, not for his nature, nor for his motives, nor for his actions, nor for the effects he produces¹⁸ ». As Nietzsche was eventually explicitly to declare in *Beyond Good and Evil*, everything in Nature is just a link in a chain that can never be broken. Nothing is « *causa sui*¹⁹ », that is to say, a “free cause” of its own self. And for this reason no one is ever morally responsible for the actions they perform, since at no time would they have been able to act in any other way than they did.

In the period of *Human, All Too Human*, in addition to questioning Schopenhauer’s metaphysical notion of an “intelligible character”, Nietzsche also contested his former philosophical hero’s assumption that character was something unalterable. Like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche conceived of character as the distinctive bundle of instincts that makes each individual unique. Unlike Schopenhauer,

¹⁵ NIETZSCHE (F.), HH aph. 33, p. 222.

¹⁶ ATWELL (J.), *Schopenhauer. The Human Character*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1990, p. 39.

¹⁷ NIETZSCHE (F.), HH aph. 39, p. 34.

¹⁸ NIETZSCHE (F.), HH aph. 39, p. 34

¹⁹ NIETZSCHE (F.), *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, henceforth abbreviated to *BGE*, aph. 21.

however, he held character to be, in principle, thoroughly alterable. Indeed, Nietzsche thought of instincts not as immutable properties, but as interpretative patterns acquired through interaction with the external world. Since they are acquired, he reasoned, they can also be changed or replaced. However, certain of these habits are so deeply rooted in us that a very substantial period of time – a period much longer than the lifetime of the average human being – would be required to replace these old habits with other, new ones. It is thus that there arises the false impression that character is immutable.

That the character is unalterable is not in the strict sense true; this favorite proposition means rather no more than that, during the brief lifetime of a man, the effective motives are unable to scratch deeply enough to erase the imprinted script of many millennia. If one imagines a man of eighty-thousand years, however, one would have in him a character totally alterable: so that an abundance of different individuals would evolve out of him one after the other²⁰.

It was, in fact, in Emerson's *Essays* that Nietzsche found the model for this notion of a character in constant evolution, so multifaceted as to give the impression of containing in itself, so to speak, a whole multiplicity of different characters. This is surprising, given that the notion of character that we find in Emerson is closer to Schopenhauer's conception than it is to Nietzsche's. Like Schopenhauer, Emerson considered each individual to be endowed with an original essence, or specific nature, by which he or she was distinguished from every other individual. In the essay *Fate* he wrote, quoting Schelling: « there is in every man a certain feeling, that he has been what he is from all eternity, and by no means became such in time²¹ ». This individual nature, however, needs to be discovered and, as it were, “acquired” even by the individual who has been endowed with it. Emerson explains that, at every moment, an individual's character is the result of the interaction of two mutually opposed forces: one's inner urge to express one's own original nature and the resistance offered to this urge by one's environment, that is to say by one's external circumstances. On the one hand, by reason of his or her own most intimate nature, each individual feels an urgent internal need to “become who he or she is”, just as the seed of a rose tends to become a rose. In other words, each person tends, by nature, to realize all the potentialities inhering in his or her own individual nature. On the other hand, however, the pressure of external circumstances hinders and restricts such self-realization. According to Emerson, it is primarily society that limits in the individual the expression of his or her individuality: « Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members [...]. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion [...]. Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist²² ».

²⁰ NIETZSCHE (F.), HH aph. 41, p. 35.

²¹ EMERSON (R. W.), *The Conduct of Life*. Vol. 6 of *Collected Works*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, henceforth abbreviated to *CL*, p. 7.

²² EMERSON (R. W.), *Essays*, Boston: James Munroe, 1841, henceforth abbreviated to *E I*, p. 29. the volume *Versuche* read by Nietzsche was the German translation of the first and second series of *Essays* published by Emerson, respectively, in 1841 and 1844. The first series of the *Essays* bore on its title page only the word *Essays*, since Emerson, at this time, did not yet envisage writing a second series. This first edition, which had an extremely

With a view to surviving in such an adverse external environment, individuals develop “reactive” attitudes that do not express their true nature. These attitudes, although initially of a certain utility, become, in the longer term, obstacles to the expression of the individual’s true self. As Emerson puts it, « Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit²³ ». However, each time the internal urge prevails over external pressures, one can say that one has removed some inauthentic feature of one’s own character and drawn a little closer to the expression of one’s own original, distinctive nature:

The changes which break up at short intervals the prosperity of men, are advertisements of a nature whose law is growth. Every soul is by this intrinsic necessity quitting its whole system of things, its friends, and home, and laws, and faith, as the shell-fish crawls out of its beautiful but stony case, because it no longer admits of its growth, and slowly forms a new house²⁴.

In contrast to Schopenhauer’s crab, eternally imprisoned within its shell, Emerson’s “crayfish” abandons, as it grows, the hard carapace that had contained it and goes in search of a more spacious domicile. Expressed without metaphor, individuals’ innate urge to increase their own power prompts them to develop and evolve, and thus to rid themselves, from time to time, of old habits and beliefs in order to form new ones. According to Emerson the frequency of these “self-renewals” is proportional to the internal force of the individual. In the case of the most vigorous natures, such “self-renewal” is something that goes on constantly and without interruption.

In proportion to the vigor of the individual, these revolutions are frequent, until in some happier mind they are incessant and all wordly relations hang very loosely about him, becoming, as it were, a transparent fluid membrane through which the living form is seen, and not as in most men an indurated heterogeneous fabric of many dates, and of no settled character, in which the man is

small print run of only 1,500 copies, was out of print already by 1845. Before republishing this volume in 1847, Emerson wanted to make some corrections to it, and on this occasion he also altered its title to *Essays: First Series*, in order to distinguish it from the second series of short pieces which he had in the meantime (in 1844) published under the title *Essays: Second Series*. Aside from the correction of a misprint, no further modifications were made to this 1847 reedition of the *Essays: First Series*, which was subsequently reprinted several times and has been included in both Critical Editions of Emerson’s works which have hitherto appeared (Houghton Mifflin, 1803, and Harvard University Press, 1971–). For this reason, whereas, when citing the *Essays: Second Series* we can use the Harvard University Press Critical Edition, in order to cite the *Essays: First Series* we are obliged to make use of the text of the first edition of this work. On Emerson’s self-reliance and the desire to be oneself see KATEB (G.), *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, New Edition, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. To be “self-reliant”, means to think for oneself and to live according to one’s own law, respecting and indeed emphasizing the difference between oneself and others (p. 32). However, Emerson’s self-reliance should also be thought as an intellectual method which consists in receiving and weighing up the greatest possible number of points of view upon a single object so as to form a new and original way of seeing it. Without receptivity or responsiveness to individualities different from one’s own, the determination to express one’s own point of view—a positive thing, certainly, in itself—is at risk of degenerating into blind arrogance (p. 4).

²³ EMERSON (R. W.), CL, p. 5.

²⁴ EMERSON (R. W.), E I, p. 72, see EMERSON (R. W.), *Versuche* (Essays: First and Second Series), translated by FABRICIUS (G.), Hannover: Carl Meyer, 1858, henceforth abbreviated to V, p. 94.

imprisoned. Then there can be enlargement, and the man of to-day scarcely recognizes the man of yesterday. And such should be the outward biography of man in time, a putting off of dead circumstances day by day, as he renews his raiment day by day²⁵.

In short, the process of the development of the character in Emerson takes the form of an evolution. This means that there exists a telos toward which this process is directed, namely, the full unfolding of one's own essence. This essence, for Emerson, is present right from the moment of the birth of each individual even if it remains unknown to him or her up until the moment when he or she gains control of it and brings it to manifestation. However, given the great disproportion between the power that individuals in fact express and the power they might potentially free from within themselves, Emerson presents the process of disclosure of one's true self as infinite. Each time one thinks one has reached one's limits one discovers new latent powers the existence of which one had not suspected. « A man's power is hooped in by a necessity, which, by many experiments, he touches on every side, until he learns its arc²⁶ ». In other words, Emerson's "true Self" can be considered a sort of regulative ideal toward which one's efforts constantly tend but which is never fully brought to realization. As Conant very clearly explains, one's true self can be thought of as « a series of attainable selves, each, once attained, leaning toward a further unattained yet attainable successor²⁷ ».

The Emersonian model of a self in continuous development, aiming and straining always to achieve higher and higher degrees of power, exercised a great fascination on Nietzsche. From the period of *Human, All-Too Human* onward, it was taken up by him as an essential point of reference for his elaboration of his own doctrine on the nature of human character, one decidedly alternative to Schopenhauer's. It was largely inspired by Emerson that Nietzsche began to envisage the "self" of each individual as being composed of "a multiplicity of individuals." This "multiplicity of individuals" consists in the many different configurations of drives that each person's "self", at different periods of his or her life or even at different moments, can take on. Nietzsche's conception here, however, remains significantly different from that of Emerson. For Nietzsche, what animates these changes and pushes them on is not, as it is for the American philosopher, some metaphysical essence which is striving to emerge into the light; rather, the animating force here is conceived of by the younger thinker as the tendency of every living form to adapt itself to its environment, or rather to try to dominate its environment. In a note jotted down on the reverse side of the front cover of his copy of the *Essays*, Nietzsche wrote:

Suck all chance events, and all situations in which you happen to find yourself, *quite dry* – and then move on to others! It is not enough to be just *one* man – This would be to demand of you that you

²⁵ EMERSON (E.), I, 72, V 94-95 Nietzsche partly underlined this passage.

²⁶ EMERSON (R. W.), *CL*, p. 11.

²⁷ CONANT (J.), « Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of Schopenhauer as Educator », in SCHACHT (R.) (ed.), *Nietzsche's Post Moralism*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 181-257, p. 234.

become restricted! Rather, pass from one over into the other! [*Saugt eure Lebenslagen und Zufälle aus — und geht dann in andere über! Es genügt nicht, Ein Mensch zu sein! Das hieße euch auffordern, beschränkt zu werden ! Aber von Einem zum Andern*²⁸!].

Nietzsche moved away from Emerson's position in two other important respects: first, as regards the notion that the process of the formation of human character is a quasi-teleological one in the sense of tending essentially toward some preestablished end; second, as regarding the specific way in which this process unfolds.

Nietzsche, as we have said, does not share Emerson's metaphysical presuppositions, namely, that the human individual has a "true nature" which he should bring to light from beneath all the masks and subterfuges imposed by society. In other words, for Nietzsche, 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. Second, the forms and modalities through which this process of formation of character is initiated and brought to realization are conceived of by Nietzsche in more complex terms than those in which Emerson had envisaged the process. Nietzsche supposes that there is formed in the first instance, at the level of an individual's basic drives, a certain ideal, or schema, of the person that he or she aspires to become. This « schema of how we should be » can be, and has been, defined as an « ideal self » or « aspirational self²⁹ ». Since Nietzsche recognizes the existence of no organizing and governing force within the human personality higher than the drives themselves, he is obliged to characterize this « aspirational self » as emerging directly out of the drives as an expression or creation of them. We find him writing in a note from 1880,

Ideals of this sort [i.e. ideals bearing upon the person that we want to become] are the anticipatory hopes of our drives, and nothing else. As surely as we have drives, they also lay out in our imagination a sort of schema of ourselves, a schema of how we should be in order to satisfy our drives — this is idealising³⁰!

Nietzsche goes on to explain that the schema elaborated at the unconscious level of the drives then becomes translated into a conscious purpose. This, acting as a catalyst, then causes the drives to assume a certain configuration. In other words, as Constâncio observes, the schema outlining the person that we want to be – what we have called our « aspirational self » – is « not only the guideline, but the moving force itself³¹ ». Once the « aspirational self » has been formed, those drives which had

²⁸ NIETZSCHE (F.), NL 1881 13[3], KSA 9.618.

²⁹ CONSTÂNCIO (J.), BRANCO (M. J.), and RYAN (B.), « Introduction to Nietzsche and the Problem of Subjectivity », in CONSTÂNCIO (J.), BRANCO (M. J.), and RYAN (B.), (eds.), *Nietzsche and the Problem of Subjectivity*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 2015, pp. 1-45, p. 26.

³⁰ NIETZSCHE (F.), NL 1880 7[95], KSA 9.336-337.

³¹ NIETZSCHE (F.), NL 1881 11[18], KSA 9: 448.

previously been inculcated in us by society begin to seem to us to be something alien to ourselves and lose the force that they had formerly enjoyed within the general structure of our personality. Consequently, the patterns of behavior motivated by these latter drives are abandoned. The same thing happens with old behavior patterns, habits and tastes each time our aspirational self undergoes a change, and we begin to feel a call to become something different from that which we had felt ourselves called to become before.

Since he rejected the notion of a “free will” in the sense of a will that remained entirely causally isolated, along, necessarily, with the idea of moral responsibility that has always been inseparably connected with this notion, Nietzsche – in sharp contradistinction to Emerson – could not and did not believe that the individual could be held morally responsible either for carrying out this process of the development of his or her character or for failing to do so. In *Twilight of the Idols* he declared, « the individual is a piece of fate, from the front and from the back, one more law, one more necessity for all that is coming and shall be³² ». This means that it is only the sufficiently well-configured organism that moves toward self-perfection.

3. Be yourself!

Despite these important differences between Emerson and Nietzsche, a substantial part of Nietzsche’s philosophy contains exhortations to “be oneself” in a society dominated by conformity. Moreover, this part of Nietzsche’s philosophy is significantly affected by Emerson’s influence. How to reconcile Nietzsche’s determinist view and his denial of the metaphysical idea of a true self to be brought to light with such exhortations? What is the truest part of his philosophy, that which brings him closer to Emerson or that which places him far from him? In a letter dated September 24, 1874, Nietzsche tells his friend in Gersdorff about the theft of his travel bag while he was returning from Bergün, a Swiss resort where Nietzsche had stayed while revising the pamphlet *Schopenhauer as an educator*. The bag contained the volume of Emerson’s *Essays: first and second series*, which Nietzsche had evidently reread again while doing his revision work. Nietzsche, in the third *Untimely meditation*, urges his contemporaries to live by their own measure and law. « The man who does not wish to belong to the mass needs only to cease taking himself easily; let him follow his conscience, which calls to him: “Be your self! All you are now doing, thinking, desiring, is not you yourself³³!” ».

This exhortation is strongly reminiscent of Emerson’s essay *Self-reliance*, which represents the epitome of Emersonian individualism: the protagonist of the essay is the individual’s effort to emancipate himself from the constraints society places on self-expression and self-realization. The exercise of self-reliance leads in the intellectual realm to the expression of one’s genius, while in the

³² NIETZSCHE (F.), *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, And Other Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, henceforth abbreviated to *TI*, *Morality as Anti-Nature* section 6.

³³ NIETZSCHE (F.), *Schopenhauer as educator*, in *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, henceforth abbreviated to *SE*, section 1.

ethical realm it gives rise to moral autonomy. On closer inspection, in the third *Untimely meditation*, Nietzsche does not portray the historical Schopenhauer; rather, he uses Emerson's philosophy to flesh out an ideal that even contrasts with the philosophy of the Danzig philosopher. Schopenhauer considers the purpose of morality to be to extinguish or at least mitigate the suffering inherent in the human condition. Since this suffering, in his view, is linked to each individual's tendency to desire, he suggests an ascetic path that extinguishes desire, and thus the will to live. This goal is achieved when one realizes that individuality is nothing but an illusion and recognizes oneself as one with all other human beings. Ultimately, moral life for Schopenhauer consists in a liberation from desire and individuality. For Emerson, on the contrary, it consists in undertaking a process of liberation that takes place through desire and through a strengthening of individuality. The fundamental message Nietzsche wants to convey with Schopenhauer's character is precisely the exhortation to pursue self-realization through the cultivation of one's distinctive individuality.

One could reconcile this message of the third *Untimely meditation* with the anti-metaphysical and determinist profession evident in *Human, All Too Human* by assuming an evolution of Nietzsche's thought. However, Emerson's essay *Self-reliance* is also the source of several excerpts drawn from Nietzsche in early 1882. In the summer of 1881 spent in Engadine Nietzsche is in the company of a new copy of Emerson's *Essays*. Nietzsche states about it: « I've never felt so at home and at home in a book as – I don't have to praise it, it's too close to me. It would be like praising myself³⁴ ». These excerpts closely resemble the admonition to be oneself expressed by Nietzsche in the third *Untimely meditation*.

If you give credence to your thoughts – if you believe that what is true in the depths of your heart is also true for all men: this is genius³⁵.

In each work of genius we recognize our own thoughts that we have rejected: thus they return to us with a certain alienating majesty³⁶.

Emerson reminds Nietzsche that those in every age who were called “geniuses” distinguished themselves by the confidence they placed in their own insights, even and especially where they came into conflict with dominant beliefs. Indeed, the risk is that the thoughts one did not have the courage to express would be made known by others, endowed with greater courage, from whom one would then have to receive as an admonition what one had first discovered. Other excerpts from this essay emphasize the need to define one's own conduct of life and values independently. « No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this;

³⁴ NIETZSCHE (F.), NL 1881 12[68], KSA 9.588.

³⁵ NIETZSCHE (F.), NL 17 [20] 1882, KSA 9.669; see EMERSON (R. W.), V, 32.

³⁶ NIETZSCHE (F.), NL 17 [21] 1882, KSA 9.669; see EMERSON (R. W.), V, 33.

the only right is what is after my constitution; *the only wrong what is against it*³⁷ » states Emerson in a passage Nietzsche summarized in his 1882 notebook³⁸. Ultimately, even in his mature period Nietzsche uses Emerson to exhort the individual to be himself against the pressures of a conformist society.

This picture does not change even in later writings. In fact, Nietzsche in *The Twilight of the Idols* and the preparatory notes praises Emerson in contrast to Carlyle for the way he looks at the great men of the past. Carlyle is portrayed as « a man of strong words and eccentric attitudes, rhetorician by necessity, who is constantly provoked by the desire for strong faith and irritated by the feeling of being incapable of it (precisely therefore a typical romantic) ». On the contrary, Emerson is marked by a faith so high in man and his potentialities that he can afford « he luxury of skepticism » of questioning even that which is most sacred and venerable in it.

The desire for strong faith is not evidence of strong faith, but of the opposite: if one has it, this is betrayed precisely by being able to afford the luxury of skepticism and frivolous unbelief; one is precisely rich enough for this. Carlyle wants to stun something within himself by the violence of his admiration of men of firm faith and by his fury against all who are less naive: this continual passionate dishonesty toward himself, to speak in moral terms, disgusts me³⁹.

To combat the utilitarianism and liberalism of industrial civilization, while averting the danger of social tensions exploding in a revolution similar to the French Revolution, Carlyle dreams of the advent of a new aristocracy. It will be composed of the great men, semi-divine beings to whom ordinary men have a duty to submit and pay adoration. For Emerson, on the contrary, the great men of history are not objects of worship but merely examples and witnesses to the height to which everyone can rise once he comes to trust in himself. Emerson writes in the introduction to *Representative Men*, which Nietzsche had translated for himself in 1883 by Ida Overbeck: « Great men exist that there might be greater men⁴⁰ ».

Even from the gloss “Ego” affixed by Nietzsche to a passage in the essay *Spiritual Laws* we can see his agreement with the position expressed by the American.

May I [...] complete my work in such a way that the idle, if they find pleasure in it, may compare my plot with that [of the great men of the past] and find it identical with the best of them⁴¹.

³⁷ See EMERSON (R. W.), E I, 30, see also V 37.

³⁸ NIETZSCHE (F.), NL 1882 17[26] KSA 9.669.

³⁹ NIETZSCHE (F.), NL 1887-1888, 11 [45].

⁴⁰ EMERSON (R. W.), *Representative Men*. Vol. 4 of *Collected Works*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, henceforth abbreviated to RM, p. 20. See NIETZSCHE (F.), *Kritische Gesamtausgabe Briefe III/2*, Berlin, De Gruyter, letter no. 215. The translation is not preserved in Overbeck's *Nachlass*. See MEYER (K.) and REIBNITZ (B. von) (eds.), *Friedrich Nietzsche / Franz und Ida Overbeck Briefwechsel*, Stuttgart-Weimar, Metzler, 2000, p. 479.

⁴¹ EMERSON (R. W.), V, 122.

Ultimately, even in Emerson and Nietzsche's critical gaze at the great men of the past one can find an exhortation to be oneself addressed to the present man.

To resolve the contradiction between Nietzsche's profession of determinism and his anti-metaphysical outlook on the one hand, and his seemingly naive exhortations to "be oneself," much in the style of Emerson, we can distinguish two meanings of the term character: the first indicates the mixture of characteristics that make up an individual's personality. The second indicates individual's moral character, i.e. Emerson's virtue of self-reliance, that is, the ability to assert one's distinctive personality in the intellectual and moral fields. Those who possess "character" in this second sense will be able to express their point of view against that of the masses and develop independent conduct, as well as feel stimulated by observing the great men of the past. The expression "character development" or "character formation" indicates for both authors precisely the path that brings from character (1) to character (2).

4. Become who you are

Certainly, according to Nietzsche, it does not depend on "free will" whether one possesses or develops the quality that Emerson calls self-reliance and that distinguishes the so-called "people of character", i.e. self-reliant individuals. However, it cannot be passed over in silence that Nietzsche actually devotes many pages to explaining how to forge and mature one's character, i.e. how to pass from character (1) to character (2).

In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche compares the operation of perfecting oneself to the activity of the gardener, speaking as if he believed that the individual is completely free to act on one's character and mold it to one's liking.

One can dispose of one's drives like a gardener and, though few know it, cultivate the shoots of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as productively and profitably as a beautiful fruit tree on a trellis; one can do it with the good or bad taste of a gardener⁴².

Also in *Daybreak*, Nietzsche speaks of a « second nature », that is, the discipline one must give to oneself in order to achieve the full expression of one's first nature. This second nature must neither replace nor stifle the first: it must be thought of as a sort of « protective skin » that allows one's first nature to develop unhindered and to ripen underneath⁴³. The process of maturing one's character—in the sense of developing independence of thought and moral autonomy—is ultimately presented by Nietzsche as a path of "self-care".

⁴² NIETZSCHE (F.), *Daybreak*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, henceforth abbreviated to *D*, aph. 560, p. 225.

⁴³ NIETZSCHE (F.), *D* 455, p. 457.

Nietzsche takes up and expands on observations made in the works of his “middle period” in *Ecce Homo*, a work in which he sets out to explain how he became what he is: that is, how he became capable of expressing his genius and defining his moral conduct. Nietzsche ascribes the secret of his success to his attention to the small facts of everyday life. « Nutrition, location, climate, recuperation », often considered negligible details, became for him « fundamental concerns of life itself [...] : far more important than all the concepts people have considered important so far⁴⁴ ». The intellectual dynamism that is commonly called “genius” is in fact traced by Nietzsche back to a great power and agility of spirit, which arises through great care of one’s living conditions: « dry air and clear skies are conditions for genius, which is to say its conditions includes a rapid metabolism and the possibility of a constant supply of large, even enormous, amounts of energy⁴⁵ ». In addition to place and climate, fundamental is nutrition, since « the smallest intestinal inertia is more than enough to turn a genius into something mediocre⁴⁶ ». In other words, character building according to Nietzsche does not start from the education of the mind, but from the care of the body: « the gesture, the diet, physiology; the rest follows from that⁴⁷ ».

The paragraph in which Nietzsche develops these considerations, « Why I am so clever [*Klug*]⁴⁸ », is openly an homage to Emerson’s essay *Prudence*, which, in the German version read by Nietzsche, is translated precisely as *Klugheit*. Emerson transvalues this virtue, traditionally considered a « silly, purely negative virtue, hovering somewhere between caution and timidity and hinting at failure⁴⁹ ». Rather, he makes it the first and most important virtue of the great man. Prudence is defined by Emerson as « the art of securing a present well being⁵⁰ » through meticulous attention to the smallest facts of daily life, such as diet, sleep or climate. « We live by the air which blows around us, and we are poisoned by the air that is too cold or too hot, too dry or too wet », Emerson states in a passage that Nietzsche emphasized profusely and glossed in the margin with the note “bravo⁵¹ !”. Any lack of prudence is punished by nature with a decrease in energy. « On him who scorned the world », Emerson warns « the scorned world wreaks its revenge. He that despiseth small things, will perish by little and little [...], like a giant slaughtered by pins⁵² ».

Ultimately, we can conclude that Nietzsche borrows from Emerson his inversion of the traditional image of the great man as the one who, having superabundant energies, is exempt from concern about how best to manage them. On the contrary, according to Nietzsche and Emerson, it is precisely the

⁴⁴ NIETZSCHE (F.), *Ecce Homo*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, And Other Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, henceforth abbreviated to *EH*, *Clever* 10, p. 98.

⁴⁵ NIETZSCHE (F.), *EH*, *Clever* 2, p. 88

⁴⁶ NIETZSCHE (F.), *EH*, *Clever* 2, p. 88,

⁴⁷ NIETZSCHE (F.), *EH*, *Clever*, 1. p. 85.

⁴⁸ NIETZSCHE (F.), *EH*, *Clever*, 1. p. 85.

⁴⁹ FRANK (A. von), « Essays: First Series (1841) », in PORTE (J.) and MORRIS (S.) (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 106-120, p. 112.

⁵⁰ EMERSON (R. W.), *E I*, p. 199.

⁵¹ EMERSON (R. W.), *E I*, p. 186, see also V 166.

⁵² EMERSON (R. W.), *E I*, p. 192-193, see also V 171 Nietzsche underlined, in his copy, parts of this passage.

superior type, the one with the most instincts, who must have the most caution. Precisely because of its greater complexity, the superior type is much more fragile than the average type: « the superior type presents an incomparably greater complexity, a greater sum of coordinated elements; therefore disintegration also becomes more probable⁵³ ».

How are all these indications concerning self-care reconciled with the denial of free will in Nietzsche's philosophy? Nietzsche explains the feeling of being free by tracing it back to the feeling of power from which it derives. This feeling of power, in turn, arises in conjunction with an effective configuration of one's drives. In a well-organized organism, drives that act as "distractions" outside the dominant configuration are a negligible part and do not have the power to disrupt it. As a result, the individual feels in control of himself or, in other words, free to decide what to do or not to do. In an 1881 note, Nietzsche explains that feeling free means feeling « not pushed and shoved, without a feeling of compulsion ». In other words, what we call « freedom of the will » is nothing more than « the *feeling of our preponderance of force* » over external pressures or, in other words, « the consciousness that our force *compels*, in relation to a force which is compelled⁵⁴ ». From the feeling of being masters over oneself then comes the feeling of being able to influence one's external environment. As Pippin points out, the feeling of overcoming external resistance is essential to feeling free⁵⁵.

How is freedom measured, in individuals as in nations? By the resistance which has to be overcome, by the effort it costs to stay aloft. One would have to seek the highest type of free man where the greatest resistance is *constantly being overcome*⁵⁶.

The individual whose instincts work in synergy is also perceived by others as having a strong will, i.e., as one capable of independently establishing his or her own goals and pursuing them with determination⁵⁷. On the other hand, when instincts are not functionally aggregated and lack command, the organism is weak. From the perception of this weakness, one generates the representation of oneself as being overpowered by external forces, and therefore unable to determine the events of one's life. Even by others, this individual will be perceived as having weak willpower, enslaved to the judgments and expectations of others. The contradiction between the profession of absolute determinism and the whole doctrine concerning self-creation is therefore in Nietzsche only apparent: the powerful man, i.e., endowed with an effective configuration of instincts, cannot help but perceive himself as free and

⁵³ See NIETZSCHE (F.), NL 1888 14[133], KSA13.317.

⁵⁴ NIETZSCHE (F.), NL 1885 34 [249], KSA 11.505-506.

⁵⁵ PIPPIN (R.), « How to Overcome Oneself: Nietzsche on Freedom », in GEMES (K.) and MAY (S.) (eds.), *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 69-87, p. 76.

⁵⁶ See NIETZSCHE (F.), TI Expeditions 38, p. 92.

⁵⁷ See NIETZSCHE (F.), NL 1879 42[25], KSA 8.600.

therefore assigns to himself the responsibility and credit for cultivating his individuality to the best of his ability. This is the case with Nietzsche himself.⁵⁸

5. Conclusion

In an 1883 letter addressed to his friends Franz and Ida Overbeck, who shared with him a passion for Emerson, Nietzsche writes:

I don't know what I would give to succeed, albeit belatedly, in making such a splendid, great personality, rich in feeling and spirit [*eine solche herrliche große Natur, reich an Seele und Geist*] subject himself to severe discipline, to real scientific training. As it is, in Emerson we have lost a philosopher! [*So wie es steht, ist uns in Emerson ein Philosoph verloren gegangen!*]⁵⁹.

With his naively metaphysical belief in a “true self” to be unearthed through a strenuous exercise of “free will”, Emerson possessed for Nietzsche neither the preparation nor the rigor that must distinguish a true philosopher. However, with his genuine enthusiasm and Emerson represented for Nietzsche the antidote for European illness and “*decadence*”. With his confidence in man and the future, his antidogmatism and New World nonconformism the reading of Emerson was the fuel for the cultural and moral revolution Nietzsche became the bearer of.

⁵⁸ As Nietzsche was to specify in the works that followed *Zarathustra*, strong individuals who endorse fatalism are obviously themselves aware that their drawing of their own advantage from necessity is no free choice on their part but rather simply the consequence of their internal drives' being as marvelously well-organized as they are. This does not, however, mean that the strong individuals cease to take any personal credit for all that they achieve thereby; they continue, essentially, to do so, merely shifting the praise due for these achievements away from the “I” conceived in the narrow traditional sense of an acting consciousness over toward their “nature” in the sense of their organism in its entirety. For further discussion of the issue of self-creation and determinism in Nietzsche, see ZAVATTA (B.). *Individuality and Beyond. Nietzsche reads Emerson*, cit., p. 49.

⁵⁹ NIETZSCHE (F.), KSA 6.573, n. 566.