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Pragmatism and Transcendentalism: a disputed inheritance

1. In this paper I refer to the ongoing debate on the relationship between Pragmatism and Transcendentalism. Recently, inside to the so-called ‘post-analytical’ area, the problem of the ‘origins’ of American philosophy stood for a new, stimulating field of comparison and gave rise to conflicting positions. Some studies on Pragmatism, dating on the end of the Eighties of the Twentieth century, interpreted the cultural events subsequent to US political independence from Europe by means of a genealogical key reconnecting many ideas coming from Pragmatists to the Transcendentalist source. The outcomes of this thread of research – between others, in Harold Bloom, Joel Porte, Richard Poirer, Joel Myerson - allowed that a relevant interpretative turn occurred not only on the historical-philosophical plane, but also on a theoretical one. In that same period, a particular care has been addressed also to point out the so-called «romantic legacy» of American philosophy, coming from an European ‘post-Enlightenment’ philosophical context. So, with his attention particularly turned in that direction, Charles Larmore analyzed some outstanding ethical topics, such as the relation between rationality and imagination, the sense of belonging to the community and, least but not last, the notion of authenticity. However, in his work Larmore completely by-passes the ‘*native*’ romantic tradition that found an original and incisive expression during the so-called *American Renaissance* and permeated the whole of American culture in its philosophical as well as literary expressions.

So, I think that a review of this descent could become the necessary premise also to understand the deeper sense of the social-ethical message of classical Pragmatism. Although in different ways, Pragmatists themselves often appeared aware of their indebtedness towards Transcendentalism, especially as regards that ‘*new individualism*’ which constitutes the basis of their democratic ideals. On this approach to the identification of a breaking point between the rising American philosophy and the traditions of European home country surely played a role the belief that Transcendentalism had not produced any philosophical mind and that ‘the visionary’ Emerson, with his messy and multifaceted defending of feeling and imagination, had expressed a purely rhetorical reference to the value of individuality, working in one direction dangerously bordering irrationalism. In this way, it should not seem restrictive the fact that during those same years, the strong link between Pragmatism and Transcendentalism was overshadowed by the important issue concerning the impact of scientific revolutions on pragmatist movement as a whole. Between the second half of the Nineteenth century and the first decades of the Twentieth, scholars easily attested the direct descent of the thought of Pragmatists from varied forms of evolutionisms, such as Lamarckian, Spencerian or, especially, Darwinian.

From my point of view, these issues have not lost anything of their relevance, and I think that, quite thanks to its scientific sources, pragmatism has been able to release from the detrimental charges of *practicalism* and *utilitarianism*, largely related to the ways of its dissemination in Europe. Simply, I maintain that the scientific sources of Pragmatism are not sufficient to show us the richness and the complexity of the Pragmatist source and our possibility to reconnect to it.

2. On this basis, assumes a special meaning that the first accomplished review of the descent from Emerson's Transcendentalism of some Pragmatist's crucial ideas finds expression in a 'post-philosophical' way; in the volume by Cornell West, published in 1989 and significantly titled: *The American Evasion of Philosophy. A Genealogy of Pragmatism*.

West argues that the historical-cultural events that accompanied the growth of Pragmatism in its way towards the construction of the democratic ideal take on the traits of an authentic 'civil religion' represented by the quest for a restless, intellectual and moral, self-consciousness. Also along this route takes on a special relevance the convergence between Emerson's idea of *self-reliance* and several issues made on in different situations by the 'second generation' of Pragmatists (in particular, Dewey and Mead) with reference to the *creativity* of human thinking and acting. The sense of West's search thus assumes a definite 'ethical commitment'. Unlike Larmore, he strives to find the distinctive features of a national identity within the American philosophical tradition and not outside of it. He carries on a well-established cultural as well as political operation that, in historical perspective, sinks its roots in an attempt to connect the overcoming of European tradition (*The Old Muses*, according to Emerson) to a new way of understanding human thinking and acting. This detachment was considered the basis of the difficult task of constructing in America a *new identity*; an identity that individuals and peoples of the *old* Europe, rightly or wrongly, thought to possess *ab aeterno* in an accomplished, perfect form.

The link between Pragmatism and Transcendentalism, therefore, in the first place, allows us to reconstruct this ethical-civil path.

3. Secondly, it looks clear that West awards to this 'genealogical question' a definite philosophical and propositional relevance, not only a philological one. On this specific plan – but only on this one – West's aims find an indirect confirmation in an investigation concerning the same '*genealogical problem*' that engages Stanley Cavell from about thirty years. However, what I want to point out in this paper are not the convergences between Cavell and West on a problematic plane but, on the contrary, their divergences relative to the interpretation of the relationship between Transcendentalism and Pragmatism. Cavell, in fact, founds his renewal of the first on its complete incompatibility with the second. Cavell's idea relative to the problem of the origins of American philosophical thought *by-passes* pragmatism, and I think that this by-passing produces a sort of warped view.

I fully agree with Cavell's assumption that the sources of American thought cannot technically – that is, academically – be defined 'philosophical', but belong to a cultural field, extremely broad and variegated.

Cavell's studies on Thoreau and Emerson recognize these personalities – especially the second – like: «the founder of the difference in American thinking». And, if this is true: «later American thinkers such as Dewey and James are going to be indebted to Emerson». So, Cavell's reading of this disputed inheritance opens a glimpse of a cultural situation of the origins much more complex and varied of that one we are accustomed to thinking in Europe.

On this particular point it is worth to recall another indication by Cavell drawn from an article of 1998, recently republished in a volume that – according to the author – includes his «definitive expression» on Emerson. Cavell remembers that he repeatedly characterized the difference between Dewey and Emerson arguing that: «Dewey wanted to get the Enlightenment to happen in America, whereas Emerson was in the later business of addressing the costs of the way it has happened». In the essay, provocatively titled 'What's the use of calling Emerson a pragmatist?', Cavell wonders why, after having forgotten or ignored for decades the 'genealogical problem', in recent years some scholars have come to make Emerson a proto-pragmatist: John Dewey would simply *captured* and *clarified* Emerson. This notation, really, could be taken as a simple, legitimate complaint of the excesses to which Transcendentalist legacy has been put before by more than one scholar. Instead, it becomes the premise of a *theoretical turn*, that Cavell performs by means of his 'post-philosophical' skepticism. Quite this turn *requires*, so to speak, to by-pass 'classical' Pragmatism.

The reasons for this reside in what Cavell estimates as a sort of 'betrayal' operated by those scholars who, unwisely, tried to cancel the specificity of Transcendentalism. Relating to these contested attempts, he writes: «The new emphasis I mentioned manifested in recent efforts to trace Emerson's textual influence on Dewey should serve as a welcome corrective to my earlier impatient and repeated claim that although Dewey admired and praised Emerson, he could make no use of him textually, that is, in the actual detailed work of philosophizing.». This consideration aims to confirm that, in the context of American philosophy, Enlightenment and 'post-Enlightenment' are two separate routes from the beginning and that it is not possible to find a common origin of them. Moreover, according to Cavell, these ways *must* remain strictly separate and independent: «Both Dewey and Emerson are necessary for what each of them thinks of as democracy»; but, surely, there is not a continuity of any sort. The image that Cavell's thesis suggests is that of an original, *not philosophical*, source - such as Emerson – to which, from a certain moment onwards, the pragmatist source puts itself beside, but with a cultural project radically different and far less independent from the European tradition than it might appear at a first glance. The entire relapses of this interpretation surely require considerations that cannot be carried out in this paper, nevertheless, I try to individuate a first area of concern worthy of attention.

4. It is certainly plausible that - even before the scholars of Pragmatism - the Pragmatists themselves have distorted Transcendentalism by means of undue assimilations to their ways of thought. It is therefore necessary to think about the relationship in question in terms of a 'selective appropriation'. Surely, Dewey in some way 'secularized' Emerson and 'rationalized' some of his ideas. Nevertheless, in the delineation by the Pragmatists of the complex notion of experience are clearly traceable those imaginative and sentimental

reasons arising from Emerson's thought, from Whitman's poetry, from Thoreau's essays and romance; in other words, from that "romantic legacy", alive and vibrant, of the America of Nineteenth century. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine that the Pragmatists – that knew and appreciated Transcendentalism in the most part of its manifestations – by-passed it to reconnect themselves to the purity of the European Enlightenment tradition. It seems more appropriate that, if there has been - as I believe - an appropriation of the thought of Emerson by the Pragmatists, this happened in a way that in a relevant measure affected the new notion of creative rationality in terms of gain and not of loss.

The concluding remarks of Cavell's essay open more than a gleam also on an 'applicative' plan, according to a research perspective of great interest today, especially in the fields of politics and social-ethics. I refer to the problem of a possible application in the civil citizenship dynamics of the sympathetic and compassionate sharing exercised by poetic imagination. This issue, along with the social role of literary fantasy and, in general, of individual creativity, also occupies a central place in the reflection of Martha Nussbaum, addressed to the great question of the establishment of a good moral and civil life for individuals and communities. Along this way, lie Nussbaum's thesis expressed in *Not for Profit. Why Democracies Needs the Humanities*, where she completes the most relevant lines of thought first developed in the 1995 volume: *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life*.

5. Unlike Cavell - which, as we have seen, refers to Emerson - Nussbaum turns to the theme of poetry and to its civil role through suggestions coming from Walt Whitman. In *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum takes the term literature in all the extent that the author of *Leaves of Grass* ascribe to it and in all the strength that cross its range. A range that includes not only poetry or literary productions in the strict sense, but also religion, music, art, architecture, literature of science. As Whitman's suggests in *Democratic Vistas*, his idea of art redeems man from his natural weakness without eradicating him from nature. Whitman's idea of history, on the other hand, reveals suggestions from Emerson and recognizes in the first place the value to be attributed to daily individual experiences. Art - so understood - as the capability to exercise all human imaginative tools explains the reasons by which, according to Nussbaum, the man of letters could be considered «an interlocutor absolutely necessary» to political life. The purpose is to provide a suitable background to the belief that narrative and literary imagination is not the opposite of reasoning processes but stands as an essential component of them.

Comparing her idea of justice with that of John Rawls, Nussbaum puts literary imagination as the ground of an ethical proposal for operating on social issues. Essentially, poetic imagination proves to be a 'good teacher' in itself, its intuitions take on real significance every time they show themselves capable of producing participatory acts of sympathetic character, being in harmony with the pre-existing «thoughtful moral or political judgments». On this basis, however - not focusing on the question of the assessment of the practices produced by the imagination and not solving the problem of the validity criteria that govern the objectification of subjective ideals - Nussbaum does not deactivate the separation between reason and imagination, between judgments established in the past and value-proposals for the future: the first ones and

the second ones do not interact each other, nor do they mutually enrich themselves. It happens among them a kind of circularity, all facing backwards, whereby the function of criterion seems to be exercised only by the confirmation that descend from the usual behavior and from values settled in *ethos*. In this way, the creative - original and individual - contribution of poetic imagination to the formation of political and ethical judgments risks to be repressed.

At the basis of these outcomes of Nussbaum's «poetical ethics» there is a certain incompleteness in the establishment of a model of rationality by which the imaginative process could bring into play its potentiality to become universally shared. Unlike what occurs along Dewey's and Mead's lines of thought, in this case the two distinct *logics* underlying the processes of experience appear mutually external and alien. Intuitive the one, reflective the other, working on different registers they implement processes and methods mutually incomparable, if not incompatible. In Nussbaum, emotions - which have the peculiarity to immediately respond to the call of poetry - gain a prominent place in the grounds of action; imagination, on its part, helps men to improve. Nevertheless, her proposal is essentially based on a restatement at the institutional level of the great educational role of the humanities. But, for what concerns the rational and the imaginative reasons of human behavior, neither one nor the other are shown in their radicalism, that is, in their taking root in that *creativity* that specifies human acting and thinking *in terms of quality*.

On the contrary, this latter is – I think – the best route that Pragmatists – especially Mead and Dewey– indicated to us.

6. As a matter of fact, I believe that the answer to the question about the contribution that 'classical' Pragmatism offers to contemporary philosophy could be put on a wider basis than the one – valid and important as well - which refer to the guidelines and the policies of our cultural and educational institutions and should seek to develop some issues neglected up to now. Among these, it seems relevant the complexity of the pragmatic notion of experience; in particular, the relationship between ethical and aesthetical experiences, places of *normative action*, together with the logic. It is a relationship that has been overlooked in many respects, not least because of the overall homogenization of the interpretations of Pragmatism to which I have referred in the first part of this paper.

Along these lines is still possible to confront also with *more radical* ethical and political questions. It is well known that in their work - especially on the philosophical-anthropological side - Pragmatists take on a genetic-evolutionary approach to the relationship between thought and action; an approach that - especially in Mead's interactionism - soon escapes from the narrow mesh of a deterministic environmental naturalism to transform itself in a phenomenological approach to the complex and variegated processes of experience.

In *The Nature of the Aesthetic Experience*, Mead considers the ways in which thought processes are formed through the free plays of reason and imagination. This latter shapes ideal meanings, generated by aspirations, and planning capabilities towards the future. In the «consummation» phase of the act: «we contemplate, we accept and we stop on our representations». This is the kind of experience that Mead, in his essay of 1924, defines a way to enjoy the common aspects of daily existence in a «*whitmanesque* manner»,

that is, in the style of Whitman. A poetic and '*poietic*' style because, in this context, poetry is *poiesis*: aspiration and achievement, ideal production that, moving the will, can objectify itself, *do* and *done*; in a word, '*pragma*'.

As we can find in Whitman and Emerson, also according to Mead in ordinary life situations often the poet speaks the unique, authentic language and - thanks to the ability to induce the assumption of other's role - has an irreplaceable function in the community, promoting social cohesion also through a form of emotional sharing. In Mead the appeal to the ordinary ceases to identify with the established and/or with the idiosyncratic and becomes *a quest for community*, a dimension that must be understood in all its complexity and richness. Normative acting, in this perspective, does not arise from the outside but is 'discovered' as a constitutive element of the Self in every kind of intentional determination. Along these routes, pragmatic relativism objectifies itself, giving up absolutism, but putting a stop to skepticism and nihilism.

At last, logic, aesthetics and ethics appear directed by those human needs that can be defined the *genetic reasons* of creativity. Nothing 'esoteric' in the aesthetic experience, and, most importantly, no cold philosophical intellectualism, no dogma, no absolutism, brought down to earth by their experiential and demanding roots. Even the problem of the role of images in experience find new, productive, formulations in an anti-dualistic but not restrictive approach; an approach that, on the contrary, considers all the richness and the complexity of experience, putting in the *capability of appreciation* the last frontier of the distinction between animals and human beings.

Under this point of view, I guess that we could call 'post-Darwinian' the *rewriting* of human social-cultural evolution that Mead suggests through his work and that, perhaps unexpectedly, leads him to find the starting point of a *new human nature* on that border line that - according to the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico - identifies the 'second birth' of humanity. In this horizon, Pragmatism not only discovers the original alliance with poetry suggested by Transcendentalism, but, using varied and incisive tones, it helps to construct the idea of a reason able to offer hospitality to all those expressions that in their former, or still idiosyncratic, expressions can appear absolutely irrational - perhaps because unusual and non-consolidated - even when they retain the opportunity *to become* rational and sharable..

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