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The Practice of the Circle

Individual, World, Permanence in Ralph Waldo Emerson

Andrea Punzi

I. Recognition. Drawing the Circle

- 1 The metaphor of the circle is here taken into account as a typifying image of the Emersonian moral. In this paper I shall attempt to provide an explanatory synthesis of the concept of “circle,” in its acceptance as “the outlined,” “path,” “itinerary.” The circle will be not investigated as a mere geometrical figure, but as a condition of motion, an occasion of processuality. It will be presented as a route which unravels itself before the subject’s eyes and, all the same, from the subject himself, from his status as a thinking individual up to the projection of his own identity into an historical and cultural inter-subjective dimension. I propose to show how, starting from the analysis of the *Essays*, one can detect in the Emersonian production an increasingly stark change of the philosophical perspective, i.e. a change from the “naïve” transcendentalism of the beginnings to a gradually more solid “philosophy of practice,” which will prove decisive for the birth of the upcoming American Pragmatism. At any rate, the main center of interest here is the treatment of the ethico-moral themes which, if interpreted in the light of our idea of “circle” and of its reiteration, suggest original perspectives from which one might look at the related issues.
- 2 In the first place, it is necessary to draw the circle. One should not so much set up a beginning, a starting point as ascertain that there is a route, a trace, which the path of the subject towards the acquaintance of his own practice must follow and, as we shall see, traverse and overstep. Emerson writes: “the eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emule in the cipher of the world.”¹
- 3 What appears immediately clear is the central role played by the figure of the circle, which even assumed here as the most complete symbol of nature. Each and every thing, in the domain of nature, assumes the shape of a circle, which is the most perfect

reference shape with a view to explaining the nuances and the natural (and therefore the truest) organization of the world. The circle proposes itself as privileged metaphor not only of the worldly, but also of the human nature, given that “we are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of this first of forms.”² Human action itself presents a circular and compensatory character, and every action, as Emerson claims, expects to be overcome in a perpetual circle of action and reaction, inasmuch as “there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning.”³

- 4 The same life of man is conceived of as a circle which evolves by itself, being construed, as in the case of the trees, by infinite repetitions of the same form, now always bigger and more and more inclusive. To draw life amounts to walking ahead in one’s own existence, advancing one’s own thought into the world, conceiving every action as dynamic and each concept as progressive and non-finite. The power of the circle displays itself in the human capacity to accomplish one’s own story, to give things an aspect that is always new.
- 5 To draw the circle means to build up, step by step, one’s own future, to give a full-fledged realization to one’s own expectations, by respecting the “circular,” that is, the metamorphic and continuous, nature of one’s own existence. “Every man is not so much a workman in the world as he is a suggestion of what he should be. Men walk as prophecies of the next age.”⁴
- 6 From a gnoseologic standpoint, we identify a perspective which is surely anti-metaphysical and anti-dogmatic, provided that there is always a residual of knowledge before the concept. There is always a second-last truth that keeps us apart from the final acquisition which is there to come. The infinite progression of the circles draws us to the truth of the object, but, at the same time, distances us from it in its continuous and perennial evolution. Nothing immutable exists in the human horizon, nor does anything which has not already been given, known and deciphered. Life itself is the constant attempt made by man to solve the great enigma of the world, an enigma raised just by the mystery of the circle. Emerson writes: “There are no fixtures to men, if we appeal to consciousness. Every man supposes himself not to be fully understood; and if there is any truth in him, if he rests at last on the divine soul, I see not how it can be otherwise. The last chambre, the last closet, he must feel was never opened; there is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable. That is, every man believes that he has a greater possibility.”⁵
- 7 Emerson states: “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. The way of life is wonderful.”⁶
- 8 Having drawn the circle and caught sight of the itinerary that consciousness will have to cope with, it is necessary to perform a decisive act in order to reach a full understanding of the worth of one’s own actions. It will be necessary, in the end, to undertake the choice to walk around the circle, to traverse it, to live it up to its conclusion, and then to start again by renewing, from time to time, the sense of one’s own walking through a path. The act of choice makes itself in the ability of man to choose the sense of his own actions, by virtue of the itinerary which he must accomplish in order to realize them. The dimension of choice is immanent in the nature of things, it proceeds from the visible of the real world up to the invisible of our moral and existential concepts. The importance of the act of choice, of the fountainhead of the itinerary, is fundamental to understanding the worth assumed in this context by the human action, by the human *doing*.

- 9 The hermeneutic-creative character of the human *doing*, also assumes the characters of a biunivocal relation between Man and his own self. After all, the circle might even be run along the other way round, and the action which was previously taking place from a first point up to a second, is now retroflected from the second point to the first. Such a retroflection of man's view is, in substance, the affirmation of a vision of the human existence which is neither univocal nor static, but dynamic, ductile, ambiguous and entangled.
- 10 Having traced the initial circle, then, one cannot do anything but follow the path of man throughout the circles of his own existence. One must learn how to live through the practice of the path, that is to say through the art of always drawing a further circle beyond the one already traversed. It is the art of recognizing the end of things and their new beginning. Having drawn the initial circle, we must now take responsibility of the choice of the undertaken path, a path which sees ahead not one, but multifarious and infinite roads with respectively different and possible conclusions. It is a matter, then, of discovering oneself human through the exercise of one's own Being, so becoming aware of the fact that "we know the authentic effects of true fire through every one of its million disguises."⁷ Starting from the unveiling of the disguise, the path of the moral sense of existence gets eventually unraveled.
- 11 Moreover, to walk through the way of the circle implies a further effort of self-knowledge. The path undertaken by the subject now delineates itself through the reflection upon nature, history and the Other. The moral sense of existence firstly operates on the field of the presence of one's own self in the world and on the *recognition* of such a self by the multiformity of the other existences.
- 12 The itinerary of recognition thus unravels through the writing of one's own history and of the history of others; a history conceived of as biography, as written composition of one's own self. There is a "mind" which is common to all men, Emerson claims, so that each man, in his singularity, is in communication with it. As a necessary condition of his own existence, he is integrated since the beginning into a net of relations which define his historical existence. "Man is explicable by the entire by nothing less than all his history,"⁸ in that history – as Emerson understands it, turns out to be the account of all the works of the mind. The historical sense of actions configures itself as transversal and diachronic.
- 13 From the historical dimension of the selves, one can trace a valid path through the circle of existence, i.e. a path from which one can easily proceed so as to come to a renewed understanding of the moral sphere of the individual. From one's history and from the history of others, in other words, it is possible to detect a trace which proves a path of recognition of one's own self. A proportional, mirror relationship between the individual experience and the communitarian – so to speak – synthesis, gets immediately delineated (an aspect which will prove mostly recurrent in the last Emersonian production). What must emerge from the "active" reading of history is the awareness of the tight link between the particular and the universal, the individual and the collective.
- 14 The rethinking of the heuristic worth of history places itself into the wider context of the re-evaluation of the present time, against a static, monumental conception of the past. On this point, Albert L. Von Frank rightly observes: "Emerson shows us that it is just this arbitrary insistence on othering that makes for the wearisome impertinence of history as ordinarily received." Yet to Emerson what the human spirit does through its multitude of

individual agents cannot be alien or other to the observing human spirit. If we are alive, it must be human life that we live, so that, in consequence, we never watch anything in history but ourselves. That we respond at all comprehendingly to foreign traits and fates shows that their ground plan has been in us all long – shows us that, as Emerson says in his book's first sentence, "There is one mind common to all individual men."⁹ Emerson stresses the worth of the present time not so much as transient instant as past history brought back to the present Self standing in the 'here' and in the 'today.' It is a matter of expanding the thought of each man in the actuality of the whole history, of all that has been. It is a matter of looking at the current singularity of the subject and of catching a glimpse of what has been in each single instant of his history in a backwards process, as if a circle of his own existence should be drawn the other way round.

- 15 The "chain of affinities" can be run through only by trespassing the limits of particular knowledge, and this becomes possible by understanding history, in the first place, in its most active, energetic and actual sense, that is, in the most properly human sense of existence, where the roots of all the things are to be sought after in the Human itself. The exquisitely "humanistic" perspective which comes to be drawn is the signal of a particular way of coping with the problems related to the issue of recognition. It is good – Emerson suggests – to start back from man in order to solve the "central crux" that constitutes the complicate interweave of meanings which determines his own Being. This is not, however, a uniquely 'existentialist' (to use a more 'modern' word) perspective. We are faced with an attempt of a 'continuistic' view of history, at whose center is placed man, or, better, Man, in all the nuances of his own being, ranging wide from the problem of the Self up to the issue of the relationship with the Other. There is a continuity in history, the author claims, i.e. one of which is possible to have an insight starting by the chain of affinities mentioned before. Such a chain, in the first place, joins together the activity and the thought, the thought and the doing, the works with man.
- 16 The self of man is therefore inscribed in the works which he has built over time. In general, his own freedom is inscribed into the capability of doing, of building up, of connecting, of putting things into relations, in one word, so to speak, of *acting*. Man himself is inscribed into and writes himself in his own history. He is his own history, he is all that he has been and his life is his biography. He *recognizes* himself in history because it is the book on which all his actions are written, that is, what witnesses his passage in the world, the trace he leaves behind, his path, his circle. History as biography thus becomes a privileged tool of recognition, starting from which it is possible to go back up and move ahead towards a more complete definition of one's self and of morality. Each and every man recognizes himself and the others in history, provided that history itself, instead of becoming an "antique" and "monumental" subject, is considered as a sign of the "progressive thought," as a dimension of the time, the latter conceived of as "ebbing sea," within which, as Emerson writes, "I feel the eternity of man, the identity of his thought."¹⁰
- 17 The sphere of recognition, therefore, configures itself as a necessary condition for the affirmation of the Self in a context which is not only individual, but also and especially collective. If it is true that man must recognize himself in his peculiarity as individual, it is also true, on the other hand, that he must come to terms with the common history, that is, with the biography of himself and, all the same, of the others. Again, recognizing oneself means to perceive the identity through the changes of form, to draw the circular line of existence and remain in existence itself with a gesture which proves appropriating

and expropriating at the same time. The human activity is, in the last analysis, “philosophical perception of identity through endless mutations of form”¹¹ and the form of man “consist in the multitude of his affinities, in the fact that his life is intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being.”¹² The space of recognition, that is to say the affirmation of one’s own self for oneself and for the others, places itself on the threshold between identity and difference, it is a pole wavering between the eternity of being and the fluidity of the events. All things considered, it could not be otherwise, given that man himself, with his vital equipment, is “a bundle of relations, a knot of roots.”¹³ No origin or unique destination is admitted. The acceptance of the protean dimension of existence is the condition without which one would not understand the sense of the circle. Existence revolves around the pole of man which is both center and circumference, both depth and surface. He is an eye which views the world, he is even the world itself. His destination is the coincidence with the world, given that “he cannot live without a world,”¹⁴ *his world*.

II. Perception. Walking Through the Circle

- 18 The issue of the relationship between individual and the world stands out on the background of a broader discussion bearing on the role of perception in the ethico-practical sphere of the individual. In his seminal essay *Experience*, Emerson copes once again with some views on the fluid and dynamic character of nature. Having detected in the necessity of recognition the first point of the path towards a new definition of the self and of morals, the gaze of the philosopher turns now on the role that perception (that is, the place of the contact between the subject and the world) assumes within a view of existence marked by the circularity, the evanescence and instability of all the objects. In the totality of the things that restlessly “swim and shine,” in the uneasiness which one feels in acknowledging how things, even those which one keeps tight most, easily flow through our fingers, in this never stable, perpetually changing condition “our life is not so much threatened as our perception.”¹⁵
- 19 It is immediately clear that what must be saved is without any doubt perception, that is, the capacity to link the viewed object to the viewing subject, the touched object with the subject who touches, the experiencing subject with the experienced world. Perception, then, really assumes a prominent role in the process of appropriation of one’s own self, to the extent that it becomes a true cognitive instrument on reality. It even becomes act, action, it acquires a hermeneutical importance, so to speak, given that, by means of perception, the subject acts upon the world by interpreting it.¹⁶
- 20 How shall we connect, then, the need for a stable background where the perceptive capacity can be set up with an external world which shows its fluidity and its metamorphosis every day? The issue can be sorted out by proposing a new way of thinking of the definition of ‘perception.’ The conflict between identity and difference is not and must not be solved, but it must stay confined at the threshold between the two states and find a way to preserve the connection between the subject and his world (and also the world of the others). “Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation – (again the circle) – and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association.”¹⁷ Furthermore: “we need change of objects.”¹⁸
- 21 The subject gets a grasp of the variety of the world and, within such a variety, he builds up his own ethical sense through perception, that is, he draws the role – both moral and

cognitive in the broad sense – which he takes on in the set of relationships which constitute the real. To the dynamicity and circularity of the world must correspond a respectively dynamic and circular perceptive activity, i.e. one respectful of the variety of experience and still capable of granting the possibility of knowledge. Through Emerson's lines peeps out a definition of "perception" which we may regard as "dynamic," that is, one that witnesses the intrinsically changeable nature of the activity of perception. Every single perceptive act has an heuristic worth, it is a crucial cognitive bearer, it gives sense to the objects that populate the world. It is a matter of putting the perception of things "into practice," as the author lucidly writes: "There is no adaptation or universal applicability in men, but each has his special talent, and the mastery of successful men consist in adroitly keeping, themselves where and when that turn shall be oftenest to be practiced."¹⁹

- 22 Hence we see Emerson's re-evaluation of the ethico-practical dimension of existence. Practical life is placed at the center of the attention of the philosopher and becomes the paradigm of the interpretation of the world. Such a perspective – which we might define as protopractist – is well highlighted by the importance that the concept of 'practical life' assumes in a perspective of definition of knowledge in the first and of morals in the second place. The theory of knowledge is now addressed towards practice, it is put in the condition of coming into terms with the reality of the world in its perpetual circulating and changing activity. Emerson writes: "[...] the practical wisdom infers an indifference, from the omnipresence of objection. The whole frame of things preaches indifference."²⁰ He goes on by saying "do not craze yourself with thinking, but go about your business anywhere. Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy."²¹ The real challenge of perception and therefore of knowledge and of morals is thus that of coming to terms in the first place with the reality of a world which gives itself to the subject in the truth of its surface, a surface which is at the same time all its profundity, given that "we live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them."²²
- 23 A perception which comes to terms with this world must move, change, draw new lines, new circles in any possible way, still without reducing itself to a mere instrument for an empirical knowledge of reality, but becoming at the same time *moral perception* of the world. Moral perception must therefore start moving and get down into the world, given that "everything good is on the highway"²³ and not into an archive or in the intimate side of each individual. Practical life must decline itself for everybody into a *practice of the path*, which starts again after being doomed to come to an end. Emerson states: "The great gifts are not got by analysis. Everything good is on the highway. The middle region of our being is the temperate zone. We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeness science, or sink into that of sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry, a narrow belt. Moreover, in popular experience everything good is on the highway."²⁴
- 24 The practice of path leads man to inhabit the so-called "intermediate world," which does not configure itself as kingdom of compromise or of mediation, but rather as a meeting point for the true and the false, the good and the bad, depth and of surface. The subject, on his way with his knowledge and morality, draws the circle of existence by following the guiding line that runs through this "tight stripe" of world, where identity and difference live together and are not at odds with each other. Therefore, the space for the agent becomes broad and fertile, the perceiving subject who offers a "way"²⁵ of looking at the world through the dynamism of his perceptive act. The knowing subject and his *ethics*

in progress find their reason of being only by starting from a conception of the world which is the outcome of the trustful affirmation of the truth of the surface, a truth which explicates itself starting from the truth of the profound, and in which “[...] the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power.”²⁶

III. Exercise. The Practice of the Circle

- 25 The context of conduct, addressed towards the practice of the human, realizes itself through the accomplishment of the polarity “fate-power.”²⁷ The issue of time, or of the “spirit of time” is faced by Emerson within a pragmatic discourse, a discourse on conduct, where it is necessary to “obey the polarity”: “To me however the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live? We are incompetent to solve the times. Our geometry cannot span the huge orbits of the prevailing ideas, behold their return and reconcile their opposition. We can only obey our own polarity. ‘T is fine for us to speculate and elect our course, if we must accept an irresistible dictation.”²⁸
- 26 The encounter between the dimension of fate (or of necessity) and of power (or of freedom) is put in terms of an attempt of harmonization and compenetration of the opposed poles, renouncing though to any temptation of synthesis and of overcoming of the dichotomy. Emerson traces a *leitmotif* in history, a recurrence dictated by the unceasing progress of fatality. It is a matter of facing the cumbersome “mountain of fate,” of succeeding in the attempt to master the “torrential flows of the tendencies,” of managing the circumstances of Nature by being able to understand “what can be done.” Notably, the dynamics “fate-power” enlightens the relevance of the individual in the realization of his power through his strength of character and the practical expression of his own will. The moral aptitude of the individual cannot dispense with his creative will, from his power, and his freedom coexists with necessity, so contributing to the writing of the book of Nature, which turns out to be the “book of fate.”
- 27 Freedom, expressed by power, is therefore a part of fate. It finds its expression in the faculties of choice and of action. The relationship between man and nature expresses itself into a dynamics of action-reaction which puts the “practical” perspective at issue into light. Such a perspective meaningfully emerges in the Emersonian view of morals and, in general, in the remarks on the ethical attitude of the individual. Emerson so highlights the importance of the “creative force” of the individual (“we are like lawgivers”), as the result of the connection of thought and will in an ethical sense. Thought realizes power and forges life through character and conduct. The concept of “creative force” and of will places itself into an ethico-practical dimension which characterizes Emerson’s thought in the last part of its development, by offering a possible solution to the initial issue of the reconciliation between necessity and liberty. The dialectics fate-power (negative-positive), as it has been previously said, does not end up – in an “Hegelian fashion” – with an overcoming, but with a compenetration and a positive permanence into the dimension of ambiguity and opacity of sense.²⁹ Once again, as Emerson writes, “thought makes people free,” because it actualizes fate and puts our moral sentiment into being through the creative force and the faculty of action.
- 28 Man coincides with his will, with his propelling force, with his being moral. Man converts himself into his own will. He is made ‘human’ by his own choice and by his own practice,

by his conduct of life. It then becomes evident the central relevance of the concept of 'will' in history, conceived of as expression of the realization of power, that is, of what has not been thought yet, that is, lived, actualized, practised. The ethico-practical dimension of the human thought affirms itself through the creative action of the will, through the harmony between fate and power, between necessity and liberty. Still, we have already recalled how the polarity between fate and power is never resolved into a full synthesis. "Fate – Emerson writes – implies advancement," it presupposes an idea of process that directs the dynamics of realization of power. The shift from "being necessitated" to "being free" (that is, self-realized) is allowed by the use (that is, by the practice) of will, still without forsaking – once and for all – the origin, the provenance of freedom eventually conquered.

- 29 The relationship fate-power is always biunivocal, ambivalent, in so far as "Nature is intricate, over-lapped, interweaved and endless,"³⁰ it is an articulated set of complex phenomena which never allows any unambiguous, final resolution. What emerges from such a condition of interweave and nuances is the meaning of the freedom of the individual as realization and exercise of his own life. The secret of the world – Emerson claims – is the link event-person, inasmuch as "person makes event, and event person,"³¹ an event which is therefore always an event of the human. Emerson writes: "The secret of the world is the tie between person and event. [...] But the soul contains the event that shall befall it; for the event is only the actualization of its thoughts, and what we pray to ourselves for is always granted. The event is the print of your form. It fits you like your skin. What each does is proper to him. Events are the children of his body and mind."³²
- 30 In his finally actualized power, the individual persists in the memory of his origin as "necessitated being," he remains anchored in his having been an event of his own liberty, of his own reality. Fate is not alien to man, just as it is not alien to liberty (power). Destiny – Emerson claims – lies into man, it is the paradigm of his being there and of his future being, insofar as "the soul of Fate is our own soul." Events develop alongside with people, and fate realizes itself through the practice of life, which so becomes the practice of the human in his being-true and in his becoming-free.
- 31 Will makes the "event" of the human and the practice of his own meaning, the conduct of each individual, notably the thought itself of the human. "The pleasure of life is according to the man that lives it,"³³ given that it is impossible to differentiate the dimension of existence from that of its daily practice. "A man will see his character emitted in the events that seem to meet, but which exude from and accompany him."³⁴ "Events – Emerson says – expand with the character,"³⁵ and the man-event and his necessitated condition emerges from man himself and from his power, his character. The conduct of life (the everyday practice of life) is the realizational force, in the moral sense, of the power of each and every man. Emerson so points out the creative (ethic-practical) dimension of the moral sphere, in so far as it is the will which makes the event, which makes it truer. History is therefore the everyday outcome of the interaction between Nature and Thought, it is a "perpetual ride," an "interplay of balances."
- 32 The world is understood as a "flow of matter alongside the threads of thought," an eternal process of actualization of power, and the human being lives this condition of polarity at its fullest. He is a polar being, made by a "double conscience," which alternates the private and the public being in the continuous, circular motion of the practice of life. Fate – we say it again – urges man to realize his own power through the will.

- 33 The interest towards ‘the daily’ is strong in Emerson, especially with regard to the elaboration of a new ethics based on the return of the ordinary. Alongside the need to retrieve a new space for the moral perception, the American philosopher questions himself on the relationship between time and the human existence, by claiming the right of the latter to affirm itself in the everyday practice, to “enter the domestic fence.” The focus on the primacy of the “domestic life” and the subsequent proposal of a suggestive “philosophy of the household”³⁶ contributes, in Emerson’s thought, to place the emphasis on those themes bearing on the management of one’s own life in the everyday actions.
- 34 The “inhabiting,” the activity of taking care of one’s own being, declined into the single actions which make the day, the insight of the detail which makes our days meaningful, induces Emerson to acknowledge the seminal importance of a knowledge which always comes to terms with the daily making of things and events. Against the “mechanization” and the homologation produced by technique (cf. *Works and Days*), Emerson proposes a new “ethics of the day,” an ethics which is able to give back to man his most profound and primitive being, closer to the flow of the events that surround him. Only in this fashion a truer understanding of our being into the world will become possible. The author writes: “The household is the home of the man, as well as of the child. The events that occur therein are more near and affecting to us than those which are sought in senates and academies. Domestic events are certainly our affair. [...] The subtle spirit of life must be sought in facts nearer.”³⁷
- 35 What acquires meaning for knowledge are the values ingrained in their daily practice, which chases the succession of hours and days, always in constant motion and change. With the new day, the perspective from which events are viewed undergoes a change, what was white at first ends up by turning black. The daily exercise constitutes one’s own way of being and of operating into the world, that is to say the conduct; it implies the meaning of what we see, feel and touch. “I am not one thing and my expenditure another. My expenditure is me. That our expenditure and our character are twain, is the vice of society.”³⁸ Once again, then, Emerson puts emphasis on the heuristic character of the conduct of life, conceived of as practice of one’s own existence in the daily. He writes “The great facts are the near ones. The report of the body is to be searched into the mind.” “The history of your fortunes is written first in your life.”³⁹ The aim is, once again, that of retrieving a practice of the human in the daily exercise of one’s own life, that of recovering a lost ethical sense, by declining it into the world through the exercise of its components. “We owe to man higher succors than food and fire. We owe to man man.”⁴⁰
- 36 The importance of the exercise of one’s own self in the daily mostly emerges in relation to the problem of technique and of its employment. In an essay like *Works and Days*, Emerson pays attention to the dynamics occurring between the influence of technique in the life of individuals and their rediscovery of a truer existential dimension through a rethinking of one’s own daily life. The diffidence displayed by Emerson towards mechanization becomes immediately clear when he writes: “The human body is the magazine of inventions, the patent office, where are the models from which every hint was taken. And the tools and engines on earth are only extensions of its limbs and senses. [...] Machines can only second, not supply, his unaided senses. The body is a meter.”⁴¹
- 37 The link between the body and the truer dimension of knowledge is one of the key terms in the Emersonian thought. The difference between the wisdom of technique and the wisdom of the human body lies in the degree of adhesion to the daily reality, viewed as the most congenial expression of Nature, “our daily food.” The danger embedded in

technique lies in its power of alienation of the human being; it lies in the capacity of the machine to expel him from the discourse on reality and to throw him out of himself towards an improper (mechanized) use of his own being. Emerson writes: “Machinery is aggressive. The weaver becomes a web, the machinist a machine. If you do not use the tools, they use you. All tools are in one sense edge-tools, and dangerous. [...] The machine unmakes the man. Now that the machine is so perfect, the engineer is nobody. Every new step in improving the engine restricts one more act of the engineer – unteaches him.”⁴²

- 38 The improper use of technique causes man to lose the mastery of his own potency, and rules him out from the creative dimension, distances him from the invention, from strength and character. It becomes necessary, then – as Emerson states – to find another way, another meter for the worth of man. “But if, with all his arts, he is a felon, we cannot assume the mechanical skill or chemical resources as the measure of worth.”⁴³
- 39 The new ethical cipher of man is to be looked for in the value of the day, in the daily sense of existence. “Tornare all’ordinario prospetta una via di fondazione della validità di un discorso” (“To go back to the ordinary involves a foundational way to the validity of a discourse”).⁴⁴ It is necessary to reinsert man in a broader *circle* than the one drawn by technique and the material powers. A *circle* that is never transcendent, but always immanent, inclined to reveal the primitive dimension of the human, wrapped in the ordinary practice of his own being and doing. A practice which explicates itself in the value of the “minimal things,” towards a new ethics of the daily. Again, Emerson claims: “But life is good only when it is magical and musical, a perfect timing and consent, and when we do not anatomize it. You must treat the days respectfully, you must be a day yourself, and not interrogate it like a college professor. The world is enigmatical – everything said, and everything know or done – and must not be taken literally, nut genially.”⁴⁵
- 40 The ethics of the daily is always transient, given that the “human life is made up of such transits.”⁴⁶ Transits which take place in the “day” more than in the “works,” in the “ordinary” rather than in the “extraordinary.” As Soressi writes: “il gesto più quotidiano, ordinario e all’apparenza insignificante assume significati più ampi, se assumiamo vedute più ampie” (“the most daily, ordinary and apparently insignificant act acquires broader meanings, if we acquire broader views”).⁴⁷ Life itself is, eventually, a “search for power,” a search understood as sharing the nature of the world, inasmuch as “the mind that is parallel with the laws of nature will be in the current of events and strong with their strength.”⁴⁸ It is necessary to be “in sympathy with the course of things,”⁴⁹ in order to become part of the events in history and also part of their realization. In order to “become what one is,”⁵⁰ as Nietzsche would say, it is necessary to express through the will all the positive and creative strength embodied in the idea of “power.” This means to have the chance to realize the thought of one’s own being, to put the primeval condition of one’s own freedom into action. Emerson invites men to realize their own power, in that “only so can that amount of vital force accumulate which can make the step from knowing to doing.”⁵¹ Only through the use and exercise of the practices of life power and the will can be expressed. Knowledge and the freedom that comes from it advance through the daily conduct of life, its exercise, its choices, its decisions.
- 41 Exercising culture means to make it a factor of compensation. “The pest of society is egotists.”⁵² He senses the danger ingrained in an unbridled individualism, which would entail a drastic lost of contact with the world (egotism as “disease of the temperament”). Exercising culture means to free oneself from “pure power,” it means to accomplish the

freedom of each and every individual in relation to the set of relationships which shape the real world. To release the “pure power” means furthermore “a power to see with a free and disengaged look every object,”⁵³ to understand the sense of the closeness of individuals to the objects and the subjects inhabiting the world. It means to have the capacity to measure the “ray of affinity” of men with respect to their fellows.

- 42 Emerson’s individualism is continuously put into question, by putting the meaning of a solitary life alongside the life of the community. The individual is not here understood in an exclusivist sense, but as a part of a broader community, including all the ones who “[hanno] bisogno di percepirsi come riconoscibili” (“need to perceive themselves as recognizable”).⁵⁴ The Emersonian community indicates the direction towards the concrete realization of a specific possibility: that of drawing on a common heritage, in the first place linguistic and, in the broad sense, cultural. As Soressi writes, “Emerson è consapevole del fatto che la solitudine, l’individualismo, la democrazia, la libertà, la morale sono anche costruzione sociale, o meglio, sono anche costruzione linguistica per la quale è necessaria una comunità linguistica, ma anche una lunga storia d’interazione linguistica e simbolica tra persone” (“Emerson is aware of the fact that solitude, individualism, democracy, freedom, morals are also a social construction or, better, they are also a linguistic construction in view of which a linguistic community is necessary, but they also constitute a long story of symbolic and linguistic interaction between people”).⁵⁵ With regard to this, Emerson writes: “Language is a city to the building of which every human being brought a stone; yet he is no more to be credited with the grand result than the *acaleph* which adds a cell to the coral reef which is the basis of the continent.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the reference to an inter-subjective dimension above mere individuals turns out to be of prominent importance in view of an understanding of the more profound sense of the thought of the American philosopher. There is no realization of one’s own power without communion of intentions and thought. That is to say, men are prevented from “practicing” (in the sense which we have seen) their own existence without being part of that thick and infinite net of cultural relationships which give them the occasion of “feeling themselves human.”
- 43 This community, this macro-subject we all belong to, is defined by Emerson as *Oversoul*, i.e. a word which, rather than standing for a dimension that transcends the mundane human experience, expresses the universality of the feeling which lies at the basis of the recognition and of the reciprocal affirmation. Without such a subject, the realization of one’s own self in the ethical-practical and cultural sense would be impracticable. The *Oversoul* is our “common heart,” our “almighty reality.” Emerson: “The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which we rest as particular being is contained and made one with all other. [...] but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.”⁵⁷
- 44 The determined individuality of each and every man is indissolubly tied to the others and, all together, they constitute that primeval union of subject and object, of soul and body, so to speak. Only through the affirmation of such an empathic and inter-subjective dimension it is possible to pave the way for a new moral, addressed to the achievement of shared goals and future targets, i.e. a moral always inclined to the realization of whatever comes about from our daily practice.

- 45 Emerson's community is factual, historical and present. It embraces the toil of conversation, the importance of the social life and the construction of a common cultural speech. The shift from the individual to the collective lies at the basis of the dynamics of construction of the Self. For this reason, we see a proportional (also mirror-) relationship between individual experience and communitarian synthesis drawn in Emerson's thought. A "universal nature" is available to men, i.e. one which gives worth to the particular and to the single things, still, not in the sense of a unifying and a-storical substrate, but as a common paradigm which validates the conditions for a collective activity of perceiving and thinking. The sense of Nature, as Emerson claims, stems from the mind of a single, primeval man, but it grafts itself into History, into the mind of others, by so extending itself to a community that shares a net of cultural meanings.
- 46 Thus, Emerson enlightens the ethical quality of the concept of 'culture' and that of its exercise, viewed as cipher of the worth of society, left aside any egotism and sterile and dumb individualism. In favor of a renewed sense of empathy and of communication, he puts the accent on the ethical power of education, and he acknowledges the necessity of a new pedagogical practice which distances itself once and for all from the classical educational institutions. Furthermore, he reaffirms the primacy of the ethico-practical dimension in the cultural progress of the individuals, by declining the polarity freedom-necessity, in the terms of a renewed culture and a new morals, which frees men (starting from their condition of necessitated beings) from the *impasse* due to the decadence of society, dragged apart by the failure of the great monotheistic religions. Emerson fiercely launches a final attack against the moral crisis of the society of his own time, so anticipating, in some respect, the Nietzschean attempt of transvaluation of all values.
- 47 Since the beginning, Emerson writes, man has been the bearer of beliefs which have somehow determined the cultural paradigm of every age, ending up by defining, as in the case of Christian religion, even the cultural and social directives of an entire community. Not by chance, "Christianity, in the romantic ages, signified European culture – the grafted or meliorated tree in a crab forest."⁵⁸ Religions, then, have in the first place a historical dimension, so to speak objective, which allows the complementariness between the public and private aspect of the human existence. "Heaven always bears some proportion to earth,"⁵⁹ and the actions of men in history are governed by the set of beliefs which happen to make part of the daily practice of individuals, i.e. the same beliefs which affect their moral perception of things.
- 48 With the crisis of the great monotheistic religions (and of faith in general), we assist to a "divorce" between religion and morality, in such a way that contemporary society falls victim to a moral flattening, which no longer finds in the religious and intellectual experience a clear landmark, but falls victim of the most blind conservatism, of indifference and of a miserable materialism. The faith in an universe both moral and intellectual turns out to fade away, and we assist to a consequent crisis of culture in general. One has the feeling of a detachment from religion, there is mistrust in human virtue, and the spreading skepticism towards the community is the symptom of the physiological decadence of the ancient forms of religion.
- 49 Thence, the central questions in Emerson's discourse become the following: which future is there for morals, for culture in general? Which way do human beings have to retrieve an ethical sense of their own "doing," i.e. one which coincides with their own thought and their own power? Again, the author states: "The cure for false theology is mother-wit. Forget your books and traditions, and obey your moral perceptions at this hour. That

which is signified by the words “moral” and “spiritual,” is a lasting essence, and, with whatever illusion is we have loaded them, will certainly bring back the words, age after age, to their ancient meaning. I know no words that mean so much. In our definitions we grope after spiritual by describing it as invisible. The true meaning of spiritual is real; that law which executes itself, which works without means, and which cannot be conceived as not existing.”⁶⁰

- 50 Emerson brings our attention back to the present time, that is, to the transient time, a time which becomes always different from itself and incessantly returns to the original form, transfigured though in the flow of the daily events. It is just here, in the ordinary, and not in the metaphysical aspect of the historical dogma, that the true essence of the existing, the most profound meaning of the Human lie. Emerson traces in the mundane perceptive field a new dimension of the “spiritual,” able to solve and overcome the ethical crisis due to the failure of the great moral constructions of the past. In that case, we have a new moral (and therefore cultural) sense, engendered from the spontaneous perception of the daily flow of the events, built up through the practice of his own power and, once again, through the realization of his own will. From “sentimentalism” we pass to “realism,” so paving the way for a sort of philosophy of action and of practice, that is, one able to restore a renewed ethical sense for men. It turns out, then, that the knowledge of the nature of things, of their ethical declension and of their cultural significance, takes place through the public force, the force of character and the habit of conduct.
- 51 Thus, the new moral perception translates itself into a renewed faith in one’s own poetic capacity and in his own power, inasmuch as “we are the builders of our fortunes”⁶¹ and, to some extent, of the fortunes of other people, given that “the relations and connections are not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always.”⁶² The opinion of the world is the confession of its character, and the only way to restore the ancient ethical sense which properly defines man as “moral being” is – as it has already been said – that of realizing life through the daily practice of his own power. Such a perspective of thought declines itself, then, into a new philosophy of praxis, i.e. one that embraces the exercise of one’s own concepts in order to realize freedom and give substance to one’s own being-human.
- 52 The exercise of culture, and the sense of liberation which this entails, allows the deepest expression of the self, of one’s own power. Alongside Nature, which is “careless of the individual,” goes the cultural practice, which is properly human and which is the means of exhibition of the progressive strength of man, of his advancement, of his continuous metamorphosis. Through the power of education (which is the outcome of the exercise of culture), the individual realizes his ability to get out of his primeval dimension as “necessitated being.” It is a “courageous education,” a new one, far away and different from the classical schemes of the formative techniques. An education which is, in the first place, a teaching of the practice of culture, that is to say, an awareness of the active role of culture in the daily life of the individual. “We shall one day learn to supersede politics by education.”⁶³
- 53 In substance, what makes Emerson’s stance somehow close to that of the American Pragmatists is the attention towards the conduct, this viewed as practical realization of the meaning of one’s own being, always projected into the future as privileged cognitive dimension. One can adduce as an example some words of the renown father of American Pragmatism, Charles S. Peirce: “The rational meaning of every proposition lies in the

future. How so? The meaning of a proposition is itself a proposition. Indeed, it is no other than the very proposition of which it is the meaning: it is a translation of it. But of the myriads of forms into which a proposition may be translated, what is that one which is to be called its very meaning? It is, according to the pragmatist, that form in which the proposition becomes applicable to human conduct, not in these or those special circumstances, nor when one entertains this or that special design, but that form which is most directly applicable to self-control under every situation, and to every purpose. This is why he locates the meaning in future time; for future conduct is the only conduct that is subject to self-control.”⁶⁴

- 54 This sense of future which validates our actions and makes the meaning of our propositions true, is remarkably characteristic of Emerson’s thought, in that his “philosophy of conduct” is inclined to represent the way of realization of fate in an ethico-practical perspective, which comes to terms with the metamorphosis and the infinite motion of the events towards a future horizon, always open and indefinite. As well as Peirce and James, even Emerson regards the *esse in futuro* as the only condition for the realization of the will, that is, as condition of the realization of the expectation, of power, in a world, of the human.
- 55 In order to do that, it is necessary to gain, as we have already seen, a new “moral perception,” starting from the truth of the act, conceived of as the expression of one’s own character. “[...] My thinking and speaking want body or basis.”⁶⁵ The corporeal dimension (once again, an ethical-practical one) of knowledge is well highlighted by the words of the author, who reaffirms the absolute importance of a culture which is accompanied by its exercise, by its practice in the life of man. “Culture opens the sense of beauty,”⁶⁶ incites to evolution, to amelioration, to the realization of power. Emerson so announces the final transformation of all the negative forces in power, in the first place through the practice of culture as we have understood it. The organic effort of Nature of climbing and advancing towards the “best of the human being” runs parallel to the conduct of the life of each and every individual, viewed as a constant and daily exercise of experimentation of the self and of the practice of one’s own being.

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NOTES

1. Ralph W. Emerson (1883), *Essays. First Series*, Cambridge, The Riverside Press, 281. (From now onwards E,I.)

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. Ivi, 285.

5. Ivi, 286.

6. Ivi, 300.

7. Ivi, 157.

8. Ivi, 9.

9. Albert J. Von Frank (1999), *Essays: First Series (1841)*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 107.

10. E, I, 30.

11. Ivi, 33.

12. Ivi, 38.

13. Ivi, 39.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Ralph W. Emerson (1883), *Essays. Second Series*, Cambridge, The Riverside Press, 50. (From now onwards E, II.)

16. On the interpretative character of perception in Emerson's thought see the reading offered by Cavell, especially in his (2004) *Cities of Words. A Pedagogical Letter on a Register of the Moral Life*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press. Cavell comments on the idea of perception as interpretative activity in Emerson, by stressing the presence, in the thought of the American philosopher, of an ethics of perception as active and inherently moral reality. Cavell writes (Cavell, *op. cit.*: 389): "A way of summarizing what I take to be Emerson's criticism of previous philosophy's idea of experience – say in Locke and Hume and in Kant – is to reinterpret what it means to take experience as based upon impressions. These former philosophers classically take impressions to be the result of a casual relation borne to me by the world. In Emerson, my impressions are my interpretations of the world, the way I experience the world, the basis of my judgments of its worth, how it matters to me, impresses me, or not."

17. E, II, 58.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Ivi, 60.

20. Ivi, 62.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. Ivi, 65.

24. *Ibid.*

25. This is the view which Stanley Cavell has labeled "epistemology of the moods." On this gnoseologic paradigm – traceable in particular in the essay *Experience*, although appearing in all

the writings of our author – we are unable to know anything in a direct and immediate fashion, nor do we get a knowledge of what a thing is in itself; we only get acquainted with a particular aspect or *mode* of a given thing.

26. Ivi, 86.

27. As Anna M. Nieddu observes in her introduction to the Italian edition of *The Conduct of Life* (Aragno 2008, p. xvi): “Per Ralph Waldo Emerson, fervente ammiratore di Dante Alighieri in terra americana, l’autentica Vita Nuova si realizza nel momento in cui l’individuo acquista la capacità di cogliere la presenza della forza spirituale al fondo della bellezza fisica e di misurarsi con un impulso al rinnovamento, con una forma di apertura attiva e autentica che invita l’individuo a prendere in mano le redini della propria esistenza e a condurla al di là e oltre il mero appagamento del desiderio. In questo atto risiede la realizzazione di un impegno etico fondamentale, volto all’auto-determinazione, che è liberazione dalla passività, nella tensione fra opposte polarità, presa d’atto della incomponibile compresenza di ‘fato’ e ‘libertà’ al fondo dell’operare di ogni individuo, e dell’intera storia dell’uomo” (“For Ralph Waldo Emerson, fervent admirer of Dante Alighieri in the American land, the authentic New Life actualizes itself precisely at the time when the individual acquires the capacity to grasp the presence of the spiritual force underlying physical beauty, and also that of confronting himself with an impulse to renewal, through a form of active and authentic overture which invites the individual to take the reins of his own existence and to lead it to another land, beyond the mere satisfaction of the desire. In this act resides the realization of a fundamental ethical commitment, bent towards the self-determination, which is a rescue from passivity, in the tension between opposed ‘polarities,’ in the acknowledgment of the irreconcilable coexistence of ‘fate’ and ‘freedom’ underlying the acting of each individual and of the whole history of man”).

28. Ralph W. Emerson (1883), *The Conduct of Life*, Cambridge, The Riverside Press, 9. (From now onwards CL.)

29. Nieddu writes in her introduction to the Italian edition of *The Conduct of Life* (cit., p. xvi): “[...] Anche il multiculturalismo e il connesso pluralismo religioso statunitense, [...] possono, in chiave emersoniana, venire letti come un ricercato equilibrio armonico tra opposte polarità. A questa forma di equilibrio, sempre precario e fallibile a causa del mistero che lo circonda, il filosofo americano allude negando con determinazione qualsiasi possibile approccio di matrice hegeliana al problema della storia, qualsiasi connessione, cioè, ad una dialettica conciliatrice che risolve i contrari in una sintesi superiore” (Even the American multiculturalism and the related religious pluralism [...], in an Emersonian perspective, can be read as a refined harmonic balance between opposed polarities. At this form of balance, always precarious and fallible due to the mystery that surrounds it, the American philosopher hints by denying with firmness any possible approach of Hegelian nature to the problem of history, that is, any connection to a conciliatory dialectics able to solve the contraries in a superior synthesis”).

30. CL, 40.

31. Ivi, 42.

32. Ivi, 43.

33. Ivi, 44.

34. Ivi, 45.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Cfr. the essay *Domestic Life*, included in *Society and Solitude*. The essay represents an interesting attempt to shift the scientific and moral attention from the chief historical-political systems to the family, domestic life. It is, at the same time, some sort of self-analysis undertaken by Emerson starting from the observation of one of his children. This essay consists in one of the very first attempts to draw a philosophy of the household and of the “inhabiting.”

37. Ralph W. Emerson (1883), *Society and Solitude*, Cambridge, The Riverside Press, 105. (From now onwards SS..)

38. Ivi, 107.
39. Ivi, 106.
40. Ivi, 112.
41. Ivi, 151.
42. Ivi, 158.
43. Ivi, 159.
44. B. Soressi (2004), *Ralph Waldo Emerson. Il pensiero e la solitudine*, Roma, Armando editore, 74.
45. SS, 172.
46. Ivi, 173.
47. B. Soressi, *op. cit.*, 76.
48. CL, 58.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Cfr. F. Nietzsche, *Ecce homo. How one becomes what one is*, Oxford world's classic.
51. CL, 74.
52. Ivi, 128.
53. Ivi, 131.
54. B. Soressi, *op. cit.*, 105.
55. Ivi, 103.
56. Ralph W. Emerson (1883), *Quotation and Originality*, Cambridge, The Riverside Press, 190.
57. E,I, 252-3.
58. CL, 197.
59. Ivi, 196.
60. Ivi, 205-6.
61. Ivi, 211.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Ivi, 135.
64. Charles S. Peirce, *The Monist*, 15:2 (April 1905), 161-81.
65. CL, 151.
66. Ivi, 152.