The Takeover by a Literary Culture

Richard Rorty's Philosophy of Literature

Elin Danielsen Huckerby

Faculty of English

Magdalene College

University of Cambridge

April 2021

Preface

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Faculty of English Degree Committee.

The Takeover by a Literary Culture

Richard Rorty's Philosophy of Literature

By Elin Danielsen Huckerby

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive account of the role literature, the 'literary', and the notion of a 'literary culture' plays in the work of the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty (1931-2007). While these notions are systematically significant in Rorty's work, no thoroughgoing study of the literary aspect of his *oeuvre* exists. I undertake this study to understand why Rorty hoped 'culture as a whole' would be 'poeticized' (*CIS* p. 53) rather than simply pragmatised, and why he, at the end of his career, stated that his key contribution had been his narrative about the 'takeover' by a 'literary culture' (PTG p. 4). I ask what work literature and a particular literary vocabulary does for Rorty as he articulates his own brand of pragmatism.

Examining Rorty's narrative *as* narrative, and foregrounding his constant alignment with the literary attitude, allows me to understand the Rortian project as a break with traditional forms, and, importantly, with the governing forms we impose on history and moral progress. Tracing the roots of the idea of a 'literary culture' in Rorty's work permits me to see *CIS* as a literary and poeticist response to a question Rorty's adoption of a literary vocabulary helps him articulate: how we might cultivate a humanist pragmatism – a mode of thought and work that emulates the attitude and writerly practices of the literary artist or critic. And, lastly, looking closely at why Rorty, despite advancing a thoroughly contextualist and functional conception of literature, recommends that we centre liberal-intellectual practice around plays, poems, and especially novels, lets me delineate the morally significant function Rorty takes literature in the narrow sense to be more efficient at performing – the performance of which depends on the cultivation of literary skill. I close by offering some thoughts on Rorty's readings of *Lolita* and *1984*, on how my findings enables us to become better readers of Rorty, especially of Rorty as a reader of literature, and on what I take Rorty's attention to literature to imply about the role and importance of the literary (critical) institution in contemporary society.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Dr Ross Wilson, whose expertise, pointed questions, and helpful commentary has been invaluable to this work, and whose support and unfailing faith in my ability to complete this project was essential to my own determination to see it through. I want to thank my advisor, Dr Christopher Tilmouth, for helpful advice at critical junctures, and Dr Sarah Meer who, as Director of Graduate Studies, created an environment for graduate students where I felt welcomed and valued. My thanks also go to everyone else at the Faculty of English, and at the University Library. The Fellows and staff at Magdalene College contributed significantly to making my time in Cambridge a memorable experience. I especially want to thank Dr Jane Hughes and 'Team English' – our road trips will be fondly remembered.

A decade ago, I left a job in the IT-industry to study literature, hoping to find a way to live where what I did for a living would be something I loved. As I progressed through a BA and an MA at the University of Bergen, I benefited greatly from the encouragement of Professor Erik Bjerck Hagen. His friendship and continued enthusiasm for my research has been a source of renewed confidence and perseverance in the face of setbacks. I also want to thank Dr Michael Bacon for his willingness to listen as I worked to get to grips with the subtleties of Rortian philosophy, and Professor Bjørn Ramberg's kind and heartening conversation whenever we met. Reader in Philosophy at the University of Warwick, Dr Eileen John, provided guidance and mentorship through the BP/SWIP-UK Mentoring Scheme, and Professor Emerita Catherine Belsey, who sadly passed away this spring, filled a similar role in my life in a personal capacity. Dr Yvonne Hütter-Almerigi and Dr Tracy Llanera have provided a space for discussion and critical thinking about all aspects of life and thought in our conversations. I owe them all my thanks.

When we moved to England, I did not expect that I would be so lucky as to find true friends, but at the school-gate I was taken in by a bunch of smart, warm, funny women, to whom I will always be grateful. They made me laugh when I needed it the most and rallied to help us when

Abbreviations and Conventions

Works by Rorty

AOC   *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998)

CIS   *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

CP   *Consequences of Pragmatism: (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982)

EHO   *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1991)), Philosophical Papers, 2

ORT   *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (1991)), Philosophical Papers, 1

PCP   *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), Philosophical Papers, 4

PMN   *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979)

TP   *Truth and Progress:* Philosophical Papers, 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Individual Articles

FMR   'Freud and moral reflection', in Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Philosophical Papers, 2 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1991)), pp. 143–63

IA   'Intellectual Autobiography of Richard Rorty', in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, ed. by Randall Auxier and Lewis Hahn, The Library of Living Philosophers, 32 (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2010), pp. 3–24

IV 'The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature', in *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 125–40

HKD 'Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, by Richard Rorty, Philosophical Papers, 2 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1991)), pp. 66–82

NITT 'Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism', *The Monist*, 64.2 (1981), 155–74

PKW 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An essay on Derrida', *New Literary History*, 10.1 (1978), 141–60

PPTC 'Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture', *The Georgia Review*, 30.4 (1976), 757–69

PRI 'Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 53.6 (1980), 719-738

PTG 'Philosophy as a Transitional Genre', in *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, ed. by Richard J. Bernstein, Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (MIT Press, 2004), pp. 3–28

TPP 'The Pragmatist's Progress', in *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, ed. by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 89–108

TWO 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 3–20

This dissertation adheres to the conventions of the MHRA Style Guide.

A note on spelling. In the case of verbs ending in -ize or -ise and their derivatives, I have opted to use the -ise form. Where the -ize form occurs in quotations, this has, naturally, been left intact.

Contents

x

Chapter 1

Pragmatism, Literature, Attitude

Introduction

That Richard Rorty was a literary philosopher in some sense is immediately clear from his work. Literature and an idea of a postmetaphysical 'literary culture' is a recurring refrain in his writing from the mid-seventies onwards. With the publication of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989, hereafter *CIS*), this theme became a prominent and distinctive facet of Rortian thought. Rorty deployed a range of concepts that sit at the heart of literary studies, urged philosophers to turn to literature and criticism, and turn away from philosophical representationalism. Moreover, he used novels, writers, and critics to make his case: Harold Bloom, Milan Kundera, Charles Dickens, Marcel Proust, George Orwell's *1984*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, to name a few.

  CIS is hard to categorise. It might be called a work of political or moral philosophy but is more appropriately described as a call to intellectual action to make a better world. It contains Rorty's rationale for a version of liberal democracy he calls a 'literary' or 'poeticized' culture.[1] He envisages this as a possible future where people turn to literature and literary critics for moral guidance. It is a place where intellectuals adopt a stance of self-conscious awareness of their own and everyone's writing *as* writing: as literature or poetry, rather than as a transparent layer between thought and world. They see their ideas – including their idea of who they are – as human-made imaginative creations. In this culture, perceptions of what constitutes a better world – or society, or person, or the good, or the just – would not be construed as metaphysical ideas but as temporary, renegotiable outcomes of a continual, imaginative, creative, and conversational process of human making. As this thesis will show, *CIS* can also be considered a literary work in a particular Rortian sense of 'literary'.

  It is a major task of this thesis to investigate what Rorty means by the designation 'literary', as well as by a 'literary' culture, and his invocations and uses of 'literary' works. These notions and their uses are not only central to *CIS* but systematically significant to his thought. In a late essay, 'Philosophy as a Transitional Genre' from 2004 (hereafter PTG), Rorty submitted that the most significant contribution he had made in his philosophical career was to further our efforts to bring about a 'literary culture'. The urgency and sense of drama conveyed as he makes this suggestion indicates the importance of its central construct:

---

[1] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 53.

A way of getting Nietzsche, James, Wittgenstein, Derrida, Heidegger, and Dewey under the same antirepresentationalist tent, and a focus on the overlap between their views rather than on their disagreements, is pretty much all I have to offer. I want us to see all six of them as heralds of a new dawn – not just a new stage in the history of philosophy, but a new self-image for humanity. I think of them all as assisting in the takeover by what I call a 'literary culture,' a culture unlike anything that has existed in the past.[2]

While Rorty's is not a Hegelian end-of-history vision, the rise of 'a new dawn', the 'takeover', the emergence of a radically new 'self-image for mankind', do not denote an insignificant event. There is clearly a before and an after.

The narrative about Western culture's intellectual and moral progress towards a 'literary' culture that Rorty points to as his central contribution was a story he told repeatedly – as he emphasises in PTG – throughout his career.[3] Its roots are already discernible in his 1967 'Introduction' to *The Linguistic Turn* when he worries that philosophy might never be able to move beyond a cycle of philosophers attempting to be presuppositionless but constantly being shown to fail by their successors.[4] It was articulated as a progress-narrative in the 1970s and was further elaborated in the 80s and 90s. Rorty's story runs from Platonic idealism, via the dualist, essentialising, systematic philosophising of Descartes and Kant, through Hegel's historicism to romantic expressivism, via Nietzsche, Darwin, classical pragmatism, and analytic philosophy, to a point where this vision of an expressly *literary* culture 'unlike anything that has existed in the past' becomes a conceivable future.[5]

This novel narration of intellectual history thus culminates in a utopian vision that cannot be set out without recourse to literature and poetry. In *CIS,* Rorty introduced the idea of 'final vocabularies': the set of words that we employ to justify ourselves, to formulate our 'long-term projects' and our 'highest hopes'.[6] 'Literary culture' was undeniably a part of Rorty's final philosophical vocabulary, and, by extension, so was the word 'literary' and a notion of literature.

---

[2] Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as a Transitional Genre', in *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, ed. by Richard J. Bernstein, Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (MIT Press, 2004), pp. 3–28 (p. 4).
[3] Rorty, 'PTG', p. 5.
[4] Richard Rorty, 'Introduction: Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy', in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. by Richard Rorty (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992 (1967)), pp. 1–39 (pp. 1–2).
[5] Rorty, 'PTG', p. 4.
[6] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 73.

There is, then, good reason to hold that literature and the literary is a vital topic in Rortian philosophy. However, despite this being a key term to Rorty, 'literary' is not regularly used to characterise him and his work. While it is frequently noted in the commentary that he used literary examples to illustrate his philosophical case, and that he considered literature of vital importance to moral and political deliberation and advancement, it is not unusual to come across explications of his thought that proceed as if there was a core Rortian *philosophy* and that literature and 'the literary' was an auxiliary matter.

Two sources might serve as examples: the entries on Rorty in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (hereafter *SEP*) and *Oxford Bibliographies*. The author of the former, Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg, is a thoughtful, nuanced, and sympathetic Rorty-interpreter, known for having made Rorty concede ground on the question of whether we need some conception of 'getting it right' to be successful users of language.[7] Additionally, while he mainly writes in an analytical vein, Ramberg has written on Rorty and hermeneutics, irony, and *CIS,* and appreciates Rorty's engagement with the continental tradition.[8] Yet, his authoritative account of Rortian philosophy does not provide any clues to the importance of literature in Rorty's work. The entry begins:

> Richard Rorty developed a distinctive and controversial brand of pragmatism that expressed itself along two main axes. One is negative – a critical diagnosis of what Rorty takes to be defining projects of modern philosophy. The other is positive – an attempt to show what intellectual culture might look like, once we free ourselves from the governing metaphors of mind and knowledge in which the traditional problems of epistemology and metaphysics… are rooted.[9]

The critical diagnosis was chiefly set out in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979, hereafter *PMN*) and in the essays published shortly before and after *PMN* collected in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982, hereafter *CP*).[10] Ramberg continues: 'Rorty's principal target is the

---

[7] See Bjørn T. Ramberg, 'Post-ontological philosophy of mind: Rorty versus Davidson', in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. by Robert Brandom, Philosophers and Their Critics, 9 (Malden, Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 351–70. Rorty's response follows. For a recent evaluation of what is at stake here, see Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi, 'Two Forms of Realism', *ejpap*, XII.1 (2020).

[8] See for instance Bjørn T. Ramberg, 'For the sake of his own generation: Rorty on destruction and edification', in *Richard Rorty: From Pragmatist Philosophy to Cultural Politics*, ed. by Alexander Gröschner, Colin Koopman and Mike Sandbothe (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 49–72; Bjørn 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.

[9] Bjørn T. Ramberg, 'Richard Rorty', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta [accessed 20 January 2020].

[10] *Consequences of Pragmatism: (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

philosophical idea of knowledge as representation, as a mental mirroring of a mind-external world. Providing a contrasting image of philosophy, Rorty has sought to integrate and apply the milestone achievements of Dewey, Hegel and Darwin in a pragmatist synthesis of historicism and naturalism'.[11]

Ramberg does add that:

> Characterizations and illustrations of a post-epistemological intellectual culture, ...are more richly developed in later works, such as *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), [and other works]. In these writings, ranging over an unusually wide intellectual territory, Rorty offers a highly integrated, multifaceted view of thought, culture, and politics, a view that has made him one of the most widely discussed philosophers in our time.[12]

While this emphasises the importance of *CIS*, the observation that literature and a specifically literary, 'poeticized' culture is important to Rorty's work is not made.[13] Ramberg only mentions 'literature' once, as he notes that Rorty ended his career as a Professor of Comparative Literature at Stanford University.[14] The significance of this is not considered.

A similar observation can be made by looking at Neil Gascoigne's entry in *Oxford Bibliographies*. Gascoigne has worked extensively on Rorty and is also a sympathetic commentator.[15] *CIS* is summarised in the following way:

> Describes the trajectory of Western thought as an attempt to make commensurable two 'constellations' of values: those relating to our individual need to fulfil, create, or perfect ourselves (to exercise private autonomy), and those relating to our desire for solidarity with others, expressed in our public obligations. Rorty's alternative image for the intellectual is that of the 'liberal ironist,' combining an awareness of the contingency of one's own self-conception with a commitment to liberal values.[16]

There is nothing inherently wrong with this formulation. What appears incongruous is that this is a description of *CIS* as a work, yet its defining focus on literature is not deemed worthy of note.

---

[11] Ramberg, 'Richard Rorty'.
[12] Ramberg, 'Richard Rorty'.
[13] Poeticized: Rorty, *CIS*, p. 53.
[14] Ramberg, 'Richard Rorty'. My italics.
[15] See for instance Neil Gascoigne, *Richard Rorty: Liberalism, irony and the ends of philosophy*, Key Contemporary Thinkers (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), and Neil Gascoigne, *Rorty, Liberal Democracy, and Religious Certainty* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2019).
[16] Neil Gascoigne, 'Richard Rorty', in *Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets: Philosophy*, ed. by Duncan Pritchard (Online: Oxford University Press).

Moreover, while Gascoigne mentions 'literary criticism' and the 'poet' very briefly when introducing Rorty as a philosopher, Rorty's literariness does not make it into the list of themes in his work Gascoigne provides. Nor is this aspect mentioned as part of the discussions of these themes.[17]

Anyone turning to either of these sources to find representative distillations of prevailing views on Rorty and Rortian pragmatism would be forgiven for remaining unaware of the fact that Rorty placed great importance on literature.

One might object that caring about literature is not what *philosophers* do – that would make them literary critics. However, as I contend in this thesis, Rorty's persistent literariness cannot be separated from his philosophical, ethical, or political concerns. Moreover, he explicitly argued that philosophers ought to become 'literary critics' (I return to this in chapter 6). Hence, one might expect any expert interpreter of his work to consider this matter with care. Even if becoming a literary critic might seem a step too far, a lack of attention to the literary aspect of Rorty's work at moments when the explicit aim is to do it justice as a whole begins to look not just like a shortcoming, but one that leaves out something vital. What I want to suggest is the possibility of foregrounding Rorty's literariness – of taking it as seriously as Rorty did. That is what this thesis aims to do.

Rorty, Language, and Literature

What do I mean when I talk about Rorty's literariness? *PMN* has a literary dimension not widely remarked upon: its most apparent and structuring imagery is Shakespearean. It seems likely that Rorty adopted the mirror-metaphor most directly from Wittgenstein, but when the 'Mirror of Nature'-image is juxtaposed with the title of Part One 'Our Glassy Essence', the imagery points directly to Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, and *Measure for Measure*.[18] The phrase 'mirror of nature' occurs when Hamlet explains to the players how to perform the famous 'play within the play', urging

---

[17] The central themes in Rorty according to Gascoigne are: Philosophy of Mind and Transcendental Arguments; Epistemology; Reference, Truth, and Objectivity; Democracy; Liberalism; Religion; Varieties of Pragmatism; Pragmatism and the Future of Philosophy. I take no objection to this as a way of organising Rorty's work *per se* but observe that any discussion of the role of literature in Rorty's work is omitted from this account.

[18] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 9. Rorty says: as he states: '[i]f we have a Wittgensteinian notion of language as tool rather than mirror, we will not look for necessary conditions of the possibility of linguistic representation'. The mirror-metaphor was central to Wittgenstein, and I have not been able to find any other sources that would let me ascertain who Rorty adopts this image from.

them to deliver their lines carefully so as to not turn the performance into comedy. Their task is: '…to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure'. As George Hibbard observes, Shakespeare is referencing a long and much-quoted definition of comedy, attributed to Cicero: comedy is 'an imitation of life, a mirror of custom, and an image of truth'.[19] Rorty credits Peirce for first having used the phrase 'man's glassy essence', from *Measure for Measure*, in philosophy, but also quotes Shakespeare directly: 'But man, proud man / Dressed in a little brief authority / Most ignorant of what he's most assured— / His glassy essence—like an angry ape, / Plays such fantastic tricks before high Heaven / As make the angels weep—who, with our spleens, / Would all laugh themselves mortal.'[20]

Thus, *PMN* will, to anyone familiar with Shakespeare, have a literary undercurrent, and one that runs together leitmotifs like the comedic, play and playfulness, truth, representation and the real, fiction and drama, scepticism and knowledge, the problem of action in the face of imperfect knowledge, powerlessness, voice, and moral justice – themes vital to Rorty's *oeuvre* as well. This pivotal work plays itself out against a Shakespearian backdrop, and it hardly seems an accident, given how substantial Rorty's writing on literature would become. However – I draw attention to this to say that when I claim that the literary has been central to Rorty since the 1970, I do *not* mean it in the sense of discussing Shakespeare, *Hamlet*; plays, novels, or poetry. 'Literary' here needs to be understood differently.

---

[19] *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (1600)*, ed. by George R. Hibbard (Online, 2012), *The Oxford Shakespeare*, 3.2.

[20] Rorty, *PMN*, p. 42. Rorty's use of solidi and m-dashes rather than line-breaks. See also *Measure for Measure (1604)*, ed. by N. W. Bawcutt (Online, 2012), *The Oxford Shakespeare*, 2.2.
Rorty provides some interesting comments in n19 p. 42: 'See J. V. Cunningham, " 'Essence' and *The Phoenix and the Turtle*," English Literary History 19 (1952), p. 266 for the claim that the "glassy essence" here is the "intellectual soul," which is "glassy, for it mirrors God." The O.E.D. does not give this sense of "glassy," but Cunningham is persuasive and is followed by the editors of the Arden Shakespeare (to which l owe the reference to Cunningham). Shakespeare here seems to be simply original, rather than using a stock trope. There is apparently no allusion to the "*speculum obscurum*" passage in St. Paul or any other standard notion. For the history of analogies between the soul and a mirror, see Herbert Grabes, *Speculum, Mirror und Looking-Glass* (Tiibingen, 1973)'. This footnote is also where Rorty credits Peirce: 'The phrase *man's glassy essence* was first invoked in philosophy by C. S. Peirce in an 1892 essay of that title on the "molecular theory of proto-plasm," which Peirce strangely thought important in confirming the view that "a person is nothing but a symbol involving a general idea" and in establishing the existence of "group minds" (cf. *Collected Works,* ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss [Cambridge, Mass., 1935], 6.270 '271)'. It is beyond the scope of this Introduction to discuss this in detail, but I hope to do so in the future within a larger discussion of imagery and metaphor in the pragmatist tradition.

From the beginning of his career, Rorty persistently grappled with the consequences of adopting a particular stance towards minds, selfhood, language, vocabularies, texts and textuality, and with philosophy's role within the broader intellectual culture. In his essays from the 1970s, collected in *CP*, Rorty provides variations on pragmatist objections to representationalism that emerge from a shifting focus on Dewey, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Freud, Derrida, Cavell, and others, combined with sketches of alternatives to foundationalist intellectual culture. He builds the case against analytic philosophy that will culminate in *PMN*, but rather than detailing a point-by-point argument against representationalism, describes the narrative, human-made, and contingent character of philosophical problems.

It is striking how early and consistently Rorty describes his stance in terms that explicitly align his philosophical attitude with perspectives usually attributed to literary artists and critics. In 'The World Well Lost' (1972), he emphasises that what counts as morality, or poetry, or science, is a matter of what kinds of stories we think it possible to tell.[21] In 'Dewey's Metaphysics' (1975) and 'Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey' (1976), Rorty emphasises that Dewey's work helps us reject the idea that we are on a 'quest' for truth as certainty and to see types of inquiry and experiences as non-competing activities. (Rorty is referencing Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty* (1929). The quest-idea is a significant theme in chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis).[22] Dewey, moreover 'helps us put aside that spirit of seriousness which artists traditionally lack, and philosophers are traditionally supposed to maintain.'.[23]

These observations play directly into Rorty's writings on Wittgenstein. In essays like 'Keeping Philosophy Pure' (1976) and 'A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor' (1980), Rorty explicates Wittgenstein as a thinker that helps us resolve a residual quasi-essentialism in Dewey with regards to the idea of 'experience',[24] and to adopt hermeneutics as 'an attitude': an 'intellectual position' of

---

[21] Richard Rorty, 'The World Well Lost', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 69.19 (1972), 649–65 (p. 654) The world best lost is 'the world' understood as '...the realistic true believer's... obsession...' (p. 661). Rorty's title invokes John Dryden's 1677 drama *All for Love; Or, The World Well Lost: A Tragedy*, but Rorty only mentions Dryden once – as a poet that does not look like a poet to an imagined Patagonian unfamiliar with our 'world' (p. 658).

[22] Richard Rorty, 'Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 30.2 (1976), 280–305. Reprinted in CP 1982.
Richard Rorty, 'Dewey's Metaphysics', in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. 72–89 Lecture given in 1975, reprinted in CP.

[23] Rorty, 'Dewey's Metaphysics', pp. 87–88.

[24] Richard Rorty, 'Keeping Philosophy Pure: An Essay on Wittgenstein', in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. 19–36 (p. 35).

being open to 'the course of conversation'.[25] Wittgenstein aids us in thinking of philosophy as, in Wilfrid Sellars' terms, narratives that articulate how 'things' 'hang together' (I discuss this in chapter 2).[26] Rorty insists that making such a narrative turn would not mark the end of an essential human pursuit, but rather the end of a cultural tradition: the end of an argumentative *form* (I pick up 'form' as a cue in chapters 2 and 3, and traditions, form, and style in chapter 6). Wittgenstein helps us see this old form as 'hopeless' through responding to it with 'satire' and 'examples'.[27] In 'Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey' Rorty adds that Wittgenstein teaches us that all we can do is to 'assemble reminders for a particular purpose' – Rorty would later use Mathew Arnold's term 'touchstones' to describe a similar practice (as I explain in Chapter 4).[28]

Derrida becomes increasingly important to Rorty in the 1970s and helps Rorty complement his pragmatist-Wittgensteinian critique of representationalism, the 'picture picture' of language, and the correspondence theory of truth.[29] In 'Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy' (1977), Rorty adds an emphasis on *writing*: 'Derrida thinks that the ability to see writing as writing is what we need to break the grip of the notion of *representation*, of getting things accurately pictured'.[30] He develops this in 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing' (1978), where Rorty suggests that 'writing about writing will help to "deconstruct" the Kantian way of looking at things'.[31] Becoming more fully aware of ourselves *as* language users engaged in a process of playing with and deploying signs and sounds for effect, will aid the antirepresentationalist cause. (This is a topic in Chapter 5).

Similar examples could be drawn from nearly every essay he publishes throughout the 1970s, and it is against this rich and repeatedly 'literary' background that Rorty first deployed the term a 'literary culture' in 'Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture' (1976, hereafter PPTC).[32] He further develops this idea in 'Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-

---

[25] Richard Rorty, 'A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor', *Review of Metaphysics*, 34.1 (1980), 39–47 <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1290792513/fulltextPDF/13829870DA854697PQ> [accessed 19.03.19] (p. 39).
[26] Rorty, 'Keeping Philosophy Pure', pp. 29–30.
[27] Rorty, 'Keeping Philosophy Pure', pp. 32–34.
[28] Rorty, 'Heidegger and Dewey', p. 295.
[29] Richard Rorty, 'Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 74.11 (1977), 673 (675-676).
[30] Rorty, 'Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy', p. 678, Rorty's emphasis.
[31] Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An essay on Derrida', *New Literary History*, 10.1 (1978), 141–60 (p. 146). Hereafter PKW.
[32] Richard Rorty, 'Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture', *The Georgia Review*, 30.4 (1976), 757–69.

Century Textualism' (1981, hereafter NITT).[33] I return to these texts and the development of this term in Rorty's work in substantial detail in subsequent chapters.

And Rorty continued to associate his variant of pragmatism with the literary (critical) institution throughout the 1980s. The majority of his essays from this period are collected in *Objectivity, relativism, and truth* (1991, hereafter ORT) and *Essays on Heidegger and others* (1991, hereafter EHO).[34] His engagement with language, texts, poetry, metaphor, and how this relates to our form of (moral) life continues and expands. Donald Davidson's philosophy of language plays an increasingly important role in Rorty's thinking through the 70s and 80s, and Davidsonian perspectives add to his analysis of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Freud, and Derrida. Community, and how we shape our lives in relation to and as part of a community, is a vital matter in many of the texts from this period, for instance, 'Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism' (1983), 'Habermas and Lyotard on Post-Modernity' (1984) and 'The priority of democracy to philosophy' (1988).[35] Here, too, Rorty aligns his pragmatist attitude with that of the artist when he recommends a 'light-minded' attitude towards problems we deliberate on in public (moral, political, philosophical) – he wants us to 'view matters aesthetically'.[36] 'I should argue', he tells us, 'that in the recent history of liberal societies, the willingness to view matters aesthetically – to be content to indulge in what Schiller called "play" and to discard what Nietzsche called "the spirit of seriousness" – has been an important vehicle of moral progress'.[37] (This topic – holding our concepts lightly, viewing matters aesthetically – is a vital issue in Chapter 5 of this thesis.)

One of Rorty's more startling advances at this time is that he redefines objectivity as solidarity, as intersubjective agreement. In several articles Rorty relates science to rule-governed behaviour and the solidity of its facts to the firmness of its solidarity. He also makes a case for a pragmatic humanism, for human solidarity (a defining topic in Chapter 6), and already here suggests that literature plays a vital part as a resource for expanding our sense of self. Literature helps us become able to have conversations that lead to broader agreement and understanding, to

---

[33] Richard Rorty, 'Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism', *The Monist*, 64.2 (1981), 155–74.

[34] *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (1991)), Philosophical Papers, 1 < https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/objectivity-relativism-and-truth/04DFAEAC5991EC3C403C50B83C6F4086>,
 Essays on Heidegger and Others (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1991)), Philosophical Papers, 2 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/essays-on-heidegger-and-others/AEDEB66001493274C87B57D66585A59A>.

[35] Richard Rorty, 'Habermas and Lyotard on Post-Modernity', *Praxis International*, 4.1 (1984), 32–44
Richard Rorty, 'The priority of democracy to philosophy', in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 175–96.

[36] Rorty, 'The priority of democracy', pp. 193–94.

[37] Rorty, 'The priority of democracy', pp. 193–94.

greater solidarity, by equipping us to have conversations with participants in ever more varied kinds of interpretive communities.[38]

The essays I have enumerated to this point are integral to the development of Rorty's conception of a literary culture, without, however, extensively engaging with either literary theory or literary texts. But Rorty does address literary themes and problems directly in essays such as 'Deconstruction and Circumvention' (1984), 'Texts and Lumps' (1985), 'Freud and Moral Reflection' (1986), and 'Philosophy without Principles' (1985).[39] In 'Deconstruction and Circumvention', Rorty levels all principled distinctions between philosophy and literature, or literature and science. Literature is, he suggests, what we have come to call texts that use words in more unfamiliar ways.[40] Or it is the 'conversational situation' where 'everything is up for grabs at once, where the motives and terms of discussion are a central subject of argument'.[41] This kind of situation is, he says, a 'literary' conversation. Moreover, in these essays, Rorty begins to think of a 'literary culture' as a term with a broader scope: we can '...think of a 'literary or "poetic" moment as occurring periodically in many different areas of culture – science, philosophy, painting, and politics, as well as the lyric and the drama.'[42]

---

[38] See for instance Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism Without Method', in *Sidney Hook: Philosopher of Democracy and Humanism*, ed. by Paul Kurtz (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1983), pp. 259–73.
Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism without method', in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 63–77. Richard Rorty, 'Solidarity or Objectivity?', *Nanzan Review of American Studies*, 6 (1984), 1–18 <https://nanzan-u.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=pages_view_main&active_action=repository_view_main_item_detail&item_id=645&item_no=1&page_id=13&block_id=21> [accessed 7 September 2020].
Richard Rorty, 'Science as solidarity', in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 35–45.
Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner, 'Introduction', in *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. by Richard Rorty, Jerome B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 1–14.
Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 9–26.
[39] Richard Rorty, 'Deconstruction and Circumvention', *Critical Inquiry*, 11.1 (1984), 1–23 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343288>.
Richard Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', *New Literary History*, 17.1 (1985), 1–16.
Richard Rorty, 'Freud and Moral Reflection', in *Pragmtism's Freud: The moral disposition of psychoanalysis*, ed. by Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan, Psychiatry and the humanities, v. 9 (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 1–27.
Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy without Principles', *Critical Inquiry*, 11.3 (1985), 459–65.
[40] Rorty, 'Deconstruction and Circumvention', p. 3.
[41] Rorty, 'Deconstruction and Circumvention', p. 4.
[42] Rorty, 'Deconstruction and Circumvention', p. 4.

A similar drift is detectable in Rorty's reply to Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels's 'Against Theory' (1982): 'Philosophy without Principles' (1985).[43] Rorty suggests that philosophy must become a practice of playing vocabularies against vocabularies to see what works. And this, Rorty offers, is what 'literary theory' already does: 'It names the practice of splicing together your favorite critics, novelists, poets and such, and your favorite philosophers.'[44] (What Rorty means by 'literary criticism' is a topic in chapters 4 and 6 of this thesis.) In 'Texts and Lumps', Rorty continues to commend this kind of literary attitude and practice and equate its adoption with progress. There is no difference, Rorty here insists, between texts and lumps: both types of objects can *cause* us to hold beliefs, but no objects can suggest beliefs for us to hold.[45] What occurs is that we tell stories about them; we make it hang together, recontextualise, have conversations about them, experiment, make heuristics, put to use. Culture can thus be reclassified in terms of genre, a sequence of texts, as a way of getting by by using a particular language (I discuss this in chapter 6).[46]

These essays that deal explicitly with the literary attitude and the uses of literature should be read alongside Rorty's writings on language and metaphor, like 'Pragmatism, Davidson, and truth' (1986) and 'Unfamiliar noises' (1987) or 'Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics' (1989).[47] Rorty sees metaphors as contributing to moral and intellectual progress through functioning as stimuli that cause effects and, over time, perhaps pragmatic change (I address this in my discussion of *CIS* in Chapter 5 of this thesis). This takes us up to the publication of *CIS* in 1989 and the point where Rorty's literariness became recognised as a prominent feature of his thought. Later, these themes are further developed in essays such as 'Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens' (1991), Rorty's 'Introduction' to *Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov (1992), 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language' (1993), 'Tales of Two Disciplines' (1994), 'The Necessity of Inspired Reading' (1996, later expanded into 'The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature' in 1998), and his 2004 Page-Barbour lectures, published in 2016 as *Philosophy as*

---

[43] Steven Knapp and Walter B. Michaels, 'Against Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 8.4 (1982), 723–42, and Rorty, 'Philosophy without Principles'. Both of these and responses to Knapp and Michaels by Stanley Fish and E.D. Hirsch, amongst others, are collected in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Against theory: literary studies and the new pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
[44] Rorty, 'Philosophy without Principles', p. 463.
[45] Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', p. 7.
[46] Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', p. 15.
[47] Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism, Davidson, and truth', in *ORT,* pp. 126–50; Richard Rorty, 'Unfamiliar noises: Hesse and Davidson on metaphor', in *ORT,* pp. 162–72; Rorty, 'Philosophy as science, metaphor, politics'.

Poetry.[48]

It is then this literariness I have sought to identify and understand – the why and how of Rorty's constant alignment of his pragmatist attitude with that of the literary artist and critic: his literary *stance*.

The above summary indicates that Rortian pragmatism might indeed be understood as an attitude. The whole of this thesis attempts to undergird this suggestion by explicating Rorty as advocating a literary attitude that correlates, for pragmatic reasons, with the adoption of a literary intellectual (critical) – readerly and writerly – practice. I emphasise this not just because the attitude-practice division is central to this thesis but also because others in contemporary literary studies talk in similar terms, for similar anti-theoretical, anti-representationalist reasons. In her recent *Revolution of the Ordinary*, Toril Moi emphasises how a Wittgensteinian view of language (which Rorty also subscribes to) sets aside the 'Augustinian picture of language' where every word has a meaning determined by its correlation to the world.[49] And Moi sees Wittgensteinian philosophy and her Cavellian brand of ordinary language philosophy as an attitude: '[a]ll Wittgenstein leaves us with is a certain spirit or attitude in which to go about our investigations. Here the word "spirit" stands in opposition to "approach," or "method," or "theory," for ordinary language philosophy proposes no such thing.' Moi takes this word up from Cora Diamond and Richard Fleming, and notes that Rita Felski similarly speaks of 'the "thought style" or the "mood" uniting otherwise different kinds of critique'.[50] Similarly, I want to talk about Rorty's attitude – albeit more in terms of an

---

[48] Richard Rorty, 'Philosophers, Novelists, and Intercultural Comparisons: Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens', in *Culture and modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, ed. by Eliot Deutsch (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), pp. 3–20.
Richard Rorty, 'Introduction' in Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, Everyman's library, 67 (London: David Campbell, 1992 (1962)), pp. vii-xix.
Richard Rorty, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language', in *The Cambridge companion to Heidegger*, ed. by Charles B. Guignon, Cambridge companions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 337–57. Richard Rorty, 'Tales of Two Disciplines', *Callaloo*, 17.2 (1994), 575–85.
Richard Rorty, 'The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature', in Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 125–40.
Philosophy as Poetry, ed. by Michael Bérubé, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016), Page-Barbour Lectures.
[49] Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 26. A Rortian might talk about literary studies after Wittgenstein, Quine, and Davidson, as these are the figures Rorty takes to have dismantled the idea that language is a clearly defined structure: see Rorty, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language', pp. 337–38.
[50] Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, pp. 1–2.

intellectual disposition than a mood or a feeling. Although that certainly also follows. Explicating the Rortian attitude is a key objective of chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis.

The Literature on Rorty and Literature

Given the above, Rorty's conception of a poetic or literary attitude seems to be at least as significant in his work as his specific uses of literary works. I want to argue that it is, and moreover, that a full appreciation of Rorty's uses of literature can only be articulated in the context of the close alignment of the Rortian pragmatist attitude with the aesthetic attitude. This framework seems necessary for wholly understanding Rorty on literature. Thus, the lack of a coherent account of Rorty and the question of literature that situates it within his philosophical work has been the fundamental motivational drive for writing this thesis.

The fact that, as late as 2015, Ulf Schulenberg, with his *Romanticism and Pragmatism,* could provide the first sustained discussion of the idea of a literary culture in Rortian thought, speaks to my claim that this is indeed an underappreciated topic in the extensive secondary literature on Rorty.[51] However, while Schulenberg's book does focus on Rorty's 'literary culture', the comparisons and contextualisation he offers take up the greater part of his analysis: Schulenberg relates Rorty's notion to the thought of F.C.S. Schiller, Roland Barthes, Marcel Proust, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, John Dewey, Martha Nussbaum, Michel Foucault, and Richard Wright. Because the scope of Schulenberg's study is this broad, it cannot be as deep as it is wide, and it does not provide a detailed and comprehensive study of the literary within Rortian thought.

What Schulenberg sees, which William Curtis also notes, is that Rorty's romanticism 'is too often neglected or summarily dismissed by his philosopher critics'.[52] Schulenberg importantly

---

[51] Ulf Schulenberg, *Romanticism and Pragmatism: Richard Rorty and the Idea of a Poeticized Cultur* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). The commentary on Rorty can be difficult to approach. Christopher Voparil noted fifteen years ago that 'Achieving a mastery of the vast secondary literature on Rorty has long ceased to be humanly possible.' Christopher Voparil, 'On the Idea of Philosophy as Bildungsroman: Rorty and his Critics', *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 2.1 (2005), 115–33 (p. 118). Voparil also observes that 'the greatest as yet unsolved puzzle surrounding the Rorty phenomenon may very well be the question of why so much of the secondary literature is... hyper-critical in nature' and that this leads to a situation where '[it] is often difficult to discuss Rorty without reference to a mountain of philosophical and historical baggage that demands as much attention as Rorty's thought itself.' (p. 116,119). Ten years later, William Curtis affirmed that this still was the case, and matters have not gotten any less complicated since. See William M. Curtis, *Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and liberal virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 'Introduction' and p. 55.
[52] Curtis, 3n6.

sketches the lines from Rorty's romanticism to his anti-authoritarianism but only once acknowledges Tim Milnes's crucial book on this topic. In *The Truth about Romanticism* (2010) Milnes discerns a (proto)pragmatist mode of thought in John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in particular and shows its resemblance to the theories of modern pragmatist thinkers such as Rorty, Davidson and Jürgen Habermas.[53] While Milnes is sympathetic to the Rortian position, he argues that Rorty, in his attempt to isolate 'the romantic celebration of creation from what he perceives to be its nostalgia for absolute grounds […] underplays the "pursuit of intersubjective, unforced agreement" within romanticism itself.'[54] While I am broadly in agreement with Milnes's assessments of Rorty and Curtis's of the lack of writing on Rorty's romanticism, my topic is a different one, and my task is another than both Schulenberg's and Milnes's, who both contextualise Rorty within a broad set of figures from Kant until today. I want to present careful readings of primary texts where Rorty elaborates his notions of the 'literary' and a 'literary' culture.

While Schulenberg insists on the philosophical potential in Rorty's ideas, others are less enthusiastic. I touched on Moi above, who quickly dismisses the entire pragmatist tradition as yet another 'formalism' resulting from unselfconscious essentialist thinking.[55] As Áine Mahon shows in *The Ironist and the Romantic* (2014), there is substantial overlap between the pragmatist tradition Rorty inscribes himself in and the strand of thought from Emerson to Cavell, which Milnes tellingly names the 'romantic pragmatic tradition'.[56] Moi's expedient dismissal of pragmatism might in part be motivated by a worry about the ethical implications of its stance: she holds Rorty to be a 'radical relativist'.[57] While Rita Felski is more favourably inclined towards pragmatist thought, she expresses similar concerns when she insists that we cannot afford to be as 'cavalier about the difference between finding things out and making them up' as Rorty is; reading,

---

[53] Tim Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).
Tim Milnes, 'Rorty, Romanticism, and the Literary Absolute', in *Pragmatism and Literature*, ed. by Wojciech Małecki (= *Pragmatism Today The Journal of the Central-European Pragmatist Forum*, 2 (2011)), pp. 24–33.
[54] Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism*, p. 11.
[55] See Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, pp. 64–65.
[56] Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism*, pp. 61–65. Áine Mahon, *The Ironist and the Romantic: Reading Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
[57] Toril Moi, 'Kortversjonen. Stanley Cavell: The Claim of Reason', *Prosa*, 10 (2001). My translation from Norwegian. ('Kortversjonen' translates as 'The Short Version'.)

Felski stresses, has an ethical dimension.[58] Moi, Felski, Catherine Toal whom I discuss in my conclusion and, to an extent, Mahon perceive Rortian pragmatism to lack a constructive moral project. The word 'spirit' might be invoked again: these critics conjure Rorty as a troubling spirit – Felski holds him to be 'cavalier', Moi indicates that Rorty is not interested in human experience, Mahon sees Rorty as 'blasé', less hopeful than Cavell, less honest, courageous, and sincere.[59]

Rorty was and is a disturbing presence in philosophy too. His dismissal of concerns and purposes philosophers took to define their discipline and self-image provoked many to respond with a refusal to see Rorty as anything but trouble. Alan Malachowski persuasively argues that a great deal of Rorty-criticism is curiously aimed at Rorty as a person and misses its target owing to demonstrable misapprehensions of his aims.[60] But this matter of taking Rorty *seriously*, of the spirit he writes in, and in what spirit to take his work, prevails. In a recent article, Gascoigne and Michael Bacon take this matter up and shows how closely it is linked both with philosophers' self-conception and with the question of whether Rortian pragmatism fails to present us with effective strategies – which the authors maintain it does.[61] Cheryl Misak serves as one of their prominent examples. In a later essay, she sharply reaffirms a view where Rorty's presumed lack of seriousness and commitment is taken to render his position not just philosophically problematic but ethically and politically inert.[62] In the same publication, Christopher Voparil reads Rorty's rhetorical playfulness as integral to his philosophical case and achievements. Voparil observes that Rorty, in a newly published paper from the 1980s, suggests he was, in fact, 'trying to moralize' truth.[63]

This thesis attempts to contribute to these contemporary debates by articulating Rortian pragmatism as both an attitude and a playful, poetic practice – where the latter is indeed construed

---

[58] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 115. See also Hans U. Gumbrecht and Rita Felski, 'The Inspirational Power of a Shy Philosopher', in *Remembering Richard Rorty*, ed. by Ralph Cohen (= *New Literary History*, 39 (2008)), pp. 69–70, and her remarks on Rorty in Rita Felski, 'Introduction', *New Literary History*, 44.4 (2013), v–xii.

[59] Felski, *Limits of Critique*, p. 115. Moi, 'Kortversjonen'. Mahon, p. 31 and 41.

[60] Alan Malachowski, *Richard Rorty* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[61] Neil Gascoigne and Michael Bacon, 'Taking Rorty seriously: pragmatism, metaphilosophy, and truth', *Inquiry* (2020), 1–20 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/0020174X.2020.1820375> [accessed 17 March 2021].

[62] Cheryl Misak, 'The End of the Liberal Ironist', in *Nº 20 (RORTY)*, ed. by E. D. Huckerby and Pedro Ferrão (= *Forma De Vida* (2021)). Cf. Part III of Gascoigne and Bacon. See also Cheryl Misak, 'Richard Rorty's Place in the Pragmatist Pantheon', *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, ed. by Randall Auxier and Lewis Hahn, The Library of Living Philosophers, 32 (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2010), pp. 27–43.

[63] Christopher Voparil, 'The Serious Rorty', in *Nº 20 (RORTY)*, ed. by E. D. Huckerby and Pedro Ferrão (= *Forma De Vida* (2021)). *On philosophy and philosophers: Unpublished papers, 1960-2000*, ed. by W. P. Małecki and Christopher Voparil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 151.

as emblematic of Rorty's constructive, ethical project. I suspect the relative neglect of his literary attitude and emphasis on *poiesis* contributes to the persistent difficulties concerning how to formulate Rorty's moral contribution. And my understanding of why Rorty insists on naming his culture 'literary' (rather than merely 'pragmatic') emerges from connecting his earlier suggestion that adopting an aestheticising stance (as Voparil touches on) 'remoralizes' the 'mechanical self', with his later claim that his central contribution was his narrative about the 'takeover' of a 'literary culture'. (See Chapter 5. I take up Felski's objection at the end of chapter 4, and Rorty's ethical concerns come to the fore in chapters 5, 6, and 7.)

Gascoigne and Bacon take the recent surge in explications and applications of Rortian thought as a sign that the intellectual community is ready to take Rorty's work 'seriously'.[64] In fact, in the years since his death several books have endeavoured to do so, but only one of these pertains directly to literary studies: Bryan Vescio's *Reconstruction in Literary Studies: An Informalist Approach*.[65] Vescio considers how we might perceive ourselves as a discipline – and think about reading, teaching, and theory – if we adopt a thoroughgoingly pragmatist, anti-essentialist position. His aims are comparable to Moi's in *Revolution of the Ordinary*, but where she follows Cavell, Vescio follows Rorty.[66] Vescio goes further in attempting to reconceptualise 'literature' through articulating what it is 'good for', and in defining literary studies by the social purpose it 'actually serves'.[67] This is, ultimately, to be 'a "Ministry of Disturbance," a cultural institution devoted to the disruption of received wisdom and settled methodological routine.'[68] Vescio moreover describes literary theory as having a rhetorical and pedagogical role in explaining 'a set of institutional practices' and in connecting these to 'Deweyan ideals of experiment and growth'.[69] I arrive at similar inferences in Chapter 6, and my Conclusion.

Nicolas Gaskill has also approached the matter of how we might conceive literary theory from a pragmatist perspective. Like Vescio, Gaskill begins from the premise that '[pragmatism]

---

[64] Gascoigne and Bacon, p. 1.

[65] Bryan Vescio, *Reconstruction in Literary Studies: An Informalist Approach* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[66] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to undertake a comparison between Vescio and Moi. I have, however, began work on an article outlining the salient differences and points of agreements. Their approaches, in my view, complement each other.

See also, for instance, Michael Bacon, *Richard Rorty: Pragmatism and political liberalism* (Lanham, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007); Marianne Janack, *Feminist interpretations of Richard Rorty*, Re-reading the canon (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Gascoigne, *Rorty, Liberal Democracy, and Religious Certainty*; Rosa M. Calcaterra, *Contingency and Normativity: The Challenges of Richard Rorty*, Value inquiry book series, Volume 329 (Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2019); or Tracy Llanera, *Richard Rorty: Outgrowing modern nihilism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

[67] Vescio, p. 8 and 12.

[68] Vescio, p. 15.

[69] Vescio, pp. 17–18.

asks "What does a text do?" rather than "What does a text mean?" and then traces the difference that this difference makes.'[70] But Gaskill's pragmatism is 'one of transactive experience and semiotic production rooted in Dewey and Peirce'.[71] He sees Rorty in a less favourable light: Rorty 'banished' 'an interest in "experience" outside of language' alongside 'attention to "scientific method"', and dismissed a mode of being in the world that allows us to 'make sense of our ethical connections to the lives of others.'[72] While my assessment of Rorty does not fully align with Gaskill's, I see extensive overlap between Gaskill's desire to advance a pragmatist literary-critical mode of thought and what Rorty wants to articulate.[73] Part of my argument is that Rorty does not articulate his literariness clearly enough, and doing so might open up new avenues for investigating how we might link neopragmatism to Gaskill's suggestions, and to the question of how we might envision and work within a fully-fledged pragmatist literary-critical paradigm.

The Aims and Approach of This Thesis

As I have been outlining, this thesis aims to provide a specific and comprehensive account of the conceptual role that literature, the literary, and the notion of a literary culture plays in the work of Richard Rorty. It aims to defend and substantiate the claim that Rorty was a literary philosopher and to reinforce the importance of his literariness to his philosophical project. At the same time, my goal is not to get Rorty right – an aim Rorty would reject for reasons that will become clear. My goal is to perform a reading of his *oeuvre* that proceeds from taking Rorty's own claim that his pivotal contribution was his narrative about the progress of Western culture towards a literary culture at face value and to present this reading persuasively. Using Rorty's literary vocabulary is not, and should not be, the only way to talk about his work. It is, however, an instructive way to conceptualise it – for reasons Rorty seems to have sensed more than explicitly set out, which leaves room for this study to attempt to do so.

I want to note that I am aware that these aims sketch a monumental task. Undertaking this project has required familiarity with the greater part of everything Rorty wrote over his last four decades, as well as the contexts to which it belongs. I have nevertheless held on to the conviction that the most significant contribution I could produce would emerge from working to fully

---

[70] Nicholas Gaskill, 'Experience and Signs: Towards a Pragmatist Literary Criticism', in *Remembering Richard Rorty*, ed. by Ralph Cohen (= *New Literary History*, 39 (2008)), pp. 165–83 (p. 165).

[71] Gaskill, 'Experience and Signs', p. 183n39.

[72] Nicholas Gaskill, 'What Difference Can Pragmatism Make for Literary Study?', *American Literary History*, 24.2 (2012), 374–89 (p. 381) , and Gaskill, 'Experience and Signs', p. 180n7.

[73] Gaskill's description of pragmatism as process is particularly on point here. See Gaskill, 'Experience and Signs', p. 167.

comprehend Rorty's broader reasons for talking about 'the literary' and using literature the way he does. This has meant that, much like Schulenberg, I could not also provide in-depth discussions of each subtopic of interest that arose. Several leads and observations have had to be left where they were found, at least for now. And whereas I could have written at length on Rorty's readings of, for instance, *Lolita* and *1984*, I have chosen to pay greater attention to the meta-level where the question is how and why Rorty uses these novels for his purposes (I address this in my conclusion). I could have paid extensive attention to Rorty's relationship to Harold Bloom or how he overlaps with, for instance, Wayne C. Booth, or Lionel Trilling – all of whom figure in Rorty's work. I have not. Where Schulenberg's aim was to unwrap and contextualise Rorty's idea of a literary culture, mine has been to keep it in focus throughout, but *without* losing sight of its place in Rorty's overarching narrative. Where I have seen a particularly strong potential for separate pieces of work to emerge from individual observations, I have indicated this, and in the conclusion of this thesis I relate some thoughts on further work I see emerging from this thesis.

The fact that the literary aspect of Rortian thought is inseparable from Rorty on representationalism, or ethics, or politics, or any other topic, presented a challenge as I attempted to work out how to approach this project. However, as I grappled with how to construct an instructive narrative on Rorty, I found myself increasingly mindful of *Rorty's* narrative *as* a narrative. As mentioned above, he saw himself as having told one story: his anti-representationalist story of the development of Western liberal culture.[74] This led me to contemplate what *kind* of story this was, which led to the realisation that Rorty's narrative had a different form than the governing narrative of traditional philosophy. When I also found that Rorty's semi-autobiographical narratives about his own intellectual and moral development traced the same arc, I realised that I could use the matter of form to talk about the attitude these form-choices expressed. This exploration resulted in an original and demonstrably useful redescription of Rortian pragmatism as the rejection of the quest-narrative form as a governing narrative form. As it provides an overarching conception of the Rortian attitude that has proven helpful to subsequent explications, this is where I begin my account in chapters 2 and 3.

It was also paramount to undertake a specific study of the origins of Rorty's idea of a literary culture. To this end, I carefully read and interpreted the essays in which he introduced this term in the 1970s, and considered how he conceived this literary, or 'poeticized' culture in *CIS*. I found that the scope of this term observably expanded from denoting a 'highbrow' sub-culture to envelop Rorty's vision of a utopian secular, liberal, democratic culture more broadly. I also observed that 'the literary', as used by Rorty, meant something in and of itself. It indicated an

---

[74] Rorty, 'PTG', p. 5.

attitude – and this attitude was carried into Rorty's use of the terms *literary* critic, *literary* work, and *literary* culture – they came to denote critics, works, and cultures that embodied a literary attitude. This is not a point Rorty sets out coherently, but which emerges when Rorty's writings on literature and the literary over several decades are taken together and studied for thematic coherence. Chapters 4 and 5 thus present readings of key essays and the first part of *CIS* and bring out these observations regarding the Rortian attitude from the material.

Rorty's view of the private and the public, as well as the making of selfhood and collective identity, became more prominent elements in these readings than I had expected. As did the matter of the ethical implications of his position – or more precisely the ethical problem I see *CIS* as an attempt at resolving through showing, in writing, the possibility of a character (the liberal ironist). By allowing this to emerge and take up room I developed a clearer understanding of why Rorty takes living an aesthetic life to be a moral act. This, in turn, helped me get to grips with what I describe as Rorty's recommendations for writerly and readerly practices for liberal ironists, as well as with how and why he classifies books and writers the way he does, how he thinks about the usefulness of theory versus the uses of literature. I found that while Rorty advances a thoroughgoingly anti-essentialist view of literature, he nevertheless suggests that there are texts that more effectively accomplish the task he associates with literature, an insight I use to reconstruct a Rortian notion of literature in a narrower sense. These are the topics of chapters 6 and 7.

Outline of Thesis

This thesis is then structured as follows. Chapters 2 and 3 are closely related and present a novel redescription of Rortian pragmatism as the rejection of the quest-narrative form as the governing, unifying form for history, moral or intellectual progress. Rorty's 'semi-autobiographical' essays 'The Pragmatist's Progress' (1992) and 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids' (also 1992), which detail his private intellectual development, are related to his story about the 'takeover' of a literary culture, and to central passages from Rorty's 'Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism' (1979) where he defines his pragmatist attitude. The focus is on the transformative moment when the quest-hero becomes the pragmatist, and on this as a moment of overcoming through amending one's self-image, rather than as a moment of conversion to a new doctrine.

Chapter 3 applies the insights of Chapter 2 and continues to investigate what kind of story Rorty's 'tediously-familiar up-from-representationalism' story is, through asking whether Rortian

philosophy is best seen as a *Bildungsroman,* as both Voparil and Curtis have suggested.[75] I show that while Rorty says that the narrative he constructs is 'at the start' a quest-romance, the story he actually tells does not fit this form. It is instead a story about rejecting the quest. This leads me to suggest that Rorty's work is *not* most adequately captured by the idea of *Bildung*, and to question whether Curtis' suggestion that Rorty is a virtue ethicist holds up. Taking from Alasdair Macintyre the idea that narrative unity is a premise for the articulation of virtues, and from my analysis the claim that Rorty rejects framing life and history within a unified governing narrative, I suggest it does not. Instead, I offer that the analogy of the protean, conversational, and constantly reinvented genre of the novel, or, more broadly, the literary institution, can better help us get to grips with Rortian philosophy, including his moral thought.

Having thus established an overarching view of Rortian pragmatism as literary, Chapter 4 begins a detailed study of Rorty's adoption and use of the term 'literary culture'. I read and discuss PPTC and NITT to examine how Rorty used this term around the time of the publication of *PMN*. I show that Rorty closely aligns his attitude and practices with that of the literary artist and critic. I also observe that this helps him formulate what he takes to be a relevant concern about pragmatism: a worry about our ability to constrain poetic practices.

Continuing to pay careful attention to the notions of a literary culture and a literary attitude, chapter 5 takes up this worry and sees it as the central concern of *CIS*. I read *CIS* as a literary work in the Rortian sense and the 'liberal ironist' as Rorty's attempt at showing us the possibility of a character that, at first glance, appears paradoxical. For the ironist to make not just a self but an 'aesthetic', open and expansive self, is explained as being as close to a moral obligation as it is possible to come on the Rortian paradigm. To facilitate an aesthetic (in a particular Rortian sense of that word) culture is seen as the collective equivalent of this moral obligation. This allows Rorty's insistence on the need for facilitating a 'poeticized culture' to emerge as his response to the ethical challenge left unresolved by *PMN*, underscoring the importance the aesthetic and literary dimension has in Rorty's broader project.

Chapter 6 turns to Rortian critical practices: to the style, the rhetorical mode of conduct, which the adoption of such an attitude would cause us to think useful. I examine Rorty's recommendation in *CIS* that liberal ironists use literature in the service of the liberal project (lessening cruelty) and private pursuits, but remain cautious about the use of theory for anything but their private efforts to become more sensitive ironists, more aware of the power of redescription. This helps me explain Rorty's distinctions between writers who are 'exemplars' and

---

[75] Rorty, 'PTG', p. 5.

'fellow citizens', and books that are 'stimulating' and 'relaxing', which helps me explicate what Rorty means when he talks about literature in 'the narrow sense'.

Chapter 7 concludes this thesis by looking at Rorty's readings of *Lolita* and *1984*, and showing why the analysis of Rorty's views on literature I have offered – one that fully situates this topic within his wider philosophical discourse – is needed to make Rortian pragmatism more accessible and useful to us as literary scholars. I also suggest that Rorty might have made more of the analogies between his stance and the literary attitude, because doing so brings his emphasis on making, *poiesis*, into clearer view than the idea of an 'ironist' stance, and this brings the constructive, ethical nature of the aesthetic project inherent in Rortian pragmatism into sharper focus. I close by indicating what I take Rorty's emphasis on the literary to suggest about the role of literary studies in a broader institutional and social context and offer some thoughts on what further work might come from this thesis.

Chapter 2

The Pragmatist's Progress from This World to That Which Is To Come

Wilfrid Sellars's description of the aim of philosophy reads almost like a poem, or, perhaps, like a list of writing prompts:

> THE aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. Under 'things in the broadest possible sense' I include such radically different items as not only 'cabbages and kings', but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death.[1]

Rorty adopted and adapted this description: philosophers, he thought, should tell stories about how things 'hang together'.[2] However, the task was not 'to understand', in some deep sense, as much as it was to construct narratives that made 'things' 'hang together' in such a way that they help human beings 'cope'.[3] Rorty turned to 'narratives' and 'stories' as rhetorical means for conceptualising his approach well before *CIS*. In 'Texts and Lumps' (1985), he says: 'For pragmatists, telling stories about how one's favorite literary texts hang together is not to be distinguished from – is simply a species of – the "philosophical" enterprise of telling stories about the nature of the universe which highlight all the things one likes best and least.'[4] And: 'There is no synoptic view of culture which is more than a narrative account of how our culture managed to get to where it now is.'[5] In *CIS,* he talks about history and moral philosophy in the same manner: 'A historicist and nominalist culture of the sort I envisage would settle instead for narratives which connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with Utopian futures, on the other.'[6]

---

[1] Wilfrid Sellars, 'Philospohy and the Scientific Image of Man', in Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, perception and reality* (Atascadero, California: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991 (1963)). Part I, which this sentence opens, is entitled 'I. The Philosophical Quest'. Sellars does not comment on the venture he outlines *as* a quest.

[2] See Richard Rorty, 'Introduction', in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xiii–xlvii, particularly p. xiv. See also Richard Rorty, 'Keeping Philosophy Pure: An Essay on Wittgenstein', *Yale Review*, 65.3 (1976), 336–56, and Rorty, *PMN*, pp. 182–92 (in particular. Also cf. p. 365 and the description of how we might construct edifying, hermeneutic responses).

[3] Occurs frequently. See for instance Rorty, 'Introduction' to *CP*, p. xliii.

[4] Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', p. 2.

[5] Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', pp. 15–16.

[6] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xvi.

Rorty came to see his *oeuvre* as defined by one such narrative: a story about the intellectual history of Western culture from Platonism to the burgeoning literary culture of his day, to a utopian future where culture 'as a whole' has been 'poeticized'.[7] Furthermore, as noted in the introduction, he came to see this specific narrative as defining his unique contribution to philosophy.[8] Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis examine the philosophical content of Rorty's account of history and progress. In this chapter and the next, I want to ask a question about this narrative that he did not ask: what kind of story is it? Others have considered this question: Voparil has suggested we might view Rortian philosophy as a *Bildungsroman*, a suggestion that merits further scrutiny, especially as this conception underpins Curtis' recent and original vision of Rorty as a virtue ethicist.[9] But before homing in on the form of Rorty's narrative in chapter 3, this chapter will examine Rorty's narrative as a story.

I first present a reading of two essays where Rorty recounts his *Bildung*-story: 'The Pragmatist's Progress' (hereafter TPP) and 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids' (hereafter TWO, both 1992). Rorty called TPP a 'semi-autobiographical narrative', which I take as representative for both texts. Rorty recounts his philosophical maturation within a specific culture and process of education, and in both essays, he contextualises this autobiographical tale by relating it to his philosophical aims.[10] Rorty's first-person-singular stories are not separable from his first-person-plural narrative about the 'we' of Western culture of which he is part. Juxtaposing these tales with Rorty's 'grand narrative' about the development of Western culture towards a 'literary culture' reveal them to trace a plot that moves from a state of naiveté towards a peripety where an old self-image is overcome. I clarify the transformative moment of pragmatist becoming by looking at a similar moment sketched in Rorty's important 1979 Presidential Address.[11] I close by taking up the suggestion I made in the Introduction that Rortian pragmatism is best conceived as an attitude of orientation and a related practice.

---

[7] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 53.

[8] Rorty, 'PTG', p. 4.

[9] See Voparil, 'Philosophy as Bildungsroman'. Curtis, p. 9.

[10] Richard Rorty, 'The Pragmatist's Progress', in *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, ed. by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 89–108 (p. 91). The same applies to the third, which is found in Richard Rorty, 'Intellectual Autobiography of Richard Rorty', in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, pp. 3–24.

[11] Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 53.6 (1980), 719-738.

Becoming the Pragmatist

When Umberto Eco, in his 1990 Tanner Lectures, wanted to set limits for how we might interpret a text, Rorty constructed his response around a personal narrative of intellectual development entitled 'The Pragmatist's Progress'.[12] This, he said, was a 'quest romance'.[13] Quest romances call for a chivalric hero who will overcome obstacles to win glory, love, and loot. '[A]t the start' of this particular story, Rorty says, the hero is a 'Seeker after Enlightenment' – a detail that sets up a metaphysical version of this plot, a search for ultimate Truth.[14] In the religious allegory which Rorty's title invokes, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrims Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* (1678), we follow a faithful pilgrim as he overcomes numerous temptations on his journey to Heaven. Implicitly, then, the naïve start-of-the-journey Rorty-as-a-young-man-character believed that there would be steps to be taken, a journey to complete, deeds to do, virtues to acquire, and eventual victory in the form of seeing the light. That is not, however, how this plot plays out. Our hero does not have to fight dragons or extricate himself from the Slough of Despond. The challenges he meets are books, different perspectives, alternative vocabularies. He faces intellectual trials – that ultimately challenge his sense of self.

His first test of faith and virtue comes as he 'reads a bit of Nietzsche' and begins to see established dualisms as 'just so many metaphors for the contrast between an imagined state of total power, mastery and control and one's own present impotence.' With this in mind, the Seeker rereads *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and 'comes down with the giggles' – for with 'a bit of help from Freud' he is now able to reconceive of Nietzsche's idea of the will to power 'as just a high-faluting (*sic*) euphemism for the male's hope of bullying the females into submission, or the child's hope of getting back at Mummy and Daddy'.[15] There are also inner demons to be fought: distracting daydreams that cast one in a 'Walter Mitty-like role in the immanent teleology of world history'.[16] Nevertheless, the traveller overcomes these desires to be personally powerful, to be a hero, and arrives – not at his imagined destination but at a transformational moment.

---

[12] Eco's lectures, as well as responses by Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose, were collected in Stefan Collini (ed.), *Interpretation and overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[13] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 91.

[14] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 91.

[15] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 92. This is not the laughter of the monomaniac losing his grip on reality, but that of the ironist: the one, as Rorty explains in *CIS* published three years before this essay, who sees that we cannot hold on to foundationalism and yet faces this realisation cheerfully. See the analysis of TWO below, and Chapter 4.

[16] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 92. In his later work Rorty also associated his pragmatism with anti-authoritarianism. See for instance *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

This moment unfolds when he pauses to look back on his journey so far and sees his 'previous peripeties not as stages in the ascent toward Enlightenment, but simply as the contingent results of encounters with various books which happened to fall into one's hands'.[17] It is a moment of both liberation and reckoning. The protagonist rejects the narrative that led him to this point – the story he thought himself part of and that thus had defined his self-image. But rather than feeling lost, he reframes the situation. He changes his attitude towards the specific intellectual challenges he encountered on his way to this new vantage point. They never constituted a necessary progression of ideas he must understand to arrive at Truth. In the absence of the narrative scheme that had structured these ideas and governed his actions by the power of his belief in its immanent teleology, they now appear as descriptions to be appraised 'according to their efficacy as instruments for purposes, rather than by their fidelity to the object described'. And without the governing narrative, in which the protagonist had thought his role was to be a powerful questing hero in search of Truth, he now appears to himself as one human amongst many. Still 'capable', but more modestly, of 'as many descriptions as there are purposes to be served'.[18] The 'Seeker after Enlightenment' thus *becomes* 'the Pragmatist' at the moment when his self-image is altered in this decisive way.

The formative change thus lies in going from seeing oneself as a *hero*, someone inherently better than the rest, on a singular *quest* for the right description (for truth; absolute knowledge), to seeing oneself as one human agent amongst many on a journey into the unknown – and simultaneously as someone capable of coping, of creating tools in response to shifting needs along the way. I am concerned to emphasise the dual movement at play here. On the one hand, here is the voluntary lessening of one's own importance and authority: one is not a hero, nor a chosen being in communion with God or Nature or the Moral Law. On the other, this insight also brings a heightened sense of one's capabilities *qua* 'mere' human being, derived from an increased awareness of all ideas and concepts' human-made nature. Hence this insight reinforces a sense of accountability and responsibility as well, as the discussion of TWO and PRI below will make clearer.

Rorty told the story of the Pragmatist's Progress to make a hermeneutical point. This narrative was, he said, an interpretive 'grid' he imposed on all books he came across.[19] A look at how Rorty

---

[17] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 92. This is not meant to be taken literally. Rorty fully accepts that one's program of reading, whether in an educational or private setting, will be shaped by established and reasonably predictable institutional criteria, by traditions and canons, by one's language and culture, and so on.
[18] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 92.
[19] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 91.

applied this 'grid' as he approached Eco's work can deepen our understanding of what is at stake in the moment of transformation.

Rorty's 'grid' – one possible way 'things' might 'hang together' to borrow Sellars's terms again – has a function much akin to Gadamerian pre-judgements or the scientist's hypothesis as she approaches raw data. Rorty recounts that upon reading Eco's 1988 novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, he thought he detected a parallel progression to his own. Eco's novel is a multi-layered tale of secret societies, conspiracy plots, and the search for absolute Truth, laced with philosophical ideas about semiotics, interpretive theories, and the art of reading. The novel can be read as a satire of the postmodern search for meaning, and Rorty did indeed read it along these lines:

> I decided that Eco must be satirizing the way in which scientists, scholars, critics and philosophers think of themselves as cracking codes, peeling away accidents to reveal essence, stripping away veils of appearance to reveal reality. I read the novel as anti-essentialist polemic, as a spoof of the metaphor of depth – of the notion that there are deep meanings hidden from the vulgar, meanings which only those lucky enough to have cracked a very difficult code can know.[20]

Rorty took Eco's novel to be a 'send-up' of structuralism: 'of the very idea of structures which stand to texts or cultures as skeletons to bodies, programs to computers, or keys to locks'. But Eco was not a pragmatist – Rorty concluded that the details of Eco's later work were too difficult to place within the Pragmatist's Progress-grid he was trying, by his own admission, to 'impose'.[21] As the world pushed back against the hypothesis, Rorty adjusted his interpretation accordingly. His grid was a temporary, open-ended, heuristic device for starting to think about how things might hang together.

Within this self-reflective analysis of his interpretation of Eco, Rorty provides some helpful analogies for understanding what is at stake in that decisive moment when the 'Seeker after Enlightenment' becomes 'the Pragmatist'. Rorty first read *Foucault's Pendulum* as the negation of Eco's '*A Theory of Semiotics* – a book which sometimes reads like an attempt to crack the code of codes, to reveal the universal structure of structures', and concluded 'that it stood to that earlier book as Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* to his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*'.[22] That is, he first took the novel as confirmation that Eco had undergone the same intellectual self-

---

[20] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 89.
[21] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 89.
[22] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 89.

transformation he had. Referencing a dramatic moment in the story, where its main character seems to walk away from the others' increasingly frenzied search for the code of codes, in favour of quietly relishing the experiences and sensations of life itself (the image of his infant child and the juiciness of peaches), Rorty says:

> I read this passage as describing a moment like that when Prospero breaks his staff, or when Faust listens to Ariel and abandons the quest of Part I for the ironies of Part II. It reminded me of the moment when Wittgenstein realized that the important thing is to be able to stop doing philosophy when one wants to, and of the moment when Heidegger concluded that he must overcome all overcoming and leave metaphysics to itself.[23]

This way, Rorty was 'able to call up a vision of the great magus of Bologna renouncing structuralism and abjuring taxonomy'.[24]

It is this list of transformative moments that is telling. Shakespeare and Goethe did not read Nietzsche or Freud, so this has nothing to do with Rorty's specific experience of giggling at the particular idea of Will to Power. Note also that it makes no difference to Rorty whether the writers in question expressed themselves through poetry or prose: he levels all distinctions between life and work, text and context. It is all simply taken to be juxtaposable material – 'things' that can be made to 'hang together' by 'imposing' a narrative (whether that narrative is usable or not, is persuasive or not, is another matter, as we have just seen). What matters here is that these narratives (unlike Eco's) and their peripeties do align with the grid and climax of the Pragmatist's Progress. Prospero breaks his staff so the spellbound can see reality – he dispenses with illusions. *The Tempest* ends with him asking forgiveness for his previous hubris and the realisation that he only has himself and the mercy of others to rely on – and that this will set him free. There is, of course, a long tradition of identifying Prospero the dramatic character with Shakespeare the playwright, as well as for seeing this moment in *The Tempest* as symbolising Shakespeare leaving his art behind, and hence Rorty's reference invokes this as well. Part II of *Faust* not only leaves the romantic quest of Part I behind for the ironies of its more complex narrative, but moves from individuality to collective society, from higher aspirations to earthly strivings as a source of vitality; it drops idealist illusions in favour of appreciation of physical and aesthetic value. Goethe

---

[23] Rorty, 'TPP', pp. 90–91.

[24] Rorty, 'TPP', pp. 90–91. Notice here one of Rorty's own small but effective literary moments when he, through casting Eco as 'the great magus' equates him, with dramatic flair, with Prospero, and conjures up some of the most powerful and theatrical scenes from Faust. Rorty's prose is littered with such moments, and their invariable effectiveness speak to his qualities as a storyteller.

wrote part II not as a text to be scrutinised for its hidden meaning but as an appeal to the senses and to 'satisfy the eye'.[25]

What these moments share is that they are moments of transformation constituted by giving up the quests that until then had consumed and defined these protagonists. At all these junctures, illusions are dropped, and the central characters fall back on – or must reckon with – their humanity. These are *not* moments of *conversion*, *Kehres*, as there is no re-orientation towards another fixed goal, no taking up of a different quest; no (re)turning, no getting on the *right* path to Enlightenment. The Pragmatist does not adopt a new doctrine. All these moments represent a decision to surrender. They are moments of letting go of ideas or ideals that, until that moment, *did* govern, and thus freeing moments where letting go expands one's realm of possibilities. They represent a giving up *of* higher metaphysical art- and life-defining causes and giving oneself *over* to how things then, in their mere worldly humanity, are. They moreover represent overcoming as they are moments of acceptance of limitations, earthly pragmaticism, *and* recognition of a new sense of autonomy.

A Cheerful Commitment to Irreducible Temporality

'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids' follows the same pattern of the protagonist first being captivated by a vision which a later transformative moment reveals to be an illusion, followed by a new sense of freedom and autonomy, optimism, and expansion of the realm of possibilities.

As a son of left-wing political activists, Rorty knew 'at 12' that 'the point of being human was to spend one's life fighting social injustice'.[26] This made him worry about his joyous 'private, weird, snobbish, incommunicable' and not socially useful interests – one of them in American wild orchids – which seemed incompatible with this higher goal. He was sincerely worried that Trotsky might disapprove.[27] When, at fifteen, he left home for the University of Chicago, he had a vague idea of wanting to solve the problem of how to reconcile Trotsky and orchids; socially useful activities with private, idiosyncratic pleasures:

---

[25] Johann P. Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret*, Cambridge library collection. Philosophy, 1 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 344.
[26] Richard Rorty, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 3–20 (p. 6). For an account of Rorty's family history and his parents' political activism, see Neil Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
[27] Rorty, 'TWO', p. 6.

I wanted to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework which would let me - in a thrilling phrase which I came across in Yeats – 'hold reality and justice in a single vision'. By reality I meant more or less, the Wordsworthian moments in which, in the woods around Flatbrookville (and especially in the presence of certain coralroot orchids, and of the smaller yellow lady slipper), I had felt touched by something numinous, something of ineffable importance. By justice I meant what Norman Thomas and Trotsky both stood for, the liberation of the weak from the strong.[28]

The young-Rorty-character is here once more 'at the start' of his progress, once again a 'Seeker after Enlightenment'.[29]

The phrase that thrilled Rorty is from Yeats's *The Vision,* where the poet set out a supernaturally inspired cosmological system, supposedly dictated by the spirits to his wife. Rorty misquotes Yeats slightly: the exact phrase from *The Vision*, is 'They have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice' – they being the 'circuits of sun and moon'.[30] One might surmise that the substitution of 'single thought' by 'one vision' might have been done to emphasise the ocular metaphor implicit in Yeats's title and its connotation of mirroring, reflecting, which was so important to the mature Rorty. In any case, what so excited the young Rorty, was the idea of a system that could encompass everything.

To the poets of high modernism, the notions of reality and justice in Yeats's line constituted an opposition between our everyday world as it appears and the effort to do it justice, in all its dimensions, power and potential, through poetry. Yeats had been told by the 'spirit' his wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees, was channelling, that it was bringing 'metaphors for poetry'[31] – and in the end, Yeats did come to think of his cosmology as 'stylistic arrangements of experience'.[32] But this was no lesser thing: modernists like Yeats or Ezra Pound believed that poetry could do greater

---

[28] Rorty, 'TWO', pp. 7–8.

[29] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 91.

[30] *A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision (1925)*, ed. by George M. Harper and Walter K. Hood (London: The Macmillan Press, 1978), p. 25.

[31] *A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision (1925)*, p. 8. Critics have speculated that Hyde-Lees used this device to influence Yeats to become a better husband and engage with her intellect. Yeats himself remarks that others thought his writing remarkably improved after these sessions with Hyde-Lees began. Yeats writes: 'THE other day Lady Gregory said to me: "You are a much better educated man than you were ten years ago and much more powerful in argument". And I put *The Tower and The Winding Stair* into evidence to show that my poetry has gained in self-possession and power. I owe this change to an incredible experience.' The experience being his wife beginning to channel an 'unknown writer', 'so exciting, sometimes so profound'. (Loc. cit.)
For more on 'ghostwriting' in this sense and the above influence of Hyde-Lees, see Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, Cornell Paperbacks (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), Chapter 5, in particular.

[32] *A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision (1925)*, p. 25.

justice to the reality of experience than ordinary language, and thus let us, through its transformation of the ordinary, hold the duality of the world, nature and art; how things are and how the world should be if it were just or how we would describe it if we could do it justice, in the same thought. To the young Rorty, 'reality' meant something 'numinous', hence revealing, awe-inspiring, and spiritual, that was of 'ineffable importance', and that we could sense in 'Wordsworthian moments' – in communion with nature.[33] 'Reality' was thus accessible through aesthetic experiences in the original sense of the word. 'Justice', on the other hand, was something different from what the modernists meant: a worldly, ideological, socialist programme of liberation. Trotskyism tempered by the pacifism of Thomas.[34] What the young Rorty wanted was thus more expansive in some ways than the modernist vision; more concerned with the social and institutional mechanisms of injustice. And he wanted an answer to how these equally vital concerns could be theoretically commensurated – held in one philosophical vision.

His search for answers led the young Rorty to briefly consider Christianity as the path that would let him leave his 'private obsessions' behind and serve his fellow human beings with 'proper humility', but he 'fell back on absolutist philosophy' – that is, he became an even more devoted 'Seeker after Enlightenment', to use the vocabulary of TPP, a seeker of Truth.[35] (Notice, again, Rorty's invocation of the notion of falling here, echoing how 'books', above, 'fell' into his hands – a rhetorical move which underscores the contingency of the particularities of Rorty's personal story of intellectual development.) The young Rorty thought that 'moral and philosophical absolutes sounded a bit like my beloved orchids - numinous, hard to find, known only to a chosen few', and he figured that

> if I became a philosopher I might get to the top of Plato's 'divided line' - the place 'beyond hypotheses' where the full sunshine of Truth irradiates the purified soul of the wise and good:

---

[33] Milnes comments on Rorty's use of the term 'Wordsworthian moments' as 'suggestive, particularly in light of the poet's own association of flowers with epiphanic and renovating "spots of time" recovered through the "inward eye" of memory and imagination.' Upon closer inspection Milnes finds that 'Wordsworth's relationship with evocative flora bears little resemblance to Rorty's.' Milnes makes the point that Wordsworth 'foregrounds the constitutive role of the aesthetic imagination in mediating one's interaction with the world and with other people' – and Rorty does not. While Milnes might be partially right about Rorty's offhand use of the orchid relative to Wordsworth's painstakingly considered use of floral images and metaphors, chapters 5 to 7 of this thesis argue that foregrounding the aesthetic imagination is exactly what Rorty does. See Milnes, 'Rorty, Romanticism', pp. 31–32.

[34] Rorty was not a communist and advocated democratic socialist reform, rather than revolution. While his parents were leftist activists, they strongly opposed Stalin and renounced communism in the 1950s. See Chapters 1 and 2 in Gross, on Rorty's parents, James Rorty and Winifred Raushenbush, and p. 337.

[35] Rorty, 'TWO', pp. 7–8.

an Elysian field dotted with immaterial orchids. It seemed obvious to me that getting to such a place was what everybody with any brains really wanted.[36]

This is our hero – wanting to be one of the chosen few – still at the early stages of his development, still understanding himself to be on a quest, where this image represents the envisaged destination, the moment of victory and reward.

Rorty was, however, quickly disillusioned by absolutist philosophy, for it seemed dubious that one could ever find universal principles. He started seeing epistemology as a language game and to see 'philosophical talent' as 'largely a matter of proliferating as many distinctions as were needed to wriggle out of a dialectical corner'. But such moves could not, in the end, make him 'either wise or virtuous'.[37] And if not, what was philosophy *for*? Rorty began to discern some answers as he turned to Hegel and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

> I read [it] as saying: granted that philosophy is just a matter of out-redescribing the last philosopher, the cunning of reason can make use even of this sort of competition. It can use it to weave the conceptual fabric of a freer, better, more just society. If philosophy can be, at best, only what Hegel called 'its time held in thought', still, that might be enough. For by thus holding one's time, one might do what Marx wanted done – change the world.[38]

Reading Hegel taught Rorty that redescriptions could be seen and used as a means for change, for ushering in new eras.

For a long time thereafter, Rorty tells us, he thought *Phenomenology of Spirit* was one of the greatest achievements of humanity, only equally matched by *Remembrance of Things Past*, 'the book which took the place of the wild orchids once I left Flatbrookville for Chicago':

> Proust's ability to weave intellectual and social snobbery together with the hawthorns around Combray, his grandmother's selfless love, Odette's orchidaceous embraces of Swann and Jupien's of Charlus, and with everything else he encountered – to give each of these its due without feeling the need to bundle them together with the help of a religious faith or a philosophical theory – seemed to me as astonishing as Hegel's ability to throw himself successively into empiricism, Greek tragedy, Stoicism, Christianity and Newtonian physics, and to emerge from each, ready and eager for something completely different.[39]

---

[36] Rorty, 'TWO', p. 9.
[37] Rorty, 'TWO', p. 10.
[38] Rorty, 'TWO', p. 11.
[39] Rorty, 'TWO', p. 11.

Although Rorty's reading of Hegel perhaps seems more plausible than his reading of Proust, the objection that Rorty misreads Proust and particularly misconstrues Proust's reasons for writing literature is perhaps correct, but also misses the point.[40] What is relevant to Rorty's progress-narrative here is the shift Hegel and Proust's writing triggers in his thought: a shift in attention from the eternal and universal to the time-bound and concrete of human experience.

Heeding the lesson Rorty saw Hegel and Proust as imparting, he gave up the ambition to bring their thought together on a *theoretical* level, in 'a vision', a unifying representation that truly mirrored them both. Instead, he saw them as connected through their shared attention to the temporal and the particular and their display of a common spirit and skill:

> It was the cheerful commitment to irreducible temporality which Hegel and Proust shared – the specifically anti-Platonic element in their work - that seemed so wonderful. They both seemed able to weave everything they encountered into a narrative without asking that that narrative have a moral, and without asking how that narrative would appear under the aspect of eternity.[41]

The crucial lesson was that 'Hegel's willingness to stop trying for eternity, and just be the child of his time, was the appropriate response to disillusionment with Plato'.[42] The attitude of Hegel and Proust was the one Rorty must adopt.

This was, then, the moment when Rorty dropped the illusions of his Part I, so to speak, for the ironies of Part II, and as in *Faust* this moment of overcoming a naïve idealism required not only leaving it behind, but a turn towards the human world and earthly striving, a change that manifested in Rorty's re-evaluation of the pragmatist tradition:

> Dewey now seemed to me a philosopher who had learned all that Hegel had to teach about how to eschew certainty and eternity, while immunizing himself against pantheism by taking

---

[40] For an in-depth analysis of *Remembrance of Things Past* which emphasises the thought and deliberation behind Proust's writing, see Malcolm Bowie, *Proust among the stars* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2000).
[41] Rorty, 'TWO', p. 11.
[42] Rorty, 'TWO', pp. 11–12.

Darwin seriously. This rediscovery of Dewey coincided with my first encounter with Derrida [which] led me back to Heidegger, and I was struck by the resemblances between Dewey's, Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's criticisms of Cartesianism. Suddenly things began to come together. ...The result of this small epiphany was a book called *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.[43]

As Rorty referenced 'Wordsworthian moments' at the start of this essay and draws on Proust to concretise his narrative, it hardly seems accidental that he here picks up the Wordsworthian idea of epiphany: 'spots of time' that we retain with great clarity (which is of course also a notion central to *Remembrance of Things Past*).[44] What had become so clear to Rorty was how Dewey, Wittgenstein and Heidegger could be made to 'hang together' – he saw the anti-representationalist, anti-essentialist, historicist, nominalist argument he would articulate in *PMN*. This is the moment he became the *Rortian* pragmatist.

The autobiographical narrative embedded in TWO takes us one step further than that interleaved in TPP. For in TWO Rorty comments on what he did next:

So I decided to write a book [*CIS*] about what intellectual life might be like if one could manage to give up the Platonic attempt to hold reality and justice in a single vision.

[It] argues that there is no need to weave one's personal equivalent of Trotsky and one's personal equivalent of my wild orchids together. Rather, one should try to abjure the temptation to tie in one's moral responsibilities to other people with one's relation to whatever idiosyncratic things or persons one loves with all one's heart and soul and mind... The two will, for some people, coincide... But they need not coincide, and one should not try too hard to make them do so. So, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre seemed to me right when he denounced Kant's self-deceptive quest for certainty, but wrong when he denounced Proust as a useless bourgeois wimp, a man whose life and writings were equally irrelevant to the only thing that really mattered, the struggle to overthrow capitalism.[45]

This passage restates the Pragmatist's realisation in TPP that there will be as many descriptions as there are purposes. And Rorty here, also, ties this to a moment of accepting finitude and giving up the 'self-deceptive quest for certainty': doing so means 'accepting that what matters most to you may well be something that may never matter much to most people. Your equivalent of my orchids may always seem merely weird, merely idiosyncratic, to practically everybody else.' However,

---

[43] Rorty, 'TWO', p. 12.

[44] See for instance Nicola Trott, 'Wordsworth: the shape of the poetic career', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 5–21 (pp. 16–20).

[45] Rorty, 'TWO', pp. 12–13.

Rorty adds, 'that is no reason to be ashamed of, or downgrade, or try to slough off, your Wordsworthian moments, your lover, your family, your pet, your favourite lines of verse, or your quaint religious faith.'[46]

Rorty's larger point is that we *do* have specific, material, immediate obligations to other people: 'not to bully them, to join them in overthrowing tyrants, to feed them when they are hungry'. But while our ability to see and sympathise with pain can cause us to formulate solidaric obligations and take political or compassionate action, this should not lead us to surmise that our peculiar 'sensitivity to that pain [and] idiosyncratic loves, are going to fit within one big overall account of how everything hangs together'.[47] Searching for such a theoretical explanation for why we should care, or what we should care about, is not only folly, but gets in the way of caring. The quest for a 'single vision' that accounts for suffering, obscures it.[48]

A New Self-Image for Humanity

TWO bridges the personal tale of TPP and the broader cultural story Rorty tells through its emphasis on justice and our responsibility to other people. In chapters 4 and 5 I go into this cultural progress-narrative in detail, but I want to outline it here to show that it follows the same narrative arc as Rorty's individual progress-narrative.

Briefly re-told, Rorty's story goes like this: Western intellectual culture was first under the spell of Platonism, of Ideas. Captivated by this picture, we simply kept on adding new metaphysical metaphors to fit within its frame – Descartian dualism for instance. We kept working at replacing faulty universalising frameworks (Theories) with new ones we thought – now, finally – got it right. A shift in our collective mindset occurred in the wake of Kant formulating criteria for knowledge based on human reasoning, as it opened our minds to the idea that human thinking could replace theology – that *we* could become the adjudicators of knowledge (even while Kant might not have thought so). Hegel's historicism helped us see human ideas as manifestations of history rather than Reason. While the romantics retained a metaphysical outlook in their interpretation of Kant and Hegel – in their belief that human imagination and powers of expression would reveal profound truths – their insistence on the human perspective brought us one step closer to breaking free from the hold of teleological narratives altogether.

---

[46] Rorty, 'TWO', pp. 13–14.

[47] Rorty, 'TWO', p. 14.

[48] Cf. Toal's argument in Catherine Toal, *The entrapments of form: Cruelty and modern literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). I problematise Toal's reading of Rorty in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

In this larger we-narrative, our cultural moment of transformation began to unfold when proto-pragmatists like Nietzsche *self-consciously* connected human thought to humanity's *self-image* by discussing what philosophy, human knowledge, is or is not. Darwinian evolutionary theory later led us a further step towards accepting our mere material humanity and the brute, material contingency of history. Following this insight, the classical pragmatists helped us see ideas as tools for human purposes. Still, remnants of idealism and essentialism remain discernible in contemporary thought, for instance, in post-structuralist 'textualism' (I discuss this in Chapter 4).[49] Only the combined efforts of writers like James and Dewey, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, but also Wittgenstein, Quine, Derrida, Sellars and Davidson can enable us to overcome it. Metaphysics has taken shelter in the idea of language. Their shared antirepresentationalism and common focus on *language* helps us see that what we are doing when we use language is merely to write descriptions for varying purposes, narratives that make 'things', in that wide-ranging Sellarsian sense, 'hang together'.

The story Rorty tells about the progress of Western culture towards a 'literary culture' thus traces the same development as his individual tale. Both stories move from a naive self-perception of being on a heroic quest in search of absolutes, of Platonic ideas, Enlightenment, Rationality, or Truth. Both end at a point where the very idea of a quest, a final destination, the end of inquiry, the one right vision is left behind. In both, this occurs not because these ideas were filled with new meaning or because the right conceptual scheme was finally found. But because our attitude *towards* these descriptions changed as a result of, and in conjunction with, a changed self-perception, brought about by the telling of a new story about who we are.

After examining Rorty's semi-autobiographical narratives, the 'takeover of a literary culture' passage from PTG (quoted in the Introduction) makes greater sense.[50] The 'new dawn', the 'new self-image for humanity' points to the moment when we *collectively* stop thinking of ourselves as being on a quest for Truth, and collectively (or at least predominantly) start thinking like the Pragmatist did the moment he became 'the Pragmatist'. It is a cultural version of that transformational moment of overcoming and empowerment coupled with greater self-awareness and sense of responsibility. Rorty is not articulating a Hegelian end-of-history vision. He is describing a stage where the insights of the thinkers he catalogues are becoming internalised as part of our cultural identity, as their ways of speaking become increasingly integral to our shared (final) vocabulary.[51]

---

[49] Rorty, 'NITT'.
[50] Rorty, 'PTG', p. 4.
[51] I touched on Rorty's notion of a 'final vocabulary' in the Introduction and return to it in Chapter 6.

Accepting the Contingency of Starting-Points

This 'new self-image for humanity' moment can be illuminated further by examining Rorty's preferred characterisation of pragmatism in his 1979 Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association.[52] But first, because I describe this moment as one of adopting an attitude, I briefly want to draw some lines to classical pragmatism.

The pragmatist tradition has used the vocabulary of attitudes, consequences, and practices since its inception. William James suggested that pragmatism should be thought of simply as an 'attitude of orientation'.[53] It stood, he thought, for '[n]o particular result', and was hence not a doctrine but a stance. It was: '*The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, "categories," supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts*'.[54] James aligned it with what he, with a nod to the British tradition, called the 'empiricist attitude'. But adopting what we might colloquially call the scientist's mindset and mode of inquiry was not sufficient: the pragmatist attitude also required us to 'sincerely' give up 'the rationalist temper' – by which he meant 'abstraction and insufficiency... verbal solutions... bad *a priori* reasons... fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins'.[55] James urged us to approach the world as the anti-sceptical scientist would and take the world at face value, but he *also* asked us to leave our aspirations for final answers behind. Hilary Putnam has suggested that this combination of anti-scepticism and fallibilism was 'the' insight of American pragmatism.[56]

While James (unlike Rorty) did think pragmatism had a core 'method' – to evaluate ideas by the practical consequences of adopting them – he also emphasised that 'the general triumph of that method would mean an enormous change in what I called... the "temperament" of philosophy'.[57] A similar concern with attitude and self-conception is present in Charles Sanders Peirce's and John Dewey's work.[58] In his study of the circle that gave rise to American

---

[52] 'Sloganistic', Rorty, 'PRI', p. 721.'Prefer' p. 726.

[53] William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, Cambridge Library Collection (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), p. 54.

[54] James, *Pragmatism*, pp. 54–55. James's emphasis.

[55] James, *Pragmatism*, p. 51.

[56] Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism An Open Question* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 21.

[57] James, *Pragmatism*, p. 51.

[58] For further details on this and a useful analysis of the conception of pragmatism as attitude in classical pragmatism, see Stéphane Madelrieux, 'Can We Secularize the Will to Believe?', *RIVISTA DI STORIA DELLA FILOSOFIA*, 3 (2017), 493–512.

pragmatism, Louis Menand observes that what united the early pragmatists was indeed their *attitude towards* ideas:

> They all believed that ideas are not "out there" waiting to be discovered, but are tools... that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals, but by groups of individuals – that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and environment. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability.[59]

To the early pragmatists, the desirable and 'enormous change' in the 'temperament' of philosophy sprang from a shift, not from one doctrine to another, but in how we thought about human thinking.

As the narratives above indicate, Rorty's pragmatism can be usefully understood not just as a linguistically orientated pragmatism but as pushing the pragmatist shift one further step regarding the implications its view of ideas and language has for our self-conception. Rorty not only asks us to change our 'temperament', but to do so with great *self*-consciousness, mindful of what it entails for human beings' conception of what it means to be a human being.[60] I can motivate this further by looking at Rorty's articulations of pragmatism in PRI. For Rorty here makes it clear that his sense of 'what pragmatism means', as James famously put it, hinges on whether one makes, and self-consciously so, a choice to view 'all starting points' as contingent – or not. This is precisely what was at stake at the peripeties of the narratives examined above.

In PRI, Rorty offered three 'brief sloganistic characterizations' of pragmatism.[61] 'My first characterization of pragmatism', he said, 'is that it is simply anti-essentialism applied to notions like "truth," "knowledge", "language," "morality," and similar objects of philosophical theorizing'.[62] He here articulates pragmatism as a *stance* that declines to see ideas in metaphysical-ontological terms and *a practice* (it is 'applied') of interrogating concepts from that point of view. I am stressing this latter point as I later want to relate the notion of a literary attitude to a specific kind of literary critical practice. Rorty's second characterisation of pragmatism underscores that when the pragmatist delineates, *distinctions are made in terms of practice and consequences*, not

---

[59] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club - A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. xi–xii.
[60] Rorty's rejection of the idea of 'human nature' is discussed in Chapter 5.
[61] Rorty, 'PRI', p. 721.
[62] Rorty, 'PRI', p. 721. We might, for the sake of this thesis, include "literature" here – Rorty espouses, as we will see, an anti-essentialist idea of literature.

in terms of metaphysically determined (ontological) kinds.[63] (This comes to be important when I explicate Rorty's public/private divide in Chapter 5). 'James' dictum about truth', Rorty adds, 'says that the vocabulary of practise (*sic*) is uneliminable, that no distinction of kind separates the sciences from the crafts, from moral reflection, or from art'.[64] In other words: what separates them is their function, as the Pragmatist realised in TPP. It is important to this thesis that the Rortian pragmatist paradigm lets us treat, as Rorty says elsewhere, physics and poetry evenhandedly.[65] That is, the texts of physics and of poetry alike, all texts, are seen as metaphysically deflated, human-made artefacts, distinguishable by the role they play in human lives and societies.

Rorty's preferred way of characterising pragmatism is that 'it is the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones – no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers'.[66] That this is the better way to think about pragmatism, he suggests, is *because* it homes in on the need to make a 'fundamental choice' between 'accepting the contingent character of starting points, and attempting to evade this contingency'. [67] To accept it, Rorty continued, 'is to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance'.[68] This encapsulates the close relation he sees between the conception of language he offers and his view of what it means to be human: adopting a pragmatist attitude towards language and concepts is *simultaneously* to orientate ourselves towards other human beings. If their remarks are our only source of guidance, we must pay careful attention to what they say.

In a much later essay, Rorty redescribed the opposite attitude, which we must distance ourselves from, as 'egotism', meaning 'self-satisfaction'. He also says: '[e]gotists who are inclined to philosophize hope to short-circuit the need to find out what is on the mind of other people. They would like to go straight to the way things are (to the will of God, or the moral law, or the nature of human beings) without passing through other peoples' self-descriptions.' He calls the preferable, non-egotistical view of truth 'humanistic', which here implies a concern for, and a

---

[63] Rorty, 'PRI', p. 723.
[64] Rorty, 'PRI', p. 723.
[65] Richard Rorty, 'Non-reductive physicalism', in *ORT*, pp. 113–25 (p. 113).
[66] Rorty, 'PRI', p. 726.
[67] Rorty, 'PRI', p. 726.
[68] Rorty, 'PRI', p. 726. In Chapter 5 I connect this to the idea of a 'poeticized culture' in *CIS* and Rorty's claim that it is the very understanding of contingency *as* inescapable that permits us to stand 'unflinchingly' for our convictions.

paying of attention to, other human beings.[69] Note, however, that this lateral, conversational turn – or solidaristic turn, to deploy another term central to Rorty – is brought about by *first* taking that fundamental step of accepting that contingency goes all the way down. This is what is in play at those transformative moments in TPP and TWO, and in his narrative about the intellectual progress of Western culture. In Chapter 5, I will also suggest that the same moment plays out when the liberal ironist understands that her ironism permits her to stand 'unflinchingly' for her beliefs.[70]

It is not that the pragmatist thinks we cannot or should not work systematically towards a goal, but 'that the pragmatist knows no better way to explain his convictions than to remind his interlocutor of the position they both are in, the contingent starting points they both share, the floating, ungrounded, conversations of which they are both members'.[71] Through this 'fundamental choice' to accept the contingency of all starting points, Rorty levels all hierarchies. Not one ontological category is left standing – every description appears as just one more conversationally constituted contingent starting point for *further* conversation.[72] Descriptions, texts, poems all appear as material 'things' we might make 'hang together' by imposing grids that help us interpret and make sense of our experience, in narratives that help us cope.

In his 'Intellectual Autobiography' (hereafter IA), Rorty rather beautifully articulates the need for us to embrace open-ended proliferation of a multitude of kinds of descriptions and purposes:

> The point of these new suggestions... is to twist the kaleidoscope in such a way that what looked to past thinkers like "hard, first-order, philosophical problems" simply vanish from view. There is no right way in which the bits of glass in the kaleidoscope should be arranged, because there is no right language for human beings to speak. There are only languages that serve some human purpose better than others. Human purposes and human languages change in tandem with each other.
>
> ...A consistently historicist view would envisage intellectual and moral progress not as getting closer to anything but as the process by which the kaleidoscope keeps getting bigger and more colorful. To hope that such progress will continue is to hope that the human imagination will keep inserting new bits of glass, of previously undreamt-of hues. Goethe was

---

[69] Richard Rorty, 'Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises', in *The Rorty Reader*, ed. by Christopher Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 389–406 (pp. 394–95). I discuss this further in chapters 5 and 6.

[70] Voparil also stresses the importance of this moment in PRI. See Christopher Voparil, 'The Politics of the Novel: Rorty on Democracy, Irony, and Moral Education', in Christopher Voparil, *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), pp. 61–88 (p. 64).

[71] Rorty, 'PRI', p. 736.

[72] For an insightful discussion of Rorty and ontology, see Alan Malachowski, 'Rorty against the Ontologists', in *Richard Rorty's Multiple Legacies*, ed. by Samuel C. Wheeler III (= *The European Legacy*, 19 (2014)), pp. 187–96.

right when he said that we live our life in colored reflections. That is not, as Plato thought, our misfortune. It is our glory.[73]

I want to close by putting the same point less lyrically but equally literarily by suggesting we might see Rorty as urging us to evade the lure of the quest, the call of the crusade.

Refusing the Quest

Considering Rorty's stories *as* stories shows that his narratives about his individual intellectual development have a broader philosophical function and supplement his narrative about Western culture's progress towards a literary culture in meaningful ways. These narratives all begin as quest-narratives, where the protagonist(s) 'at the start' see themselves as on a quest, on a search for Truth. Then the unfolding of events breaks, in a subtle yet radical way, the form of this quest-narrative that until that moment shaped their efforts and self-conception. These stories all trace the same trajectory and move towards the same moment of self-overcoming, acceptance of contingency, and recognition of capability and humanity.

As I read Rorty's stories, then, his protagonist reaches clarity, rather than Truth, when he refuses the quest: when he rejects the idea that history and intellectual or moral progress *can* be captured by the quest-narrative form. And from that point onwards, there is no straight and narrow path to follow towards a final destination, only a journey to go on. It is not that the journeyer veers off the straight and narrow, but that he recognises that there is no preordained path – he is the maker of it. It is a highly romantic idea, of course: the pragmatist is not a searching and beseeching pilgrim, but an autonomous, exploring *Wanderer*.

While Rorty asks us to give ourselves over to a continual process of expansion and exploration, he is not saying we cannot look back, as the Pragmatist did, and impose a 'narrative grid' on our journey thus far. Nor that we cannot construct a narrative that might guide us as we go on. However, inevitability is no longer presumed: any such story is seen *as* narrative, as a useful fiction. Rorty does not say we cannot measure improvements pragmatically and comparatively. Rather, I take him to reject the teleological quest-narrative as the unifying, governing form that allows talk about 'human progress' or 'historical progress' or 'moral progress' in the abstract. In *CIS* Rorty says that '[t]he drama of an individual human life, or of the history of humanity as a whole, is not one in which a preexistent goal is triumphantly reached or tragically not reached.'[74]

---

[73] Rorty, 'IA', pp. 22–23.
[74] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 29.

He would have, I want to suggest, benefitted from stating this rejection of the quest-narrative form more plainly than he did and from noting that his own narrative turn would be inescapably coupled to questions of form. In the next chapter, I show why.

Chapter 3

The Playful Virtues of the Novel

As mentioned at the start of the preceding chapter, Voparil and Curtis have proposed that Rorty's work might be best captured by thinking of it as a *Bildungsroman*. In 'On the Idea of Philosophy as Bildungsroman: Rorty and his Critics' (2005), Voparil submits that Rorty suggest we treat philosophy as *Bildungsroman* and that we might, in turn, apply this notion in order to interpret Rorty more usefully.[1] Voparil's interest in Rorty's uses of literature is linked to his concern for whether and how Rortian pragmatism provides effective strategies for liberal democratic thought, and thus to the motif of cultivating 'ethical character through literature' in Rorty's work more broadly.[2] In *Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue* (2015), Curtis commends Voparil for being 'especially perceptive' when he 'identifies' Rorty's work as a *Bildungsroman*. This insight helps Curtis establish his understanding of Rorty as advocating 'a particular model of ethical self-development and individuality'.[3]

The model, the interpretive 'grid' Curtis 'imposes', to use Rorty's vocabulary, is virtue liberalism. Curtis's inscription of Rorty into this tradition prompted insights: Wojciech Małecki, for instance, considered whether 'virtue' might be the notion that would connect all Rortian strands of thought.[4] But what if *Bildungsroman* is the wrong analogy here? What if the idea of *Bildung* is not the one that best captures the trajectory of moral and intellectual progress in Rortian pragmatism? As indicated in Chapter 2, I think Rorty is telling a different kind of story. Furthermore, I worry that using the *Bildung*-framework to contain the Rortian project – and this framework to model Rorty as a virtue ethicist, virtue liberal, and, as Małecki suggests, virtue aesthetician – risks setting aside those aspects of Rortian philosophy that are most original and uniquely useful – elements I take Rorty to closely associate with the idea of literature and with the genre of the novel in particular.

My aim in this chapter is to apply the insights of the previous one to the issue of whether it is helpful to talk about Rortian philosophy as a *Bildungsroman* and, more broadly, to the question

---

[1] Voparil, 'Philosophy as Bildungsroman', pp. 115–16.

[2] Christopher Voparil, 'Jonquils and Wild Orchids: James and Rorty on Politics and Aesthetic Experience', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 23.2 (2009), 100–10 (p. 106).

[3] Curtis, p. 9.

[4] Wojciech Małecki, 'Review: William M. Curtis, Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue', *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, VIII.1 (2016) <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/476> [accessed 25 June 2020].

of what kind of vocabulary we can use to get to grips with Rorty's overarching narrative. That is: I want to ask what kind of story it is, what form it takes, and to consider what this says about the Rortian stance. In the following, I develop an answer to these questions by first comparing the trajectory of Rorty's tale of transformation to familiar narrative forms, such as the quest-romance, the allegory, and, indeed, the *Bildungsroman*. I suggest that while his story might contain elements of these, his narrative transgresses their bounds. Moreover, the underlying philosophical attitude manifested in these forms is not compatible with the Rortian attitude of orientation. Comparing Rortian philosophy to Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* (1943), a novel Rorty invoked in *TLT*, I offer an explanation for why the Rortian attitude is more usefully compared with the mindset of the modernist literary author and his work with the modernist novel – as Rorty also affirmed at various junctures, in particular when he associated his stance with Milan Kundera's.

However, extracting a virtue ethics from modernist novels seems an impossible task. I problematise Curtis's *Bildung*-and-virtue-take on Rortian philosophy by agreeing with Alasdair MacIntyre's observation in *After Virtue* (1981) that virtues can only be articulated within a unified narrative form – the kind of form the modernist novel frequently mobilises to contravene. This final analysis thus helps me contextualise the study contained in Chapters 2 and 3 and show the broader relevance of the view of Rortian pragmatism I am offering.

The Form and Attitude of the Quest-Romance and the Allegory

Despite how Rorty described his protagonist as he stood at the start of his journey, his narrative is, as I have shown in Chapter 2, not a quest romance. Rorty's 'Seeker after Enlightenment' becomes 'the Pragmatist' when he leaves the very idea of being a hero on a quest behind. However, Rorty's Bunyan-reference does invoke this genre – *The Pilgrim's Progress from This world to That Which Is To Come* is a quest-romance transposed into allegorical form. And the idea of a 'quest' *is* significant in this context: Rorty notes that James talked about the search for Truth as a 'hopeless quest'.[5] James imagines 'metaphysics' as having 'followed a very primitive kind of quest' and 'philosophy' as having been defined as 'the quest for the vision of the world's unity'.[6] The most significant example in the context of the pragmatist tradition is, of course, John Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty*, where he takes this quest for finality to lead us to separate theory from

---

[5] Rorty, 'Pragmatism, Davidson, and truth', p. 126.
[6] James, *Pragmatism*, p. 52 and 129.

practice, knowing from doing.[7] The vision of a quest is a crucial metaphorical tool for pragmatist thought – as the image of the kind of journey pragmatists are *not* on.

However, in TPP, Rorty did not merely say his character set out on a quest. He invoked the literary form of the 'quest-romance' to characterise his narrative *as* narrative.[8] While there are moments in Rorty where he comes close to discussing the 'quest' metaphor's relation to form, I have not come across any explicit discussions of this connection in classical pragmatism. Rorty might have made the connection when reading Harold Bloom – their mutual admiration is well-established. Rorty began to use the term 'quest' in the latter half of the seventies (thus coinciding with his turn to pragmatism where this term then regularly occurs): Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* 'can be read as a heroic attempt to save philosophy from naturalism',[9] Heidegger is on a 'quest' for 'the holy',[10] Heidegger and Nietzsche on a 'quest for the historical sublime',[11] Derrida's target is the notion of philosophy of language as a 'quest' for foundations, and so on.[12] At this time, he also begins to deploy literary terms and tropes, and it seems likely that Rorty in this period would have read Bloom's influential *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (1970), which contains his 'The Internalization of Quest-Romance'.[13] Rorty also read Northrop Frye and his *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957), in which the quest romance is a central topic.[14] Additionally, there is the possibility that this particular vocabulary was adopted from MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), where living one's life as a virtuous human being is explicitly related to the idea of being on a quest and the matter of narrative form.[15]

We might turn to Frye for a specific explication of the quest-romance as a form.[16] He likens it to the wish-fulfilment dream; it has a sequential form (186), it posits a quest to complete, and its *completion rounds off the story*: this gives the romance its *form* (187, my emphasis). It tells of a hero's struggles, sometimes conflict with an enemy (loc. cit.), and its central form is 'the dragon-killing theme' (189, i.e., power and victory). It can be ritualistic, mythical, or mundane: the

---

[7] John Dewey, *The quest for certainty a study of the relations of knowledge and action: Gifford lectures,1929* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930).

[8] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 91.

[9] Rorty, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language', p. 343.

[10] Rorty, 'Heidegger and Dewey', p. 302.

[11] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 106.

[12] Rorty, 'Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy', 674.

[13] Harold Bloom, 'The Internalization of Quest-Romance', in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), pp. 3–24.

[14] *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 176–77, and Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of criticism: Four essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000 (1957)).

[15] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After virtue: A study in moral theory*, 3rd edn (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007)

[16] I use Frye here rather than Bloom (I return to Macintyre below) for reasons of scope and simplicity.

hero can be Messianic, a 'redeemer of society', or be after worldly treasures – in any case, there is a reward at the end (192-93). It is dialectical and antagonistic; it moves from innocence to understanding, from action to contemplation (200). Frye's description of the quest-romance fits Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a quest-romance transposed into a religious-allegorical landscape: people, events, and places here represent a topography of ideas. The protagonist, Christian, journeys from his home in search of the Celestial City and someone who can help ease a 'terrible burden' he carries on his back (his sin). He must overcome many obstacles and adversaries on his way. The struggles serve to cultivate and strengthen his virtues of character and teach him to walk away from vanities – although, in the end, Christian reaches the contemplative stage and discovers he is entirely reliant on the mercy of God to be admitted into the Celestial City and find peace.[17]

'The *Pragmatist's* Progress' similarly unfolds in a philosophical landscape where books and names represent positions toward which our hero must adopt an attitude; a progression of intellectual and moral *agons*. However, as we have seen, Rorty's plot does not unfold in the manner of a quest-romance. Our protagonist is tested, but unlike the chivalric hero on his constant march to victory, and unlike Christian on the narrow path to salvation, Rorty lets himself be led astray – and not only that: he comes to *approve* of straying (it is not a sin to stray, in Rorty). He gives up not just the *search* for ultimate Enlightenment but the very idea of it. He does not simply cease fighting to overcome his antagonists and hurdles but begins to see all his obstacles as illusions – at least *qua* obstacles. And with this, his very identity as a questing hero dissolves. In the end, the tale's pretended form can no longer contain its plot or its protagonist. As we also saw, this trajectory was mirrored in Rorty's account about the progress of the West: he rejects the quest-romance as the interpretive grid to be imposed on history and human development because these will invariably burst the bounds of any preordained, pre-graspable arrangement of events, experiences, and actions.

Nevertheless, as Rorty points to Bunyan's religious allegory, we might instead be tempted to think that Rorty's tales are, at least in some ways, allegorical. This comparison, however, sits even more uneasily within the larger context of his work. An allegory is a form of art where 'outward appearance is contrived to suggest a hidden or second order of meaning that is in some sense the

---

[17] See *The Pilgrim's Progress: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. by Cynthia Wall, Norton Critical Editions (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).
The Cambridge companion to Bunyan is instructive: Anne Dunan-Page, *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge, UK, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

"true" meaning'.[18] While Bunyan constructed a recognisable quest narrative layered on top of what he took to be an existing, deeper Truth, we know that Rorty wanted to do the opposite of constructing an appearance-reality distinction (Rorty could not make the move of saying, for instance, 'this is what Nietzsche is truly about'). We are not meant to read *behind* Rorty's text or to burrow down – his are not texts that say one thing but mean another, and where the 'real' meaning is to be excavated by hermeneutic efforts. Rorty is very much in accordance with Felski when she insists that we must leave 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' behind.[19]

But there is a difference. In Chapter 2, I briefly indicated that in TPP, Rorty advocated what we might call a horizontal hermeneutical praxis rather than a vertical one: we start with our pre-judgements, our 'interpretive grids' that seem to us, as human agents, useful for our purposes. We also adapt or abandon these if our attempts to make 'things' 'hang together' burst our grid or leaves it unwieldy. It seems more representative to say Rorty advocates a narrative, or poetic view of interpretation – sees the interpretive result as a new artefact made of the material under scrutiny or in play. As he says elsewhere, pragmatists see the question '"What is the meaning of a text" [as] as useless as the question "What is the nature of the good?", treat 'everything as a matter of a choice of context and nothing as a matter of intrinsic properties', and 'dissolve objects into functions, essences into momentary foci of attention'. But they also treat 'knowing' as 'reweaving a web of beliefs and desires into more supple and elegant folds.'[20] Seen in this way, the practical and experimental stance Rorty wants us to adopt towards texts, interpretation, and truth emerges as the inverse of Bunyan's metaphysical outlook.

This last point is critical. Neither the disposition and aims of the quest-romance nor of the allegory align with Rorty's philosophical attitude of orientation. The writer of an allegory writes from a philosophical or religious perspective that takes a deeper level of truth as existent. As Frye stated, the shape of the quest-romance is defined by the presumed existence of a holy grail (prize, salvation, Enlightenment, Truth). Worldviews are mirrored in the choice of textual form; plotlines reveal what the writer thinks is 'possible and important', to borrow another phrase that recurs in Rorty. The problem is, then, not only that the allegory-grid is too constrictive a form, or the plot

---

[18] Ian Buchanan, *A dictionary of critical theory*, Oxford quick reference (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[19] See in particular Felski, *Limits of Critique*. Cf. for instance Rorty, 'Deconstruction and Circumvention', p. 3, or Rorty, 'Philosophy as science, metaphor, politics', p. 25, or Rorty, 'The priority of democracy', p. 184. See also Ramberg, 'Irony's Commitment', p. 151, Milnes, 'Rorty, Romanticism', p. 26, and Gaskill, 'What Difference Can Pragmatism Make', p. 384.

[20] Rorty, 'Philosophy without Principles', p. 461. Milnes talks about pragmatic interpretation as tactical rather than strategic: Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism*, p. 16.

too predictable and closed off. It is also that the philosophical *attitudes* the quest-romance and the allegory are manifestations of are at odds with Rorty's.

The Shape and Aspiration of the *Bildungsroman*

If we dispense with quest romance and allegory as 'interpretive grids' that helps us understand Rortian thought, the natural next step *is* to pick up the *Bildungsroman,* as the literary form that inherits the matter of virtue- and character building. This also takes us from the early modern period to the romantic era, an epoch of integral importance to Rorty. Moreover, the romantics acquired a view of history as modelled on the ages of man – as moving from infancy, to adulthood, to maturity and wisdom – from Johann Gottfried von Herder and his 1774 *geschichtsphilosophische* treatise *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (*Another Philosophy of History for the Education of Humankind*).[21] The idea of *Bildung* has then, conveniently, a private and a public dimension, which might more easily accommodate both Rorty's 'I'-story and its parallel 'we'-story.

     Bildung originally referred to a person's development towards becoming a morally and intellectually mature individual. The evolution of character progressed towards the individual becoming a suitable, morally and intellectually fine-tuned citizen of a society. The emphasis on inner and authentic development, becoming a particular kind of human being, makes this a distinctive idea, from, for instance, French eighteenth-century ideas about instilling civility: the difference is between acting right (the latter), versus *being*, or becoming, the right kind of human being. However, this was not a simplistic idea. It went beyond the straightforward transformation of the quest-romance and was not formulaic, as the end-goal was not to turn oneself into an archetype. The goal was rather to gain *autonomy*, conceived not just as a capacity to act with volition, but as a form of inner freedom: becoming autonomous was to become *your* true self, as a mind and as a character. Moreover, this state of being was not necessarily to be achieved through mere formal education: the formation of an autonomous but also responsive self was tied to experience, to travel, to interactions with various kinds of people and the overcoming of intellectual challenges, and to writing and reading. The fully formed man (and it was usually a man) would exhibit mastery in matters of taste and judgement, and completing his formation thus depended on experience with making judgements. Hence, while the notion of *Bildung* might

---

[21] See Allen W. Wood, 'Herder and Kant on History: Their Enlightenment Faith', in Allen W. Wood, *The Free Development of Each: Studies on Freedom, Right, and Ethics in Classical German Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 119–43.

revolve around cultivating natural and individual talents, the appropriately formed character would nevertheless result in a certain *kind* of man – one that would, on the Kantian picture here adopted, *autonomously* subject himself to the moral law. It is a development from non-form to (con)form.

Bildungsromane represent such formative experiences. To use Voparil's words:

> Such novels trace the moral, psychological, and social development of a young character who journeys from youthful provinciality and innocence to a more complex social and personal maturity borne of conflict, growth, and, above all, newfound self-knowledge. But at the moral core of the *Bildungsroman* is the assumption, however faint and quixotic, that such tales might lead the reader to greater self-development as well.[22]

Voparil rightly observes that some of us have come to Rorty's work and found a body of work that not only displayed great self-development but inspired it. However, I think it is a mistake to deduce from this that the *Bildung*-theme, although occasionally evoked by Rorty, intimates how to approach his work. While I, too, find Rorty's work inspirational, all kinds of narratives can inspire and make you feel, as Voparil quotes Rumana as having felt when he read Rorty, as though you 'click' with the author.[23] All sorts of works can deal with conflict and growth and lead to self-development in the reader. And while Rorty does indeed hold that we constantly grow, learn, and forge new practical identities to cope with being in the world, this process – in Rorty – does not, as in traditional *Bildung*-plots, necessarily tend towards stability. In Rorty, self-creation is a *continual* process, open to 'gestalt switches' and moments of transformation, as the previous chapter indicated.[24] There are no enduring or necessary constraints on conversation that make this process asymptotic.[25]

One might object by saying *Bildung should* be apprehended as an ongoing process, especially *post* romanticism. And one might object that Rorty's *Bildung* is that of Gadamer, who, as Rorty points out sees it as an *element* of spirit rather than an effort to converge on the *absolute* spirit.[26] In *PMN*, when Rorty grappled with the difficulty of imagining what philosophy without epistemology might look like, he did indeed turn to Gadamer and hermeneutics, suggesting we substitute education, self-formation, for knowledge.[27]

---

[22] Voparil, 'Philosophy as Bildungsroman', p. 122.

[23] Voparil, 'Philosophy as Bildungsroman', p. 122.

[24] 'Gestalt switches' see E. P. Ragg and Richard Rorty, 'Worlds or Words Apart? The consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An interview with Richard Rorty', *Philosophy and Literature*, 26.2 (2002), 369–96 (p. 372). I discuss this in Chapter 6.

[25] There are physical constraints, of course, but no bounds on what we might say about these.

[26] Rorty, *PMN*, p. 358.

[27] Rorty, *PMN*, p. 357.

I still hesitate. The Gadamerian impulse is intent on truth, endpoint, fusion, commensurability, and form, while Rorty eschews truth as anything more than intersubjective agreement, sees us as inextricably engaged in a never-ending process of redescription, and wants us to become comfortable with knowing our descriptions and schemes often will remain incommensurable. Furthermore, Rorty himself later stated that his turn to Gadamer had been a mistake. This part of *PMN* had been

> a false start: the contrast I drew there between "systematic" and "edifying" philosophy was not the one I wanted. ...when I wrote it I was just beginning to get acquainted with the line of thought that leads from Hegel through Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Derrida. I vaguely sensed that the trouble with analytic philosophy was that it had never advanced from Kant's eternalization of the intellectual situation of eighteenth-century Europe to Hegel's historicism. But I had not yet made myself sufficiently familiar with the post-Hegelian European philosophers who had resisted the temptation to go "back to Kant". My invocation of Gadamerian hermeneutics were feeble and unproductive.[28]

Even seen through a Gadamerian lens, *Bildung* is still related to arriving at a place where one fully understands. *Bildung*-plots trace such trajectories, and *Bildungsromane*, novels of formation, are shaped by faith in the possibility of arriving at this destination. Thus, deploying the notion of *Bildung* to get to grips with Rorty seems misguided. This 'interpretive grid' imposes too constrictive a narrative structure, too predictable a plot on Rorty's stories and work, and, moreover, the underlying *stance* that it carries forth is at odds with the stance Rorty advances. The *Bildung*-idea jars in particular with Rorty's firm dismissal of the idea of a 'human nature', a topic I return to in Chapter 5.

Recall Rorty's notion of a 'final vocabulary': the set of words we employ to justify our actions, beliefs, and lives; those 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'; the words in which we 'tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives'.[29] What I am suggesting as a wider point here, is that philosophical attitude and choice of *form* are as interlinked as philosophical attitude and choice of 'final vocabulary'. And, moreover, that when narrating how 'things hang together' in Rorty, we are well-served by not using the *Bildung*-vocabulary, not deploying the *Bildungsroman*, as an interpretive grid, as a pedagogical device, for conceptualising Rorty's project, because it indicates a paradigm most readers are predisposed to associate with attitudes that run counter to core elements of the Rortian spirit.

---

[28] Rorty, 'IA', p. 13.
[29] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 73.

An Education in Play

Although the idea of *Bildung* occasionally surfaces in Rorty's work, it is not the idea of *Bildungs*roman he latches on to, but simply the *roman* – the novel. Rorty's *uses* of actual novels for moral edification and political deliberation gets the most attention in the secondary literature, and I turn to this in Chapter 6. Here I want to show that another and largely underappreciated reason why this genre was vital to Rorty comes clearly into view if the above analysis is juxtaposed with an examination of how *novels* tell stories – of how attitude and form is related in this instance. I will illustrate my point by first looking at a novel Rorty invoked in his introduction to *TLT* in 1967, when he wondered if the future for philosophy lay in it becoming '...the activity of constructing new language-games for the sheer joy of it (as in Hesse's *Magister Ludi*)', and then at Rorty's discussion of the novel as a genre in 'Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens'.[30]

Das Glasperlenspiel, the last of Hermann Hesse's major novels, was published in German in 1943, and in English in 1949 as *Magister Ludi*, later as *The Glass Bead Game*.[31] It tells the story of the intellectually, musically, and emotionally gifted orphan Joseph Knecht, his rise through the ranks of the elite academic institution and fictional province of Castalia, his climb to its pinnacle as 'Magister Ludi' – master of the Glass Bead Game – and his eventual rejection of not only position and power, but the game itself, subsequent defection from Castalia to become a teacher of the young, and ultimate death by drowning, in a lake on top of an earthly mountain. The older man attempts to befriend his first worldly, non-Castalian pupil by engaging in a swimming competition with the sportive adolescent and sinks, naked, into the glacial water. The young man is last seen wrapping himself in Knecht's robe for protection against the natural elements.

The state of Castalia is the endpoint of the evolution of (a version of) the university: it is constituted by an all-male scholarly elite, lifted up from the general population at an early age, and educated so as to acquire the virtues and habits necessary to uphold this glorious institution. The whole purpose of it is to manifest, refine, and literally embody the ideal system for knowledge-acquisition: removed from life's ordinary and practical concerns, its scholars epitomize the ideal inquirers and vessels for learning. The ultimate symbol of Castalia, the summit of its achievements and its highest ceremony and only sport, is the Glass Bead Game. It is constructed around a

---

[30] Rorty, 'Introduction to TLT', p. 23. As Jefford Valbusch notes in 'Novel Ideas: Notes toward a New Reading of Hesse's *Uternm Rad*', the US interest in Hesse 'was beginning to surge' in 1968 – just at the time when Rorty must have read Hesse. See Ingo Cornils, *A Companion to the Works of Hermann Hesse*, Camden House companion volumes (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2009), p. 17.
[31] Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game: (Magister Ludi)* (London: Vintage Books, 2000).

synthesis and abstraction of all humanistic, artistic, and scientific knowledge – a system that captures the entirety of knowledge in a hierarchical system of correspondences:

> [The] eternal idea, which for us has been embodied in the Glass Bead Game, has underlain every movement of Mind towards the ideal goal of a *Universitas Litterarum*, every Platonic academy, every league of an intellectual elite, every rapprochement between the exact and the more liberal disciplines, every effort towards reconciliation between science and art or science and religion. Men like Abelard, Leibniz, and Hegel unquestionably were familiar with the dream of capturing the universe of the intellect in concentric systems, and pairing the living beauty of thought and art with the magical expressiveness of the exact sciences.[32]

The narrator adds that the 'Game of games had developed into a kind of universal language through which the players could express values and set these in relation to one another'. Hence, while its players believe it stands in a vague but ultimate correspondence-relationship with the 'real' world, this is a language-game in pure form, axiomatic and inferential. Rorty's rendition of Yeats's 'one vision' would be aptly expressed by Hesse's words.

A string of moral and intellectual challenges lead Knecht to view the Game in a new light. Knecht's dialogues with a non-Castalian historian show him that all human understanding is situated in time. While outside its walls, Knecht is exposed to the social, economic, and political side of running and preserving the 'pure' province of Castalia – it has real-term costs, but the larger society that sustains them gets no real-term returns. The game – the pageantry of which they share with the world – is beautiful but useless. Finally, he comes to understand that it is incumbent upon him to *act* on this knowledge. But when Knecht eventually defects from Castalia, he does not go searching for its opposite – does not go on a quest, to reuse that term, for the 'real' world. He holds on to what he has learned, who he has become, and takes it into the world to face whatever lies ahead. He puts his knowledge to use.

It is not hard to draw parallels between the Game and epistemology, between Castalia and the institution of Philosophy – at least on Rorty's depiction of it. Knecht also undergoes a process of intellectual growth remarkably similar to Rorty's in TPP and TWO: Knecht, like Rorty, goes from being a 'Seeker of Enlightenment', to mastering the game of knowledge, to someone who sees themselves as a humble human ('Knecht' can, of course, mean 'servant'), and comes to understand his former worldview as optional.[33] A more extensive analysis of these parallels could,

---

[32] Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*, pp. 7–8.

[33] Cf. John Krapp, 'Hermann Hesse's Hegelianism: The Progress of Consciousness Towards Freedom in The Glass Bead Game', *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 26.2 (2002) <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl/vol26/iss2/5/> [accessed 19.03.19].

for instance, be used to illuminate Rorty's Hegelianism, which is strongly present in both Hesse's and Rorty's account of identity-formation, but also to cast light on where and why they both break with the Hegelian account. While I hope to expand on this suggestion in the future, I now want to return to the specific question of form.

The Glass Bead Game is a *Bildungsroman* of sorts. This is indeed a crucial part of what makes it, above many modernist and postmodernist novels, apt for illuminating Rorty's work: it brings Hesse's humanism to the forefront.[34] However, the *way* Hesse constructs this novel simultaneously undermines the *Bildung*-idea and any attempt at comprehending the human experience within a closed structure. Hesse's narrative is not didactic, continual, or unified in its form. The plotline is far from neat. The text is a juxtaposition of elements and it is left to the reader to determine how much weight to assign to each part. Examining the complex architecture of this novel will help set up what I want to suggest about Rorty's work and its relation to the novel as a genre.

The Glass Bead Game instantly and deliberately draws attention to itself *as* a literary creation. Its subtitle underscores the instability of its pretensions: 'A tentative sketch of the life of Magister Ludi Joseph Knecht together with Knecht's posthumous writings *edited* by Herman Hesse'. The intertwined texts that constitute it are, the title invites us to think, supposedly in existence, the story apparently true. The book is 'dedicated to the Journeyers to the East'– a reference both mythological and intertextual, as it is the title of an earlier novel by Hesse. Its first part is a general introduction to the history of the Glass Bead Game, and the second is taken up by a recounting of Knecht's life-story. But there are also parts within parts, multiple diegetic levels: the long letter Knecht sends to the Order informing them of his departure is a text within the text, where Knecht in his own words relate his intellectual progress-story – an account that at times is at odds with the official-sounding biographer's (narrator's) version. The final chapter of the biography-part takes us beyond what the narrator can establish from trustworthy sources and into 'legend'. The third and final part of the novel consists of Knecht's *Nachlass*, which contains some poems and three stories Knecht wrote as part of his studies: these life-stories has a function akin to Zen Buddhist *Koans* – riddles to be meditated on, often paradoxical, and made to make the student of Zen strive to tease out their meaning, often only to find that they are not meant to be solved by the rational mind at all.[35]

---

[34] For a discussion of Hesse's 'Romantic humanism', see Eugene L. Stelzig, *Hermann Hesse's Fictions of the Self: Autobiography and the Confessional Imagination*, Princeton Legacy Library (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 46.

[35] The sheer number of juxtaposing of elements and positions that take place in this text, the frames within frames, can make this appear as a post-modern novel ahead of its time.

There is also the matter of the narrator. Hesse uses him to induce both sympathy and suspicion. His portrait of Knecht is kind but almost entirely surface: there is little psychological detail, and his view of the past is equally superficial. Hesse establishes the skewness and blindness of this point of view in a gently humorous manner which sets us as readers up to smile ironically at the gap between the narrator's pretensions to profundity and lack of actual depth and understanding. We quickly come to question whether Castalia is the utopia he wants to portray it as – and to wonder who Knecht, this most humble and brilliant of children, and most selfless and gentle of servants to men, 'really' was, given that we cannot trust our narrator to truthfully represent this world. This reading-experience slants the point of view in such a way that we become aware of ourselves as thinking of the narrator *as* naïve and of his biography thus as reductive – we come to be mindful of ourselves as interpreters, to observe that we adopt a meta-perspective. Taken as a whole, the novel thus becomes both a *Bildungsroman and* a satire of this genre; both a *Bildungsroman* and a novel we cannot help but view *ironically* as a *Bildungsroman*; as naïvely read if taken as such. The conspicuous artfulness of Hesse's multi-tiered text pushes us to notice our efforts to understand and, importantly, our inability to close the interpretive circle.

Why draw attention to this? Because Hesse's novel demonstrates the kind of attitude the late modernist, and even more so the postmodernist author, writes from – and the stance such writing forces *us* to adopt as readers. This attitude both produces and is reflected in the complex indeterminacy of its form: in the elements that push a text like Hesse's beyond the *Bildungsroman,* those that resist closure and confront us with incommensurability, instability, and process. *The Glass Bead Game* teaches us at every turn that it will burst open any 'interpretive grid' smaller than itself. If we respond with ever more fevered attempts to control and contain this kind of text, we will lose. Understanding is only won if we accept the instability and incommensurability and respond with curiosity and imagination, and play along in the act of creation. *Magister Ludi* also means Master of Play. Such novels instruct their readers in play, demonstrate its necessity.

That this latter strategy of responsive and imaginative co-creation describes the Rortian attitude can be substantiated by looking more closely at Rorty's most focussed discussion of the novel *qua* genre, contained in 'Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens' (hereafter HKD). This lecture was given in 1989, the year *CIS* was published:[36] as Voparil notes, Kundera's 'reflections on the novel, appear to have deeply affected Rorty's thinking' at this stage.[37] In this lecture, Rorty examines Western culture and suggests the novel as the cultural artefact we should hold in the highest regard. Not as

---

[36] See *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, ix.
[37] Voparil, 'The Politics of the Novel', p. 69.

the epitome of literary quality, but as the 'characteristic genre of democracy, the genre most closely associated with the struggle for freedom and equality.'[38] Borrowing from Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*, Rorty puts it to us that whereas the metaphysical-philosophical attitude is authoritarian, controlling, the novel's attitude is anti-authoritarian: the novel *as a genre* is a vehicle of 'revolt against the ontotheological treatise'.[39] He pits 'theory, simplicity, structure, abstraction, and essence' against the novel's appreciation of 'narrative, detail, diversity, and accident', relates philosophy to 'contemplation, dialectic, and destiny', and the novel to 'adventure, narrative, and chance'.[40]

While it might appear as though Rorty is constructing a simple dichotomy, his point is more subtle. Rorty is articulating a literary attitude *towards* ideas, language, and selfhood, which, as the next chapter will elaborate, closely aligns with his pragmatist attitude. The defining trait of the novelistic attitude is that it finds the attitude of the philosopher comedic, sees that '[i]t is comical to use one's quest for the ineffable Other as an excuse for ignoring other people's quite different quests', to 'think that *anyone* could transcend the quest for happiness'. Rorty continues: '[w]hat the novelist finds especially comic is the attempt to privilege one of these descriptions, to take it as an excuse for ignoring all the others. What he finds most heroic is not the ability sternly to reject all descriptions save one, but rather the ability to move back and forth between them.' Instead, the novelist wants 'a display of diversity of viewpoints, a plurality of descriptions of the same events'.[41] As previously noted, Rorty would later describe the attitude he opposes as 'egotism', defined as 'self-satisfaction'.[42] Here in HKD, the antithesis to the novelistic attitude, the attitude the novelist finds comedic, is precisely egotism in this sense, laced with a sense of entitlement and of having the right to be taken seriously.

Rorty notes that Kundera makes the term 'the novel' roughly synonymous with 'the democratic utopia' in which nobody would think there is something more 'real' than pleasure or pain, a utopia of 'tolerance and curiosity': where 'all that is left of philosophy is the maxim of Mill's *On Liberty*, or of a Rabelaisian carnival: everybody can do what they want if they don't hurt anybody else while doing it'.[43] That Rorty here equates the attitude of Mill with that of Rabelais indicates the extent to which it is beyond the scope of the present moment to fully explicate this lecture. A full analysis would detail the intricate connections between Rorty's Kunderan gloss of

---

[38] Richard Rorty, 'Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 66–82 (p. 68).
[39] Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1988). First published in French in 1986. Rorty, 'HKD', p. 68.
[40] Rorty, 'HKD', pp. 73–74.
[41] Rorty, 'HKD', p. 74.
[42] Rorty, 'Redemption from Egotism'.
[43] Rorty, 'HKD', p. 75.

the novelistic attitude and his own when articulated in a more conventional philosophical jargon. But I want to stress one more aspect before considering what this means for attempts at describing Rorty in virtue-jargon: the unsubsumability of the novel's innumerable characters.

'Kundera's Utopia', Rorty holds forth, 'is carnivalesque, Dickensian, a crowd of eccentrics rejoicing in each other's idiosyncrasies, curious for novelty rather than nostalgic for primordiality.'[44] Dickens, Rorty submits, is the emblematic novelist, the 'anti-Heidegger'.[45] 'Heidegger's genre '...is the lyric: his hero is Hölderlin, not Rabelais or Cervantes. For Heidegger the other human beings exist for the sake of the Thinker and the Poet.'[46] He is on a quest for transcendence. As the 'anti-Heidegger', the novelist's quite mundane 'job' is to examine human life, most of all to report on both human 'glory' and 'stupidity', so that we might hope for 'an age in which the prevalent varieties of stupidity will cause less unnecessary pain than is caused in our age by our varieties of stupidity.'[47]

However, Rorty stresses, '[t]he job of the novelist' can only be undertaken 'with a whole heart' by 'someone untroubled by dreams of an ahistorical framework within which human history is enacted, a universal human nature by reference to which history can be explained, or a far-off divine event toward which history necessarily moves.'[48] The novelist, in my terms, rejects the quest. This attitude is on display in

> Kundera's insistence that the novel does not have a *nature,* but *only* a history, that the novel is a "sequence of discoveries." There is no Platonic Form for the novel as a genre to live up to, no essential structure which some novels exhibit better than others, any more than there is such a Form or such a structure for human beings. The novel can no more exhaust its possibilities than human beings can exhaust their hope for happiness.[49]

Rorty here explicitly relates the quest-motif to the matter of 'Form' and directly to the more subtle question of how what form we impose on the governing narrative we posit for human history, for human beings, matters. The novel's rejection of a closed or Platonic form lets it attend to the multitudinousness of the human experience.

Rorty in fact claims that the most memorable feature of Dickens's novels is 'the unsubsumable, uncategorizable idiosyncrasy of the characters':

---

[44] Rorty, 'HKD', p. 75.
[45] Rorty, 'HKD', p. 68.
[46] Rorty, 'HKD', p. 76, "the other human beings" *sic*.
[47] Rorty, 'HKD', pp. 76–77.
[48] Rorty, 'HKD', pp. 76–77.
[49] Rorty, 'HKD', p. 77.

Dickens's characters resist being subsumed under moral typologies, being described as exhibiting these virtues and those vices. Instead, the names of Dickens's characters *take the place* of moral principles and of lists of virtues and vices. They do so by permitting us to describe each other as "a Skimpole," "a Mr. Pickwick," "a Gradgrind," "a Mrs. Jellyby," "a Florence Dombey." In a moral world based on what Kundera calls "the wisdom of the novel," moral comparisons and judgments would be made with the help of proper names rather than general terms or general principles.[50]

The rise of the novel, and the reason it is to be lauded and learnt from, is that it helps us 'treat apparent inconsistency not as something to be rejected as unreal or as evil, but as a mark of the inadequacy of our current vocabularies of explanation and adjudication', a shift 'correlated with an increasing ability to be comfortable with a variety of different sorts of people' and 'reflected in the rise of pluralistic bourgeois democracies, societies in which politics becomes a matter of sentimental calls for alleviation of suffering rather than of moral calls to greatness'.[51]

'It may seem strange', Rorty adds, 'to attribute this sort of willingness to the recent West – a culture [that is] racist, sexist, and imperialist.' But that it is a culture '*worried* about being racist, sexist, and imperialist, as well as about being Eurocentric, parochial, and intellectually intolerant' is something we owe more to the work of novelist than to either philosophers *or* poets.[52]

Kundera's passages on 'the wisdom of the novel' famously opens *CIS*. That an articulation of the novelistic attitude stands as the epigraph of this work has received comparatively little attention. This epigraph should be seen less as a preliminary and more as a program statement, as emblematic. For it seems clear both in HKD and in *CIS,* as I will show, but also in earlier essays as noted in the Introduction and as the next chapter will explore, that Rorty, in extensive and vital ways, saw his own attitude paralleled in the literary attitude – or, vice versa, his linguistic pragmatism as mirroring the attitude of the novel as a genre. Whether Rorty 'gets' the novel *qua* genre 'right', to use a Rortian idiom, is not a question that can be properly formulated within the Rortian paradigm, nor in point. What is in point is that Rorty's conception of this genre and attitude is comprised of traits long associated with the novel as a form. There is abundant potential for further work here, especially for relating Rorty directly to the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin that so profoundly influenced Kundera, by emphasising Bakhtinian notions such as dialogue, differentiation, heteroglossia, carnivalisation, polyphony, the chronotope, or unfinalisability, and for exploring topics such as how Bakhtin's opposition to the structuralism of Ferdinand de

---

[50] Rorty, 'HKD', p. 78.
[51] Rorty, 'HKD', p. 81.
[52] Rorty, 'HKD', p. 81.

Saussure relates to Rorty's view of the novel as a vehicle for revolt against the metaphysical treatise.[53]

Rorty articulates his progress and that of an ideal, imagined 'literary culture' as moving from theory to literature, completeness to incompleteness, commensurability to incommensurability, abstract to concrete, quest to adventure, hero to humanism, egotism and self-satisfaction to solidarity and self-enlargement, mastery to coping, finding to making, seriousness and striving to comedy and play. What is most important about Rorty's turn to literature, is, on my view, not that he recommends we use literary works for moral deliberation, but that literature and the literary vocabulary helps him delimitate and articulate the highly specific attitude he holds to be the most conducive to furthering the democratic project. I am suggesting, and subsequent chapters substantiate this view, that this shift towards a *literary attitude* is the transformation at the heart of Rorty's idea of a 'literary' culture.

Curtis, MacIntyre and the Quest for Narrative Unity

To show why it matters to the broader reception of Rortian philosophy that we take this – Rorty's literariness – as significant, I want to return to Curtis and sketch some implications of the above for his argument in *Defending Rorty*. I will suggest that casting Rorty as a virtue ethicist relies on inscribing the Rortian narrative into a unifying form incompatible with its ethos.

In *After Virtue* MacIntyre gives 'an account of the human good', by which he means the virtues, defined 'purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives'.[54] The concept of 'man', to MacIntyre, ceases to be 'functional' unless it is understood in relation to a telos.[55] 'It is only', MacIntyre holds, 'because human beings have an end towards which they are directed by reason of their specific nature, that practices, traditions, and the like are able to function as they do'.[56] On this model we can only understand a life as meaningful and discern good from bad, when these concepts are understood in relation to an overarching purpose. The basic premise of his argument is that any conception of 'virtues' relies on defining these in relation to both a ground and a teleology – on being defined within a story

---

[53] Cf., for instance, Maria Shevtsova, 'Dialogism in the Novel and Bakhtin's Theory of Culture', *New Literary History*, 23.3 (1992), 747. Shevtsova interestingly notes that the impact of Bakhtin's ideas on contemporary intellectual life reached a new peak in the mid-80s following the 1981 publication of *The Dialogic Imagination,* which saw some of Bakhtin's most important essays translated into English for the first time.

[54] MacIntyre, p. xi.

[55] MacIntyre, pp. 58–59.

[56] MacIntyre, p. xi.

with a beginning and an end. Virtues are only intelligible, he insists, when their conception emerges within and is evaluated with reference to a unified and *unifying* narrative. To 'adopt a stance on the virtues', MacIntyre asserts, 'will be to adopt a stance on the narrative character of human life'.[57]

'Why this might be so', MacIntyre contends, 'is easy to understand':

> If a human life is understood as a progress through harms and dangers, moral and physical, which someone may encounter and overcome in better and worse ways and with a greater or lesser measure of success, the virtues will find their place as those qualities the possession and exercise of which generally tend to success in this enterprise and the vices likewise as qualities which likewise tend to failure. Each human life will then embody a story whose shape and form will depend upon what is counted as a harm and danger and upon how success and failure, progress and its opposite, are understood and evaluated. To answer these questions will also explicitly and implicitly be to answer the question as to what the virtues and vices are. …belief in the virtues being of a certain kind and belief in human life exhibiting a certain narrative order are internally connected.[58]

The 'shape and form' that enables and embodies the idea of 'virtue, is, then, the quest-narrative. 'The unity of a human life', MacIntyre elaborates, 'is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest'.[59] Moreover, 'without some at least partly determinate conception of the final telos there could not be any beginning to a quest'.[60]

The insight that unless one knows what something is to be good *for* one cannot evaluate its appropriateness is central to pragmatism as well. The difference is that a (Rortian) pragmatist will not want to articulate transcendent purposes, beyond the realm of 'happiness' (cf. Rorty on Dickens above) – the pragmatist is content with positing finite, concrete, local, and temporal goals and aspirations for human beings. If a Rortian pragmatist intellectual articulates her purpose in transcendental terms, quest-terms, she holds this view ironically, knowing it to be merely a narrative, a rhetorical move (see Chapter 5). Unlike MacIntyre, she will not unironically theorise premises for a 'functional' conception of 'man' and, thus, what counts as virtues (the good). Moreover, as MacIntyre points out, virtues must, as they are part of one's ethical character, one's

---

[57] MacIntyre, p. 144.
[58] MacIntyre, p. 144.
[59] MacIntyre, p. 219.
[60] MacIntyre, p. 219.

nature, carry over from the private to the public realm, and vice versa: one is not an honest man if one is not always honest. Thus, the virtue picture has the human character at its centre, functionally understood *as* a human being through its relation to a telos, judged by its acquisition of virtues derived from and within relation to its quest for its telos. This jars both with Rorty's rejection of the notion of an essential 'human nature' and his separation of public and private aims and actions (also addressed in Chapter 5).

In sum, if Macintyre is right, then talking about Rortian *virtues* requires there to be a unified, teleological narrative framework or form in place, that permits the derivation of virtues and vices. To fit Rorty in the virtue-grid, Rortian pragmatism must be (re)describable as a quest-romance. Moreover, if Macintyre is also right about virtues transcending and unifying the public and the private, that must be squared with Rorty's vocal rejection of both human nature and the desire, need or possibility to hold the private and the public in 'one vision' (cf. Chapter 2 and 5). Hence, if I am correct in my analysis and Rorty's narratives spell out a subtle but radical break with the quest-narrative form, then a reading of Rorty as a virtue ethicist starts to look tenuous.

One possible solution to this would lie in making a kind of deconstructive, or modernist-novelistic move when writing one's account of Rorty as a virtue ethicist: to either explicitly avow, or show using textual or literary techniques, that while one wants to advance a view of Rorty as a virtue ethicist, this suggestion is to be held and received ironically – with self-conscious awareness of it as just one more grid for grasping an aspect of Rorty, while fully cognisant of the virtue-narrative's problematic connotations relative to the Rortian attitude. The question then is if this is achieved. Rorty solved it in TPP by introducing diegetic levels, framing a story within a story, and by essayistically exposing his thought process and comedically questioning his preliminary interpretation. He solved it by writing a kind of *literary* text or analysis. In *CIS,* Rorty discussed whether Derrida succeeded in writing *theory* in such an ironic manner, ironist theory, and found that Derrida did not.[61] Does Curtis succeed?

When Curtis holds irony itself up as *the* Rortian virtue, his description of Rorty comes across as unironic. Curtis asserts early on that he 'demonstrates' that 'Rorty's entire intellectual project can *best* be understood as promoting a conception of virtue liberalism'.[62] Moreover, his account lapses into the teleological form when he specifies a telos. First as an idealised Silicon Valley – a community of educated 'problem-solvers' where people are judged solely by the 'content of their character' and 'the usefulness and attractiveness of their ideas'; who celebrate plurality and the 'clash and synthesis of ideas', because this 'constitutes' the 'creative,

---

[61] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 137.
[62] Curtis, p. 5. My emphasis.

risk-taking spirit of liberal culture'. Their purpose is to 'creatively, deliberatively, progressively, and competitively innovate', and thus this functional definition also defines the ideal virtues of this society.[63] This holds even when Curtis appears to see the contours of the problem with detailing a final destination and attempts to evade it by using a work of *fiction* to provide his most extensive articulation of what this endpoint would be like.

Curtis here turns to Huxley's utopian novel *Island*. For 'at the center of Huxley's literary description of Palanese society is the beautiful, liberal character of the Palanese themselves, who have been carefully socialized and educated to exhibit the liberal virtues'.[64] Curtis stresses the plurality, diversity and freedom of Palanese culture, that it aims to realise a 'fully human' happiness, that has room for 'religious mysticism, humanistic science, hallucinogenic drug use for increased self-awareness, birth control for rational population management, natural resource conservation and sustainable development, eugenics, psychology, art, poetry, and Deweyan liberal education'.[65] But despite the multiplicity of possibilities on display, the effect is still a whittling down, or a settling of form. An endpoint is specified, and thus the articulation of virtues – or a cardinal one – is made possible.

That even using a work of utopian fiction as the endpoint by which we might define the good causes significant and tangible tensions in Curtis's account to emerge, explains why Rorty only sketched his utopia, and otherwise mostly relied on *dystopian* fiction to negatively illustrate it – to show us the kind of future we do not want.[66] Rorty, as Curtis notes, wants us to engage in utopian thinking to push the limits of what we deem possible and important, and to imagine a different future. And both Curtis and Rorty urge us not to read utopian writings uniroinically – as a social blueprint.[67] But while Curtis finds it curious that Rorty did not use utopian fictions to portray possible futures, I would suggest that Rorty's choice of dystopias makes sense when their less prescriptive nature is taken into account, and, moreover, how this leaning thus largely meant Rorty evade the teleological trap I see Curtis as falling into, because it let Rorty describe a desirable future in the negative; by indicating what we do not want to happen while leaving everything else open.

---

[63] All Curtis, p. 81. It is beside the point here, but I would firmly object to the claim that the Rortian utopia could be manifested by even a mythologised Silicon Valley: the capitalist liberalism invoked here is not the social democratic liberalism I understand Rorty as advancing. The wisdom of Silicon Valley is *not* the wisdom of the novel.

[64] Curtis, p. 248.

[65] Curtis, p. 248.

[66] For instance when he discusses *1984* in *CIS*.

[67] Curtis, p. 238. Curtis stresses the need to not define endpoints and blueprints, but his narrative nevertheless takes on this form, as it must, according to MacIntyre (with whom I concur in regards to this specific point), as long as Curtis desires to define *virtues*.

While I recognise and sympathise with Curtis's desire to bring Rorty into dialogue with liberal theorists, Curtis's vocabulary and form does not, in my estimation, function well for conveying the Rortian attitude and aims. As I have argued in above, and as MacIntyre also holds, moral attitudes and narrative forms are dynamically and intimately connected. [68] Curtis's virtue-redescription traces a form and indicates a philosophy that has not entirely left behind the desire to capture history and human progress in a quest-narrative. Through articulating what a good society is, and – by virtue of this conception – what constitutes a morally good character, Curtis appears to still want to anchor his account in a (quasi)metaphysical fashion. It reveals a conservative, or at least preservative, impulse, at odds with the Rortian emphasis on expansion, change and growth – on accepting that all we can do is work from where we are, with what we have, towards something we think might work.[69]

My worry is, as stated at the outset, that the virtuous vocabulary obscures and even sets aside the most unique and radical part of Rorty – the part where he breaks with the teleological, quest-romance form and goes novelistic; becomes literary. This transgression of the tradition is the element of Rortian thought that is most original, unfamiliar, and potentially paradigm-shifting; the part that cannot be made intelligible *within* the conventional governing narrative. And this surplus and unfamiliarity – and the unsettling and defamiliarising effects of it has – thus represents what is most distinctive and useful in Rortian pragmatism.

The Question of the Novel

Paralleling the conclusion of the previous chapter, then, it might be contended that Rorty rejects not just the quest-romance but narrative form altogether. That would be to overstate my case. Neither Rorty nor the novel reject form in favour of formlessness, but both embrace experimentation *with* form, and the proliferation of forms as many and diverse as there are human viewpoints – the novel as a *genre* does not postulate an overarching form for each novel to instantiate. Instead, what I have wanted to argue in these two chapters is that Rorty not only wanted us to break free 'from the governing metaphors of mind and knowledge in which the traditional problems of epistemology and metaphysics... are rooted', as we saw Ramberg put it in

---

[68] MacIntyre, p. 243.

[69] This echoes a line from Roosevelt's autobiography: 'There is a bit of homely philosophy, quoted by Squire Bill Widener, of Widener's Valley, Virginia, which sums up one's duty in life: "Do what you can, with what you've got, where you are."' I imagine Squire Widner and William James might have made good friends. See Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography: With Illustrations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), p. 337.

the Introduction, but that he also wanted us to break free from the governing narrative *form* that shapes, or at least exerts significant pressures on, our understanding of, and conversations about, historic, intellectual, and moral progress.[70]

The unified and unifying teleological form is instantiated by the quest-romance form, the end-of-history trajectory, the end-of-inquiry story, the Truth-finding plot, and latent also in the *Bildungsroman*, as is discernible in its drive towards the formation of a stable, integrated, and persistent ethical character. This is significant because Rorty's narrative about how the history of our intellectual culture hangs together with its best possible future *constitutes* his moral philosophy: Rorty follows Sellars in seeing morality as a matter of 'we-intentions' and holds that 'the core meaning of "immoral action" is "the sort of thing *we* don't do"' – he tells us that on this picture, 'moral philosophy takes the form of an answer to the question "Who are 'we', how did we come to be what we are, and what might we become?"'.[71] The story we tell about who we are, why we are this way, how we want to be in the world is the narrative that allows us to make sense of and frame talk about what is or was good or bad, right or wrong, helpful or unhelpful. Curtis correctly discerns that Rorty's multifaceted, repeatedly retold and elaborated narrative about the history and future of our culture is co-extensive with his moral philosophy. What is not usually noted, and that I am stressing, is that the question of what *kind* of narrative Rorty formulates in response to this question then matters a great deal.

Thus Rorty would have, I want to suggest, benefitted from stating this formal discontinuity more plainly than he did, precisely because it brings to the fore the attitudinal shift he advances. It also brings into view the more subtle but important point that it might be less conducive to talk about Rorty as advocating a specific transformation of character, and more helpful to talk about Rorty as urging us to, self-consciously, change our stance towards ourselves *as* characters. Articulating Rorty's break with traditional forms helps us see that he insists that we write a different kind of story about human history and cast ourselves in a different kind of role. It brings out the 'stupidity' in thinking we can transcend the human experience, the comedy of our quests, and the philosophical priest's self-satisfaction. It shifts attention to and embraces our idiosyncratic, individual humanity, and instead of seeing the loss of the dream of the overman as tragic, it welcomes the carnival.

This, however, might not sound like a suitable approach to take if the aim is to forge a solidaric 'we' capable of getting anything done. Voparil has elsewhere concluded that

---

[70] Ramberg, 'Richard Rorty'.
[71] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 59–60.

the complexity and irony of great literature cannot easily be reconciled with the kinds of moral sentiments Rorty needs literature to disseminate to further the communal ends of his "liberal utopia." Despite appearances to the contrary, Rorty's appeal to literature looks not to irony but to sentiment for its political import. Kundera's subversive conception of the novel's irony undermines Rorty's bourgeois liberalism to the point where the two can coexist only by instituting a sharp division between public and private. This is the paradox of Rorty's political thought: while he intimates a conception of democracy grounded in an ironical, nonmetaphysical culture, he resists the full force of the human ambiguity and plurality of irony in public.[72]

Voparil stresses that we 'must address the possibility Rorty raises: can complexity, irony, and ambiguity provide a sufficient basis for collective action?'.[73] He simultaneously concludes that it cannot, and moreover suggests that it is in order to overcome this problem and to enable the formation of a stable, collective moral identity capable of action, that Rorty blocks off private irony from public solidarity.

Voparil asks the right questions but, in my estimation, draws conclusions that miss the mark, albeit not by much. Voparil's hesitation is about the moral and political efficacy of the Rortian attitude. As the next chapter shows, Rorty worried about the same matter in the essays that introduced his idea of a 'literary culture'. Voparil's doubt is also about whether the novel as a *genre* in the twentieth century, the modernist and postmodern novel in all its complexity and irony, has been a vehicle of moral progress. While Voparil appears to read Rorty as saying that only 'didactic, middle-brow, "sentimental" novels' are useful for spurring the liberal 'we' to change, I read Rorty as responding to this question – as he does to the question of whether pragmatist thought has advanced our intellectual and moral development – with an emphatic yes, it does.[74] Subsequent chapters of this thesis explore how Rorty offers a model for ethical thought where literature and complex literariness does play a key role, but virtues do not.

---

[72] Voparil, 'The Politics of the Novel', p. 62.
[73] Voparil, 'The Politics of the Novel, p. 62.
[74] Voparil, 'The Politics of the Novel, p. 62.

Chapter 4
From Romanticism to Textualism to Pragmatism

Whereas this inquiry began by asking 'why describe it as a "literary" culture and not simply a "pragmatist culture"?', now there is also the question 'why "literary culture" and not merely "novelistic culture"?'. This distinction is important. Despite his emphatic identification with the Kunderan novelistic attitude, Rorty does not tell all philosophers to become novelists, nor does he become one himself. He asks philosophers to become *literary* critics. While Rorty is impatient with Heidegger's reification of the lyric as a means for transcendence, he makes room for all variants of literature in his work. 'Sentimental' novels that address systemic injustice and cruelty play a vital part. He weaves poetry into his writing, for instance when he uses Philip Larkin's 'Continuing to Live' to explain his view of selfhood in *CIS*. When Rorty knew he was dying, he wrote that only poetry had been able to bring him comfort:

> I suspect that 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.[1]

Rorty is not insensitive to the art and effect of poetry.[2] Moreover, he also invokes literature 'in the narrow sense' and means poetry, plays, and novels.[3] This implies that there is literature in a broader sense and, also, that even the narrow sense extends well beyond the genre of the novel. The survey of the literary aspect of Rorty's work in the Introduction combines with the overarching conception of the Rortian narrative and stance in chapters 2 and 3 to create a substantial case for viewing Rorty's literariness as vital to Rortian philosophy, but there is clearly more to unpack.

Rorty might have been the son of a poet, but he started his career as an analytic philosopher. The two previous chapters traced a development in his philosophy which might, in the vocabulary I am employing, be said to move from an analytic to a pragmatist to a literary, or

---

[1] Richard Rorty, 'The Fire of Life', *Poetry*, 191.2 (2007), 129–31 (p. 130).

[2] Rorty's father was a journalist, writer, and published poet. See James Rorty, *Children of the sun, and other poems* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926). For more on the younger Rorty's formative years, see Gross.

[3] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 94.

poeticist, stance. This suggestion can be motivated by looking closely at the essays in which Rorty introduced the idea of a 'literary culture', which is also where he began to consider the characteristics and merits of literary criticism as a genre, and at the later development of this term in *CIS*. Thus, this chapter investigates the origins of Rorty's literary vocabulary, especially his adoption and adaptation of the term 'literary culture'. The next turns to Rorty's conception of it in *CIS*. As this and subsequent chapters will show, unpacking the above questions reveals vital insights about Rorty's relationship to literature.

Literature, related terms, and descriptions of impulses and attitudes that align Rorty's pragmatist stance with the literary artist's mindset occur regularly and frequently in Rorty's writings from the seventies onwards. Accounting for all these instances is beyond the scope of this thesis. I will thus concentrate on two vital junctures in his career: the time of publication of *PMN* and of *CIS* – the two works customarily taken to be his most defining. This chapter will focus on PPTC (1976), which is where the term 'literary culture' first appeared, and NITT (1981), where Rorty not only developed this idea more fully but also sketched the project he came to undertake in *CIS*. I describe how Rorty originally conceived 'a literary culture' as a subculture standing in opposition to a scientistic culture and trace his increasing identification with the literary 'highbrows'. I also show that after *PMN* Rorty begins to give this idea a broader, culture-encompassing scope: the next chapter turns to *CIS* where the literary culture takes over.[4] I conclude this chapter by briefly examining Felski's worry about the position Rorty expresses in NITT, specifically his approval of the 'strong' critic – and by offering some thoughts on how the reading I extend better enables us to address her concerns.

The Attitude that Scandalises C. P. Snow

The term 'literary culture' first appeared in 'Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture', originally given as a talk at the Bicentennial Symposium of Philosophy, held in New York in October 1976 under the caption of 'Philosophy in the Life of a Nation'.[5] Rorty's talk pitted professionalised academic philosophers against a less easily circumscribed 'culture', which transcended disciplinary boundaries and distinctions between academia and broader society. By insisting on 'autonomy', Rorty complained, professionalised philosophy was removing itself from the rest of the academy and the concerns of the society it operated within, to focus on problems

---

[4] Cf. Rorty, 'PTG', p. 4.

[5] The New York Times' archives give an insight into this "ponderous event": see Israel Shenker, *'LIFE OF A NATION' IS PONDEROUS EVENT* <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/10/10/archives/life-of-a-nation-is-ponderous-event-300-philosophers-meet-to-make.html> [accessed 15 July 2019].

created by its own formalisms.[6] The pragmatist tradition of the past, so central to the theme of the conference, had urged philosophers to turn away from this kind of self-absorbed, idealist thinking – a call American philosophy had not heeded. Instead, the insights it had offered were being developed in continental philosophy and 'highbrow literary culture'.[7]

Even though C. P. Snow is only briefly referred to in Rorty's essay, it seems clear that Rorty adopted the term 'literary culture' from Snow.[8] In *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959), Snow argued that Western society has split into two distinct cultures, the sciences and the humanities, and, moreover, that this division is a problem for humanity as it faces more complex and threatening issues. Snow pitted 'the literary intellectuals' against 'the natural scientists', and in between them, he claimed to find 'a gulf of mutual incomprehension', 'hostility and dislike', and 'most of all a lack of understanding'.[9]

As Stefan Collini notes, this 'cultural anxiety' about the divide between 'two cultures' would not have been properly intelligible prior to the nineteenth century.[10] Only in the romantic period does this take on a recognisable form, but then primarily as a distinction between 'the fulness of creative or emotional energy released by poetry' and 'the impoverished conception of human life underlying the "dismal science" of political economy'.[11] While Snow sharpens this distinction and held 'the literary culture' to mean a diverse group of intellectuals who shared only a near total 'incomprehension' of science; a backward looking, 'traditional' culture, Rorty rethinks and redescribes this division.[12]

'Highbrow culture', Rorty explained, consists of those who produce poems, plays and novels, literary criticism, and 'what... we can call "culture criticism."'[13] The 'mark of the literary intellectual' is their attention to interpretation rather than verification – to 'what the arts and the "sciences of man" have in common'.[14] Whereas analytic philosophers want to mine old philosophical texts for 'hypotheses or instructive examples of conceptual confusion' – that is: for

[6] Rorty, 'PPTC', p. 762. All citations in this thesis is from this version.

[7] Rorty, 'PPTC', p. 762.

[8] It could be speculated that Rorty borrowed this term from Bloom, but while 'literary culture' does appear in Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), it does not in the earlier Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). This is of course not conclusive evidence, but it indicates Snow as the direct source. It could be that Bloom adopted this term from Rorty: Rorty does develop his take on this idea here in PPTC in 1976, and more fully in NCITT in 1981, and we know Bloom was a great admirer of Rorty.

[9] C.P Snow, *The Two Cultures*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Canto Classics, p. 4.

[10] Stefan Collini, 'Introduction', in *The Two Cultures*, iv-lxxii, (p. ix).

[11] Collini, 'Introduction', in *The Two Cultures* (p. x-xi).

[12] Snow, *The Two Cultures*, p. 11.

[13] Rorty, 'PPTC', p. 758.

[14] Rorty, 'PPTC', p. 762.

ahistorical, eternal insights – participants in the literary culture still treat the great dead philosophers 'in the old-fashioned way', as heroes or villains..[15] Professionalised thinkers distrust 'stories' as unscientific. And 'so they are', Rorty interjects, but despite the lack of rigorous methodology, highbrow writing forms 'a *genre*…which is quite indispensable', because

> [b]esides the need to ask whether certain propositions asserted by Aristotle or Kant or Kierkegaard are true or were validly inferred, there is also the need to adopt an attitude towards such men, just as one must adopt an attitude towards Alcibiades and Euripides, Cromwell and Milton, Proust and Lenin. Because the writings of the great dead philosophers form a bundle of intertwined dialectical sequences, one has to have attitudes towards many of them to justify one's attitude towards the others. Nor can one's attitude towards Kant, for example, be independent of one's attitudes towards Wordsworth and Napoleon.[16]

Rorty continues: 'Developing attitudes towards the mighty and dead and their living rivals – dividing the pantheon into the divine and the daemonic – is the whole point of highbrow culture.'[17]

At this stage, Rorty still saw himself as a metaphilosopher intent on building greater understanding between analytic and non-analytic strands of philosophy. He later argued more firmly against analytic philosophy – not as providers of tools for thinking, but as a group, a 'we', whose self-image and collective identity rest on a self-proclaimed ability to reveal and provide the foundations of truth and knowledge.[18] This is presumably why the litany of names above connects the literary with the philosophical with the political and historical: it moves *by example* against those who believe works of philosophy can be disconnected from their cultural and historical context. Before continuing, some remarks on Rorty's practice of listing figures are required.

As the previous chapter showed, Rorty came to connect the use of proper names to the novelistic attitude of Kundera and Dickens. He tied this rhetorical practice to both his aesthetic and his humanistic stance: the invocation or creation of multitudinous characters was portrayed as a technique that, because it underscores the unsubsumability of life itself, serves to advance both anti-representationalism and anti-authoritarianism. Making the connection between anti-

---

[15] Rorty, 'PPTC', p. 762.
[16] Rorty, 'PPTC', pp. 762–63.
[17] Rorty, 'PPTC', p. 763.
[18] Gross, pp. 149–52. That PPTC stems from a transitionary phase is observable in Rorty's simultaneous insistence on, on the one hand, the need for both analytic and non-analytic philosophy and, on the other, the privileging of 'highbrow culture' implicit in his suggestion that while the productions of analytic philosophy are optional, the genre of writing produced by the highbrows is 'indispensable'.

representationalism and anti-authoritarianism explicit was at the heart of Rorty's project.[19] Moreover, populating a gallery of figures and indicating or provoking us to adopt an attitude towards these, serves to draw attention to the writing *as* writing – as a text written from the perspective of an identifiable author who has certain dispositions. Drawing attention to the made and material character of writing was a move Rorty already in the seventies had identified as one of Derrida's crucial manoeuvres for undermining the Kantian tradition.[20]

Importantly, this also relates to Rorty's privileging of 'conversation'. Recall from PRI and Chapter 2 that Rorty held that '...the pragmatist knows no better way to explain his convictions than to remind his interlocutor of the position they both are in, the contingent starting points they both share, the floating, ungrounded, conversations of which they are both members'.[21] Chapter 2 also provided an example of how Rorty deploys lists of figures that function in such a reminding-capacity: he directed our attention to Prospero and Faust, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and comparable narratives to the one he was telling, in order to deepen our understanding of the transformational moment in TPP.[22] In this quote from PRI, Rorty is pointing to the Wittgensteinian recommendation that philosophers see themselves as assembling reminders for particular purposes, a topic Rorty takes up in another essay published the same year as PPTC.[23]

In the same essay where he brings up Wittgensteinian reminders, Rorty also notes that Dewey hoped that philosophy would 'join with poetry as Arnold's "criticism of life"'.[24] In *Experience and Nature* (1925), Dewey draws on Matthew Arnold to suggest that poetry is, if not in intent, then in effect, a 'criticism of life'. Dewey means by this that 'the arts of literature, poetry, ceremony, amusements, and recreation which obtain in a community, furnishing the staple objects of enjoyment in that community... supply the meanings in terms of which life is judged, esteemed,

---

[19] Elucidating how the Rortian conception of romanticism and idea of a literary culture relates to these themes is a key aim for Schulenberg, who wants to show how 'pragmatism, humanism, anti-authoritarianism, and postmetaphysics are linked'. See Schulenberg.
Voparil, in a later article than those discussed in the previous chapter, underscores the potential for using Rortian thought to address epistemic injustice. Christopher Voparil, 'Rorty and James on irony, moral commitment, and the ethics of belief', *William James Studies*, 12.2 (2016), 1–30 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26203802> (pp. 14–15). This is an important insight. It relates to Schulenberg's work, and to the connection between Rorty's literary stance and matters such as trust and acknowledgment, a connection I attempted to address in a conference paper given in 2019, entitled 'What Literary Studies Might Teach Us About Public Discourse in a Post-Truth Society'. I hope to develop this into a publishable paper in the future.

[20] Rorty, 'PKW', p. 146.

[21] Rorty, 'PRI', p. 736. PRI was originally a lecture held in 1979.

[22] Rorty, 'TPP', pp. 90–91.

[23] Rorty, 'Heidegger and Dewey', pp. 294–95. See also for instance *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), Philosophical Papers, 4, p. 191, and Rorty, *CIS*, 57 and 58.

[24] Rorty, 'Heidegger and Dewey', p. 292.

and criticized.' These artefacts and practices supply the material for critical evaluation of the life of that community.[25] In *CIS,* Rorty repeatedly uses the Arnoldian word 'touchstones' for such Wittgensteinian reminders. But what he means is triangulation-points for creating shared understanding and coordinating linguistic behaviour.[26]

This is not what Arnold had in mind. Arnold believed that poetry had a 'high destiny', which was to 'interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us': 'Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry'.[27] Such ambitions necessitated setting a high standard for the art of poetry (in the traditional sense): poems must be of a certain quality to do 'good'. Arnold thought that to judge if a work was of the necessary standard, we should compare it to passages or lines from works we already knew to be of the highest literary quality. This would help us see beyond our own time and our subjectivity: 'Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry'.[28] He quotes lines from Homer and Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton, Goethe and Wordsworth. But Chaucer, Dryden, Pope and Shelley fall short – they lack high seriousness. (From our vantage point, this list appears to reach beyond neither time nor subjectivity.)

Talk of 'touchstones' was never exclusive to Arnold. It was already then a familiar construct, implying any object against which we might measure the worth or validity of another. A 'touchstone' is usually understood as a verified example of the class to be circumscribed or added to; as an instance of a universal idea.[29] Rorty instead employs this word much like Americans use the phrase 'touch base' in colloquial speech. For 'touchstones' to Rorty are invoked to delimit and *clarify our vocabulary* (rather than whether something is, *essentially*, a thing), and thus to help us to arrive at the kind of shared understanding that enables a focused conversation on the same subject – conversations more likely to result in shared goals or collective action. Touchstones serve as objects that set up triadic joint attention to coordinate minds and meanings.

---

[25] John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), p. 204.

[26] That Rorty appropriates this expression from Arnold is further substantiated in a later essay on the value of 'great' literature, where Rorty juxtaposes 'Arnold' and 'touchstones' in the same paragraph. Rorty, 'The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature', p. 136. See also Chapter 6, p. 161-62.

[27] William Harmon, *Classic Writings on Poetry* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 464.

[28] Harmon, p. 469.

[29] In *PMN* this word occurs occasionally, but always as Rorty calls out this traditional method of evaluation by comparison to the highest ideal; to an essential idea (see for instance p. 212). Rorty recommends a comparative practice as well, but one that is mindfully lateral and pragmatic (between, say, possible self-images, or possible futures).

Rorty's constant placement of figures then functions to clarify the subject and his stance. It furthermore functions to fashion a kind of writing that moves away from the argumentative rhetoric of analytic philosophy and towards a literary and writerly sort of persuasion. Thus, this practice is deliberately cultivated as a kind of stylistic resistance against the representationalist paradigm.

After hearing Arnold lecture, Walt Whitman dismissed him as a 'literary dude'.[30] Rorty's constant invocation of figures also demonstrates *his* growing identification with literary 'highbrows', for highbrow culture encourages, Rorty observes, this kind of 'name-dropping'.[31] I want to make one more point regarding the literariness of this practice, relevant to this thesis and to reading Rorty more generally, before returning to the text of PPTC.

Rorty is, then, well-known for peppering his prose with names, often without giving much or any explanation of why, exactly, he chooses to include *these* names in any given context. *We* might, however, want one. For despite the above and despite knowing that it would be a mistake to attempt to work out precisely what Rorty *really* means when he drops specific names – this would be to fall into the trap of reading him in the manner he mildly satirised in TPP: as if on a search for the 'code of codes' – his touchstones are not randomly chosen.[32] They are deliberately chosen to remind, to support or amplify a point: Rorty uses them to construct a topology of ideas, to sway us, in a distinctly literary manner, as he gives them relative weight through assembling and juxtaposing them.

However, it might then be surmised that we are better off attempting to receive these invocations *in* a literary manner. The systems of thought, or vocabularies, these names stand for are, of course, of some consequence: we might be better readers of Rorty if we comprehend the arguments of Kant, or Hegel, or Dewey, or Davidson. But more often than not, Rorty also provides brief restatements of the ideas we need to get his drift. These litanies of names can thus frequently simply be taken as allusions to ideas and as hints towards attitudes, rather than as representations of exact ideas, theories, or historical persons. Rorty both strongly confirms his identification with the literary intellectual and tells us that 'alluding' can indeed be used to characterise what he does, when he in PTG echoes Derrida's well-known essay 'Che cos'è la poesia?', and casts himself as the Derridean creature of potery: 'I am a hedgehog who, despite showering my reader with allusions and dropping lots of names, has really only one idea: the need to get beyond representationalism, and thus into an intellectual world in which human beings are responsible

---

[30] Harmon, pp. 461–62.
[31] Rorty, 'PPTC', p. 763.
[32] Rorty, 'TPP', p. 92.

only to each other.'[33] Rorty is often accused of not getting these figures 'right' when he deploys them in this fashion, but raising such a challenge seems to me to miss the point – and to stem from a failure to notice and attend to the literariness of Rorty's philosophical practice.

Rorty might nevertheless be selecting names or referencing works or ideas to create a specific effect, erect a stage, or set a mood. Or we might be interested in looking at these to discover instructive patterns – such as the fact that his pointers are almost exclusively to white men in the Germanic and Anglo-American tradition. But elucidating every such reference would be not only a superfluous but almost unsurmountable task – in PPTC alone we would have to touch upon: Santayana, Calvin, Dewey, Royce, Palmer, Heidegger, Tarski, Carnap, Derrida, W. James, Hook, Otto, Meiklejohn, Kallen, Fichte, Hegel, Gurwitsch, Schuetz, Reichenbach, Emerson, Husserl, Russel, Descartes, Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Kant, Kierkegaard, Alcibiades, Euripides, Cromwell, Milton, Proust, Lenin, Wordsworth, Napoleon, Goethe, Macauley, Carlyle, Vaihinger, Valéry, Marlowe, Hobbes, Forster, Moore, Green, Keats, Shakespeare, Sartre, Danto, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Snow, Whitman, Eliot, Wilson, Trilling, Goodman, Bloom, Johnson, Socrates, Niebuhr, Edwards, Jefferson, H. James, Stevens, Pierce, and Veblen. Sixty-nine in total. Recognising that these allusions do not necessarily need to be taken as pieces in a line of logical exposition – and can be understood as characters on Rorty's stage – makes it clear why following each such lead is not obligatory. I suspect that knowing this might also make Rorty's writing appear more accessible. If each name is taken as part of a code that must be solved to understand what Rorty 'truly' means, approaching it might seem daunting – seen as an array of characters, some minor, some major, Rorty's assemblage of figures instead serve to enrich his narrative. Moving forward, I will thus not discuss every name he drops into the conversation. I will, however, pause and deliberate where there is room for it and where it seems that doing so would inform *my* overall narrative.

The points made above regarding *Rorty's* literary, writerly practices, tie in well with the argument he makes in PPTC for the indispensability of literary criticism. Using these kinds of techniques, coming at matters from such a disposition, the name-dropping, moral-attitude-adopting, vocabulary-evaluating, moving-from-touchstone-to-touchstone literary culture produces an 'indispensable' genre of writing:

---

[33]Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 322–37.
Rorty, 'PTG', p. 4.

Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macauley (*sic*) and Carlyle and Emerson, a kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all these things mingled together into a new genre. This genre is often still called "literary criticism"... for an excellent reason. The reason 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 primary means by which a bright youth gains a self-image. Criticism of novels is the principal form in which the acquisition of a moral character is made articulate. We live in a culture in which putting one's moral sensitivity into words is not clearly distinguishable from exhibiting one's literary sensibilities.[34]

The account offered in Chapter 2 of this thesis illuminates this passage: Rorty is indicating that the emergence of literary criticism as a genre marked the start of our cultural moment of overcoming.

Rorty here places the rise of this genre, the start of this moment, in the romantic era, broadly conceived. While literary criticism can partly trace its roots to Plato, the changes in the perception and uses of literature of the romantic period mean we might very well talk about a 'new genre' emerging. As we saw Collini note above regarding the Snow-Leavis controversy, the idea of a 'literary culture' would hardly have been possible to imagine before this moment: philosophical, religious, and poetic writing was too intertwined. Rorty perceives this. He echoes it when he later suggests that the 'takeover' of a 'literary culture' would be 'unlike anything that has existed in the past'. In fact, it seems that Rorty uses 'romantics' and 'romanticism' not exactly to refer to a historical period, but rather to denote the start of a defining shift in our collective spirit. Not a development that brings us a step closer to the end of history, but that pushed us in the direction of becoming able to entertain the mindset the 'takeover' of a 'literary culture' implies. A mindset Rorty suggests Kant could not have grasped, as it entails the complete naturalisation and dissolution of the idea of Reason as such.[35] Rorty assigns the romantics a lead role in his narrative because the wide range of ideas they set in play did not result in the formation of a new philosophical picture of the 'one vision' kind, but rather plucked on the warp of the Kantian arras.

This 'indispensable' 'new genre' was defined by its awareness not just of its situatedness in time, but also in space. Marshall Brown describes how the romantics 'worried about their

---

[34] Rorty, 'PPTC', pp. 763–64.
[35] See Rorty, 'PTG', p. 4.
Rorty's Hegelianism is ever present, and while I might have liked him to pay more attention to Herder when presenting his overarching historical narrative, Rorty is not unaware: he later calls us '[w]e heirs of Herder and Hegel'. However, pragmatism *also* defines itself by its debt to Darwin: he allowed us to 'see our species not as endowed with a truth-tracking faculty called "reason", but rather as endowed with language and thus with the ability to engage in social cooperation'. An appreciation of the consequences of Darwin's contribution is what Rorty sees as missing in Nussbaum. See Rorty, 'Redemption from Egotism', p. 400.

historical role and studied poetry in its historical unfolding', and 'used poetics to project destinies: utopia becomes an aesthetic realm lodged in the distant future'. [36] With 'Herder's historicism as both symptom and cause', Brown continues, the romantics turned their attention to their material moment in history, geographically, and sociologically. As Brown furthermore points out, this turn to worldly concerns and uses also resulted in an aestheticising, idealising reaction in 'defence of poesy', which in Kant and Schiller was expressed through its valuation of 'play itself as a humanizing and elevating moral value': art, Brown explains, 'becomes not the representative of religion but its propaedeutic (Hegel) or even its substitute... High and low come together in the more dizzying tributes to Romantic irony.' Brown suggests that from 'the varieties of Romantic-era criticism can be derived both the elitist formalism of the modernists and the anti-elitist high jinx of postmodernists, though both tend to strip Romantic motifs of their sublime, metaphysical or transcendental dimensions.'.[37] Rorty's claim that literary criticism as we know it emerged at this time is thus well-founded.

Rorty often stresses the democratisation of knowledge taking place in this period. While this was intimately related to the evolution of a scientific mindset that drove a process of de-divinisation – compelling readers, as Rorty emphasises, to see literature as a secular source for material that might impart moral insight – it was also furthered by literary writing and writing about literature. Literary thinking turned its attention to the role of writing and reading in broader society, and criticism paid attention to religious writing, philosophy, and other forms in other areas of culture, *as* writing. Literary writers increasingly saw literature as having a variety of uses and themselves as writing for a broader public. As Brown notes,

> since the Romantic era literary criticism has been concerned not just with works but with writers and readers. When Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical ballads* defines the poet as 'a man speaking to men', he is, to be sure, making a point about the democratization of letters ('man'=common man) and missing one about the situation of women and women writers. But he is also making a novel statement about the communicative value of literature. The writer does not just provide moral exempla and frame a golden world; literature is there to be read and understood.[38]

This is when and why hermeneutics becomes important for philosophy: the democratisation of literature means the question of how the 'common reader' will understand literary works becomes

---

[36] *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 5: Romanticism*, ed. by Marshall Brown, 9 vols (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5, pp. 3–4.

[37] *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, pp. 3–4. All citations in this paragraph, loc. cit.

[38] *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, p. xiii.

pressing. 'Earlier genre criticism', Brown continues, 'concerned the laws of composition of different types of writing; now it also considers their different purposes and audiences.'[39]

Literary writing and criticism thus became much more diverse in its attentions and expressions. It cultivated an interest in local literary traditions, the forms alive and in use in the lower classes, and the novel, the genre of the middle class and women, increased in standing. Although the 'attention to women as writers and readers of literature' was still, as Brown notes 'incipient and uneven', discussion of ' literature and the other arts' became 'richer and less judgmental'.[40] To put it in Rorty's terms, this 'new genre' emerged as literary criticism adopted a more open, pluralistic, egalitarian, democratic, conversational stance and looked beyond (although not past) its own formalisms.[41] And it became 'indispensable' because of the attitude it emerged from, developed, and furthered.

Hence, when Rorty is charged with not fully appreciating the complexity of romantic thought or of not justly portraying specific philosophers or poets of this era, the accusation might be correct and still be a critique that misses its mark. While, for instance, Milnes – convincingly – argues that the romanticist conception of truth and knowledge, especially that of Keats, Shelley, and Coleridge, was much more pragmatic than Rorty assumed, supplementing Rorty's narrative with Milnes's knowledge, merely strengthens Rorty's overall narrative.[42]

What is likely to still jar in the above quotation of Rorty's – even if one concurs that literary critics can function as moral guides – is his claim that he is talking about *literary* criticism. The worry about his use of this term is further compounded when Rorty adds that in this 'highbrow culture', in the 'new genre' of literary criticism, which Rorty here also equates with 'culture criticism',

---

[39] *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, p. 2.

[40] *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, pp. 3–4.

[41] A path for moving beyond the formalism that still dominated twentieth-century literary theory – the 'attempt to find meaning or value in a text's supposedly intrinsic properties' – and *also* replace this with a more 'tenable' conception of literature (as opposed to defining a mere antiformalist position) is what Vescio takes pragmatism to offer literary studies. See Vescio, pp. 8–9. Interestingly, this is exactly what Moi, while rejecting pragmatism outright as another 'formalism', takes Cavell to offer. Cf. Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*.

[42] Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism*. For an account of Kant's conception of human nature and human experience that complicates Rorty's view of Kant, and supplements Rorty's redescription of what it is to be human, see Ross Wilson, *Subjective universality in Kant's aesthetics* (Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), and Ross Wilson, *The Meaning of 'Life' in Romantic Poetry and Poetics*, Routledge studies in romanticism, 12 (New York, London: Routledge, 2009). Wilson argues that it is when Kant examines aesthetic judgement that he first fully engages with the question of what is distinctive about human beings (purely rational beings could not make aesthetic judgement). There seems to me to be potential for examining the ways in which Wilson's interpretation of Kant can supplement the interpretation of Rorty I offer in this thesis (cf. chapters 5-7 in particular).

> [p]hilosophy is treated as a parallel genre to the drama or the novel or the poem, so that we speak of the epistemology common to Vaihinger and Valéry, the rhetoric common to Marlowe and Hobbes, the ethics common to E.M. Forster and G. E. Moore. What culture criticism does not do is to ask whether Valéry wrote more beautiful lines than Marlowe, or whether Hobbes or Moore told more truths about the good. In this form of life, the true and the good and the beautiful drop out. The aim is to understand, not to judge. The hope is that if one understands enough poems, enough religions, enough societies, enough philosophies, one will have made oneself into something worth one's own understanding.[43]

This passage is a prime example of Rorty dropping names for both philosophical *and* stylistic purposes, and considering it from a prosodic point of view might indeed be instructive.

Rorty's exemplars are pertinent to his point: the particular selection of figures makes our attention vacillate between literature and philosophy; they are subsequently recombined along disciplinary lines, a move Rorty then rejects as too narrow-minded for 'the form of life' that is the highbrow culture. If we know that G.E. Moore exerted a great influence on the Bloomsbury circle, in which E.M. Forster was included, this adds another layer to Rorty description for us – and might very well make us feel like we 'click', to use Voparil's term, with Rorty the author because we share a detailed insight: we care about the same things.[44] But while Rorty could have achieved this effect through any number of combinations, he has also carefully chosen names to create an added poetic effect. There are several alliterations in these lines, the most obvious being the repeating Vs. But there are more: a string of *o*s follow; 'ethics' and 'common' resonate with E.M. Forster and G.E. Moore. These two names taken together compose a pleasing melody from the high-pitched E down to the G and up again. The closeness of these two double-initialled names makes the crisp Englishness of their abbreviated form stand out. Hence, while it might be that for the wide-ranging, discipline crossing, highbrow literary critic, the 'true and the good and the beautiful' might become ancillary concerns to fostering understanding, Rorty is simultaneously demonstrating that he is not opposed to the writing of beautiful, rich prose. The fact that he chooses to write like this underwrites that he is deliberately aligning himself with a specific kind of literary intellectual – who cares about writing as writing. And it also shows that while he appears to dismiss the value of beautiful writing above, that is not the case: he is not devaluing literature in

---

[43] Rorty, 'PPTC', p. 764.

[44] For a resource detailing Moore's influence on E.M Forster in particular, see David Sidorsky, 'The Uses of the Philosophy of G. E. Moore in the Works of E. M. Forster', *New Literary History*, 38.2 (2007), 245–71 <www.jstor.org/stable/20058002> . 'Click', see Voparil, 'Philosophy as Bildungsroman', p. 122, and Chapter 3, p. 55.

the traditional sense. But if 'the true and the beautiful and the good' drops out, what is left of *literary* criticism as we know it?

Two observations might clarify this. The first is that Rorty, as here demonstrated, is not aiming to stop us from caring about 'beautiful lines'. Working out how and why texts persuade, resonate, comfort, inspire, trigger, or are boring is a kind of detailed scholarly labour and care which can complement the project that Rorty, using a broad brush, is sketching. A recent doctoral thesis by Kristian Bjørkdahl details how studies of rhetoric can supplement Rorty's work, and a similar treatise could be imagined from the perspective of literary studies.[45] The second thing to observe here is that Rorty is *not*, in fact, talking about actual *texts*. He is talking about a mode of critical practice – about a spirit of intellectual analysis rather than its objects – where the aim is to 'understand, not to judge'. The aim is to understand what unites epistemologies, rhetoric, ethics and hope – what we claim to know, how we talk about it, what we do, and what we believe is possible and important.

Rorty's overall point is thus that 'highbrow culture' is a culture made up of people who have adopted a specific attitude:

> It is the attitude that there is no point in raising questions of truth, goodness, or beauty, because between ourselves and the thing judged there always intervenes mind, language, a perspective chosen among dozens, one description chosen out of thousands. On one side, it is the lack of seriousness which Plato attributed to poets, the "negative capability" for which Keats praised Shakespeare. On another, it is the Sartrean sense of absurdity which Arthur Danto suggests may befall us when we give up the picture theory of language and the Platonic conception of truth as accuracy of representation. In the later Wittgenstein, it was the wry admission that anything has a sense if you give it a sense.[46]

The 'lack of seriousness', the absurdity, the wryness might recall the moment when the protagonist in TPP 'comes down with the giggles' as he realises that all theories, all governing metaphors, are simply one description out of countless possible. It also points forward to the 'ironism' of *CIS* and the satire and carnival Rorty associated with the Kunderan stance – an element he also associated with Wittgenstein and Derrida from the early seventies onward. The point here is that as the highbrow comes to think that no type of description has an innate right to be privileged over others. All theoretical distinctions between *kinds* of texts are levelled. This is, Rorty tells us, 'the attitude of the literary intellectual towards science which scandalizes C. P. Snow: the view of, say,

---

[45] Kristian Bjørkdahl, *Enlarging the Ethnos. Rorty, Redescription, and the Rhetorical Labor of Moral Progress*, (Doctoral Thesis, University of Oslo, 2016).
[46] Rorty, 'PPTC', p. 765.

quantum mechanics as a notoriously great, but quite untranslatable, poem, written in a lamentably obscure language'.[47]

For Rorty, then, 'literary culture' from the very beginning means something quite radically different from what it did for Snow – while aspects of the literary culture frustrated Snow, the literary attitude as Rorty conceives it would undoubtedly scandalise him. For Rorty, it is a culture comprised of individuals who, while they might have a great deal of knowledge about science, do not think that science – nor any human way of thinking or speaking – reveals ultimate Truths by being the correct description of the world. Rorty does not doubt the existence of the world, or elementary particles, or feelings, for that matter – as a pragmatist, he is profoundly anti-sceptic. Simultaneously, his pragmatist fallibilism also commits him to the view that the words we use to talk *about* the world and experience can always change. Rorty's linguistic redescription of classical pragmatism transposes this stance in such a way that it brings the poetic nature of all our descriptions into focus.

By this point, it is hard to tell the pragmatist from the literary highbrow, for they will both see all texts, even the theories of physics as *poems* – in the sense of products of the human imagination. It is striking to find such consistency here, between Rorty's first attempt at circumscribing a 'literary culture' and what Russell B. Goodman has called the 'central thesis of Rorty's mature pragmatism': 'that all new language, whether in the sciences, philosophy, or literature, is poetry'.[48] But in the following, vital differences between 'highbrows' and pragmatists emerge.

The Important Issue about Textualism and Pragmatism

Rorty did not deploy the idea of a 'literary culture' in *PMN*. In Part III he sketched what philosophy might become after metaphysics, but, as noted in the previous chapter of this thesis, Rorty later saw this attempt as a false start, too intent on the German hermeneutic tradition and lacking in insight into contemporary continental thought.[49] Two years later, in Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism (hereafter NITT), Rorty returned to the idea of a 'literary culture' and attempted to articulate it more fully by setting out the difference between

---

[47] Rorty, 'PPTC', p. 765.
[48] Russell B. Goodman, 'Rorty and Romanticism', in *Philosophical Topics: Pragmatism*, ed. by Edward Minar and Steven Levine (36 (2008)), pp. 79–95 (p. 81).
[49] See p. 55-56, and Rorty, 'IA', p. 13.

idealists, postmodernist yet quasi-essentialist textualists, and strong, 'fully-fledged' pragmatist-textualists. Moreover, in the concluding paragraphs he – for the first time, as far as I have been able to ascertain – explicitly outlined the question at the core of *CIS*. While NITT, for the most part, dwells on what unites and differentiates idealism and 'textualism', the most *significant* distinction Rorty makes is between 'weak' and 'strong' textualists. As I see it, Rorty is here, once again, rehearsing that moment of making the 'fundamental choice' of accepting or not accepting the contingency of all starting points.

Rorty begins, somewhat counterintuitively, by lumping together the romantic idealist of the nineteenth century with those he calls the 'textualists' of the twentieth: 'people who write as if there were nothing but texts... for example, the so-called Yale school of literary criticism centering around Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartmann, and Paul De Man, "post-structuralist" French thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, historians like Hayden White, and social scientists like Paul Rabinow'.[50] What unites them, he asserts, is an antagonistic position to natural science. Neither tradition believes that human thought culminates in the application of scientific method; both insist 'that we can never compare human thought or language with bare, unmediated, reality' – a point they use, Rorty observes, to 'put science in its place'. And both offers 'to what C.P. Snow called the "literary culture" a self-image, and a set of rhetorical devices'. [51]

These schools arrived at their overlapping points of view via different routes. The idealists took Kant to have shown that the concepts of natural science were merely instruments and that science could only ever know a phenomenal world. 'In textualist terms', Rorty continues, this 'becomes the claim that the vocabulary of science is merely one among others'.[52] Another key difference lies in their stated attitude towards the idea of truth. The idealists were metaphysicians who believed that 'art could put us in touch with that part of ourselves – the noumenal, free, spiritual part – which science cannot see'.[53] The textualists, on the other hand, disavowed the idea that we could get to truth in itself. But they nevertheless, Rorty holds – and this is a vital point in his analysis – saw themselves as being able to represent things more truthfully *by the power of* this knowledge, this dismissal. This kind of textualist exalted the 'literary artist's awareness that he is making rather than finding', more specifically 'the ironic modernist's awareness that he is responding to texts rather than to things' – and this ironic attitude allowed the textualist to think the scientist naïve.[54] Conceiving themselves as the less naïve party permitted the textualists to

---

[50] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 155.
[51] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 155.
[52] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 155.
[53] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 156.
[54] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 156.

think of themselves as closer to what is 'really' going on.[55] Both schools of thought thus hold there to be a point of view *higher* than that of science. The inability of (some) textualists to fully let go of essentialism is made visible in this transposition of the scientistic worldview: a reversal rather than a dissolution of the problem textualists of this sort Rorty classes, in Bloomian terms of poetic strength, as 'weak textualists'.

The textualists nevertheless make important progress. Whereas idealism was based upon a distinctive metaphysical thesis, textualism was not. Their goal is not to articulate foundations. Instead, as Rorty explains, they attempted to formulate something new:

> When philosophers like Derrida say things like "there is nothing outside the text" they are not making theoretical remarks, remarks backed up by epistemological or semantical arguments. Rather, they are saying, cryptically and aphoristically, that a certain framework of inter-connected ideas – truth as correspondence, language as picture, literature as imitation, for example – ought to be abandoned.[56]

Nevertheless, whereas the nineteenth century placed science, in the form of absolutist philosophy, at the centre of culture, twentieth-century textualism places *literature* at its core because textualist culture simply treats science and philosophy as literary genres.[57] The aim must be to move beyond this cycle of reversals.[58]

Rorty here defines science and literature in non-traditional ways. 'By "science"', Rorty says, 'I shall mean 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 then aim at consensus by tracing inferential chains between these principles and more particular and more interesting propositions'.[59] Science is defined in terms of being a rule-governed practice in the service of a particular purpose or intent, progressing from a shared understanding of these, of the criteria for success, and thus from an explicit and implicit intersubjective agreement on the vocabulary to be used.[60] Philosophy (analytic, professionalised) is then a science in the sense that it purports to be a methodologically governed practice which aims to 'discover those general principles which made scientific discourse scientific, and thus to "ground" both the other sciences and itself'. [61] That is:

---

[55] I take Rorty to be addressing criticism that aims to 'uncover' ideology, and by this holds itself to be moving closer to the Truth.
56 Rorty, 'NITT', p. 156.
[57] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 157.
[58] Cf. Rorty, 'Introduction to TLT', pp. 1–2.
[59] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 157.
[60] See also Rorty, 'Solidarity or Objectivity?'; Rorty, 'Science as solidarity'.
[61] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 157.

(analytic) philosophy sees itself, because its core concern is the very nature and characteristics of truth, as having the right to adjudicate between all knowledge claims. [62] To use the vocabulary of TPP and chapters 2 and 3: philosophy has the self-image of a 'hero' who, on behalf of humankind, is on a 'quest' for Truth.

'Literature', on the other hand, is an activity where the dominant vocabulary is constantly up for grabs:

> It is a feature of what I shall call "literature" that one can achieve success by introducing a quite new genre of poem or novel or critical essay without argument. It succeeds simply by its success, not because there are good reasons why poems or novels or essays should be written in the new way rather than the old. 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. The reason "literary criticism" is "unscientific" is just that whenever somebody tries to work up such a vocabulary he makes a fool of himself. We don't 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.[63]

And he continues: By "literature", then, I shall mean the areas of culture which, quite self-consciously, forego agreement on an encompassing critical vocabulary, and thus forego argumentation.'[64]

This is a rather unusual way to define *literature*. However, once again, Rorty is clearly not talking about specific texts. Nor is he offering an institutional account of literature: his description provides no criteria for delimiting conventions. And again, we must view matters in terms of attitudes and practices. For viewed through that lens, Rorty is saying that literary writing, critical or otherwise, is the kind of writing that impacts without relying on established (in Kuhnian-Rortian terms: 'familiar') argumentative forms; on fulfilling already known criteria.[65] Instead, they take us beyond those. Significantly, he is also claiming that it is *only* by degrees of relative ease of reaching agreement that science and literature are different: neither activity is, on the pragmatist picture, anything more than a set of behaviours (linguistic behaviours here included) – both are practices, merely governed by more or less strict but equally contingent and intersubjectively constituted rules. 'Science' and 'literature' here, to use a construct important to my argument in

---

[62] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 157.
[63] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 157.
[64] Rorty, 'NITT', 157-158.
[65] By extension, any contribution which succeeds in this non-argumentative manner, by simply introducing the new way of talking, can be called 'literature'.

the next chapter, denote segments of a spectrum rather than ontologically different or even ontologically significant constructs.[66]

Rorty is *not* saying that literary critics, theorists, scholars, or writers are incapable of, or unwilling to engage in, rational argument. He is saying that arguments – reasons that are fully explicable – can only be formulated in a familiar language. He is also, as R.B. Goodman emphasises, already here working on how we can have rationality *without* argument.[67] Note how Rorty concludes that this is a matter of self-awareness: the actors in the literary activity *knowingly*, 'quite self-consciously', reject the idea that there is or could be a master-vocabulary in which all descriptions, problems and solutions ultimately could be stated. This is, vice versa, to knowingly accept pluralism of vocabularies, methods and descriptions.

While Rorty accepts that this is a 'crude' way to cast the difference between science and literature, it permits him to recast this distinction as that between 'finding out whether a proposition is true and finding out whether a vocabulary is good'.[68] Once more, Rorty is going far in equating the literary attitude with the pragmatist stance: James told us that for the pragmatist, what matters is what is good in 'the way of belief', and translated into to Rorty's post-linguistic-turn idiom, this becomes how it is good for us to talk.[69] Here Rorty equates 'literature' with working on finding out whether a way to talk is good. However, Rorty does not make this identifying move directly – he goes via a return to the romanticist roots of pragmatism.

Rorty defines romanticism, too, in a nonstandard way: 'Let me call "romanticism" the thesis that what is most important for human life is not what propositions we believe but what vocabulary we use.'[70] Romanticism, he says:

> inverts the values which ...Kant assigned to the determinate and the reflective judgment. It sees the determinate judgment – the activity which ticks off instances of concepts by invoking common, public, criteria--as producing merely agreement. Kant thought "knowledge," the name for the result of such activity, was a term of praise. Romanticism accepts Kant's point that objectivity is conformity to rule, but changes the emphasis, so that objectivity becomes mere conformity to rule, merely going along with the crowd, merely consensus. By contrast, romanticism sees the reflective judgment – the activity of operating without rules, of searching for concepts under which to group particulars (or, by extension, of constructing new concepts which are "transgressive" in that they do not fit under any of the old rules) – as what really

---

[66] This is an approach Rorty outlines in another 'literary' article: see Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', p. 8.
[67] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 164 and Goodman, 'Rorty and Romanticism', p. 83.
[68] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 158.
[69] James, *Pragmatism*, p. 76.
[70] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 158.

matters. Kant, in saying that aesthetic judgment is noncognitive, because it cannot be brought under rules, is assigning it a second-best status – the status which the scientific culture has always assigned to the literary culture. Romanticism, on the other hand, when it says that science is merely cognitive, is trying to turn the tables.[71]

It is not Kant as such, then, that paved the way for seeing science and philosophy as just genres on par with other genres, but the romantics' re-evaluation of Kant and their insistence on poetry as a more essential genre. Herein lies their paramount importance as pathbreakers for pragmatism.

The most vital figure for this re-evaluation of Kant was, Rorty submits, Hegel. Kantian scientism fell with the advent of Hegelian thought:

> Hegel kept the name of "science" without the distinctive mark of science--willingness to accept a neutral vocabulary in which to state problems, and thereby make argumentation possible. Under cover of Kant's invention, a new super science called "philosophy," Hegel invented a literary genre which lacked any trace of argumentation, but which obsessively captioned itself *System der Wissenschaft* or *Wissenschäft der Logik*, or *Encyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*.[72]

To say that Rorty's redescriptions of Kant and Hegel are idiosyncratic is not to say anything new. What matters here is to note that in Rorty's narrative, the origins of literary criticism and the literary culture lies in Hegel's historicism.

That Rorty casts Hegel in this role was set out in TWO and Chapter 2: Hegel and Proust taught him to be content with trying to hold our time and its particularities in thought. Here Rorty casts Hegel in the exact same role in his story about the moral and intellectual progress of Western culture; in the 'we'-story. And, moreover, Rorty suggests that the 'best formula to express the sense of liberation from science which was Hegel's legacy' is to see Hegel as the inventor, not of a new philosophy, but, as he also claimed in PPTC, a new *literary* genre, one that

> exhibited the relativity of significance to choice of vocabulary, the bewildering variety of vocabularies from which we can choose, and the intrinsic instability of each. ...Hegel showed how the passion which sweeps through each generation serves the cunning of reason, providing the impulse which drives that generation to self-immolation and transformation. He writes in that tone of belatedness and irony which, as Snow rightly says, is characteristic of the literary culture of the present day.[73]

---

[71] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 158.
[72] Rorty, 'NITT', pp. 162–63.
[73] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 164.

In this story, metaphysical idealism becomes a short-lived stage on the way to romanticism, and philosophy a stage on the way to replacing science with literature as the 'preceding cultural discipline'.[74]

The choice between saying Hegel was right, or Hegel was wrong, Rorty deduces, is then the 'choice between Snow's "two cultures"' – between a scientistic culture or a literary one.[75] Because Hegel unwittingly wrote 'the charter of our modern literary culture', a culture which

> claims to have taken over and reshaped whatever is worth keeping in science, philosophy, and religion – looking down on all three from a higher standpoint. It claims to be the guardian of the public weal – Coleridge's "clerisy of the nation." This culture stretches from Carlyle to Isiah Berlin, from Matthew Arnold to Lionel Trilling, from Heine to Sartre, from Baudelaire to Nabokov, from Dostoievsky to Doris Lessing, from Emerson to Harold Bloom. Its luxuriant complexity cannot be conveyed simply by conjoining words like 'poetry', 'the novel', and 'literary criticism'. This culture is a phenomenon the Enlightenment could not have anticipated. Kant has no place for it in his threefold division of possible human activities into scientific cognition, moral action, and the free play of the cognitive faculties in aesthetic enjoyment. But it is as if Hegel knew all about this culture before its birth.[76]

It is the *attitude* of the literary culture Rorty believes Kant would find difficult to place, but he thinks Hegel would understand. For Hegel inadvertently exemplified, Rorty believes, what such a culture could offer: 'namely, the historical sense of the relativity of principles and vocabularies to a place and time, the romantic sense that everything can be changed by talking in new terms'.[77]

Recall the quote from PTG I have used as a touchstone throughout this thesis, where Rorty says that bringing about a *fully* literary culture, its 'takeover', would 'herald a new dawn', bring about a 'new self-image for humanity', and also that it would be 'a culture unlike anything that has existed in the past'.[78] This culture – or more precisely this attitude – is a new, post-romanticist possibility.

Importantly, however, the romanticist turn was not sufficient to realise this possibility. One more step is required – a pragmatist transformation:

---

[74] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 168.

[75] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 164.

[76] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 164.

[77] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 165. That is: historicism, anti-foundationalism, and 'poeticism'. Rorty uses the term 'poeticised culture' in *CIS* to talk about a culture in which this literary attitude has become universal. This is the topic of the next chapter.

[78] Rorty, 'PTG', p. 4.

This was the step taken by Nietzsche and William James. Their contribution was to replace romanticism by pragmatism. Instead of saying that the discovery of vocabularies could bring hidden secrets to light, they said that new ways of speaking could help get us what we want. Instead of hinting that literature might succeed philosophy as discoverer of ultimate reality, they gave up the notion of truth as a correspondence to reality.[79]

The pragmatist shift moves us towards accepting that no discipline, no group, no interpretive culture, are the heirs of the quest for Enlightenment, for truth, and that our different ways of speaking serve different aims and characterise different modes of being in the world. Rorty again pitches this as a change in *self-image*: unlike Marx, Rorty says, Nietzsche and James 'self-consciously abandoned' the search for a point of view which would let them survey 'all of culture'.[80] We recognise this moment as the transformational moment from TPP, TWO, and PRI. Furthermore, the pragmatist shift in philosophy was, Rorty tells us, 'paralleled by a change in the literary culture's self-conception'.[81] Whereas the poets of the nineteenth century still attempted to discover and represent reality truthfully, the modernists of the twentieth gave up that quest. They stopped believing we could find something permanent and stable to rely on outside the complexities, materiality and processuality of human experience. Rorty thus closely associates pragmatism and literary modernism.

Rorty has now arrived at the point where he can make a critical distinction between 'weak' and 'strong' textualists. The role of textualism in our culture, Rorty suggests, is best understood 'if we see it as an attempt to think through a thorough-going pragmatism, a thorough-going abandonment of the notion of discovering the truth...'.[82] However, while all textualists reject the model of interpretation intent on recovering authorial intention, they can go on in one of two ways. They can either treat the text as 'a machine which operates quite independently of its creator'. Or, they can 'offer what Bloom calls as "strong misreading"'.[83] The former group's attention is entirely on the text – they pride themselves on 'not being distracted' either by what the author might have meant or what others have said about it. They still retain the image of a 'secret of the text', a code to be deciphered. Their aim is, Rorty suggests, to get more out of a text than the

---

[79] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 165.
[80] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 165.
[81] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 166.
[82] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 166.
[83] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 166.

author or intended audience could have. Nevertheless, they think there are limits to interpretation – horizontal limits, limits to what might be juxtaposed or inferred.[84]

Thus, these textualists are, I take Rorty to say, still formalists.[85] Such a stance reveals a 'half-hearted pragmatist', just 'one more victim of realism, of the "metaphysics of presence"', who

> thinks that if he stays within the boundaries of a text, takes it apart, and shows how it works, then he will have "escaped the sovereignty of the signifier," broken with the myth of language as mirror of reality, and so on. But in fact he is just doing his best to imitate science – he wants a method of criticism, and he wants everybody to agree that he has cracked the code.'[86]

This textualist is a 'weak' textualist, as opposed to a 'strong' one in the Bloomian sense of fully autonomous.

The 'strong textualist', on the other hand

> asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose. He makes the text refer to whatever is relevant to that purpose. He does this by imposing a vocabulary – a "grid," in Foucault's terminology – on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens.[87]

Recall Rorty's (later) use of the word 'grid' in TPP: a heuristic narrative device that helps us understand; one possible story about how things, as Rorty said with Sellars, 'hang together'. While the strong textualist also needs such narrative grids, interpretive devices, what he succeeds in leaving behind entirely, is the *overarching* narrative, the 'framework of inter-connected ideas – truth as correspondence, language as picture, literature as imitation, for example...'.[88] He thus sees no useful 'distinction between discovery and creation, finding and making' – he is 'in it for what he can get out of it, not for the satisfaction of getting something right'.[89] That is, he rejects the idea that there is one ultimate, eternal, all-encompassing grid – only locally applicable and adaptable

---

[84] Cf. Umberto Eco, 'Interpretation and overinterpretation', in *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, ed. by Collini.

[85] It is helpful here to recall Rorty's discussion of Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* it in TPP. See Chapter 2 on this thesis. Vescio recasts this Rortian distinction between weak and strong textualists as a difference between antiformalists and informalists (pragmatists). See Part II of Vescio.

[86] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 167.

[87] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 166.

[88] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 156.

[89] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 167.

ones that might help us do particular things with words. He, in my terms, rejects the quest and works towards mere mundane or material aims.

Rorty is nevertheless fully aware that for a reading to get traction, it is as necessary for strong textualists as for anyone else to provide persuasive reasons for why he reads the way he does. Strong textualists, also on this view, must justify their approach and account for elements that might resist their readings, especially within the academic institution. The strong textualist is not irrational.[90] His objection is not towards approaching a task or a problem thoroughly and systematically. It is, more subtly, towards belief in the possibility of a predefined method because this *presupposes* the existence of a privileged vocabulary that can 'get it right': a vocabulary that can – if we only can discover it – get to the essence of what the text "itself" is about. 'Nietzsche and James said that the notion of such a vocabulary was a myth' Rorty adds, 'that even in science, not to mention philosophy, we simply cast around for a vocabulary which lets us get what we want'.[91]

Rorty elaborates this 'weak' versus 'strong' textualist distinction because it has broader implications. To Rorty, the strong textualist is also the stronger *romantic*. This claim lets Rorty cast pragmatism as the continuation of romanticism – and emphasise its affinity with literary modernism:

> Romanticism was *aufgehoben* in pragmatism, the claim that the significance of new vocabularies was not their ability to decode but their mere utility. Pragmatism is the philosophical counterpart of literary modernism, the kind of literature which prides itself on its autonomy and novelty rather than its truthfulness to experience or its discovery of pre-existing significance.[92]

The 'great modernists', like the pragmatist figures that drove cultural development towards a fully-fledged strong-textualist literary culture, explored, on Rorty's view, 'what our lives might be like if we had no hope of what Nietzsche called "metaphysical comfort."'[93] With the rejection of underlying truth, the possibility of a master-vocabulary, the comfort of foundational beliefs, all distinctions between texts are levelled: for the 'strong misreader', the strong critic or poet, the 'full-fledged pragmatist', or the modernist literary artist, 'there is no interesting difference between

---

[90] Cf. Rorty, 'PRI'.
[91] Rorty, 'NITT', pp. 167–68.
[92] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 168.
[93] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 166.

tables and texts, between protons and poems. To a pragmatist, these are all just permanent possibilities for use, and thus for redescription, reinterpretation, manipulation'.[94]

The Derridean claim that 'there is nothing outside the text', Rorty concludes, is 'right about what it implicitly denies and wrong about what it explicitly asserts'. He continues: '[t]he only force of saying that texts do not refer to non-texts is just the old pragmatist chestnut that any specification of a referent is going to be in some vocabulary'. Textualism, then, has nothing to add to this pragmatist point than the '*misleading* image' of 'the world as consisting of everything written in all the vocabularies used so far'.[95] However, what writers like Derrida have succeeded in showing us, is that vocabularies the author of a text did not know can be deployed to construct strong and useful descriptions of their work. Demonstrating this, however, needs no 'metaphysical or epistemological or semantic back-up'. Its newness and unfamiliarity, which is also its strength, make it 'the sort of claim which becomes convincing only through the accumulation of examples of the practices it inspires'.[96]

And this – inspiring a practice simply through accumulating examples of how talking or acting in new ways can make a difference – is what the 'literary culture' has been doing 'with great success'. It is

> what science did when it displaced religion and what idealist philosophy did when it briefly displaced science. Science did not demonstrate that religion was false, nor philosophy that science was merely phenomenal, nor can modernist literature or textualist criticism demonstrate that the "metaphysics of presence" is an out-dated genre. But each in turn has managed, without argument, to make its point.[97]

Rorty elaborates:

> It is just not the case that one need adopt one's opponents' vocabulary or method or style in order to defeat him. Hobbes did not have theological arguments against Dante's world-picture; Kant had only a very bad scientific argument for the phenomenal character of science; Nietzsche and James did not have epistemological arguments for pragmatism. Each of these thinkers presented us with a new form of intellectual life, and asked us to compare its advantages with the old. Strong textualists are currently presenting us with such another new form of life.[98]

---

[94] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 168. This is the core argument of Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps'.
[95] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 169. My emphasis.
[96] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 169.
[97] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 170.
[98] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 171.

The literary culture is, like 'literature' on Rorty's definition, succeeding simply by succeeding.

Notice how Rorty here expands the scope of the idea of a 'literary culture'. It might not be taking on the paradigmatic dimension it has in *CIS*, not yet be at the 'takeover', 'new dawn'-moment of Rorty's utopia, but Rorty is no longer merely imagining a Snowian 'highbrow' science-contrary subculture.

Interestingly, the detailed analysis of these essays this chapter offers, reveal NITT as the text in which Rorty first sets out the problem that *CIS*, which I turn to in the next chapter, addresses. Having settled his epistemological case, Rorty raises an objection along another line – one he thinks applies equally to both textualism and pragmatism: 'the serious objections' to the strong textualist practice, he stresses, 'are not epistemological but moral'.[99] Humanist critics such as Gerald Graff, Lionel Trilling, and M. H. Abrahams side with Bloom, Rorty observes, when he protests against Derrida and Foucault's elimination of the author of a text, because they see this as substituting 'inhuman intertextuality for human influence'.[100] But while Bloom encourages strong, idiosyncratic readings, the former three want to hold us accountable to a *common* moral consciousness, which – problematically if Rorty's epistemological case is taken as settled – requires the existence of a privileged, universal vocabulary within which to argue about what is right and good for human beings. Their objection to textualism, Rorty concludes, could thus be restated as

> a moral objection to pragmatism's claim that all vocabularies, even that of our own liberal imagination, are temporary historical resting-places. It is also an objection to the literary culture's isolation from common human concerns. It says that people like Nietzsche and Nabokov and Bloom and Foucault achieve their effects at a moral cost which is too much to pay.[101]

This objection, Rorty emphasises, 'states the really important issue about textualism and about pragmatism'. 'I have', he adds, 'no way to dispose of it'.[102]

It might help, he suggests, to draw one more distinction, this time between *two kinds of strong* textualists, between 'for example, Bloom and Foucault':

---

[99] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 171.
[100] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 171.
[101] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173.
[102] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173.

> Bloom is a pragmatist in the manner of James, whereas Foucault is a pragmatist in the manner of Nietzsche. Pragmatism appears in James and Bloom as an identification with the struggles of finite men. In Foucault and Nietzsche it appears as contempt for one's own finitude, as a search for some mighty inhuman force to which one can yield up one's identity. Bloom's way of dealing with texts preserves our sense of a common human finitude by moving back and forth between the poet and his poem. Foucault's way of dealing with texts is designed to eliminate the author – and indeed the very idea of "man" – altogether. I have no wish to defend Foucault's inhumanism, and every wish to praise Bloom's sense of our common human lot. But I do not know how to back up this preference with argument, or even with a precise account of the relevant differences.[103]

And, Rorty adds, ending his essay: 'To do so, I think, would involve a full-scale discussion of the possibility of combining private fulfilment, self-realization, with public morality, a concern for justice.'[104] This discussion is what Rorty undertakes in *CIS*.

The Dangers of Making Things Up

Rorty is regularly accused of not being sensitive to the ethical dimension of the approach he advocates. In PTG, for instance, Rorty recounts Richard J. Bernstein calling his readings 'ruthless and violent'. Rorty admits that his strong readings can be taken as such but defends them in the context of the work he aims to do – they are not, he insists, merely 'eliminable extravagances'.[105] I believe the analysis offered in this chapter might go some way towards showing that Rorty's distinctive readings are performed for specific reasons. His writing, his rendering of figures as characters we must adopt attitudes towards, his stylistic choices, are *part* of a writerly, material resistance against representationalism, and integral to his attempt to move beyond it, by example, through developing a mindfully pragmatist writerly practice. Moreover, that Rorty above stresses the ethical objection against the attitude he prefers makes it clear that he wants a pragmatism that is also a humanism. And that he later writes *CIS* to provide, as he puts it, a 'full-scale discussion' of these matters, shows that he does not take his ethical responsibilities lightly.

In *The Limits of Critique* Rita Felski takes exception to Rorty's recommendation that we 'beat the text into shape'. 'I find myself disagreeing with Richard Rorty', Felski avers, 'when he expresses his wholehearted admiration' for the kind of critic, who is (Felski quotes from NITT) '"in it for what he can get out of it, not for the satisfaction of getting something right"'. She underscores that we

---

[103] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173.
[104] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173. My italics.
[105] Rorty, 'PTG', p. 4.

cannot afford to be quite so cavalier about the difference between finding things out and making them up, between imposing our ideas on a text and learning something from a text. And while not even the most unkind of obtuse commentary can "do violence" to a text, it can certainly do harm to the text's author or to a community of readers who cherish it. Reading, in this sense, indisputably has an ethical dimension.[106]

As the above shows, Rorty does not disagree with Felski that interpretation has an ethical dimension. In the light of the above, it seems to mischaracterise his stance to say that Rorty expresses his 'wholehearted admiration' for the strong textualist – Rorty reserved his admiration for the strong textualist who is *also* concerned with our 'common humanity' (the kind of person he in *CIS* comes to call the liberal ironist). While he rejects the possibility of metaphysically grounding his convictions, he also explicitly states that he is concerned with respecting and preserving individual identity, not to be cruel or humiliate.

Furthermore, the indictment that Rorty is in it for what he gets out of it, rather than to get it right is damning – but only when taken out of the context detailed in this chapter, and, more significantly, only if one thinks it *possible* to 'get it right'. Rorty does not. 'Getting it right' on the universal, atemporal scale is, on the Rortian view, a misconstrued project. It is the quest he rejects. To talk about getting something right, doing it well, in a local, temporal, conversational, pragmatic, purpose orientated manner is often useful, as long as we remain cautious of not lapsing into universalism, as Rorty also acknowledges. Felski appears to be broadly pragmatist in her outlook and would presumably agree that the universalist sense of getting it right should be set aside. Her complaint against Rorty nevertheless makes it appear as though she lapses into the fallacy Rorty attributes to the '*weak* textualists' and retains a semi-essentialist conception of interpretation where there is a proper and correct way to get it right. For without maintaining this on some level, holding on to the distinction between finding and making, Felski's worry could not be formulated.

Is Rorty cavalier? Rorty holds that making is what we always do. Concluding that he does not care about the difference our making makes would be mistaken. In the next chapter, I turn to *CIS* and Rorty's 'full-scale' discussion of the ramifications of his views and his vision of a 'poeticized' culture.

---

[106] Felski, *Limits of Critique*, p. 115.

Chapter 5

Poeticised

In this chapter and the next, I bring the insights of the previous chapters to bear on a reading of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989). While *CIS* has been widely discussed, there is no study of this work as a whole that foregrounds its characteristic literariness or understands it in the light of Rorty's earlier writings on the literary. In the documentary *Richard Rorty: the man who killed truth*, Rorty recalls being invited to deliver a set of lectures at University College, London. He notes that this prompted him to collect his thoughts on literature, a gathering that would result in *CIS*.[1] Since *CIS* is widely recognised as the work in which Rorty most fully sets out his post-*PMN* position – what Ramberg calls Rorty's 'positive' project – it is significant that this finds its expression as Rorty assembles his reflections on literature.[2] This concurrence speaks to the integral relevance of the literary aspect to Rortian philosophy.

Foregrounding the literary aspect moreover allows a new approach to what is at stake in *CIS* to emerge. It reveals the close connection between NITT and *CIS* as it renders *CIS* as a direct response to the challenge Rorty expressed at the end of NITT. Rorty saw his endorsement of the 'strong critic' to bring the 'really important problem' with *both* 'textualism and pragmatism' into focus. The vital issue was how to address the 'moral objection' to pragmatism's denial of the existence of a vocabulary that permitted us to defend our liberal values as inherently right.[3] Rorty also restated this as the problem of how we could back up our 'intuition' that the 'humanism' of James and Bloom was preferable to the 'inhumanism' of Nietzsche and Foucault. While he condones their pragmatism, he takes exception to Nietzsche and Foucault's 'contempt' for their own 'finitude', their 'isolation from common human concerns'. The kind of intellectuals they exemplify purchase 'the stimulus to [their] private moral imagination' at the 'price of [their] separation from... fellow-humans', a 'moral cost which is too much to pay'.[4] Addressing this matter, Rorty submitted in NITT, would require 'a full-scale discussion of the possibility of

---

[1] Stuart Jeffries, *Richard Rorty: The Man Who Killed Truth* (BBC4, 16.12) Recording available from University of Brighton Library.See also
https://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/nov/03/broadcasting.artsandhumanities .
[2] Ramberg, 'Richard Rorty' [accessed 20 January 2020]. See also Chapter 1.
[3] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173.
[4] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173.

combining private fulfilment, self-realization, with public morality, a concern for justice'.[5] This is, as noted at the end of Chapter 4, what he undertakes in *CIS*.

The objection articulated in NITT was, in turn, a re-conception of the question of whether pragmatism is 'morally dangerous' which Rorty previously had addressed, 'inconclusively', in PRI (the essay in which he suggested that the pragmatist attitude arises from making the 'fundamental choice' to 'accept the contingent character of all starting points').[6] PRI was given as a lecture the year *PMN* was published. It seems that while Rorty considered his philosophical argument in *PMN* successful, this 'moral objection' was crystalising as its remainder. The question *PMN*, PRI, and NITT left unanswered was, then: how might we adopt the Rortian radically anti-essentialist pragmatist stance where no vocabulary has an intrinsic right to privilege *and also* advance an ethically responsible, solidaric, pragmatist practice? In this chapter and the next, I read *CIS* as Rorty's response to this persistent question in his pre-*CIS* work.

To encompass Rorty's 'full-scale discussion' in these chapters, I use the separation between attitude and practice that has helped me structure my argument since the Introduction, and which Rorty's remarks on the 'really important problem' also indicate. When he compared James and Bloom, on the one hand, to Nietzsche and Foucault on the other, he cast all four as (proto)pragmatists, and separated them into humanist or 'inhumanist' based on whether they also identified with 'the struggles of finite men' *and* preserved this sense in their writing, their intellectual practice.[7] I follow this lead. Hence, this chapter explores and discusses the literary attitude *CIS* articulates and why Rorty argues for a *poeticised* culture rather than, simply, a pragmatist one, and the next examines what kind of practice CIS recommends and asks why Rorty, who at one point refers to 'literature' as 'whatever the literary critics criticize', nevertheless places literature in a narrow sense at the heart of this culture.[8]

I begin by submitting that it is helpful to see *CIS* as a literary work in the Rortian sense; as doing a literary kind of work. This helps me clarify Rorty's public-private distinction as a rhetorical device rather than an ontologically vested theoretical concept. I explicate Rorty's view of language and metaphor, and show how, on Rorty's account, aestheticising our private and public lives begins to appear as moral obligations. To conclude, I ask what kind of added value Rorty gets from using the words 'literary' or 'poeticised' to talk about his utopian culture.

---

[5] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173. All preceding quotations in this paragraph, loc.cit.

[6] Rorty, 'PRI', p. 726 and Chapter 3, p. 43-44. 'Morally dangerous' and 'inconclusively': Rorty, 'NITT', 174n15.

[7] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173.

[8] 'Whatever': Rorty, *CIS*, p. 81.

The Literary Work of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*

Bernard Williams complained that *CIS* was not sufficiently coherent, a flaw he put down to it being 'rather untidily derived' from lectures.[9] *CIS* is, although not entirely, based on lectures given at University College, London, in 1986, four Clark Lectures given at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1987, and a Belitt Lecture given at Bennington College in 1988 and later published as a Bennington Chapbook on Literature.[10] Parts of the material had also been published in the *London Review of Books*.[11] Rorty subsequently extended and reworked the UCL and Clark lectures to turn them into 'Part I: Contingency', and added two further parts, 'Ironism and Theory' and 'Cruelty and Solidarity', of which a slightly amended version of the Belitt Lecture makes up one chapter of the latter part.[12] The remaining material was written for *CIS*. Rorty rehearses his anti-essentialist stance, stressing the contingency of language and of personal and communal identity. He outlines a response to the quandary of how to reconcile our desire to pursue individual goals and private pleasures with the liberal's moral conviction that our fellow human beings also have a right to flourish in their lives. Lastly, he discusses *Lolita* and *1984* to show why literature, especially novels, can help those of a liberal conviction see their own shortcomings *as* liberals more clearly (this is a core topic of the next chapter).

In NITT, Rorty thought he had to develop an 'argument', or at least a 'precise account of the relevant difference at stake' between inhumanist and humanist pragmatists.[13] However, by the time he writes *CIS,* his tactics have changed. Rorty now says he forgoes argumentation, that he

---

[9] Bernard Williams, 'Getting it Right: Review of Contingency, Irony and Solidarity by Rorty, R.', *London Review of Books*, 11.22 (1989), 3–5 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v11/n22/bernard-williams/getting-it-right> [accessed 3 November 2019].

[10] *The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty*, ed. by Alvin Feinman (New York: Bennington College, 1989), The Bennington Chapbooks in Literature.

[11] Richard Rorty, 'The Contingency of Language', *London Review of Books*, 8.7 (1986) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v08/n07/richard-rorty/the-contingency-of-language> [accessed 5 May 2020];
Richard Rorty, 'The Contingency of Selfhood', *London Review of Books*, 8.8 (1986) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v08/n08/richard-rorty/the-contingency-of-selfhood> [accessed 9 April 2021]; Richard Rorty, 'The Contingency of Community', *London Review of Books*, 8.13 (1986) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v08/n13/richard-rorty/the-contingency-of-community> [accessed 9 April 2021].

[12] The Bennington College website has no specific information about this lecture series (per 28.10.2019), which one might wish that it did: the series, in the years between 1978 and 1992, included lectures by, amongst others, Frank Kermode, Harold Bloom, Saul Bellow, René Girard, Nadine Gordimer, and Seamus Heaney. Rorty's lecture was Lecture Eleven, delivered on October 27, 1988. While the Bennington Chapbook is out of print and I have not been able to get hold of a copy, Rorty's lecture and others is available in print in Stanley J. Scott (ed.), *The Ordering Mirror: Readers and Contexts: the Ben Belitt Lectures at Bennington College* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993).

[13] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173.

will simply suggest new ways to talk.[14] As observed in Chapter 4, Rorty dubbed this kind of approach 'literary' when he defined literature as the kind of writing that does not rely on argument but succeeds simply by succeeding. He suggested that what we want from this kind of writing was for it to give us *new* terminologies.[15] This is indeed what Rorty tells us he will do in *CIS*: 'I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace', he asserts, '[i]nstead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics'.[16] The aim 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 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."[17]

Rorty's approach is, by his standards, 'literary'.

Ramberg, writing on *CIS*, insightfully emphasises that Rorty aimed to 'contribute to the large-scale cultural maturation project that he describes in world-historical terms, *precisely by depicting it as he does, in the terms that he uses*.'[18] Ramberg's observation adds to the case for reading *CIS* in a literary spirit: the implication is that its rhetorical strategies and literary qualities are matters of substance (i.e., not merely a matter of 'style'). His evaluation and Rorty's broader argument indicate that we might understand *CIS* more productively from the stance of the literary critic, who sets aside the requirement for truth as correspondence and reads with attention to writing, words, and their effects, rather than from the attitude of the truth-uncovering philosopher aiming to assess whether Rorty 'gets it right'. Ramberg's observation moreover supports my view of Rorty as displaying, through his word-choices and in his style and form, a poetic readerly and writerly *practice*: a rhetorical mode of conduct; a use of 'noises and marks' that is self-consciously modulated to be in keeping with and substantiate his philosophical attitude (cf. chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis, and the next chapter).[19]

---

[14] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xi.
[15] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 157.
[16] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 9.
[17] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 9.
[18] Ramberg, 'Irony's Commitment'. My italics.
[19] 'Noises and marks' see p. 124 below.

Whereas Williams could forgive Rorty for the untidiness of *CIS,* he nevertheless found it 'deeply unsatisfying' for an entirely different reason: that Rorty had 'lost the sense of... anything that needs to be got right'.[20] Rorty did not lose this need but deliberately left it behind, and I suspect *CIS* might seem unsatisfying unless one is prepared to entertain the possibility of doing so. One key issue critics frequently allege to be unsatisfactorily resolved in Rorty's work is his conception of the public-private distinction. This topic has been intensely debated.[21] I want to propose that Rorty's division is comprehended more straightforwardly if we adopt a literary approach. It helps us not fall into the trap of seeing this as an ontologically vested construct. Instead, it emerges as a rhetorical 'grid' pragmatically deployed to structure the story Rorty wants to tell.

Rorty begins *CIS* by addressing Western culture's millennia-long attempt to 'fuse' the public and the private.[22] He naturally does not invent this distinction, which carries a heavy theoretical and historical burden. His aim is rather to redescribe it, and he approaches this by *objecting* to the belief that it is possible to run all aspects of our lives together in one theoretical scheme; that we can capture human diversity of purposes in one description or vocabulary (recall Rorty's rejection of the 'one vision' ambition in TWO). Nevertheless, I take Rorty to suggest, it might be helpful to consider some pursuits as more directly useful to our public, liberal project, and others to be less so, in order to talk about what to prioritise, and when.

Rorty here deploys a rhetorical strategy he observably uses at least from *PMN* onwards and explicitly sets out in 'Texts and Lumps' (1985) when he says that his

> holistic strategy, characteristic of pragmatism (and in particular of Dewey), is to reinterpret every such 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....[23]

Rorty also echoes this in *CIS* when he says he uses a 'crude' way of 'blocking out a difference' to discuss Proust versus Nietzsche and Heidegger.[24] We should hold Rorty's terms as loosely as Rorty does, as *aesthetically* and 'lightly', lest we get stuck on trying to 'get them right' (evaluate whether his words correspond to 'the truth') – and miss his point. The difference Rorty assigns to

---

[20] Williams, 'Getting it Right'.

[21] Llanera provides a helpful overview of the debate. See Tracy Llanera, 'Redeeming Rorty's Private-Public Distinction', *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 13.3 (2016), 319–40 (p. 319).

[22] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xiii.

[23] Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', p. 8.

[24] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 100. I return to this below.

'private' and 'public' is a wholly pragmatic, rhetorical one.[25] It is a device for grabbing hold of (to use a favourite phrase of Rorty's) aspects of our experience, and by this be able to construct a narrative about how things 'hang together'.[26] Rorty's 'dualisms' are generally best understood in this manner.[27]

Taken in this spirit, Rorty appears to suggest that it might be of help to us, as we grapple with how to foster and further a humanistic liberal culture, to group the things we do into two, rough, heuristic categories: activities that more directly further our shared efforts towards this end (public), and those that are less directly useful to it (private).[28] The 'public' and the 'private' now look like words for ranges of activities that are on opposite ends on a spectrum of direct pragmatic usefulness to the liberal project (as we will see, private activities are dynamically and organically linked to this shared project, but their potential effects take time to emerge, and the path from action to effect is more complex). 'Activities' must here be understood broadly and includes using words, writing, reading, persuading, arguing, and so on. This is reflected in Rorty's assertion that there are vocabularies and modes of conversation that are better suited than others for successful shared, public deliberation to take place.[29]

Rorty is concerned to stress that our public duties are not *intrinsically* more important than our private desires and activities, nor the other way around.[30] Moreover, he is not, as some critics appear to presume, precluding the possibility that what we do and say in our pursuit of a flourishing life might not come to have an impact on our shared imagination and discourse – or vice versa. Milnes notes that Rorty later wished that *CIS* had more clearly expressed the 'interplay between the private and the public', but this merely conveys a familiar writer's regret: there are

---

[25] That pragmatist will only make pragmatic distinctions is the essence of Rorty's second 'sloganistic' characterisation of pragmatism in PRI. See Rorty, 'PRI', p. 723, and Chapter 2, p. 43.

[26] Cf. the start of Chapter 2.

[27] I interpret several of his distinctions in this manner in the course of this chapter and the next, and the results are helpful.

[28] See also Rorty, *CIS*, p. 68, where Rorty talks about how Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida are, looked at from a public point of view, 'at best useless'. He is talking about their usefulness *from the point of view of fulfilling public or private needs*. There is further support on p. 83n4, where Rorty says that 'all the traditional metaphysical distinctions can be given a respectable ironist sense by sociologizing them' – that is, we should consider the private/public distinction along just such sociological lines, rather than ontological ones.

[29] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xiv. These two vocabularies are 'blockings out' separated by degree of familiarity (literalisation, or 'finality'), as we will see. There is further support for this on p. 7 when Rorty suggests we do not need a 'break' between vocabularies. I see Rorty as simply tasking liberals wanting to facilitate shared discourse with using words wisely.

[30] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 194.

always, in hindsight, better ways to articulate one's point.[31] That Rorty posits a dynamic interplay between the private and the public in *CIS* is quite clear. He, for instance, suggests we associate 'morality' with the voice an individual uses *as* a member of a community, when we 'appeal to the interests of the community'. As he makes clear, he is not suggesting that the speaker, when engaging herself in such concerns, splits herself into two and leaves her private self, or full breadth of experience and knowledge, behind. On the contrary, he points out that it might lead to 'dilemmas', and that she might need to set some of her idiosyncratic, private priorities and pursuits aside for the time being.[32] The public and private in Rorty is no more separable than his first-person-singular perspective was from his first-person-plural perspective in Chapters 2 and 3; his I-story was from his we-story.[33]

At one point, Rorty says he needs a 'firm' distinction between the private and the public for the purpose of his argument.[34] Critics have invoked this moment in evidence of Rorty constructing a theoretical, ontologically significant distinction between a private and a public realm. This applies even to some pragmatist critics, like Misak, who recently affirmed her view of Rorty as suggesting a kind of split that forces us to 'sea-saw' between two sets of beliefs and modes of operation.[35] Remnants of a perception of Rorty's 'firm' distinction as ontologically significant also surfaces in sympathetic commentators such as Voparil and Llanera. It subtly rises to the surface in phrases such as Rorty 'admitting' that public and private commitments can conflict, and Rorty cutting 'moral responsibility in half'.[36] It is perceptible when Voparil calls Rorty's approach 'bifurcated' and elsewhere suggests that Rorty from this institutes an unrealistic, unworkable split between types of literary works (sentimental for public purposes and ironic for private).[37] I appreciate both Llanera's and Voparil's subtle and largely persuasive analyses, but their vocabulary choices on these occasions appear to reveal vestiges of a theoreticising mode of approach that desires 'one vision', one whole cut in half. The rhetoric relies on the kind of picture that permits the perception of conflict or break.

---

[31] Milnes, 'Rorty, Romanticism', p. 27. See for instance Henry James on this phenomenon: Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York, London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp. 338–39.

[32] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 59.

[33] Bacon connects the private and the public in Rorty by way of a discussion of the public utility of romantic irony and a useful emphasis on the liberal ironist as a Bloomian poet-figure. See Michael Bacon, 'Rorty, irony and the consequences of contingency for liberal society', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 43.9 (2017), 954–65. See also below for a discussion of the liberal ironist.

[34] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 83.

[35] Misak, 'End of the Liberal Ironist'. See also Misak, 'Rorty's Place in the Pantheon'.

[36] Llanera, 'Redeeming the Private-Public Distinction', see in particular 319-323, and 334.

[37] Voparil, 'Jonquils and Wild Orchids', p. 103 and Voparil, 'The Politics of the Novel'.

Both Llanera and Voparil draw the conclusion that Rorty's distinction indicates significant problems with his account, whereas I would argue that we instead need to reassess how *we* approach this distinction.[38] For even when he states his need for a 'firm' distinction, Rorty, I would argue, is merely setting up a firm pragmatic 'grid', a 'blocking out' for the purpose of defending a view of what kind of writing (what kind of intellectual practice) is conducive to cultivate an attitude ('ironism', I turn to this concept below) and a 'habit' ('of taking literary criticism as the presiding discipline').[39] This here, also, appears as a thoroughly rhetorical, pragmatic move on Rorty's part, or, in the language of his later works, as a distinction made for reasons of 'cultural politics'.[40]

Establishing a useful way to perceive this matter at the outset is important, because as Günther Leypoldt puts it,

> the most unconvincing critiques of Rorty's literary criticism misinterpret his references to public and private domains as a theoretically watertight demarcation of distinct and mutually autonomous areas of social experience. Indeed it is hard to see why Rorty would have to be told (in a critique by the pragmatist aesthetician Richard Shusterman) that firm public-private distinctions are "untenable because the private self and the language it builds upon in self-creation are always already socially constituted and structured by a common field." The social dimension of private pursuits does not invalidate Rorty's point that people's self-culture can, intermittently at least, fail to harmonize or clash with or have little relevance to their moral and social responsibilities.[41]

I would maintain, then, that seeing *CIS* as a 'literary' work in the sense outlined helps us perceive Rorty's reasoning in a more useful spirit and evade the mistake of thinking of these 'blockings out' on a spectrum as anything but 'heuristic' devices.[42] It helps us see the literary kind of work that *CIS* does. I will thus proceed in this manner.

---

[38] Which is indeed also Llanera's aim in 'Redeeming the Private-Public Distinction'. But whereas she wants to supplement Rorty to ease a problematic, or at least ambiguous, split, I am arguing that the resources are there, in Rorty's writing, to render this distinction unproblematic.

[39] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 83. Rorty here proposes that a specific strand of theory, which he calls ironist theory, is helpful for cultivating ironist awareness, but not directly helpful for large-scale shared projects. I discuss this in Chapter 6.

[40] See Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*.

[41] Günter 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)), pp. 145–63 (p. 150).

[42] Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', p. 8.

An Ironist who is also a Liberal

Rorty's redescription of the private-public split is mirrored in his creation of the central character of *CIS*: an 'ironist' who is *also* a liberal.[43] Situating this character requires addressing Rorty's view – or rather dismissal – of 'human nature'.

The original mistake that led us to believe we could hold the private and the public in one commensurated vision, Rorty offers, was to think we all possessed an essence that defined what it meant to be human.[44] What he contends in these pages is, in summation, that as long as we believe in a common human nature, say, a Kantian (moral) self, or a Christian soul made in the image of God, we will fall into the trap of thinking that to come to know oneself is to come to understand the human nature in which we partake – which we then would believe amounted to clarity on what is right and good for human beings as such. This fallacy leads us to think that what is most important to *us* is also what is – or should be – most important to everyone else.[45] We become convinced that the ways we cope with the world must be how everyone should go about it – and that they would if only they adopted our point of view; if our perspective and experiences could be shown to be universally valid.

If we give up the idea of an essential human nature, however, the need for a theory about what a (morally good) human being *is*, disappears. It is from this vantage point that it makes sense to think of the practices we engage in, whether motivated by private or public needs or desires, as complementary but not necessarily commensurable human activities, or pursuits. We might need to talk about these in a variety of ways, and because each of these will be intimately linked to our needs, doings, and experiences, one is not necessarily reducible to another. The value we derive from our varied pursuits, and various ways of describing these will, conversely, not be possible to capture in one master-vocabulary. *CIS* begins from this outlook, and it is a recognisable vantage point, for it is the view of the Pragmatist after he underwent the transformational moment at the heart of TPP (see chapters 2 and 3). *CIS* stakes out a direction from this contingent starting post.

Rorty posits two interrelated goals to move towards: to ensure individual liberty and flourishing to the extent that it is not realised at the expense of the liberty and flourishing of others, and to foster the broadest possible sense of human solidarity while taking care to ensure this has the smallest possible impact on our opportunities for individual flourishing. He moreover wants us

---

[43] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 84. Bacon notes that what is most distinctive about *CIS* is Rorty's creation of this character. Bacon, 'Rorty, irony and the consequences', p. 954. Both Bacon and Ramberg, in their respective articles on *CIS*, ironism, and the liberal ironist, offer more insight than I here can provide into the philosophical criticism against Rorty's protagonist.

[44] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 6–11.

[45] See also Rorty, *CIS*, p. 27.

to give both pursuits – private perfection and public solidarity – equal weight *in principle*, and for us to deliberate continually and pragmatically on what to prioritise, say and do. We cannot know the answer to 'when to struggle against injustice and when to devote [oneself] to private projects of self-creation?' in *advance*, as that would only be possible to determine on the basis of a foundational theory of human nature from which we could derive right and wrong. This question is

> as hopeless as the questions "Is it right to deliver n innocents over to be tortured to save the lives of $m \times n$ other innocents? If so, what are the correct values of n and m?" or the question "When may one favor members of one's family, or one's community, over other, randomly chosen, human beings?" Anybody who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question – algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas of this sort – is still, in his heart, a theologian or a metaphysician. He believes in an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities.[46]

When to prioritise public need over private desires and interests will, on this model, be a matter of constant and active, pragmatic deliberation.

Rorty is not saying that we cannot make ethical choices. He says that these are decisions we must make again and again, for problems defined in concrete terms, fully aware that the practical circumstances and real-life consequences that play into the decision are and will be relentlessly in flux. There is no escape from the messy, complex materiality of the human experience. This, however, makes it painfully clear that the problem from NITT remains. Indeed, it makes it more evident why this is a quandary in the first place: how can we justify the humanist-pragmatism of James over the inhumanist-pragmatism of Nietzsche? Given the above, Rorty cannot make a theoretical case for this moral choice that requires us to assent to a conception of human nature, and by virtue of this requires us to assent to treat others with consideration. That we will act in such a way is nevertheless the real-life outcome he desires. But without recourse to theory, Rorty must build his case for a humanistic pragmatism in another way. Thus, he takes up another literary tool and creates fictional *characters*.

The central character of *CIS* is 'the liberal ironist'. 'I use "ironist"', Rorty explains, '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.'[47] An ironist thus accepts the pragmatist position and is self-consciously aware of all our concepts, including her idea of who she is, as historically and culturally contingent products of the human

---

[46] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xv.
[47] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xv.

imagination. Rorty's central protagonist is 'also' a liberal.[48] While this largely carries the familiar meaning of 'humanist' from NITT and PRI, Rorty now redefines it in terms of cruelty, suffering, and humiliation: '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.'[49] 'Liberal ironists', then, 'are people who include among [their] ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease.'[50] Note that the liberal ironist is someone who has adopted the ironist attitude and then also *chooses* to include in their 'ungroundable desires' a personal hope for a future where we are less cruel.

Rorty writes to show us the possibility and utility of cultivating a type of character, someone who holds their concepts lightly, ironically, and yet holds firmly on to their moral convictions: a pragmatist and a humanist in the manner of James and Bloom, who were defined by their 'identification with the struggles of finite men'.[51] He wants to 'disentangle' the question of whether the 'absence of metaphysics [is] politically dangerous?' from the question 'is ironism compatible with a sense of human solidarity?'.[52] Ramberg recognises this when he suggests that Rorty narrates a 'problem situation' and writes the liberal ironist as a character who responds to this situation, and furthermore notes that Rorty proceeds through 'both telling and showing' to 'bring about recognition in the reader'.[53] I agree with Ramberg and Bacon that even while Rorty later came to see his description of the liberal ironist as flawed, this does not mean Rorty's protagonist is not worth our attention, although it might be that there are better was to describe or explicate this character.[54] It seems Rorty here, too, is expressing the kind of familiar writer's regret mentioned above.

The challenge Rorty faces, a challenge he recognises and articulates, is to make this character psychologically believable – for the liberal ironist will seem psychologically implausible to the extent that ironism is seen as inherently *opposed to* care and principled action. And as Rorty notes, '[l]ots of people, from Julien Benda to C. P. Snow, have taken a connection between ironism and antiliberalism to be almost self-evident.'[55] In the closing pages of *CIS* Rorty says that '[t]he fundamental premise of the book is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper

---

[48] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 84.
[49] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xv.
[50] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xv.
[51] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173.
[52] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 87.
[53] Ramberg, 'Irony's Commitment', pp. 145–46.
[54] Ramberg, 'Irony's Commitment', p. 147. Bacon, 'Rorty, irony and the consequences'.
[55] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 89.

than contingent historical circumstance'[56] The possibility of such a character – that this is a workable, helpful attitude to adopt – is what he attempts to embody in the liberal ironist.

The psychological believability of the liberal ironist is substantiated if it is considered that it is complete acceptance of, as Rorty put it in PRI, the contingency of all starting points that permits her steadfast defence of what she holds to be good. As chapters 2 and 3 discussed, it was the transformational moment described in TPP and TWO – a moment of profound and self-conscious awareness of the inevitability of contingency – that made fully aware commitment possible in these narratives. Hence, when Rorty in *CIS* says that 'if the demands of a morality are the demands of a language, and if languages are historical contingencies, rather than attempts to capture the true shape of the world or the self, then to "stand unflinchingly for one's moral convictions" is a matter of identifying oneself with such a contingency', I take his point to be that as long as we are caught up in trying to 'get it right', we will never reach clarity.[57] We will be caught up in that never-ending quest for Enlightenment, or Truth. For in the quest-narrative, it is only when we reach our final destination (Truth) that will we be able to say with *certainty* 'now I can unflinchingly stand for this claim'. If one instead rejects the quest-romance as the governing form for our account of inquiry (or of moral progress, and so on), and thus the very possibility of ever arriving at certainty, *then* it is possible to understand oneself as simply taking a stand where one happens to be. Only then might we stand unflinchingly for what we believe, without a nagging doubt about whether it is the theoretically, philosophically, epistemologically *right*, or true, thing to believe.

The above argument also speaks to the believability of the liberal ironist in other ways. While Rorty renders the liberal ironist relatively flat, it is not a non-complex character: she is shaped by perpetual tension between commitment and doubt – *doubt in the pragmatist sense* of leaving open the possibility that there might be more useful things to say or more rewarding causes. This is not the doubt of existentialism, and not the doubt of Cavell: while Rorty's and Cavell's thinking overlaps in significant ways, Cavell takes 'the truth of skepticism', the anxiety brought on by the recognition of our own mere, frail and limited, humanity, as epistemically and existentially significant in a way Rorty does not.[58] The doubt of the liberal ironist is *self-doubt*, it is the worry that she is not (yet) the person she would want to be. She is not oscillating or vacillating, not 'in alternate moments, Nietzsche and J. S. Mill.' [59] The liberal ironist is engaged in the same task Rorty tells us that *he*, as noted above, is engaged in when he writes this character: to

---

[56] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 189.
[57] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 60. Rorty borrows the term 'unflinchingly' from Isiah Berlin, see pp. 45-60.
[58] See for instance Mahon, p. 41.
[59] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 85.

'untangle' the question of whether ironism is incompatible with a sense of human solidarity.'[60] The liberal ironist is thus believable *because* she is written as a (Rorty-like) kind of intellectual who is aware enough to worry about her moral conduct in the face of her own ironism, and not as a type to stand, allegorically, for Everyman.

One might, however, still be concerned about the liberal ironist's trustworthiness: she will necessarily also be an ironist about her commitment to liberalism. She is only human and might, as Rorty accused Nietzsche and Foucault of doing, decide to purchase self-realisation *at* the cost of solidarity. It is, however, not Rorty's job to assure us of the perpetual trustworthiness or sameness of *all* instances of a kind – that is what theory purports to do, not literature. Literature gives us examples. And Rorty points out further reasons for why ironism is not inherently hostile towards liberalism or democracy: since the ironist cannot envisage a final theoretical solution, she will cast ethical problems in practical terms. Moral progress in Rorty is thus reimagined in terms of practical and imaginative effort, as a species of creative *work*:

> In my Utopia, human solidarity would be seen not as a fact to be recognized by clearing away "prejudice" or burrowing down to previously hidden depths but, rather, as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people.[61]

In Rorty's literal culture, moral progress would be, self-consciously, understood as a matter of making, *poiesis*.[62] An ironist can hence chose to prioritise working to lessen suffering – there is nothing inherent in ironism that says this must be her choice, but nor is there anything that dictates an antiliberalist agenda (or even mere detachment) for all ironists.

The liberal ironist is moreover created to serve as an exemplar citizen of this utopia who drops traditional ideas of Truth and 'morality' to attend to the practical work of making not just a larger, more solidaric 'we', but creating the kind of we where she can be an ironist. The ironist knows she depends on making a specific kind of culture that engenders the sort of freedom that gave rise to ironism and is capable of furthering it.[63] She depends on ensuring the continuation of a society where she is at liberty to make herself and her communities. Thus, her political task has

---

[60] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 87.

[61] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xvi.

[62] Ramberg comes at this matter from a different angle than mine, and suggests, insightfully, that 'the recognition of contingency is good for liberalism, because, on the whole, in a post-metaphysical culture it will be more difficult to argue for its competitors'. Ramberg, 'Irony's Commitment', p. 145.

[63] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 89.

two defining aspects. The poeticised culture Rorty envisages in *CIS* would not just see solidarity as the work in progress but also the 'realization of Utopias, and… still further Utopias', see themselves engaged in 'an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth.'[64]

Self-Making as Moral Obligation

Not surprisingly, Rorty's utopian culture is a culture where 'ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal'.[65] A culture where historicism and nominalist anti-essentialism is taken as common sense.[66] He describes a society that recognises and understands that we all take part in making the culture we live in: its values, discourse, and institutions. However, while the citizens of this utopia appreciate the contingent and made nature of these artefacts, Rorty's narrative makes it clear that there is one act of making that even in this culture is pragmatically more important than others: the making of selves, both individual and communal, because these form the (moral) loci that enable us to act. Rorty would later speak of these as 'practical identities'.[67] Still transient, these sites of identity-experience make deliberate, *self*-aware forging possible. And their primary pragmatic utility in Rorty's scheme renders self-making the closest one might come to a moral obligation within this framework of thought.[68] This, and hence the above explication of the liberal ironist, is considerably more closely tied up with the idea of the 'literary' or a 'literary attitude' in Rorty than first might be evident.

To set out his view of selfhood, Rorty begins by setting out his views on language and metaphor. For it would also be 'emblematic' of the utopian literary culture he describes that it has accepted the 'contingency of language'.[69] In *CIS*, as in *PMN*, Rorty's case centres on his objection to the idea of language as a *medium*, something that stands 'between the self and the nonhuman reality with which the self seeks to be in touch'.[70] While the world might contain 'the causes of our being justified in holding a belief', it 'cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other

---

[64] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xvi.
[65] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. xv–xvi.
[66] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xvi. I return to the distinction Rorty appears to make between commonsense ironism and the ironism of intellectuals and strong poets below.
[67] *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, pp. 201–02.
[68] Utility relative to the purpose of fashioning a liberal democratic society. I stress this because it is vital to note that Rorty is not suggesting there is a fundamental function that defines 'man' as a concept, as for instance MacIntyre does. Cf. Chapter 3.
[69] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xvi.
[70] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 10–11.

human beings can do that.'[71] Rorty's line of reasoning should be familiar from the exposition this thesis has offered thus far: after accepting the contingency of all starting points, what we have to go on, are the remarks of our fellow inquirers.

In *CIS,* Rorty uses Davidson to extend and detail his Wittgensteinian-pragmatist view of language.[72] For Davidson, the boundary between 'knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally is erased'.[73] Rorty explains elsewhere that Davidson asks us to think of human beings as simply 'trading marks and noises to accomplish purposes', and to 'see this linguistic behavior as continuous with nonlinguistic behavior, and to see both sorts of behavior as making sense just insofar as we can describe them as attempts to fulfill given desires in the light of given beliefs'.[74] Moreover, Davidson helps us see that while we might find it useful to talk of truth and representation, doing so only makes sense relative to a local scheme devised for a particular purpose.[75] The resulting view naturalises language and makes its relation to the world causal.[76] Language is perceived more akin to a tool than as a medium. Our concern becomes to understand what kind of linguistic practices work for us: it is 'more like discarding the lever and the chock because one has envisaged the pully, or like discarding gesso and tempera because one has now figured out how to size canvas properly'.[77]

Rorty points out that the tool-analogy is not entirely apt. We do not always know what tools we need at the outset: –sometimes we can only state aspirations and desires *after* developing the vocabulary that lets us imagine these. Considering this leads Rorty to speak of 'poets' and mean it in a very 'wide sense of the term – the sense of "one who makes things new"'; who extend the set of possibilities for what we might imagine, articulate, or do.[78] 'Poetry' is thus of vital importance because it keeps us alive to the possibility of better ways of talking, keeps open the possibility that we might engage in *other*, yet unseen, purposes. Rorty elsewhere and repeatedly credits the romantics and Shelley in particular for instigating the cultural shift that made this view of language and imagination possible. As Rorty later put it: 'At the heart of Romanticism... was the

---

[71] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 5–6.

[72] For details of how Rorty considers Davidson to supplement and improve on Wittgenstein, see Rorty, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language', pp. 345–46. Rorty relies on Donald Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. by Ernest Leopore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

[73] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 15. Rorty is quoting Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', p. 446.

[74] Rorty, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language', p. 346.

[75] Richard Rorty, 'Introduction: Pragmatism as Anti-Representationalism', in John P. Murphy, *Pragmatism: from Peirce to Davidson* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990) (p. 2).

[76] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 15.

[77] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 12.

[78] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 12–13.

claim that reason can only follow paths that the imagination has first broken. No words, no reasoning. No imagination, no new words. No such words, no moral or intellectual progress'.[79]

Rorty's allusion to Ezra Pound's modernist 'make it new' slogan is not accidental either. He first mentions this phrase in the 1978 essay 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing' where he describes Derrida's *différance* as 'a name of the situation which the dialectical philosopher starts from the wish to revolt against the eternalization and cosmologization of the present vocabulary by creating a new vocabulary which will not permit the old questions to be asked', and adds 'it is the "make it new" which Pound thought expressed "modernism."'[80] It seems noteworthy that Rorty here uses the term 'cosmologization', which in the context of modernist poetry cannot but bring to mind Yeats's cosmology in 'A Vision', which played an important part in TWO (see chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis). Rorty does not elaborate on his modernist allusions, however, but ties this to passages in Derrida that underscore both Derrida's own call for newness, but also for action, strength, as well as satire and play: 'There will be no unique name [for différance]... we must affirm it – in the sense that Nietzsche brings affirmation into play – with a certain laughter and with a certain dance.'[81] Rorty's allusions to the poets of romanticism and modernism go together to accentuate the themes of imagination, creativity, strength, originality, but also play and playfulness, satire and laughter that suffuses *CIS*.

Viewing language in the way Rorty proposes, as a human-made device that serves as a tool for communication and also for expanding our scope for meaningful awareness – the set of what we currently see as 'possible and important' – implies that our concepts have a history.[82] It means, Rorty submits, that '*the arts, the sciences, and the moral sense' can be thought of as the history of metaphor*.[83] The history of our achievements and leaps of imagination, is traceable in the history of our uses of 'noises and marks'.[84] We, human animals, use noises and marks for human purposes, experiments, needs, and pleasures. Against this background, Rorty offers a

---

[79] Rorty, 'The Fire of Life', p. 129.

[80] Rorty, 'PKW', p. 153.

[81] Rorty, 'PKW', p. 154. Rorty is citing Derrida, *Speech and Phenomenon,* pp. 158-59.

[82] The phrase 'possible and important' is repeatedly used in *CIS*. See p. 17, 23, 39, 48, and 82.

[83] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 16. Rorty also relies on Donald Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', *Critical Inquiry*, 5.1 (1978), 31–47. My italics.
The Nietzschean and deconstructive undertones are obvious here (Rorty discusses Nietzsche, metaphors and truth on pages 27-29), but Rorty is also building on Mary Hesse, specifically her 'The Explanatory Function of Metaphor" in *Revolutions and reconstructions in the philosophy of science*, ed. by Mary B. Hesse (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980). See also Susan Haack, 'Surprising Noises: Rorty and Hesse on Metaphor', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 88 (1987), 293–301 <http://www.jstor.org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/stable/4545085>.

[84] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 13–19. Rorty repeatedly deploys variants of the Davidsonian phrase 'noises and marks' in *CIS*.

reconceptualisation of metaphor defined in contrast to, but not ontologically separated from, literalised language. For once again, Rorty describes a 'blocking out' on a spectrum, this time on a spectrum of *familiarity*.

While to Rorty there is no difference in kind between literal language and metaphor, there are differences in how easily we can assimilate a 'noise' into ordinary language. Whereas literal language is made up of familiar noises that we already have known uses for, metaphors are constellations of marks or noises that are still *unfamiliar* – that make us stop in our tracks and ponder how we might use these, or cause a reaction which we later might try to make sense and use of. 'In this view', Rorty explains, explicating Davidson,

> 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.[85]

One can only 'savour or spit' metaphors, not rephrase them.[86]

Rorty's view of familiar language and metaphor is very much akin to how we view the difference between novels and poetry: we tend to associate poetry with original and unfamiliar or defamiliarising uses of language, and with a focused emotional impact. We recognise that poems might affect us, even though we might not be able to articulate what happened – at least not yet, for we accept that we might have to work hard to interpret poems. Furthermore, live metaphors, just like lines of what once was the most original kind of poetry, can eventually, if they catch on, become a part of our shared language, and die off into literalness.[87] Rorty creates an organic metaphor of his own to describe this process:

> Davidson lets us think of the history of language, and thus of culture, as Darwin taught us to think of the history of a coral reef. Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors. This analogy lets us think of "our language" – that is, of the science and culture of twentieth-century Europe – as something that took shape as a result of a great number of sheer contingencies. Our language and our culture 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.[88]

---

85 Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 17–18. There is obvious potential for further work here, on comparing Rorty's view of poetry and metaphor to the theories of the (Russian) formalists. I touch on this in Chapter 6.
86 Rorty, *CIS*, p. 18.
87 See Rorty, *CIS*, p. 37.
88 Rorty, *CIS*, p. 16.

Our language, for language is not a thing in itself, grows like a coral reef, or, in James' very similar organic metaphor, like a tree expanding, its inner wood hardening as it grows a new layer of cambium.[89] They both see developments and progress as happening organically in response to our needs and desires.

To Rorty, then, all language began as metaphor, as poetry. In his extended sense as the 'one who makes things new', the 'poets' includes Galileo and Darwin alongside Hegel and Yeats because they gave us new metaphorical resources and opened up frontiers for growth and expansion of human imagination. Thus, when we see 'human history as the history of successive metaphors', we will see 'the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species.'[90]

How does Rorty's discussion of language tie in with his reconception of selfhood? To Rorty, all meaningful awareness is 'a linguistic affair' – a doctrine he attributes to Wittgenstein and sees as extended by Sellars, as well as Derrida.[91] To have a meaningful view of oneself, it is not sufficient to have reactions and attitudes and unarticulated beliefs. We must be able to put these into words, words that accumulate their meaning (literalisation) through use. Thus, it follows that we – individuals and communities alike – also have a metaphorical history. Rorty puts it to us that we are defined by the words we use, a set of words, or metaphors, where some matter more to our sense of self than others. These Rorty call our 'final vocabulary':

> 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.[92]

[89] William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1907), p. 64.
[90] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 20.
[91] Rorty, 'PKW', pp. 150–51.
[92] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 73.

This definition occurs a little later in *CIS* than Rorty's discussion on metaphor, but juxtaposing these discussions makes it apparent that our 'final vocabulary' stands to selfhood as literalised metaphors stand to language: they are the hardened part of the coral reef, or the core-wood of James's tree, below the live space for growth that is the cambium. Removing these hardened parts will cause permanent and significant transformation. Notice that our 'final' vocabulary *is* not something in and of itself – it, too, appears as a 'blocking out' on a spectrum, here of words arranged according to the degree to which it would alter our sense of self if they were taken from us.

The making of a self is then also an ongoing, creative process of finding our language, our metaphors – poetic to the extent that we are able to make ourselves anew. To understand why Rorty imbues this process with moral significance, or at least a kind of pragmatic primacy, it helps to read his earlier essays on Freud. In 'Freud and Moral Reflection' (1986), Rorty pits Hume against Freud in terms of what they did for our self-image.[93] While Hume mechanised the mind, he did not de-divinise the self. After Hume there was still a common moral consciousness at the heart of human nature.[94] This did not change with Kant, although he 'recognized the ad hoc and factitious character of [the] Cartesian attempt to keep the world safe for nonmechanism'. Instead, Kant

> developed a ...more drastic, strategy to achieve the same end. He was willing to put mind and matter on a par, and to follow Hume in dissolving what he called "the empirical self" into predictable associations of mental atoms. But he distinguished that self from the true self, the moral self, the part of the self that was an agent, rather than a subject of scientific inquiry.[95]

'This still smaller and more mysterious enclave of nonmechanism', Rorty observes, 'became the preserve of a subject called "moral philosophy"'.[96]

After Kant, the romantics wanted to place the idiosyncratic poetic imagination at the heart of human selfhood, but, as also described in Chapter 4, Rorty sees this as another iteration of an

---

[93] Richard Rorty, 'Freud and Moral Reflection', in *Pragmatism's Freud: The moral disposition of psychoanalysis*, ed. by Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan, Psychiatry and the humanities, v. 9 (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 1–27. See also Richard Rorty, 'Freud, Morality, and Hermeneutics', in *Psychology and Literature: Some Contemporary Directions*, ed. by Ralph Cohen (= *New Literary History*, 12 (1980)), pp. 177–85.
[94] Richard Rorty, 'Freud and moral reflection', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 143–63 (p. 145). Hereafter FMR. All subsequent citations from this essay are taken from this version.
[95] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 156.
[96] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 156.

essentialising view of human nature: it was still a 'divinized self'.[97] The divinised self stands in relation to an external power. On Rorty's view, this casts us as mere players in a narrative presumed to be already written by nonhuman forces (God, the Absolute, Nature). This view of the self was not overcome until Freud helped us see ourselves as contingent products of our biology, experiences, and language – and just that. Freud did not simply produce one more iteration in a millennia-long sequence of essentialising conceptions of what a human being *is*. As Rorty says in *CIS*, Freud did away with the idea of a moral or essential self altogether.[98] Recall from above how important this is to Rorty – belief in an essential human nature was the mistake that led us to believe we could 'fuse' the public and the private, have a moral philosophy, and believe in the intrinsically good and evil.

In his 1986 essay, Rorty explains more clearly than in *CIS* how Freud also turns the making of a self into a relational and conversational process. Freud's metaphors, Rorty explicates, make it seem like there are, within our minds, 'quasi people with whom to struggle'.[99] He 'populated inner space... with analogues of persons — internally coherent clusters of belief and desire'. [100] Freud made it conceivable that an individual brain might be able to formulate more than one set of beliefs – imagine more than one way of being. And, moreover, that these clusters of beliefs and desires can affect one another. In Rorty's words, they form part of a 'single unified *causal* network'.[101] Each conceptualization of who we are, each 'quasi-person', might 'shoulder aside' our rational (central) self and say and do things it would not do, and thus cause us to change or adjust who we think we are. To (re)gain and preserve a stable sense of self, we must 'wish to become acquainted with these unfamiliar persons, if only as a first step toward killing them off.'[102] This requires us to enter into dialogue with them.

Rorty is not necessarily taking Freud's metaphors literally. He examines the *effects* of Freudian language on our culture. One effect was that rather than seeing a person as made up of a rational self and lower 'passions', we started to think of our inner reflective process as a holistic dialogue between 'intellectual peers'.[103] Another was that the notion of a true, divine, moral self, 'a common human nature that is somehow the source and locus of moral responsibility', was no

---

[97] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 30. See also Rorty, 'NITT'.
[98] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 35.
[99] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 146.
[100] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 147.
[101] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 147.
[102] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 148.
[103] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 149.

longer available.[104] We became, in Rorty's words, centreless webs of beliefs and desires.[105] Elsewhere Rorty describes both texts and lumps as 'nodes within transitory webs of relationships', which also captures Rorty's conception of minds well because it emphasises how he sees us as constituted by our mind-internal and external conversational, narrative relations. [106]

The moral implication is that we are responsible for creating our locus of moral responsibility: for imaginatively, poetically making ourselves *as* moral agents. Thus, it becomes imperative to understand our idiosyncratic self – our inner conversation. We must study the 'raw material': our current sense of self, our metaphorical history, and the worldview from which we act as moral agents. [107] Rorty draws a striking conclusion from this: finding out about our unconscious motives will thus no longer be 'just an intriguing exercise', but becomes 'more like a moral obligation'.[108] Freud's formulation of selfhood lets one 'see oneself as a Rube Goldberg machine that requires much tinkering, rather than as a substance with a precious essence to be discovered and cherished'.[109] And our task becomes 'to find new self-descriptions whose adoption will enable one to alter one's behavior'.[110] Freud thusly, Rorty observes, 'remoralizes' the mechanistic self.[111]

This moralisation of the naturalised self is not to be understood as a *resurrection* of the moral self. It is not only that on this picture, 'the contingencies of our upbringing' shape our conscience, as Rorty puts it in *CIS*.[112] But also, as he stresses in the earlier essay, that the very *idea* of 'conscience' becomes a product of human imagination, time, and place: '[i]t makes conscience, like passion, one more set of human beliefs and desires — another story about how the world is, another Weltanschauung. Most important, it makes it *just* another story — not one that (in the case of the passions) is automatically suspect nor one that (in the case of conscience) is automatically privileged'.[113] Rorty echoes this in *CIS* when he says that Freud 'treats rationality' as 'a mechanism which adjusts contingencies to other contingencies'. [114] For this is another way of articulating the idea, familiar from Chapter 2, that what we do is to create narratives that make 'things' – or in Freud's case, selves – 'hang together'.

---

[104] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 148.
[105] Rorty uses similar phrases repeatedly to describe his view of selfhood. See for instance Rorty, 'The priority of democracy', p. 192; Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 83–84, or Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 83–84.
[106] Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', p. 12.
[107] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 148.
[108] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 145.
[109] Rorty, 'FMR', pp. 152–53.
[110] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 153.
[111] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 153.
[112] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 30.
[113] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 151.
[114] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 32–33.

It is thus vital, lest we lapse into essentialism and representationalism, that we take this activity of self-creation lightly, understand it as an open-ended poetic endeavour. 'Maturity will', Rorty tells us in his essay on Freud,

> consist... in an ability to seek out new redescriptions of one's own past – an ability to take a nominalistic, ironic view of oneself. By turning the... parts of the soul into conversational partners for one another, Freud did for the variety of interpretations of each person's past what the Baconian approach to science and philosophy did for the variety of descriptions of the universe as a whole. He let us see alternative narratives and alternative vocabularies as instruments for change, rather than as candidates for a correct depiction of how things are in themselves'.[115]

A change in what appears as relevant and useful to do is implied here. The search for one's 'true self', a desire to become 'a simpler and more transparent being', is replaced by a desire for 'self-enlargement', a desire to 'embrace more and more possibilities, to be constantly learning, to give oneself over entirely to curiosity, to end by having envisaged all the possibilities of the past and of the future... Freud is an apostle of *this aesthetic life, the life of unending curiosity, the life that seeks to extend its own bounds*'.[116]

Rorty adds that for most of us, 'the principal technique of self-enlargement will be... the enrichment of language. One will see the history of both the race and oneself as the development of richer, fuller ways of formulating one's desires and hopes, and thus making those desires and hopes themselves – and thereby oneself – richer and fuller.' Rorty continues:

> I shall call such a development the "acquisition of new vocabularies of moral reflection." By "a vocabulary of moral reflection" I mean a set of terms in which one compares oneself to other human beings. Such vocabularies contain terms like magnanimous, a true Christian, decent, cowardly, God-fearing, hypocritical, self-deceptive, epicene, self-destructive, cold, an antique Roman, a saint, a Julien Sorel, a Becky Sharpe, a red-blooded American, a shy gazelle, a hyena, depressive, a Bloomsbury type, a man of respect, a grande dame. Such terms are possible answers to the question "What is he or she like?" and thus possible answers to the question "What am *I* like?" By summing up patterns of behavior, they are tools for criticizing the character of others and for creating one's own. They are the terms one uses when one tries to resolve moral dilemmas by asking "What sort of person would I be if I did this?".'[117]

---

[115] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 152.

[116] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 154. My italics. Llanera discusses self-enlargement and the notions of egotism and redemption in Rorty: see Tracy Llanera, 'Richard Rorty and the Concept of Redemption', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 82.2 (2016), 103–18.

[117] Rorty, 'FMR', pp. 154–55.

Here, again, the immediate connection between self-making and moral progress is made clear: moral progress becomes a matter of enlarging our vocabulary and enhancing our capacity for nuanced deliberation. On my reading of Rorty, moral deliberation becomes the activity of reflecting on the possibility of a self in a possible world, a character in a story.

Freud is furthermore of integral importance to Rorty because Freud democratises what Nietzsche wanted to reserve for the elite – the ability to create an original self:

> For Freud, nobody is dull through and through, for there is no such thing as a dull unconscious. What makes Freud more useful and more plausible than Nietzsche is that he does not relegate the vast majority of humanity to the status of dying animals. [His account] shows us how to see every human life as a poem – or, more exactly, every human life not so racked by pain as to be unable to learn a language nor so immersed in toil as to have no leisure in which to generate a self-description. He sees every such life as an attempt to clothe itself in its own metaphors.[118]

On the Freudian picture, all minds become faculties for creating metaphors.[119] Rorty does not think everyone succeeds in creating an original, autonomous self, but Freud helps us see that we all, given the chance, have the potential to do so.

Rorty uses this to do away with the essentialising idea of poetic genius. He recognises that some people are more skilful with words, that some brains are wired for creating 'iridescent patterns', as he calls it when discussing Nabokov.[120] However, whether poetic innovations succeed is also a matter of 'luck'.[121] A wide range of factors will go into whether the population at large will begin to literalise the metaphors at hand. Rorty thinks that 'poetic, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need'.[122] We 'call something "fantasy" rather than "poetry" or "philosophy"', he notes, 'when it revolves around metaphors which do not catch on with other people – that is, around ways of speaking or acting which the rest of us cannot find a use for.'[123] The difference between genius and eccentricity becomes a matter of degree of uptake and subsequent literalisation of an individual's preferred metaphors.

This democratisation of poetic genius is integral to the role Rorty gives to Freud in his narrative about the intellectual and moral progress of culture towards a literary one. Rorty sees Freud as having played the same kind of role as Kant did. By de-throning religion and placing

---

118 Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 35–36.
119 Rorty, *CIS*, p. 36.
120 Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 154–55. I discuss this in Chapter 6.
121 Rorty, *CIS*, p. 29.
122 Rorty, *CIS*, p. 37.
123 Rorty, *CIS*, p. 37.

philosophy in its stead, Kant taught the rising generation that the disciplinary hierarchy was negotiable. Hence Kant unwittingly paved the way for the romantic inversion of it. Likewise, by helping us see the self as re-configurable, Freud helped us articulate the possibility that we might not have a determinate self at all. It was *not* Freud's specific vocabulary that was his gift to us. It was that he helped us see that ever new vocabularies for talking about the self *could* be invented. This brought us one step closer to a fully poeticized culture because he, like Kant, dislodged something presumed fixed and showed it instead to be as human-made and re-mouldable as all our other ideas.

This last observation makes Freud appear significantly more important to Rorty's work than is often noted. His import to Rorty argument is then not primarily to be found in the novel vocabulary Freud invents, in, as Voparil puts it (referencing Richard Rumana), in his offering of 'a new set of psychic metaphors for creating one's own life story'.[124] Freud did extend our vocabulary in this way. But the effect of it was to usher in a pivotal shift in our understanding of how we might view and talk about ourselves as a species, and this is the point of greater significance to Rorty's narrative. Freud's imagination, like Kant's and the romantics', broke – as Rorty might put it, a path down which collective reason could follow.

Rather than genius, Rorty, as we know from the previous chapter, talks about strength. He talks about the 'strong maker': poets, textualists, critics. He also distinguishes between commonsensical ironists versus intellectuals. These distinctions, which can appear unclear, can be made to 'hang together' as elements of Rorty's overarching narrative if we understand them as I described Rorty's public-private distinction and his division between literalised language and metaphor: as blockings out on a spectrum, this time of awareness.

'Ironism', Rorty explains, 'results from awareness of the power of redescription'.[125] An ironist is someone who has 'radical and continuing doubts' about her final vocabulary. She knows this doubt will be there, whatever vocabulary she adopts, for there is no one, right and true language.[126] 'I call people of this sort "ironists"', Rorty clarifies,

---

[124] Voparil, 'Philosophy as Bildungsroman', p. 121. Richard Rumana, *On Rorty* (Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), p. 56.
[125] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 89.
[126] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 73.

because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in the position which Sartre called "meta-stable": never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves.[127]

Awareness is the operative word here. Notice that the ironist's awareness of contingency also leads her to become less self-assured.

The antithesis to ironism is 'common sense'. 'Common sense' is:

the watchword for those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated. To be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies.[128]

'Unselfconsciously' is here the operative word. This is then not common sense as Heidegger and Nabokov saw it, as 'a self-deceptive apologia for thoughtlessness and vulgarity' – although it might be that, too.[129] Rorty appears to equate common sense with a kind of un-questioning conservatism of ideas, an un-awareness of contingency and its intellectual consequences, and also with a kind of self-assuredness he later discussed as 'egotism'.[130] When Rorty says that in his utopia, ironism would be 'in the relevant sense', universal, I take him to mean that getting by without recourse to foundational ideas would be something the citizens of this culture would be as habituated into as the greater part of the population now is to get by without recourse to religious doctrine.[131] The metaphors of historicism and nominalism would be literalised into ordinary language. The people of this utopia would take it for granted that this vocabulary suffices to describe and to judge. They would be 'blasé' about their final vocabularies being contingent and meet doubts about their way of talking with requests for concrete alternatives for how they might instead talk or what they might instead do.[132]

Intellectuals are those who *do* actively question the ways we think and talk. In the hope of finding better alternatives, ironist intellectuals will, moreover, deliberately expose themselves to new vocabularies. However, Rorty democratises the idea of 'the intellectual', just as he does with

---

[127] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 73–74.
[128] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 74.
[129] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 150.
[130] Rorty, 'Redemption from Egotism'.
[131] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. xv–xvi.
[132] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 84.

'genius'. Intellectuals are not inherently different from other people. What sets them apart is that they deal in words, the

> intellectual (the person who uses words or visual or musical forms for this purpose) is just... somebody who does with marks and noises what other people do with their spouses and children, their fellow workers, the tools of their trade, the cash accounts of their businesses, the possessions they accumulate in their homes, the music they listen to, the sports they play or watch, or the trees they pass on their way to work. Anything from the sound of a word through the color of a leaf to the feel of a piece of skin can, as Freud showed us, serve to dramatize and crystallize a human being's sense of self-identity.[133]

Notice that this does not say that all intellectuals have always been, or are, ironists, but that they are always engaged in redescription: 'Redescription is a generic trait of the intellectual, not a specific mark of the ironist'.[134]

In Rorty's narrative, strong poets are intellectuals who *also* have a powerful desire to leave behind an imprint of their idiosyncratic self. The strong poet seeks to make a mark that will make a difference and, additionally, desires that this mark is recognised as theirs, that it testifies to their existence. Rorty moreover tells us that the strong poet is aware that their desire to leave such a mark is a result of their recognition of their own human limitations and frailty. Everyone has, to Rorty, an unconscious need to come to terms with who they are – to respond to mortality by making a self, and to understand themselves in a context.[135] The strong poet goes beyond this aiming to '*demonstrate* that he is not a copy or replica'.[136]

'Strong' here then refers to an intellectual and artistic strength by which some individuals overcome the ideas and language they were given. Furthermore, the strong poet has the greater *awareness* of ironism – of the power of redescription:

> If, with Davidson, we drop the notion of language as fitting the world, we can see the point of Bloom's and Nietzsche's claim that the strong maker, the person who uses words as they have never before been used, is best able to appreciate her own contingency. For she can see, more clearly than the continuity-seeking historian, critic, or philosopher, that her language is as contingent as her parents or her historical epoch. She can appreciate the force of the claim that "truth is a mobile army of metaphors" because, by her own sheer strength, she has broken out of one perspective, one metaphoric, into another.[137]

---

[133] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 37.
[134] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 90.
[135] Rorty, *CIS*, 37-38 and 43.
[136] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 43. Rorty's italics.
[137] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 28.

Because of her powerful ironist sensibility, she can also acknowledge her own making as a response to the existentialist reckoning that full acceptance of contingency can cause. The 'strong' maker, in Rorty's rhetoric, is thus the concept that 'blocks-out' a portion on the very end of a spectrum of awareness, or appreciation, of contingency, a spectrum that runs from commonsensical, unquestioning acceptance of nominalism and historicism, to the fully contingency-cognisant, and thus as autonomous as possible, strong poet.

This still has obvious Nietzschean overtones. Rorty tempers these by using Bloom to further deflate ingrained ideas about poets and poems. The importance of Bloom in this context does not primarily lie in giving us a fuller vision of the strong, romantic poet.[138] It lies in Bloom's *de-divinisation* of the Nietzschean strong poet. Bloom is important because he

> de-divinizes the poem, and thereby the poet, in the same way in which Nietzsche de-divinized truth and in which Freud de-divinized conscience. He does for romanticism what Freud did for moralism. The strategy is the same in all these cases: It is to substitute a tissue of contingent relations, a web which stretches backward and forward through past and future time, for a formed, unified, present, self- contained substance, something capable of being seen steadily and whole. Bloom reminds us that just as even the strongest poet is parasitic on her precursors, just as even she can give birth only to a small part of herself, so she is dependent on the kindness of all those strangers out there in the future.[139]

'Parasitic' here points to the fact that while metaphors are un-familiar uses of words, this is only possible 'against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways'.[140] However strong a poet is, she can never escape the debt of her language to the language of other people. For, Rorty says, languages, whatever use they are put to, 'remain media of communication, tools for social interaction, ways of tying oneself up with other human beings'.[141]

Bloom thus helps Rorty show that even the strongest of poets is not some mythical overman, but one of us, who, in part due to a stronger drive to leave behind a mark, in part due to intellectual maturity (degree of self-consciousness about their uses of noises and marks), in part due to skill and luck and how well their poetic suggestions happen to coincide with public need, succeeds in making their mark. Recall the problem articulated at the end of NITT and restated at the start of this chapter: how, Rorty asked, could we make a case for the humanist-pragmatism of James and Bloom over the inhumanist-pragmatism of Nietzsche and Foucault? Freud's view of the self and Bloom's pragmatic view of the poem as a product of both individual ingenuity and that of

---

[138] See Rorty, *CIS*, p. 29.
[139] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 41.
[140] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 41.
[141] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 41.

others permits Rorty to keep the romanticist belief in the power of the imagination and expression while simultaneously conceiving the process of poetic creation as entirely prosaic and utterly dependent on our relations to other people. Although making an autonomous self is something to strive for as it drives and is driven by greater ironist awareness, which is desirable because an ironist attitude is more conducive to facilitating a self and a culture open to change, even the most autonomous self is deeply indebted to and interlinked with the self-creative projects of other people. We can never evade, to speak with Bloom, those traces that go from poem to poem.[142] This recognition, and its traceability in Bloom's own writerly practice, was what defined Bloom's 'humanism' for Rorty at the end of NITT.[143] In Bloom's theory of poetry, attention to these traces is what defines the literary critic – the kind of critic Rorty wishes philosophers would become.

Aestheticising the Life of our Culture

As the Freudian vocabulary grew in use and influence, Rorty observes, the broader shift that took place was that it became possible to 'take the activity of redescription more lightly' than ever before – we became 'able to juggle several descriptions', and more able to accept them as merely tools.[144] Freud's de-centring of not just the human self, but with it a worldview that placed the human moral self at its centre, galvanised a tendency into something that had the power to affect a discernible change in our collective mindset:

> It is unlikely that Freud's metaphors could have been picked up, used, and literalized at any earlier period. But, conversely, it is unlikely that without Freud's metaphors we should have been able to assimilate Nietzsche's, James's, Wittgenstein's, or Heidegger's as easily as we have, or to have read Proust with the relish we did. All the figures of this period play into each other's hands. They feed each other lines. Their metaphors rejoice in one another's company.[145]

Together, the metaphors of these figures de-divinised and de-essentialised our ideas of truth, knowledge, language, and the self. In other words: the collective imagination and skills of a range of writers working at this time resulted in a broadly enveloping shift in intellectual culture towards an anti-essentialist, anti-metaphysical, aesthetic, poetic (intent on making) attitude.

---

[142] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 96.
[143] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173 Rorty, *CIS*, p. 25n2. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 96. See also Rorty's description of the writerly practice that defines his 'humanism' (contra Foucault) in NITT.
[144] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 39.
[145] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 39.

Rorty emphasises that it would be a mistake to think this development inevitable: 'This is the sort of phenomenon it is tempting to describe in terms of the march of the World-Spirit toward clearer self-consciousness, or as the length of man's mind gradually coming to match that of the universe. But any such description would betray the spirit of playfulness and irony which links the figures I have been describing'.[146] Rorty's words constitute another warning against inscribing ourselves into a quest-narrative, as discussed in chapters 2 and 3. And as noted in previous chapters, play and playfulness are again shown to be a vital component of the Rortian attitude. The suggestion made is not that we at this turn stopped or should stop taking what matters to us or others seriously – merely that as a culture, and as individuals in this culture, we developed an ability to hold our descriptions of these matters more *lightly*, aesthetically. That is, we became more able to adopt a literary attitude towards all human marks and noises.

While this development was not inevitable, Rorty nevertheless underscores that the emergence of liberal democracies represents progress relative to earlier non-liberal, non-democratic societies. Continuing and improving this culture is thus an explicit aim. Because Rorty sees 'intellectual progress' as materialising through a process of literalising 'selected metaphors' the question of *which* metaphors to work with matters a great deal.[147] The vocabulary best suited to sustain and develop liberal democracies, Rorty submits, is the vocabulary of 'metaphor and self-creation' he has promoted when talking about individual identity-making.[148] This vocabulary can help 'reformulate the hopes of liberal society in a nonrationalist and nonuniversalist way'.[149] Rorty's suggestion emerges from a practical evaluation: talking in these terms can strengthen a historical tendency in our (intellectual) culture, one he sees as already having contributed to lessening human suffering and oppression.

Thus reformulating his hopes for the future of liberal society in these preferred metaphors, Rorty sketches an argument familiar from the above but transposed from the individual to the communal level. Not only the self, but the 'world' would be 'de-divinized'.[150] People, in general, would be able to recognise the contingency of their consciences and yet remain faithful to them.[151] The chief virtue of such a society would be the recognition of contingency *as* freedom: recall the discussion above on the recognition of contingency as enabling us to stand 'unflinchingly' for what we believe in.[152] This culture would recognise that 'rational' argument can only occur within

---

[146] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 39.
[147] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 44.
[148] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 44.
[149] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 44.
[150] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 45.
[151] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 46.
[152] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 46.

a familiar language but that it is 'irrational' change, outside our familiar bounds, that drives progress. They would understand that new metaphors, through such poetic transgressions of the ordinary, materialise as causes of new beliefs.[153] And they would see it as an aim in and of itself to foster a shared, public, conversational culture, content to see as true '*whatever the upshot of [free and open encounters] turns out to be.*' [154]

As we work towards such a culture, Rorty indeed insists that what we need is not more secure philosophical foundations but 'an improved self-description'.[155] Our culture has built its self-image around identification with Enlightenment scientism, but 'unfortunately the Enlightenment wove much of its political rhetoric around a picture of the scientist as a sort of priest, someone who achieved contact with nonhuman truth by being "logical," "methodical," and "objective."' While this was useful and brought progress at the time, it is not the most helpful image to place at the heart of our cultural identity anymore. Although 'the sciences have burgeoned a thousandfold since the end of the eighteenth century, and have thereby made possible the realization of political goals which could never have been realized without them, they have nevertheless receded into the background of cultural life.' Rorty suggests that this is largely due to the increasing need for specialist knowledge to follow the developments within this branch of culture. He proposes that this is not something to rectify, but to 'be coped with' through 'switching attention to the areas which *are* at the forefront of culture, those which excite the imagination of the young, namely, art and Utopian politics.'[156]

Thus, he suggests, we need to reimagine the democratic project of Western culture as an effort to bring about a 'poeticized' culture: 'We need a redescription of liberalism as the hope that culture as a whole can be "poeticized" rather than as the Enlightenment hope that it can be "rationalized" or "scientized." That is, we need to substitute the hope that chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized for the hope that everyone will replace "passion" or fantasy with "reason."' [157] Recall Rorty's objection to the idea of human nature and his rejection of the possibility of 'fusing' the private and the public on one theoretical scheme that would allow us to know who we are and what to do. His description of a poeticised culture articulates the kind of pluralist vision which dismissing the traditional 'human nature' line of reasoning leads to. It results from his insistence that we must not attempt to subsume private idiosyncrasy under an abstract conception of what it means to be human.

---

[153] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 50.
[154] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 51–52. Rorty's emphasis.
[155] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 52.
[156] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 52.
[157] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 53.

Hence, in Rorty's view,

> an ideally liberal polity would be one whose culture hero is Bloom's "strong poet" rather than the warrior, the priest, the sage, or the truth-seeking, "logical," "objective" scientist. Such a culture would... no longer be haunted by specters called "relativism" and "irrationalism." ...it would drop the idea of [foundations]. It would regard the justification of liberal society simply as a matter of historical comparison with other attempts at social organization – those of the past and those envisaged by Utopians.
>
> To think such a justification sufficient would be to draw the consequences from Wittgenstein's insistence that vocabularies – all vocabularies, even those which contain the words which we take most seriously, the ones most essential to our self-descriptions – are human creations, tools for the creation of such other human artifacts as poems, Utopian societies, scientific theories, and future generations.[158]

What we should do, Rorty suggests, is to 'build the rhetoric of liberalism around this thought'.[159] 'A poeticized culture', he continues, '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'.[160]

This instant in Rorty's *CIS*-narrative echoes the conversion from a desire for purification to a drive towards aestheticisation and enlargement Rorty introduced in his discussion of Freud. It also suggests the moment in TPP and TWO when 'the Seeker of Enlightenment' becomes 'the Pragmatist' and comes to understand all descriptions as mere possible, contingent descriptions, and yet as possibly useful instruments for change. It resonates with Rorty's wish for us to accept the contingency of all starting points in PRI. And it describes the moment of the 'takeover' of a literary culture in PTG.

Rorty's claim that we need a 'poeticization' of culture is thus not based on a foundational understanding of this as 'good' as such, but of it as *good for* a purpose. It is set out as a pragmatic suggestion for how it would be useful for us, as individuals and as a collective, to view ourselves and the task before us, given that this is to work to lessen cruelty and oppression. Rorty is standing 'unflinchingly' for his own conviction: that, as we approach a broader cultural recognition and acceptance of the contingency of all starting points, we are best served by actively cultivating an

---

[158] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 53. '...culture hero' *sic.*
[159] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 53.
[160] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 53–54.

ironist, poetic attitude because the development of such a stance towards our ideas, concepts and institutions has led to progress in this respect, comparatively measured, and approaching the task of sustaining and furthering this development from such a stance is thus likely to be helpful.

Underscoring the parallels between what Rorty here says about the relation between our moral and intellectual progress and communal identity-making and what he said above about self-making as a moral obligation can serve to bring out that acting to make a collective self-image is also an act that comes as close to a moral obligation it is possible to come within the Rortian paradigm. The naturalised, centreless, conversational self is mirrored in a contemporary culture that understands itself as a contingent, centreless product of human evolution and history. This culture has no essential identity, for it no longer believes in 'human nature'. It is a culture in which no idea or doctrine retains a foundational claim to furnish our collective conscience – not God, not the Moral Law within. We, and our moral sense and customs, are the product of history, just as individual consciences are the products of their upbringing. The Freudian reconception of the self as minds populated by 'quasi-persons', 'intellectual peers', who conversationally shape the individual's self-image, is, moreover, mirrored in Rorty's utopian conversational culture, where equal peers articulate, revise and negotiate its shared self-image. And just as Freud allowed us to stop thinking of our selves as made up of reasons and passions, the literary culture lets us do away with the notion that there is any ontological difference between rational and irrational discourse.

Open and curious collective conversation then becomes our culture's best available means for forging a shared 'source and locus of moral responsibility', to borrow that phrase from Rorty's discussion of Freud.[161] Seen like this, it also becomes imperative on the collective scale to work to, as Rorty put it in his 1986 essay on Freud, 'wish to become acquainted with these unfamiliar persons', if only so as to become able to articulate a more stable sense of self to work from.[162] For also on the collective level, persons might come along and 'shoulder aside' the dominant self-conception. Other persons, or other collective identities, become, on this scoped-up culture-encompassing model of self-making, part of the causal network that might lead us to think, or talk, or do something out of character. 'Know thyself' becomes an instructive dictum also on a societal level.

And, conversely, if those acting out of character – different to the norm – seem persuasive, we might have to rethink our collective identity in order to integrate their (linguistic) behaviour into our sense of who 'we', as a moral community, are. Recall Rorty's adoption of Sellars' understanding of immoral action as 'the sort of thing we don't do'.[163] A 'we' can expel or repress

---

[161] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 148.
[162] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 148.
[163] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 59–60.

someone acting out of character on the communal level. That would be the purification-strategy of those searching for a 'true' self. The other strategy, as Rorty explained in his discussion of Freud, is one of 'self-enlargement', which involves turning conversationally towards the 'quasi-persons' of the self, to broaden and change one's sense of self to accommodate these, and through this awareness-work become a more resilient, adaptive and diversely capable whole. Likewise, a community, a moral 'we', might expand its sense of self to accommodate difference or novelty. Being open and curious about others becomes the source and driver of cultural self-understanding and what enables us to forge a useful sense of who we are – a 'bundle' capable of deliberation and action. Finding out about our communal 'unconscious', so to speak, having a conversation with our peers, stops, then, as Rorty says about the individual unconscious, being 'just an intriguing exercise, and becomes more like 'a moral obligation'.[164] Here, too, 'alternative narratives and alternative vocabularies' become 'instruments for change'.[165]

As noted, Rorty said that in Freud's view, our selves appeared as 'Rube Goldberg machines' that 'required much tinkering'. Our task became 'to find new self-descriptions whose adoption will enable one to alter one's behavior'. As I understand him, it is the shift towards acknowledging the pragmatic primacy of this task that he takes to constitute the remoralisation of the mechanistic self.[166] I want to suggest that Rorty offers a view where this process is mirrored and replicated on the communal level – he tells a story that 'remoralises' our collective self-making. It matters to make a positive, helpful, communal sense of self, as is his primary argument in *Achieving Our Country.*

Takeover

In Rorty's poeticised liberal utopia, literary culture has taken over. This should be seen, Rorty suggests in PTG, 'as the triumph, if not exactly the aesthetic (a Kantian notion for which I have little use), of what I call the ''literary.''[167] This idea of the 'literary' in Rorty's work thus evolves a great deal from the moment he takes up a largely Snowian conception of it in PPTC until it in *CIS* and beyond comes to characterise the intellectual attitude and practices of the larger human culture he wants us to work towards. As an attitude, the 'literary' stance here seems to have little to do with specific works of literature, although it clearly has everything to do with a sensitivity to words, their effects, and uses, and a literary kind of ability to hold descriptions lightly, playfully

---

[164] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 145.
[165] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 152.
[166] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 153.
[167] Rorty, 'PTG', p. 4.

while still taking their making and their consequences to be of the utmost importance. It considers it to be morally important that we, as individuals and as communities, seek to cultivate an 'aesthetic life' of 'unending curiosity' that 'seeks to extend its own bounds'.[168]

The deflating, de-divinising, conversational and solidaric attitude that is part of this Rortian version of what it means to live an aesthetic life means that although the Rortian attitude closely aligns with that of the modernist literary author (cf. Chapter 4), or the novelist (cf. Chapter 3), it overlaps more significantly with that of the strong literary *critic*. For while the strong poet in the Bloomian sense is intent on autonomy, often at the cost of turning a blind eye to the lives and words of others, Bloom-the-critic is stronger yet. Strong due to his ability to 'beat' a text into a shape that serves his purpose, but even stronger in his capacity to trace the lines that go from poem to poem. The literary critic's true strength, Rorty appears to say, lies in the humanism she must cultivate and display to do her job well.

The case Rorty makes in *CIS* for a poeticised culture is a profoundly literary case for the pragmatist humanism of James and Bloom – it is a call for us to actively cultivate the attitude of the character Rorty invents to capture James's and Bloom's salient traits in this regard: the ironist (pragmatist) who is also a liberal (humanist). At this point, it becomes possible to formulate a reason why Rorty does not simply refer to his utopian culture as a *pragmatist* culture. His use of a literary vocabulary is needed to capture elements of the Rortian attitude unique to it, which could not be formulated in the familiar metaphors of pragmatist thought. Rorty is using this specific vocabulary to transgress the bounds of the familiar, for philosophers but also for pragmatists. He is blurring a line that *has* been taken to have ontological significance since Plato's republic, and thus shows himself a strong poet in his own right.

Hence, although Rorty did not set it out explicitly, this thesis amounts to a proposal to view Rorty's suggestions that we see his pragmatist stance as comparable to the literary attitude as deliberate attempts to convey vital components of Rortian thought: those that set it apart from, and goes beyond, traditional pragmatism. I also want to propose that we might take up Rorty's literary redescription of pragmatism – the view I am suggesting of his pragmatism as a literary attitude – as a useful pedagogical analogy that can help explain the Rortian attitude. The Rortian attitude is like the attitude we adopt towards works of literature but scaled up to encompass all of textual and conversational culture, the sciences and religion included: it holds *all* utterances to be literary, or poetic; to be kinds of writing. It holds them in mind as human artefacts, to be evaluated – as the literary critic does – for their usefulness and relevance to humans wanting to live their fullest and richest lives.

---

[168] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 154.

Of course, the bearing these artefacts have might depend on their beauty, on *how* they are made. As indicated at the start, I take Rorty in *CIS* to not only be sketching an attitude but also a poetic practice. For in his open-ended liberal utopia, it is works of literature in a narrower sense that are considered most useful to moral progress, and their capability to affect us is key. This is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 6
Unsettling Iridescence

The readings presented in the previous chapters amount to an argument for why it might be both apt and helpful to think of the Rortian stance as a literary attitude. I take this to apply to the larger pragmatist attitude he articulates in his work, rather than simply as an alternative way to talk about 'ironism': as indicated in the previous chapter, ironism does not fully capture the Rortian attitude. Moreover, while I suggested there that Rorty deployed his literary vocabulary poetically to push even pragmatist thought out of its traditional bounds, I also see Rorty's constant need to use the vocabulary of literature and poetry as manifesting the shortcomings of the irony-idiom. For the language of poetry, of poets; of literature or 'the literary', adds an aspect to ironism that is of integral importance to Rortian pragmatism: an emphasis on practice, on making, *poiesis*.

In Rorty's narrative, we make selves, and make a locus of moral responsibility from which to act, we make communities, and we make solidarity. In his work we are – perhaps more than anything – makers, of actions, and tools, of noises, conversation, poems, institutions, democracies, freedom, human flourishing, and futures. As outlined in the previous chapter, the Rortian pragmatist seeks to lead an aesthetic life, and to facilitate the aesthetic life of her community – not aesthetic as in beautiful, although that too, and not merely in the sense of *aisthēsis*, but as in open, curious, imaginative, creative, and, vitally, in a sense that means descriptions are held *lightly*, while their potential is nevertheless taken seriously.[1] The Rortian pragmatist is, in Rorty's own terms, an artist.

Artists have practices. It is not sufficient to think like an artist or desire to be an artist to be an artist. To adopt an attitude is, however, sufficient to qualify as an ironist, and therein, I am suggesting, lies a crucial difference. The previous chapters have explored the Rortian literary attitude, its roots, and how it comes to bear on Rorty's conception of a 'literary' or 'poeticized' culture. This chapter is about the practices Rorty recommends. It aims to show that at the heart of Rorty's thoroughly de-essentialised, institutional, and functional conception of literature, lies an acknowledgement of how the key moral function assigned to literature is directly related to the literary, writerly skill of arranging words in patterns that are effective at unsettling settled selves. Rorty does not fully articulate the main point this chapter aims to get across. Doing so helps explain why he places literature in a narrower, traditional sense at the heart of his

---

[1] For passages where Rorty associates his pragmatism with the beautiful as opposed to the sublime, see Rorty, *CIS*, p. 106, 125, 136. See also Richard Rorty, 'Habermas and Lyotard on postmodernity', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 164–76 (p. 176).

postmetaphysical, poeticised liberal culture. And this bolsters my claim, which I return to as I conclude this thesis, that understanding Rorty's uses of literature is vital to understanding Rorty, and, furthermore, that from a Rortian position, the matter of what literature does, and the question of how we might better support its creation, proliferation, and standing in contemporary culture, becomes a task of vital importance.

Hence, in this chapter, I open by examining why Rorty asks us to keep theory private and think of literature as pertaining to social hope, before I examine what Rorty means by 'literature' when it is used in a wide sense, and then turn to the matter of what, to Rorty, characterises literature in a more narrow sense and why this is the kind of writing he places at the heart of his utopian culture. I find that there are important reasons – reasons that have to do with how literary texts are forged even while they are seen as tools – for why works of literature do important work for Rorty's purposes.

Keeping Theory Private

As previously indicated, Rorty shares an anti-theoretical disposition (although he is not against theory in the pragmatic sense of guidelines for action) and distrust of methodology with Felski and ordinary language critics like Moi. However, while Rorty eschews setting out a method, he does not stop at indicating an attitude in which to work, for he also sketches what might be construed as a set of best-practice recommendations for liberal ironist intellectuals. This is one way *CIS* goes further than *PMN*, for in the later work he is not only concerned with the consequences of pragmatism for philosophical thought but wants to consider how we might have a postphilosophical intellectual practice. Rorty's recommendations are, however, not set out as universal. They emerge *from* a Rortian perspective where some aims and thus some doings, for practical reasons, appear more useful than others. Writing universalising works of theory appears as meaningless (use-less). Engaging in direct, point-by-point argumentation within a language game you think needs to be rendered obsolete looks like an activity that counters what you are trying to achieve intellectually and politically. Working to find what a text 'really' means, or to articulate general criteria for truth or knowledge appear as nonsensical aims. These valuations lead to a set of suggestions specifically *for* liberal ironists.

Furthermore, the pivotal question of how we might cultivate the humanist-pragmatist attitude of James and Bloom also shapes Rorty's practice-recommendations. Hence, as detailed in Chapter 5, some activities and resources also begin to appear more useful relative to our shared effort to minimise cruelty and maximise solidarity than others. Noticeably, and perhaps surprisingly, Rorty sees literature rather than theory as the most useful genre for the liberal cause: '[t]he metaphysician's association of theory with social hope and of literature with private

perfection is, in an ironist liberal culture, reversed.'[2] This does seem counterintuitive. But what perhaps seems more counterintuitive at this stage, is that Rorty upholds that theory might be useful for something. To understand why Rorty performs this reversal of the roles we usually assign to literature and theory, it is necessary to look more closely at what kind of project ironist self-making is.

To Rorty, self-making is a lifelong activity driven by hope: the hope of making 'the best self for ourselves that we can.'[3] As this is a process only constrained by our lifespan and because our experiences and circumstances are constantly developing and changing, we need a steady supply of intellectual resources, tools to 'tinker' with our practical self.[4] As we have seen, in Rorty's narrative, all meaningful awareness requires that we endeavour to put our experiences into words, and all individuals 'carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives'. This he calls our 'final vocabulary'.[5] 'Final' only in the sense that the individual at this moment in time is thrown back on simply stating it when pushed. We also know that ironists are those who will not unhesitatingly defend their current final vocabulary, but question it, and thus themselves, in the face of doubt. However, as the ironist recognises no authorities external to human conversation (God, Nature, the Moral Law) that might provide the standard against which she is to be judged, she can only seek comparative, pragmatic justification. Thus

> 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. Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original. 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.[6]

Rorty rephrases this to stress that 'our doubts about our own characters or our own culture can be resolved or assuaged only by enlarging our acquaintance.'[7]

However, the ironist not only worries that she has the wrong vocabulary, but that she is in the wrong 'tribe', has been 'taught to play the wrong language game'.[8] Her search for autonomy

---

[2] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 94.
[3] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 79–80.
[4] Rorty, 'FMR', pp. 152–53.
[5] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 73.
[6] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 80. Recall that Rorty sees progress as a series of literalisation of metaphors.
[7] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 80.
[8] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 75.

thus requires her to extend her literary critical work (understood here, then, in a sense that encompasses philosophical inquiries approached in a 'literary' spirit) beyond the language, figures, and books of the tribe. Ironists

> are afraid that they will get stuck in the vocabulary in which they were brought up if they only know the people in their own neighborhood, so they try to get acquainted with strange people (Alcibiades, Julien Sorel), strange families (the Karamazovs, the Casaubons), and strange communities (the Teutonic Knights, the Nuer, the mandarins of the Sung).[9]

Rorty thus proposes that the 'easiest way' for the ironist intellectual to assuage doubts about our own character and culture, is to 'read books', and comparatively evaluate what they offer.[10]

This activity thus has an expansive direction, a quality Rorty, as we know, associates with the 'aesthetic life'.[11] But apart from requiring it to be thus directed, he places no constraints on what kind of self private individuals can or should create, offers no guidelines for what human beings in pursuit of their private projects should read, or how they might talk or write.[12] He cannot make such suggestions, because, as detailed in the previous chapter, he rejects the idea that there is a human nature and underscores that human needs and desires will be infinitely diverse and changeable. It follows that there is no one (re)description that will serve or appeal to all individuals. He does, however, take one activity as integral to all *ironists'* private pursuits: becoming a better ironist.

That this is a vital part of every ironist intellectual's perfectionist project makes sense, as Rorty defines ironists by the degree to which they understand themselves *as* ironist, hence ironism is not simply a stance towards concepts or language, but towards one's self. Ironist *theory* does a

---

[9] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 80. Rorty does not specify this, but it seems likely that he is referring to Nobel Laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz's *The Knights of the Cross*, also published as *The Teutonic Knights* (org. *Krzyżacy* (1900)). – a historical novel, set in the Middle Ages and revolving around the State of the Teutonic Order and its eventual destruction. See NobelPrize.org, *The Nobel Prize in Literature 1905* (2021) <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1905/sienkiewicz/biographical/> [accessed 10 April 2021] and Culture.pl, *Henryk Sienkiewicz* (2021) <https://culture.pl/en/artist/henryk-sienkiewicz> [accessed 10 April 2021]. It seems plausible that 'the Nuer' as a 'strange community' would point to E. E. Evans-Pritchard's writings on the Nuer community in Sudan: Evans-Pritchard was central to the development of social anthropology as a discipline and wrote several articles on this topic in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the book *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer* (1951). As for 'the mandarins of the Sung', an educated guess can be made that it refers to Robert Elegant's historical novels set in China during the Taiping Rebellion. *Mandarin* was published in 1983 as the third instalment of a trilogy. The timing hence fits well with Rorty writing the precursor lectures and essays to *CIS* in this period.
[10] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 80.
[11] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 154 and Chapter 5, p. 131.
[12] Cf. Rorty, *CIS*, p. 91.

particular job in this respect: 'ironist philosophers are private philosophers – philosophers concerned to intensify the irony of the nominalist and the historicist.'[13] That is: these philosophers help ironists intellectuals become better ironist intellectuals by heightening their awareness of contingency and the power of redescription.

To explain why such theorising should be thought of as a private activity, Rorty imagines another special case of the general ironist type: the ironist theorist.[14] This figure is an ironist who specialises in the history of theory. Rorty equates philosophy and theory here, but uses 'theory' because it gives him the connotations of 'taking a view of a large stretch of territory from a considerable distance'.[15] What the ironist theorist is taking a view of, is metaphysical theory.[16] 'The past', for the ironist theorist, 'is the books which have suggested that there might be such a thing as an unironizable vocabulary, a vocabulary which could not be replaced by being redescribed.'[17] Rorty furthermore gives the ironist theorist the ambitions of a strong poet: the need to demonstrate that they are not a copy.[18] By 'ironist theory' Rorty then does not mean systems of thought put forth for thinking about how things *are*, or how things, universally, should be conceptualised. That would be unironic theorising. Unironic theorists will sincerely believe themselves engaged in the work of accurately representing how things *truly* are for the public and common good. Nor does he mean intellectual conversation about how we might talk about our ironism as a stance, and cope with the shift in practices this might lead to – that would be ironist writing. He means the kind of retrospective narrative about the history of philosophy that allows the ironist to undertake the 'task' that 'Coleridge recommended to the great and original poet: to create the taste by which he will be judged.'[19] It is vital to note that unironic theorising, philosophy with universalising ambitions, is simply side-lined in Rorty's discussion of theory in *CIS*. It is *not* the subject under debate. What is at stake is whether it is possible for a self-aware and committed ironist to write theory, the forms such theory takes, and the purpose it might serve in his utopian literary culture.

But the ironist's ambition proves difficult to square with a proper commitment to contingency. The ironist theorist's 'perfect life', Rorty states, 'will be one which closes in the assurance that the last of his final vocabularies, at least, really was wholly his.'[20] By achieving

---

[13] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 94–95.
[14] Cf. Chapter 5, pp. 133.
[15] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 96.
[16] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 96.
[17] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 98
[18] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 43, and cf. Chapter 5, pp. 133.
[19] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 97.
[20] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 97.

this, he hopes to overcome the need to theorise: 'The goal of ironist theory is to understand the metaphysical urge, the urge to theorize, so well that one becomes entirely free of it. ...The last thing the ironist theorist wants or needs is a theory of ironism.'[21] The ironist theorist wants to write a strong-poetic account of the history of theory in such a way that it not only frees him from his need to theorise, but an account that also demonstrates his own intellectual, poetic autonomy, and, moreover, singles him out as the last theorist *History* ever needed. Conceived like this it is clear why Rorty considers the writing of an ironist theory with such aims as a *private* project, meaning a project which has the individual's own flourishing and validation as its main concern. The ironist theorist is not engaged in a project of public service, but one of personal becoming and over-coming.

That Rorty attributes a desire to pronounce on behalf of humanity to the theorist underscores why, on the Rortian picture, maintaining that theorising is a publicly useful activity can be seen as an oppressive move. To home in on this, Rorty compares Proust, on the one hand, and Nietzsche and Heidegger on the other, to show the inhumanism inherent in taking one's own imaginative creation to signify something *more* than a piece of writing one has crafted.

Proust and Nietzsche both, Rorty notes, are considered to have achieved the kind of autonomy and perfection Coleridge described – they not only replaced inherited contingencies with their own but *understood* themselves *as* doing just this.[22] They were profoundly aware of their self-creation as a project of making what they could of themselves before the end, rather than as a quest to uncover and become who they 'truly' were. While both thought there was '*nothing* more powerful or important than self-description', they knew there were 'only little mortal things to be rearranged by being described'.[23] Their difference, to Rorty, lies in the way and extent to which they took their work to matter to the lives and conducts of other people. Whereas 'Proust took metaphysics as just one more form of life', Rorty observes, 'it obsessed Nietzsche. Nietzsche was not only a nonmetaphysician, but an antimetaphysical theorist'.[24] Nietzsche wrote as though he had a 'social mission', to change the world, whereas Proust wrote to change individual minds.[25]

This difference is reflected in the form they chose for expressing their thoughts (cf. the claims advanced in chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis): in the difference between theory and novels.

---

[21] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 96–97.

[22] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 98. Rorty states that his readings of Nietzsche and Proust here are heavily influenced by Nehamas. See Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987 (1985)).

[23] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 99.

[24] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 98.

[25] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 99.

Novelists, Rorty suggests, are content to make concrete matters hang together, theorists aim for an overarching view. A 'crude way of blocking out a difference between Proust and Nietzsche', he says, is to note 'that Proust became who he was by reacting against and redescribing people – real live people whom he had met in the flesh – whereas Nietzsche reacted against and redescribed people he had met in books.'[26] More importantly, whereas Proust's array of characters, 'parents, servants, family friends, fellow students, duchesses, editors, lovers', represent '*just* a collection, just the people whom Proust happened to bump into', Nietzsche's litany of characters stand for vocabularies that are linked in an internally related sequence – in Nietzsche this is not just a 'chance collection', but a 'dialectical progression'.[27] He is not describing his life, but that of a 'big person' he names 'Europe'.[28]

This 'invention of a larger-than-self hero, in terms of whose career they define the point of their own' is, to Rorty, what makes Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger theorists, rather than novelists. They are 'people who are looking at something large, rather than constructing something small.' While they are 'genuine ironists' they are 'not yet full-fledged nominalists' because they cannot let themselves be 'content to arrange little things'. That is 'what sets their narratives apart from *Remembrance of Things Past':*

> Proust's novel is a network of small, interanimating contingencies. The narrator might never have encountered another madeleine. The newly impoverished Prince de Guermantes did not have to marry Madame Verdurin: He might have found some other heiress. Such contingencies make sense only in retrospect – and they make a different sense every time redescription occurs. But in the narratives of ironist theory, Plato *must* give way to Saint Paul, and Christianity to Enlightenment. A Kant *must* be followed by a Hegel, and a Hegel by a Marx. That is why ironist theory is so treacherous, so liable to self-deception. It is one reason why each new theorist accuses his predecessors of having been metaphysicians in disguise.[29]

As I read Rorty in these pages, he is saying that theorists of this kind are problematic to the extent they fail to be novelists.

Rorty is not saying Proust the author did not have theories about meaning or memory or writing – or about the importance of detail. But that he wrote as though what mattered and should be foregrounded, were the constituents of life. Rorty's description moreover implies that novelist and novels are defined by their more thoroughgoing acceptance of historicism *and* nominalism.

---

[26] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 100. Note again Rorty's use of 'blocking out'.
[27] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 100.
[28] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 100.
[29] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 100–01. Rorty does not say 'small' and mean unimportant. 'Small' indicates the opposite of 'big' in the sense of transcendent, overarching, universalising, dominant.

This thus represents yet another instance where Rorty aligns his pragmatist attitude with that of the novel and the novelist.

Another way of putting Rorty's point, I think, is to use the line of thought developed in chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis and suggest that ironist theorists still see themselves as figures in a suprahistorical quest-narrative. Compare Rorty here adding that while 'ironist theory must be narrative in form', but the kind of relation it sets up is not one to other human beings or his own past, but to 'a larger past, the past of the species, the race, the culture'. It is

> a relation not to a miscellaneous collection of contingent actualities but to the realm of possibility, a realm through which the larger-than-life hero runs his course, gradually exhausting possibilities as he goes. By a happy coincidence, the culture reached the end of this gamut of possibilities just about the time the narrator himself was born.[30]

The ironist theorist writes as though he has succeeded in making – rather than, as the unironic theorist would see it, finding – the holy grail. But as he by this act becomes (in his own eyes) the one who overcomes theory, he is still casting himself in the role of the hero. That is, while he starts from an ironist outlook, he ends up writing an instance of the familiar end-of inquiry narrative, the kind of story that permits him to retain this self-image.

The novelist's way of overcoming is, conversely, to foreground and use his fully-fledged recognition of contingency to his advantage. Proust's autonomy was forged by redescribing those who had described him. He 'drew sketches of them from lots of different perspectives [and] from lots of different positions in time - and thus made clear that none of these people occupied a privileged standpoint.' He explained 'to himself why the others were not authorities, but simply fellow contingencies. He redescribed them as being as much a product of others' attitudes toward them as Proust himself was a product of their attitudes toward him.' Thus:

> At the end of his life and his novel, by showing what time had done to these other people, Proust showed what he had done with the time he had. He had written a book, and thus created a self – the author of that book – which these people could not have predicted or even envisaged. He had become as much of an authority on the people whom he knew as his younger self had feared they might be an authority on him.[31]

---

[30] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 101.
[31] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 102–03.

Notice once again how Rortian pragmatism aligns well with the attitude and intellectual practice Rorty associates with the novelist. There is the same foregrounding of the concerns of human life, and the same attention to language and its arrangement, the same understanding of idiosyncratic detail, of the relation between vocabulary, narrative and (autonomous) selfhood.

Rorty's account of Proust furthermore echoes the moment chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis revolve around, and which also, importantly, was the moment of acceptance of contingency and finitude that permitted the liberal ironist full, 'unflinching' autonomy in the previous chapter. For Proust's 'feat enabled him to relinquish the very idea of authority, and with it the idea that there is a privileged perspective from which he, or anyone else, is to be described.[32] Proust was able to become autonomous, Rorty suggests,

> without claiming to know a truth which was hidden from the authority figures of his earlier years. He managed to debunk authority without setting himself up as authority... He mastered contingency by recognizing it, and thus freed himself from the fear that the contingencies he had encountered were more than just contingencies. He turned other people from his judges into his fellow sufferers, and thus succeeded in creating the taste by which he judged himself.[33]

The lesson Rorty draws from all this is the pragmatic conclusion that 'novels are a safer medium than theory for expressing one's recognition of... relativity and contingency', for

> novels are usually about people – things which are, unlike general ideas and final vocabularies, quite evidently time-bound, embedded in a web of contingencies. Since the characters in novels age and die – since they obviously share the finitude of the books in which they occur – we are not tempted to think that by adopting an attitude toward them we have adopted an attitude toward every possible sort of person.[34]

He notes that '[t]here are, of course, novels like Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* in which the characters are simply dressed-up generalities. The novel form cannot by itself *insure* a perception of contingency. It only makes it a bit harder to avoid this perception.'[35]

Even ironist theory, however, attempts to evade contingency. Hence, we should make a point of seeing ironist theory as merely one more tradition of modern Europe, 'comparable to the modern novel in the greatness of the achievements which exemplify it, though far less relevant to

---

[32] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 102–03.
[33] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 103.
[34] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 107.
[35] Rorty, *CIS*, 108n8.

politics, social hope, or human solidarity.'[36] It is crucial to appreciate that Rorty does not think there is something to theory in and of itself that makes it an inherently private matter. Theory is simply seen as possibly pragmatically useful for heightening the ironist's ironist awareness, but likely to stand in the way of finding useful shared ways to talk about human suffering and how we might go about lessening human cruelty. Rorty is *tasking* us with keeping theory private – asking us to stop short of taking theoretical schemes of this kind to have importance for the governance and progress of the liberal moral project. 'The best one can do with the sort of challenges offered by Nietzsche and Heidegger', Rorty suggests, is to

> ask these men to privatize their projects, their attempts at sublimity – to view them as irrelevant to politics and therefore compatible with the sense of human solidarity which the development of democratic institutions has facilitated. This request for privatization amounts to the request that they resolve an impending dilemma by subordinating sublimity to the desire to avoid cruelty and pain.[37]

Rorty hence does not want us to set aside these theorists altogether. But he asks us to refrain from seeing their work as anything more than resources that might help us heighten our ironist awareness and understand the history and power of redescription.[38]

Literature for the Liberal Cause

This call to keep our theorising drives under control opens a wider public space for other forms of expression, other pursuits, and descriptions. Recall from Chapter 5 that Rorty defined the liberal ironist as an ironist who was *also* a liberal. Ironists, Rorty tells us, think 'that the *only* redescriptions which serve liberal purposes are those which answer the question "What humiliates?"'.[39] I take Rorty to mean that ironists are *liberal* ironists to the extent they consider coming to understand this as central to their purpose. In my view, Rorty does not ask us to leave our ironism behind when we work for the liberal cause, but the emphasis of the ironist's practice,

---

[36] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 119.

[37] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 197.

[38] Not necessarily individually – we might also be part of a community of interpreters. Thinking of theory as a private matter is to think of it as an activity on the side of the spectrum of activities that are less directly useful to the shared liberal project of lessening cruelty. Heightening individuals' awareness of the power of redescription is, nevertheless, useful to the holistic approach towards sustaining and facilitating a liberal postmetaphysical literary culture that Rorty sketches: cf. Chapter 5.

[39] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 91.

including her choice of vocabulary, will, for pragmatic reasons, change in response to a shift in aims.[40] Her striving for personal flourishing falls out of focus – and her attention turns to the flourishing of the community and all its individual members.[41] She sees herself as participating in a shared effort to create our communal moral source and locus, and what is at stake in that moment is working out who 'we', as a Sellersian moral community, are.

Rorty, we know, holds that making a better society depends on *expanding* this sense of who 'we' are, and suggests that doing so depends on us engaging in a 'creative' and 'imaginative' effort to come to see 'other human beings as "one of us" rather than as "them"' – a stance-shift most efficiently brought about by a 'detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like.'[42] This sense of solidarity is 'created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people'.[43] Hence, whereas ironists see it as integral to the solidification of their private selves to heighten their ironist sensibilities, the liberal community expands and solidifies its understanding of itself through working to increase its awareness of suffering.

This is 'a task not for theory, but

for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel. Fiction like that of Dickens, Olive Schreiner, or Richard Wright gives us the details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended. Fiction like that of Choderlos de Laclos, Henry James, or Nabokov gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves.[44]

'This is why', he adds, 'the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress'.[45]

Rorty does not unpack this observation. There are, however, resources in his work to say something further than that literature provides detailed content. Given the analysis Chapter 5 presented, I hold the operative part of the passage above to be Rorty's description of a dynamic two-way activity: we read (or expose ourselves to other kinds of detailed accounts of other people's lives), and we *allow it* to change our self-image, actively work to find out how it might.

---

[40] See Chapter 5, p. 112.
[41] Cf. Rorty, *CIS*, p. 59.
[42] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xvi.
[43] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xvi.
[44] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xvi.
[45] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xvi.

Rorty, I want to suggest, places literature in a narrower sense at the heart of his literary culture, because the literary tradition contains, concentrates, and makes space for texts that are skilfully crafted to achieve this kind of effect – to unsettle us, to make it new. To articulate why requires starting with Rorty's levelling of all textual hierarchies.

Whatever the Literary Critics Criticise

Metaphysicians, Rorty suggests in *CIS*, 'see libraries as divided according to disciplines, corresponding to different objects of knowledge' – they

> want to start by getting straight about which of these people were poets, which philosophers, and which scientists. They think it essential to get the genres right – to order texts by reference to a previously determined grid, a grid which, whatever else it does, will at least make a clear distinction between knowledge claims and other claims upon our attention. [46]

Ironists, however, see libraries as divided 'according to traditions, each member of which partially adopts and partially modifies the vocabulary of the writers whom he has read. Ironists take the writings of all the people with poetic gifts, all the original minds who had a talent for redescription... as grist to be put through the same dialectical mill.'[47]

The metaphysician's scheme, Rorty submits, arose in response to the Kantian 'traditional picture of the self as divided into the cognitive quest for true belief, the moral quest for right action, and the aesthetic quest for beauty (or for the "adequate expression of feeling")'.[48] However, thinking in these terms not only led us to want to separate books that contain knowledge from those that do not, but to an oversimplified 'view of the relation between literature and morality – both social morality and individual morality'. For this stance takes literature to be a matter of adequacy of the expressions of feeling and literary criticism as a matter of judgment of taste, and such views 'simply do not do justice to the role which novels, in particular, have come to play in the reform of social institutions, in the moral education of the young, and in forming the self-image

---

[46] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 75–76.
[47] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 75–76. On this view of everything as a resource for making further remarks, see also Rorty, 'Philosophy without Principles', p. 463. Cf. Rorty, 'PKW', p. 159.
Note that these important statements on Rorty's philosophical program were published in prominent literary journals (*Critical Inquiry* and *New Literary* History).
[48] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 142. Rorty again uses the idea of a quest to sweepingly state the narrative his opponents adhere to.

of the intellectual.'[49] If we instead 'abandon this traditional picture' we would 'stop asking questions like "Does this book aim at truth or at beauty? At promoting right conduct or at pleasure?" and instead ask, "What purposes does this book serve?".[50] In *Rorty's* library, all 'books', all texts, are in principle equal. Any distinctions are to be drawn along functional lines.

In a 1982 essay Rorty puts it as follows: '[w]hen the notion of knowledge as representation goes, then the notion of inquiry as split into discrete sectors with discrete subject matters goes. The lines between novels, newspaper articles, and sociological research get blurred. The lines between subject-matters are drawn by reference to current practical concerns, rather than putative ontological status.'[51] Here the lines between disciplines are recast as a matter of culture, as genres, or in terms of solidarity. Science is where we have clear rules for success, for when an inquiry terminates, and for how to talk as we negotiate such epistemological equilibria as our discipline aims for.[52] This is a matter of 'solidarity' because the stronger the intersubjective agreement on vocabulary, methods and results the 'harder' we take the discipline and its results to be. In 'Texts and Lumps' Rorty notes that:

> [The pragmatist] thinks, with Stanley Fish, that "all facts are institutional, are facts only by virtue of the prior institution of some such [socially conceived dimensions of assessment]." The only way to get a noninstitutional fact would be to find a language for describing an object which was as little ours, and as much the object's own, as the object's causal powers. If one gives up that fantasy, no object will appear softer than any other. Rather, some institutions will appear more internally diverse, more complicated, more quarrelsome about ultimate desiderata than others.[53]

Literary studies, on Rorty's view, is just the most querulous (critical in one sense of the term) of academic disciplines. The rules are less well-defined, and it is more open to change.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Rorty took Hegel's historicism and irony to have paved the way for this kind of reconceptualization of culture as divided into genres.[54] In *CIS* he restates this: 'what Hegel actually did, by founding an ironist tradition within philosophy, was help de-

---

[49] Rorty, *CIS*, 142n2.

[50] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 142.

[51] Richard Rorty, 'Method, Social Science, and Social Hope', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 11.4 (1981), 569–88 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40231218> (p. 582).

[52] See for instance Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps'; Rorty, 'Solidarity or Objectivity?'; Rorty, 'Science as solidarity'.

[53] Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', p. 7.

[54] See for instance: Rorty, 'NITT', pp. 162–63 and p. 164, Rorty, 'PTG', p. 9, Rorty, 'IA', pp. 22–23, Rorty, 'PKW', p. 142, Rorty, 'The World Well Lost', pp. 649–50, Rorty, 'Heidegger and Dewey', pp. 294–95, Rorty, 'Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy', p. 679, Rorty, 'FMR', pp. 154–55.

cognitivize, de-metaphysize philosophy. He helped turn it into a literary genre.'[55] We have also already seen that Rorty takes Hegel's historicism to enable the rise of a *new* genre: literary criticism. The key, I think, to forming a coherent and cohesive view of how Rorty thinks about 'genres' like literary criticism and philosophy and religion, is to realise that these genres *qua* kinds of writing, are the generative products of a foregoing sequence of texts, of exemplars (figures), vocabularies, styles, modes of approach. Genres are not essentially something in and of themselves. They are here seen as the linguistic-behavioural product of, as Rorty said about his own aim in *CIS*, redescriptions that create a 'pattern of linguistic behavior' that tempts 'the rising generation to adopt it'.[56]

Moreover, each sequence of texts or exemplars that generates a distinctive kind of writing is as contingent as the next. Rorty – unhelpfully, I would suggest – uses the word 'canon' repeatedly to denote such a sequence. Unhelpfully, because this word carries connotations that then need to be actively suppressed, for 'canon' is here not to be understood as a collection of works of the highest literary quality (for there is no such thing as literary quality in and of itself in Rorty). Nor does, say, the analytic canon contain those books that cast the brightest of lights on what knowledge or reason is. It must be understood much more loosely. In 'The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature' (hereafter 'IV') Rorty describes 'canons' as collections of recommendations for where the young might find hope and inspiration.[57] Canons, he also says, are 'temporary', consisting of replaceable 'touchstones'.[58] Canonical status is 'as changeable as the historical and personal situations of readers.'[59] In Chapter 4 I showed why 'touchstones' in Rorty should be understood as reminders that help us clarify our vocabulary, coordinate our uses of words. Thus when Rorty here invokes the word 'canon' it is best read as 'a temporary list of replaceable touchstones that might be useful in this context, for the particular conversation we are engaged in'.

Genres, Rorty says in 'Texts and Lumps', represent a way to use language that is developed over time and *self-consciously* in reference to a set of such touchstones (a canon): 'Each new language creates or modifies a genre – that is, a sequence of texts, the later members of which take earlier members into account.'[60] Thus Rorty can say things like: 'Philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing. It is delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by tradition – a

---

[55] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 79.

[56] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 9. He, as discussed, associated this approach with literature. Rorty, 'NITT', p. 157, and Chapter 5, pp. 109-110.

[57] Rorty, 'The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature', pp. 136–37.

[58] Rorty, 'IV', p. 136.

[59] Rorty, 'IV', pp. 136–37.

[60] Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', p. 15.

family romance involving, e.g., Father Parmenides, honest old Uncle Kant, and bad brother Derrida.'[61] Or, elsewhere, speaking about Heidegger: 'It is not Athens, Rome, Renaissance Florence, the Paris of the Revolution, and the Germany of Hitler which form the history of Being. Nor is it Sophocles, Horace, Dante, Goethe, Proust, and Nabokov. It is the sequence from Plato to Nietzsche.'[62] What makes Heidegger a *philosopher* is that he places himself in that particular sequence of figures – models his self-image on a set of exemplars – and adopts and modifies a set of related aims and ways of speaking.

In 'Texts and Lumps' Rorty also adds to the above that thinking in these terms helps us reclassify culture in terms of various experimental practices designed to 'see if we can get what we want at a certain historical moment by using a certain language'. [63] Rorty thus takes genres to denote ways of using language, but also to refer to specific rhetorical styles, modes of expression, emerging as one writer self-consciously places herself in relation to writers gone before; as the next figure in a series of exemplars.[64] And this way of using language is then also intimately related to one's philosophical attitude, seen as one's attitude towards exemplars/vocabularies – towards the progression one aims to extend. Thus, Rorty can say things such as 'English poetry is not verse written in English, but what one writes after reading Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Yeats', and 'philosophy of the non-Kantian sort is not a certain "approach to the problems of philosophy," but what one writes after reading Plato, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud'.[65]

Rorty also makes it clear that he sees one's selection of expressive form as intimately connected to one's view of language: to whether it is seen as a transparent medium for conveying objective truth about a matter, or as a material part of communicating our subjective experience and estimation of the same. This is for instance explicitly set out in 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing', where Rorty says that Kantian philosophy on Derrida's view can be seen as 'a kind of writing which would like not to be a kind of writing':

---

[61] Rorty, 'PKW', p. 143.
[62] Rorty, 'Heidegger and Dewey', p. 295.
[63] Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', p. 15.
[64] Macintyre's conception of tradition can help shed light on Rorty's. Macintyre says that '[a] living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.' MacIntyre, p. 222. An extended comparison between Rorty and Macintyre on this topic is something I will have to return to on a future occasion, but I take the pivotal difference to lie in the extent to which they have a view of 'tradition' as an utterly contingent construction. Macintyre more clearly expresses what a tradition is, in particular the kind of self-awareness *of* a tradition *as* a tradition that both Rorty and Macintyre take to be constitutive of traditions. Hence using Macintyre to clarify Rorty's more thoroughgoingly de-essentialised conception of tradition would be helpful.
[65] Rorty, 'Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy', pp. 679–80.

It is a genre which would like to be a gesture, a clap of thunder, an epiphany. That is where God and man, thought and its object, words and the world meet, we want speechlessly to say; let no further words come between the happy pair. Kantian philosophers would like not to write, but just to show. They would like the words they use to be so simple as to be presuppositionless.[66]

The analytic tradition, its style, argumentative form, word choices, its entire mode of expression, reflects a desire for language to become transparent, or a mirror.

Because Rorty wants to do away with the view of language as a medium he takes the opposite approach, and understands form and content, attitude and style, as inseparable.[67] He pays careful attention to textual materiality, to rhetoric – to uses of words, our writerly practice. In this way, too, he is literary rather than philosophical. The clear connection Rorty sets up between attitude and literary style makes Martha C. Nussbaum a natural point of reference on this topic. But while Nussbaum and Rorty overlap to a significant extent, particularly with regards to their insistence on the value of literature for moral discernment and development, there are also significant differences.

'Style itself', Nussbaum holds, 'makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters'. 'Literary form', she adds, 'is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content'. This Rorty would agree with. But Nussbaum adds that it is an integral part of 'the search for and the statement of truth.' She suggests that there are some truths, or aspects of the human experience, that can only be properly and adequately articulated in the language, or narrative modes, of literature.[68] The difference is of course that Nussbaum posits that there are such things as truths. Nussbaum still retains a representationalist view of language – and of style.[69] She is on a quest for finding properly representative language. In Rorty there is certainly continuity, in the form of a dynamic relation, between who we see ourselves as, what we pay attention to, what we care about, what we believe to be important to find ways to say, and what we do say and do. However, in Rorty, there is no right nor final way to do this. Our uses of language, our style, are always experiments in using and modifying the language we know.[70] There is no particular way to talk that will uncover Truth.

---

[66] Rorty, 'PKW', p. 156.

[67] This was of course also a core component of my argument in Chapter 3.

[68] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's knowledge: essays on philosophy and literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 3–4.

[69] See also Rorty, 'Redemption from Egotism', p. 400 and Schulenberg, 142, 165. See also Tracy Llanera, 'Morality by Words: Murdoch, Nussbaum, Rorty', *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, 18.1 (2014), 1–17 <https://journals.ateneo.edu/ojs/index.php/budhi/article/view/BU2014.18101> [accessed 18.02.19]. I hope to be able to undertake a detailed comparison of Rorty and Nussbaum on literature in the future.

[70] Cf. Rorty, 'Texts and Lumps', p. 15.

Rather, particular ways of talking or writing reveal *an element of who we perceive our self to be*, what we (individually or collectively), in Rorty's phrase, hold to be 'possible and important'.

In keeping with this, literary criticism is also conceived as a genre that relates to and extends a tradition, and which has developed a certain mode of rhetorical conduct. Describing this genre Rorty once again aligns his own attitude with that of the literary critic. Whereas the analytic philosopher wishes argument to be reducible to logical moves and for language to be transparent, the 'ironist's preferred form of argument', on the other hand, is 'dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition. Her method is redescription rather than inference. Ironists specialize in redescribing ranges of objects or events in partially neologistic jargon, in the hope of inciting people to adopt and extend that jargon.[71] I have noted several times how Rorty defines this approach as 'literary'.[72] And Rorty also here continues by suggesting that Hegel's dialectic method can be viewed as an 'attempt to play off vocabularies against one another, rather than merely to infer propositions from one another': Iin Rorty's view 'Hegel's... method is not an argumentative procedure or a way of unifying subject and object, but simply a literary skill'. It is a skill at 'producing surprising gestalt switches by making smooth, rapid transitions from one terminology to another. ...In practice, though not in theory, [Hegel] dropped the idea of getting at the truth in favor of the idea of making things new'.[73]

By doing this Hegel 'broke away from the Plato-Kant sequence and began a tradition of ironist philosophy which is continued in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. These are the philosophers who define their achievement by their relation to their predecessors rather than by their relation to the truth.'[74] That is, Hegel founded a new genre: a breakaway sequence, that generated a new way of writing. 'A more up-to-date word for what I have been calling "dialectic"', Rorty adds, 'would be "literary criticism."'[75]

Literary criticism, as Rorty conceives it, is an amalgamated genre, a mode of rhetorical conduct that traces its roots to Hegel. A genre which, as Rorty put it in PPTC (which I discussed in Chapter 4), is 'neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all these things mingled together into a new genre.'[76] In *CIS* Rorty adds that comparison,

---

[71] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 78.
[72] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 157. See Chapter 4, p. 93.
[73] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 78–79.
[74] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 78–79.
[75] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 79.
[76] Rorty, 'PPTC', pp. 763–64.

playing off of figures against each other, is the principal activity now covered by the term "literary criticism." Influential critics... are not in the business of explaining the real meaning of books, nor of evaluating something called their "literary merit." Rather, they spend their time placing books in the context of other books, figures in the context of other figures. This placing is done in the same way as we place a new friend or enemy in the context of old friends and enemies. In the course of doing so, we revise our opinions of both the old and the new. Simultaneously, we revise our own moral identity by revising our own final vocabulary. Literary criticism does for ironists what the search for universal moral principles is supposed to do for metaphysicians.[77]

While 'literary criticism' originally meant 'comparison and evaluation of plays, poems, and novels', it got extended 'to cover past criticism (for example, Dryden's, Shelley's, Arnold's, and Eliot's prose, as well as their verse)', and 'to the books which had supplied past critics with their critical vocabulary and were supplying present critics with theirs.' The end result was that the sequence, the tradition, that generates literary critical writing, had to be extended to include 'theology, philosophy, social theory, reformist political programs, and revolutionary manifestos. In short, it meant extending it to every book likely to provide candidates for a person's final vocabulary.'[78]

Rorty observes that it is for mere accidental reasons that we have stuck with the name 'literary criticism': instead of changing the name we have 'stretched the word "literature" to cover whatever the literary critics criticize.' A 'literary critic in what T. J. Clarke has called the "Trotskyite-Eliotic" culture of New York in the '30s and '40s was expected to have read *The Revolution Betrayed* and *The Interpretation of Dreams,* as well as *The Wasteland* (sic)*, Man's Hope,* and *An American Tragedy'.* In our 'Orwellian-Bloomian culture' she is 'expected to have read *The Gulag Archipelago, Philosophical Investigations,* and *The Order of Things* as well as *Lolita* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.*' The word 'literature', Rorty concludes, 'now covers just about every sort of book which might conceivably have moral relevance – might conceivably alter one's sense of what is possible and important.'[79]

Rorty then adds:

---

[77] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 80.
[78] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 81.
[79] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 81–82.

The application of this term has nothing to do with the presence of "literary qualities" in a book. Rather than detecting and expounding such qualities, the critic is now expected to facilitate moral reflection by suggesting revisions in the canon of moral exemplars and advisers, and suggesting ways in which the tensions within this canon may be eased – or, where necessary, sharpened.[80]

'Literature' on this view, is just the resources people we call literary critics currently make use of in their intellectual practice. Literary critics function as moral advisers, because they can guide us in our encounters with morally relevant books. But only, Rorty adds, because they 'have an exceptionally large range of acquaintance. They are moral advisers not because they have special access to moral truth but because they have been around. They have read more books and are thus in a better position not to get trapped in the vocabulary of any single book.'[81] To Rorty, literary critics assemble their reminders for the purpose of helping us work out our attitudes to writers, books, vocabularies, and thus towards our own self-image. They help us change our selves.

Required Skills

This does, however, seem to me to have everything to do with both literary quality and literary skill – with how literature in a much narrower and more traditional sense is forged. Rorty fails, I think, to properly set out how his two meanings of the word 'literature' are interlinked. There is the broad idea where it means 'whatever the literary critics criticize', a text- and genre-encompassing meaning where 'literature' refers to 'every sort of book which might conceivably have moral relevance – might conceivably alter one's sense of what is possible and important.'[82] And there is 'literature' in the sense of the books the liberal ironist thinks public intellectual culture centres around, 'in the older and narrower sense of that term – plays, poems, and, especially, novels'.[83] Rorty's view of literature is, as Leypoldt affirms, 'thoroughly contextualist'.[84] His idea of literature is fully contingently and functionally reconceived.[85] Yet, it

---

[80] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 81–82.

[81] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 80–81.

[82] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 81–82.

[83] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 93–94.

[84] Leypoldt, p. 148.

[85] Catherine Belsey might be suggested as a critic who overlaps in important ways with Rorty on literature. She expresses a desire to be able to do away with the idea of 'literature' for its connotations of value judgements (of literary quality as such), and, like Rorty, strongly insists on the plurality of functions that literature is capable of filling. She also emphasises conversation and use. See for instance Catherine Belsey, *A Future for Criticism*, Blackwell manifestos (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) and Catherine Belsey, *Criticism*, Ideas in profile (London: Profile Books, 2016). Belsey did not write on Rorty, but I am grateful to her for enlightening conversations on these matters.

appears to me that Rorty nevertheless uses the word 'literature' to point to texts where not only a certain attitude, but a certain skill is on display – a skill for arranging words in ways that are more *likely* to persuade us to change our selves. To substantiate my case, I must return to how Rorty defined literature in opposition to theory.

As is clear from his definition of literary criticism above, Rorty does not exclude texts we would typically talk about as philosophical from the public realm. He does think that a set of interrelated ambitions emanating from philosophers starting to see themselves as placed to speak on behalf of humanity, as 'rational' human beings able to raise their voices above the noise of passions, should be exposed as misguided and sometimes dangerous. But philosophy working '*in the service* of democratic politics', is useful as '...one of the techniques for reweaving our vocabulary of moral deliberation in order to accommodate new beliefs (e.g., that women and blacks are capable of more than white males had thought, that property is not sacred, that sexual matters are of merely private concern).'[86] However, Rorty also insisted above that theory cannot fulfil this kind of public role. But 'theory' in this line of thought stands for a very specific kind of writing emerging from writers who hold on to the kind of ambitions Rorty wants us to leave behind.

Theory aims to take 'a view of a large stretch of territory from a considerable distance'. Theorists, Rorty holds, specialize in 'standing back from'.[87] Rorty uses the word 'literature' to indicate a kind of writing that stands in opposition to this ambition and approach. Literature moves in close. In his discussion of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Proust, literature is about the small rather than the large, the concrete rather than the abstract. As a pragmatist, Rorty also wants to move away from Theory and abstract ideas and foreground the concerns and details of human life and happiness. Rorty's preference for literature thus relates to his larger philosophical project in subtle ways, all of which cannot be explicated here. However, I want to make three observations to situate Rorty's literary-like attention to detail: it is in keeping with the approach of pragmatist philosophy, it relates to Rorty's anti-authoritarianism, and to the conviction that a liberal society

---

[86] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 196. By the latter Rorty does not mean that we should not openly discuss, as a society, how we conceive or talk about sexual orientation or gender politics. I take him here to be specifically pointing to the oppression of non-heterosexual individuals by the majority moral 'we', who inscribed their condemnation of difference into public laws that restricted the private sexual freedom of consenting adults. Abolishing those laws made sexual orientation a private concern in the sense that there was no longer subject to public intervention. Here, too, Rorty could have been more careful in distinguishing between the senses he gives to concepts that play vital roles in his overarching argument. Private and public in this passage has a more traditional and narrow sense, which can be squared with Rorty's broader, less specific use of these terms, but only through careful consideration.

[87] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 96.

must be woven from strands and pieces of who we already are. There is pragmatic value in looking closely.

The pragmatist tradition – the series and genre Rorty seeks to extend and amend – consist of figures and works that urge us to think in concrete terms rather than abstract ideas; to be pluralistic, perspectival, and to use what works for us as human beings wanting a good life, rather than maintain what sustains a specific Theory. Dewey, Rorty notes, wanted to fill the gap opening as pragmatism left the metaphysical tradition behind with '...concrete attention to beings – to the strip-mines, for example.'[88] This is of vital importance to Rorty, as for instance his blunt criticism of Heidegger shows. Rorty read Heidegger as espousing a variant of pragmatist thought and admired his work. Nevertheless, Rorty charges Heidegger with working from a similar inhumanism to the one he apprehends in Nietzsche and Foucault: Heidegger held a metaphysics of human experience more dearly than actual human beings. 'Heidegger's hope [of recapturing Thought] is just what was worst in the tradition', Rorty asserts, 'the quest for the holy which turns us away from the relations between beings and beings (the relations, for example, between the ghastly apparatus of modern technology and the people whose children will die of hunger unless that apparatus spreads over the rest of the planet).'[89] The humanist pragmatist tradition Rorty wants to insert himself in, attends, in Dewey's words, to 'the problems of men' – it turns, Rorty says, towards 'the ordinary world'[90]

While Rorty advocates this as a general characteristic of pragmatist thought, he pays a very particular kind of attention not just to material and pragmatic concerns, but to the fact that details matter, scale matters, to the construction of democratic cultures, and, also, to the articulation of the small; the need to account for it. He considers not just the details of human lives, but the details of how we speak and write this culture into existence.[91] Coming to see the specific ways in which

---

[88] Rorty, 'Heidegger and Dewey', pp. 297–98.

[89] Rorty, 'Heidegger and Dewey', p. 302. Rorty is not advocating the destruction of the planet but arguing that withholding technology that might improve human life on purist, ideological grounds is to act out what is 'worst' in the Western philosophical tradition.

[90] Rorty, 'Heidegger and Dewey', p. 304. John Dewey, *Problems of Men* (New York Bognor Regis,Sussex: John Crowther, 1946).

[91] Leypoldt holds Rorty to be engaging in a kind of Goodman-like 'worldmaking'. See Leypoldt. I am not partial to the constructivist connotations this image of making 'a world' inevitably gives, but the comparison has value and merit. While Rorty also uses this world-word occasionally, he does so carefully, while simultaneously emphasising his pragmatist anti-scepticism. Rorty does think we make our culture. That this is a matter of 'cultural politics' (see *PCP*). 'Culture' is a very deliberately chosen word, I believe, to preserve a kind of Whitmanesque sense of multitudinousness and plurality, also a plurality *of* cultures (preserves Rorty's self-aware ethnocentrism – see Richard Rorty, 'On ethnocentrism: A reply to Clifford Geertz', in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 203–10. For a problematisation and response to this essay, see Tracy Llanera, 'Ethnocentrism: Lessons from Richard Rorty to Randy David', *Philipine Sociological Review*, 65.Special Issue (2017), 133–49).

someone else is suffering or living their lives, to work out who we are and how we are to live ours – this small, piecemeal, and constant task of negotiating how we are to feel and talk about ourselves and each other – is, in Rorty, a pivotal task for making and sustaining a liberal society. 'Solidarity', he holds, 'has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it.'[92] And moreover, such a piecemeal approach must be what we build our efforts around: the liberal ironist, Rorty tells us, thinks 'that recognition of a common susceptibility to humiliation is the *only* social bond that is needed.'[93] Bond-forming recognition requires detailed descriptions. Thus, social cohesion depends on the proliferation of narratives that provide such particulars, that attends to them.

It is vital to see that Rorty is not making metaphysical claims that pertain to either what literature essentially is, what a just or good society is, and so on. What matters is increasing the *likelihood* that our society will move in a direction of lesser and lesser cruelty. 'The liberal metaphysician', Rorty explains, wants 'our *wish to be kind* to be bolstered by an argument, one which entails a self-redescription which will highlight a common human essence, an essence which is something more than our shared ability to suffer humiliation'. [94] The liberal ironist, rejecting the notion of a human essence, 'just wants our *chances of being kind,* of avoiding the humiliation of others, to be expanded by redescription'.[95]

Rorty's desire for us to reject theory and embrace narrative is thus related to this kind of bottom-up, piecemeal approach. Furthermore, his poeticised liberalism requires us to develop the kind of literary skill here specifically associated with the novelist: being content to arrange small things in helpful ways. Rorty's up-to-date Hegelian 'dialectics', his insistence, with Sellars, that what we do is to make 'things' 'hang together', requires a competence Rorty explicitly defined as a literary (critical) skill.[96] And this skill depends on cultivating our perception of details, and an ability to self-consciously (strongly) – with ironist, poetic awareness – place them in interpretive grids. It foregrounds a willingness to, and capability of, connecting our own humanity to that of others, like the critic seeks and traces lines from poem to poem. And it judges comparatively, on the basis of what is effectuated by our noises and marks as they work in human experience.

Developing such skills is not to be done for the sake of it, that is, not to aestheticise life or our relations to others in Rorty's unfavoured essentialising sense of the word. We should cultivate these skills to come to know what to do. The ironist, Rorty says, thinks we should centre our

---

[92] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 94.
[93] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 91.
[94] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 91.
[95] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 91. Rorty's emphasis.
[96] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 78–79.

liberal, public intellectual culture around 'literature (in the older and narrower sense of that term –
plays, poems, and, especially, novels)' because she seeks 'a certain kind of know-how'. She sees her
task as increasing her 'our skill at recognizing and describing the different sorts of little things around
which individuals or communities center their fantasies and their lives.' She is equally interested in
coming to know what it entails to centre one's life around the vocabulary of metaphysics or religion or
liberalism. She takes these sets of 'words' as 'just another text, just another set of little human things'.
Her liberalism 'does not consist in her devotion to... particular words but in her ability to grasp the
function of many different sets of words.'[97] Rorty later associates this kind of skill and know-how with
'sensitivity' towards others, which he contrasts with egotism, knowing, and being faithful to principles.
The person who 'hopes for greater sensitivity just wants to develop the know-how that will let him
make the best of what is always likely to be a pretty bad job – a situation in which people are likely to
get hurt, no matter what decision is taken.'[98]

The attitude Rorty here describes the ironist adopting, is what I have been calling a literary
attitude: an attitude that looks at all texts as one amongst many, one way amongst many to use
words. The ironist will gravitate towards the literary canon as a sequence of touchstones and a kind
of writing, because she is here more likely to find texts, thinking, where human concerns are
foregrounded, where other human beings have experimented with what it means to modulate
attention and writing in response to human experience rather than to ideas. Building and making in
this piecemeal, parts-to-whole way, and cultivating this kind of sensitivity and this kind of
responsiveness, is also tied to the fostering of freedom: to Rorty's anti-authoritarianism, an aspect
that characterised his post-*CIS* writings. Paying mindful attention to details rather than subsuming
details under an overarching abstract theory, is less likely to be oppressive. This was an important
element of Rorty's endorsement of the novelistic attitude of Kundera.[99]

However, while this provides a general overview of reasons for cultivating a literary
attitude using literary works, it fails to fully explain 'why literature in the *narrower* sense?'. Why
these specific kinds of text? What is about them – for it cannot be all in the details – that make
them so central to *moral* progress? The key to resolving this lies in noticing how Rorty portrays
the small, incrementally-transformational moments on the individual level, that add up to society's
moral and intellectual progress, as a dynamic, two-step and two-*way* process. It consists of
exposing oneself to new vocabularies, standpoints and contexts, *and* actively using what one learns
to redescribe one's self. This hinges on us being willing to change, allow change to happen. It
hinges on the cultivation of the kind of aesthetic mindset described in Chapter 5, where not only

---

[97] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 93–94. Recall from Chapter 2 and TPP that Rorty considers 'interpretation' to be another
name for 'putting it to work'. Rorty, 'TPP', p. 93.
[98] Rorty, 'Redemption from Egotism', p. 395.
[99] See Chapter 3.

holding descriptions lightly but being open, curious, and willing to grow, expand one's understanding and self, was essential. What we need for the liberal cause, is thus not only detailed accounts of cruelty and how it is precipitated, but writing capable of *stimulating* us to change, to act, and to want to keep this open attitude alive.

While Rorty does recognise this, it is treated as a parenthetical topic in *CIS*. Bringing it to the foreground not only helps us systematise the various categories of 'books' and writers Rorty sketches, but also attain greater clarity on why the liberal ironist centres her attention on a quite specific subset of texts.

Rorty's focus in *CIS* is, expressly, on 'historicist' writers: those that reject essentialism, including the notion of human nature. His specific and limited focus on ironist theorists above was inferable from this broader constraint. If Rorty is taken to be working out how one can be an ironist *and* a liberal – how one can be a humanist pragmatist in the spirit of James and Bloom rather than Nietzsche and Foucault as he put it in NITT – then it makes sense that his attention will be on writings that inform and instruct pragmatist thought (universalising theory, for instance, would be of less pragmatic value to his discursive aims in *CIS*). Such 'historicist thinkers', Rorty tells us, like Hegel and Nietzsche, have denied that there is a 'deepest level of the self': 'Their strategy has been to insist that socialization and, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down...'.[100] Moreover: 'Such writers tell us that the question "What is it to be a human being?" should be replaced by questions like "What is it to inhabit a rich twentieth-century democratic society?" and "How can an inhabitant of such a society be more than the enactor of a role in a previously written script?"'.[101]

There are, furthermore, Rorty suggests, two kinds of historicist writers: those who, like Heidegger and Foucault, 'still tend to see socialization as... antithetical to something deep within us' and, on the other hand, those, like Dewey and Habermas, who are 'inclined to see the desire for private perfection as infected with "irrationalism" or "aestheticism"'.[102] In *CIS*, Rorty wants to 'do justice to both groups':

---

[100] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xiii.
[101] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xiii.
[102] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 13–14.

I urge that we not try to choose between them but, rather, 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 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. We shall only think of these two kinds of writers as *opposed* if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision.[103]

They are, he adds, 'as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars.'[104]

'Citizens' and 'exemplars' overlap with Rorty's public-private distinction: the former help the liberal project more directly, and the latter are less directly helpful for this but can help us create a more self-consciously ironist and aestheticised (in the Rortian sense) life.[105] The latter kind are 'writers on autonomy' that lets us 'realize that the social virtues are not the only virtues, that some people have actually succeeded in re-creating 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'.[106] These writers remind us that that we 'need not speak only the language of the tribe, that we may find our own words, that we may have a responsibility to ourselves to find them' – to (re)create ourselves and become autonomous beings.[107] On the other side of the spectrum, 'writers on justice' 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'.[108] They tell us that the responsibility to strive for autonomy is not the only one we have.[109]

Rorty picks this division up again in Part III of *CIS*, when he again divides 'books' into two rough categories: those that have 'relevance to autonomy' and those that have 'relevance to cruelty'.[110] The latter category of 'books which help us become less cruel', are 'relevant to our relations with others, to helping us notice the effects of our actions on other people. These are the books which are relevant to liberal hope, and to the question of how to reconcile private irony with such hope.'[111] Rorty then splits this category in two further sub-categories: '(I) books which help

---

[103] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xiv.
[104] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xiv.
[105] Note how Rorty uses a language that indicates a sequence of figures, touchstones, genres, as discussed above.
[106] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xiv.
[107] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. xiv–xv.
[108] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xiv.
[109] Rorty, *CIS*, p. xv.
[110] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 142.
[111] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 141.

us see the effects of social practices and institutions on others and (2) those which help us see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others.'[112] 'The first sort of book', Rorty continues,

> is typified by books about, for example, slavery, poverty, and prejudice. These include *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and the reports of muckraking journalists and government commissions, but also novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Les Miserables*, *Sister Carrie*, *The Well of Loneliness*, and *Black Boy*. Such books help us see how social practices which we have taken for granted have made us cruel.[113]

I want to stress that the second sub-category is Rorty's focus in *CIS*.

Rorty is often taken to be more concerned with the first kind, to be a fairly simplistic proponent of providing the public with a sentimental education in the service of moral progress. And Rorty does, as the previous chapter discussed, want us to value sensitivity – increase our ironist awareness, and heighten our sensitivity to suffering. As noted above he contrasts cultivation of sensitivity with devotion to principles.[114] This thus has liberalist value in and of itself. Nevertheless, Voparil sums it up well when he says Rorty believes that by 'cultivating our ability to imaginatively identify with others, we can extend the reach of our sense of injustice and form the kind of democratic moral community where sympathetic fellow feeling renders us more likely to act on behalf of less fortunate distant and different others.'[115] But seeing Rorty as only, or predominantly, thinking of literature as useful for this kind of sympathetic identification, is reductive, and leads, as Voparil also notes, for Rorty's strong valuation of complex, ironic, destabilising works of literature, and the kind of novelistic attitude he aligns his outlook with in HKD and elsewhere, to seem incongruous.

We saw above that Rorty relates literary skill with being able to affect 'gestalt switches', change the vocabulary, persuasively change the subject. Writers who have cultivated such skills can 'exploit the possibilities of massive redescription'.[116] I take Rorty here to mean systemwide, culture-encompassing redescription, but also to imply the transformation of the masses which might ensue. He comments on this in a later interview:

---

[112] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 141, mixing of Roman and Arabic numerals *sic*. Notice how this echoes Rorty's discussion of metaphors and effect, detailed in Chapter 5. Also, note how whole literary works can be causes.
[113] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 141.
[114] Rorty, 'Redemption from Egotism', p. 395.
[115] Voparil, 'Jonquils and Wild Orchids', p. 100.
[116] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 78–79.

ER: One of [your] arguments [is] that we can empathize through the solidarity of imagining other people's pain. Books are supposed to do this. But isn't that position rather idealistic? Wouldn't a pragmatist happily concede that literary, or any linguistic communication, depends upon the intersection of vocabularies, on reaching "intersubjective agreement," and that, as ironists, we can't be sure whether or not vocabularies will fulfill such useful purposes as being able to empathize? After all, the ironist... needs to read as many books as possible to optimize the possibility of consensus, but knows that we cannot answer the Nazis by getting them to read Anne Frank.

RR: We can't be sure, but we know that it's happened in the past. We know of the effect that Dickens, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Orwell, and others, have had on the way we think about politics and contemporary social issues. I think that the fact you need intersubjective agreement is perfectly compatible with the fact that a whole lot of people can suddenly undergo a gestalt switch as a result of reading a novel.[117]

As Leypoldt explains, Rorty

never argues that novels *should* be educational case studies of human cruelty, or that the production of participant emotion is the most important aspect of the literary as a universal concept, or even that the production of sentimental solidarity is what literature does best. His claims are much weaker: narrative, while it has no intrinsic moral relevance (any more than an intrinsic literariness), has shown itself to be, in a variety of historical accidents, a potentially more effective world-making tool than traditional moral philosophy – partly because human solidarity has no reasonable basis, partly because empathetic emotion is a more powerful agent of solidarity than rational reflection. [118]

Thus, Leypoldt adds, 'when Rorty argues that "the emergence of the human rights culture owes nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories," he may overstate the historical importance of, say, *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* but he does not "reduce" the literary to its moral effects.'[119]

As previously noted, simplifying Rorty's position to one very close to Nussbaum's will lead to issues, as both Voparil and Llanera notice.[120] It renders Rorty as suggesting literature's primary function is to provide a 'sentimental education' or drive a 'politics of sentiments'.[121] Against such an interpretation, Voparil struggles to square Rorty's belief in the public, liberal

---

[117] Ragg and Rorty, p. 372.
[118] Leypoldt, p. 151.
[119] Leypoldt, p. 151. Leypoldt is citing Richard Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality', in Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress,* Philosophical Papers, 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 167–85 (p. 172). Rorty means we do not owe moral progress to efforts at getting closer to what is morally right, or true, in *principle*.
[120] Voparil, 'The Politics of the Novel'; Voparil, 'Jonquils and Wild Orchids'; Voparil, 'Rorty and James on irony, moral commitment, and the ethics of belief', and Llanera, 'Morality by Words'.
[121] Voparil, 'Jonquils and Wild Orchids', p. 101.

utility of literature, with his high valuation of complex, ironic works of literature, and the Kunderan novelistic attitude. My contention is that such issues result from undervaluing that what is perhaps the *more* important thing about novels and literature to Rorty, is the kind of larger, philosophically pertinent literary attitude which it emerges from and sustains. To return to the categories above: when it is recognised that Rorty in *CIS* is primarily interested in the second sub-category which focuses on the cruelty of individuals and contains the kind of literature that might reveal 'the ways in which particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people', Rorty's views on literature no longer appear as a naïve argument for an uncomplicated cause and effect relation between sentimental works of literature and mass gestalt-switches that materialise as moral progress.[122]

The most useful books for sensitising liberal ironists to the kind of pain they might inflict as private individuals, are

> 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. [123]

Remember that Rorty wants to work out what a culture of liberal ironist, of pragmatist humanists, needs. Individuals thus inclined, are already on-board with the aim of lessening cruelty. They are already aware of the contingency of their ideas and sense of self. What they need to further their moral deliberation, which, as the previous chapter showed, is also to deliberate on who they are and their own poetic self-making, are books like this that emphasise the ongoing work they do to weight their own needs against those of others, the constant question of when to prioritise private desires over the public good, and the question of how to (pragmatically, in our lives) reconcile private irony with liberal hope. These are the books, Rorty adds, 'which dramatize the conflict between duties to self and duties to others.'[124]

In the above, Rorty thus separates books that address the question of whether the system is just from those that prompt me to ask whether I am just, in my specific dealings in particular moments. This is not to ask if one fails to live up to the edicts of the Moral Law within, be authentic or good. The question is whether I succeed, in practical terms, to notice cruelty in the

---

[122] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 141.
[123] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 141.
[124] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 141.

world, to pay attention to suffering, and act on it when I see it. Whereas the first class of books are resources for comparatively re-evaluating, redescribing and recontextualising our systemic practices, institutions, cultures, and the effects of these *on* human flourishing (slavery, colonialism, systemic causes of poverty and discrimination, and so on), the second class of books help us comparatively to evaluate and redescribe how we are performing as liberal individuals.

It might still not be immediately clear why Rorty should want to primarily pay attention to those books that challenge us as *individuals* – those that show 'the ways in which particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people'. [125] Why not be mostly concerned with those that make us more sensitive to systemic injustices? This makes sense in the light of Chapter 5 and the discussion of self-making as (akin to) a moral act.[126] Moreover, public, intersubjective agreement results from individual members of interpretive communities coming to pay attention to the same matters and talk in a shared manner about these. As discussed, I see the private and public as dynamically linked in Rorty. There is a feedback loop: as we 'tinker' with our personal senses of selfhood, we also create our moral locus – the stance from which we will act within and for our community. And our communities and shared perceptions exert pressures on our own self-making. It makes more sense still, if *CIS* is read, as I have been proposing, as a case *against* the presumption that the connection between ironism and antiliberalism is self-evident.[127] That is, as a demonstration of the possibility of an ironist who is also a liberal through writing a character which embodies the humanist pragmatism of James and Bloom rather than that of Nietzsche and Foucault. What is at stake in this matter is the possibility of an ironist attentive to not just to the more obvious dangers of unjust systems, but to the particular cruelties she, *as* an aware ironist intellectual who is also a sensitised liberal, might inflict on other people.

When this is accounted for, another distinction Rorty introduces, between books that are *stimulating* and those that are *relaxing*, begins to not only appear less digressive and idiosyncratic than it might at first, but to seem both important and enlightening. The later 'The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature' also casts light on this division. In this essay, Rorty erects a dichotomy between 'inspirational' and 'knowing'.[128] 'Knowingness is a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe. It makes one immune to romantic enthusiasm.'[129] Works that have 'inspirational value', on the other hand, pushes us to let that state of mind go. We 'attribute inspirational value to works of literature' (note how it is not an intrinsic property of a kind of text),

---

[125] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 141.
[126] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 145, and Chapter 5, pp. 128-130.
[127] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 89.
[128] Rorty, 'IV'.
[129] *Achieving Our Country*, p. 126.

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. To view a work in this way gives understanding but not hope, knowledge but not self-transformation. For knowledge is a matter of putting a work in a familiar context-relating it to things already known.
>
> If it is to have inspirational value, a work must be allowed to recontexualize much of what you previously thought you knew; it cannot, at least at first, be itself recontextualized by what you already believe. Just as you cannot be swept off your feet by another human being at the same time that you recognize him or her as a good specimen of a certain type, so you cannot simultaneously be inspired by a work and be knowing about it.[130]

We call works 'inspirational' when they manage to sweep us off our feet, bring us out of our selves. Inspirational works set up a potential that might lead us to reweave our bundle of beliefs, change our (final) vocabulary, and thus our self. 'Great' works of literature, Rorty suggests, are great because they have inspired many readers, not as having inspired many readers because they are great.'[131]

I take Rorty's most important point in this essay to be that it is those who 'still read for inspiration' who are likely to be most useful to 'building a cooperative commonwealth.'[132] This describes an attitude and its outcome: being willing to risk one's current sense of self, willing to risk being changed by someone else, is the spirit that, if adopted, will make us as individuals more useful to the work of fostering solidarity and lessening cruelty. Rorty's essay about 'great works of literature' is not so much about literature – Rorty describes no traits of such works beyond what we might call their capacity to destabilise our settled sense of self, to defamiliarise – as it is about the necessity for human beings to be willing to risk their individual self-conception, to put their selfhood on the line for the world to change.

This later essay thus casts light on the similar split in *CIS* between 'books' that 'supply novel stimuli to action' and those which 'simply offer relaxation': [t]he former suggest (sometimes straightforwardly and sometimes by insinuation) that one must change one's life (in some major or minor respect). The latter do not raise this question; they take one into a world without

---

[130] Rorty, 'IV', pp. 133–34.
[131] Rorty, 'IV', p. 136.
[132] Rorty, 'IV', p. 140.

challenges.'[133] Rorty's dividing line is between books that put our current practical self on the line – and thus have moral relevance because forging a (better) self, engaging in a process of continual curiosity-driven change, is as close to a moral obligation we get in Rorty's view – and books that do not succeed in doing this.

There is, however, no way to provide criteria that lets us identify all such books, for 'different people lead different lives, feel challenged by different situations, and require holidays from different projects. So any attempt to go through our libraries, reshelving books with this distinction in mind, is going to be relative to, our special interests.' 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. 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.[134]

Here, as in 'IV', Rorty's descriptions indicate a blocking out on a spectrum of texts more or less likely to destabilise the current beliefs and vocabularies of readers, and thus create a potential for changing her perceptions and ways of talking.

Relaxing books denote those texts that lets us rest easy with who we are. Rorty's lists of works can obviously be contested. To ask whether he here gets these categories *right* by itemising these particular touchstones would be somewhat beside the point. What matters to understanding the Rortian narrative is to note that stimulating books put our selves on the line.[135] This helps us see

---

[133] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 143–44.
[134] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 143–44.
[135] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to detail how Thomas Kuhn influenced Rorty. It should however be noted that Kuhnian ideas are in play in the background when Rorty talks about the familiar and the unfamiliar, and very clearly so here: the books that inspire us to work out new vocabularies are those that push us to begin working out a new paradigm.

why Rorty says this stimulating-relaxing split is the closest he can come to reconstructing the moral-aesthetic distinction.[136] Stimulating books are more likely to set up a potential for change.

However, Rorty is no more interested in saving the moral-aesthetic distinction, than he is in resurrecting the Kantian 'moral self'. This is further evidenced in his discussion of Nabokov as a writer, and there takes the form of the observation that stimuli for both aesthetic pleasure *and* moral deliberation might be contained in the same work. Rorty empathises with Nabokov's suspicion of 'philosophers' attempts to squeeze our moral sentiments into rules for deciding moral dilemmas.'[137] But he criticises Nabokov for his insistence on the priority of the aesthetic *over* the moral, and for seeing the aesthetic and the moral as *antithetical* Rorty does not think we should place 'Housmanian tingles' in opposition to 'the kind of participatory emotion that moved liberal statesmen'. They are instead noncompetitive goods:

> Nabokov is quite right when he says, "That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science" *(LL,* p. 64). This dictum simply spells out the relevant sense of the term "pure." But it seems quite compatible with saying that the ability to shudder with shame and indignation at the unnecessary death of a child – a child with whom we have no connection of family, tribe, or class – is the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained while evolving modern social and political institutions.[138]

Even when speaking on Charles Dickens, Rorty notes, Nabokov insisted that 'all' that mattered was Dickens' ability to produce such tingles, as an effect of style. 'Nabokov does not try to defend his assumption that social reform does not have the same claim on our attention as "pure art and pure science." He gives no reasons for doubting that people as gifted as Dickens have sometimes been able to do quite different things in the same book.' It would have been much easier, Rorty suggests, for Nabokov 'to admit that *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.'[139]

---

[136] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 143–44.
[137] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 148.
[138] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 147.
LL refers to Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcout Brace Jovanovich, 1980).
[139] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 147.

This relates to the discussion on details above. Nabokov thinks that bestowing a particular kind of attention onto the details of existence, even to the exclusion of noticing suffering, is a transcendent, supreme form of human consciousness. Rorty observes: '[t]he theme of Nabokov's essay is what he calls the "supremacy of the detail over the general". He thought a 'capacity to wonder at trifles – no matter the imminent peril – these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life' revealed the highest form of human consciousness.[140] Rorty takes this up to refute a traditional, art for art's sake kind of aestheticism, and do away with the moral-aesthetic distinction:

> Nabokov wanted to absolutize the moral claim by backing it up with the metaphysical claim. He wanted to say that idiosyncratic imagery, of the sort he was good at, rather than the kind of generalizing ideas which Plato was good at, is what opens the gates of immortality. Art, rather than mathematics, breaks through the walls of time into a world beyond contingency.[141]

Nabokov merely flips the scientistic image. It is an essentialising move, not consistent with the characteristic of the novelist as Rorty portrays her when discussing Proust, content to rearrange little things in pleasing or helpful ways. Hence, while Rorty urges us to foreground the details of life, to poeticise culture, he takes care to stress that he is not an aesthete in Nabokov's sense. He instead underscores that what matters, is the effect literary works cause.

At this point it might seem like a natural move to turn to established theories of literature or poetry that address the question of how texts can produce an unsettling, dislodging, or destabilising effect in readers. Russian formalists, the romantics, Nietzsche, and Freud and the 'uncanny' seem like obvious points of reference. But Rorty makes no such connections. Nor does he indicate having considered his own thoughts on literature in relation to reader-response theories of literature. While such theories of poetry or literature want to put into words what literature *is*, that is, the above withstanding, still not what Rorty is doing. He does not want to delimitate literariness or determine the extent to which the meaning of a text is to be found in the reader's interpretation of it. He does, however, appear to tie the extent to which literature succeeds in bringing us out of our current selves, to the extent to which it manages to produce physical effects in us, emotional responses to external stimuli, and this to how texts are forged.

Rorty talks about the effects literary works produce as 'shudders' and 'tingles'. As noted above, Rorty picks up the words 'tingles' from Housman, via Nabokov, and he appears to have picked up 'shudders' from Goethe and *Faust*. In *CIS* Rorty gives no source for his talk of 'shudders', but later indicates one when talking about the importance of keeping open a space in

---

[140] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 151.
[141] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 151.

academia for those driven by inspiration rather than knowing: intellectuals like Whitehead (on whom Rorty wrote his PhD) who 'stood for charisma, genius, romance, and Wordsworth. Like Bloom, he agreed with Goethe that the ability to shudder with awe is the best feature of human beings.'[142] It is never specified, but Rorty is likely referring to *Faust Part II*, where Goethe's lines, generally in older English translations, are rendered as 'Humanity's best part in awe doth lie'.[143] This seems like a somewhat inadequate translation. The theme of shuddering – and not just in awe, but in fear, in *Grauen*, is important in the larger context of the work. The original reads:

> Faust:
> Doch im Erstarren such' ich nicht mein Heil,
> Das Schaudern ist der Menschheit bestes Teil;
> Wie auch die Welt ihm das Gefühl verteure,
> Ergriffen, fühlt er tief das Ungeheure.[144]

There is much to say about this passage, and not just in reference to the play itself, but in reference to, for instance, Kant and the notion of the sublime, romanticist thought, and how this might again connect to the unsettling effect Rorty is after. Here, however, what I want to get across is that what is implied by Goethe's 'shudder' is multifaceted, and a physically participative emotion – a point I will return to in a moment.

Rorty's tingle-talk appears in his discussion of Nabokov and Orwell. Rorty notes that 'Nabokov's talk of tingles was certainly influenced by Housman's *Name and Nature of Poetry* (the best-known manifesto in English of what Nelson Goodman calls "the Tingle-Immersion" theory of aesthetic experience).'[145]. In 'Name and Nature of Poetry', Housman suggests that poetry is more a matter of physical, emotive responses to associative connections triggered by it in the human imagination, than about cognitive or interpretive processes. Nabokov echoes this, as Rorty points out, when Nabokov says that although

---

[142] Rorty, 'IV', pp. 128–29.

[143] See for instance Johann W. von Goethe, *Faust: In Two Parts* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1879), p. 221.

[144] John R. Williams, *Goethe's Faust*, Routledge Library editions: German literature, volume 33, 1st edn (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 116.

[145] Rorty, *CIS*, 149n10.

we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle. Let us be proud of our being vertebrates, for we are vertebrates tipped at the head with a divine flame. The brain only continues the spine: the wick really goes through the whole length of the candle. If we are not capable of enjoying that shiver, if we cannot enjoy literature, then let us give up the whole thing and concentrate on our comics, our videos, our books-of-the-week.[146]

And continues:

> The study of the sociological or political impact of literature has to be devised mainly for those who are by temperament or education immune to the aesthetic vibrancy of authentic literature, for those who do not experience the telltale tingle between the shoulder blades. (I repeat again and again it is no use reading a book at all if you do not read it with your back.)[147]

Both Housman and Nabokov take such shivers and tingles as a reliable indicator of *true* aesthetic *quality*. And for both it is a particular and pure feeling only a particular kind of person can experience – Rorty also notes this, and objects to the elitism of it.

When Goodman, in *Languages of Art* (1968), talks about "the Tingle-Immersion" theory of aesthetic experience, he is instead deriding it:

> I have not attempted the formidable task of defining "aesthetic" in general, but have simply argued that since the exercise, training, and development of our powers of discriminating among works of art are plainly aesthetic activities, the aesthetic properties of a picture include not only those found by looking at it but also those that determine how it is to be looked at. This rather obvious fact would hardly have needed underlining but for the prevalence of the time-honored Tingle-Immersion theory, which tells us that the proper behavior on encountering a work of art is to strip ourselves of all the vestments of knowledge and experience (since they might blunt the immediacy of our enjoyment), then submerge ourselves completely and gauge the aesthetic potency of the work by the intensity and duration of the resulting tingle. The theory is absurd on the face of it and useless for dealing with any of the important problems of aesthetics; but it has become part of the fabric of our common nonsense.[148]

Goodman satirically attributes the Tingle-Immersion theory to 'Immanuel Tingle and Joseph Immersion (ca. 1800)'.[149]

---

146 Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 64. Rorty, *CIS*, p. 147.

147 Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, p. 64.

148 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of art: An approach to a theory of symbols*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), pp. 111–12.

149 Goodman, *Languages of art*, 112n8.

In terms of views on epistemology, language, and art, Rorty overlaps to a much more substantial degree with Goodman than either Housman or Nabokov, but Rorty goes even further than Goodman in contextualising his perception of art. Rorty is *not* attempting to formulate a theory of art, the aesthetic, or literature at all. He is attempting to work out how we best, most pragmatically, might facilitate human growth and change and in this process possibly lessen human cruelty. Tingles and shudders and other bodily states and feelings can serve this purpose to the extent they unsettle our settled sense of self. The point of 'novels or plays or poems', Rorty says, 'is not to represent human emotions or situations "correctly"'. In fact, '[l]iterary art, the nonstandard, nonpredictable use of words' should not be measured by its representativeness, for 'such accuracy is a matter of conformity to convention, and the point of writing well is precisely to break the crust of convention'.[150] Rorty wants us to, as part of our moral practice, expose ourselves to the possibility of change by engaging with artefacts that have the power to crack open the crusty parts of our *selves*. Those works that succeed in producing an effect on our bodies and minds are, Rorty's discussion implies, most likely to achieve this effect.

Hence, 'tingles' can serve an important function, and so can 'shudders of awe' – but also shudders of 'shame and indignation at the unnecessary death of a child',[151] or the arousal of 'revulsion'[152]. To Rorty there is no competition between 'aesthetic bliss' and such 'participative emotion', and thus nor between sentimental novels that have a clear moral message or complex, ironic works. What matters is that we expose ourselves to texts (or ethnographies, or journalist's reports, or TV-programmes, or novels or poems) that are capable of effectuating a response in us, a reaction that dislodges our sense of self in such a way that it opens us up for connection and makes room for growth, for increased and multifaceted awareness and sensitivity. Rorty's pressing message is not that we ought to read a certain kind of literature, high art, or books with a message. The moral is *to* read and seek out the kinds of artefacts that push change and enlargement in *us*, and keep the literary attitude and culture going.

---

[150] Rorty, *CIS*, 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 Rorty, 'Philosophy as science, metaphor, politics', 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." (Dewey, J. (1954) The Public and its Problems, Athens, OH: Swallow Press, p. 183).' James Tartaglia, *Rorty and The Mirror of Nature*, Routledge philosophy guidebooks (London: Routledge, 2007), 231n3.
[151] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 147.
[152] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 148.

We might still want to ask what features are typical of texts that do succeed in unsettling our sense of self. Presumably, Rorty would see inquiry into this as a legitimate pursuit if it were conceived as a naturalised inquiry looking at cause and effect, patterns and responses. This is indeed the connection he indicates when he does mention features of those texts that succeed in breaking the crust on our conventional selves. Talking of Nabokov Rorty says Nabokov's brain 'happened to be wired up so as to make him able continually to surprise and delight himself by arranging words into iridescent patterns.'[153] This helps us see why, despite Rorty's thoroughgoing antiessentialism, even though he rejected the notion of literature or literariness as such, he still put literature 'in the older and narrower sense of that term - plays, poems, and, especially, novels' at the heart of his utopian vision of a postmetaphysical, democratic liberal culture.[154] For while Nabokov would have been horrified at the suggestion, 'iridescent patterns' can be found everywhere, we now know that our brains are wired for both pattern-recognition and for feeling some patterns and symbols are more luminous than others.[155] Parts of the mechanisms outlined above could undoubtedly be further naturalised, as is of course being done.[156] Nevertheless, we *can* reconceive literature in the narrower sense as a genre, a kind of writing, that through trial and error has developed a writerly practice that is particularly good at not just attending to the details of lived experience, not just good at describing the pain that unites us, or the specific ways in which we hurt and oppress, but that has specialised in causing these kinds of measurable – and bodily-tangible – effects while doing so, and thus render our minds more open to suggestions for change, directly or indirectly, proposed.

Rorty's narrow sense of literature has the novel at its heart. While this naturally has to do with the reasons he outlines in HKD – the novel's attitude and mode of operation, elements that are, as we have seen, also emphasised in *CIS* – I want to suggest that Rorty's focus on the novel might also simply emerge from a more pragmatic consideration, one Rorty does not acknowledge. In fact, Rorty at one point appears to deny that there is any use-difference:

---

[153] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 154–55.

[154] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 93–94.

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

[156] For a recent article that reflects on such empirical efforts, see Olivia 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 Małecki has moved towards an empirical approach in his work, and, starting from a largely Rortian position, discusses animal welfare, ecocriticism and more. See for instance Wojciech Małecki and others, 'Can fiction make us kinder to other species? The impact of fiction on pro-animal attitudes and behavior', *Poetics*, 66 (2018), 54–63.

> ER: But would you say that poetry is not generally quite as accessible as prose and the narratives that novels suggest? Do you find poetry less obviously useful as a medium?
> RR: No, that's just an idiosyncrasy. I'm not a very good reader of poetry. Bloom has read just about every poem published in English and remembers each of them. Poetry is what comes first to his mind. It just doesn't happen to be the first thing that comes to my mind.[157]

But this response quite evidently goes against everything Rorty elsewhere writes on novels and the novel as a genre.

For – Bloom withstanding – novels are generally speaking, more directly useful to a greater number of people than, say, image-rich experimental poetry. There might be a higher concentration of those important, effect-inducing 'iridescent patterns' in poetry. But because the transformation Rorty wants is a two-way process, where recognition of detail and *application* to one's own lifeworld matters greatly, novels are more readily put to use in the service of such transformations. Reading them is often, as Rorty often points out, like getting to know other people.[158] Novels provide more straightforwardly applicable narratives for us to place our possible selves in, and on the Rortian view of selfhood, the narrative we place our selves in as an integral part of our sense of who we are. As Rorty holds that we can only critically evaluate our selves comparatively: against other options, other vocabularies, other life-stories, novels are simply a more easily employed resource for this kind of imaginative, comparative, critical work.

I can come at this from another angle: I see literature as standing to the rest of our textual production as Rorty takes metaphors to stand to literalised language. Metaphors, to Rorty, are no different than other parts of language, just more novel, more unfamiliar, strange.[159] Thus, as we saw in Chapter 5, what they elicited was not immediate adoption and use for known and well-mapped out purposes, but effects. Only through careful consideration and experimental integration might they, if they found a use, literalise into ordinary language. Over time, and with chance and luck, they might cause a change in our non-linguistic behaviours. The literary tradition, and the history of poetry in particular, similarly contains texts that require more work before they are integrated into our everyday use of language, our ordinary understanding of how things 'hang together' – and thus require a more sustained engagement on our part before we see their applicability, their meaning, to and in our lives. Poetry usually, quite literally, has a greater metaphorical density. Rorty's reasons for placing the novel at the heart of his culture, also, then, has to do with how language works, how we utilise it, how our brains process it.

---

[157] Ragg and Rorty, p. 371.
[158] Rorty, 'Redemption from Egotism', p. 394.

As Rorty put it when talking about 'inspirational' works of literature: we 'should cheerfully admit that canons are temporary, and touchstones replaceable. But this should not lead us to discard the idea of greatness. We should see great works of literature as great because they have inspired many readers, not as having inspired many readers because they are great.' We should 'not expect the same key to open every heart'. Nevertheless, we should draw up canons to be 'able to offer suggestions to the young about where they might find excitement and hope'.[160] I find myself wanting to be more prosaic than even Rorty here, and say we should draw up canons to keep a particular conversation going, a particular genre and tradition, that has shown itself useful for furthering a more humanistic culture, and to facilitate, or increase the likelihood of, the continued production of works that cause 'tingles' and 'shudders' to keep the process going. We might then see the literary (critical) institution as engaged in mindfully creating and curating texts, and collections of texts that serve these kinds of purposes.

The literary institution, on this view, contains resources we might efficiently and usefully employ in our work for moral progress. Because it holds, as Rorty uses Kundera to say in the epigraph to *CIS*, the 'wisdom of the novel', 'iridescent patterns', unsettling metaphors, uncompromising self-examination, and means for making ourselves anew.

Poesis Against Inhumanism

How does Rorty substantiate his case for the humanist pragmatism of James and Bloom over the inhumanist pragmatism of Nietzsche and Foucault? By indicating a set of recommendations for how liberal ironists might forge a writerly and readerly practice that furthers both their ironism *and* their liberalism, Rorty sketches a practical strategy for countering inhumanism. In 1981 he had 'no way to dispose of' the moral objection to pragmatism's claim that even the vocabulary of our liberal imagination was a temporary resting place.[161] And he does not, in 1989 either – not as a theoretical problem. He instead sets it aside as a theoretical problem and comes up with a functional strategy. There are no epistemological defences against evil. To counter inhumanism we must actively work to oppose it, in ourselves, in our language, and in society; build solidarity through acts of recognition and change. We must imaginatively, creatively, aesthetically, make our future. And in this work, *CIS* asserts, literature plays a vital part.

Rorty's utopian culture might (to echo Rorty on ironism) be understood as a culture where an aesthetic, literary attitude is 'in the relevant sense' universal.[162] I have been endeavouring to

---

[160] Rorty, 'IV', p. 136.
[161] Rorty, 'NITT', p. 173.
[162] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. xv–xvi.

argue that Rorty's turn to literature, his talk of poets and poems, also is an attempt to capture the dimension of *making* that is so necessary to his case against inhumanism. Rorty suggested we need a 'poeticization' of liberalism. It might be suggested there is a need to poeticise Rortian pragmatism to more clearly set out that in his work literary attitude and poetic practices are two sides of the same coin, as closely linked as we are to others. Next, I conclude this thesis by expanding on this and suggesting that Rorty perhaps should have stated his alignment with the literary attitude and literary institution more clearly and firmly than he did. It helps us understand what is at stake in his work – and understand what is at stake for literary studies.

Chapter 7
A Necessary Inconclusiveness

Rorty closes *CIS* with a discussion of Nabokov's *Lolita* and Orwell's *1984* – two novels selected because they, on the one hand, warn us 'against social injustice by warning us against the tendency to cruelty inherent in searches for autonomy' and 'warn the liberal ironist intellectual against temptations to be cruel', and, on the other, 'dramatize the tension between private irony and liberal hope'.[1] Despite Rorty also saying that *1984* can help us see systemic cruelty, he is here reading these as books in his second category, as detailed in the previous chapter: the kind of books that show how our private pursuits might make us oblivious to the pain we are causing.[2] Moreover, he is not addressing how literature (or novels) *in general,* or *as* such, can help everyone bring their own blindness into view. He discusses Nabokov and Orwell as writers whose work can help, specifically, 'ironist intellectuals', especially those who also consider themselves liberals – who include in their ungrounded hopes the hope of a less cruel world – to notice their blindness and thus areas where they might act without due compassion.

Rorty earlier in *CIS* explicitly says he aims to defend 'ironist intellectuals' against accusations of 'irresponsibility', a set which here includes both Theodor Adorno and Foucault. Rorty is particularly concerned – because he holds Habermas in high regard – to mount a defence against Habermas's dismissal of their critique of Enlightenment rationality.[3] That Rorty stresses this, dovetails well with my suggestion that Rorty writes *CIS* as his 'full-scale' response to the same irresponsibility-worry he himself had taken up in PRI and NITT, and with my suggestion that *CIS* revolves around making a case for the possibility and plausibility of the seemingly paradoxical character of the liberal ironist – for the humanist pragmatist. The protagonist in Rorty's readings of Nabokov and Orwell's novels is, then, not Nabokov, Humbert Humbert, Lolita, or the Barber of Kasbeam, nor Orwell, Winston, or O'Brien. It is the Liberal Ironist. Rorty's readings are undertaken to explore what is at stake for the liberal ironist as she, self-aware and fully cognisant about 'the powers of redescription' – as an intellectual who knows that 'anything could be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being re-described' – engages in the kind of pragmatic deliberation Rorty takes moral reflection to be.[4] This is why Rorty is

---

[1] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 144.
[2] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 141.
[3] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 66–67.
[4] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 89; Rorty, *CIS*, p. 7; Rorty, *CIS*, p. xv. Rorty is, then, not naively thinking sadists might read novels and undergo a kind of humanistic conversion.

concerned to point out that the kinds of novels here under discussion are helpful because they 'dramatize the conflict between duties to self and duties to others'.[5]

Rorty's reading of *Lolita* centres on a portrayal of Humbert the aesthete, the seeker of aesthetic bliss so self-consumed with his quest for sublimity that he fails to notice the pain and suffering, or even the mere perspective, of other people. 'This particular sort of genius-monster – the monster of incuriosity – is', Rorty suggests, 'Nabokov's contribution to our knowledge of human possibilities.'[6] Humbert's aesthetic*ism* is not to be confused with the Rortian sense of aesthetic, which, as previously discussed, includes curiosity as part of the aesthetic (literary) attitude.[7] In his readings of these novels, Rorty notes that Nabokov, in the Afterword to *Lolita*, identified 'art with the compresence of "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy."'. 'Notice', Rorty adds, 'that "curiosity" comes first'.[8] Nevertheless, he thinks Nabokov knew that 'ecstasy and tenderness not only are separable but tend to preclude each other', and thus in his novels attempt to '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.' [9] This is, Rorty surmises, why Nabokov creates characters 'who are both ecstatic and cruel, noticing and heartless, poets who are only selectively curious, obsessives who are as sensitive as they are callous. What he fears most is that one cannot have it both ways — that there is no synthesis of ecstasy and kindness.'[10] Rorty finds this same dramatisation 'of the tension between private irony and liberal hope' playing out in *Pale Fire* and in *Bend Sinister*.[11]

What Rorty does not explicitly articulate, but which this thesis allows me to add, is that in his readings of these novels, he presents us with various ironist characters – Humbert, for instance, is an ironist, literary intellectual – who, because of their incuriosity, fail to be artists. Not in Nabokov's sense, but decidedly in Rorty's. Rorty indicates the same when he says that Humbert's 'inattentiveness to anything irrelevant to his own obsession' means he is unable 'to attain a state of being in which "art," as Nabokov has defined it, is the norm.'[12] Rorty's deduction echoes my own, when I see Rorty as saying that the problem with theorists is that they fail to be novelists.[13] Thus Rorty's readings of Nabokov's works can be seen as yet one more instance of Rorty aligning the

---

[5] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 141.
[6] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 161.
[7] Rorty, 'FMR', p. 154.
[8] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 158.
[9] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 159.
[10] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 160.
[11] See also Rorty's introduction to Nabokov, *Pale Fire*.
[12] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 163.
[13] Chapter 6, p. 154.

attitude he recommends with that of the literary artist or critic. They substantiate my claim that the Rortian literary culture is best understood as 'taking over' when the cultivation of an aesthetic attitude, or life of a culture, as Rorty defined this, would be the norm.

Rorty's reading of *1984* elucidates the ethical burden the liberal ironist carries in a complimentary way. Winston is forced to surrender his individuality to the collective – a joint self, imaginatively created from the crippled remains of private selves. Human bodies stand shoulder to shoulder: the 'we', the moral community of Big Brother, and thus, in a way, a formidable, all-encompassing solidarity is achieved. But this comes, of course, at the expense of privacy and freedom. Winston's systemic oppression into solidarity is the opposite of Humbert's singular quest for autonomy – it is the forced, total surrender of self-governance and identity. However, while this novel contains an obvious demonstration of how systems can be cruel, that is not Rorty's main concern – his concern is still the 'liberal ironist intellectual' and her 'temptations' to be cruel.[14] Thus, his reading of *1984* centres on an ironist intellectual on another private, imaginative quest for sublimity: O'Brien.

O'Brien is an ironist intellectual who knows there is no human nature, and thus understands that people can be broken and remade in his image.[15] And he is an intellectual who is a poetic a maker of *cruelty*. O'Brien, unlike, Humbert notices other people. His forging of sublime cruelty depends on *being* curious about the specific details of other people's lives and experiences, and then skilfully tailoring his responses to invalidate or obliterate their sense of self. His aim is to perfect a kind of sadistic manipulation that renders a specific, unique, and idiosyncratic self without a final vocabulary, without a narrative about who they are, and thus incapable of reconstituting itself after the event.[16] The artful perfection of torture for the sake of torture is O'Brien's obsessive private perfectionist project. In writing this character, Rorty takes Orwell – like Nabokov – to have written into literature the psychological possibility and plausibility of a new kind of person.[17]

Here, as in his reading of *Lolita*, Rorty takes the central cruel-intellectual character to be the one the liberal ironist intellectual will find most unsettling. Thus, he takes *1984* to read as a stark warning to the liberal ironist against complacency – as a demonstration that humiliation of others can in fact be inherent to the purposes around which ironist intellectuals shape their lives. This is a much more subtle claim than the prosaic observation that *1984* show us how systems or groups of people can be cruel. Rorty wants to warn us, and uses Orwell to do so, against a

---

[14] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 144.
[15] See Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 176–77.
[16] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 179.
[17] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 176.

'possible future society, one in which the intellectuals had accepted the fact that liberal hopes had no chance of realization.'[18] Orwell, Rorty says, managed to convince us that 'all the intellectual and poetic gifts which had made Greek philosophy, modern science, and Romantic poetry possible might someday find employment in the Ministry of Truth.'[19]

Put in the same terms as above, Big Brother-society is O'Brien's ingenious poetic work. He is a creative, imaginative maker. But he fails to lead an aesthetic life in the Rortian sense, not for lack of curiosity as was the case with Humbert, but for lack of kindness. The moral in tow for Rorty's readings of Nabokov is pay attention, notice, be broadly curious, and specifically curious about the suffering of others, and willing to change in response to what you discover. Rorty's reading of *1984* is part of his case for compelling us to act for solidarity, against cruelty, and specifically to take action to cultivate kindness – to cultivate an intellectual culture and practice that is not just curious, but also acknowledging and non-oppressive.

Rorty here tells us Nabokov and Orwell wrote new characters into our collective consciousness. Writing the possibility and plausibility of a character is what I have been suggesting Rorty aims for when he writes the liberal ironist. In Rorty's larger philosophical narrative, Humbert and O'Brien stands to Rorty's liberal ironist as Nietzsche and Foucault to James and Bloom: as inhumanist pragmatism stands to humanist pragmatism. Rorty is populating his Sellersian moral 'we' by saying it includes Orwell and Nabokov, but not Humbert or O'Brien. He is performing the job he assigns to the literary critic: acting as a moral guide, showing us the kinds of attitudes we might adopt towards the characters in play and thus towards our own selves. These literary critical readings are not illustrative appendices to a philosophical argument, but wholly a part of Rorty's literary case for how we might facilitate a fully historicist *and* nominalist pragmatism *while* also cultivating ethical awareness in its intellectual practitioners.

Rorty's readings of these two novels are complex and nuanced assessments, although his judgments are not unproblematic – in particular, Rorty's conception of Nabokov the writer, whom Rorty endows with a kind of humanism I am not convinced Nabokov possessed, could be problematised. However this might be, his readings clearly demonstrate that for Rorty, how texts induce change is not resolved by simply pointing to the fact that we can be moved to change through sentimental identification with the victims of cruelty. It is the possibility of *O'Brien* that Rorty thinks might stimulate readers to action, not simply our sympathy for Winston. As noted, Rorty suggests that novels can induce 'gestalt switches' on a population level.[20] However, he does not say these changes depend on triggering *sentimental* feelings. He says 'gestalt switches' depend

---

[18] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 183.
[19] Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 175–76.
[20] Ragg and Rorty, p. 372.

on cultivating a 'literary skill' and goes on to suggest that we are more likely to change our disposition on the basis of a work of literature if the words are arranged in such a way that they succeed in triggering (bodily) emotions in us: tingles, shudders, revulsion, shame.[21]

That the nuancing of Rorty's use of the concept of the 'literary' and works of literature this thesis has offered is itself of use, can be supported by a brief examination of Catherine Toal's assessment of Rorty's readings of Nabokov and Orwell in her 2016 book *The Entrapments of Form: Cruelty and Modern Literature*. Toal discusses Rorty in a section entitled '"Cruelty" and American Philosophy', which comes towards the end of a sequence of readings of writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Henry James that discuss how the idea of 'cruelty' acquires a new meaning in modernity. Toal dismisses Rorty's philosophical position as inconsistent due to his public-private split, which Toal reads as ontologically significant (as a theoretical separation that in its unreasonableness undermines his position). He is described as a (semi)quietist, and as holding that reform of social institutions and practices will be furthered by simple sympathetic identification with people of other beliefs, and, also, as relegating sympathy with the victims of cruelty to the private realm, alongside our ambitions for autonomy, thus leaving us as passive, observant noticers of cruelty, incapable of and unwilling to articulate an ambition to change the world.[22] This leads Toal to read Rorty as part of a trend in twentieth-century philosophy that negates lived experience of cruelty.

It seems that without a fully comprehensive account of the context, aims, and thus of the rhetorical moves in play in Rorty's readings of these writers (she also touches on Rorty on Proust and Derrida), it is difficult to give a just evaluation of both Rorty on cruelty and as a reader of literature.[23] Toal's readings fail to re-present what is at stake in Rorty. He is taken to define cruelty passively, as a mere by-product of self-absorption, and hence his readings of Nabokov are seen simply as relating how cruelty might arise from inattentiveness, and these readings' role in Rorty's wider philosophical argument is missed. His readings of Orwell are taken to be about the cruelty of social practices, even while his emphasis on O'Brien is noted. The analysis Toal provides fails to demonstrate a nuanced and well-considered understanding of Rorty's philosophical position, and as a result correspondingly reductive conclusions are drawn about his readings of literature.

Rorty's many readings, uses, and mentions of specific works of literature are worthy of a study in their own right. What this thesis offers, is an analysis that better enables such a next phase of work to proceed: it lays down the foundations that permits a close and valid analysis of Rorty's

---

[21] Cf. Rorty, *CIS*, pp. 78–79.
[22] Toal, p. 126.
[23] As Bacon notes, Rorty's open-ended definition of cruelty is deliberate and leaves room for our understanding of 'cruelty' to constantly be nuanced and responsively altered. Bacon, 'Rorty, irony and the consequences', p. 960.

readings of literature to be undertaken, and for the results of such an analysis to emerge as coherent, and as representative of Rorty's actual position.

Nevertheless, Toal's struggle to pin down exactly where Rorty's active engagement against cruelty in America is located is understandable. The study this thesis has provided might help Toal formulate a more effective critique. My aim in this thesis was to provide a comprehensive account of the conceptual role the literary, and the notion of a literary culture plays in Rortian pragmatism, as well as to substantiate the claim that the literary aspect of his work is not a by-product but a defining feature. It seemed to me that accounts of Rortian philosophy that leave this strand of thought out were omitting something of vital importance. I am now better placed to suggest what this is, and also to relate it to Toal's worries, and thus say something about how centring Rorty's literariness helps render his philosophical position with greater clarity.

Through situating the literary aspect in the foreground of a reading of Rorty's work, this thesis has brought out in clear relief a strand of his thinking tangibly present throughout his *oeuvre*, but not yet properly delimited and accounted for in the secondary literature. As it is traced in this thesis, Rorty's literary turn is considered to emerge in response to two needs. The first is a need to formulate a vocabulary for expressing his constructive project (his brand of pragmatism, thus demonstrating that he is not a copy, but a strong poet in his own right). The second, was a need to address his worries about the moral implications of the philosophical stance he advanced. His literary vocabulary originally emerged from his redescription of Snow's idea of a literary culture, which Rorty reformulated as a culture that stands in opposition to the scientistic culture of professionalised philosophy. The broader result of this turn was a shift towards imagination, literature, and an emphasis on making, *poesis*: on that we must make, through speaking and writing and other actions, selves and lives and institutions and cultures that recognises the need for countering cruelty and furthering solidarity through the formation of material human habits and practices. It seems to me that if a criticism is to be raised against this, it must come from the vantage point of questioning whether Rorty's literary vocabulary provides a helpful way to formulate a pragmatist response to the worry Rorty shares with Felski and Toal.

This thesis has argued that it does, and, moreover, that emphasising Rorty's literariness and bringing out his reasons for aligning himself with the literary institution and the literary critic in fact might help pragmatists sympathetic to Rorty better respond to these kinds of critiques. It has thus augmented Rorty's own articulation of his stance by reconstructing his argument as saying that the full recognition of contingency he insists on amounts to adopting an aesthetic attitude to all human making, all noises and marks – as saying that this is ultimately what is

entailed by his suggestion that we can treat physics and poetry 'evenhandedly'.[24] It suggests that this aesthetic attitude of openness and curiosity – capable of holding all human artefacts equally lightly while nevertheless taking their potential uses, interpretations, consequences seriously – is as important in Rortian philosophy as his uses of specific literary works, or his suggestion that reading literature might heighten our ethical sensitivity and lead to moral progress. Through its literary emphasis, this thesis moreover pulls making into the heart of the matter, a move that emerges from and also strengthen Rorty's own alignment of his pragmatism with the attitude and practices of the poet. This shifts the focus *beyond* the moment of transformation sketched in chapters 2 and 3, and places the stress on what is at stake when we have come to see ourselves as mere poets. On what kind of practice we adopt, as we self-consciously, aware of the power of redescription, partake in making selves and communities and institutions and cultures in the hope the artist always has: that what she makes might make a difference. Thus, this thesis also opens up a space within Rortian philosophy for asking further questions about how literary critics and poets do their work – how texts that succeed in changing us are made.

It is my contention, then, that Rorty did not fully articulate a satisfying, wholly persuasive account of what his attitude incorporates beyond 'ironism', beyond the 'fundamental choice' to take all starting points as contingent – and that this thesis helps formulate such a response. Hence, while I disagree with Toal's assessment that Rorty encourages an 'imaginary erasure' of cruelty, I can understand why such a reading of Rorty might arise.[25] Such assessments of Rorty will arise as long as his ironism is taken to be what defines his pragmatism – whenever his deflationary attitude towards language and ideas (including the idea of selfhood and community) is taken to be the extent and core of his contribution. When this happens, Rorty's poeticism falls out of focus. And it should, on my view and as already noted, be seen as the other side of the Rortian coin: attitude and practice, ironism and liberalism, pragmatism and humanism, adopting a literary stance and writing poems. 'Ironism' should not be used synecdochically to indicate 'Rortian pragmatism'. It is misleading and reductive. I suspect a conflation of Rortian ironism with Rortian pragmatism is at least partly to blame for criticism of Rorty that worries about, as Rorty himself put it, 'whether pragmatism is morally dangerous'.[26] This appears to be the shared worry of Toal, Felski, and Misak: a worry that strong readings might be unethical, about the dangers of 'making things up', and whether it is possible to cultivate a humanist pragmatism even while stating that there is no theoretical, epistemological, or morally foundationalist defence against cruelty.[27]

---

[24] Richard Rorty, 'Non-reductive physicalism', in *ORT*, pp. 113–25 (p. 113).
[25] Toal, p. 131.
[26] Rorty, 'NITT', 174n15.
[27] See Chapter 4, p. 104. Cf. Felski, *Limits of Critique*, p. 115.

Rorty is also often seen through an affect-lens, rather than a work-lens: as suggesting that we need to invoke the right feelings rather than doing the right work. As we have seen, it is far from that simple. While Rorty does not make policy suggestions, he did see himself as attempting to do work, poetic work, that might potentially change how people talk, and in the long run 'tempt the rising generation' to change their behaviour.[28] Asking whether Rorty got it right, got, say Peirce right, or Kant right, is to miss the point. Requiring Rorty to construct a rigorous metaphysical argument against cruelty is like asking an atheist to provide a theological argument for the existence of God. Rorty's *oeuvre* is, as already suggested, a strong poem in its own right, and is, I am contending, most usefully read as such: for its effects, for its uses in human language and conversation and lives. Rorty's narrative, *as he tells it*, is the point. And to suggest that this is not valid as intellectual or political intervention, is to say that literature has no such capability.

Another important reason for wanting to advance the idea that Rortian pragmatism can be seen as a literary attitude, is the usefulness of this suggestion as a pedagogical tool. Rorty associates the literary attitude with quite specific qualities: a heightened appreciation of contingency, historicism, *and* a fully-fledged appreciation for nominalism; with moving in close, and with addressing humanly interesting content; with paying attention to the materiality of 'noises and marks', considering their uses and effects, and with anti-authoritarianism, acknowledgement and conversation. The literary stance does not have universalising ambitions; knows that what is written will not be the last word – does not want it to be the last word but wants for its words to generate more noises and marks. And it sees us all as poets, whatever we are writing – and not as collectively engaged in discovering the exact, determinate language that corresponds to how things *truly* are. When Rorty talks about 'literary, as in 'literary critic', and 'literary culture', and 'the attitude of the literary artist', his use of this word carries these connotations.

Most people would likely recognise that when we read literary works, we adopt a stance where the matter of correspondence is set aside: we do not expect a novel to 'tell the Truth' in that sense. Moreover, that when we read poems, materiality, effect, understanding, helpfulness to human lives and in human relations, are concerns that come to the fore. One approach to develop this angle further, would be to turn to the work of Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, and their definitions of a truth-as-correspondence-suspending, evaluative and appreciative 'literary stance'.[29] A Rortian account of 'the literary stance' would amount to similar definitions, *sans* their insistence on *separating* this stance from our regular attitude towards noises and marks; towards

---

[28] Rorty, *CIS*, p. 9.

[29] See Peter Lamarque and Stein H. Olsen, *Truth, fiction, and literature: a philosophical perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

texts. Elaborating on this similarity would, I think, have significant explanatory power vis a vis Rortian pragmatism.

One way of explaining the Rortian stance, then, is to say it breaks down the difference between theory and fiction. And, having established that, asks: now what? Where do we go from here? If everything is poetry, if even quantum mechanics is, as Rorty put it, 'a notoriously great, but quite untranslatable, poem, written in a lamentably obscure language'; if there is no scheme or format or language or vocabulary that is *the* right one for knowledge or morality or physics or politics, what do we do?[30] How do we now negotiate knowledge equilibria? Engage in moral deliberation? Build institutions that take the processuality and contingency of their own making and operation into account? *What will work now?* What kind of practices do we need; what kind of guidelines for action?

This illustrates why Rorty's suggestions for how to think about what will work in a fully poeticised culture are well-worth evaluating, expanding on, and actively employing in our so-called post-truth society. On a cultural level, we have come to acknowledge that we no longer have foundational and eternal truths to rely on, and we appear to collectively be grappling with the 'what will work now?' question. Many nevertheless still hold the truths of science to be our fundamental truths, rather than our most useful truths for prediction and control. The Rortian approach offers resources for discussing how we might think and talk if we adopt the latter view.

Here I think literary studies, as a discipline that produces knowledge, is a key case in point. Rorty fails to connect that in our field we have long had to deal with the question of how to negotiate knowledge-equilibria without recourse to correspondence-incidents (as is part of Lamarque and Olsen's point). As an academic discipline, we successfully negotiate knowledge about literature in the absence of an ambition to find the right, true, representative, mirroring, language to talk about, say, John Ashbery. Of course, we operate with facts, but we also do so with self-conscious, even ironic, awareness of these facts as constructed, as products of a situated practice and a language. Seen from this angle, literary studies *because it is the more querulous* discipline (see p. 159), because it knowingly uses literary skills for persuasion, and because is content to treat knowledge claims as temporary and revisionable, might be said to be at the forefront of knowledge negotiation in our so-called post-truth culture. Literary studies might be where we need to turn to learn more about where to go from here, if, as Rorty implicitly argues, this discipline, this culture or interpretive community, works from an attitude towards ideas and texts that is useful for sustaining democratic openness and solidaric sensibilities, and cultivates and propagates a vital set of analytical, interpretive, and writerly skills.

---

[30] Rorty, 'PPTC', p. 765.

Moreover, Rorty's argument for giving literature the central role he does, amounts to an argument for giving literature and literary criticism a considerably more central role in contemporary society. If literature both emerges from and helps us cultivate an attitude and a kind of attention we need– if it helps us cultivate the dispositions and habits we need to sustain and advance democratic culture as we know it (and we still do not have any better alternatives by comparison, which is the measure here), and helps us better imagine what might be 'possible and important' – then ensuring its recognition and proliferation, ensuring the cultivation of a necessary kind of literary skill, has the same kind of pragmatic primacy as Rorty gave to self-making. It implies that ensuring that literature and art and criticism is *recognised* as integral to our shared efforts towards a better future, is a vital matter. Vescio makes very similar points when he insists on the necessity of literary studies and criticism as a 'Ministry of Disturbance' defined by an unsubsumable plurality and constant critical debate about what we say and who we are. This is now, he says with Rorty, the place in society where students and intellectuals most ardently and imaginatively struggle to work this out, and the literary critical institution thus performs a necessary function for liberal democratic societies.[31]

Yet, as I noted in the Introduction, Rorty takes care to downplay his own centring of literature and the literary. We must not privilege literature. Insight into writing must not be permitted to replace philosophy as the master discourse. [32] In an interview he is asked by E. P. Ragg: '[w]ould it be fair to say, then, that thinking holistically is, to some degree, literary?' And Rorty replies:

> No, I don't think so. It would be more appropriate to say thinking holistically, in the sense of not being limited to a given context or disciplinary framework, is a matter of thinking imaginatively. Politicians and theologians and engineers think imaginatively just as much as literary people do. To call it literary would be unduly to privilege literature.[33]

In PTG he warns literary culture against giving itself airs.[34] In *Philosophy as Poetry* published in 2016 but based on Rorty's 2004 Page-Barbour Lectures (given the year PTG was published), Rorty offers a sweeping, driven, at times startling version of the narrative he spent his career developing, and, as I noted in the Introduction to this thesis, told again and again: in PTG he called it his 'tediously familiar up-from-representationalism story', the story about the 'takeover' of

---

[31] Vescio, especially Part I.3.
[32] Rorty, 'PKW', p. 153.
[33] Ragg and Rorty, p. 370.
[34] Rorty, 'PTG', p. 27.

'literary culture'.[35] But in these Page-Barbour Lectures, Rorty is concerned to not overstate the importance he had placed on literature for three decades. He says it seems 'misguided' to have said that postphilosophical (as in post-truth-as-correspondence) intellectual culture should place 'literature and the arts' in the place of 'science and philosophy as sources of wisdom'. 'I think it would be better', Rorty says, to say it would be a culture where 'wisdom' meant 'something like "skill", something that could be gained only through the accumulation of experience'.[36]

The last comment in fact merges well with my discussion of Rorty on 'literary skill' above (pp. 163-166) and my suggestion that what is at stake is an attitude and a practice – a novelistic literary attitude or sensibility, and a readerly and writerly practice, or skill. Nevertheless, it is valuable to note and affirm these moments in Rorty's work where he expresses the fear that we might get a culture that is the *inversion* of the scientistic-philosophical intellectual culture. But like Ragg, and like Vescio whose book as a whole affirms this view, I would suggest that Rorty in these instances fails to see the aptness of describing his attitude in the manner Ragg suggests. For what Ragg sees and expresses in this interview, goes beyond holism, to the kind of self-awareness about the made character of all texts, and the literary, novelistic attitude Rorty overtly supports and advances. Ragg can see that thinking of his approach as 'literary' is a suggestion that emerges from Rorty's work – a line of reasoning I have been working to bring out more clearly. I am not saying science and its ways of talking and doing are not as vital as literature. But I am suggesting – and I think with Rorty – that cultivating that the kind of literary self-awareness that is the mark of the intellectual in Rorty's utopian culture, will get us farther in the long run than seeing ourselves as seekers of Truth, for reasons Rorty extensively articulated. And thus, as suggested above, that cultivating it – even and perhaps especially in our scientists and philosophers – has a kind of pragmatic primacy of concerns.

There is support for this interpretation also in those same Page-Barbour Lectures. Rorty notes that Robert Brandom's 'paradigm of rational inquiry is the common law' because it is a hermeneutic model of thought. Then he adds that 'literary criticism' would serve as well as a model for discourse, because its 'necessary inconclusiveness is made plain by a remark that Brandom quotes from T. S. Eliot: "What happens when a work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it"'.[37] Rorty's remark appears to condense a range of features he, in the course of a long career, associated with literary criticism, into one: processuality, acceptance and even celebration of redescription, an emphasis on tracing

[35] Rorty, 'PTG', p. 5.
[36] *Philosophy as Poetry*, pp. 58–59.
[37] *Philosophy as Poetry*, p. 41. The original quote is from 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', see Eliot, T. S., *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1950 (1920)), pp. 49-50.

those lines that go from poem to poem, its conversational nature, openness, and its holism – one that connects tradition, or a genre, with making it new, and by this alters and expands it. All these features combine to characterise literary criticism as a mode of discourse premised on 'inconclusiveness' as its defining condition.

Here, as on numerous previous occasions, the aptness of Rorty's literary invocation is, moreover, striking. The lines that go from Eliot's theory of poetry to Bloom's are easy to trace. But there is more to it than what might at first be obvious. As Helen Thaventhiran notes in her book on modernist criticism, in which she borrows the phrase 'radical empiricism' from William James to serve as the lens through which to offer a reinterpretation of key critics of this era, Eliot 'openly ridiculed what he called "the lemonsqueezer school of criticism"'.[38] It might be said of Rorty that he similarly caricatured the lemonsqueezer school of philosophy. This invocation of Eliot also brings up Rorty's explicit alignment with modernism, rather than postmodernism. As Thaventhiran puts it, this was the 'heyday' of the question of the 'meaning of meaning'.[39] Although pragmatism construes this question somewhat differently than the literary modernists did, it also permeates pragmatist thought: pragmatism, at least as I see it, still seeks a way to talk about meaning. There is, I would suggest, considerably more to explore here in relation to the question of why Rorty holds on to an identification with literary modernism, and on what it is that modernism sought that postmodernism lost interest or faith in, and that perhaps needs to be recovered.

Richard Shusterman has painted Rorty as even more of a magpie-writer than James, suggesting he merely looked around, took what he found, and went with it.[40] While that, too, surely was sometimes part of his process, most of Rorty's literary invocations seem carefully selected. As the project this thesis contains comes to a close, it has already given rise to a new one, where I have begun the work of detailing these uses and appeals in a manner undergirded by the work undertaken for this thesis. What I have been arguing in it, what Ragg sees and Rorty acknowledges in the above, is that literary criticism works as a model for the holistic, humanistic, revisionary (and re-visionary) kind of thinking and knowledge-negotiating Rorty advocates. Furthermore, the remarks Rorty makes in the above, and this thesis as a whole, substantiate my claim in Chapter 1 that the role of literature and literary thinking in Rorty merits considerably more attention than it has been getting. It seems mistaken, to me, to construe Rorty's literariness as

---

[38] Helen Thaventhiran, *Radical Empiricists: Five Modernist Close Readers*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 7.
[39] Thaventhiran, p. 9.
[40] Richard Shusterman, 'The Contingency of Rorty's Sources: A Poetic Example', in *The Roots of Rorty's Philosophy*, ed. by Alexander Kremer (= *Pragmatism Today The Journal of the Central-European Pragmatist Forum*, 2 (2011)), pp. 9–13.

an 'aspect' of his work. The closer it is examined, the more it appears as an integral, uneliminable part of Rortian thought, interwoven into his writings, persistently and over decades. It connects ironism and liberalism, pragmatism and humanism, attitude and practice, lightness and seriousness. And it emphasises what is most distinctive about Rortian pragmatism: its radical unboundedness and necessary inconclusiveness.

Bibliography

Bacon, Michael, *Richard Rorty: Pragmatism and political liberalism* (Lanham, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007)

--- 'Rorty, irony and the consequences of contingency for liberal society', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 43.9 (2017), 954–65 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453716688365>

Baron-Cohen, Simon, *The pattern seekers: A New Theory of Human Invention* (London: Penguin Books, 2020)

Bawcutt, N. W., *Measure for Measure (1604)* (Online, 2012), *The Oxford Shakespeare*

Belsey, Catherine, *A Future for Criticism*, Blackwell manifestos (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011)

--- *Criticism*, Ideas in profile (London: Profile Books, 2016)

Bérubé, Michael, *Philosophy as Poetry*, 1st edn (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016), Page-Barbour Lectures

Bjørkdahl, Kristian, 'Enlarging the Ethnos. Rorty, Redescription, and the Rhetorical Labor of Moral Progress' (Doctoral Thesis, University of Oslo, 2016)

Bloom, Harold, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982)

--- *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

--- *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973)

--- 'The Internalization of Quest-Romance', in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), pp. 3–24

Bowie, Malcolm, *Proust among the stars* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2000)

Brown, Marshall, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 5: Romanticism*, 9 vols (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5

Buchanan, Ian, *A dictionary of critical theory: Over 750 entries*, Oxford quick reference (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018)

Calcaterra, Rosa M., *Contingency and Normativity: The Challenges of Richard Rorty*, Value inquiry book series, Volume 329 (Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2019)

Collini, Stefan, *Interpretation and overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

--- 'Introduction', in C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, Canto Classics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

Cornils, Ingo, *A Companion to the Works of Hermann Hesse*, Camden House companion volumes (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2009)

Culture.pl, *Henryk Sienkiewicz* (2021) <https://culture.pl/en/artist/henryk-sienkiewicz> [accessed 10 April 2021]

Curtis, William M., *Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and liberal virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Davidson, Donald, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. by Ernest Leopore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986)

--- 'What Metaphors Mean', *Critical Inquiry*, 5.1 (1978), 31–47 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1342976>

Derrida, Jacques, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 322–37

Dewey, John, *Experience and Nature* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929)

--- *Problems of Men* (New York Bognor Regis,Sussex: John Crowther, 1946)

--- *The quest for certainty: A study of the relations of knowledge and action: Gifford lectures,1929* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930)

Dunan-Page, Anne, *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan*, Cambridge companions to literature (Cambridge, UK, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

Eckermann, Johann P., *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret*, Cambridge library collection. Philosophy, 1 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

Eco, Umberto, 'Interpretation and overinterpretation', in *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, ed. by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

Eliot, T. S., *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1950 (1920))

Feinman, Alvin, *The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty* (New York: Bennington College, 1989), The Bennington Chapbooks in Literature

Felski, Rita, 'Introduction', *New Literary History*, 44.4 (2013), v–xii <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2013.0034>

--- *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago The University of Chicago Press, 2015, 2015)

Fialho, Olivia, 'What is literature for? The role of transformative reading', *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 6.1 (2019), 1692532 <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2019.1692532>

Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of criticism: Four essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000 (1957))

Gascoigne, Neil, and Michael Bacon, 'Taking Rorty seriously: pragmatism, metaphilosophy, and truth', *Inquiry* (2020), 1–20 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2020.1820375>

Gascoigne, Neil, 'Richard Rorty', in *Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets: Philosophy*, ed. by Duncan Pritchard (Online: Oxford University Press)

--- *Richard Rorty: Liberalism, irony and the ends of philosophy*, Key Contemporary Thinkers (Cambridge: Polity, 2008)

--- *Rorty, Liberal Democracy, and Religious Certainty* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2019)

Gaskill, Nicholas, 'Experience and Signs: Towards a Pragmatist Literary Criticism', in *Remembering Richard Rorty*, ed. by Ralph Cohen (= *New Literary History*, 39 (2008)), pp. 165–83

--- 'What Difference Can Pragmatism Make for Literary Study?', *American Literary History*, 24.2 (2012), 374–89 <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajs017>

Goethe, Johann W. von, *Faust: In Two Parts* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1879)

Goodman, Nelson, *Languages of art: An approach to a theory of symbols*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976)

Goodman, Russell B., 'Rorty and Romanticism', in *Philosophical Topics: Pragmatism*, ed. by Edward Minar and Steven Levine (36 (2008)), pp. 79–95

Gross, Neil, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2008)

Gumbrecht, Hans U., and Rita Felski, 'The Inspirational Power of a Shy Philosopher', in *Remembering Richard Rorty*, ed. by Ralph Cohen (= *New Literary History*, 39 (2008)), pp. 69–70

Haack, Susan, 'Surprising Noises: Rorty and Hesse on Metaphor', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 88 (1987), 293–301 <http://www.jstor.org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/stable/4545085>

Harmon, William, *Classic Writings on Poetry* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005)

Harper, George M., and Walter K. Hood, *A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision (1925)* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1978)

Hesse, Hermann, *The Glass Bead Game: (Magister Ludi)* (London: Vintage Books, 2000)

Hesse, Mary B., *Revolutions and reconstructions in the philosophy of science* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980)

Hibbard, George R., *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (1600)* (Online, 2012), *The Oxford Shakespeare*

Huetter-Almerigi, Yvonne, 'Two Forms of Realism', *ejpap*, XII.1 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.1868>

James, Henry, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York, London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934)

James, William, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, Cambridge Library Collection (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907)

--- *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1907)

Janack, Marianne, *Feminist interpretations of Richard Rorty*, Re-reading the canon (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010)

Jeffries, Stuart, *Richard Rorty: The Man Who Killed Truth* (BBC4, 16.12)

Knapp, Steven, and Walter B. Michaels, 'Against Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 8.4 (1982), 723–42

Krapp, John, 'Hermann Hesse's Hegelianism: The Progress of Consciousness Towards Freedom in The Glass Bead Game', *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 26.2 (2002) <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1536>

Kundera, Milan, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1988)

Lamarque, Peter, and Stein H. Olsen, *Truth, fiction, and literature: a philosophical perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994)

Leypoldt, Günter, '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)), pp. 145–63

Llanera, Tracy, 'Ethnocentrism: Lessons from Richard Rorty to Randy David', *Philipine Sociological Review*, 65.Special Issue (2017), 133–49

--- 'Morality by Words: Murdoch, Nussbaum, Rorty', *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, 18.1 (2014), 1–17 <https://journals.ateneo.edu/ojs/index.php/budhi/article/view/BU2014.18101> [accessed 18.02.19]

--- 'Redeeming Rorty's Private-Public Distinction', *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 13.3 (2016), 319–40 <https://doi.org/10.1163/18758185-01303005>

--- 'Richard Rorty and the Concept of Redemption', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 82.2 (2016), 103–18 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-016-9596-8>

--- *Richard Rorty: Outgrowing modern nihilism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

MacIntyre, Alasdair C., *After virtue: A study in moral theory*, 3rd edn (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007)

Madelrieux, Stéphane, 'Can We Secularize the Will to Believe?', *RIVISTA DI STORIA DELLA FILOSOFIA*, 3 (2017), 493–512 <https://doi.org/10.3280/SF2017-003008>

Mahon, Áine, *The Ironist and the Romantic: Reading Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014)

Malachowski, Alan, *Richard Rorty* (New York: Routledge, 2002)

--- 'Rorty against the Ontologists', in *Richard Rorty's Multiple Legacies*, ed. by Samuel C. Wheeler III (= *The European Legacy*, 19 (2014)), pp. 187–96

Małecki, W. P., and Christopher Voparil, *On philosophy and philosophers: Unpublished papers, 1960-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020)

Małecki, Wojciech and others, 'Can fiction make us kinder to other species? The impact of fiction on pro-animal attitudes and behavior', *Poetics*, 66 (2018), 54–63 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2018.02.004>

Małecki, Wojciech, 'Review: William M. Curtis, Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue', *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, VIII.1 (2016) <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/476> [accessed 25 June 2020]

Menand, Louis, *The Metaphysical Club - A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001)

Milnes, Tim, 'Rorty, Romanticism, and the Literary Absolute', in *Pragmatism and Literature*, ed. by Wojciech Małecki (= *Pragmatism Today The Journal of the Central-European Pragmatist Forum*, 2 (2011)), pp. 24–33

--- *The Truth about Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)

Misak, Cheryl, 'Richard Rorty's Place in the Pragmatist Pantheon', *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, ed. by Randall Auxier and Lewis Hahn, The Library of Living Philosophers, 32 (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2010), pp. 27–43

--- 'The End of the Liberal Ironist', in *Nº 20 (RORTY)*, ed. by E. D. Huckerby and Pedro Ferrão (= *Forma De Vida* (2021))

Mitchell, W. J. T., *Against theory: literary studies and the new pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985)

Moi, Toril, 'Kortversjonen. Stanley Cavell: The Claim of Reason', *Prosa*, 10 (2001)

--- *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017)

Nabokov, Vladimir, *Lectures on Literature* (New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980)

--- *Pale Fire*, Everyman's library, 67 (London: David Campbell, 1992 (1962))

Nehamas, Alexander, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987 (1985))

NobelPrize.org, *The Nobel Prize in Literature 1905* (2021) <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1905/sienkiewicz/biographical/> [accessed 10 April 2021]

Nussbaum, Martha C., *Love's knowledge: essays on philosophy and literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)

Putnam, Hilary, *Pragmatism An Open Question* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995)

Ragg, E. P., and Richard Rorty, 'Worlds or Words Apart? The consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An interview with Richard Rorty', *Philosophy and Literature*, 26.2 (2002), 369–96

Ramberg, Bjørn T., 'For the sake of his own generation: Rorty on destruction and edification', in *Richard Rorty: From Pragmatist Philosophy to Cultural Politics*, ed. by Alexander G. Sandbothe and Colin Koopman & Mike (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 49–72

--- '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

--- 'Post-ontological philosophy of mind: Rorty versus Davidson', in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. by Robert Brandom, Philosophers and Their Critics, 9 (Malden, Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 351–70

--- 'Richard Rorty', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta

Roosevelt, Theodore, *An Autobiography: With Illustrations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920)

Rorty, James, *Children of the sun, and other poems* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926)

Rorty, Richard, 'A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor', *Review of Metaphysics*, 34.1 (1980), 39–47 <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1290792513/fulltextPDF/13829870DA854697PQ>[accessed 19.03.19]

--- *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998)

--- *Consequences of Pragmatism: (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982)

--- *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

--- 'Deconstruction and Circumvention', *Critical Inquiry*, 11.1 (1984), 1–23 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343288>

--- 'Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 74.11 (1977), 673 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2025769>

--- 'Dewey's Metaphysics', in Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 72–89

--- *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1991)), Philosophical Papers, 2

--- 'Freud and Moral Reflection', in *Pragmtism's Freud: The moral disposition of psychoanalysis*, ed. by Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan, Psychiatry and the humanities, v. 9 (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 1–27

--- 'Freud and moral reflection', in Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others,* Philosophical Papers, 2 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1991)), pp. 143–63

--- 'Freud, Morality, and Hermeneutics', in *Psychology and Literature: Some Contemporary Directions*, ed. by Ralph Cohen (= *New Literary History*, 12 (1980)), pp. 177–85

--- 'Habermas and Lyotard on postmodernity', in Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others,* Philosophical Papers, 2 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1991)), pp. 164–76

--- 'Habermas and Lyotard on Post-Modernity', *Praxis International*, 4.1 (1984), 32–44

--- 'Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens', in Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others,* Philosophical Papers, 2 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1991)), pp. 66–82

--- 'Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality', in Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress,* Philosophical Papers, 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 167–85

--- 'Intellectual Autobiography of Richard Rorty', *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, ed. by Randall Auxier and Lewis Hahn, The Library of Living Philosophers, 32 (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2010), pp. 3–24

--- 'Introduction', in Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xiii–xlvii

--- 'Introduction: Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy', in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. by Richard Rorty (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992 (1967)), pp. 1–39

--- 'Introduction: Pragmatism as Anti-Representationalism', in John P. Murphy, *Pragmatism: from Peirce to Davidson* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990)

Rorty, Richard, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, 'Introduction', in *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. by Richard Rorty, Jerome B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 1–14

Rorty, Richard, 'Keeping Philosophy Pure: An Essay on Wittgenstein', in Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 19–36

--- 'Keeping Philosophy Pure: An Essay on Wittgenstein', *Yale Review*, 65.3 (1976), 336–56

--- 'Method, Social Science, and Social Hope', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 11.4 (1981), 569–88 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40231218>

--- 'Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism', *The Monist*, 64.2 (1981), 155–74

--- 'Non-reductive physicalism', in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* Philosophical Papers, 1 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (1991)), pp. 113–25

--- *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (1991)), Philosophical Papers, 1

--- 'On ethnocentrism: A reply to Clifford Geertz', in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* Philosophical Papers, 1 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (1991)), pp. 203–10

--- 'Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 30.2 (1976), 280–305

--- 'Philosophers, Novelists, and Intercultural Comparisons: Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens', in *Culture and modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, ed. by Eliot Deutsch (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), pp. 3–20

--- *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979)

--- *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999)

--- *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), Philosophical Papers, 4

--- 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An essay on Derrida', *New Literary History*, 10.1 (1978), 141–60

--- 'Philosophy as a Transitional Genre', in *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, ed. by Richard J. Bernstein, Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (MIT Press, 2004), pp. 3–28

--- 'Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics', in Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others,* Philosophical Papers, 2 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (1991)), pp. 9–26

--- 'Philosophy without Principles', *Critical Inquiry*, 11.3 (1985), 459–65

--- 'Pragmatism, Davidson, and truth', in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* Philosophical Papers, 1 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (1991)), pp. 126–50

--- 'Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 53.6 (1980), 719-738 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3131427>

--- 'Pragmatism without method', in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* Philosophical Papers, 1 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (1991)), pp. 63–77

--- 'Pragmatism Without Method', in *Sidney Hook: Philosopher of Democracy and Humanism*, ed. by Paul Kurtz (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1983), pp. 259–73

--- 'Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture', *The Georgia Review*, 30.4 (1976), 757–69

--- 'Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises', in *The Rorty Reader*, ed. by Christopher Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 389–406

--- 'Science as solidarity', in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* Philosophical Papers, 1 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (1991)), pp. 35–45

--- 'Solidarity or Objectivity?', *Nanzan Review of American Studies*, 6 (1984), 1–18 <https://doi.org/10.15119/00000638>

--- 'Tales of Two Disciplines', *Callaloo*, 17.2 (1994), 575–85 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2931782>

--- 'Texts and Lumps', *New Literary History*, 17.1 (1985), 1–16

--- 'The Contingency of Community', *London Review of Books*, 8.13 (1986) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v08/n13/richard-rorty/the-contingency-of-community> [accessed 9 April 2021]

--- 'The Contingency of Language', *London Review of Books*, 8.7 (1986) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v08/n07/richard-rorty/the-contingency-of-language> [accessed 5 May 2020]

--- 'The Contingency of Selfhood', *London Review of Books*, 8.8 (1986) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v08/n08/richard-rorty/the-contingency-of-selfhood> [accessed 9 April 2021]

--- 'The Fire of Life', *Poetry*, 191.2 (2007), 129–31

--- 'The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature', in Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 125–40

--- 'The Pragmatist's Progress', in *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, ed. by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 89–108

--- 'The priority of democracy to philosophy', in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* Philosophical Papers, 1 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (1991)), pp. 175–96

--- 'The World Well Lost', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 69.19 (1972), 649–65 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2025059>

--- 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 3–20

--- 'Unfamiliar noises: Hesse and Davidson on metaphor', in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* Philosophical Papers, 1 (Online: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (1991)), pp. 162–72

--- 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the reification of language', in *The Cambridge companion to Heidegger*, ed. by Charles B. Guignon, Cambridge companions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 337–57

Rumana, Richard, *On Rorty* (Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000)

Schulenberg, Ulf, *Romanticism and Pragmatisme: Richard Rorty and the Idea of a Poeticized Cultur* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

Scott, Stanley J., *The Ordering Mirror: Readers and Contexts : the Ben Belitt Lectures at Bennington College* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993)

Sellars, Wilfrid, 'Philospohy and the Scientific Image of Man', in Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, perception and reality* (Atascadero, California: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991 (1963))

Shenker, Israel, *'LIFE OF A NATION' IS PONDEROUS EVENT* <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/10/10/archives/life-of-a-nation-is-ponderous-event-300-philosophers-meet-to-make.html> [accessed 15 July 2019]

Shevtsova, Maria, 'Dialogism in the Novel and Bakhtin's Theory of Culture', *New Literary History*, 23.3 (1992), 747 <https://doi.org/10.2307/469228>

Shusterman, Richard, 'The Contingency of Rorty's Sources: A Poetic Example', in *The Roots of Rorty's Philosophy*, ed. by Alexander Kremer (= *Pragmatism Today The Journal of the Central-European Pragmatist Forum*, 2 (2011)), pp. 9–13

Sidorsky, David, 'The Uses of the Philosophy of G. E. Moore in the Works of E. M. Forster', *New Literary History*, 38.2 (2007), 245–71 <www.jstor.org/stable/20058002>

Snow, C. P., *The Two Cultures*, Canto Classics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

Stelzig, Eugene L., *Hermann Hesse's Fictions of the Self: Autobiography and the Confessional Imagination*, Princeton Legacy Library (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014)

Sword, Helen, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, Cornell Paperbacks (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002)

Tartaglia, James, *Rorty and The Mirror of Nature*, Routledge philosophy guidebooks (London: Routledge, 2007)

Thaventhiran, Helen, *Radical Empiricists: Five Modernist Close Readers*, 1st edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

Toal, Catherine, *The entrapments of form: Cruelty and modern literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016)

Trott, Nicola, 'Wordsworth: the shape of the poetic career', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 5–21

Vescio, Bryan, *Reconstruction in Literary Studies: An Informalist Approach* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

Voparil, Christopher, 'Jonquils and Wild Orchids: James and Rorty on Politics and Aesthetic Experience', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 23.2 (2009), 100–10

--- 'On the Idea of Philosophy as Bildungsroman: Rorty and his Critics', *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 2.1 (2005), 115–33 <https://doi.org/10.1163/18758185-90000005>

--- 'Rorty and James on irony, moral commitment, and the ethics of belief', *William James Studies*, 12.2 (2016), 1–30 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26203802>

--- 'The Politics of the Novel: Rorty on Democracy, Irony, and Moral Education', in Christopher Voparil, *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), pp. 61–88

--- 'The Serious Rorty', in *Nº 20 (RORTY)*, ed. by E. D. Huckerby and Pedro Ferrão (= *Forma De Vida* (2021))

Wall, Cynthia, *The Pilgrim's Progress: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 1st edn (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), A Norton critical edition

Williams, Bernard, 'Getting it Right: Review of Contingency, Irony and Solidarity by Rorty, R.', *London Review of Books*, 11.22 (1989), 3–5 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v11/n22/bernard-williams/getting-it-right> [accessed 3 November 2019]

Williams, John R., *Goethe's Faust*, Routledge Library editions: German literature, volume 33, 1st edn (London: Routledge, 2020)

Wilson, Ross, *Subjective universality in Kant's aesthetics* (Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007)

--- *The Meaning of 'Life' in Romantic Poetry and Poetics*, Routledge studies in romanticism, 12 (New York, London: Routledge, 2009)

Wood, Allen W., 'Herder and Kant on History: Their Enlightenment Faith', in Allen W. Wood, *The Free Development of Each: Studies on Freedom, Right, and Ethics in Classical German Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 119–43