

Received: 5 July 2022 Accepted: 11 November 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/agon.v16i1.2705>

## Nietzsche and Emerson on History

Laura Langone<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to show how Nietzsche was influenced by Emerson in developing a conception of history as a set of values to be embodied in order to gain a deeper insight into the essence of reality. It is a conception that Nietzsche first expressed in his second Untimely Meditation, On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life (1874) and that fully developed in the period of his so-called “free spirit philosophy” (1878-1882). Firstly, I will briefly outline the relationship between Nietzsche and Emerson. Secondly, I will illustrate Emerson’s stance on history. Thirdly, I will show how Nietzsche drew on Emerson’s thought.*

**Keywords:** History; self-cultivation; plastic power; character; experimentation; perspectivism; free spirit

### **Introduction**

Nietzsche first read Emerson when he was 17 years old. The books he read at that time were *Essays: First and Second Series* (1841-1844) and *The Conduct of Life* (1860). From then on, such texts accompanied Nietzsche for the rest of his life. He repeatedly came back to them over the years. Around 20 years after his first encounter with Emerson, in 1882 he wrote down in a notebook passages drawn from Emerson’s *Essays*. In 1888, the year before his death, he declared that Emerson had been for him a good friend who had always made him happy in his dark moods, which confirms the importance of Emerson for Nietzsche for his entire life.

### **Emerson**

For Emerson, humans as well as everything that exists are the emanation of a divine principle he calls Oversoul. As emanations of the Oversoul, human beings mirror its characteristics, sharing its powers although on a smaller scale. It is as if they were little gods.

Behind the many events of history there is only one mind, that of the Oversoul shared by the various individuals:

Of the works of this mind history is the record. Its genius is illustrated by the entire series of days. Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history. Without hurry, without rest, the human spirit goes forth from the beginning to embody

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Langone, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. E-mail: [ll544@cam.ac.uk](mailto:ll544@cam.ac.uk)



every faculty, every thought, every emotion which belongs to it, in appropriate events.<sup>2</sup>

Those who explain history by reconstructing the cause-effect relationships between events are mistaken, as there is only one cause, the mind of the Oversoul manifesting itself in everything. The hand of God is everywhere, and, as a consequence, to the wise people realising this, “to the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine.”<sup>3</sup> As is well known, Nietzsche used this sentence as the motto of the first edition of *The Gay Science* (1882), chronologically the third work of his so-called “free spirit philosophy”, after *The Dawn* (1881) and *Human, All Too Human* (1878).

Since there is only the mind of the Oversoul behind the multiple events of history, it follows that knowledge, all the spiritual creations produced by humans over the course of history, belong to everyone. No kind of knowledge is foreign to us. Rather, the world and what happened in it throughout history can be a treasure for our self-cultivation. This depends on our willingness to learn from them:

The world exists for the education of each man. There is no age or state of society or mode of action in history to which there is not somewhat corresponding in his life. Every thing tends in a wonderful manner to abbreviate itself and yields its own virtue to him.<sup>4</sup>

For Emerson, history can only be actively read. Otherwise, it would not make sense to read history:

There is no age or state of society or mode of action in history to which there is not somewhat corresponding in his life. He should see that he can live all history in his own person. [...] I can find Greece, Asia, Italy, Spain and the Islands – the genius and creative principle of each and of all eras, in my own mind. We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience and verifying them here. All history becomes subjective; in other words there is properly no history, only biography. Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself – must go over the whole ground.<sup>5</sup>

“There is no history, but only biography”. This sentence, which was written down by Nietzsche in his 1882 notebook of passages from Emerson’s *Essays*, contains the core of Emerson’s conception of history. For Emerson, history is not a set of dead facts to be recorded, but a well of possibilities of being. History shows so many ways in which human beings can express their nature.

Being aware of this, reading history actively means taking inspiration from history in order to build our personality. History illustrated that humans can become what they want. Reading history actively is tantamount to living in our present life the possibilities of being history showed in the past.

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Random House, 1950. P. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson, *The Complete Essays*. P. 128.

<sup>4</sup> Emerson, *The Complete Essays*. P. 130

<sup>5</sup> Emerson, *The Complete Essays*. Pp. 126-127.



History no longer shall be a dull book. It shall walk incarnate in every just and wise man. You shall not tell by languages and titles a catalogue of the volumes you have read. You shall make me feel what periods you have lived.<sup>6</sup>

In this passage the key word is “incarnate”. Emerson encourages us to incarnate history. We have to continuously wear somebody else’s shoes, incarnate one possibility of being after the other. Emerson calls such a process “intellectual nomadism”.

The human beings reading history actively are nomads. From time to time, they live according to many values, perspectives. They develop their character by incarnating the innumerable characters illustrated by the human mind throughout history. The more they develop their character, the closer they come to the Oversoul. Approaching the Oversoul is the highest goal of human beings. Therefore, by embodying history, they enrich their character while joining the divine principle at the same time.

Our task as humans is to make history our own. For example, by studying the history of the production of a Gothic cathedral, we make it a part of our character. In our inquiry, we come to know the forest-dwellers, the stone and the wood used to build the cathedral, the kind of decoration dominating at the time the cathedral was built. By immersing ourselves in the study of the genesis of the cathedral, we become the very individuals who built it. It is as if we built it anew.

In other words, we make a fact our own if we achieve the mindset that originally contributed to it. We become the co-authors of a past event by inhabiting the mind behind it. Indeed, “the true poem is the poet’s mind; the true ship is the shipbuilder.”<sup>7</sup> Or, “when a thought of Plato becomes a thought to me – when a truth that fired the soul of Pindar fires mine, time is no more.”<sup>8</sup>

If on the one hand the mind is One, on the other hand nature is its correlative. It follows that human beings are a “bundle of relations”, and that they “cannot live without a world.”<sup>9</sup> Humans express themselves through their relations with nature and other fellow human beings, ultimately through their relations with the world. The stimuli we are exposed to during our life influence the way we develop our personality. For example, “put Napoleon in an island prison, let his faculties find no men to act on, no Alps to climb, no stake to play for, and he would beat the air, and appear stupid.”<sup>10</sup>

Nature is an appendix, an accident of the only one substance, the mind of the Oversoul. The latter created nature to make humans contemplate its own face:

Seen in the light of thought, the world always is phenomenal; and virtue subordinates it to the mind. Idealism sees the world in God. It beholds the whole circle of persons and things, of actions and events, of country and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, act after act, in an aged creeping Past, but as one vast picture which God paints on the instant eternity for the contemplation

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<sup>6</sup> Emerson, *The Complete Essays*. P. 142.

<sup>7</sup> Emerson, *The Complete Essays*. P. 131.

<sup>8</sup> Emerson, *The Complete Essays*. P. 130.

<sup>9</sup> Emerson, *The Complete Essays*. P. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Emerson, *The Complete Essays*. P. 141.

of the soul. [...] But this theory makes nature foreign to me, and does not account for that consanguinity which we acknowledge to it.<sup>11</sup>

Nature and beings, including humans, are a manifestation of the same mind, hence the only one reality is spiritual. In this respect, idealism is wrong, as it radically separates humans from nature. They, as everything that exists, share the same essence. However, this does not mean demoting nature. Indeed, nature is the privileged place where we recognise all that exists as the divine Oversoul or Universal Being:

There I feel that nothing can befall me in life – no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me.<sup>12</sup>

## Nietzsche

I will show that in most of his philosophical production, for Nietzsche, in the same way as Emerson, history has to be actively read. Nietzsche's philosophy developed throughout the years, and I agree with the traditional division of Nietzsche's thought into three main periods: the "early phase" (1870-1876), the "free spirit phase" (1878-1882) or "middle phase", and the "philosophy of the eternal recurrence" or "late phase" (1883-1888).

While in his early phase, under the influence of Schopenhauer and Kant, Nietzsche draws on the metaphysics of the thing in itself, in the middle phase of his philosophy he rejects this metaphysics, replacing it with the *Weltanschauung* of the natural sciences. In the third and last period, Nietzsche conceives of the two most famous concepts of his thought that contributed to the history of philosophy: the eternal recurrence and the will to power.

My point is that Nietzsche takes a similar position on history to that of Emerson in the second *Untimely Meditation* in the early period of his oeuvre as well as in his free spirit philosophy in the middle period. In my view, the active reading of history after the manner of Emerson is the *fil rouge* linking these two different periods of his philosophical production, the "metaphysical one", and the "scientific one".

In *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Nietzsche affirms his view of history using words that could be mistaken for Emerson's words: "If, [...] you acquire aliving knowledge of the history of great men, you will become mature [...]. Sate your soul with Plutarch and when you believe in his heroes dare at the same time to believe in yourself" (HL §7, p. 95).<sup>13</sup> By encouraging us to "acquire aliving knowledge of the history of great men", Nietzsche intends to call into question the dominant conception of history at his time, historicism.

Historicism considers history a set of dead facts to be merely recorded. In addition, it maintains that history is a progress always tending to better conditions of life and ending

<sup>11</sup> Emerson, *The Complete Essays*. Pp. 33-34.

<sup>12</sup> Emerson, *The Complete Essays*. P. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.



with God's redemption. This progress happens according to a logic of necessity that humans have to merely accept bowing their heads before it.

It is this logic of necessity that Nietzsche targets in his attacks against historicism. This logic makes human actions pointless as it contends that everything has been already established once and for all. Against this view, Nietzsche affirms that the facts of history show that humans are subject to becoming. They illustrate how many possibilities of being humans expressed in the past. We can learn from them in order to shape our present life.

Nietzsche's position on historicism is "untimely" as it is exceptionally thought-provoking, historicism being the main horizon of meaning of his age:

This meditation too is untimely, because I am here attempting to look afresh at something of which our time is rightly proud – its cultivation of history – as being injurious to it, a defect and deficiency in it; because I believe, indeed, that we are all suffering from a consuming fever of history and ought at least to recognize that we are suffering from it. (HL §1, p. 60)

The human being is the only being on earth who suffers from the malady of history. Animals know no past, they live in an eternal present: once an event has passed, they soon forget it. Their forgetfulness is the cause of their unconscious happiness. Nothing represents a burden for them, as they forget everything. Nietzsche calls this act of forgetting "the unhistorical".

If the unhistorical is typical of animals, the act of remembering or "the historical" uniquely belongs to human beings. They can go through a traumatic experience whose memory prevents them from going forward and starting a new life. The burden of past events is too heavy for them to act. They cannot find within themselves the strength and motivation to change attitude to the world. Memory becomes the prison trapping them forever.

Thus, they must forget something, otherwise they will not be able to live, to make decisions, plans, to actually know happiness:

He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past, who cannot stand balanced like a goddess of victory without growing dizzy and afraid, will never know what happiness is – worse, he will never do anything to make others happy. (HL §1, p. 62)

Humans have to endow themselves with a "plastic power," that is the capacity to draw limits to what can be remembered and what can be forgotten, so as to prevent history from becoming a burden which paralyses their agency. This is because we need both the historical and the unhistorical to live. In this respect, Nietzsche's approach to history represents a paradigm shift compared to the main horizon of meaning of his age. The point is not to accumulate as much information on history as possible just for the sake of erudition. Rather, Nietzsche's point is in which way knowledge, specifically historical knowledge, can be in the service of life.

Now we can already glimpse the similarities between Nietzsche's approach and that of Emerson. Both Nietzsche and Emerson reject a conception of history as a disinterested study focused on the collection of information for its own sake. History is not about the

registration of events, as historicism believes it to be. Instead, history is about ourselves, our lives, our way of learning from it.

If on the one hand “the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture” (HL §1, p. 63), on the other hand Nietzsche adds a third approach to history: “the suprahistorical”. The suprahistorical individuals believe being to be immutable and with eternal features. History for them does not teach anything new, being just a constant repetition of these features. Nothing really happens but everything stays the same eternally.

Contrary to the suprahistorical perspective, for Nietzsche history does teach. Its value lies precisely in the fact that it, illustrating the multiple experiences of human beings across the centuries, can be an inspiration to us all. By learning from the past experiences of humans, we can enhance our own experience *hic et nunc*.

For this reason, quoting Goethe, Nietzsche begins the forward to the second *Untimely Meditation* putting life at the centre: “In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity” (HL, p. 59). Knowledge is not something separated from our life. Rather, it is the very matter of our life, insofar as it can invigorate it. It is almost straightforward that this conception very much resembles Emerson’s thought summarised in his sentence “the world exists for the education of each man.”

For Nietzsche, our task is to make use of historical knowledge everyday, so as to have a more complete experience. In this respect, I agree with Anthony Jensen (2013) who underlines how the critique of disinterested knowledge, a key topic of Nietzsche’s late philosophical period, is already present in Nietzsche’s oeuvre in his early work on history.<sup>14</sup>

Depending on our needs, there are three main types of history that can invigorate our life: “monumental history,” “antiquarian history” and “critical history”. We have to find a balance between them. If one prevails over the others, it can be extremely harmful to our life.

That the great moments in the struggle of the human individual constitute a chain, that this chain unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks, that the summit of such a long-ago moment shall be for me still living, bright and great – that is the fundamental idea of the faith in humanity which finds expression in the demand for a monumental history. (HL §2, p. 68)

Firstly, monumental history underlines the similarities between events rather than their differences. Those who are highly ambitious and want to “do something great” can find support in monumental history by looking at the great actions of humans in the past. In realising that great events actually happened in history, monumental people overcome resignation. They find in history the motivation to repeat great actions of the past in their own age.

However, an excess of the monumental perspective can give birth to fanaticism: “When we go on to think of this kind of history in the hands and heads of gifted egoists and

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<sup>14</sup> See Anthony K. Jensen, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.



visionary scoundrels, then we see empires destroyed, princes murdered, wars and revolutions launched” (HL §2, p. 71).

Secondly, antiquarian history belongs to “him who preserves and reveres – to him who looks back to whence he has come, to where he came into being, with love and loyalty; with this piety he as it were gives thanks for his existence” (HL, §3, p. 72). In other words, he or she who is attached to tradition and loves venerating the past can take refuge in antiquarian history. Antiquarian individuals, for example, are those who look at the history of their city, with its walls, gates, and regulations, as their own history, recognising in it a diary of their youth. They are like the Italians of the Renaissance wanting to reawaken in their poets the genius of ancient Italy.

An excess of antiquarian history can be dangerous as well, undermining agency and the birth of new events. Indeed, antiquarian history is only able to preserve life, not to engender it. By exalting only the past, it loses sight of the present, making agency pointless. It serves only the life of the past in such a way that it ends up mummifying the life of the present.

Thirdly, those who consider the present state of affairs unfair can make use of critical history to undermine its foundations. For example, people wanting to fight against ancient privileges can denounce them as unjustified by uncovering their historical origins.

However, as is the case with the other two kinds of history, critical history must not prevail, otherwise it can be harmful. A total rejection of the past would lead to a loss of our roots. Ultimately, this would mean losing ourselves, as we are the very outcome of our past.

For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them. (HL §3, 76)

To summarise, history can be fruitful for our own life, provided that we find a balance between the historical, including monumental, antiquarian and critical history, and the unhistorical. To express this, Nietzsche uses the metaphor of the ocean, affirming the following:

In truth, no one has a greater claim to our veneration than he who possesses the drive to and strength for justice. For the highest and rarest virtues are united and concealed in justice as in an unfathomable ocean that receives streams and rivers from all sides and takes them into itself. (HL §6, 88)

Achieving an equilibrium between the historical and the unhistorical means temporarily incarnating the values, the spiritual products created by humans throughout history, and then forgetting them so as to incarnate other values, in a continuous process. The values we constantly incarnate are the waves of our ocean. Perhaps it is not fortuitous that Nietzsche wrote down the metaphor of the ocean on the last page of his copy of Emerson’s *Essays*. Here we find a first translation of Emerson’s intellectual nomadism.

Nietzsche then develops Emerson's intellectual nomadism in his free spirit philosophy. Here he does not use the metaphor of the ocean but Emerson's very expression: intellectual nomadism or *geistiger Nomadentum*.

In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche presents the figure of the free spirit as follows:

We may call ourselves [...] "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)<sup>15</sup>

By definition, free spirits are those who are able to free themselves from external influences in order to think for themselves. They are those who call into questions every value society passes on. The way free spirits question society's values is to experiment with them, instead of taking them for granted, as the majority of people do. Experimenting with values is the new criterion of truth of the free spirit. So Nietzsche affirms in *The Gay Science*:

I approve of any form of scepticism to which I can reply, "Let's try it!" But I want to hear nothing more about all the things and questions that don't admit of experiment. This is the limit of my "sense of truth"; for there, courage has lost its right. (GS §51)<sup>16</sup>

Experimenting with values means incarnating them in one's own skin. This is a process that involves continuously embodying values and giving them up in order to embody new ones. Thus, free spirits are nomads in constantly experimenting with different perspectives. As nomads who always move house, they constantly change values, perspectives, worldviews. It is this continuous experimentation of different perspectives that shows the free spirits' intellectual nomadism as perspectivism.

Benedetta Zavatta (2019) argues that the reason behind Nietzsche's perspectivism is the search after power: "Already in the second of the *Untimely Meditations*, but above all starting from the middle period works, what impels, in Nietzsche's vision, the scholar to turn to the past is precisely a hunger to increase his or her own power."<sup>17</sup> She also underlines the indebtedness of Nietzsche's concept of the will to power to Emerson's notion of the power in the namesake essay in his book *The Conduct of Life*.

In this essay, Emerson summarises his view of power as the essence of the world as follows: "Life is a search after power; and this is an element with which the world is so saturated, – there is no chink or crevice in which it is not lodged, – that no honest seeking goes unrewarded."<sup>18</sup>

While it may well be the case that Nietzsche was inspired by Emerson in devising his concept of the will to power, it must be underlined that this concept is foreign to Nietzsche's free spirit philosophy. Nietzsche elaborates this concept in the very last phase

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<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. P. 263.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. P. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Benedetta Zavatta, *Individuality and Beyond: Nietzsche Reads Emerson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. P. 12. The page number refers to the chapter *Making History and Writing History* of the online version of the book.

<sup>18</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Conduct of Life*. Cambridge (USA): The Riverside Press, 1860. P. 47.





of his philosophy. Hence, Zavatta is wrong in linking the perspectivism of the free spirit with the will to power.

In my view, the most complete expression of Nietzsche's perspectivism in his middle period, which is at the same time the most complete development of Emerson's conception of history as biography, is in aphorism 292 from the first book of *Human, All Too Human*. Here Nietzsche affirms the following:

Forward on the path of wisdom with a bold step and full of confidence! However you may be, serve yourself as your own source of experience! [...] Can you not, precisely with aid of these experiences, follow with greater understanding tremendous stretches of the paths taken by earlier mankind? [...] Turn back and trace the footsteps of mankind as it made its great sorrowful way through the desert of the past [...]. Your own life will acquire the value of an instrument and means of knowledge. (HH §292)

In this aphorism, Nietzsche summarises the path to knowledge of free spirits. Knowledge is not achieved by applying eternal concepts to life, as was the case in the previous philosophical systems. For Nietzsche, knowledge comes directly from life. In other words, life is a means of knowledge: we learn to know things insofar as we incarnate them in our own skin. This involves experimenting with all spiritual products created by humans throughout history, the whole culture. With words similar to those of Emerson, Nietzsche encourages free spirits to "trace the footsteps of mankind." This means embodying the whole culture in one's own person, much in the same manner as Emerson's human beings embodied the whole history.

In conclusion, as for Emerson human beings have to incarnate many perspectives with the aim of approaching the Oversoul as close as possible, so Nietzsche's free spirits have to experiment with many values in order to obtain knowledge of the world.