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BOOK REVIEW

Nietzsche: filosofo della libertà. Laura Langone (Edizioni ETS, 2019, ISBN: 978-8846754790).

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Nietzsche once opined that “a good review of a research book consists in better solving the problem that book advances” (KGW IV/2, 24 [53]).¹ To some extent, Nietzsche’s ambitious conception of criticism aides in offering a review of Laura Langone’s *Nietzsche: filosofo della libertà* (*Nietzsche: Philosopher of Freedom*). Langone deals with a complex and centuries-old theme, as it appears and develops through the Nietzschean corpus: that of freedom. The book attempts to answer questions pertinent to this theme: can we become free? If so, how might we achieve this goal of freedom? What does being ‘free’ really mean, for Nietzsche? How might this freedom affect our lives?

Rather than situating freedom as an isolated theme, Langone argues that it permeates many of the central concepts of Nietzsche’s productive output. As such, in an attempt to synthesize an account of freedom with concepts such as the death of God, will to power, eternal recurrence, the free spirit, and the Übermensch, Langone’s work hopes to contribute an overall vision of Nietzsche’s philosophy. By means of articulating this vision, the book gestures at an explanation of how Nietzsche’s philosophy might lead us from necessary despair, to (at least a singular moment of) absolute, joyful existence. I begin by summarizing the main arguments of Langone’s chapters, before proposing - in the hope of emulating Nietzschean free-spiritedness – some general comments with “a sceptical attitude, that calls into question every truth” (Langone, p. 76).

The prologue of the book opens with the death of God, and the radical disorientation it entails: a lack of meaning, the loss of fixed points of reference, the collapse of secular values. Actions seem devoid of criteria, and this can precipitate humanity’s fall into the abyss of nihilism. “But not all is lost”, Langone reassures, paraphrasing Nietzsche (p. 12). Zarathustra announces the Übermensch, the culmination of *Zarathustra’s* ‘Three Metamorphoses of Spirit’, which ultimately constitute that work’s *fil rouge*. The camel carries on its back the dominant moral values like a weighted burden, the lion frees itself from such burdens through combative experimentation, opening the field to the possibility of new values, and finally the child plays, destroys and creates without rest.

Part and parcel of facilitating this metamorphosis is a process of emancipation from metaphysics and its evaluative commitments. Essential to this emancipation is the requirement of a sensitivity to linguistic structure, which conveys subterranean support to metaphysical ideas such as substance, cause-effect, agent-action. Of specific interest to Langone is to highlight the social and utilitarian origin of language and truth. Neither truths

¹ All translations of both Nietzsche and Langone are by the author.



nor words can be absolutely individual, because their communication relies on being shared and given up to common assent or analysis. Rather than being in the remit of objective and disinterested knowledge, on the contrary, they act as instruments for the conservation of mankind by virtue of their more superficialized communicability.

An awareness of these potentially distortive influences and the commitments that come from them is a precondition for a Nietzschean conception of freedom. Before reaching this, however, Langone explains what Nietzsche takes to be erroneous conceptions of freedom. The third chapter is dedicated to the difference between free will as traditionally conceived by metaphysics on one hand, and the Nietzschean conception of freedom on the other. Free will means the possibility for man to choose his own action in every moment, as if this choice took place from a faculty in a vacuum, outside of time and space, in isolation from all context and one's past. Free will has historically made man a slave, by elaborating concepts such as responsibility, coherence, and guilt. Nietzsche contrasts this with the idea that irresponsibility is in some sense necessary – man, whose growth resembles a plant, cannot be ultimately blamed for what it is and it does.

Langone then analyses the conception of the body. As opposed to the transparent introspection associated with the accounts of freedom Nietzsche criticizes, Langone posits a functional, bodily kind of self-awareness, possessed by the free spirit. In opposition to any metaphysical or theological dualism, the soul is but a word to indicate something of the body, for Nietzsche. When it comes to the possibility of intervention in the chaos of instincts that constitute our body, Langone argues that there are stratagems to prevent certain instincts from being discharged, as well as the possibility to redirect them. In the end, we count as free when we dominate the impetuosity of the flow of instincts, like a gardener who is forced to prune in order to make a plant develop. We are free when we can choose how to discharge our instincts. Langone writes that “man coincides with his own action [...] He is a ‘necessary consequence’, in the sense that he completely dissolves himself in his actions, as a consequence of himself, with no space between himself and his own fulfilment” (p. 51). Some pages later, she asserts “we are capable of auto-determinism so that our body results from our actions and not from external judgements [...] we are free to develop our personality, by choosing every time which instinct to nourish” (p. 73).

This is a necessary process to undertake before the possibility of the metamorphosis into a ‘lion’, which Nietzsche identifies with the free spirit. For the transformation to be possible, it is necessary to recognize oneself as a set of experiential possibilities, and thus to abandon the metaphysical conception of the self as an immutable substance. Whereas a bound spirit acts uncritically, by virtue of ideals handed down from tradition and accepted in an uncritical way, typical of the free spirit is instead a sceptical capacity to question. He does not receive values like a pre-constituted kit. Rather, because those metaphysical commitments have been wholly abandoned, the free spirit experiments with values. Only experience and only many attempts will make it possible to understand what is congenial, using a standard of evaluation based on this bodily sensitivity.

The distinction that the author is interested in, that of individual versus society, becomes more and more evident through the book. Society subjugates the individual, binding him, preventing him from developing his own character, because it ensnares him with pre-given behaviours and fixed rules. The herd is always synonymous with the disposition to slavishness. In light of this the chapter about the free spirit concludes with an apparently



necessary and insuperable stage in the path of liberation: solitude. Experimenting with lives and values eventually leads the free spirit into an individualized 'desert'.

At this point, the overcoming of metaphysics requires the embrace of an alternative vision. From the sixth chapter on, this new paradigm is displayed. It is based on the will to power, the eternal recurrence and the transvaluation of all values. Will to power means that life is a constant self-overcoming – this is a key concept for Langone's interpretation. An essential decision characterizes the superman: the acceptance of the thought of the eternal recurrence. It is framed by Langone as an ontological theory that has ethical and epistemological consequences. It can cause two different kinds of reaction: 'teeth grinding' despair, or joy. Langone prioritizes discussing the ethical dimension to eternal recurrence: accepting the eternal recurrence means changing the way we experience every single moment of our life. However, it is specifically the gnoseological interpretation of the eternal recurrence that the author proposes as a new research path to follow, specifying that Nietzsche here could have been inspired by Emerson. The man, who accomplishes his essence of will to power, becomes a mirror of their being; he creates, he keeps repeating the act of creation, and this is the new and only way towards an objective knowledge of reality. In fact, since the world is pure becoming that always comes back, the philosopher who is willing to grasp it, should recognize that they themselves become eternally recurrent (p.185). The knowledge will always be partial, from the perspective of a singular life. However, it is possible to approximate to the world through a process of creation-destruction, that has contradiction as its main instrument. Against all criticism of being contradictory, in Nietzsche "the circle is virtuous: the more contradictions, the more knowledge and the more truth" (p.178). Langone claims that for Nietzsche, "in the light of the doctrine of eternal return – the gesture of experimentation is repeated endlessly" (p.185) and, as consequence, "only by experimenting with as many interpretations as possible, contradicting ourselves every time, we can get closer and closer to grasping the essence of the principle" (p.187). So, what is freedom, ultimately? The author explains in light of this that it is the power of living in the creation and perpetual overcoming of beliefs, the ability of ceaselessly changing conditions of existence and, that way, even the possibility to more deeply understand one's reality.

The value of the book is certainly to provide an additional opportunity to "ruminate" on Nietzsche's work – as he would have wanted – in its main themes. The exposition is focused on the philosopher, with, it is argued, no interferences from other authors or perspectives, except for Emerson. The American thinker – as anticipated – plays an important role in Langone's work, following the idea that "Nietzsche develops Emerson's intuitions, giving them a theoretical foundation and converting them in a grounded and original philosophical proposal" (p.65).

Returning to Nietzsche's challenging definition of a good book review: the reviewer should take a problem advanced by that book, and better solve it. The central thesis advanced by Langone's book corresponds to its title: that Nietzsche is very much a philosopher of freedom. To us, the only way to better solve such a complex issue is not by reformulating the answer. Rather, it is to recognize that, when we do philosophy, solving problems means formulating more-rounded questions. Langone coherently solves one dimension of the problem of freedom in Nietzsche. But the account offered is arguably too one-sided. What seems to be missing in her account is a willingness to engage with the kind of

experimentation that Nietzsche recommends, of different paths, alternative interpretations, and the contradiction of perspectives, rather than a rigidity to a singular concept of freedom. Langone's account demonstrates the importance of Nietzsche's deconstruction of pre-given meanings, of fixed concepts, clear truths, and how this is in service of the ideal of the free spirit. But it would have been even more Nietzschean in spirit to try to apply that content to the research itself, in a kind of immanent critique. Nietzsche's arguments tend to be presented as offering straightforward theses, while they are crossed everywhere by enigmatic points, unsolved issues, contrasting and conflicting perspectives.

A few examples of issues that could be explored in more depth will be illustrative, here. It is true that according to Nietzsche we are somehow alike to plants, necessarily irresponsible, and it is true that, at the same time, those who are gardeners can decide which branches to prune in order to develop themselves (if their will is strong enough). However, the paradox at the heart of the metaphor emerges, one that demands further exploration, is, can one be both a plant and a gardener? That is, an irresponsible and necessary plant and a careful gardener, who chooses and decides how to act? Can we be both, at the same time and in the same sense? If so, is this one instance of a contradiction? If so, perhaps it doesn't mean that we should reject the contradiction as such, but rather that we should question it as such. Nietzsche presents us with challenges that, as challenges, must be taken up in all their problematic aspects. Every thesis shouldn't simply be announced, but should itself be immanently questioned and put into doubt from different perspectives.

Another such investigation could be made about the concept of the individual. Central to the author's account is the personal dimension of the search for one's own identity, the development of one's own character. Nevertheless, Langone approaches Nietzsche's theoretical deconstruction of the individual, conceived as a single, separate, autonomous block: the chapter titled "body as soul" shows that the body is not a substance, but a dynamic hierarchy of instincts. According to this conception, the rigid border between inside and outside, internal and external, individual and environment/society fades away. In view of all this, the question can and I think should be asked of how the development and empowerment of the self goes about interacting, influencing, and integrating, in the process of empowerment or depowering of other selves. If there is no substantial selfhood to my individuality, then how does this "chaos of instincts" that constitutes me harmonize with other chaos' of instincts? Or how does it harm them? This problem is well posed by Deleuze, one of the interpreters who has most experimented with Nietzsche's works. Synthesizing a reading of Nietzsche with an interpretation of Spinoza (an author to mention, in addition to Emerson, as an inspiration for Nietzsche when talking about the coincidence between freedom and necessity), Deleuze asks: what can a body do? Are there any limits to the will to power? What is the relation between will to power and overpowering, prevarication, violence? In other words, we should question, as Nietzsche himself does, the problem of the "limit". This doesn't mean that will to power must impose a maximum or minimum threshold upon itself, rigid boundaries, understood as the "you must" and "you mustn't" that the lion rejects. However, the problem of the limit is innate, necessarily linked to that of the topic, central to the author, of self-development. Are there limits to self-enhancement, to experimentation, which, if overcome, are no longer



functional to growth, but are or can be harmful? If so, which ones? How best to identify them?

This becomes further entangled when we deepen the question of whether the “essence of the living being” as “ceaselessly creating values” (p.131). We could ask: can creation for creation’s sake really be an end in itself, as a model for Nietzschean flourishing? Further, is every creation, every game, every temporarily adopted mask, the same as every other creation, every other game, every other mask? For Nietzsche, there are hierarchies, more successful “games” – the Greek tragedy – and less successful “games” – the Wagnerian drama. But we could question ourselves starting from Nietzsche and even beyond Nietzsche: if the body judges, as was said, and if the body at a certain point in the experimentation would find ways of existence that allow for its flourishing... under what criteria should it still attempt to overcome them? Should it a priori adhere to infinite experimentation? Can it ever rest?

Question marks could be multiplied endlessly, opening up to the most varied interpretations, readings, authors, experiences of thought and life. It is hoped, therefore, to have adhered, on the one hand, to the spirit of Langone’s book, which invites exactly to this kind of process – that is, not to give for certain, but to interrogate every thesis, even ones that seem to be firm. And to have adhered, on the other hand, at least in a broad sense, to Nietzsche’s admonition about book reviews: the only way, perhaps, to “say better” than an author is to take their thesis and question them again, in order to doubt them, deny them, reformulate them, or perhaps even just to eventually reconfirm them.