

David LaRocca's responses to Silvia Bellia's questions for

Ho Un Libro in Testa

(I Have a Book in the Head)

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1. What's the relationship between Nietzsche's thought and American culture?

Readers may be surprised to learn that the links between Nietzsche and Emerson—that is, Emerson's influence on Nietzsche—form a robust segment of scholarship. It's understandable, right? They are, after all, two of the most prominent intellectual figures of their respective countries. But more than that, they seem, at first blush, to be so conceptually and temperamentally *different*. Partly, the bold differences may be owing to caricatures of the thinkers that so often deviate from the content of their work. In a literal sense, though, the relationship between the two men can be described in part by Nietzsche's early reading of Emerson (in German translation). Nietzsche was a teenager—albeit a very smart, even a preternaturally gifted philosopher, one might say—when he first came to read Emerson, and he really never stopped reading him thereafter. Emerson was one of the few writers Nietzsche returned to steadily for a quarter-century thereafter. The question that defines—and occasionally haunts—the secondary scholarship on this relationship is: what elements did Emerson bring to Nietzsche's thinking, and moreover, how did Nietzsche translate or transform those elements to make them his own.

The philosopher, Stanley Cavell, for instance, has described one of the more interesting and unexpected pedigrees for Emerson's influence. In *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford UP, 2003), Cavell explores the extent to which Heidegger was influenced by Nietzsche, and later how Heidegger was taken up by American academics, especially philosophers veering away from the Anglo-American strain. At the time that Heidegger was being voraciously read and commented on, however, *Emerson* was not considered a bona fide part of philosophy, even *American* philosophy; he was, instead, primarily relegated to English departments. Heidegger's legitimacy in many US philosophy departments had the unintended effect, Cavell attests, of rehabilitating Nietzsche's thought (as Nietzsche too was denigrated for false associations with the rise of the Nazi party), and by extension, Emerson's. Cavell takes this odd narrative of intellectual history to emphasize Emerson's recovery in the country whose thinking he helped found—and that recovery, in some measure, owes to Nietzsche's high opinion of his work, and incorporation of it.

For a more conceptual compare-and-contrast approach to the question, though, and a very good question it is, please look to the many excellent works of scholarship that carefully explore the relationship. In work by Lawrence Buell, George Kateb, David Mikics, George Stack, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, and of course, Cavell, we find many essential appraisals of Emerson's impact on Nietzsche's thinking. And I have written a short essay, already translated into Italian, "Una Traduzione Transatlantica: Fato e libertà in Emerson and nel giovane Nietzsche," which you can find in *Nietzsche L'America* (a cura di Sergio Franzese, Edizioni ETS (Nietzscheana Saggi 2), 2005). Also, I've collected a few of Nietzsche's remarks on Emerson in my latest edited volume, *Estimating Emerson: An Anthology of Criticism from Carlyle to Cavell* (Bloomsbury, 2013), and I draw from Nietzsche's work, and its relevance to our thinking about Emerson, in my newest book: *Emerson's English Traits and the Natural History of Metaphor* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

2. Do you think that American literature is connected to philosophy?

If we think of American literature as a term that refers, at first, to the remarkably fecund and founding period F. O. Matthiessen called the “American Renaissance,” then, we can fairly quickly see how that generation of writers—including Hawthorne, Melville, Cooper, Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson—were possessed of tremendous philosophical (and religious) foment. These writers, not all of them penning novels, were nevertheless founding American literature in a way that complements the founding of America as such by figures a generation or two earlier (especially, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson). It is necessary to believe in that first founding, I suggest, aside from Matthiessen’s abiding contribution, so we can think of the mid-19th century period as a “renaissance” at all. A re-birth requires a first birth. But it is just this kind of condition—say, the need for founding, the questions of creation and legitimation—that draws the American writer into pointedly philosophical issues. A novel such as *Moby-Dick* strikes at the very comfort we might have with the term “novel,” for what is this whale-of-a-book but a philosophical investigation?

And as the decades pass, and the centuries shift, we see how American literature—or the letters it creates in myriad forms (poetry, criticism, theatre, screenplays)—perpetually invokes a philosophical orientation. We see this from Frederick Douglass to James Baldwin, from Zora Neal Hurston to Toni Morrison, from Emily Dickenson to Elisabeth Hardwick, from Henry James to Philip Roth, from Saul Bellow to David Foster Wallace. Each writer, each American writer, it seems brings along his or her contested philosophical ground: whether it be the status of the human; the nature of race; the difference and sameness of sexes; the legacy of colonialism, chattel slavery, and anti-semitism; or the evolving definition of human life in the “posthuman” age of bits, digits, and pixels.

As “American” necessarily refers to a plurality, the literary creations of the nation are somehow also necessarily drawn from a particular point of view—not from a national Gestalt or a unified racial or generational history. This fact is liberating and daunting for any writer, for it demands a serious confrontation with the predicates of one’s own existence, and the limits one’s writing can achieve (for oneself and others). Because the American writer is perpetually contributing to the meaning of American writing, the expression of American literature will always be caught up with philosophical concerns (moral, metaphysical, logical, epistemological, and aesthetic). Such is the gift and the curse of the difference in American literature—that it constitutionally demands consciousness of its philosophical nature.

3. Does literary theory need philosophy?

Would it be too bold to suggest that literary theory is already part of philosophy—that, at the very least, it occupies a significant space in aesthetics? Literary theory, like philosophy, is not monolithic, so I suppose a reply depends on how it is practiced. A quick analogy might find literary theory attending to the surface of a text and its relationship to other texts; yet that analysis misses the extent to which the surface is bound up with what lies beneath it. And beginning in the depths, we can see readily the degree to which philosophy is undertaken as a linguistic enterprise, and in its finer forms might be simply credited as a variant of literature or the art of letters; from this orientation, it would be philosophy that stands in need of literary theory.

The question is a good one in so far as it seeks less to prove the criteria for what counts as literary theory or philosophy per se; or to determine what each is responsible for; and instead acknowledges them as interpenetrating phenomena that are mutual

reinforcing and complementary. In this spirit, a reader will find the questions of philosophy in/as/of literature will share many of the same theoretical preoccupations as those in literary theory. If there is a sense of reliance or need, then, it could be said that philosophy needs to be regarded as a literary experiment (always positioned for analysis, as any other written text), and literary theory needs to acknowledge overlapping interests with the history of aesthetics.

4. Why can we, or can we, estimate Emerson as America's Plato?

One well-known appraisal of Emerson as America's Plato comes from "Emerson — Philosopher of Democracy" by John Dewey (an essay featured in my edited volume, *Estimating Emerson: An Anthology of Criticism from Carlyle to Cavell*). The comparison made by Dewey, and supported by others, may be read on several registers: first, that Emerson is a founding or seminal thinker; secondly, that his thought is both wide-ranging and integrative (for example, where we find moral insight in the context of aesthetic reflection, or that an observation of ethical conduct yields a view of order, compensation, and beauty); and, thirdly, that both the expansiveness of his thought and the unity it seeks, reflects an abiding resemblance to Plato's outlook—some call it idealism, transcendentalism, or transcendental biology, while Emerson preferred to call it a Natural History of Intellect.

5. Who is your favorite writer? What are his/her main questions?

Ralph Waldo Emerson—owing, in part, to the economy of his prose and the depth of thought in that radical concentration of space. His writing, among few others, seems to contain—and provoke—the most thinking in the fewest words. Regularly this quality of abbreviation and allusion, or this method of informed restraint, is referred to as "aphoristic," and it certainly is an accurate description of his writing style. But the notion of an aphorism also carries with it the connotation of the fragment or isolated element—that the sentence is not just brief but fully contained. Like a maxim, like a commandment, one can hold onto it, carry it around, and reflect on it. One of Emerson's achievements, then, is to have taken the hard-won philosophical depth of the aphorism and coupled it with the impact of consecutive prose. An essay of Emerson's often reads like a series of aphorisms: to some this can feel bewildering, even ungracious—as if the host didn't leave guideposts and thesis-statements at each turn. But taken up without that demand for counseling explicitly, the effect can be forcefully illuminating—and more surprisingly, stimulating for one's own thinking. While a reader may admire the sheer poetical force and rhetorical grace of Emerson's writing—a coupling always in the service of thought—it is the extent to which those lines underwrite one's own thinking that remains a true marvel of his talent.

One of his main questions is self-reflexively part of his own writing—namely, the extent to which we are capable of our own thoughts: having them, knowing them, as our own. As a writer and editor, for Emerson or any other, the interaction between the creation of prose and the quotation of prose is an active and lively one. Emerson rarely uses footnotes or endnotes, and yet as any annotated version of his work illustrates, his ideas are often at once his *and* drawn from a source (variously unnamed, alluded to, occasionally invoked or credited); see for example, *The Annotated Emerson* (edited by David Mikics (Harvard, 2012)). If Emerson labored to distil his thoughts into precipitates of titanic significance, it is our pleasure as readers and critics to work in countermeasure—allowing those ideas to expand our thinking by activating it.

6. Is there a film that you think can be considered a work of contemporary philosophy?

There are so many. Or rather, it would seem that film-as-such—as a medium—is philosophical, and so almost any film might rise to the level of consideration as a work of philosophy. Stanley Cavell has written that it would seem that film was created as if for philosophy—so that the discipline or field or work of philosophy might be aided and amplified by some force beyond it. Film is, in this respect, a medium that has, and continues to make, a crucial difference for philosophical thinking.

In the essays I've written about specific films, however, there are definitely features and elements of content that make a film more or less *available* to philosophical thinking. For example, where Cavell found his philosophical films in the romantic comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, I find reason to think seriously about films written by Charlie Kaufman or in the genre of war films (see for example the multi-author volume I edited, *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, 2011). And contemporary directors commonly draw from philosophy, or contribute to philosophy, intentionally or not; for example, we find both overt and inadvertent representations pertinent to philosophy in films by Terrence Malick, Lars von Trier, the Coen Brothers, Tim Burton, Michael Mann, and Werner Herzog.

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