



THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE EYES OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON & FRIEDRICH WILHELM NIETZSCHE

Eman M. Ghanem

Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Jordan, Jordan
E-mail: areghanem07@yahoo.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.12.2.198](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.12.2.198)



Article info

Article Received: 20/04/2024
Article Accepted: 26/05/2024
Published online: 12/06/2024

Abstract

Many writers have explored the notion of 'individual' in their writings while attempting to characterize this concept based on the socio-political and cultural contexts. The paper aims at examining "Nature" (1836), "The American Scholar" (1837) and "Self-Reliance" (1841) of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Part One of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) in light of Emerson's definition of 'Man Thinking' that exhibits a conceptual parallelism and affinities with Nietzsche's Übermensch or Superman. Even though there are historical and social differences in the contexts of their literary works, the representation of the individual in the thoughts of Emerson and Nietzsche is of a remarkable resemblance. This paper begins by tracing some of *Thus Spake Zarathustra's* strong "echoes" (i.e. textual echoes) of Emerson's works in order to underline the affiliations between the two authors. Then, the paper proceeds by suggesting that Emerson as a possible precursor of Nietzsche, in reference to Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence.

Keyword: Emerson, Man Thinking, Nietzsche, Superman, Bloom.

The great American thinker and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and the influential German philosopher and culture critic Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), though writing in different historical and social contexts, both have represented the individual and its creation in reference to "Man Thinking" and "Self-reliance" concepts of the former and "Overman" or "Superman" of the latter. In her *Individuality and Beyond: Nietzsche Reads Emerson* (2019),

Benedetta Zavatta shows that Nietzsche started reading Emerson at seventeen and in 1881, on a personal note, Nietzsche commented on Emerson's *Essays* (1841) that he had felt 'home' while reading it, pointing out that this feeling of closeness to Emerson's literary work led him to refer to Emerson's work as his own (Zavatta xiii). Considering this, Emerson's influence on Nietzsche's thinking could be traced in Nietzsche's literary work. This essay aims at examining "Nature" (1836), "The American

Scholar" (1837) and "Self-Reliance" (1841) of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Part One of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's philosophical novel of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) in reference to their philosophy of the individual to showcase their philosophical parallels and conceptual affinities.

As a way of introduction, nature for British Romantics represented a medium of rescuing and purifying the self with its rehabilitative dimension from the ills of the society and the city. In American Romanticism, to which Emerson belongs to, the idea of reform had been added. Hence, going to nature to purify the self and transcend by way of preparation to go back to society and reform it. According to Emerson, who is singled out as a major American transcendentalist, Nature and self are interconnected. In his essay entitled "Nature", which embodies Emerson's ideas of Nature and Romanticism, he posed his dualistic approach as he states "Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE" (Emerson and Atkinson 4). In the provided quote, Emerson introduces the philosophical distinction between the self and Nature, in other words, the me and not me and anything belongs to not me, including the body, is referred to as Nature. Furthermore, Emerson describes solitude as "To GO into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds will separate between him and what he touches "(5), so he takes solitude to describe the state of being alone far away from the society, yet still reading and writing as means of thinking within the self and furthermore the self in solitude is more possibly to function through its connection with Nature

by looking at the physical part of it such as the stars. But, looking at the sensuous and physical part of Nature, as the stars in the previous example, is not enough for Emerson as he elaborates "To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child" (6) and what matters most is the meta-sensuous and meta-physical experience. Yet, this solitude is not a substitution of the social interaction or the society, nevertheless, it is presented by Emerson as means of contemplation, reflection and cultivation to go back to society and claim a social role.

Similarly, Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* echoes the virtue of solitude as the prologue introduces Zarathustra's experience of solitude as "When Zarathustra was thirty years old he left his home and the lake of his home and went into the mountains. Here he enjoyed his spirit and his solitude and for ten years he did not tire of it" (Nietzsche, Del Caro and Pippin 3). As a result of this solitude in Nature, Zarathustra's "heart transformed" (3) and this transformation is associated with the influence of Nature on him as:

one morning he arose with the dawn, stepped before the sun and spoke thus to it: "You great star! What would your happiness be if you had not those for whom you shine? For ten years you have come up here to my cave: you would have tired of your light and of this route without me, my eagle and my snake. But we awaited you every morning, took your overflow from you and blessed you for it. (3)

Thus, and through Zarathustra's interaction with Nature, he is transformed and in other words created and this creation as individual requires solitude in Nature. Like Emerson whose idea of solitude is practical since the individual should obtain a role in his

society, Zarathustra himself depicts this when he shows awareness of his gained wisdom while addressing the sun "Behold! I am weary of my wisdom, like a bee that has gathered too much honey. I need hands that reach out" and this wisdom should be transformed to others, just as Zarathustra proceeds with his talk and decides to "bestow and distribute until the wise among human beings have once again enjoyed their folly, and the poor once again their wealth" and this requires to leave his solitude and "descend into the depths, as you do evenings when you go behind the sea and bring light even to the underworld, you super-rich star!" and he concludes that he "must go down" (3) to be with the human beings.

It is noticeable how solitude is appreciated and praised by both Emerson and Nietzsche, yet Emerson elaborates subtly on the function of Nature in terms of the transcendentalist experience of the self. In his essay "Nature", Emerson dissects the body of Nature into different components and ranks them hierarchically. In addition, his essay has a spiritual dimension where he illustrates how Nature brings the individual closer to God "Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us" (Emerson and Atkinson 28). Nevertheless, both writers introduce solitude in Nature as means and catalyst of self-elevation for the individual who aims at claiming a practical role in the society and this could be only achieved through a balanced solitude.

In his way down, Zarathustra met the old man in the forest whom he describes as "This wanderer is no stranger to me: many years ago he passed by here. Zarathustra he was called; but he is transformed" (Nietzsche, Del Caro and Pippin 3), and this transformation is associated with the state of a child where the old man comments "Yes, I recognize Zarathustra. His eyes are pure, and no disgust is visible around his mouth. Does he not stride like a dancer? Zarathustra is transformed, Zarathustra has become a child, an awakened one is Zarathustra" (3). Echoing Emerson's idea that

the sun can only shine "into the eye and the heart of the child" (Emerson and Atkinson 6), Nietzsche refers to the purity and innocence of the child to showcase Zarathustra's transformation.

In his "The American Scholar", the Phi Beta Kappa address that Emerson delivered at Harvard in 1837, Emerson refers to the scholar as "the delegated intellect. In the right state he is *Man Thinking*", but also the scholar adversely "in the degenerate state" when he is "the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking" (Emerson). In his lecture, Emerson sheds light on education and how the scholar is made, yet it is not the conventional education, as Emerson states "Let us see him in his school, and consider him in reference to the main influences he receives" (Emerson). On that account, Emerson lists the influences through which the individual passes by to become consequently a scholar. According to Emerson, the first and most fundamental influence is Nature; the scholar is the graduate of Nature, where Nature functions rehabilitatively and at the same time teaches the scholar to know and see more than other people and hence to be a social reformer, he says:

The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. Every day, the sun; and, after sunset, Night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows. Every day, men and women, conversing, beholding and beholden. The scholar must needs stand wistful and admiring before this great spectacle. (Emerson)

In other words, Emerson's previously proposed notion of solitude in Nature aims at not creating a hermit, but a scholar who will come back to the society and fight.

The second influence "into the spirit of the scholar is the mind of the Past, — in whatever form, whether of literature, of art, of institutions, that mind is inscribed. Books are the best type of

the influence of the past, and perhaps we shall get at the truth, –learn the amount of this influence more conveniently, –by considering their value alone” (Emerson), yet Emerson heavily draws a line between bad and good books, where the good books as he comments can evoke and provoke the mind and therefore the scholar should not let any “book be the authority but to read, think and decide for himself. There is a fine line between study, appreciation and assimilation of books and ideas from the past and idolizing these books and ideas” and the scholar “must examine, rewrite, create, learn from the old but write our own books from our own time and experience” (Haines). On one hand, the former influences i.e. Nature and books sound familiar, but Emerson’s third proposed influence intersects with the reformatory dimension directly, which is action, he says, “Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action” (Emerson) After highlighting the education of the scholar by the three previously mentioned influences, Emerson illustrates his duties and comments “They are such as become Man Thinking. They may all be comprised in self-trust. The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances”. In short, Emerson believes that the one and only way for the scholar to fulfill his duties towards the society is by living a self-oriented life, and this could be achieved through his self-trust, in addition to , “Free should the scholar be, –free and brave” (Emerson) and this happens when the scholar think for himself independently or in other words becomes a Man-Thinking. In like manner, the scholar, is “one who raises himself from private considerations and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts. He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart” (Emerson). Hence, Emerson, and as a great believer of the self, entitles the scholar to be the heart and the eye of the world and to go beyond the private considerations and functions in

accordance with his social role. Ultimately, Emerson in “The American Scholar” describes in detail how the scholar is created through the three proposed influences along with his duties towards the society.

Similarly, Nietzsche in his *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, he declares his philosophy explicitly through Zarathustra who concludes after his talk with the old man in the forest that “God is dead!” (Nietzsche, Del Caro and Pippin 5) and this metaphor illustrates “Nietzsche’s exasperation, expressed in the form of the madman,” and “ was directed at people’s ignorance at the loss of a ground of morality – indeed, as he says, the “collapse” of “our entire European morality” (Lattier). In response to his ‘death of God’, Nietzsche has introduced his concept of Overman, when Zarathustra met the people in the marketplace and “spoke thus to the people: “I teach you the overman. Human being is something that must be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?” (Nietzsche, Del Caro and Pippin 5), thus and according to Nietzsche, the state of Overman is exaltation and wisdom and this state could be reached through the journey from down-going to over-going which is described as “What is great about human beings is that they are a bridge and not a purpose: what is lovable about human beings is that they are a crossing over and a going under” (7) and this journey of creating the ‘Overman’ is embodied in Zarathustra’s point of departure “Thus began Zarathustra’s going under” (16). The essence of this journey, for the individual, is to go beyond the confinements of the herd and the engraved values by following oneself and gravitating new values. In his quest for companions, Zarathustra describes them as “I need living companions who follow me because they want to follow themselves – wherever I want” , “The one who breaks their tablets of values, the breaker, the lawbreaker – but he is the creative one”, “Companions the creative one seeks and not corpses, nor herds and believers. Fellow creators the creative one seeks, who will write new

values on new tablets”, and “They shall be called annihilators and despisers of good and evil. But they are the harvesters and the celebrators” (14). In a nutshell, those individuals who are creators, reapers and rejoice are potentially able to attain the state of Overman. Those who obey themselves and not commanded, fight and refuse their fate and choose, and break the table of old values and create new ones.

Nietzsche’s appreciation of the idea of following oneself and rejection of the herds as means of crystalizing one’s individuality resembles Emerson’s views in his article “Self-Reliance” (1841), where Emerson’s assertion of individualism is connected to the rejection of two major notions: conformity and consistency. In the essay, Emerson justifies his resistance of conformity as he states “Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing. Act singly, and what you have already done singly will justify you now” (Emerson 149). In the same manner, Emerson’s condemnation of consistency is explained in his words as “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. 'With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do” (148). Alike, Nietzsche and through Zarathustra’s description of the companions he aims at having, he states clearly that one’s individuality takes shape once it resists to follow and start saying no.

Resorting to analogy to clarify his ideas, Nietzsche states in the chapter entitled “On the Three Metamorphoses” that the individual should go through three phases or metamorphoses to attain the state of Overman: the camel, the lion and the child. The camel phase which is an equivalent to the individual who is burdened by his full and passive obedience of the society, yet “All of these heaviest things the carrying spirit takes upon itself, like a loaded camel that hurries into the desert, thus it hurries into its desert” , and being

alone in the desert, the second phase occurs, the “spirit becomes lion, it wants to hunt down its freedom and be master in its own desert”(16). And in order to resist and fight, the individual should destroy the Dragon, which stands metaphorically for the society with its traditions, religion and old values, and create “new values – not even the lion is capable of that: but to create freedom for itself for new creation – that is within the power of the lion” (17). The last phase for the individual to attain the state of the Overman is equivalent to the state of the child where the child is :innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a wheel rolling out of itself, a first movement, a sacred yes-saying” (17) and hence the child is a creator , reaper and rejoice-r.

To sum things up, in their quest for individuality, both Emerson and Nietzsche have characterized the individual that they aim at and described the influences that shape and reshape him according to the former and the phases or metamorphoses as stated by the latter. Though both writers have entitled Nature a significant role is the process of creating and transforming the individual, specifically the notion of solitude in Nature, Emerson has paid more attention to it. As one of the prominent figures in the literary scene in America during the 19th century and one of the founders of Transcendentalism, Nature has played a major role Emerson’s writing, not in the Wordsworthian sense, but as Emerson has introduced his philosophical metaphor ‘transparent eyeball’ , representing the eye as receiving what nature offers. In the introduction of *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1940), Brooks Atkinson states that Emerson:

rejoiced that man is part of nature and that nature is his home. The most significant statement he made is that man becomes a part of God when he surrenders himself to association with nature: "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the

Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God." The rest of Nature showed the connection between nature and civilization. (qtd. in Emerson xxi)

Therefore, Emerson is more concerned with Nature in terms of his Romantic approach and the spiritual dimension.

Unlike Emerson, the German philosopher and cultural critic Nietzsche whose writings and philosophy have influenced a wide variety of philosophers, writers and psychologists has elaborated on the concept of Overman in a more universal sense. In his article "Emerson and Nietzsche: Fate and Existence", George Stack quotes Charles Andler (1866-1933), who was a French Germanist and philosopher and the author of *Les precurseurs de Nietzsche* (1920), who "identified Emerson as one of Nietzsche's precursors and remarked that "Emerson ... has not anticipated all of the theories of Nietzsche, but he obliged Nietzsche to establish them" (Andler I:342)" (qtd. in Stack), in other words, Nietzsche took Emerson's views as point of departure to frame his own philosophy. In short, Emerson's transcendentalism, Americanism and religious background have framed his philosophy in a way or another. Whereas Nietzsche's universality could be justified in reference to the time factor and the how each of them envisioned the role of the individual in the society. To conclude, in their quest for individuality, Emerson and Nietzsche showcase a philosophical parallelism and conceptual affinity, yet their writings represent a diverse literary product to reflect intimately their socio-political, cultural and religious backgrounds.

References

- Emerson, Ralph Waldo, and Brooks Atkinson. *The Complete Essays And Other Writings Of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: The Modern Library, 1950. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Digital Emerson, The American Scholar."

Digitalemerson.wsulibs.wsu.edu. N.p., 1837. Web. 31 July 2020.

Haines, Nancy. "Emerson, American Scholar." *Itech.fgcu.edu*. N.p., 1998. Web. 31 July 2020.

Lattier, Daniel. "What Did Nietzsche Mean By 'God Is Dead'?" *Intellectual Takeout*. N.p., 2016. Web. 31 July 2020.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, Adrian Del Caro, and Robert B Pippin. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.

Stack, George. "Emerson And Nietzsche: Fate And Existence." *Nineteenth-Century Prose* Vol. 19, No. 1 (1991): n. pag. Web. 31 July 2020.

Zavatta, Benedetta. *Individuality And Beyond: Nietzsche Reads Emerson*. OUP USA, 2019. Print.