Towards a Pragmatist Aesthetics

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In this paper, I make the case that the tradition of pragmatism may usefully inform aesthetic criticism. To that end, I contrast the anti-essentialist outlook and the ethico-political concerns of neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty with the epistemological underpinnings of analytic aesthetics. The aim is to outline an alternative meta-theoretical perspective that 'overwrites' long-standing concerns with exactitude and objectivity. Drawing on examples from my own area of expertise, film, and television studies, I seek to explicitly set up aesthetic criticism, especially evaluation, as a means of social progress and human flourishing within the framework of liberal democracy.

1. Introduction

The notion of a pragmatist aesthetics has circulated since the 1980s, most prominently in the work of Richard Shusterman.[1] Although he is mostly sympathetic to arguably the key neo-pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty, Shusterman finds his emphasis on language insufficiently attentive to the somatic dimensions of art, and so mainly reaches back to the classical pragmatism of John Dewey (1934). I see Rorty's linguistic focus as crucial to a pragmatist effort to rearrange and refocus aesthetic enquiry, and do not believe it gives priority to any particular art forms or aesthetic experiences. My own account focuses on the ways in which Rorty welds together philosophical and political beliefs to forge an ambitious, alternative overall 'picture of inquiry', uncoupled from conventional epistemological presumptions. Before relating this pragmatist optic to the field of aesthetics, I will outline the most relevant ideas of Rorty's philosophy.

2. Rorty's Phantom Foundation

Rorty ultimately takes aim at what he sees as the central distinction in Western epistemology—between (conceptual) scheme and (empirical) content. He wants to let go of the notion that the adequacy of words and sentences is a matter of representational accuracy, and to think of knowledge instead simply as 'a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality' (Rorty, 1991, p. 1). From a Darwinian vista, all historical cultures and communities are simply different manifestations of humans using language 'like a sense organ' (Davidson, 1999, p. 668) to adapt to their surroundings. This outlook softens epistemological intuitions, framing the 'hardness' of truth and objectivity not as a function of their success in coinciding with intrinsic natures or real essences, but as a

1 See in particular Shusterman (2000 [1992]). For an overview, see Malecki (2014).

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result of their having proven themselves useful for some human purpose such that they have come to seem non-controversial. Truth is thus 'simply a compliment paid to the beliefs which we think so justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed' (Rorty, 1991, p. 24).

Rorty seeks to convince his readers to adopt this perspectival shift in two main ways. First, by putting strain on the traditional 'representationalist' framework—according to which, adequate description is seen as getting the right linguistic units inside our minds to mirror the right non-linguistic units out there. He points out that there's no 'sky-hook' to 'lift us out of our beliefs to a standpoint from which we glimpse the relations of those beliefs to reality' (1991, p. 9). Instead, we should rest content with what he calls 'toeholds'—provisional and contingent positions where we work with what is seen as working.

Second, Rorty argues that an anti-foundationalist mindset has certain advantages. He encourages his readers to drop the idea that the pursuit of knowledge is 'the search for that which compels the mind to belief' (Rorty, 2009 [1979], p. 163) and to resist the notion that there are things that must be heeded—essences, natures, facts—to ensure that enquiry is properly anchored. Rorty draws on a rhetoric of emancipation to play up the appeals of a society 'where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity' (1989, p. 22), whether that be science, moral imperatives, the word of God, or the nature of man. The point is to highlight the scope of action that is available, and to get across that we might lead richer, fuller lives if we kick the habit of seeking counsel from true foundations and instead make human purposes and interests our lodestar.

The invitation to think of enquiry as the pursuit of beliefs that are 'useful' might appear scandalously irresponsible. Rorty insists, however, that the image of *getting in touch with reality* is superfluous. His musings on literary interpretation are illustrative: his anti-essentialism leads him to dismiss distinctions between textual meanings that are 'found' and 'made' (or made *up*), and to hold that there's no need to worry about which interpretations get at 'real' meanings. While the recommendation to just let personal interests guide us would seem to provoke hermeneutic anarchy, Rorty points out that among those personal interests is the wish to appear convincing. It is thus not the case that anything goes, for 'what we say must have some reasonably systematic inferential connections with what we or others have previously said' (Rorty, 1992, p. 98). In other words, there is already a system of checks and balances in place in the form of disciplinary norms and practices, such as: '[I]f you want to make your interpretation of a book sound plausible, you cannot just gloss one or two lines or scenes. You have to say something about what most of the *other* lines or scenes are doing there' (1992, p. 95).

Rorty adopts the concept of 'language game' to suggest that there are more or less well-defined rules—about what counts as important, valid, rational, and so on—that make some moves permissible and others not. We speak of truth when we cannot see any way or need to question the rules of the game—namely, when there is inter-subjective

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agreement on what is possible and important. The desire for coherence is also strongly regulative, as we seek to iron out contradictions both within and across fields of enquiry.

Unsurprisingly, Rorty's position has prompted charges of relativism. The worry is that it leaves truth up for grabs and forsakes criteria by which to establish objective matters of fact that we rely on to ground enquiry and settle disputes. But while Rorty does maintain that access to sovereign touchstones of truth is beyond reach, he insists that an anti-foundationalist outlook does not leave us *without* criteria to guide us; he merely frames those criteria in terms of practical utility rather than correspondence with antecedent actualities. So, even if we can never compare an account with the 'in-itself-ness' of the thing described or explained, we can nevertheless compare the relative practical benefits of competing options.

Of course, people frequently disagree on what is useful, so it is not at all clear how one alternative can be justified as 'better' than another. Philosophically, Rorty can only indicate how *not* to go about it: We should acknowledge that there's no way to reach beyond the contingencies of time and place to take direction from that which is right or true in some ahistorical, absolute sense. We should let go of the dream that enquiry, if conducted diligently, will 'someday converge to a single point' (Rorty, 1991, p. 38) such that necessity will resolve matters *for us*. Rorty seeks to put a positive spin on this, framing notions of intrinsic natures and non-optional beliefs as 'something dragging us down that we need to cut free of' (Rorty and Ragg, 2002, p. 385). But an anti-foundationalist outlook cannot tell us what to *do* with that newfound freedom. Pragmatism can point out that navigating by human purposes, rather than real essences, makes available more courses of action, but it cannot suggest which course of action to follow. It can remind us to always keep in mind practical effects, but it has no special powers to ascertain which consequences are 'better' or 'worse' *per se*.

To unpack what counts as useful requires deliberation of goals and purposes, and absent some transcendent criterion we can only seek to formulate what counts as good for *us* on the basis of *our* contingent acculturation. Who 'we' are varies by context, and can only be loosely specified as some constellation of humans that share enough beliefs to make constructive conversation possible. For Rorty, then, enquiry is inherently 'ethnocentric', as he calls it, for the mundane reason that we simply have no choice but to 'work by our own lights' (1991, p. 26).

The 'we' (or *ethnos*) that Rorty most generally identifies with is an idealized version of liberalism, a tradition that values human freedom, plurality, and broadmindedness, and that strives to reduce suffering and avoid cruelty. He thus seeks to shore up a framework crafted from that which he holds to be most worth preserving and perfecting of his own age and culture. *His* commitments too are products of acculturation, and the metaphor of 'working by one's own lights' does not entertain the image of people carrying headlights in the same dark space, so that their respective beams may fall on the same spot of ground to reveal something that automatically looks identical to everyone. The colony of liberals cannot say, 'Point your lights where we point ours', and expect members of a caste society or theocracy to change their ways. The illuminated area will only look the same if one

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party gets another to move over to where they are standing, which is to come around to their way of talking and seeing.

There is, then, no way to justify the beliefs *of* liberalism that is independent of one's belief *in* liberalism. Liberals can only rationalize their beliefs circularly by stating and restating the specific meanings and values they attach to words such as 'cruelty' and 'freedom'. They can provide *reasons* for their beliefs, but none that are presuppositionless–that is, that will inevitably and predictably lead those who inhabit other perspectives to submit to their power. All they can do is keep speaking liberalese and hope that the grammar rubs off onto others, so that they too come to accept as their own the premises that *make* the arguments for liberalism click into gear.

Pushing anti-essentialism to its logical extreme, Rorty wants to 'move everything over from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics' (1993, p. 457). That includes his own meta-philosophy. In a key passage, Rorty notes of fellow pragmatist John Dewey that he:

> was accused of blowing up the optimism and flexibility of a parochial and jejune way of life (the American) into a philosophical system. So he did, but his reply was that *any* philosophical system is going to be an attempt to express the ideals of *some* community's way of life. He was quite ready to admit that the virtue of his philosophy was, indeed, nothing more than the virtue of the way of life which it commended.

(1991, p. 43)

Rorty's willingness to make the same admission makes it hard to get a clear picture of the relationship between his philosophy and his politics. On the one hand, he is quite clear that his commitment to liberalism is ethnocentric and contingent, and it is hard to escape the sense that it somehow rests on, or grows out of, his general ideas on truth. On the other, like a magician explaining the secret of her trick as she performs it without breaking the illusion, Rorty is equally explicit that his own meta-philosophy is a kind of phantom foundation. He realizes that the claim that there is nothing out there to get right cannot logically claim to have gotten reality right either. The sleight of hand is evident, for example, in Rorty's remark that pragmatism may be viewed 'not as grounding, but as clearing the ground for, democratic politics' (1991, p. 13). Here he manages to suggest both that philosophy somehow precedes and paves the way for a specific form of politics *and* that it is a kind of strategic stage-setting, suggesting that Rorty's liberalism 'really' is the tail that wags the philosophical dog.

Rorty realizes that there is no necessary connection between his philosophy and his politics; it is possible to be a liberal meta-physician or a conservative pragmatist. But he deliberately strives to weld them together, writing *as if* liberalism both leads to and leads from pragmatism, constructing a kind of Penrose stairway—an optical illusion that can be conceived of either as a continuous ascent or a continuous descent, but either way forming a closed loop. The trick, as Rorty keeps reminding his readers, is to drop the urge for epistemological foundations altogether, even if the notion that contingency goes all the way down is as hard to wrap one's mind around as the notion that time goes all the way back.

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3. Consequences of Pragmatism

Critiques of the foundations of knowledge are hardly philosophically novel, but for Rorty, epistemological scepticism is neither the main point nor the end point. Indeed, he has repeatedly taken issue with scholarly traditions that fetishize 'questioning' for its own sake—namely, for problematizing without establishing a problem or proposing a solution (Rorty, 1991, p. 16; Rorty and Ragg, 2002, p. 44–46). Rorty reframes the postmodern commonplace that everything is 'constituted by language'[2] as the observation that 'there is nothing we talk about that we might not have talked of differently' (2016b, p. 69) and offers it not as a significant finding but as a springboard for enquiry. The aim is to explore in practice how the scope for redescription and recontextualization may be utilized productively. In effect, this is a call for philosophy to de-specialize, to abandon its preoccupation with epistemology and instead 'try to contribute to humanity's ongoing conversation about what to do with itself' (Rorty, 2007, p. ix).

Rorty, then, seeks to make available a more flexible optic on the relationship between language and world, designed to help us ease ourselves out of old vocabularies and attendant habits of mind. Yet the specifics of this process can be frustratingly ambivalent, and Rorty alternately overplays and underplays his hand: sometimes he hints at the great things that would follow if we could dig new mental tracks so that we came to see 'increased knowledge' not as 'increased access to the Real but as increased ability to do things' (2016b, p. 70); other times he suggests that a pragmatist perspective will not so much prompt us to do anything different as to just think differently about what we do (Rorty and Ragg, 2002, p. 391).

Plenty of academics from various disciplines have been keen to explore how these ideas might inform their own research. But Rorty himself has been less than encouraging of such initiatives. In reply to disputes about the ontological status of historical narratives, for example, he writes that: 'I am not sure why any historian, in his capacity as such, would care whether the pragmatists or their opponents are right. For either view is compatible with historians continuing to do just what they have always done' (2000, p. 198). More generally, he observes that 'there's no need to situate oneself in philosophical space before writing one's book' (2000, p. 198).

Some of Rorty's allies have maintained even more firmly that epistemological beliefs have no consequences outside the realm of meta-philosophy. Stanley Fish, for example, insists that there is 'no commerce' (Fish, 2003, p. 397) between the metaphysical domain and practical domains:

> [W]ere I to have a theory about whether or not [literary] interpretation is grounded, there would be no way to get from it to the particulars of any interpretive act; or, rather (and it amounts to the same thing), my theory of interpretation at that level would accommodate any and all interpretive acts, neither approving some nor rejecting others (2003, p. 410).

2 Rorty finds this claim misleading as it implies that langue somehow brings reality into existence, which he characterizes as 'obviously absurd' (2016a, p. 18).

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Both Fish and Rorty hold that nothing bad follows from giving up on criteria that transcend inter-subjectivity—it does not cause commitments to weaken, nor objectivity to crumble. But unlike Rorty, Fish also dismisses the idea that something *good* might follow, such as 'freeing us from the hold of unwarranted absolutes so that we may more flexibly pursue the goals of human flourishing' (Fish, 1985, p. 440). Fish does not think anti-foundationalism affords any agency, as meta-philosophy is not some special sphere over and beyond practical contexts. It is just one more context, albeit one that deals with particularly general questions. A philosophy of truth cannot offer instruction because it is an extrapolation, not an independent calculus. It cannot detect new evidence, nor transform *already* formed beliefs about facts or causes, and thus has no power to trump what *already* counts as true—hence 'no commerce'. In the event that some new piece of data came to light so that a theory of truth failed to cover all particulars, the anomaly would compel the *theory* to adjust.

Rorty, however, does not simply trace his epistemological ideas where cool logic takes them; instead, he appeals to—and seeks to *make appealing*—a picture of human life and enquiry as autonomous, self-reliant, and adaptable. I take him to agree with Fish that there's no inherent agency in anti-foundationalism, but Rorty thinks there is *potential* agency—if it is actively cultivated. Fish's somewhat crude summary of Rorty's position does not acknowledge this possibility:

> The reasoning behind this hope [that something good might follow from anti-foundationalism] is that since we now know that our convictions about truth and factuality have not been imposed on us by the world, or imprinted in our brains, but are derived from the practices of ideologically motivated communities, we can set them aside in favor of convictions that we choose freely (Fish, 1985, p. 440).

But this leaves out Rorty's anti-representationalism, and any effort to make sense of the agency that Rorty hints at must give priority to the linguistic turn. We might say that Fish follows that part of Rorty's reasoning that leads to the idea that 'contingency goes all the way down', and he is right to say that this picture *moves* nothing. It is what Fish ignores—Rorty's tinkering with issues of language and representation—which leads Rorty to the related observation that 'there is nothing we talk about that we might not have talked of differently'. This picture *does* have some potential agency in that it prompts further tinkering: If language is a coping mechanism, what other language games could we play so as to cope better? If our representations and beliefs are not *given*, could we set things up differently and more usefully?

The consequences of pragmatism, then, hinge on linguistic intermediaries, and Rorty calls attention to the transformative power of redescription and metaphor, suggesting that it lies in their ties to the human imagination's capacity to push thinking beyond its present parameters: 'Rationality is a matter of making allowed moves within language games. Imagination creates the games that reason proceeds to play' (Rorty, 2016b, p. 76).

Still, critics have questioned whether it is feasible, or even desirable, to dissolve age-old epistemological dichotomies—reality/appearance, necessity/contingency, objective/subjective, and so on—that are so culturally ingrained as to constitute the very

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tracks upon which our trains of thought run. Anti-foundationalism seems particularly counter-intuitive in relation to straightforward verities like the redness of a rose, the date of some historical event, or the moon's gravitational pull. Though Rorty is able to muster shrewd counter-arguments even to such commonsensical objections, it is worth noting that the utility of his all-embracing ideas *does* appear context-dependent. The guardians of our most basic facts, like physicists and mathematicians, may reasonably shrug their shoulders and say that they fail to grasp what is at stake because it is hard to see what it would mean for them to become 'less essentialist'. It simply does not make much difference in practice—or *to* practice—whether the physicist's finding is framed as *having disclosed one more chunk of nature's true essence* or as *having put nature to use in some manner that works*. If there's no way to cash in the pragmatist gift card that reads 'You're free to let human purposes guide inquiry', then the effort to trivialize truth comes to seem an irreverent irrelevance.

The possible benefits of a Rortian mindset thus mainly present themselves in the softer areas of culture, like aesthetics, where there are vestiges of essentialism to 'untighten'. Rorty himself prefers to tinker with the big pieces, challenging the notion that differences between 'hard' and 'soft' science are *epistemological*, and that the former is in possession of more powerful methods for homing in on the way the world really is. Rorty's alternative distinction runs between activities that have criteria for success laid down in advance and activities that do not. This allows him to reshape core epistemological concepts, aligning *truth* with 'inter-subjectivity', *objectivity* with 'solidarity', and *rationality* with 'civility' and 'tolerance'. The aim is to replace an epistemological optic with an ethical one, so that objectivity and rationality can be seen not as surgical instruments for truth-extraction that only some scholars are properly qualified to operate, but rather as virtues that both physicists and art historians may endorse (Rorty, 1991, p. 1–110).

It is important to note that redescription has both a 'deconstructive' and a 'reconstructive' component. The former is evident in Rorty's fondness for characterizing familiar phenomena in oddly detached and distanced ways. His notion of fields of enquiry as 'language games' is one example; others include his depiction of being educated as 'being reprogrammed' (1991, p. 90), and of textual coherence as 'no more than the fact that somebody has found something interesting to say about a group of marks and noises' (1992, p. 97). Such zoomed-out redescriptions read like the field notes of an alien anthropologist, and serve to defamiliarize things by putting them as starkly as possible, thus wiping the slate clean.

The reconstructive work, by contrast, requires commitment to contingent goals or values. A pertinent example is Rorty's effort to 'set up' literary criticism differently by sidestepping customary classifications (by topics, genres, orders of knowledge, etc.) He uses instead his private/public distinction[3] as an off-ramp to rearrange his imaginary library into 'books which help us become autonomous' and 'books which help us become

3 This refers to Rorty's ameliorative proposal to think of our selves as having two dimensions that need not be fully reconcilable: a public part committed to minimizing human suffering and humiliation, and a private part devoted to self-creation (Rorty, 1989, pp. 73–137; 1999, pp. 3–22).

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less cruel' (1989, p. 141), before proceeding to map out some further subdivisions within each category. The aim is not to find a better way to do some agreed-upon task, but to advance a new vocabulary that suggests something else to do. This illustrates how Rorty hopes to reshape critical practice through linguistic innovations. The goal is to promote a particular role for literature (broadly understood): Rorty sees books as productive means for cultivating both autonomy and empathy, and his redescriptions are designed to highlight just these purposes.

At the same time, a number of scholars have observed that Rorty's own excursions in practical criticism—he has written on Nabokov and Orwell (Rorty, 1989, pp. 141–188)—are surprisingly old-fashioned and conventional. Shusterman notes that Rorty comes perilously close to treating literature as 'a branch of practical ethics' (Shusterman, 2002, p. 206), while Áine Mahon writes that his 'readings of texts are less innovative and less radical than his polemics might suggest' (Mahon, 2014, p. 80). While it is somewhat unreasonable to see Rorty's sketchy literary criticism as symptomatic of what he thinks criticism should do *in general*, these writings nevertheless raise all the familiar questions about whether, and how, pragmatist ideas might shape and modify inquiry outside the philosophical domain.

In the following, I explore the potential 'effects' of pragmatism from a somewhat different angle. I wish to investigate the scope for change 'from within' the field of aesthetics by staging an encounter between pragmatist and analytic aesthetics. Rorty himself has frequently pitted his own meta-philosophy against the essentialist inclinations of analytic philosophy more generally,[4] but I believe we can bring into sharper focus the transformative force of pragmatism by turning its optic on a particular sub-field.

4. The Roots and Remnants of Aesthetics

Although philosophers of ancient Greece wrote on the nature, function, and principles of art, it is widely held that it was towards the end of the eighteenth century that aesthetics emerged as a distinct philosophical discipline, with Immanuel Kant's *Critique of judgment* (1790) as the most important and influential contribution. Inspired by advances in the natural sciences, Enlightenment and Late Enlightenment philosophers extended the idea that the world is governed by universal laws to such things as truth, morals, and beauty. At the risk of underestimating the sometimes substantial disagreements among then-contemporaries, we might say that eighteenth-century writers on aesthetics mostly shared a striking confidence that it is possible to establish correct standards of taste and to distinguish clearly art from non-art. Although Enlightenment philosophers routinely started from the everyday observation that tastes vary wildly, it was largely taken for granted that behind the veil of appearances lay universal standards that philosophers took it upon themselves to uncover.

4 In the early part of his career, Rorty worked within the analytic tradition, before breaking with it in the course of the 1970s. Still, this narrative has been the subject of much debate and some revision (see Misak, 2013), as has the broader issue of the relationship between pragmatism and analytic philosophy.

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The philosophers of the Age of Reason were grandiose system-builders, but it is hard to escape the feeling that the very foundations of their constructions rested on less than solid ground. Certainly, from 'our' present outlook, the idea that the outward messiness of taste camouflages some grand natural order where the timeless essences of 'the true', 'the good', and 'the beautiful' neatly line up has come to seem like a rather curious supposition (or superstition).

The firmness—the presumed objectivity and universality of art and taste—has softened as the metaphysical underpinnings of Enlightenment philosophy have been challenged. This is certainly evident in art criticism—the practical application of aesthetic faculties, which grew exponentially in the nineteenth century—where supremely authoritative accounts of artistic value and genius became increasingly rare and qualified in the course of the twentieth century. The emergence of the cultural industries and of popular culture also prompted theoretical reconceptualizations, while the avant-garde devised new artistic functions and ideas, including the view that it is the role of art to provoke, challenge, and question. We might say that the key terms around which notions of artistic value once revolved, like 'the beautiful' and 'the good', have been supplemented, and sometimes supplanted, as a series of artistic movements—surrealism and modernism, say—linked art to new concepts and imperatives such as 'the unconscious' and 'Make it new!'.

This is not to necessarily say that essentialist proclivities have been completely dispensed with. For more than half a century, Anglophone philosophy has been dominated by analytic philosophy, which still attends to questions of ontology and epistemology. There is, however, some controversy over the extent to which the tradition's relevant subdivision, analytic aesthetics, is characterized by essentialism. When the tradition emerged in the 1950s, it explicitly presented itself as a refutation of the idea that art has some deep, singular essence (Shusterman, 2002, p. 19), insisting that it is necessary to investigate particulars, and to retire the idea that there's some metaphysical unity to all art. Nevertheless, the tradition's self-avowed anti-essentialism is a matter of some dispute.

Here I wish to acknowledge the challenges of making broad characterizations of such a heterogeneous tradition as analytic aesthetics. It is tricky to specify what pragmatism hopes to replace or reframe without portraying it as overly monolithic or naïve. Rorty himself frequently resorts to lofty concepts like 'capital-T Truth', 'essentialism', 'the really real', or 'the myth of the given', which can come across as caricatures rather than evenhanded descriptions of actual positions. In seeking to highlight general differences, my own account, too, sometimes offers sweeping contrasts that hardly represent all analytical works equally fairly. At the same time, I would insist that there *are* real differences. For example, although analytics does accommodate both essentialist and overtly anti-essentialist notions of art, the latter are not couched in the comprehensive anti-foundationalism that lie at the heart of Rorty's thinking. Those who reject efforts to state the necessary and sufficient properties of art (see, for example, Weitz, 1956 and Thomasson, 2005) do not tend to reject essentialism outright, but merely argue that *art* is not the kind of phenomenon that can be defined, and thus should be distinguished from other phenomena that *can* be pinned down.

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Arguably, this is symptomatic of a broader tendency to dissipate rather than discard essences. It seems to me that analytics has made the philosophy of art significantly more atomized, both *conceptually* (by forsaking notions of 'art', 'artistic intention', or 'aesthetic value' in the abstract in favour of increasingly fine-drawn taxonomies) and *empirically* (by gradually moving away from questions about, say, the ontology of art towards questions about the ontology of specific art forms, like music, or about the aesthetic values of specific sub-categories, like pop or rap). The granularity of the analytic tradition stands in sharp contrast to Rorty's eagerness to dissolve distinctions rather than to slice them up into ever thinner pieces when problems emerge, as well as to his disinclination to offer precise definitions (he never explains in any detail, for example, what he means by langue game, but simply trusts that the metaphor is sufficiently evocative to do its job).

Indeed, the dissimilarities between the two traditions are perhaps most readily apparent in terms of writing style. Analytic philosophy puts a high premium on terminological precision, argumentative clarity, and formal logic. Pragmatism, by contrast, does not entertain the image of reason and logic as a kind of grindstone against which to sharpen concepts so that they may cut the world at the proper joints. It is possible to make too much of these differences and presume that the analytical tradition's habit of 'testing' concepts and distinctions against limit cases (actual and hypothetical) inevitably betrays metaphysical beliefs. While analytic writings may give the *impression* that the aim is to apply reason and rigour to get at the true nature of phenomena, it is by no means given that efforts to clarify concepts are symptomatic of a commitment to essentialism and objectivity.

But it is also possible to underestimate the differences. From a pragmatist point of view, it is crucial to explicitly acknowledge that enquiry is more a matter of creation than of discovery (and note that this contrast is not meant to imply that all analytic philosophers hold that aesthetics knowledge derives from the unearthing of mind-independent facts; it is rather to suggest that they do not actively emphasize the creation part nearly as strongly as Rorty does). The aim is to cultivate an 'optic' that deliberately frames enquiry as proactive rather than re-active, as less a function of ontology (of where reason takes us) and more a function of politics (of what we hope to achieve). In the following, then, the aim is to explore how this alternative 'picture of inquiry' may create different resonances in the field of aesthetics and serve to untighten the analytic outlook.

5. New Resonances

While pragmatism's holism tends to counteract excessive scientificness, system-building, and scholarly hyper-specialization, nothing in particular follows directly, predictably, or inevitably from an anti-foundationalist mindset. Rorty himself is fond of the metaphor (adopted from Quine) of the human mind as an ever-changing web of beliefs, noting that when new beliefs come into conflict with present beliefs, the web will typically reweave itself. It will seek to ease the tension by letting go of the old belief or devise some new set of beliefs to accommodate both old and new. But our webs are far too complex and idiosyncratic to say with any degree of certainty what specific consequences the introduction

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of a certain configuration of beliefs will have elsewhere in the structure. There's just no way of knowing what tensions or ruptures new beliefs will cause, or how the web will mend itself (or even whether it *will* mend itself; sometimes, when we struggle to reconcile contradictions, we choose to ignore, or just get on with, the torn strings as best we can).

Thus, while anti-foundationalism may well induce changes in aesthetic beliefs or practices, it does not determine or dictate specifics. Changes in remoter areas of the web tend to require lots of further prompts closer to the particular matter at hand. As we have seen, although Rorty and Fish both hold that contingency goes all the way down, basic belief comes wrapped in different beliefs and arguments about consequences. It is quite conceivable that the potential ripple effects of anti-foundationalism depend on how one has arrived at that perspective.

Still, it seems to me that *if* one is swayed by Rorty's ideas, such that they become an integral part of one's own web of beliefs, his redescriptions and metaphors tend to make all sorts of things resonate differently. I often notice this when I revisit scholarly literature in my own field that I initially digested without having read Rorty first. When I return to some familiar topic in analytic aesthetics—authorial intention, say—I am puzzled that I took seriously the idea that this might be an issue on which it is important or possible to have some principled position. I would now say that the merits of considering artistic intentions are contingent on analytical or interpretive purposes and interests, and that the epistemological intricacies that inevitably arise (concerning the availability, trustworthiness, or relevance of such intentions) must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

Conversely, I used to find it hard to take seriously Laura Mulvey's seminal article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), about the gendered viewing positions of classical Hollywood films, because I could not take seriously its talk of fetishistic scopophilia and castration threat. Now I can look past my misgivings about the theoretical framework and hold that the value of Mulvey's contribution lay not so much in the explanatory power of her psychoanalytical analogies as in her perceptive and productive *metaphors* (man as bearer of the look, woman connoting to-be-looked-at-ness, etc.).

The later demise of psychoanalytical film theory—arguably the closest thing to a paradigm shift in film studies—also resonates differently in light of Rorty's insistence that there's no need to situate oneself in philosophical space. The framework was challenged by prominent film scholars like David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, who called into question dubious premises, presumptions, and protocols, thus creating a growing sense that acute problems were piling up. Carroll's entry in *Post-Theory* (1996)—one of the hardest blows to the psychoanalytic paradigm—is illustrative as it explicitly raises issues of truth. He clarifies that he is a fallibilist, but no naïve proponent of Absolute Truth, and that he 'respects the Kuhnian, antipositivist emphasis on the importance of historical and social contexts for inquiry' (1996, pp. 58–59). Carroll's wish to dissociate himself from the image of a positivist hard-liner is understandable given that questions of truth had become politically charged. But I now think of these remarks as optional posturing, and that his views on truth had no bearing on his critique of how psychoanalytical ideas shaped film studies. It was the charges emanating from *within* the discipline that undermined the paradigm: the observation that psychoanalytic film theory rested on questionable

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assumptions, that it resorted to associative reasoning, that it tended to cherry-pick examples, that more credible explanations were available, and so on. And such arguments are neither strengthened nor weakened by one's stance on truth, for they are as consistent with an anti-foundationalist position as with a foundationalist one.

To give more depth and detail to how pragmatism's anti-essentialist picture of enquiry can reshape widespread analytical premises and presumptions, I'll turn to a single contribution, Ted Nannicelli's (2016) 'In Defence of the Objectivity of Evaluative Television Criticism'.

6. Untightening the Analytic Outlook

Nannicelli aims to establish that 'at least some instances of evaluative judgement are objective and truth-evaluable' (2016, p. 126). He makes his case in a typically analytic fashion, starting out from ostensibly non-controversial propositions, then drawing inferences and addressing potential objections. One such non-controversial premise is that cultural artefacts are intentionally designed to fulfil particular functions, so that their value is largely a matter of how well they succeed in this task. By analogy, 'the goodness of a particular chair is relative to how well it fulfils the function of a chair to afford comfortable sitting' (2016, p. 137). For maximum clarity, Nannicelli selects minimally contentious examples such as children's television, which is aimed at a well-defined audience and has a narrower range of purposes and functions than more complex programming. He then proceeds to single out one particular function—to exercise and develop children's cognitive skills without frustrating them—as a candidate for objective evaluation.

Along the way, he makes several concessions to attenuate his claims for objectivity: He grants that works of art have a multitude of functions, so objective evaluations rest on an assessment of the *kind* of work that it is (2016, p. 136); that there are no universal aesthetic norms; and that artistic value is 'heterogeneous, sociohistorically contingent, and relative to particular interests and purposes' (2016, p. 138). Of children's programming, he notes that the function of honing cognitive skills is not absolute, but a weaker, defeasible principle, although one that 'might nevertheless lend *prima facie* support to an inductive argument that has a value judgement as its conclusion' (2016, p. 131). He also points out that the honing of cognitive skills obviously does not exhaust the value of a children's programme, and that it 'may indeed be insufficient to warrant a positive judgement of the programme's overall artistic value' (2016, p. 139).

Amid these caveats, however, objectivity becomes rather blurry, and Nannicelli glosses over key issues. For example, settling what *kind* of work a work is seems to me a significantly trickier proposition than his account lets on for the processes of classification, contextualization, interpretation, and evaluation are holistic and dialectical. Identifying the appropriate medium, genre, style, tradition, and so on is not simply a preliminary matter, or some basic task that must be completed before moving on to more complex tasks. I do not see it as a 'first step' that grounds interpretation and evaluation, for interpretive and evaluative takes tend to reciprocally inform descriptions and classifications as well.

We might say that criticism—the umbrella term for these activities—is the endeavour of relating textual features to a boundless repository of other beliefs, presumptions, facts,

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and discourses. But the key components of this venture—labels like 'original', 'unified', 'realistic', 'beautiful'—are not straightforwardly either descriptive or evaluative. Criticism always mobilizes a multitude of interconnected and multi-layered bits of knowledge and beliefs, and may tap into discourses that are not widely accepted by, or even familiar to, all prospective readers. A critical account that mobilizes a film's realism as an evaluative prism would have to explicitly or implicitly draw on some notion of what realism *is* in the first place and consider which aspects of realism are pertinent in the particular context (psychological realism? stylistic realism? historical accuracy? the credibility of plot events?). It would also need to bring into play a range of assumptions about the degree of similarity between specific features of the screen representation and the world we inhabit. Another consideration is the aptness of realism as an evaluative criterion for the work under consideration, which rests on conjectures about artistic aims as well as familiarity with generic norms (for example, it is likely to matter a great deal whether the film is a farce or a sombre drama). And more specialized, scholarly evaluations may articulate or allude to sweeping theories about the 'politics' or 'ideology' of realism: Does the critic believe, for instance, that realism is capable of subverting the status quo, or rather that it is inherently complicit with it? The answer here, in turn, plugs into yet other beliefs about what is meant by 'the status quo', and about whether, and how, the status quo ought to be overturned.

As for originality, one cannot properly assess the merits of a work's adherence to or deviance from conventions and traditions without addressing thorny questions like: to what extent is originality a productive optic for this specific work? Does it seem to aspire to inventiveness in the first place, or is it content to adhere to established norms? Are those established norms stimulating or stale (or *made* stimulating or stale by the work's mobilization of them)? And can the work's originality be contextualized or interpreted so as to make it seem artistically useful or interesting? That is, can we ascribe some purpose to its non-orthodoxy so that it comes to appear artistically valuable and worthwhile? To answer such questions is to offer a holistic take, but I fail to see that such takes rest on purely descriptive observations that precede the process of evaluation.

From a pragmatist perspective, the quest for 'objectivity' creates more problems than it solves. It would instead see aesthetic criticism as a language game that sometimes consists of fairly standard moves, sometimes of highly intricate moves that only come off to the extent that they resonate with complex configurations and layers of other beliefs. I realize that Nannicelli deliberately picks simple and clear-cut examples in order to illustrate the *possibility* of objectivity, but the very pursuit of simplicity and clarity risks rendering aesthetic evaluation overly mechanical and insufficiently holistic.

And even if we grant that it makes sense to isolate some maximally simple and acceptable evaluative benchmark (such as the honing of cognitive skills) that is appropriate for some easily recognizable kind of work (such as children's television), there's still no guarantee that two critics would arrive at the same *verdict* were they to 'apply' that benchmark to the same work. They may, for example, come to enlist different pieces of textual evidence, or have different notions of what counts as 'too demanding' or 'too undemanding' for a child of a certain age, or of what 'cognitive skill' entails: Is it purely a matter of

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narrative logic, of figuring out causal relations, of recognizing character traits and motivations, of constructing the proper chronology of events, or similar? Or does it involve emotional, moral, and political dimensions of storytelling as well? But Nannicelli does not consider the practical procedures and deliberations involved in evaluation, and so does not actually seem to argue that evaluative *verdicts* are objective. This is evident in his observation that: 'In practice there may be a divergence of opinion regarding how well a particular chair fulfils its function, and thus how good it is'; but he then counter-intuitively adds that this nevertheless 'does not jeopardize the objective basis of evaluative judgement' (2016, p. 138).

The 'objective basis' that Nannicelli hopes to establish in fact seems to be something rather less ambitious, namely that cultural artefacts have certain *properties* that are objective in the sense that they are 'mind-independent [and] intersubjectively accessible' (2016, p. 128). Nannicelli makes much of the fact that we often seek to back up our aesthetic likes and dislikes with reasons and arguments, and that in doing so we make reference to the 'objective features' of the work in question. He sees this as refuting so-called *expressivism*, the position of those who, Nannicelli finds, 'have moved too quickly from the plausible premise that there are no universal principles of artistic value to the dubious idea that evaluative judgements of television can be neither objective nor evaluable for truth' (2016, p. 125). But here, too, he misrepresents his own case: For he does not in the end argue that aesthetic *judgements* are objective, just that textual *properties* (and perhaps evaluative criteria) are. And in any case, any pragmatist, however anti-essentialist, would happily concede—would insist, in fact—that cultural artefacts do have intersubjectively available properties, and that we frequently engage in meaningful and rational debates about their aesthetic merits. But there is no reason or need to conclude that this makes evaluation objectively grounded.

There is, however, another component to Nannicelli's notion of objectivity which frames it as a function of cultural norms and conventions, of shared beliefs and agreement on procedures and purposes. This consensual dimension, of course, is what pragmatists wish to play up, but in Nannicelli's account, it is largely suppressed, and when it does surface, it is not so much expressly stated as inadvertently betrayed. It is dimly discernible in the remark that: 'In any given sociohistorical context it either is or is not the case that the primary function of a chair is to afford comfortable sitting' (2016, p. 138). And it is evident in the throwaway line that children's programmes have artistic merit to the extent that they fulfil their cognitive function and 'whatever other purposes we agree children's television has' (2016, p. 139).

While the differences in substance between analytic and pragmatist aesthetics are hard to gauge precisely, the differences in terms of rhetoric and points of emphasis are readily apparent. Analytics tend to downplay the role of contingency and consent, presumably because it does not connote the desired firmness. Nannicelli's take on evaluative criteria is indicative: He grants that universal value norms are out of the question, and offers instead the notion of 'defeasible principles'. This means that a conclusion holds *given* the correctness of some reasonable initial presumption; the caveat is that the presumption is always open to revision, and that it would be 'defeated' were new evidence or information to

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come to light. The concept thus serves to renounce the (long-discredited) idea that evaluation is objective in some *absolute* sense, without giving up on the hardness of objectivity altogether. It is a way to acknowledge that evaluative practices sometimes do change, but framing it as a result of some new 'fact' having entered the fray, thus preserving the idea that diligent enquiry brings us ever closer to how things really are. I am more amenable to the Kuhnian view that we do not progress towards truths that await discovery, but rather *away from* conceptions of the world that have run into difficulties (Hacking, 2012, p. xxxiv). Certainly, a pragmatist perspective would put discursivity front and centre and say that we make adjustments for all manner of reasons, and that it is only to be expected that some forms of evaluation fall out of—and others into—favour over time.

Nannicelli's chair analogy throws up similar problems. On the one hand, he does make some basic qualifications that are perfectly in line with a pragmatist outlook, as when he stresses that he is not arguing that chairs 'have an unchanging, timeless function that could not be otherwise' (Nannicelli, 2016, p. 138), or when he notes that a chair may have other forms of value besides comfort. On the other hand, there are oddly blunt statements, such as 'the goodness of a particular chair is relative to how well it fulfils the function of a chair to afford comfortable sitting' (2016, p. 137), which there is no reason to accept in general. There are obviously chairs for which comfort is well-nigh irrelevant (those that fold up for easy and efficient storage, for instance). Even more curious-sounding to pragmatist ears is the claim that 'a chair's value *as a chair* is a matter of how well it fulfils the primary function of chairs' (2016, p. 137). Although it is not entirely unequivocal, the implication appears to be that the primary function refers to comfortable sitting, in which case Nannicelli elevates one possible function into a kind of trans-contextual essence, which is to slide back fully into metaphysics. And the assertion that the function of a chair is 'an objective matter of fact' strikes me as a rather ungainly way of saying that there may—especially in the case of very simple objects in well-defined contexts—be plenty of agreement on purpose, and thus on evaluative criteria.

Nannicelli also insists on an awkward contrast between objective and subjective evaluations, suggesting that there *are* instances of wholly subjective tastes as well, such as food preferences. He notes that, in the case of television, 'we are able to debate our evaluations in a way that is not possible when two people do not see eye to eye about the flavour of coriander, chopped liver or hops', and that: 'My wife thinks cookies-and-cream ice-cream is disgusting, which I find baffling, but there is neither any need for her to go on to give reasons why, nor any sense in me offering reasons to sway her view' (2016, p. 128). But I fail to see that gastronomic taste is any more innately resistant to reason-giving than other kinds of taste. There are no natural boundaries to the discourses of expertise and appreciation that we humans can create in the course of making sense of the world by talking about it. It is simply a matter of acculturation and interest, of having been exposed to and enticed by the relevant language games. It requires no great leap of the imagination to envision a pair of gourmands exchanging perfectly meaningful reasons for liking or disliking this or that dish, and the husband telling a friend that 'My wife thinks *Seinfeld* is boring, which I find baffling', and then dismissing the whole thing as beyond rational debate.

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My most basic disagreement, however, concerns the analogy between, on the one hand, the evaluation of chairs and children's programmes and, on the other, the evaluation of more complex art works. Nannicelli finds that the evaluation of TV works has 'not advanced as much as it could because television studies scholars have not availed themselves of some of the theoretical concepts and distinctions in [analytic philosophy]' (2016, p. 125). The implication seems to be that we ought to extract insights from the study of clear and simple cases and then apply the findings to more complex cases as well, thus 'advancing' evaluative practices in general. I much prefer Rorty and Ragg's observation that:

> I don't think texts are best approached with criteria in mind; unless you know exactly what you want to get out of the text in advance. If you're reading a training manual that is explicitly written to enable you to perform a certain task then of course you have criteria to bring to the text: you have tests to apply which will tell you whether it was what you wanted. But when we read literary texts, typically we don't know in advance what we want. So we're not in a good position to bring criteria to bear on the text (Rorty and Ragg, 2002, p. 372).

The encounter I have staged here is meant to unsettle the epistemological presumptions of analytic aesthetics and, as such, mainly serves what I previously called pragmatism's 'deconstructive' function. Its *reconstructive* powers are harder to specify. Rorty's key idea is just that we would do well to slough off the habit of navigating by what is given and instead seek to navigate by what is 'good', even as he recognizes that no objective or universal standard is available. 'Goodness' is a function of what 'we' want, so human interests and purposes must be front and centre. To that end, my (necessarily thinly sketched) reconstructive account of aesthetic evaluation will—like Rorty's meta-philosophy—look to the ethnocentric ideals of liberal democracy for traction.

7. Reconstructing Criticism

It is important to note that aesthetic evaluation is not the kind of activity that has criteria for success laid down in advance. For example, in medicine, we know very well what we hope to get from the research community, such as efficient vaccines. But, as Rorty puts it, we are 'not now, and never will be, in a position to say what purposes novels, poems, and plays are supposed to serve' (2007, p. 101). It simply does not make sense to assign art and art criticism any particular or predefined set of purposes, although we can, of course, list certain general and widely shared functions. We can say that art provides entertainment, understanding, visceral impact, sensuous pleasures, and contemplation; and that films, TV series, novels, music, and so on shape individual and collective beliefs, sometimes through explicit polemics, sometimes more indirectly or incidentally, moulding collective and individual notions of love, war, and art, or of what is heroic or villainous, admirable or shameful, normal or abnormal. And we can think of aesthetic criticism as the space we have built for deliberating the ways in which art fulfils, or fails to fulfil, its innumerable

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purposes. It exists to keep up a conversation about art's significance, relevance, meaning, and value, in general and in specific instances.

I fail to see, however, that this conversation is enhanced by the pursuit of 'objectivity'—by efforts to maximize order, certainty, and predictability by analytical means. From a liberal point of view, we should *want* art to come up with ever more purposes for itself, and to offer a plurality of perspectives—including perspectives that are contradictory or uncomfortable. And we should *want* evaluation to be tied to the specifics of time and place, as well as tied up with all kinds of other beliefs, as happened recently in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement's demonstrations against police violence and killings: As protestors took to the streets to call for systemic reforms, such as defunding the police, critics began to ponder whether the largely favourable portrayals of crime fighting in films and TV series have forged misleading and unhelpful perceptions of the means and ends of police work.

It is good that art interrogates habits of mind, pokes fun at pretentions, challenges beliefs, or calls attention to institutional flaws; it is *also* good that it celebrates what we hold dear. We should want art both to foster respect for and trust in law enforcement (or the legal system, democratic politics, science, etc.) *and* to question those very same commitments, to critically examine their stated or unstated presumptions, and to highlight actual or possible failings. To cultivate and pay tribute to just one of those purposes would be to surrender to either complacency or cynicism. Similarly, we should want art to both commemorate and probe national mythologies and identities, or Romantic love, or capitalism, or anything else.

From this perspective, firmness and certainty are not particularly worthwhile goals. To pin down artistic values is to pin down purposes, which is to sever art's link to liberal democracy and its tenet that it is socially beneficial to facilitate openness, pluralism, and change. Surely, if the scholarly community were to announce that it had, at long last, managed to solve the key problems of aesthetic judgement, the public response would—and should—be ridicule rather than relief. Objectivity in aesthetic evaluation is both unattainable and undesirable. Or, to be more precise: it is undesirable because it is attainable (or near-attainable) only by non-liberal means—namely, as a by-product of intense and prolonged indoctrination by some form of totalitarian rule. Liberal societies, then, should not seek to define or delimit the purposes of art (except when works violate some other right or freedom), but hope to enable a multitude of artistic explorations and engagements because that very enabling is part of what makes for 'a good life' and 'a good society'.

To illustrate how ungainly the concept of objectivity is, we can turn to the other example of TV evaluation that Nannicelli considers besides children's programming. He argues that some makeover programmes 'essentially police women's bodies and simultaneously subvert potential critiques of this function by couching it in neoliberal individualist rhetoric', and that such 'political, ideological and ethical flaws … may constitute artistic disvalue in an objective sense' (2016, p. 140). This line of reasoning is perfectly plausible, and I take issue only with the claim to objectivity. For however much members of liberal societies might agree on the distastefulness of *Extreme Makeover* or *The Swan* (two of his examples), it is still the case that the verdict—that these shows amount to a form

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of gender oppression—rests on the conviction that gender oppression is bad. The judgement, in other words, presupposes certain a prioris in order to resonate. That is perfectly fine (and predictable) from a pragmatist point of view, but these a prioris are decidedly *not* objective—at least not if that is meant to denote something stronger than 'verifiable by reference to beliefs that are self-evident *to us*'. After all, other people—a fundamentalist religious community, say—may be just as firm in their belief that some work that liberals cherish is blasphemous or morally reprehensible because they chime with other a prioris. Would analytic philosophers be prepared to see such evaluations as equally objective? For my own part, I would be happy to concede that the alternatives are *epistemologically* on a par as there's no way to extricate oneself from one's own web of beliefs to take up a position outside of competing language games to find out which one is 'really right'. *Ethnocentrically*, however, my commitment to liberalism makes it an open-and-shut case.

More generally, I prefer Rorty's description of objectivity as a kind virtue rather than a property: 'The desire for 'objectivity' boils down to a desire to acquire beliefs which will eventually receive unforced agreement in the course of a free and open encounter with people holding other beliefs' (Rorty, 1991, p. 41). It thus seems to me that the aim of aesthetic criticism should not be to become more 'analytical'— more rigorous and precise—but rather more generous. That is obviously not to say that we should see all evaluations as equally valid and valuable, as long as they conform to liberal ideals. Evaluation *does* involve expertise and knowledge; but in criticism the point of knowledge is not to safeguard certitude.

Instead, I would encourage the view that the complex vocabularies of accomplished critics are not so much tools to ground enquiry as tools to get enquiry off the ground. Jason Mittell offers a productive outlook when he urges us to think of aesthetic evaluation as 'an invitation to a dialogue', and remarks of evaluative television criticism that it 'helps us to see a series differently, providing a glimpse into one viewer's aesthetic experience and inviting readers to try on such vicarious reading positions for themselves' (Mittell, 2015, p. 207). This constructively fosters an attitude of generosity and inclusiveness, and nurtures the view that critical engagement is geared towards enlightenment, communion, and enrichment.

Knowledge of an art form's conventions and means of expression, of its history and its key figures, and of whatever else the critic brings into her evaluative take, is crucial for purposes of persuasion. To *be persuaded*—that is, to actually move over to (or nearer to) where the critic is standing—is a good thing. It means we have tried on a different perspective and found it compelling. We may think of a piece of criticism as a suggestion to 'try looking at it *this* way' ('try bringing *this* context to the work', for example, or 'try ascribing to it *this* aim, purpose, or thematic concern'), so that what once appeared puzzling may start to resonate, or so that what used to strike us as reasonable and perceptive comes to seem biased and simplistic. Either way, to be persuaded entails having absorbed something that expands or enhances our register of aesthetic responses.

The key is to encourage the expectation that authority must earn its spurs—namely, to say with common sense that in aesthetic criticism expertise manifests itself not in the final verdict but in the arguments that motivate it. This is profoundly different from hard

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science, where non-experts do not need to understand anything about how or why, say, quantum physics works to enjoy the fruits of the scientists' labour (computers, smart phones, MRI machines, etc.). Criticism, by contrast, just does not produce findings or outcomes that can be enjoyed independently of our ability to trace the preceding steps. Of course, we sometimes seek out 'just the verdict' for quite trivial purposes: We may scan the review section to see how many stars the latest films or books have been awarded, or study year-end best-of lists to satisfy our curiosity, or to get pointers about what to watch or read next—but no one would (or should) accept a critic's verdict without contemplating his or her reasoning.

From a pragmatist point of view, the purpose of criticism is not to pursue firmness, but to facilitate engagement aimed at gratification and edification. Thus, Nannicelli's observation that evaluative claims 'aim towards truthfulness' (2016, p. 128) seems to be an unnecessary effort to dress up in science-y garments the truism that we aim towards communication. The analytic vocabulary often seems invested in the image of enquiry as a matter of 'closing down' or 'getting to the bottom', thus calling attention to the *nature* of criticism. To my mind, it seems more important to attend to the *spirit* of criticism. We are likely to get all the firmness we need from the fact that criticism is a communal act of persuasion, which is to say that it is addressed at an implied set of others (however ill-defined). This is what distinguishes the language game of criticism from the mere private exchange of likes and dislikes. When we discuss some work of art with friends and family, the imperative to appeal to recognized criteria, and to offer carefully crafted arguments, is weaker. We may—the patience of our acquaintances permitting—offer half-baked reasons or idiosyncratic justifications. Criticism, by contrast, is a *public* conversation, which means there is less tolerance for the flagrant display of personal hang-ups—if the critic openly surrenders to eccentric fancies, the result is unlikely to be of much relevance and interest to strangers.

There's thus an expectation that evaluative criticism draws on premises and arguments capable of finding resonance in an audience of unknown others. This tacit rule weeds out unabashedly subjective reasoning and encourages reasoning that aims for intersubjectivity. After all, we seek out criticism not to learn *of* a critic's pet peeves and soft spots, but to learn *from* her insights.

8. Concluding Remarks

Very generally, we might say that analytic and pragmatist aesthetics offer different views on the function of meta-criticism. The former sees it primarily as a matter of honing critical concepts, distinctions, methods, and protocols; the latter sees it as a means of deliberating the kind of society we hope to inhabit, and the roles that we wish art to play in the lives of individuals and communities. These functions are not mutually exclusive, however, and there's a sense in which pragmatism can be overly dismissive of meta-theorizing more generally, insisting that there are already toeholds in place that help critics get the job done. 'A literary critic already knows what to do simply by virtue of his being embedded in a field of practice', writes Fish (1985, p. 450). And Rorty tends to

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jump at every chance to characterize toehold inspection as symptomatic of a naïve desire to uncover true foundations, when it could be construed more generously as an effort to iron out contradictions.

This is evident, for example, in his dispute (in Collini, 1992) with Umberto Eco, who sets out to investigate whether it is feasible to tell apart acceptable and unacceptable textual meanings, and thus to draw a line between interpretation and what he calls 'overinterpretation'. Eco harbours no illusion that there's such a thing as getting the text right, and merely focuses on whether it is possible to identify interpretations that can be *ruled out*. Rorty nevertheless finds Eco too essentialist-sounding and seeks to erase the contrast between irresponsible 'uses' (or abuses) of texts and more legitimate interpretations. His point is that there's no way to divine what the text is 'really' up to, so all we ever do is put it to use (and whether or not our assertions are *of use* is a function of how well they satisfy some contingent purpose or interest).

Rorty, then, suggests, that there's no *need* for literary studies to delve into general questions about how meaning is constrained by such things as the text's internal coherence or the author's intentions, for such constraints already exist in the form of disciplinary modi operandi. But it could be argued that such checks upon interpretation are, to a significant extent, *there* precisely due to the massive body of meta-theoretical work that is an integral and inevitable part of literary studies: asking questions about the epistemological vices and virtues of doing what we do this way rather than that; scrutinizing concepts and distinctions (either in pursuit of specific aims, or just to refine or replenish the field's vocabulary); and critically examining the integrity of the general beliefs and tacit presuppositions that motivate the study of art in the first place. To the extent that the field of enquiry is self-correcting, then, it is largely thanks to precisely such 'analytic' impulses, which spring from the human mind's compulsion to infer and abstract, to generalize, systematize, and synthesize. Rorty, after all, *does* acknowledge that we instinctively seek coherence, even if it is not something he tends to elaborate on it. His aim is to highlight the opportunities of redescription rather than the constraints upon it, and to suggest new language games rather than to fine-tune existing ones.

From this perspective, a somewhat more conciliatory and complimentary view emerges on the relationship between pragmatist and analytic aesthetics. At the same time, there is a risk that this glosses over more deep-seated disagreements. Arguably, Rorty's main gripe with the analytic tradition is that it frames philosophy as overly narrow and specialized. Analytic aesthetics, too, largely rests on the premise that there are specifically *philosophical* problems in aesthetics that can be investigated in relative isolation, abstracted from (or at least *more* abstracted from than Rorty would like) art's wider social and political contexts and dimensions. My argument as well has been that the analytic tradition's preoccupation with epistemological firmness and conceptual clarity can be somewhat restricting, and that it tends to focus our energies on deducing the 'right' rules to play by when we perhaps could, more productively, debate and explore what are the most *rewarding* rules.

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