

## Part V

# Culture, Politics, and Religion

## Rorty and Literature

SERGE GRIGORIEV

Rorty uses the words “literature” and “literary” quite liberally, yet he does not have a philosophy of literature proper. Instead, he offers some potentially interesting suggestions regarding the place of literary culture within the larger context of contemporary intellectual life. Philosophers of literature ordinarily concern themselves first and foremost with literature as an art form (Lamarque 2009, 12). Accordingly, various elements that enter into the making of a literary work are normally evaluated in the light of their perceived contribution to the aesthetic value of the whole (p. 171). This naturally applies also to the thematic content of the work: views and perspectives announced in a novel are usually understood primarily in relation to the world of the novel, not the practical world around it (2009, 236–7). Of course, no one can stop the reader from applying the “lessons” learned from the novel to the conduct of ordinary life, but such educational exercises would, as Lamarque correctly opines, amount to “the appropriation of literature for some further end” (2009, 287). Nabokov puts the point quite nicely when he says that good readers “read books not for the infantile purpose of identifying oneself with the characters, and not for the adolescent purpose of learning to live, and not for the academic purpose of indulging in generalizations” (1980, 381), but for the thrill of enjoying the author’s unique and particular manner of constructing a fictional world (p. 113), a world “with its own logic, its own conventions, its own coincidences” (p. 146).

Rorty, by contrast, is almost entirely uninterested in works of literature qua aesthetic artifacts. In his book, literary texts are meant to serve primarily as a means of moral and intellectual “edification” (Rorty 1979, 360). A pragmatist reader valorized in his writings makes no distinction between using texts and interpreting them, between the meaning of the text in itself and its possible implications for one or another external context (Rorty and Eco 1992, 93). Rorty explicitly advocates using the text (philosophical or literary) as an “object of exploitation” (Rorty 1982, 50), beaten into shape by a “strong misreading” which relates it to the reader’s own antecedent interests and

preconceptions (p. 151). The only nod to the literary work's autonomy permitted within this scheme, is a demand for sufficient openness on the part of the reader to allow for the possibility of a text actually altering the reader's preexisting desires and conceptions (Rorty and Eco 1992, 106).

The talk of texts, rather than literary works, is moreover perfectly appropriate: because almost any kind of text can, in principle, fulfill the edifying function that Rorty associates with reading literature. What Derrida writes, for example, counts as literature, despite Derrida's own protestations that literature is a public institution distinguished by historically concrete determinate characteristics that set it apart from other forms of writing (Derrida 1996, 82). In fact, it is fair to say that Rorty's use of "literature" has very little to do with *any* customary meaning of the term; instead, it marks a series of distinctions internal to his own philosophical position. Rorty does not even *try* to offer a positive account of literature, except maybe as a type of discourse that abandons the misplaced pretensions of traditional philosophy (Fischer 1990, 241). Literature is explicitly defined by him as "areas of culture which ... forego argumentation" (Rorty 1982, 142). Literary criticism, advocated by him as the presently proper form of intellectual engagement, is merely a contingent label used by intellectuals who "got jobs in universities by pretending to pursue academic specialties" (Rorty 1989, 81). As such, it has nothing to do with "literary qualities"; for its chief merit consists in facilitating "moral reflection by suggesting revisions in the canon of moral exemplars and advisers" (p. 82). Literature, then, in Rorty's hands, appears to devolve into a lazy catch-all notion, meant to merely signal a departure from the currently established modes of philosophical writing. However, as we advance in a crabwise fashion through the series of contrasts in which this notion is consecutively placed, it gradually begins to cut a fairly intriguing figure.

## 1 Philosophical and Literary

To some degree, of course, Rorty's discussions of the literary are meant to counteract the morbid effects of professionalization on contemporary philosophical discourse. In the course of the last century philosophical profession has come to define itself primarily in terms of "argumentative skill" (Rorty 1982, 62), withdrawing over time into progressively technical and specialized areas of concern, where the proper degree of argumentative rigor could be plausibly sustained – withdrawing, as a result, both from other academic disciplines and from the rest of culture in general (p. 62). Philosophy has tried to model itself on the mode of operation associated with what Kuhn used to call "normal science"; and the typical outcome of its activity these days can be described as "an impersonal report of limited results for a severely restricted readership" presented as part of a "collaborative enterprise" (Danto 2010, 54). However, as Danto points out, it is perhaps more reasonable to think of philosophy as a singular "crossbreed of art and science" (2010, 52). In which case, Rorty's insistence on the "literary" can be seen as a timely reminder that we need to return the artistic element, the element of "revolutionary" science, into the philosophical discussions from which it has been largely purged. Literature, then, becomes a byword

for the openness to the new unfamiliar ways of speaking (Reeves 1986, 353), to the change of our discursive paradigms.

The distinction between normal and abnormal discourse (Rorty 1982, 106) has been central to Rorty's thought at least since the *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. There he insisted on the contrast between "epistemology" and "hermeneutics," understood as the contrast between those areas of discourse where we have a strong preexisting agreement on the proper practices of inquiry and those where we do not have such an agreement: the open, unsettled, contested areas where no common standards have as yet been attained (Rorty 1979, 321). "Hermeneutics" in this sense has almost nothing to do with the continental hermeneutical tradition proper, instead it stands for the sheer attitude of openness to fresh and interesting innovative proposals and descriptions (Caputo 1983, 678). "It is a feature of science" says Rorty, "that the vocabulary in which problems are posed is accepted by all those who count as contributing to the subject" (Rorty 1982, 141). By contrast, in suggesting "new paradigms of argumentation, a philosopher cannot appeal to antecedent criteria of judgment, but he may have spectacular success" in providing us with a new and invigorating perspective (1982, 40). "Literature," understood in this context, stands for the efforts to "give us *new terminologies*" (p. 40), as opposed to the "philosophical" or "epistemological" activity of working within the terms of an already established critical argumentative framework.

Literature, thus understood, is not meant to replace professional philosophy, but merely to augment its conceptual horizons. In response to Habermas's worry that, within the scope of his argument, "the capacity to solve problems" would be permitted "to disappear behind the world-creating capacity of language" (Habermas 1992, 205), Rorty issues an unambiguous reassurance that, in his view, the world disclosure and problem-solving are not mutually exclusive, but rather coordinate, functions (Rorty 1995, 154). Problem-solving "typically requires the use of familiar, traditional, literal language" (1995, 153). Poetic language of innovation, however, allows us to conceive of "new ways of being human" (p. 154). Accordingly, when critics like Haack insist that serious philosophers are meant to express themselves "as explicitly and unequivocally as possible" (Haack 1996, 68), unlike the literary types who thrive on exploiting productive ambiguities (p. 69), Rorty can readily agree, demurring only that there is more to philosophy than earnest analytical excavation, for such excavation requires the ordinary act of stage-setting, which cannot be accomplished by conventional philosophical analysis. If one does not care to invent a new language or say something that has not been said before, but merely aspires to show "how something falls into place in a previously established context" (Rorty 1982, 106), then one can dispense with the "literary pretensions" (p. 106) and set down to do some honest, productive, and even potentially ingenious work.

The emphasis on innovation, however, does not exhaust the intended sense of the "literary": it is but one important strand. The other can be best described as a philosophical turn to cultural criticism (Rorty 1982, xl). Here, Rorty takes his cue from a perceived convergence of two philosophical traditions, resulting in a realization of human finitude, contingency of all synoptic philosophical visions, and tolerance toward and curiosity about potential alternatives to our present perspective (Rorty 1999, 20). One is the post-Hegelian tradition which turns from the "metaphysics of experience" to

a “study of cultural development” (Rorty 1982, 76). The other is the post-Wittgensteinian tradition which treats all conceptual necessity “anthropocentrically,” as resulting from the historical “contingencies of social practice” (p. 27). Both traditions, when read (or misread) in Rorty’s admittedly partisan and forceful way, succeed in reinstating the human being, as opposed to reason, as the proper subject of all philosophical reflection. Philosophy thus transformed can only afford to have the ambition associated by C. P. Snow with “literary culture” whose highest hope is to grasp its time in thought (Rorty 1982, xli). But that, of course, makes the role of philosopher “almost synonymous” with that of a generalized intellectual (p. 30).

“All one might want a philosopher to do” according to Rorty, “is to synthesize the novels, poems, histories, and sociologies of the day into some larger unity” (Rorty 1982, 77). The new image of philosopher is “somebody who remaps culture – who suggests a new and promising way for us to think about the relation among various large areas of human activity” (Rorty 1999, 175). Ostensibly, a philosopher of this sort is not likely to be found in a traditional philosophy department; his proper habitat is the preserve of the “highbrow culture,” instantiated best by literary culture or “cultural criticism” (Rorty 1982, 61). Hence, another side of insistence on the “literary” designates a broadly humanist concern with “the human self which philosophy has been avoiding” (1982, 188) at the risk of courting downright cultural irrelevance, with intellectuals advancing the literary concerns thus understood acting first and foremost as “the friends of finitude, the friends of man” (p. 189).

Importantly, despite desiring to be the friends of man, literary intellectuals of the highbrow ilk are no more understood by the ordinary man on the street than the professional philosophers with their at times esoteric concerns. Literary culture is largely isolated from “common human concerns” (p. 158). In fact, it can almost be seen as directly antagonistic to such concerns, insofar as its general intellectual pathos obliges it to question or treat ironically many of the philosophical assumptions deeply “woven into the public rhetoric” (Rorty 1989, 82). “I cannot imagine a culture,” Rorty concedes, “which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization” (p. 87). Hence, intellectual’s re-description of commonly shared assumptions and practices “often humiliates” (p. 90). Ironically, then, the literary intellectual’s prized audience turns out to consist primarily of traditional philosophers, whose common-sense realism she tends to playfully question (Rorty 1982, 136). This is, of course, as it should be if we consent to construe the relationship between cultural criticism and traditional philosophy on the roughly Kuhnian model of the relationship between revolutionary and normal science. It should come as no surprise then that, according to Rorty, the questioning, unsettling work of literary ironists is always parasitic on the existence of a positive philosophical culture (Rorty 1989, 88), since the two must be seen as coordinate and complimentary phases in the larger temporal process of intellectual cultural development.

But there is more, of course; and it is now time to take a walk on the wild side. The “cultural hegemony” of the literary impulse (Rorty 1989, 3), proclaimed by Rorty, is meant to replace philosopher’s search for truth with a romantic’s quest for freedom (p. xiii). The associated talk of giving a meaning to one’s life through a combination of “art and politics” (p. 3) is liable to mislead one into thinking that Rorty intends to substitute something like cultural studies or literary critical theory for the rigors of traditional

analytic argument. But that is not the case: cultural studies merely train their students “to clothe resentment in jargon” (Rorty 1998, 127); and the renewal of philosophy requires something more than a mere change of disciplinary matrix. The literary impulse, instead, is meant to be anarchic, deeply personal, intent on individual projects of self-creation conceived of as “a proliferating realization in contrast to a convergence towards a pre-existing truth” (Rotenstreich 1990, 614). This is the sense in which literary, here, is opposed to the philosophical: an ideal philosophical contribution brings the discussion to a close by resolving the problems that gave rise to it; whereas an ideal literary contribution, say a novel, inspires the writing of more novels. This is also why Rorty chooses Derrida as his (somewhat reluctant) hero: “For Derrida, writing always leads to more writing, and more, and still more” (Rorty 1982, 94).

The insistence on proliferating textual productivity makes perfect sense for someone who (like Rorty) believes that all philosophical problems stem from the conceptual vocabularies that we end up favoring. Writing, on such a view, becomes a strategy for escaping the old language habits, for breaking out of the picture that holds us captive. This notion that *all* philosophical problems are language problems is probably a delusion (coming to terms with death is probably not a linguistic problem), but then it is a widely shared and familiar one. The more unusual is the simultaneous insistence that all writing must be *personal* (Rorty 1989, 125), that we must resist the philosopher’s temptation to substitute an attempt at “systematic renewal” of culture for “a personal story of intellectual development” (p. 101). Could this be more than a mere sentimental predilection congenial to those “whose lives were saved by books” (Rorty 1996b, 14), those whose highest aim is to teach others to love what they themselves have loved (p. 14)? We will have to postpone the answer to this question.

## 2 Ethics and the Image of Man

Professional philosophers are clever but lacking in wisdom (Rorty 1982, 221). They do not understand that political, ethical, valuational concerns must take precedence over the cognitive ones: because knowledge can only acquire significance in the context of a particular form of life; because it makes little sense to speak of knowledge without asking for what this knowledge is used. From this perspective, Rorty’s concern with the literary serves to underscore his commitment to the primacy of the value perspective over the purely cognitive one, to remind us about the importance of having a vision, or different alternative visions, to remind us that something has been lost when philosophy “was flattened out to the production and transmission of papers” (Danto 2010, 55).

Philosophy carried on as a literary enterprise, by contrast, could be thought of as initiating its audiences into a shared form of life (Danto 2010, 55). When it comes to literature this “Wittgensteinian” line of thinking is fairly common. Novels, presumably, produce moral insight by increasing our attunement to the form of life we call our own: by providing a fresh or nuanced perspective, by presenting the familiar in a new light, by deepening our understanding of what we already know and feel (Lamarque 2010, 381). They allow their readers to identify with the characters and to imaginatively inhabit their worlds. Meanwhile, professional philosophy in the recent past has resigned itself to depicting worlds “which readers cannot fit” (Danto 2010, 67): worlds inhabited

exclusively by dry philosophical abstractions. Philosophy, then, can be charged with forgetting in Murdoch's words "how to picture and understand human situations," with becoming oblivious to the problem of taking up a meaningful perspective on life, accompanied by attention to complexity and subtlety of concretely situated judgments. Thus, if the great works of literature can be seen as "monuments to the enduring human effort at revealing and understanding our deepest concerns about what it is to be human" (Lamarque 2009, 295), we may want the outstanding works of philosophy to be still counted among such literary masterpieces.

Rorty's pragmatist philosopher, accordingly, becomes a kind of philosophical anthropologist wondering retrospectively what "image of man" gives rise to the traditional philosophical problems (Rorty 1982, xxxiii). The eventual goal is to formulate a new image of man, which would enable us to simply jettison the old problems (p. 32), replacing them with new and more interesting ones. However, this project should not be conducted as a mere theoretical undertaking; instead it should be attempted in the Emersonian spirit as a process of ethical self-formation, whereby a person discloses herself as a "method" (Emerson 1983, 311) by establishing selective affinities for things that she will eventually call her own, while rejecting anything indifferent or uncongenial. The whole point of what Rorty calls the "highbrow culture" consists for him in sorting the past visions and figures into the good and the bad (Rorty 1982, 65), "the sort of person one wants to be from the sort one does not want to be" (Rorty 1989, 47). It is, then, a highly personal undertaking. The only reason to associate such intellectual activities with the literary is that "in the course of the nineteenth century imaginative literature took the place of both religion and philosophy in forming and solacing the agonized conscience of the young. ... Novels and poems are now the principal means by which a bright youth gains self-image. Criticism of novels is the principal form in which the acquisition of moral character is made articulate" (Rorty 1982, 66). However, in principle, nothing stops philosophers from contributing to this enterprise.

Literature can contribute to the formation of individual character in two different ways. It can do so intellectually, by providing the reader with a new vocabulary, a new set of categories, enlarging her conceptual repertoire, enabling thereby new, potentially liberating, shifts in perspective. Arguably, this is a task that a certain kind of philosophical writing should also be able to accomplish. Additionally, literature can provide a kind of sentimental education, clarifying the reader's emotions, and increasing her sensitivity to the sufferings of others. Philosophy admittedly cannot ordinarily compete in this realm without crossing over into some form of literary narration. Coincidentally, Rorty has a lot more of interest to say about the first task than he does about the second.

What he has to say about sentimental education, in fact, is not very different from the things that Nussbaum says in support and vindication of "the cognitive guidance of emotion" (Nussbaum 2010, 257): we should "cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars, not as representatives of a law, but as what they themselves are: to respond vigorously with senses and emotions before the new; to care deeply about chance happenings in the world, rather than to fortify ourselves against them; to wait for the outcome, and to be bewildered" (2010, 255). Moral progress, according to Rorty, is not secured through the familiar forms of argumentation but through expanding our "moral imaginations" (Rorty 1999, 127), and becoming more sensitive to the claims of others (1999, 81). We do not expand our moral imaginations by latching on to some

shared general similarities (Rorty 1989, 190), but by paying attention to concrete, densely written details of human existence, through the “detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like” (p. xvi). “Solidarity” says Rorty “is not discovered by reflection but created” (p. xvi); and it is ordinarily created by drawing on the resources of imaginative empathy (or sympathy) which are best developed by works of narrative fiction. The suggestion is not particularly controversial, nor is it particularly original.

With respect to inventing the new vocabularies, however, one cannot help but be amused by the uncanny semblance between Rorty’s rebel literary philosopher and the prototypical artist of the modernist avant-garde. The relationship, of course, is overtly acknowledged by Rorty when he says, for example, that, with respect to its emphasis on autonomy and novelty, “pragmatism is the philosophical counterpart of literary modernism” (Rorty 1982, 153). And of course, just as with the artistic avant-garde, not just any kind of novelty would do. An avant-garde artist may be an innovator, but he innovates by grasping the as yet unarticulated conventions that will presently enable him to establish his work’s “nontrivial identity” as a work of art (Fried 1982, 227). In other words, the artist strives to produce and “accepted innovation” (Danto 1986, 108), by invoking new conventions that can be acknowledged by others retrospectively as sharable (Jost 2010, 40). In a way, then, the avant-garde suggests a general model for thinking about progress in humanities: whereas a scientist succeeds by muscling the system of recorded observations into a new explanatory framework, an artist, or a philosopher succeeds by muscling the preexisting system of authoritative utterances, perspectives, and conventions into a new kind of story told in the language of his own. One succeeds by producing an accepted strong misreading.

The highest task for the ironist, says Rorty, is “to create a taste by which he will be judged” (Rorty 1989, 97). It is meant to be, once again, an intensely personal project: an attempt by the writer “to sum up his life in his own terms” (p. 97), “by redescribing the sources of heteronomous descriptions” (p. 100). One should not be worried about being “too personal,” or too idiosyncratic. In fact, the reason why “tracking one’s causes home, is identical with the process of inventing a new language” has to do with the fact that an antecedently shared language cannot capture what is most unique and idiosyncratic about a person (p. 27). Apparently, the goal is to be (in Kipling’s words) “wonderful and different and unlike all other animals, by five o’clock this afternoon” (Rorty 1996a, 60).

Nevertheless, although the project of self-creation through the creation of a new idiom may be a deeply personal endeavor, its success does depend on the way that it ends up being received (eventually) in the public cultural sphere: on whether suitably qualified others acknowledge it as an interesting innovation. A writer cannot break entirely free from the inherited language, which necessarily ties her to other human beings and their familiar modes of expression (Rorty 1989, 41). All innovation is always only partial (p. 43), always parasitic upon the possibilities of the accepted idiom. Hence, what one ends up saying always resonates to some degree with the utterances and concerns of others, and a powerful enough resonance may produce a transformation of the public idiom itself. One should not deliberately aim at producing such a transformation, or attempt to anticipate its consequences in advance. The proper motivation behind the invention of a new language is self-creation – a personal, existential concern – not an



activist striving to transform the world. Yet, the importance of one's intellectual developmental path is assessed retrospectively in the light of its aftereffects in the realm of the shared culture. After all, the rare books that succeed at creating new vocabularies "make the greatest differences in the long run" (Rorty 1989, 143).

There are two distinct ways in which one's individual contributions may eventually be taken up by the cultural discourse. There are those whose vocabulary gets absorbed into the everyday idiom: they "become a name but cease to be a person" (1989, 152). Then there are those whose works retain an intense sense of personal presence, but have only marginal effects on the public consciousness (p. 152). There are books we treat as teachers, and there are books we treat as close friends. The former tend to be written by philosophers, and the latter by writers of literature proper, although naturally there is a considerable overlap. The poetic function of creating a new language can be performed by writers and philosophers equally well, for the latter are, in the end, "ascetic priests" searching for "a language different from the tribe's" so as to enrich the language of later generations, disclosing new unanticipated possibilities of thought (Rorty 1991, 72). The real differences are twofold. First, a philosopher seeks to anchor himself in something that is not contingent, to rise above history; whereas a novelist is happy to "throw" herself [and her work] into history (1991, 76) as just yet another contingent possibility. Philosopher, of course, ends up doing (inevitably) the exact same, but continues to do his best throughout to remain in denial about it. Second, the philosopher has a taste for "theory, simplicity, structure, abstraction, and essence," while the novelist's taste is "for narrative, detail, diversity, and accident" (1991, 73). The philosopher, in other words, seeks a language that is capable of dissolving in a public idiom, transforming it in the process; whereas a novelist remains closer to the sphere of intimacy and trust that informs and shapes an individual's personal perspective.

The distinction is one of *modus operandi*, not of social significance. Moral and political reform are impossible without an intensity of a personal commitment which comes to be individually shared by those who discover that certain forms of indifference and cruelty militate against their deeply interiorized sense of self. The eventual moral consensus, on the other hand, is usually expressed in the form of philosophical platitudes. However, moral impact in the public realm is only a side effect. Most *avant-garde* literature, as Rorty readily admits, only teaches us how to live, not how to live morally (Rorty 1996a, 62). There is no reason, aside from the constraints of energy and time, why self-creation and concern for others cannot be combined (p. 64), but the two are only "compatible" (p. 62), they by no means entail each other.

### 3 Naturalism and Humanism

Some may be tempted to think about Rorty's position as a contemporary variant of Nietzsche's aestheticism. There are, of course, important similarities there. For example, as Nehamas reminds us, Nietzsche also gives preference to individuals who give "novel and unusual interpretations of the events that make them up" (Nehamas 1996, 29) and delights in the sheer play and proliferation of creative possibilities that result from their creative activity (p. 28). However, if we are looking for a common ground in this case, it may be wise to set aestheticism aside in favor of another Nietzschean observation:

namely, that “every culture is itself a natural phenomenon” (p. 28). *That’s* the key theme: one that’s shared by Nietzsche and Rorty, but also by Dawkins and Dennett. “Pragmatism” says Rorty, “starts out from Darwinian naturalism – from a picture of human beings as chance products of evolution” (Rorty 1996b, 15). Accordingly, he refers to his favorite view of the human beings as “biologistic” (Rorty 1999, xxxii).

This may come as something of a surprise, however, on a closer reading, Rorty’s recurrently repeated central tenets are substantially in accord with the naturalist commitments of an atheist humanism, which insists on the primacy of the human person understood as “contingent consciousness, shaped by genetic inheritance and by physical and social circumstances” (Clark 1993, 22). On this view, human beings have no essence to guide their destiny: all they have is “the current state of affairs – biological and cultural – that contains the preferences, values, beliefs, and dreams that *now* define us” (1993, 22). Human beings, then, are not distinguished from other animals by the fact that they carry within themselves the roots of all that is good and true (“rationality,” “morality,” “knowledge,” etc.), but by the mere capacity to alter themselves by acting upon themselves, for better or worse.

Accordingly, human languages, their conceptual vocabularies, can be understood as ways of “abbreviating the kinds of complicated interactions” that human beings end up having with their environment (Rorty 1999, 64). “Our language and our culture” according to Rorty, “are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids” (Rorty 1989, 16). Our culture, in other words, is a product of an evolution guided by the principles roughly analogous to those of natural selection. (We say “analogous” because most cultural products – such as new conceptual vocabularies – generally thrive or perish in cultural environments, and have only a mediate relationship with the natural environment proper.)

On this view, there is no need to explain cultural novelty in terms of some unfolding logic of cultural development; it is just something that happens – accidentally – like the scrambling of atoms by cosmic rays, and maybe as a result of some such scrambling (Rorty 1989, 17). Nor is there any need to explain why some conceptual innovations succeed, aside from stating that, insofar as they endure, they must have happened to find a niche. Philosophical vocabularies of Kant and Nietzsche are just “two out of many forms of adaptation, two out of many strategies for coping” (p. 35). So, to ask which one is right or which one is better is like asking whether rabbits are better than magnolias: we are merely talking about different presently viable life-forms, not the consecutive approximations to some ideal form. The advantage of such a view, according to Rorty is that it is “compatible with a bleakly mechanical description of the relation between human beings and the rest of the universe” (p. 17). His naughty postmodernist valorization of the “literary” is, in the end, but another facet of a prosaic commitment to metaphysical materialism.

“Strong poets” are “like all other animals” just “causal products of natural forces,” who are “capable of telling the story of their own production” in a new idiom (Rorty 1989, 28). With luck, their conceptual linguistic inventions may find a popular niche, because they simply happen to satisfy some transient need (p. 37). This kind of luck is what normally makes the (retrospective) difference between “genius and eccentricity” (p. 29), although essentially the same process leads to the production of both. The

“process” is perhaps too strong a word, for what we have in each case is an idiosyncratic agglomeration of contingencies, a chance meeting and intertwining of blind causes specific to the individual case. This, is why Rorty compliments Freud on his attention to “*details*” in the formation of individual character, to “the countless contingent causes” (p. 31). A materialist account of the mind is concentrated more plausibly on the detailed causal history of a concrete organism, than on the conceptual formation of a generic human type. Freud’s greatest accomplishment? The “mechanization of reason” (p. 33).

The merit of Rorty’s view, according to his own lights, is that it teaches us “to see a blind impress as not unworthy of programming our lives or our poems” (Rorty 1989, 35). An individual is best regarded as an “experiment in living” (p. 45); and literary individuals are merely those who can produce something like a verbal conceptual equivalent of their form of life. To be like them, roughly, is to think in *their* own terms. Their intention, however, is never to produce something novel by examining what has been done before: genuine novelty cannot be implied in or reasonably follow from something that preexists it. Like ordinary life-forms in the animal realm, literary individuals spring from what has come before them (causally); but they spring forth with a difference, a chance divergence, a slight mutation that makes them new, makes them harbingers of new lineages unthinkable heretofore. Whether they succeed depends on whether they find a niche, and here “fashion” is a good enough word for the process that determines whether speaking in a certain vocabulary proves to be a viable adaptation (Rorty 1989, 48). As Rorty puts it, “the creation of a new form of cultural life, a new vocabulary, will have its utility explained only retrospectively” (p. 55). It is, therefore, pointless to ask whether a particular accomplishment was recognized for “good reasons” or for purely “historical reasons,” since, on a naturalistic account of this sort, the line between reasons and causes becomes hopelessly blurred (p. 48). A life-form succeeds (provisionally) by simply proving itself viable under the present circumstances; and so does a form of thinking and writing.

The biologicistic metaphor (as metaphor) undoubtedly has its charm. It is endearingly reminiscent even of Nabokov once describing a talented writer as a freak: “and let us bless the freak; for in the natural evolution of things, the ape would perhaps never have become a man had not a freak appeared in the family” (Nabokov 1980, 372). As a substantive theory of culture, however, it is decidedly question-begging. Language, in this story, is “just language” (Caputo 1983, 671), “a tribute to the resourcefulness and inventiveness of the beings which we are” (p. 673), with new vocabularies adopted and discarded “to meet changing human purposes, to help people cope” (p. 674). Caputo is probably right to think that such a treatment of language is somewhat fatuous, for it entirely ignores the question of our historical and existential situatedness as human beings (p. 679), as it bypasses any substantial reflection on the relationship between language and the form of life in which it is embedded (see Reeves 1986, 353). After all, using a new vocabulary by itself almost certainly *does not* amount to inventing a new shared form of life. Nor can we easily dismiss Habermas’s rationalistic irony when he comments on Rorty’s nonchalant willingness to consign the development of every cultural discourse, including science and morality, to the work of “language-creating protuberances” (Habermas 1992, 206). The exclusion of normative dimension from assessing the validity or promise of cultural projects and shared forms of life requires a sophisticated and rigorous argument: we cannot simply assume that the failures and

shortcomings of conceptual systems and political initiatives are best understood as “symptoms of waning vitality, or aging processes analogous to the processes of nature” (Habermas 1992, 206), obviating the need for rational criticism undertaken in the more traditional spirit.

This is not the right place, of course, to pursue such objections conscientiously. Instead, we still need to elucidate the nature of the relationship between the individual (literary) projects of self-creation and their incidental public influence or usefulness. How can the private projects of self-creation recurrently produce new idioms uniquely suited to address important problems in the public realm? Isn't it a bit like trying to solve engineering problems by introspection? One possible answer is that, in fashioning new ways of thinking and speaking, creative individuals do not address public problems in a piecemeal fashion, but reconfigure instead our general sense of perspective by providing us with a new potentially viable “image of man.” Every sustained effort at self-articulation can be understood as an individual experiment in working out a contingent and concretely situated possibility of a meaningful personal perspective associated with a more or less consistently integrated self-consciousness. So, the products resulting from such efforts can be plausibly viewed as loosely sketched personality templates, enriching our repertoire of interesting, remarkable, or simply noteworthy characters whom we may want to emulate or distance ourselves from. Like all experiments, experiments in self-fashioning are best conducted on a limited scale. There is no reason why such experiments must be extreme or dangerous, as some critics suggest (Longford 2001, 585); however, the general practice of experimentation in all inquiries advises limiting exposure during the initial stages of testing a new proposal. In Rorty's case, the task of initial testing is undertaken voluntarily by the individual who is committed to being a certain kind of person or thinking in a certain way, accepting the ensuing consequences or implications. Others may be seduced, but never forced, to follow in his or her footsteps (at least partially): always convinced by personal example, but never by authority, be it the authority of persons, numbers, or accepted modes of argumentation. After all, one cannot give an argument for the kind of person you must choose to be, without undermining the very autonomy that lies at the core of your personhood.

#### 4 Concluding Remarks

The emphasis on the personal, so closely tied to the concern with the literary in Rorty's naturalistic conception of culture, has often been discussed with a view to its political implications, ostensibly because it pits his view against the entire influential tradition of critical theory, particularly popular in literary studies at the time. Rorty's enthusiasm for “depoliticizing” writing and philosophy – which he mistakenly associated with the work of Derrida (1996, 90) – has often been interpreted as “an apologia for the *status quo*” (Rosenow 1998, 259), if not an outright capitulation to the prevailing discourse of liberal capitalism. Rorty explicitly questions “the utility of philosophical theory for social democratic politics” (Rorty 1987, 565), and does so on the grounds that political interests (and corresponding visions) are always transitory: “people change their central projects” (Rorty 1999, 63). Admitting contingency as a driving force of cultural and social development renders attempts to articulate a transhistorical political theory

hopelessly futile (McGuinness 1997, 33). We would be better off trusting literature to improve our political climate by using irony and appealing to sympathy on a more personal level (p. 35). It may be tempting to call Rorty's view irresponsible. One could insist that it is desirable to have arguments we can offer those who for some reason remain obstinately unmoved by cruelty (p. 40). However, criticisms of this sort are ultimately misplaced. Rorty does not say that arguments of the sort desired are undesirable, he merely suggests that effective arguments of this sort are impossible, for we have no argument to offer those who do not recognize the basic terms of the argument.

Caputo sums up Rorty's ideological position very nicely when he says that, from the perspective of postmodern critical theory, Rorty's conception of the autonomous subject is "too strong," while his "suspicion of collective structures" is "too weak" (Caputo 1993, 165). Yet, neither is a product of a misunderstanding, political aloofness, or philosophical oversight. Rorty deliberately opposes the elimination of "the unique and the personal" in the fashionable works of theory (Rorty 1998, 125). He actively believes in the cultural need to create a positive space for individual self-involvement, a personal space par excellence. What he opposes, accordingly, are the ubiquitous forms of social collectivism which threaten and disdain the very existence of such a personal space. Rorty is, then, at least partially suspicious of *all* collective structures; what distinguishes him from a critical theorist, instead, is the refusal to single out the so-called "dominant" structures for special attention. In fact, he compliments the liberal societies precisely because they give an individual ironic intellectual the "freedom to articulate her alienation" (Rorty 1989, 89). "After all," according to Rorty, "part of the point of the efforts of us social democratic intellectuals is to help create a society in which there is room for subjectivity and self-involvement, room for the kind of private spiritual development that politically irrelevant philosophers and novelists help us to achieve" (Rorty 1987, 573).

Rorty's esteem for liberal societies is based on their presumed ability to balance the divergent demands of "socialization and individuation" (Rorty 1999, 117), and to provide the social order necessary for stability without introducing undue restrictions on the space for private experimentation. Perhaps he should have simply said that liberal bourgeois societies tend to be more hospitable to people with literary interests, who prize their personal space and intellectual autonomy. He could then add that the priorities of such people deserve respect despite the fact that they have no overt connection to social responsibility or usefulness, despite the fact that the autonomy these people seek "is not the sort of thing that *could* ever be embodied in social institutions" (Rorty 1989, 65). He could suggest that such respect is warranted, nonetheless, even in terms of social utility: because our past history suggests that individuals of this sort sometimes end up making transformative contributions to culture which could not be imagined otherwise. A stronger claim which links a peculiar naturalized conception of cultural development with the decisive role of contingent literary contributions, establishing thereby the primacy of liberal societies which best allow these contributions to flourish – *if* such a claim is being made – would not be likely to bear serious scrutiny. Instead it would obscure a very important point which Rorty's discussion of the literary brings to the fore: namely, that it is important to retain "idiosyncratic things or persons one loves with all one's heart" (Rorty 1999, 13), without hoping that such private predilections may one day become fused with popular social agenda, or sanctified by a universally shared goal.

Rorty's celebration of the literary intellectuals reminds us that there once was a numerous class of people whose intellectual pursuits were driven by personal interest and curiosity, rather than social activism or academic professionalism. These people reacted with amusement and vexation to the professional collectivism of intellectual and academic fads, because they believed that the integrity of belief is a matter of individual conscience, and that a certain inalienable degree of interiority is precisely what bestows a special dignity on us, human beings in general. In virtue of being intensely personal, their visions were more likely to inspire an individual life than to create a shared form of life (although sometimes they could do that as well, incidentally). The future probably does not belong to such literary intellectuals. The age of social networking is not likely to have much use for interiority; and a genuinely democratized public sphere unequivocally favors the engagement afforded by traditional philosophical arguments over the withdrawn solicitude of private literary imaginings and musings. Nonetheless, Rorty's spirited defense of the personal, the literary, the unshared, and the disengaged may still serve as a timely reminder of the value of the things past in a world where the meaning of "private" has been largely reduced to that of "domestic." In his discussions of literature, and of books in general, Rorty produces for us a value-laden vision of private (or personal) as that which one is entitled to keep to oneself, to shelter and conceal: not in the way in which one hides private property or stores it for safekeeping, but in the way that one conceals intimacy from public sight, to shelter it and to preserve it in loving care, so as to let it blossom when the time is right. In doing so, he also demonstrates, by personal example, that being a true literary intellectual permits one to remain, despite the passage of time, consistently more interesting than one's critics.

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