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WHEN THE INMOST BECOMES THE OUTMOST: EMERSON'S WRITING AND THE POETIC OF THOUGHT

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> To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, – that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, – and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment.[1]

> What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages. Alas for this infirm faith, this will not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow! I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall.[2]

Ralph Waldo Emerson's style of writing and thinking does not lend itself to being reduced to simple labels, especially if we aim to relate them to Emerson's understanding of his own role as an author and thinker. Part of what makes his style unique is its complexity and elusiveness.[3] The elegant, well-amalgamated surface of many of its pages barely conceals a textural density that is sometimes extreme.

[1] Emerson, *Self-Reliance* (*Essays*, *First Series*, 1841): CW II: 27.
[2] Emerson, *Circles* (*Essays*, *First Series*, 1841): CW II: 182.
[3] On Emerson's style of writing and thinking see Richardson 2009; Hosseini 2019; Phillips 2018; Thompson 2007; Lansing 1997; Wilson, E. 1997; Steele 1983; Woodlief 1978.

Such a difficulty arises not only from his eclectic Romanticism (which may be attributed to the prevailing spirit of his era), but also from his innate tendency to simultaneously theorize and poetize.

In fact, he saw himself as a poet from the start – and poet he was, but of a particular kind. His poetry more often sounds like a condensate of thought, an expression of the emotion of a mind deeply involved in reflecting on the spiritual laws that rule nature and human vicissitudes, rather than a mere lyric outburst of a contemplative heart [Strauch 1970]. Even where the latter seems to prevail, the tension of a cogitating mind can be perceived in the threads.

When in the last of his *Wide Word* juvenile notebooks (1824), Emerson was arguing about valuable books in the eyes of the public and of himself, he clearly stated the *Proverbs* of Solomon as well as the *Essays* of Montaigne (and «eminently» of Francis Bacon)[4] as those he would like to emulate (JMN II: 264-265). This being drawn from the beginning to such a sacred and secular wisdom literature – outstanding examples, respectively, of thoughtful poetry and of a certain philosophical prose – is a fairly clear indication of a two-facet vocation that would lead him to develop an unmistakable style.

Frequently in his texts, we can find reasoning images and imaginative reasoning sketching vertiginous ellipses, while thought tends to proceed with the pace of a river of vast range. A river whose course, however, is opposed by conflicting currents and often hindered by the roughness of a riverbed that barely contains it. For it is not infrequent that, under the same, explicit title, he brings together sequences of ideas that tend, at least apparently, to shift the focus from themes to themes only loosely – at least, on the surface – related to it. Besides, as Cavell recognises, «any sentence of an Emerson paragraph, or essay, may be taken to be the topic sentence» [Cavell 2003, 4].

The well-cut and elegant aphorisms that stand out throughout his works, together with the use of uncommon, striking, and often metaphorical (if not even allegorical) imagery, inevitably captures the

[4] This preference for Bacon may arise from Emerson's initial interest in natural history and related methodical issues. Nevertheless, already his famous epiphanic experience in the Parisian Jardin des Plantes of 1833 (see JMN IV: 200) points out how these concerns were deeply imbued with Romantic organicism.

reader's attention, outshining the overall construction of the text and reasoning. His thrifty use of adjectives, which is another distinctive element of his style, may also be what led him to be generous with images, metaphors, and allegories so as to obviate the risk of misleading lack of characterization.

Certainly, Emerson's preference for analogic structures is connected with his adhesion to a Romantic version of Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences, but it is also due to his relentless pursuit of writing that could express processes and induce changes in perspectives, thus accentuating the actuosity of language.

In other words, generally speaking, his writing stands out as ostensive rather than descriptive. This is highlighted by the prevailing assertive tonality of his sentences, which is often deceptive. Besides, at least at first glance, what Richardson affirms sounds plausible: that «Emerson's preferred unit of composition is the sentence, not the paragraph, and certainly not the essay» [Richardson 2009, 4]. And since «his writing always had one foot planted in nature» while «the other foot rested […], on his wide and eager reading» [Richardson 2009, 5], it tends to mimic the mirroring function attributed by Emerson to nature. Images thus become cyphers of human conduct and condition, while cryptic quotations stand as fixed points in the flow of his reasoning. Nevertheless, these general impressions risk overshadowing the structure that Emerson painstakingly composes in his writings, in which the rhetorical paraphernalia aims to engage the reader in an adventure of thought with bewildering outcomes.

1. Intuitive experiences

Although many of his compositions, especially in his early production, are articulated on the basis of a well-considered scheme, the reasoning is not linear for the simple fact that, for the most part, it is conceived as the result of a dialogical confrontation between different viewpoints.[5] The reader is therefore forced to grasp and untangle the several voices,

[5] According to Newfield, Emerson conceived the self as a corporate individual, with a multiplicity of voices: Newfield 1996, 5.

trying to understand the reasons for the various points of view, and can only do so by bringing his or her own experiences, knowledge, and beliefs into play. And this is precisely what Emerson aims for, to capture the reader's attention, in order to inducing him to become involved in such a way as to provoke in him or her a change in perspective and attitude that is close to a true conversion.

As he write in his journal: «if you desire to arrest attention, to surprise, do not give me the facts in the order of cause and effect, but drop one or two links in the chain, and give me a cause and an effect two or three times removed» (JMN VII: 90). This strategy induces at least some degree of cognitive discomfort in the reader, which can be overcome by making the effort to think independently and fill in as many gaps as possible. As Richardson points out, «coherence, then, is something that happens in the reader's mind» [Richardson 2009, 37]. We are then forced to build as we can risky bridges or attempt winding detours – and we can only do so by drawing on our own experience and following our nose and preferences. In fact, as Rohler notices, Emerson's sermons as well his lectures were characterised by a «form that would through indirection and suggestion invite audience participation in developing the meaning of his discourse».[6] And this simultaneously active and creative role with which listeners found themselves invested may also be an explanation for the deep fascination that Emerson's lectures never failed to arouse.

The strategic use of cognitive distress is also found in the essays, where it is elicited not only by the elimination of links in the chain of reasoning but also by the juxtaposition of arguments or ideas that appear contradictory to each other. Emerson's essays, seen as «meditations on intellectual themes» on the ground of his experience, often present at least apparent contradictions. These contradictions are first of all due to the complexity of the experience itself. Thus, if Emerson sometimes seems to contradict himself, it is because, as Robinson enlightens, «experience itself demands self-contradiction» [Robinson 1993, 12-13].

[6] Rohler 1995, 20. Emerson's systematic use of indirection also has a theoretical and not just rhetorical motivation, see Cavell 2003, 134-135.

2. *Transcendentalism*

Emerson was formed as a preacher of the Unitarian Church,[7] but, like other of his fellow New England young intellectuals, he soon developed an increasing distaste for what was felt to be too rational and formal an approach to faith and adhered to the new Romantic gospel of the Idealistic Spirit. After the deep existential, vocational crisis also heightened by the premature death of his first wife, he resigned from the ministry, leaving Boston for a long journey through Europe in search of recovery and a new start [see Richardson 1995, 131-156; Bosco 2000, 9-25; Packer 2007, 40-41].

Back home by the end of 1833, partly by chance and partly by personal inclination, he began an intense, successful lecturer career that lasted until his later years of activity and saw him conquer audiences throughout his homeland and the old continent as well [see Robinson 1982; Wilson, R. J. 1999, 76-96]. Meanwhile, he published his major collections of essays and poetry – milestones, along with his first book *Nature* (1836), of the still evolving American cultural identity.

Therefore, with Emerson, we are dealing with an author who begins as a preacher and goes on to become a lecturer and essayist, with a strong, abiding concern for poetry and philosophy as well. All these different roles, and their being overlapping and interconnected, could be considered as outcomes of his own involvement with Transcendentalism – the eclectic version of Romantic Idealism professed, from the beginning of the Thirties' onward, by the young New Englander Intelligentsia.

Romantic Idealism, for Emerson and his friends, was far more

[7] Ralph Waldo came from a long lineage of New England ministers. His father, William Emerson, was a liberal clergyman who adhered to the incipient Unitarianism. Developed as a reaction to the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination and to the irrational character of the charismatic movements, Unitarianism formed the spiritual background of the Transcendentalist movement, subscribing to a faith based on the moral perfection of God and the moral perfectibility of man. Rejecting the theological legacy of Puritanism, Unitarian preachers and theologians were concerned principally with the rational Lockean attitude towards Christian faith and the Holy Scriptures, trying to balance a rational and optimistic anthropology with revelation as recorded in the Bible.

than the newest, fascinating philosophical current.[8] As he states in *The Transcendentalist* (1842), it was a «Saturnalia (…) of Faith» (CW I: 206) – in short, a new, almost secularized religion of self-perfection with a strong appeal to militancy and concrete reform [see Fortuna 2020]. Besides, the new faith professed the creator Spirit as the ultimate presence and substance of the whole living nature, everything being anything but its expression. The expressive character of each member of the organic structure in nature finds its peak in human beings, who are able to perceive it as both the eternal law of nature and their own proper moral task.

All this considered in the background of the Romantic mindset of his day, the cohabitation of preacher, lecturer, essayist, poet, and thinker in Emerson is not surprising. And it is not surprising that such a quixotic style of writing and thinking results from the merging of their various apparatuses of specific formal aims and tools. Living and philosophising (i.e., searching for truth and pursuing authenticity), writing, preaching, or lecturing are converging activities of the same attitude of witness to truth – not by chance, one of the New Testament attributes of the creator Spirit. And the mission of this witness would remain to the last to show how the «transformation of genius into practical power which the world [but we may call it America] exists to realize» (CW 3: 48) is possible precisely in the background of acknowledgment of the fatal limitations of the human condition. The New Nation requires new apostles, those who have gone through that radical conversion, which is the rejection of intellectual and moral conformity to the canonical forms of style, taste, and attitude. Thus, to create a new style of language mastery in order to provoke such a conversion in listeners and readers, a new rhetoric for the new apostle capable of drawing in and shaping a renewed public, became Emerson's mission throughout his active lifetime [see Thompson 2017].

[8] See Parker 2010, 84-101; Tanner 1968, 83-103. On Emerson and Romanticism see Keane, 2005; Greenham 2012; Harvey 2013.

3. The preacher's attitude

Almost ten years of preaching had unavoidably left a substantial mark on Emerson's approach to writing and lecturing. Despite the repetition of the traditional homiletic patterns, writing sermons did, in fact, have a discernible bearing on the evolution of Emerson's early thought and style.[9] In fact, the preacher attitude never entirely left Emerson during his lifetime.

In a way, Emerson's sermons are the first public embodiment of the spiritual quest recorded in the private pages of his journals and notebooks, where his characteristically inquiring mind finds its expression in a restless comparison with heterogeneous sources. Self-scrutiny and self-culture were interrelated consequences of his anti-dogmatic eclecticism, leading him to develop the inner freedom or autonomy that, while endorsing him to distance himself from the conventional approach of official Unitarianism, soon became a cypher of his thought with the name of self-reliance.

Following his cultural curiosity and spiritual insight, he had early on acquired the habit of recording whatever he thought relevant from his various and wide readings in his journals and notebooks. Collecting ideas, together with his comments and experiences, he then thematically cross-indexed them to be used as raw material, initially for his sermons and afterwards for his lectures and essays. In fact, even if sometimes actually heterogeneous, these materials receive coherence once composed in the general design of his texts, often organized as they are around leading themes or metaphors. Texts written first for sermons and later for lectures were not infrequently reused by him in his essays, always recomposed with great freedom, adapting them to the new purposes.

Emerson's process of composition was eminently dialogical, substantiated as it was by his recurrence to various sources not simply used but often examined and thus recast in his own thinking. As Rohler notices describing Emerson's eclectic style of composition,

[9] On Emerson as preacher and lecturer see Robinson 1982; Rohler 1995; Field 2001, 467-493; Thompson 2017. On the continuity between the Emerson's early lectures and his preaching see Baumgartner 1963, 477-486.

«his temperament did not incline him to the legal model of sustained argument». Therefore, «he preferred to present several different perspectives of the issue under discussion, moving not in a straight line from one point to another, but circling it and seeing how one view may be changed by another. His mind worked by analogy, by comparison and contrast» [Rohler 1995, 14].

Following the Romantic approach to preaching and thus distrusting the presumption that any strictly formal argumentation would be able to disclose the spiritual truth, Emerson's style of preaching was mainly directed to involve the audience in a spiritual experience. With this aim, he favoured the use of metaphors and images that, by appealing to the imagination, involved his hearers. Hence, suggesting rather than demonstrating, he was trying to give way to that surplus of insight that resists a logical demonstration.

The same care for the perlocutionary aspect of his own speech is retraceable in the lectures and the essays. The main assets of his style and architecture of composing is substantially the same: eclectic, dialogical and evocative, it is rich in references to personal experiences as well as to direct and indirect quotations.

By the time he left his ministry, his style of preaching was fully developed. Starting his new career as a lecturer, Emerson continued on his already connatural way to address the public, taking it as an opportunity for the growth of his own and others' spiritual life by means of culture. The time was ripe for this kind of career. The diffusion of cultural initiatives, whose aim were «to make all branches of knowledge, and especially the natural sciences, accessible to the layman» [Dant 1989, 44, 22], have favoured lecturing as a suitable way to match needs and interests of the general public with the special expertise of men of culture.

4. Persuading while problematizing, or shaping essays

In general terms, we can say that the prevailing tonality of Emerson's writings is marked by the rather conflicting tendencies of persuading and problematizing, of leading the readers to adhere with the assenting attitude of believers while challenging them to question themselves with

the crucial philosophical issues involved in any existential stance. And to this dual concern, we can relate the pronounced rhetorical inflection and the equally pronounced sense of displacement well perceivable by the reader throughout Emerson's major writings.

Nonetheless, this dual concern could be considered the "natural" outcome of Emerson's involvement with the Goethean idea of *Bildung* – or (self)-culture, as he and his fellow Transcendentalists called it, the never-ending task of perfecting themselves and others pursuing authenticity through self-expression.[10] The enthusiastic disciple of the Romantic Spirit must be animated by awe and obedience to truth; thus, dedication and self-scrutiny become the key requisites of the Transcendentalist.

And herein also lies the difference between Emerson's style of thinking and writing and those of Montaigne, to which he was otherwise consciously indebted.[11] Both uncompromising inquirers of the human condition through the relentless investigation of themselves and their own experience and knowledge, both indefatigable critics of social conformity and custom, they differ precisely with regard to whether they can rightly consider themselves apostles of truth. Where Emerson has no doubt in recognizing this as the true task of the Transcendentalist, Montaigne seems to enact a continuous strategy of disclaimer, prompting the reader to recognize that the search for truth cannot be identified with militancy for a defined ideal of human flourishing as the best for everyone and everywhere.

Leaving aside the *vexata quaestio* of whether or not Emerson adhered to some form of skepticism, and without delving into his conception of Montaigne's personality and thought as it can be gleaned from the central essay of *Representative Men* (1850) dedicated to him, the fact remains that the choice to compose essays with Montaigne and Bacon as ideal predecessors was neither accidental nor merely induced

[10] See Robinson 1982, 7-29, who points out American Unitarianism and its theological roots as the proper source of Emerson's concept of self-culture. On Transcendentalism and *Bildung*, see also Horlacher 2016, 72-87; Andrews 2017; Johansson and Schumann 2019, 474-477; Schumann 2019, 488-497.

[11] On Emerson and Montaigne see Basile 1976, 10-18; Taylor 2012, 1-18; Edelman 2019, 55-68.

by the taste of the age. Like the choice of the pulpit or of the lectern, the choice of the essay well suited Emerson's intellectual and moral aims and inclinations.

It is noticeable that Emerson chose Montaigne and «eminently» Bacon as tutelary guides in the pursuit of writing in which style and thought tend to coincide, as if style, aims, and fears of the defense attorney of a prudent faith in the progress of human knowledge could balance those of such a prosecutor.

The experimental character of his essays, their being at the same time texts and tests, as aporetic and hyperbolic as they sometimes sound, is well apparent to an unbiased reader. They are experiments in thought as well as in rhetorical construction, even in the case of such texts as *The American Scholar* (*Essay, First Series*, 1841), whose topic and goal appear to be clearly defined and argued. And where the questions at stake are more burning, they register Emerson's own even painful thinking experience not only as an attempt to deal with a plurality of points of view or stances, but also with the rigor and sentiment of a mind that cannot help but presage and face their disappointing outcomes, as in *Fate* (*The Conduct of Life*, 1860). Be that as it may, the not shallow reader is compelled to follow suit as best he or she can, not shirking the test and experiment, even at the cost of finding himself or herself in such an uncomfortable place as that vertigo of steps that opens *Experience* (*Essays, Second Series*, 1844). In a few words, as Robinson clarifies, «an Emerson essay is best thought of as a proving ground for the culture of the soul, in which a subject is educated or cultivated through confronting and responding to a series of intellectual and existential problems. Each response within an essay generates new problems» [Robinson 1993, 10]. In Cavell's words, Emerson «proposes in his essays a genre of writing that shows a finite prose text to contemplate an infinite response. […] His prose is not poetry […] but his sentences aspire to […] the self-containment of poetry» [Cavell 2003, 4].

5. Emerson, the analogist

At the core of Emerson's Transcendentalism stands, from the beginning, his own adhesion to Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences – albeit Romantically reinterpreted – that basically constitutes an actualisation of the ancient microcosm-macrocosm analogy. Especially in his first book, *Nature*, this doctrine provides Emerson with a satisfactory justification for one of the main and highest features that he attributes to human beings, their role as meaning makers – or, better, as analogist – grasping images and forging accordingly a language true to truth. We will therefore look at chapter 4, *Language*, where Emerson goes into further detail about this view and its effects, including stylistic ones.

That nature is a mirror for the human being is recognisable not only at the normative level (i.e., of the spiritual inner laws of each and every being and event in nature) but also, and in the first instance, at the representative level (i.e., of their being or composing images or figures of such or such human tract and vicissitude). Thus, the proper human attitude would be to decipher from the face of nature and in the flux of becoming the inner meaning of phenomena in order to render them as an outer expression of the human condition.

Given the marked anthropocentrism, inherited from the Eighteenth-century debates on human nature and almost never put into question by Emerson, it is not surprising what he writes:

> It is easily seen that there is nothing lucky or capricious in these analogies, but that they are constant, and pervade nature. […] man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects. He is placed in the centre of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man. All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren, like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life (CW I: 19).

This role of man as a catalyst of meanings is due to his expressive character, that differs from nature's expressive being because it is finalized to, or moved from, «the love of truth» and the «desire to

communicate it without loss» (CW I:20). Since this «love of truth» is at the core of man's perfection, it implies not only a cognitive disposition but also the moral duty of truthfulness. That is to say that while we are dealing with communication, we take responsibility for what we know as well as for what we praise. For this reason, «the corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language» (CW I:20).

In the following passages, Emerson's text assumes the tonality of a peroration of his own style of writing, speaking highly of the allegorical fashion like «the working of the Original Cause through the instruments he has already made» (CW I:20). Such a figurative style, ignited by a «noble sentiment» (we take it as the love of truth), is vivified by acquaintance with the natural landscape. An intrinsic connection between metaphysics, epistemology, language theory and ethics is then underlined with the aid of a quotation by Swedenborg, a paraphrase of De Staël, and an allusion to Plotinus (CW I:21-22).

6. The art of appropriation

The recurring use of quoting from heterogeneous sources to construct intuitively cogent argumentation is another of Emerson's typical rhetorical tools. Quotations are widespread throughout his work and pose a daunting challenge to interpreters because, in most cases, they are not openly attributed. Therefore, exhausting perusing of diaries, notebooks, letters, and reading lists is necessary in the hope of reconstructing the framework of references and sources. It must always be kept in mind, however, that although they are essential elements for reconstructing the coordinates of thought underlying the writing of his works, Emerson's use of quotations is often extremely free, nor does he always feel obliged to take into account their original meaning or their role in the context of their author's thought. In his journals, they were annotated as good material for his own thought and, possibly, for the enrichment of his prose; in his essays, they are used mostly to spur the reader's reflections, to mark a climax or a transition.

When, as here and there in *Nature*, this use verges on abuse, so that we find ourselves dealing with entire passages composed of quotations, we could be tempted to consider Emerson's text as the product of some

sort of extreme cut up, where "*objets trouvés*" and relics of thoughts and visions of others are recomposed in a new masterpiece of rhetorical virtuosity. Here, if ever, the sense arises from the cogency of the author, his being deeply involved with his own fundamental question, his fine capability in resonating with others' thoughts and going further, opening his own way through the inflection of others' tracks.[12] Besides, Emerson was confident that, as he states at the incipit of his essay *History*, the first of *Essays*, *First Series* (1841), «There is one mind common to all individual men. […] Who hath access to this universal mind, is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent» (CW II:3). An instinctive confidence in his own mind and insight concurred from his youth on to predispose him to freely and creatively reuse in his writing as much as Goethe *notabilia* dredged up from his wide range of readings [Richardson 1995, 172-173].

7. «Nature is a sea of forms»

Goethe's influence was certainly not limited to this – it was much wider and deeper, and is noticeable in several aspects of Emerson's thought. Among these, it was the organic conception of human nature, particularly regarding its expressive character. Thus, writing too was virtually conceived as an organic process, as if the living core of a topic could and should, by its very potentiality, find its own form of expression. Form then becomes the organic expression of the particular laws that govern the nature of things, events, and topics. This is also, in short, another way of expressing being true to nature – the attitude *sine qua non* of the Transcendentalist poet-philosopher. After all, as he argues in the third chapter of *Nature*, entitled *Beauty*, closely following Goethe: «A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature, in miniature. […] Nature is a sea of forms».[13]

[12] On the question of Emerson's originality, see Keane 2005, 153-183.

[13] CW I: 16-17. In his later writings on morphology (*Zur Naturwissenschaft überhaupt*, *besonders zur Morphologie* (1817-1824), Goethe states that all living beings, particularly humans and plants, are naturally endowed with an organic

In Emerson's mind, there is a strict analogy between the domain of nature and the domain of thought – better, between the ways in which they work – since they both reflect the same expressive ratio of the creator Spirit. Thus, as he states in *The Poet* (1844, in *Essays*, *Second Series*), «it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, – a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing» (CW III:6).

8. Writing (and thinking) as founding

Up to this point I have proceeded as if one could consider the style of writing and the style of thinking as one constant whole. In Emerson's case, the coincidence of the two styles is a fact – or rather a purpose consciously pursued because of his ambition to accentuate the actuosity of language that I have already discussed. Yet it is also a fact that Emerson's writings reveal an evolution in writing style as well as in thought, albeit in the former less pronounced than in the latter. That the writing style does not show dramatic changes over time is perhaps due to its being functional to Emerson's perlocutionary preoccupation, which never subsided. Nevertheless, the enthusiastic tones of his first works faded over the years, giving way to a drier style of writing, though his prose remained unmistakable, characterised by the same elusiveness and complexity as in the early days.

Certainly, personal, political, and social events had a major impact on Emerson's intellectual evolution. Among the many bereavements and disappointments that marked his life from the 1830s to the 1870s, the death of his first-born son, Waldo, in 1842, at the age of five, was a kind of point of no return in Emerson's intellectual and human story. His ghostly presence in *Experience* (*Essays*, *Second Series*, 1844), shows the dramatic reverberation of a loss that transcends personal tragedy, connected as it is to the recognition of the impracticality of

structure intrinsically oriented by a principle of self-development that follows the pattern of its own natural law or *raison d'être* in interaction with the environment or context.

philosophically founding America on an idealistic basis without risking ultimately finding oneself in the untenable position of the solipsist.[14] Henceforth, of the faith in Romantic Idealism that had substantiated his earlier works, only vestiges remain, while a certain desolate acquiescence emerges in which all the doubts and forebodings of failure that had marked his adherence to Idealism from the beginning converge.

The evolution of Emerson's thought that sees him first adhering unconditionally to an "imported" idealism and then distancing himself from it by turning towards a more "home made" proto-pragmatism can still be considered the standard interpretation and certainly has been defended with good and argued reasons.[15] Still, it tends to underestimate the presence of skeptical currents in the flow of his thought from the very beginning and to blur the awareness of the paradoxicality and, at the same time, the inevitability of the choice for the ordinary and the commonplace to which the disillusioned Emerson of the later works seems to fall back. And it not infrequently seems to be an interpretation moved, at least to a certain extent, by a desire to exorcise the sense of displacement engendered by the peculiar difficulty of Emerson's texts and thought – the same desire that is perceptible in the recurrent attempts to deny Emerson's relevance as a philosopher, reducing him

[14] The preservation of the subjective self-sufficiency promised by Idealism, leads to the subject presumption of being at the same time "external" to the world as its originator and "internal" as the radiating centre of its meaningfulness. While the world disappears, reduced to be mere appearance as it is, the bloating subject is in a constant state of destabilization: he cannot grasp anything, he cannot stand on anything, he cannot move towards anything, he cannot even reach any practical meaning at all. The hypertrophy of the idealistic subject blocks his knowing as well as his moral acting. To overcome this situation the subject should regain the sense of his own limitations, withdrawing from the centre of all reality to the centre of his own world, no more pretending that both are the same, but accepting it as just one of many, most probably peripheral.

[15] On Emerson's thinking as the starting point of American pragmatism, see, for instance, West 1989. For a well-balanced pragmatist reading of Emerson's later work, see Robinson 1993. On the usefulness and plausibility of a pragmatist reading of Emerson, see Albrecht 2012, 25-52. For an interesting survey of some points of porosity between Emerson's Romanticism and the thought of William James and other American pragmatists, see Goodman 2015, 234-260.

to the somewhat remote figure of the Sage of Concord and his works to masterpieces of (rhetorical) literature.

According to Stanley Cavell, who strenuously opposed both the pragmatist and the "not yet a philosopher" interpretation [Cavell 2003, 215-213], one of the recurring themes in Emerson's major essays is the philosophical focus on writing as an act that is both foundational and revelatory. The foundation of American philosophical identity is closely connected to a demanding search for individual authenticity to be attained also through a «struggle for a language which […] promises honesty (expresses, hence scrutinizes, our desires, so far as we are able to read our desires)» [Cavell 2003, 3]. And such a language is at least a kind of philosophical language – the one that goes hand in hand with the Socratic attitude that Emerson also cherished.

> For an American, the discovery of such a language, one allowing the continuous registration of the self's motion, presents a double task, since America, as Emerson was beginning to write, had as yet to inherit effectively a patrimony in European philosophy; no one had proven that the encounter of America with philosophy […] was feasible, hence had shown what it might sound like. To express America's difference (one could say, to justify its existence, its independence) was for Emerson's generation most pressing in its call for a mode of literature that expressed the American experience. Emerson, in effect, established both modes of expression, suggesting that, for America, philosophy and literature would bear a relation to each other [Cavell 2003, 4].

Moreover, Emerson's prose, conceived as it is by such a two minded author, is characterised by a tension – Cavell notices – not to become extinct in poetry but to «remain in conversation with itself, answerable to itself» [Cavell 2003, 17]. The result is a constant struggle with oneself and for oneself, of writing, thinking, and poetry, for the event of a truth, or reality, that can never be possessed but only received. Actually, writing, as a creative act, is «not the exercise of power but of reception» [*ibid.*], in acknowledgment of the penury that constitutes us as human beings.

It is a penury, in fact, that shows and demonstrates our limitations and, in so doing, makes possible the actualization of a space that

can be shared with others. Finding ourselves cohabiting in a space of confrontation and encounter, which is the human condition – the «talking together», as Cavell interprets it in his reading of Emerson's *Fate* [Cavell 2003, 71] – is, in short, possible only if, with the acceptance of limitedness, we understand that we can no longer be the radiating fulcrum of all meaningfulness [Fortuna 2024]. And this decentralization, this retreat, this probing of one's limits is both painful and glorious, an affirmation of a higher order of power, one that is able to limit oneself, to contemplate ones limits not as a defeat but as a victory over the violence of an imperialistic mind.

References

Emerson's texts are quoted from the critical edition, using the standard abbreviations:

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JMN refers to *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* [1960-1982], edited by W.H. Gilman *et al*., 16 vols., Cambridge (MA), Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, followed by the volume and page numbers.

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Key words

Ralph Waldo Emerson; transcendentalism; romantic idealism; Stanley Cavell

Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson's style of writing and thinking is as complex as allusive, and this is not simply the result of his eclectic romanticism but also derives from the fact that by nature he is inclined to theorise and poetise at the same time. Reasoning images and imaginative reasoning sketch vertiginous ellipses while thought programmatically tends to proceed in ever-widening circles. After all, according to Stanley Cavell, one of the recurring themes in his major essays is the philosophical focus on writing as an act that is both foundational and revelatory. The foundation of American philosophical identity goes hand in hand with, and is closely connected to, a demanding search for individual authenticity. His texts are not monologues but – ideally – dialogues, in the tension not to become extinct in poetry but to «remain in conversation with itself, answerable to itself». The result, according to Cavell, is

a constant struggle with oneself and for oneself, of writing, thinking, and poetry, for the event of a truth, or reality, that can never be possessed but only received. Writing, as a creative act, is in fact «not the exercise of power but of reception» [Cavell, 2003], in acknowledgment of the penury that constitutes us as human beings.

Lo stile di scrittura e di pensiero di Ralph Waldo Emerson è tanto complesso quanto allusivo, e ciò non è semplicemente il risultato del suo romanticismo eclettico, ma deriva anche dal fatto che per natura egli è portato a teorizzare e poetare allo stesso tempo. Immagini ragionanti e ragionamenti immaginativi tratteggiano ellittiche vertiginose, mentre il pensiero tende programmaticamente a procedere in cerchi sempre più ampi. Del resto, secondo Stanley Cavell, una delle caratteristiche dei suoi saggi principali è la focalizzazione filosofica sulla scrittura come atto fondativo e rivelatore. La fondazione dell'identità filosofica americana va di pari passo con l'intransigente ricerca dell'autenticità individuale ed è strettamente connessa ad essa. Il testo emersoniano non è un monologo ma, idealmente, un dialogo, nella tensione a non estinguersi in poesia ma a «rimanere in conversazione con se stesso, rispondendo a se stesso». Il risultato, secondo Cavell, è una lotta costante con se stessi e per se stessi, di scrittura, pensiero e poesia, per l'evento di una verità, o realtà, che non può mai essere posseduta ma solo ricevuta. La scrittura, in quanto atto creativo, è infatti «non l'esercizio del potere ma dell'accettazione» [Cavell, 2003], nel riconoscimento della penuria che ci costituisce come esseri umani.

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