Finely aware and ironically responsible: Rorty and the functions of literature

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Abstract

Richard Rorty's conception of literature has been criticised more than acclaimed. While Rorty certainly has impacted literary studies, a comprehensive account of his understanding of literature is still lacking. Moreover, while literature is seen as significant to his later work, the philosophical role this plays in Rortyan thought is underexamined and underappreciated. This paper aims to provide an account of the role of literature and the "literary" in Rorty's philosophy and the functions he assigns to literature and poetry – in a broad and narrow sense – in democratic cultures. Beginning with an account of Rorty's conceptions of metaphor and "unfamiliar" language, it draws on this to explain Rorty's parallel view of literature in the "narrower sense" as playing the same role in culture as metaphors do in language. "Stimulating" literature unsettles settled selves and beliefs and expands human imagination. Using Rorty's readings of Lolita and 1984 as examples, it shows that to him, literature not only plays a part in increasing empathy and solidarity but has a distinct therapeutic epistemological task: it helps individuals and societies adopt a more pluralist, ironist, post-metaphysical outlook. Both are important democratic functions. For these reasons, Rorty recommends that we work to realise a "literary" culture that rejects any ontologically inflected distinctions between kinds of texts, where philosophy becomes comparative "literary" criticism, and we see literature in the "narrower sense" as equally necessary material for

making selves, communities and just institutions as any philosophical or political treatise.

Keywords: Richard Rorty, pragmatism, antiessentialism, ironism, metaphysics, philosophy, moral philosophy, self-making, selfhood, literature, metaphor, language, democracy, democratic culture, 1984, Nineteen-Eighty-Four, Lolita, George Orwell, Vladimir Nabokov

Introduction

Richard Rorty's interpretations of *Lolita* and *1984* were contentious from the start[1]. They play a significant role in *Contingency, irony and solidarity (*1989), which charts Rorty's vision of a «poeticized» culture, a post-metaphysical «liberal utopia». In the wake of *CIS*, Rorty debated the limits of interpretation with Umberto Eco, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose[2], and his takes on Nabokov, Orwell and the role of literature in democratic culture were challenged by Alexander Nehamas, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Posner[3].

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[1] I use «*1984*» as opposed to George Orwell's original title of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to be consistent with Rorty's titling of this novel. See the third and final part of Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989, hereafter *CIS*. This paper is based on arguments advanced in E.D. Huckerby, *The Takeover by a Literary Culture: Richard Rorty's Philosophy of Literature*, (Doctoral Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2021).

[2] S. Collini (ed.), *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992.

[3] See A. Nehamas, *A Touch of the Poet: On Richard Rorty*, in *Raritan Quarterly*, 35a, 1990; M. C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Beacon Press, 1995); R.A. Posner, *Law and literature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., London, 2009[3]. See also A. Nehamas, *What Should We Expect from Reading?*

Responding to this debate, Simon Stow wrote a scathing takedown of Rorty's interpretations and understanding of literature, claiming that Rorty presented not simply conservative but intellectually *deceitful* readings: readings founded on old tropes of authorial intent and intrinsic textual meaning – quite contrary to his explicit philosophical position of ironism and pluralism[4]. While Stow's response tends towards disingenuousness in its sheer incredulity at Rorty's presumed audacity, perceptions such as Stow's – of Rorty's readings of literature as reductive, instrumentalist and (to many, worst of all) morally didactic – persist today. In *The Entrapments of Form: Cruelty and Modern Literature* (2016), Catherine Toal goes as far as dismissing Rorty as not merely morally didactic but as actually *obscuring* rather than elucidating the experience of cruelty by his interpretations of Nabokov and Orwell[5]. More recently, Serge Grigoriev asserted that Rorty is «almost entirely uninterested in works of literature *qua* aesthetic artifacts»: literary works are there to serve as «means of moral and intellectual "edification"»[6]. On these accounts, Rorty was not a great reader of literature.

Nevertheless, Rorty's conception of literature has also received sympathetic commentary since Stow's takedown, for instance, by Wojciech Małecki, Christopher Voparil, Bryan Vescio, and Tracy

(There Are Only Aesthetic Values), in *Salmagundi*, 111 (1996), pp. 27–58; R. Rorty, *Duties to the Self and to Others: Comments on a Paper by Alexander Nehamas*, *Salmagundi*, 111 (1996), pp. 59–67. It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail these debates.

[4] S. Stow, *The Return of Charles Kinbote: Nabokov on Rorty*, *Philosophy and Literature*, 23.1 (1999), p. 71. Stow appears later to have adjusted his views on Rorty somewhat, see S. Stow, *Republic of readers?: The literary turn in political thought and analysis*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2007.

[5] C. Toal, *The entrapments of form: Cruelty and modern literature*, Fordham University Press, New York 2016, pp. 124–28.

[6] S. Grigoriev, *Rorty and Literature*, in *A Companion to Rorty*, ed. by Alan R. Malachowski, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy, 73, Wiley Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ 2020, pp. 413–414.

Llanera[7] In marked contrast to the above, Voparil, in his recent major study of Rorty's relation to the pragmatist tradition, calls Rorty's reading of *Lolita* «brilliant»[8]. Here, Rorty's work to lessen cruelty comes to the *fore*, to Voparil, and he suggests the lesson Rorty draws about noticing the suffering of others is of lasting importance to moral philosophy[9]. Yet, despite his enthusiasm, Voparil struggles to delineate a fully coherent view of literature in Rorty – he cannot wholly reconcile Rorty's appeal to sentimental stories to create a «larger loyalty» with Rorty's *simultaneous* attention to complex, modernist, ironic works of literature[10]. In the sympathetic camp, too, Rorty's readings stir confusion.

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[7] A far from exhaustive list includes: W. Malecki, *Things 'too amorphous to talk about': Introductory Remarks on Pragmatism and Literature*, in *Pragmatism and Literature*, Special issue of *Pragmatism Today The Journal of the Central-European Pragmatist Forum*, ed. by Wojciech Malecki, 2 (2011), pp. 5–9; C. Voparil, *On the Idea of Philosophy as Bildungsroman: Rorty and his Critics*, *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 2.1 (2005), pp. 115–133; Id., *The Politics of the Novel: Rorty on Democracy, Irony, and Moral Education*, in C. Voparil, *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Maryland 2006, pp. 61–88; B. Vescio, *Reconstruction in Literary Studies: An Informalist Approach*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2014; T. Llanera, *Morality by Words: Murdoch, Nussbaum, Rorty*, in *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, 18.1 (2014), pp. 1–17; Id., *Richard Rorty: Outgrowing modern nihilism* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2020.

[8] Voparil echoes similar assessments in *Reconstructing Pragmatism: Richard Rorty and the classical pragmatists*, Oxford scholarship online, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2021, p. 121; C. Voparil, *Rorty and James on irony, moral commitment, and the ethics of belief*, *William James Studies*, 12.2 (2016), p. 16; Id., *Rorty's Ethics of Responsibility*, in *A companion to Rorty*, ed. by Alan Malachowski, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy, 73, Wiley Blackwell, Hoboken, N.J. 2020, p. 503n15.

[9] Doug Battersby helpfully enumerates the (now limited) impact Rorty has had on Nabokov studies. See D. Battersby, *Close Reading, Epistemology, and Affect: Nabokov after Rorty*, *Philosophy and Literature*, 44.2 (2020), pp. 323–49. I do not take up Battersby's discussion of how Rorty might offer a useful approach to contemporary literary studies, as responding to Battersby's understanding of Rorty would necessitate a separate article.

[10] C. Voparil, *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision*, cit., p. 62.

When non-pragmatists reject Rorty's readings of literary works, the cause is often relatively easy to trace to clear philosophical differences or misapprehensions of Rortyan pragmatism[11]. However, significant philosophical objections should not be the root cause of confusion amongst Rortyans. Misappreciation could be. The literary aspect of Rortyan philosophy is still underappreciated[12]. While Rorty progressively aligned his pragmatism with what he named a «literary» attitude, this fact does not have a principal place in the commentary, at least not as an element vital to Rorty's *philosophy proper*[13]. However, Rorty's readings of literary works can only be fully appreciated in light of how he perceives «literary» as a distinct operational term, literature in the «narrower sense»,[14] *and* how he sees the relationship between philosophy and literature.

Indeed, Rorty's radical reconceptualization of the spirit and practice of philosophy *as* «literary» criticism advances a way to clarify the relationship between literature and philosophy more broadly. His readings of *Lolita* and *1984* offer case studies that aid clarification. Thus, what I want to do in this paper is to attempt to disentangle Rorty's view of literature and the literary. I will then examine his readings of *Lolita* and *1984* as examples of how Rorty puts literature to work for philosophical purposes. To conclude, I will reflect on the relationship between philosophy and literature more generally

[11] It is well documented that the intense negative response directed at Rorty after the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) often emanated from misconceptions. See for instance Alan Malachowski, *Richard Rorty*, Routledge, New York 2002.

[12] I elaborated this claim in E.D. Huckerby, *The Takeover by a Literary Culture*, cit.

[13] Philosophy "proper" veers into metaphysical conceptions of philosophy, which is precisely what I take to happen here: even awovedly antiessentialist philosophers sometimes advance a rhetoric of (quasi)essentialism when what is at stake is preserving philosophy as a distinct pursuit, separate from literature. Not giving due attention to Rorty's literariness is an omission that serves to preserve established lines and realms.

[14] *CIS*, p. 93.

against this backdrop. Because his understanding of philosophy versus literature parallels his distinction between familiar and unfamiliar language, I begin by outlining Rorty's view of language and metaphor.

Kisses and slaps in the face: Rorty's view of language and metaphor

Rorty's political, moral, and epistemological contributions emerge from his antiessentialism, expressed as a rejection of the idea that language represents by mirroring (corresponding to) the world[15]. Taken right back to its bare bones, the Rortyan view of language is that human bodies produce «noises and marks» that often have some sort of effect[16]. Exactly which noises and marks are produced, how they come to function, and what reach they come to have is *contingent* on various factors. These factors include but are not limited to our time in history, culture, language, degree of freedom to speak, access to education, and needs and desires. The effects caused can be anything from sparking joy to coordinating verbal and bodily behaviour tightly enough to land a rocket on the Moon.
While the term «contingency» moved to the forefront with the publication of *CIS*, it was an operative word in Rorty's work long before.

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[15] R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1979, hereafter *PMN*; Id., *Consequences of Pragmatism: (Essays: 1972-1980)*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1982.

[16] «Noises and marks»: a turn of phrase Rorty picks up from Donald Davidson. See R. Rorty, *Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language*, in *The Cambridge companion to Heidegger*, ed. by Charles B. Guignon, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, p. 346. See also Id., *Method, Social Science, and Social Hope*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 11.4 (1981), p. 578; *CIS*, pp. 17–18; Id., *Is Derrida a transcendental philosopher?*, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, Philosophical Papers, 2, p. 127; *CIS*, p. 37; R. Rorty and M. Hesse, *Unfamiliar Noises*, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 61 (1987), p. 294n26.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty's great case against representationalism, he elaborated the «necessary-contingent» distinction (the separation between foundational and dependent truths) to *repudiate* the existence of necessary, mind-*in*dependent truths. In a famous address of the same year, «contingency» is vital to Rorty's «preferred» definition of pragmatism: that because there is no essential «nature of objects» to constrain how we talk about them, what does inform and limit are «the remarks of our fellow-inquirers»[17]. He continues, and this is key:

> [the above] seems to me to focus on a fundamental choice which confronts the reflective mind: that between accepting the contingent character of starting points, and attempting to evade this contingency. To accept the contingency of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance[18].

Here, "contingent" takes on a broader meaning than "accidental" *qua* ontological term (as in the opposite of "essential"). To say that all starting points are dependent is to say that *no starting points are mind-independent*. This move does not equate contingency with happenstance. Instead, Rorty asserts that we are always *in medias res*; can never start from scratch. We cannot presume or pretend the stance *theorists* wish to take: step back to take «a view of a large stretch of territory from a considerable distance»[19].
Rorty is often misconstrued at this point. Avoiding it hinges on recognising that Rorty fully accepts that nonlinguistic causal pressures

[17] R. Rorty, *Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism*, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 53.6 (1980), p. 726.
[18] *Ibid.,* p. 726.
[19] *CIS*, p. 96.

upon us also shape our noises and marks. We operate as enlanguaged bodies who utter noises and shape marks in response to stimuli that include conversational input[20]. Our conversational output will nevertheless be an extension of conversations that have gone before[21]. Moreover, Rorty's is *not* a position that rejects "reality", or the usefulness of scientific or logical argumentation[22]. He furthermore retains a conception of "objectivity" reconceived as solidarity: our facts are as solid as the intersubjective agreement (solidarity) they garner[23]. Coming to agree on such *shared* response patterns (a precondition of successful communication) is understood as an ever-ongoing, conversational negotiation process to produce what I conceptualise as (temporary) *knowledge equilibria*.
Because Rorty's antirepresentationalism leads him to talk about our ideas *and* vocabularies as human-made, imaginative creations[24], Russel Goodman has rightly asserted that it is «a central thesis of Rorty's

[20] Cfr. R. Dreon, *Enlanguaged experience. Pragmatist contributions to the continuity between experience and language*, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (2024). See especially the chapter on realism in C. Voparil, *Reconstructing pragmatism*, cit.
[21] At several points Rorty talks of «awareness» as a «linguistic affair», a view he attributes to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wilfried Sellars, and Jaques Derrida. See for instance R. Rorty, *Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An essay on Derrida*, *New Literary History*, 10.1 (1978), pp. 141–60.
[22] Y. Huetter-Almerigi, *Two Forms of Realism*, *EJPAP*, XII.1 (2020); C. Voparil, *Reconstructing pragmatism*, cit.
[23] R. Rorty, *Solidarity or Objectivity?*, *Nanzan Review of American Studies*, 6 (1984), pp. 1–18; R. Rorty, *Science as solidarity*, in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, Philosophical Papers, 1, pp. 35–45.
[24] «A poeticized culture would be one which would not insist we find the real wall behind the painted ones, the real touchstones of truth as opposed to touchstones which are merely cultural artifacts. It would be a culture which, precisely by appreciating that *all* touchstones are such artifacts, would take as its goal the creation of ever more various and multicolored artifacts» (*CIS*, pp. 53–54).

mature pragmatism [that] all new language, whether in the sciences, philosophy, or literature, is poetry»[25]. But it goes further than that. To Rorty, all (new) language starts as *unfamiliar* noises or marks[26]. Consider our noises and marks as being on a spectrum of familiarity. On the entrenched, highly familiar end are the words with the largest user community in (rough or more precise) agreement about how to deploy these words. We might again picture a community of scientists and engineers working on landing a rocket on the Moon: they need a familiar set of words they firmly agree on how to use to achieve their cooperative task. It is in the realm of the familiar that we can formulate what we dub (logical) arguments because that game *requires* shared, entrenched rules for justification – knowing what moves are allowed and disallowed. On the *other* side of the spectrum lie the utterly unfamiliar noises and marks, those we have yet to put to (shared) use and give a predictable function.
Entirely unfamiliar uses of noises and marks will begin as singular and idiosyncratic utterances. Most will never get traction within our practices – but some will. As a broader, shared understanding of their uses and effects solidifies, these noises and marks become increasingly familiar to more people and eventually simply appear as ordinary language[27]. Rorty also talks about whole «vocabularies» this way: unfamiliar sets of noises and marks emerge (say, the vocabulary of gravitational physics). At first, these will seem strange, but if proven beneficial, these sets of related words might eventually become entrenched. And on it goes: «strong poets» will invent new

[25] R.B. Goodman, *Rorty and Romanticism*, in *Philosophical Topics: Pragmatism*, ed. by Edward Minar and Steven Levine (36 (2008), p. 81.
[26] Think Wittgenstein amalgamated with Donald Davidson seen under a Kuhnian view.
[27] There is an in, here, to approach the overlap and differences between Rorty and Cavell, pragmatism and ordinary language philosophy. I use "ordinary" not in the OLP sense.

ways of talking. Rorty considers these «the vanguard of our species»[28] for being capable of pushing the boundaries of how we talk and thus of our imagination, which in turn breaks the paths that reason must follow[29]. Depending on uptake, such strong poets will be declared lunatics or geniuses[30]. Nevertheless, our «moral progress» as a species depends on the *supply* of strong poets as a resource for developing our imaginative capabilities.

Metaphors, to Rorty, belong in the unfamiliar realm. Moreover, they do a particular kind of work by the power of being unfamiliar. Whereas we have settled theories about «what people will say under various conditions» (or we could not be successful users of language for communication[31]), metaphorical use «makes us get busy developing a new theory»[32]. Rather than seeing metaphors as a representation of a literal meaning (dual meaning theory) or as a divergent interpretation of what a literal interpretation says, Rorty suggests metaphors helpfully *un*-settle. Because they do not yet have a place in the language game:

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[28] *CIS,* p. 20.

[29] This is an idea Rorty adopts from P.B. Shelley. See R. Rorty, *The Fire of Life*, *Poetry*, 191.2 (2007), p. 129; Id., *Pragmatism and romanticism*, in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA 2007, Philosophical Papers, 4, pp. 105–119.

[30] «The difference between genius and fantasy is not the difference between impresses which lock on to something universal, some antecedent reality out there in the world or deep within the self, and those which do not. Rather, it is the difference between idiosyncrasies which just happen to catch on with other people — happen because of the contingencies of some historical situation, some particular need which a given community happens to have at a given time» (*CIS*, p. 37).

[31] Cfr. B.T. Ramberg, *Post-ontological philosophy of mind: Rorty versus Davidson*, in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. by Robert Brandom, Blackwell, Malden, Massachusetts, Oxford 2000, pp. 351–70; R. Rorty, *Response to Bjørn Ramberg*, in *Ibid.*, pp. 370–77.

[32] *CIS*, pp. 17–18.

> tossing a metaphor into a conversation is like suddenly breaking off the conversation long enough to make a face, or pulling a photograph out of your pocket and displaying it, or pointing at a feature of the surroundings, or slapping your interlocutor's face, or kissing him. Tossing a metaphor into a text is like using italics, or illustrations, or odd punctuation or formats[33].

So, on the journey from unfamiliar noises and marks to familiar and increasingly literalised ordinary language, noises and marks start off doing affective, unsettling, inspiring, innovation-driving work and end up doing argumentative, justificatory, consolidating, coordinating work. Eventually, even the most original metaphor will become outdated and do no work, die, or lapse into cant. In the end, reified language can become oppressively stifling and solidify a «crust of convention»[34]. Thus, while emerging on the startling level of kisses and slaps in the face, noises and marks end up providing a «final vocabulary», that familiar set of words we keep to hand, beyond

[33] *Loc cit*.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 167. Rorty elsewhere attributes the idea of pragmatism breaking the «crust of convention» to Dewey. The phrase is repeatedly in use in *PMN*. See also R. Rorty, *Philosophy as science, metaphor, politics*, cit., p. 18. James Tartaglia explains that this exact phrase is not to be found in Dewey: «Despite being his favourite Dewey quote, Rorty never provides the reference. The passage I think [Rorty] has in mind is when Dewey wrote, «The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought. The process is art.» (J. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, Swallow Press, Athens, OH 1954, p. 183). See J. Tartaglia, *Rorty and The Mirror of Nature*, Routledge London 2007, p. 231n3.

which we have no argumentative recourse[35]. In this practice, a supply of novel metaphors and «strong poetry» is necessary to facilitate progress (change) and avoid repression by entrenchment[36].
Rorty thus works to (re)embed language into human *practice*. Human beings invent and *act out* language. We are not vessels through which truths/words/ideas manifest if and when we discover the correct (corresponding, reality-mirroring) words. All ordinary (familiar) language emerges from novelty. It *is* poetry, precisely as Goodman indicates, yet "poetry" in a broader *and* more radical sense than he imagines: poetry in the broad Rortyan sense that denotes human, imaginative creations, *poiesis*[37]. Language is *made*, and whittled to shape through experimentation and use.

Where everything is up for grabs at once: the broad notion of the «literary» and «literature» in Rorty's work

[35] «All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person's "final vocabulary".
It is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force. A small part of a final vocabulary is made up of thin, flexible, and ubiquitous terms such as "true," "good," "right," and "beautiful." The larger part contains thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, "Christ," "England," "professional standards," "decency," "kindness," "the Revolution," "the Church," "progressive," "rigorous," "creative." The more parochial terms do most of the work.» (*CIS*, p. 73)
[36] See Vescio (2014) and his strong, Rortyan case for literary studies as a «Ministry of Disturbance» that institutionalises this vital function in democratic societies.
[37] C.f., again, Rorty urging us to accept that we are making artefacts: *CIS*, pp. 53–54.

Understanding Rorty's conception of literature in the «older and narrower sense of that term – plays, poems [and] novels»[38], pivots on *replicating* how he considers familiar versus unfamiliar language. In *Texts and Lumps* Rorty described his strategy for teasing apart differences that make a practical difference:

> My holistic strategy, characteristic of pragmatism [...] is to reinterpret every [...] dualism as a momentarily convenient blocking-out of regions on a spectrum, rather than as recognition of an ontological, methodological, or epistemological divide. So I shall construct such a spectrum and use it as a heuristic device [...][39].

Familiar versus unfamiliar language are poles on a sliding scale. Likewise, science and *literature* denote two ends of a scale going from knowing what we want, which words to use and which rules to follow, to a situation where «everything is up for grabs»[40].
In this, Rorty is rehearsing a theme that runs through his entire oeuvre, namely the opposition between two contrasting *attitudes*: the metaphysical-scientistic stance on the one hand and what Rorty calls a «literary» attitude on the other. The metaphysical (Philosophical) stance is geared towards uncovering truth and thus needs language as clear as glass to allow the most direct access to what *is*, essentially, underneath it all. A short version of Rorty's historical narrative about how such an attitude developed runs like this: the intellectual history of the West is profoundly shaped by the Plato-Kant tradition, in which ideas are taken to have metaphysical existence/an essence. The aim was to uncover true essences and the language that corresponded to these. That is, *discover* a language (notice how "language" becomes a metaphysical entity of its own here, quite separate

[38] *Ibid.,* pp. 93–94.
[39] R. Rorty, *Texts and Lumps*, *New Literary History*, 17.1 (1985), p. 8.
[40] Id., *Deconstruction and Circumvention*, *Critical Inquiry*, 11.1 (1984), p. 4.

from human creativity, limits, power struggles and needs) so as to transparently reveal how things are in and of themselves. While this mode of thought began to unravel in romanticism and was directly challenged in pragmatism (which Rorty considers the tradition romanticism was *aufgehoben* in[41]), it survives today. It found refuge in, for instance, analytic philosophy of language[42] and any realm of scientistic, metaphysically orientated philosophy. If you think there is such a thing as "the good in and of itself" or the *true* in and of itself, you still subscribe to this view. This stance and practice is what Rorty indicates when he talks of philosophy with a capital P or theory with a capital T[43].

The core self-image at stake here is that of the philosopher or theorist as the adjudicator of true knowledge.[44] At the heart of Rorty's thinking is a push for *an adjustment of self-image within intellectual culture*. As he puts it, «analytic philosophers» are «missing a desirable form of self-consciousness» to the extent that they fail to historicise their views[45]. Conversely, Rorty sees the outlook of (traditional) Western philosophy as self-satisfied to the extent it insists that it owns the

41 R. Rorty, *Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism*, *The Monist*, 64.2 (1981), p. 168.

42 See *Two Retrospective Essays*, in Richard Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (1967), University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1992.

43 Sometimes these are not capitalised but merely indicated by context/negatively.

44 The view of «philosophy as providing "foundations" or "justifications" for the rest of culture, or as adjudicating *quaestiones juris* about the proper domains of other disciplines». R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature: Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 2009, p. 394.
It is a stance aimed at "getting it right" that flips over into being righteous. See also R. Rorty, *Redemption from egotism: James and Proust as spiritual exercises*, *Telos*, 3.3 (2001). Tracy Llanera helpfully elaborates this stance as «egotism», and its inherent anxiety and brittleness, in T. Llanera, *Richard Rorty: Outgrowing modern nihilism*, cit.

45 R. Rorty-J.B. Schneewind-Quentin Skinner, *Introduction*, in *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. by R. Rorty-J.B. Schneewind-Q. Skinner, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, p. 14.

articulation of, or methodologies for uncovering, universal, ahistorical truths. This tradition boldly goes on in the belief that its knowledge and moral judgements are superior by virtue of being more *true* in and of themselves, more representative of what *really* is. Rorty elsewhere talks of this stance as a form of egoism: to

> be egotistic in the relevant sense is to be satisfied that the vocabulary one uses when deciding how to act is all right just as it is, and that there is no need to figure out what vocabularies others are using which justify them, in their own eyes, from doing things one regards as wrong[46].

Instead of working to uncover Truth, Rorty wants us to «work» to «enlarge» ourselves[47], individually and collectively. To aim for proliferation of ways of attending and describing. And, rather than aiming to hone in one the point of Truth, to be «ready to be bowled over by tomorrow's experiences — to remain open to the possibility that the next book you read, or the next person you meet, will change your life»[48]. Reading to «[enlarge] our acquaintance»[49], hoping to be «bowled over», working to re-weave oneself and one's vocabularies, stories, and relations, is to work in a literary spirit.
Along lines that parallel the continuum he set up to talk about familiar and unfamiliar language, Rorty thus describes science and literature as *activities* at opposite ends of a spectrum of *rule-governance* and thus of familiarity. The human practice of science is, to Rorty, «the sort of activity in which argument is relatively easy - in which one can agree on some general principles which govern discourse in an area, and

[46] R. Rorty, *Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises*, in *The Rorty Reader*, ed. C. Voparil-R.J. Bernstein, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, Mass. 2010, p. 395.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 392.
[48] *Loc cit.*.
[49] *CIS*, pp. 80–81.

then aim at consensus by tracing inferential chains between these principles and more particular and more interesting propositions»[50]. «Easy» because the rules are clearly laid out and support relatively well-defined larger aims formulated in a widely supported vocabulary. On the other side of this spectrum, Rorty places the activity of «literature». Here, a proposal «succeeds simply by its success». There is no «constant vocabulary in which to describe the values to be defended or objects to be imitated, or the emotions to be expressed, or whatever, in essays or poems or novels». He continues: the reason this practice is «unscientific» is that when someone attempts to encompass literature or literary criticism in a master-vocabulary, once and for all, «he makes a fool of himself». We do not «want works of literature to be criticizable within a terminology we already know; we want both those works and criticism of them to give us new terminologies»[51]. Rorty puts this better elsewhere as the contrast between

> two sorts of conversational situations. One is the sort of situation encountered when people pretty much agree on what is wanted and are talking about how best to get it. In such a situation there is no need to say anything terribly unfamiliar, for argument is typically about the truth of assertions rather than about the utility of vocabularies. The contrasting situation is one in which everything is up for grabs at once, where the motives and the terms of discussion are a central subject of argument[52].

Literature is what happens at «the vanguard of our species», where all presumptions can be scrutinised, where the work of imagining new ones happens.

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50 R. Rorty, *Idealism and Textualism*, cit., p. 157.
51 *Loc cit.*.
52 R. Rorty, *Deconstruction and Circumvention*, cit., p. 4.

A «literary» culture, which is how Rorty re-envisages «liberal utopia», is, then, a culture that has moved from thinking of itself as constrained by the former sort of conversation and instead sees itself as engaged in the latter. To such a culture, ensuring plurality and originality is vital, as is proliferating possible ways to attend and talk. In a literary culture, only specific niches have strict rules for uses of words, for modelling, development and so on. Such niche uses support important pursuits where strict governance is helpful, but their approach is *not* posited as the *model* for culture at large, *nor* as morally superior. This culture recognises that «revolutionary physics, and metaphysics, has always been "literary" in the sense that it has faced the problem of introducing new jargon and nudging aside the language-games currently in place»[53]. And it knows that scientific innovations as well as «moral progress», depend not only on challenging current dogma and inventing new ways to talk *but also* on our ideas being held "lightly", and by this I mean as poetic or aesthetic objects that we can make and remake[54]. These are central reasons why Rorty asserts that to bring about «liberal utopia», we need a «poeticization of culture as a whole»[55].

Iridescent patterns and shaped charges: literature in the «narrower sense»

Rorty's work has two main parts: an argument for a shift in attitude (*PMN*) and an exploration of what kind of consequences this shift has for practice if guided by the reduction of cruelty as the «hope»

[53] *Ibid.,* p. 14.
[54] This latter point is mostly overlooked in Rorty commentary. I elaborate on the significance of holding our ideas as aesthetic objects in Huckerby.
[55] *CIS*, p. 53.

to steer by (*CP*, *CIS*, *AOC*, *PSH*)[56]. Part of his argument is that metaphysical and literary attitudes produce different kinds of readerly and writerly practices[57].

For those working in a philosophical (metaphysical/scientistic) spirit, reading and writing is undertaken to uncover universal and universalising insight. Philosophical, religious or scientistic theorising will appear most salient for such a purpose. Theorists of this disposition might deploy poems in the narrow sense, but while these might embellish or adorn, they are not apt for supplying "really" true insights or vocabularies as crucial as those proposed by "proper" works of philosophy. Literature is inferior to the task of philosophy on this view. The kind of language that corresponds to reality, truth, and goodness must ideally be transparent so as to let us see straight through or past it to the fundamental nature of things. Thus, such theorising relies on *familiar* language, or at least language that does not interpose by *drawing attention to* its materiality. Hence the convention that in philosophy and theory, literary devices and flourishes, or essayistic digressions, or subjective musings get in the

[56] I.e. if one is a «liberal» in Rorty's idiosyncratic definition of this word. *CIS* «sketches a figure whom I call the "liberal ironist." I borrow my definition of "liberal" from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use "ironist" to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires - someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease». (*CIS*, p. xv).

This division into two parts is a rough heuristic, but draws out an important point. Compare *PMN*, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, *CIS*, R. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* , Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1998; Id., *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin Books, New York 1999. See also Id., *Philosophy as Poetry*, ed. by Michael Bérubé, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, VA 2016.

[57] Cfr. R. Rorty, *Philosophy as a Kind of Writing*, cit.

way (and hence Jane Tompkin's famous lament in *Me and My Shadow*)[58].

Contra this, literature is a writerly practice that *deliberately embraces* the materiality of writing and knowingly employs this to cause effects (*including* affects). Such a practice emerges from an attitude that takes language to be noises and marks writers use to tell a *story*. Narratives are forged to have an impact rather than to uncover universal Truths[59]. Literature instead understands ideas and vocabularies as aesthetic artefacts and holds them "lightly", in the sense suggested above. Writers of this attitude mindfully write from a recognition of limits and perspective, and attend to the human condition, our actions, cares, needs and desires. Moreover, literature is conversational, written to be read by and impact another. It thus serves to «keep the conversation going», which, to Rorty, is a critical aim. Adopting such an attitude thus triggers a responsive shift in rhetorical conduct (appeals to "the Truth" no longer work) and a concomitant shift in what kind of arguments or inquiries one finds most helpful to read. Doctrines setting out metaphysically defined ideas

[58] J. Tompkins, *Me and My Shadow*, *New Literary History*, 19.1 (1987), pp. 169–78. Obviously, writing quantum theory in actual verse would place constraints and introduce difficulties scientists do not need (Rorty at one point calls this «a notoriously great, but quite untranslatable, poem, written in a lamentably obscure language», see R. Rorty, *Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture*, *The Georgia Review*, 30.4 (1976), p. 765. But what Rorty labours to get across is not that philosophers or scientists might have plain *functional* consideration ("too cumbersome") – he is delineating an attitude and writerly practice which deliberately avoids drawing attention to the limits and materiality of writing because it for metaphysical reasons preserves the possibility of the *right* language being capable of transparently revealing the true nature of what lies beneath.

[59] We traditionally do talk of literature as providing universal insights into, say, "human nature" (a notion Rorty replaces with thinking of us as enlanguaged bodies with «bundles of beliefs that shape how we respond to the world and others). However, that is beside the point here.

and final answers become less salient[60]. Writings by others of a poeticist outlook more so: Rorty for instance holds that as Western culture has become secularized, we increasingly turn to literature for «moral guidance».

It is because Rorty most frequently talks about literature and the «literary» in this broad and attitudinal sense that he must specify when he means it in a «narrower» textual sense. Adopting a poeticist *Weltanschauung* does not dictate how to write. Yet *something about how literature in the narrow sense is fashioned* sets it apart. When Rorty knew he knew he was dying, he shared that only poetry was of help: «no comparable effect could have been produced by prose. Not just imagery, but also rhyme and rhythm were needed to do the job. In lines such as these, all three conspire to produce a degree of compression, and thus of impact, that only verse can achieve. Compared to the shaped charges contrived by versifiers, even the best prose is scattershot»[61]. The move that makes sense of Rorty's view of literature in the narrower sense is to posit it as a tradition curating and responding to texts that are more likely to have the «impact» of *un-settling settled selves*[62].

I derive this understanding from Rorty's distinction between states of «knowingness» and «inspiration», and between «stimulating» and «relaxing» «books»[63]. Against «knowingness» as a «state of soul which prevents shudders of awe», Rorty pits being «inspired» and

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[60] They can, however, still be read *qua* literature – seen as artefacts – that might be rewarding for other purposes than providing a mindset and model of thought to adopt as the one that "gets it right".

The reasons why have several facets, but that literature does not present algorithmic searches for hypostasizing answers is one such reason. In *CIS* Rorty explicitly aims to centre «historicist writers» (who sees ideas in a broadly ironist manner).

[61] R. Rorty, *The Fire of Life*, cit., p. 130 My emphasis.

[62] Notice that Rorty always talks in terms of *likelihoods* of bringing about a specific outcome, rather than about how things are, or will be, in and of themselves.

[63] Notice how this echoes philosophical versus literary, and familiar versus unfamiliar and ordinary versus metaphorical and, even, a shared public rhetoric and the striving for private autonomy and a private, idiosyncratic vocabulary.

open to «romantic enthusiasm»[64]. We «*attribute* inspirational value to works of literature» (note how it is not an intrinsic property of a kind of text) when they succeed in jolting us out of «knowingness»; when they «succeed in making us "think there is more to this life than [we] ever imagined"». This kind of effect is

> typically not produced by the operations of a method, a science, a discipline, or a profession. ...You cannot, for example, find inspirational value in a text at the same time that you are viewing it as the product of a mechanism of cultural production... If it is to have inspirational value, a work must be allowed to recontextualize much of what you previously thought you knew; it cannot, at least at first, be itself recontextualized by what you already believe[65].

Thus, inspirational works *set up a potential* for change. They limber us up, crack us open, or ease us apart, in a way required to reweave our selves, qua «bundles of idiosyncratic beliefs and desires»[66].
Rorty's most important point in this essay is that those who «still read for inspiration» are more likely to engage in «building a cooperative commonwealth»[67]. What is vital, then, to moral/democratic progress, is to *remain willing to risk one's current sense of self*. In the Rortyan paradigm, the closest one comes to a moral obligation is to accept responsibility for making a responsive self. There are no Moral Laws to tell us how – *we* are charged with making selves as the moral

[64] R. Rorty, *The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature*, in *Achieving Our Country*, cit., p. 126.
[65] *Ibid.,* pp. 133–34.
[66] Selves as «bundles» of beliefs, see *CIS*, 106, 142 Rorty indicates that he adopts the word «bundle" from Isiah Berlin, see *CIS* p. 45-46. However, it occurs as early as ten years before, in Rorty's story about the «Antipodeans» in *PMN* (p. 71 and 75 in the 2009 version).
[67] R. Rorty, *Inspirational Value*, cit., p. 140.

locus from which to act[68]. Engaging in such an ethical practice requires us to be willing to put our *current* self-understanding on the line – expose ourselves to being un-settled. We might need other or additional resources to re-settle a functional or «practical» sense of self[69]. Thus, such a continual process of making and remaking a practical yet responsive self is expansive in direction because

> nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription... Nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture — for persons and cultures are, for us, incarnated vocabularies. So our doubts about our own characters or our own culture can be resolved or assuaged only by enlarging our acquaintance[70].

Rorty's essay about «great works of literature» is not so much about literature as it is about our obligation to put our settled sense of self on the line for the world to change.
These insights inform the split Rorty sets up in *CIS* between «books» that «supply novel stimuli to action» and those which «simply offer relaxation». Stimulating books «suggest... that one must change one's life (in some major or minor respect)». Relaxing books merely «take one into a world without challenges»[71]. Again, the difference that makes a difference lies in whether a reading experience put our current practical self on the line or leave it intact. The spectrum is

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68 Cfr. R. Rorty, *Freud and moral reflection*, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, cit., pp. 143–63. «Moral obligation», p. 145, 148, 157; «locus of moral responsibility», p. 148.
69 Cfr. B.T. Ramberg, *Irony's Commitment: Rorty's Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, in *Richard Rorty's Multiple Legacies*, ed. by Samuel C. Wheeler III, *The European Legacy*, 19 (2014), pp. 144–62.
70 *CIS*, p. 80.
71 *CIS*, pp. 143–44.

drawn between «books» that have moral relevance through being more likely to productively un-settle and those that merely affirm or entertain our current practical self.
There is, however, no method for discerning (ever)lasting criteria that let us identify all such books, for «different people lead different lives, feel challenged by different situations, and require holidays from different projects». However,

> it is clear that this attempt usually will not put Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and Wordsworth's *Prelude* on different shelves, nor Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* and *Middlemarch*, nor *The Education of Henry Adams* and *King Lear*, nor *A Genealogy of Morals* and the *New Testament*, nor Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* and the poems of Baudelaire. So this distinction between the stimulating and the relaxing does not parallel the traditional lines between the cognitive and the noncognitive, the moral and the aesthetic, or the "literary" and the nonliterary [in the traditional sense]. Nor does it conform to any standard distinctions of form or genre. This distinction will nevertheless, for most people, separate all the books just mentioned from Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, Runciman's *History of the Crusades*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Saint-Simon's *Memoirs*, Ian Fleming's *Thunderball*, Macauley's *Essays*, Wodehouse's *Carry on, Jeeves!*, Harlequin romances, Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*, and works of uncomplicated pornography. Such books gear in with their readers' fantasies without suggesting that there might be something wrong with those fantasies, or with the person who has them[72].

[72] *Ibid.* I elaborate Rorty's sources for talk of «tingles» (Nabokov, but also Nelson Goodman, in *Languages of Art* (1968) and Housman's *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (1933)) and «shudders» (cfr. Goethe, *Faust Part II*) in Chapter 6, *Unsettling Iridescence* in Huckerby.

To ask whether Rorty here gets these categories *right* by itemising the correct touchstones would be somewhat beside the point. What matters is to note the role he observes stimulating works to play in awakening a desire to change.

But what *characterises* stimulating books, novels, plays or poems? What makes something «shaped charges»? This matter is somewhat elaborated in Rorty's discussion of Nabokov and Orwell.

Rorty chides Nabokov for his insistence on the priority of the aesthetic *over* the moral and for seeing these as *antithetical*: aesthetic bliss and «Housmanian tingles» are not opposed to «participatory emotion» but are noncompetitive goods. That we can experience «shivers» of aesthetic bliss is, to Rorty, «quite compatible with saying that the ability to shudder with shame and indignation at the unnecessary death of a child» and holding the latter to be «the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained while evolving modern social and political institutions»[73]. Moreover, gifted writers can «do quite different things in the same book»: Dickens, in «*Bleak House* aroused participative emotions which helped change the laws of England, and also made Dickens immortal by having been written so as to keep right on producing tingles between the shoulder blades long after the particular horrors of Dickens's century had been replaced by new ones».[74] «Tingles», bliss and intellectual pleasure can serve vital functions, and so can «shudders of awe», of shame and indignation, or the arousal of «revulsion»[75]. Defining these as noncompetitive responses is to reject that there is a hierarchy or competition between sentimental novels that have a more readily assimilable moral message and complex, ironic works. What matters is that we expose ourselves to texts (or ethnographies, journalist's reports, comic books, docudramas,

[73] *CIS*, p. 147.
[74] *Ibid.,* p. 147.
[75] *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

TV programmes, novels or poems)[76] capable of effectuating a response in us that dislodges our sense of self in such a way that it makes room for growth and change. Rorty's pressing message is not that we ought to read a certain *kind* of literature, nor is it that sentimental stories have a higher value, which he is often presumed to suggest. The moral is *to* read and to seek out the kinds of artefacts, acquaintances, and experiences that prevent our settled selves from ossifying.

Still, we are no closer to pinpointing the features of texts that do succeed in having an impact. The closest we will get to a Rortyan answer lies in considering a phrase he uses to describe Nabokov. Nabokov's brain, says Rorty, «happened to be wired up so as to make him able continually to surprise and delight himself by arranging words into iridescent patterns»[77]. While Nabokov might have been horrified at the suggestion, «iridescent patterns» can be found everywhere – we now know that our brains are wired for pattern recognition and for feeling some patterns and symbols are more luminous, for lack of a better word, than others. And we light up at different kinds, not just when we see "beauty" (say, notice tessellations, or stereotyping)[78]. However, the mechanisms of this phenomenon in regard to art can, of course, be further naturalised, as is being done[79]. What makes me latch on to this is that if we take a Rortyan view of literature as a tradition of cultivating and responding to

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76 Cfr. *Ibid*., p. xvi.

77 *CIS*, pp. 154–55.

78 For a recent book that argues our brains are pattern-finding machines, see S. Baron-Cohen, *The pattern seekers: A New Theory of Human Invention*, Penguin Books, London 2020.

79 For a recent article that reflects on such empirical efforts, see O. Fialho, *What is literature for? The role of transformative reading*, *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 6.1 (2019), 1692532. Its bibliography offers further pointers. The literary theorist Malecki has moved towards an empirical approach in his work, and, starting from a largely

a particular readerly and writerly practice, then the literary institution preserves the art – refined through trial and error and establishment of conventions – of forging «iridescent patterns» out of language. Patterns, or «shaped charges», that are *more likely* than «scattershot prose» to trigger bodily-tangible effects. Through cultivating this skill, the literary conversation is thus *more likely* to stimulate shifts in affects or imaginative capabilities, or other dispositions and preconditions, that prepare the path that changes in vocabularies and beliefs might travel (to paraphrase both Rorty and Shelley). This means that «stimulating» literature (or however you want to name writings that do this well) does a different *job* than philosophy and science: not affirming beliefs but chipping at their solidity, heaving their settledness, pulling apart their familiarity.

This shows just how close Rorty comes to formulating an affect theory of literature, a topic I will not take up here but hope to in the future. We might, in fact, want to point out similarities with a range of literary theories of prominence in the twentieth century, starting with the Russian formalists. However, Rorty's attention to literature as an activity cultivating skills for using language to unsettle in ways that prepare the ground for renewal makes it more of an *impact theory* of literature[80]. "Impact" is here understood as including affect. "Impact" also carries the unpredictable and unintended as well as the causal. I am not saying that literature in Rorty's «narrower sense», or any other sense, cannot also provide resources for formulating or even affirming beliefs and theories. I am saying that the activity of literature is the area of culture where our skills for unsettling are

Rortyan position, discusses animal welfare, ecocriticism and more. See for instance W. Małecki et al., *Can fiction make us kinder to other species? The impact of fiction on pro-animal attitudes and behavior*, *Poetics*, 66 (2018), pp. 54–63.

[80] This is a topic for a different text, which I hope to write in the future, and which I outlined in the conference talk *A critical difference. The potential of a Rortyan critical pragmatism alive to Sarah Ahmed's transformative Practices*, Women in Pragmatism Conference, University College London, London, UK, 2 August 2022.

deliberately nurtured, and lauded for having the impact of hurling attitudes, beliefs, narratives, perspectives, vocabularies (back) into play. What Rorty dubs «stimulating» or «inspirational» or «great» works of literature display such skill to a more significant extent and by this foregrounds this feature as the salient quality of this tradition, compared to other writerly practices. However, Rorty is *not* attempting to formulate a theory of art, the aesthetic, or literature in a narrow sense. He is attempting to work out how we best, most pragmatically, might bring about a culture that centres human growth and change to lessen human cruelty. Tingles and shudders and other stimulated (body) states can serve this purpose to the extent they unsettle our settled sense of self. This is not an affect theory of literature, nor a reader response theory as has been suggested[81]. It is Rorty insisting that we*, as part of a moral practice of care*, to seek to be prodded, moved, even upended[82].

Stressing being unsettled as a moral practice helps us see why *both* «sentimental stories» that appeal directly to our compassion and sense of justice while mainly using familiar language and conventional plot lines *and also* great modernist, complex, less straightforwardly assimilable works of literature or poetry play vital roles in

[81] S. Stow, *The Return of Charles Kinbote*, cit. Günter Leypoldt sees Rorty's as a «reader-response theory» for transforming «discourse». This interpretation is close to what I want to get across, but not the same: I disagree that Rorty's pragmatism is limited to a linguistically orientated pragmatism and takes his emphasis on bodily excitations here to exemplify one of the ways in which his pragmatism is also deeply concerned with bodies, embeddedness and "being in the world". The activity of literature does not only or even primarily (initially) impact «discourse». It impacts discourse to the extent it impacts individuals and garners uptake in «familiar» language. C.f. G. Leypoldt, *Uses of Metaphor: Richard Rorty's Literary Criticism and the Poetics of World-Making*, in *Remembering Richard Rorty*, ed. by Ralph Cohen, *New Literary History*, 39 (2008), p. 158n19.

[82] There are grounds here for comparison with D.J. Haraway, *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene, Experimental futures technological lives, scientific arts, anthropological voices*, Duke University Press, Durham, London 2016.

Rortyan thought. They affect us differently, impact different people and different quantities of people, but both unsettle in ways that might make us feel distinct changes are needed. Considered pragmatically, novels, the genre most important to Rorty, are more helpful to heightening «fellow feeling» at scale because novels more often tell stories in familiar language, relate more easily recognised situations, lives, and details, and might, by this relative ease of identification, more easily stir «participative feeling». But the democratic function of literature is dual in Rorty: affective *and* epistemological. To be or become «liberal ironists» we need both to heighten our sensibility to suffering *and also* increase our awareness of "the power of redescription», that is, our ironist awareness. The sheer variety of descriptions literature presents us with can help us accept our own ideas as mere variants. Literature often thematises language, writing, and the limits of perspective. More complex works of art can excel in imparting a civic sense of irony[83]. This function of literature is of democratic use, as ideas held more lightly are ideas we are more open to responsively amend[84].

This extends what Rorty says about writings of various forms serving differing functions. Some writers serve as «exemplars» of autonomy, others as exemplars of how to be «fellow citizens». Rorty insists, several times in *CIS*, that we should not attempt to choose between writers based on some overarching criteria. He urges that we

> give them equal weight and then use them for different purposes. Authors like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov are useful as exemplars, as

[83] Cfr. the notion of «commonsensical» historicism and nominalism in *CIS*, p. 87.
[84] This last point, although glossed differently, I take to be the core of W.M. Curtis, *Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and liberal virtue*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2015.

> illustrations of what private perfection — a self-created, autonomous, human life — can be like. Authors such as Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas, and Rawls are fellow citizens rather than exemplars. They are engaged in a shared, social effort — the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel[85].

«Writers on autonomy» let us «realize that the social virtues are not the only virtues, that some people have actually succeeded in recreating themselves. We thereby become aware of our own half-articulate need to become a new person, one whom we as yet lack words to describe»[86]. Grouped on the other side of a sliding scale are «writers on justice» who remind us of «the failure of our institutions and practices to live up to the convictions to which we are already committed by the public, shared vocabulary we use in daily life»[87]. They tell us that the responsibility to strive for autonomy is not the only one we have[88]. Similarly, we might say writers of sentimental stories remind us of our compassion, writers of complex ironic works of contingency. What setting up such heuristics can obscure is the very contingency of *all* these dichotomies in Rortyan pragmatism. As Rorty pointed out when talking about Dicken's *Bleak House*, there is no need to constrain single works to one side or the other, for writers are «able to do quite different things in the same book»[89]. We could plot "writers" and works on a variety of axis, but there is no need to reduce one to the other on the level of theory.

Rorty is often charged with not caring about "aesthetic value" in the traditional sense, but that is, as the above shows, to misjudge his

[85] *CIS*, p. xiv.
[86] *Ibid.*
[87] *Ibid.*
[88] *Ibid.,* p. xv.
[89] *Ibid.,* p. 147.

position. Indeed, he empathises with Nabokov's suspicion of «philosophers' attempts to squeeze our moral sentiments into rules for deciding moral dilemmas».[90] Rorty does not insist on reading didactically and values literary skill and the forging «iridescent patterns».[91] The most valuable patterns for «liberal ironists» qua *liberals*, however, are those that sensitise people to the plight of others and – as Rorty elaborates in his readings of *Lolita* and *1984* – to our own particular ways of being cruel.

On a Blindness in Certain Human Beings: Rorty's readings of *Lolita* and *1984*

If we now turn to Rorty's interpretations of *Lolita* and *1984,* we are more capable of reading *Rorty*. Rorty's readings are a part of a specific examination of how those of an ironist disposition can commit particular forms of cruelty[92]. He is, to paraphrase William James, working to expose a blindness in *certain human beings*[93]. This is a vital point, as we will see.

To explore the specific ethical challenges of *liberal ironists*, Rorty does *not* turn to «books» that «help us see the effects of social practices and institutions on others», typified «by books about, for example, slavery, poverty, and prejudice». Such books include journalism and social studies, but also «novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Les Miserables*, *Sister Carrie*, *The Well of Loneliness*, and *Black Boy*». Instead,

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[90] *Ibid.,* p. 148.

[91] It is important to remember that on the reading of Rorty I present, narrating «iridescent patterns» might be any pattern that stands out to any reader as luminous, c.f. Rorty's definition of «stimulating books». A sentimental novel can set up a pattern through showing us a progression of events in our own life story as parallel to characters. Also, a new, intriguing pattern in a science paper or medical study can cause us to unsettle settled beliefs and «grasp about for a new theory».

[92] Fall short as liberals in the Rortyan sense, as *liberal* ironists.

[93] W. James, *On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings*, in *On Some of Life's Ideals*, ed. by W. James, Henry Holt And Company, New York 1900, pp. 3–46.

he turns to «books» that help us see «the ways in which particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people»[94]. These include

> works of fiction which exhibit the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another kind of person. By identification with Mr. Causaubon in *Middlemarch* or with Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*, for example, we may come to notice what we ourselves have been doing. *In particular, such books show how our attempts at autonomy, our private obsessions with the achievement of a certain sort of perfection, may make us oblivious to the pain and humiliation we are causing*[95].

In Rorty's story, the character of the liberal ironist is portrayed as sensitive to the «power of redescription», including its power to create an autonomous self. But she is *also* aware of the selfishness inherent in private perfectionist projects. Thus, one especially beneficial aid to moral deliberation for such a person will be works that «dramatize the conflict between duties to self and duties to others»[96]. While Rorty here is not *directly* examining how systems are just, he is pushing the question «am I just?»[97]. He is doing so to work out «a new public final vocabulary» in response to the question « [w]hat sorts of things about what sorts of people do I need to notice?»[98]. Rorty's readings of *Lolita* and *1984* each centre a *failure* to notice and respond.

Rorty's reading of *Lolita* is an essayistic discourse on Nabokov, this novel, aestheticism and "art for art's sake". Its core philosophical

94 *CIS*, p. 141.
95 *Ibid.,* p. 141. My emphasis.
96 *Ibid.*
97 *Ibid.,* p. 143.
98 *Ibid.*

concern, however, is the pursuit of radical autonomy, here exemplified by the pursuit of art for art's sake. So, when Rorty says that *Lolita* revolves around the theme of «the choice between tenderness and ecstasy which those gifted with artistic talent face, the necessity that they be only selectively curious»[99], the motivating theme is the choice strong poets in his broad sense face, between being obsessive about «making it new» (including an autonomous self or life) and being considerate and connected. The general moral drama under scrutiny, so often amplified in the artistic canon, is to what extent one must compromise one's idiosyncratic desires by attending to the needs of others. This resonates with a worry Rorty takes up several times: whether pragmatism is «morally dangerous»[100], which I take to be the possibility that pragmatism of the Rortyan *poeticist* kind is dangerous in its insistence on making rather than finding[101].

To sharpen the dilemma at stake, Rorty moves to debunk what he presents as a delusion enshrined in sanctioning art for art's sake: that the pursuit of pure art is itself a *moral* good. This conviction relies on a traditional hierarchy of sentiments, where appreciation of beauty is taken to be the most essential, pure, ideal human sentiment – the one that shows that human beings are closer to God than the beasts. Rorty, wanting to level this hierarchy, asserts that while Nabokov «would desperately like artistic gifts to be sufficient for moral virtue», he knows that «there is no connection between the contingent and selective curiosity of the autonomous artist and …the creation of a world in which tenderness and kindness are the human norm». Furthermore, those who revere the sensation of «aesthetic

99 *Ibid.,* 161n26.

100 R. Rorty, *Idealism and Textualism*, cit., 174n15.

101 This is Felski's worry about Rorty, cfr. R. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2015, p. 115.

bliss» above «participative emotions» risk a certain kind of hypocrisy: expressing a desire for a less cruel world not out of compassion but because the need for pity interferes with their bliss[102].
Nabokov is, according to Rorty, guilty of such hypocrisy. While Nabokov «would like to see all the evil in the world…as produced by nonpoets»[103], he knows he must «face up to the unpleasant fact that writers can obtain and produce ecstasy while failing to notice suffering, while being incurious about the people whose lives provide their material». Even though Nabokov in the Afterword to *Lolita* «identifies art with the compresence of "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy"», Rorty thinks this is a pretence on Nabokov's part, designed to let him off the hook for not genuinely having time for «other people's fantasies». For Nabokov «knows quite well that the pursuit of autonomy is at odds with feelings of solidarity»[104].
Rather exoneratively[105], Rorty takes this blindness to be what Nabokov writes to explore, most notably in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote are

> the central figures of Nabokov's books about cruelty - not the "beastly farce" common to Lenin, Hitler, Gradus, and Paduk, but the *special* sort of cruelty of which those capable of bliss are also capable. These books are reflections on the

[102] Rorty attributes a sense of fellow feeling and humanity to Nabokov I am not convinced he possessed. And Rorty too does ot seem convinced: he speaks of Nabokov having «pity» rather than empathy. «Pity» denotes a standing above, a looking at those who suffer without necessarily feeling com-passion.
[103] *CIS*, pp. 159–160.
[104] *CIS*, p. 158. Again I am not entirely sure Nabokov was as compassionately self-aware and as genuinely concerned with the ethical burden on his shoulders as Rorty appears to want, but this biographical nuance does not alter the philosophical import of Rorty's overall reading, nor my reading of Rorty.
[105] See L. Toker, *Liberal Ironists and the "Gaudily Painted Savage": On Richard Rorty's Reading of Vladimir Nabokov*, *Nabokov Studies*, 1 (1994), pp. 196–206.

> possibility that there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets[106].

Both Kinbote and Humbert are «exquisitely sensitive to everything which affects or provides expression for their own obsession, and entirely incurious about anything that affects anyone else». These characters «dramatize, as it has never before been dramatized», *incuriosity* as «a particular form of cruelty»[107]. By this, Nabokov makes his «contribution to our knowledge of human possibilities»: a «particular sort of genius-monster – the monster of incuriosity»[108]. The individual that is «both ecstatic and cruel, noticing and heartless, poets who are only selectively curious, obsessives who are as sensitive as they are callous»[109].

Rorty draws attention to episodes of egotistical incuriosity in *Lolita*, such as when Humbert does not notice Dolores' grief over her dead baby brother and the lack of a loving father or when Humbert fails to understand that the barber of Kasbeam's son is dead[110]. Significantly, Rorty highlights that Nabokov shaped his charges and «iridescent patterns» to create a shock of recognition, or as Toker puts it, a «rhetorical strategy» for setting up a «self-referential turn» in the reader[111]. Nabokov draws in his readers, so they first fail to be mindful of the cruelty inflicted on Dolores: Humbert is crafted to be convincing. And for those readers who overlook the cruelty on display, Nabokov includes an Afterword in which he explains what they have missed. If not before, the reader will here, Rorty suggests, see their perspective *fused* with that of Humbert Humbert – a distinctively un-settling experience – and disassociate sufficiently from this

106 *CIS*, p. 157.
107 *Ibid.,* p. 158.
108 *Ibid.,* p. 161.
109 *Ibid.,* p. 160.
110 *Ibid.,* p. 163.
111 L Toker, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

perspective to realise that *Lolita* does have a «moral in tow»: not «to keep one's hands off little girls», but «to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering». The moral is also to notice that one's failure to notice can *compound* the suffering of others[112]. While Rorty does not pay attention to the lyrical beauty or prosody of the text or any such similar qualities, he *is* delineating an «iridescent pattern» – albeit a more cognitive one. This, in turn, is taken to cause a bodily response («shock») that is deeply unsettling. Traditionally, a literary critic is also expected to document patterns of words that can justify a judgement of beauty (or not), a grounding for an experience of «aesthetic bliss». While Rorty does not preclude the centring of such patterns, he is simply more interested in a different sort. This focus does not make Rorty a philosopher rather than a literary critic. It makes him a literary critic who takes literature in a «narrower sense» as *equally* valid to employ for inquiry into «the motives and the terms»[113] of philosophical, moral and political deliberation as any other genre of writing.

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[112] *CIS*, pp. 163–64. Rorty is not setting aside *Lolita* as informing our understanding of the cruelty of child sexual abuse. He is stressing that incuriosity is central to it *and* to other forms of cruelty and that this can be a core act of cruelty for those seeking to pursue perfectionism, retain their ego intact, who fail, in the glossing I propose, to seek to be unsettled as a practice of moral care. There are the seeds to a comparison here, of Rorty and Iris Murdoch and the notion of a «just and loving gaze». Cf. «I have used the word "attention", which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent». I Murdoch, *The sovereignty of good*, Routledge, New York 2014, p. 33. See also T. Llanera, *Morality by Words*, cit.

[113] The literary «situation is one in which everything is up for grabs at once, where the motives and the terms of discussion are a central subject of argument». R. Rorty, *Deconstruction and Circumvention*, cit., p. 4.

Rorty's reading of *1984* elucidates the ethical burden of the liberal ironist in a supplementary way. Unlike Humbert Humbert, O'Brien *is* overtly and constantly attentive and curious. His failure is a failure to be kind.

Rorty's reading is actually of the novel's last third because cruelty is here the central topic[114]. While Orwell *generally* wrote about cruelty «from the outside»[115], Rorty suggests that in this last part of *1984* Orwell «wrote about cruelty from the inside»[116]. Like Nabokov in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, the book of O'Brien helps us «see the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty» – specifically, it elucidates the «dimly felt connection between art and torture»[117].

Rorty must set aside traditional interpretations of Orwell's novel to establish his own. The first two-thirds of it, Rorty observes, works to sensitise readers to a rhetoric «put in circulation by a particular group», not in the novel but in the culture of its time. For this part, Orwell has a «limited, practical goal»: he wanted to break the hold that Soviet propaganda had «over the minds of liberal intellectuals in England and America»[118]. To do so, to expose hypocrisy and systemic moral failings, Orwell writes in a spirit of revealing truth[119].

Also, «stimulating» literature, or «strong poetry» is what happens at «the vanguard of our species» (*CIS,* p. 20), where, as I put it above, all presumptions can be scrutinised, where the work of imagining new ones happens.

114 *CIS*, p. 146.

115 «From the outside», i.e. the perspective of the victim, or to expose systemic injustices.

116 As Toker expresses it, «Nabokov's works deal less with victims than with victimizers, showing us why we can all find ourselves on the side of the hammer rather than the nail». (L. Toker, *op. cit.*, p. 196) Rorty is suggesting that this is also what characterises the last third of *1984*.

117 *CIS*, p. 146.

118 *Ibid.,* pp. 170–71.

119 *Ibid.,* p. 172. Noticing this of Orwell or his readers does not commit Rorty to the belief that revealing Truth is possible.

To this end, Orwell dramatizes the traditional metaphysical standoff between «contrived appearance and naked reality». In this mode (the Philosophical one), reality can be «obscured by bad, untransparent prose and by bad, unnecessarily sophisticated theory»[120]. «Sneaky» intellectuals will «try to evade plain... facts» such as «truth is "independent" of human minds and languages, and that gravitation is not "relative" to any human mode of thought». Rorty notes that approaching *1984* in this spirit has led «many commentators to conclude that Orwell teaches us to set our faces against all those sneaky intellectuals». Orwell has «been read as a realist philosopher, a defender of common sense against its cultured, ironist despisers»[121]. Significantly, these readings presume Orwell is demonstrating the *limits* to human powers and, as Rorty put it elsewhere, that there *is* a «real wall behind the painted ones»[122]. As Rorty uses Samuel Hynes to express, *1984* is taken to testify to the fact that some things are «beyond politics»[123]. That is, O'Brien, because he is human, does not have the power to alter these essential facts and thus cannot fully triumph. This has an important implication. If one thinks that «[once] the dirt is rubbed off the windowpane, the truth about any moral or political situation will be clear», then eventually, anyone who has failed to adhere to the essential nature of the good and has allowed «their own personality (and in particular their resentment, sadism, and hunger for power) to cloud their vision» will be shown to be in the wrong. One such «plain moral fact is that it is better to be kind than to torture»[124]. Thus on this view, Orwell's novel merely «provided a fresh glimpse of obvious moral realities»[125].

120 *Ibid.,* p. 173.
121 *Ibid.,* p. 172.
122 *Ibid.,* pp. 53–54.
123 *Ibid.,* p. 172n8.
124 *CIS*, p. 173.
125 *Ibid.,* p. 174.

But Rorty thinks *1984* does something more. In that last third, it not only becomes the «book of O'Brien», but becomes «prospective» rather than descriptive: it ushers a *warning* to liberal intellectuals[126]. Orwell is

> trying to make a concrete political possibility plausible by answering... "How will the intellectuals of a certain possible future describe themselves?" [...] "How will their talents be employed?" He does not view O'Brien as crazy, misguided, seduced by a mistaken theory, or blind to the moral facts. He simply views him as *dangerous* and as *possible*[127].

Rorty sees Orwell as making a specific contribution to the knowledge of human possibilities in the form of a *character* (as Nabokov, and as Rorty himself does with the liberal ironist): this time it is a «genius-monster» of inhumanity.
As indicated above, faith in an epistemological bulwark against evil is a premise of traditional readings of *1984*. Rorty takes Orwell to show us that *there is no such thing*. Nothing «in the nature of truth, or man, or history»[128] can block the possibility of O'Brien. Implied is a radical take on what is required to realise human freedom. It is a deeply embedded belief in Western culture that we will always retain a kernel of inner freedom located «beyond politics» at the point of our «essential humanity»[129]. Rorty quotes Orwell to elucidate that the

126 *Ibid.,* p. 171.
127 *Ibid.,* p. 176.
128 *Ibid.,* p. 175.
129 *Ibid.,* 172n8. This is in part an inheritance of stoicism. Consider how deeply rooted this idea is in, for instance, German folk-philosophical tradition, via the song *Die Gedanken sind Frei*. It is thought to have roots in Cicero's *Pro Milone*, and here in Norway, too, it is a much-loved song. However, while Rorty does hold it to be a mistake that we can *inevitably* retain such a kernel of freedom and self-made self, he does allow that eradicating even this takes the kind of torture *1984* attempts to examine. That we have a sort of pragmatic kernel of self is retained

> fallacy is to believe that under a dictatorial government you can be free inside. The greatest mistake is to imagine that the human being is an autonomous individual. The secret freedom which you can supposedly enjoy under a despotic government is nonsense, because your thoughts are never entirely your own. Philosophers, writers, artists, even scientists, not only need encouragement and an audience, they need constant stimulation from other people... Take away freedom of speech, and the creative faculties dry up (CEJL, III, 133)[130].

To Rorty, this contains a historicist, socialist critique of «liberal individualism». It *also* expresses that we are what has been socialised into us: our «ability to use language, and thereby to exchange beliefs and desires with other people»[131]. The upshot is that to be a person is «to speak *a particular* language, one which enables us to discuss particular beliefs and desires with particular sorts of people». It is «a historical contingency whether we are socialized by Neanderthals, ancient Chinese, Eton, Summerhill, or the Ministry of Truth»[132].
This has two relevant consequences. One is that freedom of speech is vital not in some intrinsic, discursive, taken-for-granted-facet-of-democracy sense but in the sense that *freedom to speak is freedom to create an autonomous self*. To Orwell's «[t]ake away freedom of speech, and the creative faculties dry up», and Winston's claim in *1984* that «[f]reedom is the freedom to say that two plus two equals four [and if] that is granted, all else follows», Rorty famously responds «[i]f we

in Rorty's idea of a "final vocabulary": if we can keep that intact, we can reconstitute ourselves even in the face of the outer layers, so to speak, of our core being stripped away.

130 *CIS,* p. 176 Rorty is citing George Orwell, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, *The collected essays, journalism, and letters of George Orwell*, Penguin Books, London 1970.

131 *CIS,* p. 177.

132 *Ibid.,* p. 177.

take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself»[133]. What matters, then, is not so much what you believe so much as «that if you do believe it, you can say it without getting hurt», that you can «talk to other people about what seems to you true». This contains a democratic point. We must be «ironic enough»[134] to facilitate autonomy. Or, conversely, we ought to worry more about facilitating freedom than about being «in direct contact» with truth. If we can «keep the conversation going», a refrain of Rorty's, then figuring out what is right and good to believe will be negotiated within such an open discourse[135].

The other relevant consequence of the claim that to be a person is to speak a particular language – that we are socialised through and through – is that there is no *essence* that constitutes our «common bond». Instead, what we «share with all other humans is the same thing we share with all other animals — the ability to feel pain»[136]. This is, to speak with Wittgenstein, where Rorty's spade is turned, and where Rorty takes up working to lessen cruelty as a guiding obligation. Precisely what cruelty consists of is, as Michael Bacon has argued[137], left *open* because to define it once and for all would likely

133 *Ibid*., p. 176.

134 *Ibid.*

135 Cfr. ironism as a civic virtue in Curtis. See also B.T. Ramberg, *Shaping language: What deliberative legitimacy requires*, in *Sociolinguistica*, 30.1 (2016). What it takes on the institutional side to facilitate this kind of conversation is a different matter. What is Rorty's concern here is what kind of perceptions of ourselves as a community we are better off cultivating if our aim is to reduce cruelty/realise freedom.

136 *CIS*, p. 177.

137 As Bacon notes, «the point of Rorty's use of the term "cruelty" is that it is an open category. To specify cruelty's necessary and sufficient conditions implies that we are able to give a final account of what is and is not cruel, but Rorty's claim is that we are never in this position». M. Bacon, *Rorty, irony and the consequences of contingency for liberal society*, in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 43.9 (2017), p. 960. Rorty's open-ended definition of cruelty is deliberate and leaves room for our understanding of "cruelty" to constantly be nuanced and responsively altered.

have the pragmatic effect of becoming incurious about new and different forms of cruelty. The work of understanding how we are cruel never ends. However, because being a person means speaking a particular language, *one* specific form of pain *is* unique to humans. The pain caused by «the forcible tearing down of the particular structures of language and belief in which they were socialized (or which they pride themselves on having formed for themselves)»[138]. This is the pain of «humiliation», and it has the potential to unmake a person.
To Rorty, the last third of *1984* is about this kind of pain. O'Brien, and Rorty is quoting him from the novel, desires to «tear human minds to pieces and put them together again in new shapes of [one's] own choosing»[139]. This sadistic wish, Rorty observes, is developed «in detail by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, where her argument entails that

> the worst thing you can do to somebody is not to make her scream in agony but to use that agony in such a way that even when the agony is over, she cannot reconstitute herself. The idea is to get her to do or say things – and, if possible, believe and desire things, think thoughts – which later she will be unable to cope with having done or thought. You can thereby, as Scarry puts it, "unmake her world" by making it impossible for her to use language to describe what she has been[140].

It is a process of eradicating the means for self-constitution and, thus, agency – and freedom.
Such eradication must be thoroughgoing in a way that forcing someone to deny a fact about the world is not. Making Winston deny that two plus two equals four is an occurrence Winston later could have

138 *CIS*, p. 177.
139 *Ibid.,* p. 177.
140 *Ibid.,* pp. 177–178.

re-integrated into a coherent understanding of himself by rationalising it as an irrational blip[141]. However, when O'Brien succeeds in making Winston genuinely want O'Brien to make the rats eat the face of Julia, his love, then his world is «unmade». From then on, he can no longer have «a self because [he] becomes incapable of weaving a coherent web of belief and desire». His irrationality is more than simply having «lost contact with reality»: he can «no longer justify» himself to himself[142]. After desiring cruelty to be inflicted on his love, he can never again use the words he used to describe himself by – «honest, or loyal, or devout». He can no longer «tell a coherent story» about himself[143]. There is a point for all of us, Rorty suggests, that once passed, renders us unmade.

Thus, the last third of *1984* is, Rorty insists, «about torturing, not about being tortured», and in this lies its contribution to human imagination. O'Brien represents the possibility of an ironist who takes *pleasure in humiliation*, in using his «awareness of the power of redescription»[144] to inflict pain. The ironist for whom cruelty does *not* induce shudders of disgust but instead *bliss*. O'Brien is terrifying in his abandonment of the hypocrisy Humbert still displays[145]. What is on display is a raw desire to be cruel for the bliss of artfully inflicting it. It's the making of *patterns of pain* «iridescent» to O'Brien's mind. So, when O'Brian states that the «object of torture is torture», Rorty observes, this sentence is «the analogue of "Art for art's sake" or "Truth for its own sake," for torture is now the only art form and the only intellectual discipline available to such a person». That sentence is, to Rorty, «the central sentence of *1984*»[146].

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141 *CIS*, p. 178.
142 *Ibid.*
143 *Ibid.,* p. 179.
144 *Ibid.,* p. 89.
145 See chapter six in D. Runciman, *Political hypocrisy: The mask of power, from Hobbes to Orwell and beyond*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2018.
146 *CIS*, p. 180.

Significantly, O'Brien's art of torture depends on *cultivating* curiosity – the very skill Humbert failed to develop. Forging the sublime cruelty of total humiliation depends on being curious about the specific details of other people's lives and experiences, and then skilfully tailoring responses to invalidate or obliterate their sense of self. The artful perfection of torture for the sake of torture is O'Brien's obsessive, private, intellectual perfectionist project – the only one available to him in this post-totalitarian state. Thus, Rorty concludes, «O'Brien, the well-informed, well-placed, well-adjusted, intelligent, sensitive, educated member of the Inner Party, is more than just alarming». He is a terrifying plausible character «of a possible future society, one in which the intellectuals had accepted the fact that liberal hopes had no chance of realization»[147]. On Rorty's reading, then, *keeping that hope alive*, even, as Rorty admits, an ungrounded hope[148], is a most pivotal task. The task is not to erect epistemological bulwarks against evil – the materials would crumble. The task is to create a society that, while commonsensically ironist, weaves a story about itself around the belief that cruelty is the worst thing we do, and construct its shared final vocabulary to support this story. It is to take practical, responsive action *now* to avoid the future of *1984*. In Rorty's reading of *1984*, what is retained and comes to the fore is an absolute insistence on the connection between cruelty, power, and *policy*. It is to accept what Hynes wanted to deny, in his realist reading of 1984, that *nothing* is beyond politics. We are made aware of the extent to which – when socialisation reaches to the core – cruelty is sanctioned and instilled by those in power, even in democratic politics. The answer is not to say "some people will be sadists by birth". The point is to say "we must put in the work to make our

147 *Ibid.,* p. 183.

148 I.e. not founded on metaphysical arguments, but posited, in practice, as our guiding aim. Cfr. *CIS*, p. xv.

policies, and the powers we agree to undergird, as just and responsive to cruelty, in all its forms, as possible". One approach to this task is to bring about, as Rorty puts it, a «poeticization of culture as a whole»[149]: the kind of culture that sees itself, as described above, as not on a teleological trajectory but as constantly in a «conversational situation» – a literary situation – where everything is «up for grabs at once», where «the motives and the terms of discussion are a central subject of argument»[150].

The flip side of identifying incuriosity as an aspect of human cruelty, as Rorty does in his reading of *Lolita*, is that cultivating *curiosity* must be associated with the opposite. However, the book of O'Brien tells us this is not sufficient. «[A]ctually knowing the good», observes Rorty, is not a matter for the imagination, but of «sensing what matters to other people, what their image of the good is», and this depends on *combining* «tenderness» and curiosity[151]. To Rorty, «the good» can only be articulated in relational, curious, other-directed, and responsive processes. What we need, as ironists or pragmatists mindfully engaged in self-making, is, as Rorty puts it elsewhere, the skills of a literary critic: an ability to preserve a «sense of a common human finitude by moving back and forth between the poet and his poem», to follow the «traces» that go from poem to poem[152]. That is, we must make a point of drawing the lines that bind and indebt us. Such a (literary kind of) practice will allow us to «see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation», an «ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of "us"»[153].

149 *CIS*, pp. 53–54.
150 R. Rorty, *Deconstruction and Circumvention*, cit., p. 4.
151 *CIS*, p. 159.
152 R. Rorty, *Idealism and Textualism*, cit., p. 173.
153 *CIS*, cit., p. 192.

Finely aware and ironically responsible: Stow, Toal, and Voparil's readings of Rorty

Zooming back out, we can now return to some objections to Rorty's interpretations and his understanding of the connection between literature, philosophy, and democratic progress.
Stow charges Rorty with mistakenly presuming that «simply as a result of reading these books we will become less cruel, and as such, better citizens of his postmodernist bourgeois liberal utopia»[154]. Moreover, he thinks it problematic that Rorty relies upon «tropes such as authorial intent and intrinsic textual meaning»[155] because this is at odds with «Rorty's philosophical views and his approach to the texts»[156]. If Rorty does not *actually* believe in authorial intent and intrinsic meaning, he displays *elitism* by offering up morally didactical readings *as if* intent and meaning were real in order to inculcate the masses with the correct moral values[157]. It is, it seems, a lose-lose situation for Rorty. Against the backdrop of the above, the last two charges appear ungrounded. Acknowledging that a person has made a work of art is not an essentialising move. Furthermore, gathering supplemental evidence from historical sources, biographies, autobiographies and journals, and supplementing this with perceptions acquired through close reading, as Rorty does, to support *one possible* reading, is merely to present a case in a literary critical fashion[158]. I

154 S. Stow, *The Return of Charles Kinbote*, cit., p. 73.
155 *Ibid*., p. 71.
156 *Ibid*., pp. 73–74.
157 *Ibid*., p. 73. Stow likens Rorty to the sociopathic Kinbote (p. 75).
158 This is how Rorty sets out to «do philosophy» in CIS: «The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example, the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions. This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather, it works holistically and pragmatically. It says

do not think it should be underplayed that Rorty's bluff style can make him appear more definitively assertive than was the case. I take that, however, to be because he did take it as his task to be persuasive in a «literary» fashion, rather than an argumentative one: he sets out to «persuade» by weaving «together some texts labeled "philosophical" with other texts not so labeled», by advancing a «practice of splicing together your favorite critics, novelists poets, and such, and your favorite philosophers»[159].

But Stow's first objection is taken up by Toal. Toal's key charge is that Rorty's readings of literature fail to have any democratic, cruelty-reducing effect. In fact, they serve to *obscure* the experience of cruelty. On Toal's reading, Rorty is averring the «ethical lesson derivable from literature and relevant to all human interaction: the imperative of "noticing' the suffering of others». As a consequence, cruelty «itself [is] defined as a fatal incuriosity, a culpable paucity of attention rather than a direct violence or malignancy»[160]. Rorty advances a closed definition of cruelty as «a mere by-product of "searches for autonomy" or "the pursuit of aesthetic bliss"»[161]. This leads Toal to conclude that in Rorty, «reform will be furthered through acquisition of the skill of "noticing" as a private, individually developed skill, and thus that it is

> clear from the cancellation of philosophy effected by Rorty's reconfiguration of public and private, as well as the unacknowledged expansion of what is essentially a "private" impulse, the cultivation and proffering of "sympathy," into the public sphere, that the main consequence of his schema

things like "try thinking of it this way" — or more specifically, "try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions». (*CIS*, p. 9). Compare above, where Rorty talks about literature as a practice of foregoing «argumentation».

159 R. Rorty, *Philosophy without Principles*, *Critical Inquiry*, 11.3 (1985), p. 463.

160 Toal, pp. 125–26.

161 *Loc cit.*.

> is the deflection of attention from the social and institutional causes of "cruelty" themselves[162].

To her, Rorty relegates moral deliberation to the private realm and by this «participates in the imaginary erasure of "cruelty" [...] eviscerating its meaning in the very process of recommending its avoidance»[163].
Toal makes the mistake of reading Rorty *as if he were a metaphysician*[164]. As the above shows, she fails to see that Rorty's pragmatist stance precludes him from taking it upon himself to pronounce on behalf of *all* literature and from articulating *universal* moral edicts. Moreover, her claim that Rorty privatises the work of diminishing cruelty and relegates it to the task of refining an emotional capacity for sympathetic identification[165], appears rooted in a misconception of Rorty as a metaphysician *compounded* by a misunderstanding of his specific reconstrual of the private/public distinction. Instead of understanding Rorty's constructive project to be impacting intellectual and public culture in ways that might reduce cruelty, Toal takes Rorty's *governing* project to be «a redrawing of the boundaries between "public" and "private"', and to argue that «even 'public' or nonintimate cruelty is the result of the illegitimate extension of what ought to be a "private" quest for autonomy»[166]. This is not only a misapprehension of Rorty's core constructive aims. It ignores that

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162 *Ibid.* p. 127.
163 *Ibid.,* pp. 127–28.
164 «So metaphysicians believe that there are, out there in the world, real essences which it is our duty to discover and which are disposed to assist in their own discovery. They do not believe that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed — or, if they do, they deplore this fact and cling to the idea that reality will help us resist such seductions». Rorty, *CIS*, p. 75.
165 C. Toal, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
166 C. Toal, *op. cit.* p. 126.

Rorty reads these novels, explicitly, to help expand our *public* vocabulary for grappling with, refining our understanding of, the ways we – and ironist intellectuals in particular – can be cruel.
But the worry of exactly how Rorty sees the connection between reading literature and democratic progress remains even in Christopher Voparil's analyses. Voparil is one of the most nuanced, well-informed readers of Rorty in contemporary philosophy[167]. Yet he, too, is puzzled by how Rorty envisages such a dynamic. Voparil skillfully identifies the salient difference between Rorty and Nussbaum: whereas she presumes a necessary causal connection where «[v]ividness leads to tenderness, imagination to compassion», Rorty does not[168]. The problem, for Voparil, arises when observing that while Rorty holds that «reading nondidactic literature, on account of its concreteness and attention to the details of the lives of others, will help make people into better perceivers», more just, and more tolerant, he, at the same time, *denies* that «general moral lessons can be extracted from the concrete situations portrayed in such literature»[169]. Pondering Rorty's embrace of Milan Kundera's «subversive conception of the novel's irony» Voparil is at a loss because «Rorty's appeal to literature looks not to irony but to sentiment for its political import», for creating a «shared moral identity». Voparil presumes that this is *not* something «that complex and ambiguous works [can] provide». Thus, it is

> not the nuanced, introspective, highbrow novels whose "variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty," in Lionel

[167] He for instance recently published the first comprehensive study of Rorty's inheritance and expansion of the pragmatist tradition: see C. Voparil, *Reconstructing pragmatism*, cit.
[168] C. Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, cit., p. 74. Voparil is citing M.C. Nussbaum, *Love's knowledge: essays on philosophy and literature*, Oxford University Press, New York 1990, pp. 207–209.
[169] C. Voparil, *The Politics of the Novel*, cit. p. 75.

> Trilling's famous phrase, [that] prompt self-reflective questioning of ourselves and our world, but the far less complex and various lessons of didactic, middlebrow, "sentimental" novels like Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Dickens's *Bleak House* that for Rorty are of the greatest value to democracy[170].

In sum, to Voparil, Rorty's commitment to «ethical reflection» through literature «does not hold up»[171].
It seems to me that Voparil makes two inferences I would not. One is that Rorty looks to «sentiment» rather than «irony for political import». As the first part of this paper argues, «irony», or a capability for holding our beliefs lightly, aesthetically, has pivotal importance to Rorty's vision of democratic progress and of a «liberal utopia» in the form of a «poeticized culture». Sentimental stories are not the most conducive to inculcating irony. Literature broadly understood, in its sheer variety of descriptions, its plurality, the un-containment it puts on display, does cultivate poetic distance to our ideas and stories. This is a variant of un-settling. And this is, to me, the novelistic attitude Rorty extols in *Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens*[172]. When Rorty there upholds the novel as «the characteristic genre of democracy», I think this should be read as extolled because it, as a genre, enshrines and manifests a pluralistic, playful, antiessentialist, anti-representational, conversational and democratising attitude (in its resistance to universalising ambitions and interpretations)[173]. Our capacity for irony can be *driven by* exposure to literature, through engaging in conversational situations (which reading, also, is) where «everything is up for grabs».

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170 *Ibid.,* p. 62.
171 C. Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, cit., p. 74.
172 R. Rorty, *Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens*, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, cit., pp. 66–82.
173 C. Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, cit., p. 61.

This brings out that whereas Voparil appears to settle on the sentimental as what Rorty takes to drive moral and liberal democratic progress, I read Rorty as recommending exposure to whatever impacts us in such a way that we are left somewhat unsettled – sentimental stories *included*. As I hope to have shown, this is what Rorty's delineation of «stimulating» books is about: they make us feel we must change, somehow, and by inducing such effects, set up a potential for change to subsequently take place (for change is only material if it enters practice). But as Rorty stresses, what can cause such stimulus of productive sentiments can differ from person to person. Thus, while I take Rorty to indeed urge us to be willing to undergo an education by sentiments, I do not (always) equate his talk of sentiments with *sentimentality*. Yes, Rorty suggests that «sentimental novels» have specific democratic utility in facilitating solidarity. But as I have already touched upon, his preference for novels is likely because they have a more direct potential for uptake in our broader culture, for reasons of ease of assimilation and recognition. Moreover, when Rorty in *CIS* talks about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Black Boy,* it is not as sentimental stories, but as «books» that put systemic and social cruelties on plain display. Doing so does not hinge on a sentimentalist expression intended to trigger «fellow feeling». Finally, in his readings of *Lolita* and *1984*'s part three, Rorty does show that «books», of precisely the complex, subversive kind that Voparil takes to lack the moral message necessary for social progress, can cause affective, unsettling non-sentimental responses in their *readers,* such as disgust rather than «fellow feeling», and by this stimulate a felt need to change or, as Rorty tells us, reveal injustices on other levels than the systemic.

That Voparil's reading of Rorty on literature is different than the one I present here, appears rooted in having subtly distinct understandings of Rorty's conception of the private and public. Voparil would, I think, deny thinking of Rorty's private/public distinction as ontologically determined. Yet, at various moments Voparil writes

as if this was an ontologically inflected binary opposition, or at least that a strong, permanent bulwark exists between these poles – rather than a dynamic interaction. As outlined above, I take this pair, too (taking my lead from Rorty[174]), to be a dichotomy constructed to be a heuristic device, indicating «blockings out» on a spectrum of dynamically interrelated practices, constructed to enable us to conversationally grab hold of differences that make a difference to our practises. That Voparil employs a quasi-metaphysical rhetoric on this topic seems evident when he presumes that there is one «reading list» for each side: one for learning to be a liberal democratic citizen, and one for self-transformation – and that the former must consist of morally didactic, sentimental stories while the other contains «highbrow» works that «do edify, but in a way only of interest to those attempting to live in an original and imaginative fashion who are not concerned with their responsibilities to others»[175]. But,

174 R. Rorty, *Texts and Lumps*, cit. p. 8.

175 C. Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, cit., p. 74 I am not suggesting Voparil reads Rorty as a metaphysician, as Toal does. That he does not, is what makes this such an interesting case. But while Voparil reads Rorty pragmatically, it is my position that anyone who reads Rorty's private/public split as if there were bulkheads in between, or even as «rigid», is not reading Rorty antiessentially enough. I am aware that Rorty writes, in *CIS*, that his defence of «ironism, and the habit of taking literary criticism as the presiding intellectual discipline» turns on «making a firm distinction between the private and the public» (*CIS*, 83). First of all, the use of «firm» here was, in my opinion, a mistake on Rorty's part – it is easily misinterpreted. Secondly, Rorty is here making a «polemic» argument against «Habermas, who has mounted a sustained, detailed, carefully argued polemic against critics of the Enlightenment», i.e. against the usefulness of self-reflection for social and democratic purposes. Rorty wants to turn that on its head, and insist on the usefulness of self-reflection, moral deliberation and self-(re)making to democratic cultures. Moreover, he wants to say that «ironist theorists» such as Derrida, might help us with that kind of self-development, through helping ironist intellectuals become even more aware of the power of redescription. But that kind of theory is not, Rorty argues *against* Habermas, «the best candidate for [social] glue» (*CIS*, 83). I do see that even the suggestion that there is a «firm» pragmatic division here

as argued above, Rorty's readings of *Lolita* and *1984* read these as edifying *liberal* ironists, that is, ironists very much concerned with their responsibilities to others. Moreover, Rorty explicitly tells us these are, to use Voparil's term, on his recommended «reading list» for learning to be a liberal democratic citizen. It is as though Voparil wants to bring familiar order to Rorty's more transgressive views, in which there is no point in designating individual works to fixed categories, where the moral-aesthetic distinction is explicitly set aside – and where complex, ironic works also can impact us in ways that teach us about cruelty.

This binary division furthermore leads Voparil to presume that «[f]orging a democratic moral community» is the «project which lies behind [Rorty's] turn to literature»[176]. I would argue that at first Rorty's adoption of a literary vocabulary was driven by its usefulness in providing a pedagogical manner of articulating his pragmatist stance. As he increasingly detailed the alignment of his stance with that of a «literary» attitude, he took up the idea that people of such a disposition would turn to literature rather than doctrines of philosophy or treatises of religion for guidance, and he began to stress the connection between the development of a literary culture and democratic culture. What is involved in Rorty's turn to literature is thus much more than a mere insistence on reading literature for empathetic or sentimental education. *Literature schools us in antiessentialism*

can be criticised. But Rorty's reason for proposing this is to centre individual self-reflection as socially useful – precisely the conclusion Voparil does *not* draw, when he relegates self-transformation through complex, modernist works to the private realm and working towards autonomy only. But Rorty clearly states his defence of self-reflection and *individual* change in perception and judgement as socially useful. "Individual" and "private" often seem to get conflated in readings of Rorty.

[176] C. Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, cit., p. 63.

– and that, which is also Curtis' message in casting ironism as a «civic virtue»[177] – is itself vital to democratic sustainability and progress.
Finally, the binary division leads Voparil, in a manner reminiscent of Stow, to suggest that Rorty's aim is to inculcate a «monolithic moral identity»[178]. This is the point at which complex, modernist works of literature no longer fit. On Voparil's reading, such nondidactic works lack the «moral sentiments Rorty needs literature to disseminate to further the communal ends of his 'liberal utopia'»[179]. Voparil presumes that «this project of cultivating a broader and more inclusive sense of solidarity, understood as a form of collective identity, that gives Rorty's appeal to literature and stories its moral thrust»[180]. But as this paper shows, this is not the only democratic function of literature in Rortyan thought. Rorty privatises ironist *theory* but not modernist or postmodernist, complex or even ironist works of literature or art. He relegates the former to the private realm because theoretical works aimed at subsuming the history of theorising under a new ironist theory to get rid of theory once and for all, is still Theory. It simply has little public use and does not do much to lessen cruelty. However, complex, ironist *literature remains of public use*, for Rorty takes literature, per definition, to not offer such attempts at "getting things right" – but merely to make offers of how to see and how to talk. Thus, when Voparil infers that Rorty elides the «transformative potential» of complex non-sentimental works of art[181], I think that is to misunderstand the project at hand – of transforming culture to become ironist *as a part of* bringing

177 W.M. Curtis, *Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue*, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY 2015, p. 89.
178 C. Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, cit., p. 77.
179 *Ibid.,* p. 62.
180 *Ibid.,* p. 64.
181 *Ibid.,* p. 77.

about a more empathic culture – and miss the central role non-sentimental stimulating works play in such an endeavour, and in Rortyan thought.
In sum, I think we should grant how close Rorty does come to Nussbaum when conceptualising the role of literature in advancing the reach of empathy and «fellow feeling», but also insist on the dimension Rorty *adds:* the role literature plays in making us more capable ironists, more sensitive to the transformative power of redescription in all realms of society, including science and philosophy, and this as undergirding sustainable democratic progress. Paraphrasing a famous Nussbaum dictum, we might say Rorty tells us to become finely aware and ironically responsible[182].

Philosophy as Poetry, Pragmatism as Literary Criticism

I said at the start that I believe Rorty's thoughts on literature help us untangle the seemingly twisted knot of the relationship between literature and philosophy. In closing, I will try to sketch why.
On the account given above, the practice of Philosophy ought to evolve to become philosophy – move away from metaphysics towards the problem of men (to speak with Dewey). Even better, it should become «literary» criticism. This does not entail a practice that centres a piece of writing as an object of "beauty" or "aesthetic quality". It denotes a radically horizontal practice, involving

> an attempt to weave together some texts traditionally labeled "philosophical" with other texts not so labeled. It names the practice of splicing together your favorite critics, novelists, poets and such, and your favorite philosophers. This is not exactly what Mailloux calls "metapractice (practice about

182 Compare Martha C. Nussbaum, *"Finely Aware and Richly Responsible": Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 82.10 (1985), pp. 516–29.

> practice)," for that term suggests a vertical relationship, in which some practices are at higher others.... Rather, it is just more practice of the same sort, using a slightly different set of raw materials. Thinking of it this way helps one get rid of the idea that philosophy is somehow on another level. It lets one think of "philosophical" and "literary" texts as grist for the same mill[183].

Such a practice can and will only remain steady in its literariness when forged from an attitude content to level all ontological hierarchies, give up the idea of "kinds" of texts in favour of seeing various texts, ideas, narratives and vocabularies as good for different uses. This is the attitude that Rorty takes literary culture, in sum, to further.

Moreover, this kind of practice is *playful* and experimental, while taking what it makes seriously – just as any artist does. Philosophy *qua* literary criticism plays books against books, vocabularies against vocabularies[184]. And such a critic manages to hold their judgements and descriptions, as I want to put it, lightly, aesthetically, open to being remade. In not taking itself seriously in the *Platonic* sense of being a pursuit of Truth, literature has epistemological and anti-representational impact by helping us sustain an ironist, poeticist stance. Just as literature in the «narrower sense» is more likely to be «stimulating» in the manner that makes us feel a need to change, the literary *institution*, as Bryan Vescio argues, has the wider democratic function of being a «ministry of disturbance»[185] – unsettling democratic culture to prevent stagnation, allowing experimentation with who we are as a moral community.

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183 R. Rorty, *Philosophy without Principles*, cit., p. 463.

184 *CIS*, pp. 78–79.

185 See B. Vescio, *Reconstruction in Literary Studies: An Informalist Approach*, cit., Chapter 3 and Conclusion.

Literature in the «narrower sense» and philosophy, in the account given above, simply fulfil different cultural and conversational roles and have differing conventions for how «familiar» a language they need or want to employ. While these are but contingent conventions, we *need* the unfamiliar, like we need «kisses and slaps in the face», to make us grasp around for «new theories». The unsettling and unfamiliar open the paths that the philosophical – in its greater reliance on familiar language and argumentation – later might traverse. Likewise, however, new, unfamiliar scientific or philosophical ideas can give rise to novel literature. It is not that only literature in the narrower sense has a negative or subversive thrust, but that literature, or strong poetry of any genre or field, has greater potential to *productively* unsettle.

I want to make two last points. What the above allows us to see is that when Rorty states that he takes the poet's side in the «ancient quarrel», he does not mean that he, or anyone, are obliged to write poetry in a «narrower sense». Rather, Rorty makes an epistemological point and recommends an intellectual attitude and practice, one he articulated in a literary vocabulary that fits his philosophy of language as «poetry» and his view of human beings as makers. This is not the only way to articulate the Rortyan stance, but it is more important and significant than most Rorty commentary today permits. Moreover, the practice Rorty recommends is so radically horizontal that it is unusual even today. For Rorty shows how literary works can be used *not* simply to *illustrate* phenomena such as cruelty but to understand what it means in practice. He demonstrates the social and democratic utility of literary art and the skills of the critic. By setting an example of how a critic can engage literary texts *without* feeling obliged to comment on beauty and goodness, prosody, or narrative complexity, Rorty claims literature in the «narrower sense» as *equally* necessary to the neverending labour of working out who we are and how to realise a just society as any religious, philosophical, moral, or political treatise ever written.

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