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Rorty's Elective Affinities. The New Pragmatism and Postmodern Thought

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Chapter IV

Rorty and literature, or about the priority of the "wisdom of the novel" to the "wisdom of philosophy"

1.

Let us start our peregrinations to meanders of Rorty's considerations devoted to literature with the most important and at the same time most general statement: it seems that Richard Rorty's approach to fiction results from its consistently - to use here his own opposition - "solidarity-related" account; the "other side", literary self-creation, remains programmatically and intentionally undiscussed more seriously. One can just get the impression that literature, and the novel in particular, has been burdened with an ("unbearable") heaviness of *responsibility*... Does in Rorty's reflections the novel appear as a source of multifarious metaphors, of the whole worlds born out of the writer's imagination? Is there in it another dimension of the reality in which mundane obligations no longer bind the human being and where one can give rein to usually hidden desires and passions? The answer is in the negative. The world of fiction of which Richard Rorty writes is a *pragmaticized* one - and fiction itself is supposed first to build, and then to defend a democratic, liberal order as one of utopias feeding that order. On the other extreme, let us hasten to add, there is philosophy with its right to choose self-creation (the right given so willingly to that fragment of Derrida of which the most famous are perhaps telecommunicational phantasies from *The Post Card* or quasi-polemics from

Limited Inc.). The situation as outlined by Rorty might be described in the following manner: the writer has to be responsible (similarly to - although with a different ideal than - Sartre's conception of *littérature engagée*), the philosopher may indulge in certain irresponsibility - or rather certain irrelevance with respect to social problems. It is as if making "poets" return back to *polis* after more than twenty five centuries and think about the state and laws, relieving at the same time at least some philosophers from the respectful Platonic duty of "enlightening the darkness" of the world. In today's intellectual climate it is probably easier to accept a new role of philosophers than accept the putting part of the burden of responsibility for the success of a contingent, like it or not, experiment of liberal democracies on the writer's shoulders. Rorty thus seems to me to be making both one step forward and two steps backwards, as his pragmatism does not allow to leave society at the mercy of spiritless technocrats, social engineers of the future, when poets and philosophers no longer have much to say. (The opposite direction is taken by Jacques Derrida, to insert here a short note in parentheses. He accords this "strange institution called literature", as he writes, the right of *tout dire*, of saying everything, the power of breaking away from existing rules and conventions, of questioning and dislocating them. The writer can say whatever he wants to, or whatever he is able to, remaining in an institutional zone protected against any censorship; the institution of literature is according to him strictly linked to "the coming about of the modern idea of democracy".¹ So while in Rorty literature "fights" for democracy, in Derrida literature can already "make use" of its charms). Philosophy and poetry, to a large extent, are on the "private side", on the "public" one being the novel together with politics. That is the picture one can get from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and related essays from *Philosophical Papers*, especially the second volume of them. Conceptual difficulties of philosophy and individual idioms of poetry do not seem to change the world - the key to social reality is held by liberal politics and the novel that shapes human sensitivity. That is a very pragmatic solution which rejects traditional roles and obligations ascribed in culture to literature and philosophy. What I intend to discuss in this chapter is what may have pushed Rorty to such conclusions (as I want to read them) and where he finds justification or support for them.

A pragmatic line of reasoning is seemingly simple, and is certainly convincing: liberal society does not need "philosophical foundations" any more

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. by D. Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 37.

- liberal culture will be much better served with still more refined self-descriptions. The natural sciences are no longer, as he puts it, "the most interesting or promising or exciting area of culture"² and the imagination of the youth is moved by the arts and politics. A cultural hero of postmodernity is a "strong poet" - rather than a warrior, priest, sage or natural scientist who is searching for objective truth. Ironists do not take philosophers as their moral advisors any more, as the whole French and German Enlightenment tradition would wish, turning instead to literary critics, as they fear getting stuck in one single vocabulary - the one in which they have been educated. Therefore they change perspectives, compare redescriptions by various figures with one another rather than redescriptions with their "originals". Finally - they read a lot of books (which is a guiding trait of the intellectual), "spend[ing] more of their time placing books than placing real live people".³ (And it was already Marx who said in one of his letters: "I am a machine doomed to devour books", as Paul Johnson reminds in his *History of the Jews*). Literature has more to say and more to do - together with literary criticism; traditional philosophy is less interesting to culture and giving less to it in this account. Thus, describing various possibilities, either we will deal only with literature, or we will try to think of another possibility of the other, of philosophy, taken off the Kantian pedestal, or we will think philosophy through with the help of a specific kind of literature (as Frenchmen do, starting with Bataille and Klossowski to Foucault and Derrida), or - finally - we will keep silence in the manner of the young Wittgenstein, pretending that nothing has changed in philosophy in the times of postmodernity. And that latter possibility will probably be the cultural end of philosophy.

Culture and society need many "vocabularies of moral deliberation" (as Rorty calls them in his text on Freud, "Freud and Moral Reflection") which constantly have to be coined, developed, transformed and made up-to-date as the world changes. The Kantian idealistic morality of duty, one side of moral philosophy falling to pieces (the other side being politics, as in Marx or Bentham) caused essential pauperization of possibilities of moral deliberation. The result of closing of possibilities of moral philosophy (of ethics) was in Rorty's view the opening of possibilities of enriching moral reflection by "novelists, poets and dramatists".⁴ Culture cannot stand void - so it was filled with the nineteenth-century novel. And it has been since then that "literature"

² Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 52.

³ Ibidem, p. 80.

⁴ Richard Rorty, PP 2, p. 156.

cares more than "philosophy" for the said vocabularies of moral deliberation, the central role in culture of which can only be doubted if a "human nature" common to all is believed. The "human nature", the essence, from which philosophers as the only entitled to, deduce how is one to behave, and then pass that knowledge to people (like those Platonic heroes who were able to make a "journey upward", "look at the Good", and then to go back down here to "those people in chains", being their guides in the unreal world of shadows⁵).

So far I have been using the "self-creation"/ "solidarity" and the "private"/"public" distinctions, but one can easily add to them other pairs, more or less metaphoric, coming from various Rorty's texts, such as, for instance, "sublimity" and "decency", "private narcissism" and "public pragmatism", "private irony" and "liberal hope" or "Trotsky" and the "wild orchids".⁶ These seem to be various approaches to and different accounts of the fundamental opposition of the two - still present over the years in Rorty - themes: the romantic and the pragmatic ("romantic" in the sense of the text on "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism" and "pragmatic" - in the sense of e.g. "Pragmatism and Philosophy"⁷). Pragmatic and romantic conceptions of philosophy are the two reactions to "Plato-Kant canon", two different and opposite responses to metaphysics (as well as to Husserl with his vision of philosophy *als strenge Wissenschaft*). As philosophy can no longer be science in an unquestionable way, let it be politics - that is Dewey's answer - or metaphor - that is the answer of Heidegger after his "turn" (to put the thought in a title of Rorty's essay: "Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics"). These are answers going in opposite directions for it is not easy to make politics metaphorical or make metaphor political (suffice it to say how Walter Benjamin was afraid of aestheticization of politics; and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in his *Heidegger, Art, and Politics* called National Socialism - just "national aestheticism"); these are two incommensurable, metaphilosophical conceptions of the role of philosophy in culture. But Rorty would be willing to be at the same time - and that is one of key points of a reading outlined here - that pragmatist and that "strong poet", be a utopian social engineer and a visionary, both to serve his community and to make use of intellectual pleasures derived from self-creation. For he bears in mind that in the future we will not be turning to the philosophers for rescue and advise as our ancestors turned to the priests -

⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, 519D.

⁶ Richard Rorty, PP 1, p. 210; CIS, pp. 73-96; "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids".

⁷ Richard Rorty, CP, pp. 139-159; "Pragmatism and Philosophy" in *After Philosophy. End or Transformation*, K. Baynes et al (eds.), pp. 26-66.

"we shall turn instead to *the poets and the engineers*, the people who produce startling new projects for achieving the greatest happiness of the greatest number".⁸

Rorty is consistent *not to choose* between romanticism of the poet and pragmatism of the politician and social engineer; we have to agree here with Nancy Fraser who says that according to Rorty "it is the desire to overcome the implacable split between public and private life that is at the root of many theoretical and political difficulties".⁹ It may be perhaps so that while the Romantic need turns Rorty to philosophy, the pragmatic one directs his attention to literature, and to the novel in particular. Philosophy, inessential, insignificant in today's culture and devoid of transformative powers as it seems to be, is located by him in the same camp as poetry, while the novel which transforms vocabularies of moral deliberation and shapes liberal sensitivity gets closer to politics and liberal social engineering. Theory is "de-politicized", politics - "de-theorized", as Thomas McCarthy puts it in his reaction to Rorty.¹⁰ Philosophy - like in Zygmunt Bauman in *Intimations of Postmodernity*¹¹ - either hides behind silent walls of the Academy, or takes alliance with literary criticism and poetry. The direct link between (philosophical) theory and (political) practice is broken. As Rorty puts it, "we philosophy professors are people who have a certain familiarity with a certain intellectual tradition", and nothing more, let us add, "as chemists have a certain familiarity with what happens when you mix various substances together".¹²

To sum up briefly these notes outlining the background for a more detailed reflection: the pragmatic impulse, ideals of liberal democracy, the priority of democracy to philosophy etc. push Rorty's thinking towards literature as a certain democratic utopia (the novel as Milan Kundera's "paradise of individuals"), the Romantic impulse, on the other hand - from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* to Derrida, pushes his thinking towards self-creational kind of philosophy. There is no third way. Both ethos constitute at the same

⁸ Richard Rorty, PP 2, p. 26 - emphasis mine.

⁹ Nancy Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy" in *Reading Rorty*, ed. A. Malachowski (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 311.

¹⁰ Thomas McCarthy, "Ironie privée et décence publique" in *Lire Rorty. Le pragmatisme et ses conséquences* (Paris: Editions de l'éclat, 1992), p. 94.

¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 16.

¹² Richard Rorty, "Trotsky...", p. 152.

time his liberal sensitivity - what is important is other people's suffering, their pain and humiliation *as well as* what he has named over the years in various texts with different words: "self-enlargement", "self-invention", or already in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* - "edification" (derived from Gadamer's *Bildung* from his *Truth and Method*). Both ethos are constantly present, both give birth to confessions like, on the one hand, "what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark"¹³ and on the other hand: "the pragmatist philosopher has a story to tell about his favorite, and least favored, books - the texts of, for example, Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, Dewey and Russell"¹⁴, or, to put it still stronger: "nothing is more important than saving our liberal institutions"¹⁵ from the pragmatic side and "redescribing ourselves is the most important thing we can do"¹⁶ from the Romantic side. It is difficult to abandon any of the two sides, nor can they be agreed with each other: the only solution seems to be the public-private split, the split of both orders. Hence maybe Rorty's specific attitude towards literature (the novel) that satisfies the need of communal thinking as opposed to a post-Philosophical attitude to philosophy, satisfying the need of "privatized thinking" (as Rorty writes of Derrida in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*). Let us add that is just a general tendency in his considerations rather than some rigid distinction. We will attempt in the present chapter to place his philosophical reflections on literature in a wider context of his views about the role and place of philosophy in contemporary culture.

2.

Richard Rorty in his philosophizing asks about, among other things - in a quite pragmatic manner - what literature and philosophy can give us, elevating the former on numerous occasions by means of juxtaposing its usefulness with apparent uselessness of traditional philosophy. He brings them close to each other - treating as two "kinds of writing". He does not make use of criticism already traditional today: that is, e.g. of showing philosophical background of literary works (themes, questions, oppositions, conceptuality - as if the second "bottom" of literature) - nor does he seek "literariness" of philosophical works. As a matter of fact, he does not change the status of literature; instead, together

¹³ Richard Rorty, CP, p. 166.

¹⁴ Richard Rorty, PP 1, p. 82.

¹⁵ Richard Rorty, "Brigands et intellectuels", *Critique* 493-494, Juin-Juillet 1988, p. 485.

¹⁶ Richard Rorty, PMN, pp. 358-359.

with the whole conception of philosophy being developed since *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), he takes off from philosophy the place accorded to it so far (at least since the Kantian times).

For in the *cultural conversation* going on (the word "conversation", incidentally, being the key-word to a vast part of attacks on that book), the philosopher has so far had a privileged position, the first and the last word belonged to him, it was he who knew better as he knew the widest - philosophical - context of questions and answers. For it was he who used to decide, in the last instance, about claims to knowledge of all the other domains of culture. Rorty says that the central concern of the whole hitherto existing philosophy was

a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so).¹⁷

Thus, on the one side of that landscape there was philosophy as a Kantian "tribunal of pure reason", on the other side of it there were claims made by all other areas of culture which philosophy either rejected or accepted. Philosophy would "ground" knowledge claims, it was a "foundational" discipline, overwhelming and legitimating other domains. The abandonment of the Kantian perspective (reinforced still in the twentieth century by Russell's and Husserl's ideal of "scientific" and "exact" philosophy) would be an attack on the philosopher's self-image - would be an abandonment of the idea that his voice "always has an overriding claim on the attention of the other participants in the conversation".¹⁸ That would be - to be more precise - a collapse of the idea that there is some "philosophical method" or some "philosophical point of view" which enables the philosopher owing to his profession to express interesting opinions, *ex officio*, on the subject of e.g. psychoanalysis, moral dilemmas of humanity or values of literary works. Philosophy in Rorty's account becomes less important and thereby the philosopher himself becomes less important, the philosopher whose opinions have so far been important owing to the importance of the philosophical discipline itself... Philosophy cannot escape from history, therefore Rorty asks why it was an autonomous discipline, foundational for the whole of culture? It was the case because German idealists

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 3.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 392.

of the nineteenth century, he goes on explaining, told us that such a discipline was the "hope of mankind"¹⁹ and we kept believing them (just as we kept believing in the Lyotardian, Enlightenment "metanarrative of Emancipation" as long as dark clouds of the "signs of history" did not cover the horizon - which, incidentally, separates Rorty and Derrida from e.g. Lyotard and Baudrillard). To sum up, Rorty elevates literature, locating at the same time philosophy in the place which is one of many, devoid of any old privileges. Old philosophy, or philosophy with a capital "P", as Rorty sometimes claims, is a dubious domain, considering, pragmatically, its twentieth-century failings on the one hand, and its cultural deadness on the other.

So Rorty does not apply philosophical conceptuality to literature, does not seek its "philosophical core" to which one can get removing surface layers of vocabulary, style or getting at its "blind spots" or unsaid "margins". He does not ask a question about the *essence* of literature, asking instead about what it is doing, how it is working: for example, in Rorty's response, the novel enlarges human sensitivity to suffering and cruelty (which is, incidentally, a peculiar, liberal-pragmatic reduction of the richness of literary senses and benefits, including e.g. a lack of any benefit at all). There appears a question here whether Rorty is interested in literature as literature or perhaps as a better, more effective tool than - for instance - philosophy? So, is not Rorty's writing about literature *instrumental* with respect to it as what is perhaps at stake is merely juxtaposing it to philosophy? That is, showing what post-Philosophical philosophy ought to be, or might be, by means of idealizing, drawing artificial contours, even - caricaturing literature and, in broader terms, the so-called highbrow literary culture. Today's "supremacy of literary culture"²⁰, placing literature in the center of culture and treating both science and philosophy as literary genres (as did philosophers he described as "textualists") may result from Rorty's new ideal, new pattern to be followed (once the sciences - in philosophy and in culture - are not that ideal any more). That can be testified by the way in which he accounts for the work of the literary critic - as *strong misreading*. What is the way of reading texts in literary criticism and in literature according to him? Rorty sees here so accepted lack of a method, of general, ahistorical and permanent criteria of evaluation, he admires self-creational possibilities (imposing one's own vocabulary on someone else's text, redescription carried out in one's own terms rather than in terms of a given text

¹⁹ Richard Rorty, CP, p. 148.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 150.

or inherited ones). Another question²¹ - is not Rorty producing for his own pragmatic needs such a picture of literary criticism that suits him fine, on the basis of e.g. philosophical conceptions or their application (Derrida and Harold Bloom). Literary criticism would be an outlet for self-creational desires of the critic or the philosopher. The text would serve only the critic's own aims - Rorty's "method" shown following Harold Bloom might be as follows: the critic shapes the text for his own needs imposing to it a vocabulary which "may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens".²² Rorty applies that "method" - and admits it explicitly - in his discussions of Derrida. When Jacques Bouveresse (in a congenial volume of texts on Rorty and his responses: *Lire Rorty. Le pragmatisme et ses conséquences*) reproaches him that he makes the Derrida he needs, Rorty answers that he takes from him whatever he wants, rejecting what is left. He uses him as a grain to be ground in his own mill (*comme le blé pour mon propre moulin*).²³ And he gets the right for it from the fact of being a "strong misreader" endowed with the right of his own redescriptions. He is rightfully proud that he can, as he puts it, "get more out of the text than its author or its intended audience could possibly find there".²⁴ Literature replaces philosophy as a "presiding cultural discipline", like science in the nineteenth century was replaced with philosophy as a secular substitute of religion.

In the nineteenth century, the secular intellectual began losing faith in science in the same fundamental way as the Enlightenment lost its faith in God.²⁵ Philosophy would give the secular intellectual his conception of himself. Rorty says that in the nineteenth century "'philosophy' became, for the intellectuals, a substitute for religion", namely

[i]t was the area of culture where one touched bottom, where one found the vocabulary and the convictions which permitted one to explain and justify one's activity *as* an intellectual, and thus to *discover the significance of one's life*.²⁶

²¹ See Michael Fischer, "Redefining Philosophy as Literature: Richard Rorty's 'Defence' of Literary Culture" in *Reading Rorty*, pp. 233-243.

²² Richard Rorty, CP, p. 151.

²³ Richard Rorty, "Réponse a Jacques Bouveresse" in *Lire Rorty. Le pragmatisme et ses conséquences*, p. 156. 

²⁴ Richard Rorty, CP, p. 152.

²⁵ See *ibidem*, p. 228.

²⁶ Richard Rorty, PMN, p. 4 - emphasis mine.

In other words, as we have noted right at the beginning - I am important as a philosopher, because philosophy itself is that important... But in the nineteenth century, with the beginning of what Rorty calls the culture of the man of letters, that is the culture of the "intellectual who wrote poems and novels and political treatises, and criticisms of other people's poems and novels and treatises"²⁷, there are clouds over the importance of philosophy. Consequently, scientists became isolated with the beginning of the twentieth century from the majority of intellectuals, just like theologians had been isolated before. Moral teachers of the youth, to use favorite Rorty's formulation, became poets and novelists, and the more philosophy wanted to be "scientific" or "exact", the more it drifted away from the rest of culture and thereby the more absurd in Rorty's view its traditional claims to being a foundational discipline for the whole of culture were. To show the next part of history in one sentence, one can add that it was Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey ("the three most important philosophers of our century", as Rorty says) who first wanted to make philosophy a grounding or foundational discipline according to the Kantian ideal, and then broke with that ideal and did everything they could to warn philosophers and philosophy against succumbing to such temptations; they gave birth to the possibility of such a culture in which there is no room left for one, single, all-encompassing discipline that legitimates all other disciplines.

Rorty, within a framework of C.P Snow's dichotomy of the "scientific culture" and the "literary culture", seems to place philosophizing, together with, for instance, literary criticism, as well as poetry, within the latter culture, with all consequences of that.²⁸ Who is that "literary intellectual" or - in broadest Rortyan terms - "cultural critic" and what is his role in culture? He feels he may comment on everything in culture that is going on around him. He is a prefiguration of a philosopher of the "post-Philosophical" era, the one who has abandoned traditional pretensions to Philosophy (with the capital "p"). That is his congenial description: "He passes rapidly from Hemingway to Proust to Hitler to Marx to Foucault to Mary Douglas to the present situation in Southeast Asia to Ghandi to Sophocles".²⁹ He is a "name dropper", a master in using proper names as sets of descriptions, ways of seeing the world. He specializes in searching for similarities and differences between big visions, pictures of the world painted in the most general lines. Deprived of historical

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 4.

²⁸ See Thomas McCarthy, "Ironie privée et décence publique", in *Lire Rorty*, p. 91.

²⁹ Richard Rorty, CP, p. xl.

constants, doomed to redescrptions of redescrptions ("like Nietzsche, to interpret interpretations" - Derrida), he is doomed to be quickly forgotten. Not finding immortal sentences, true statements - he leaves behind merely mortal, ever-changing vocabularies. According to Rorty, the "temporalization of rationality" discovered by Hegel in his *Phenomenology* was one of the most significant steps on the road to pragmatic incredulity towards - atemporal and ahistorical - Philosophy.³⁰

Rorty's answer to the question about philosophy and literature, while convincing, is perhaps too simple, similarly to the one given by Zygmunt Bauman in *Intimations of Postmodernity*³¹: namely, philosophy and literature in the past (when the former was still Philosophy) would stand on the *opposite sides of the dichotomy*, they were paradigmatic cases of the oppositions: subjective/objective, rational/irrational, scientific/non-scientific, *doxa/episteme* i.e. opinion and knowledge, contingent/universal, historical/ahistorical etc. (and still earlier the opposition of *logos* and *mythos*, that is to say, philosophers and poets). Nowadays - if one were to abandon the traditional account of truth, objectivity, rationality - philosophy would not stand on the side of the objective, the rational, the atemporal etc. One part of the dichotomy would have to disappear, and together with the dichotomy itself would share its fate. So what would separate philosophy and literature today? The common answer of the two thinkers would be: different books, different traditions, finally, different history, for philosophy, like literature, cannot escape from its history and historicity, although it is sometimes difficult to remember that also e.g. the philosophy of Rorty himself is just a contingent product of liberal American culture of the end of the twentieth century. It so happened, but it *could have happened* in a quite different way. In a word, philosophy today can dare only what Hegel so beautifully called "grasping one's time in thought".

And then both philosophy and literature see the present (and the past) in their contingent vocabularies, endowed with different degree of sensitivity, embedded in different conceptuality shaped by their respective histories. In a different *style*, one could say (referring to Nietzsche, Deleuze, Derrida). But claims of both disciplines to be coining a neutral vocabulary (as discovering one is totally out of the question) are equally unjustified. What is significant is Rorty's attitude to practical achievements of both spheres of culture - whose sensitivity to pain was changed by traditional philosophy, did it manage to change the world to the better? Literature has its successes - Rorty advises us to

³⁰ Ibidem, p. xli.

³¹ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, p. 215.

compare the role played by novelists and literary critics in coming to liberal democracies in the Western world with that rather insignificant one played by philosophers.³²

If one assumes all Rorty's points of departure, it may turn out that philosophy is merely "a kind of writing" (as he wrote of Derrida's writings in *Consequences of Pragmatism*). It is most difficult to agree with such a seemingly reductionist point to all those who see some specific, universal and emancipatory tasks for philosophy; to those who seek one, final and never-changing over the centuries "philosophical context"- in which one can put, and then judge, in front of a philosophical tribunal of reason, all other disciplines and all other participants in a cultural conversation precisely from a "philosophical point of view". To the question whether philosophy can be outdated as a discipline, Rorty will answer that "disciplines outlive paradigms that give birth to them". For the philosopher who is able to answer the question of an inquisitive student "what Hegel meant" will always be needed. The practical problem - "who will be teaching Hegel" - guarantees the survival of philosophy today, like questions of e.g. Heidegger tomorrow, or of a Rorty the day after tomorrow... For who else if not the philosopher is able to provide us with that "commentary on the details of the tradition" the depth and extent of which distinguishes the philosopher from "the amateur, the philistine, the mystic, or the belletrist".³³

3.

What is needed now in our discussion is the brief excursus to Rorty's attitude towards the history of philosophy - for the choice of one's own history of philosophy determines the self-image of the philosopher. "The self-image of a philosopher, Rorty says - his identification of himself as such (rather than as, perhaps, an historian or a mathematician or a poet) - depends almost entirely upon how he sees the history of philosophy". The adoption of a new vocabulary - an independent gesture of each philosopher - "is motivated almost entirely by a perception of one's relation to the history of philosophy".³⁴ The choice: Hegel or Plato, and further pragmatism or some fundamentalism - that is, on the one hand, philosophy seen as "one's time grasped in thought", and on the other, "an escape from conversation to something atemporal which lies in the background of all possible conversations" - is made simply by reading the history of

³² See e.g. Richard Rorty, "Brigands et intellectuels", p. 486.

³³ Richard Rorty, CP, p. 41.

³⁴ Ibidem, pp. 41, 41.

philosophy and drawing a moral.³⁵ The similar attitude to the history of the novel is taken by Milan Kundera, one of recent Rorty's favorites. Perhaps it would be easier to understand Rorty's attitude towards philosophy - as well as his account of the history of philosophy - by means of comparing it with Kundera's account of the novel and its history from *The Art of the Novel*. Let us add first, though, what binds so closely Rorty, Lyotard or Foucault with Kundera: *histories*, stories, micrologies, written narratives. Without developing that theme, for there is not enough space for it here, let us use a couple of well chosen citations. Kundera says the following: "I am making stories, juxtaposing them and that is why how I ask questions"³⁶ which is echoed by Lyotard when he says that he is merely "telling you a story, unfolding a little story of my own"³⁷ and advising to "set to work forging fictions rather than hypotheses and theories"³⁸; Rorty's response might be the aforementioned sentence about telling stories about most and least favored books, and Michel Foucault's agreement might be expressed in the following statement: "I am fully aware that I have never written anything other than fictions". In other words, as Maurice Blanchot explains it, "I am a fabulist composing fables whose morals one would be unwise to wait for".³⁹ (Setting free of various narratives may, in the most general terms, be associated with May '68, that Lyotardian "narrative explosion"... and so on, and so forth, we cannot diverge from the main course taken in that chapter so let us cross out, not without regret, the very possibility of birth of Sterne's digressions).

Philosophy is a thing devoid of its nature - its essence, endowed only with its history ("Personne ne sait qu'est la philosophie, pas plus que l'on ne sait qu'est la poesie ou la science", as Rorty will put it in his response to Bouveresse⁴⁰). Kundera writes about the novel as a "sequence of discoveries" - and about the "need to answer to no one but Cervantes"⁴¹ and Rorty writes about commenting on "the Plato-Kant sequence". What does the ironist philosopher do? He is a parasite to metaphysics as "the topic of ironist theory is

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 174.

³⁶ Milan Kundera in *Kundera. Materiały z sympozjum* (London: Polonia Book, 1988), p. 149 (in Polish).

³⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Lessons in Paganism" in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. A. Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 125.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 118.

³⁹ *Foucault/Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), p. 94.

⁴⁰ Richard Rorty in *Lire Rorty*, p. 151.

⁴¹ Milan Kundera, *Art of the Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), p. 144.

metaphysical theory" ⁴² - he wants to understand a "metaphysical desire to theorize" in order to be able, finally, to get free from it. Ironist philosophy remains without a task, an aim, devoid of its *telos*. It does not head towards a settled point (e.g. towards truth) nor does it look for roads leading to it. According to Husserl's *Crisis of European Sciences and Phenomenology*, philosophy was born out of the "passion of knowing". The birthplace of spiritual Europe (to which, let us add, belongs according to Husserl also North America - but not "Eskimoes, Indians, travelling zoos or gypsies permanently wandering all over Europe", of which Derrida reminds us in his *Of Spirit*⁴³) was Ancient Greece of the seventh and sixth centuries BC, and it was there that a theoretical attitude appeared for the first time: "man becomes there a non-engaged observer, he looks at the world, becoming a philosopher".⁴⁴ The "passion of knowing" in question, separated by Husserl in Greece, lies at the origins of philosophy, it also gave rise to the novel, although after many centuries, in Cervantes, Fielding or Richardson. With Cervantes, the new European art began to indulge in deliberations on human existence about which, since Descartes and Galileo, modern philosophy began to "forget" under the influence of "stray rationalism" (Husserl). A novel which does not discover an unknown bit of existence is *immoral*, Kundera will say following Hermann Broch. Novels have to "set out on a further conquest of being". When they do not discover anything, they do not participate in that sequence of discoveries - in the history of the novel, and when they stand next to it, they fall out of it. They either refer to their history - or are dead.

Rorty seems to want philosophy - together with the novel and similarly to it - to recognize that the world is ambiguous, that there is no single, absolute truth but a multitude of relative and contradictory truths. He would like to accept Kundera's "wisdom of the novel" (*la sagesse du roman*) which is the "wisdom of uncertainty". He is seduced, paradoxically enough, by the truthfulness of an ambiguous and relative world that philosophy does not want to accept. "The world of a single Truth" is not only a totalitarian world, as Kundera presents it. It is also, let us add, the world of the traditional philosophy made of a different material than the "relative world of the novel". "Totalitarian

⁴² Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 96.

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit. Heidegger and the Question* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1989), p. 120.

⁴⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences and Phenomenology*, a Polish translation by J. Sidorek, *Kryzys europejskiego cz³owieczeństwa a filozofia* (Warsaw: Aletheia, 1993), p. 31.

truth excludes relativity, doubts, questions and can never accept what I would call the spirit of the novel".⁴⁵ The method of truth of epistemologically-oriented, traditional philosophy deriving from Kant, of truth of philosophy as foundational discipline for the rest of culture, is similar. The "wisdom of the novel" seems closer to Rorty than the "wisdom of philosophy", if I can put it that way, as the former took better care of freedom of the individual - for it is the novel that is a "fascinating imaginary space where no one is the owner of truth and where everyone has the right to be understood".⁴⁶ In the face of dangers to (fragile and unstable) culture it comes in handy that the "precious essence of the European spirit is, like in a silver jewellery box, in the history of the novel, in the wisdom of the novel".⁴⁷ And Rorty, the philosopher, the pragmatist, believes in it for he is convinced by his liberal opinions and his philosophical views. The wisdom that allowed to shape the West in the way it is shaped today (and let us remind here of Rorty's attitude to the USA - that "best of all possible worlds"- and American culture, so different from that of catastrophists of Marxist postmodernism or of a Baudrillard from *Amérique* who says with a scorn: *Les Etats-Unis, c'est l'utopie réalisée*, but so full of concern for the future) did not come from philosophers, nor was it defended by philosophers. It was mainly done according to Rorty by literary imagination, the writers' sensitivity and their loud voice, given to them temporarily only⁴⁸, incidentally, by the project of modernity that may be coming to its completion.

4.

It is not the point that the philosopher has to write about literature, the point may be that he re-thinks the very knot of relations between philosophy and literature. It is sometimes not in investigating how philosophy approaches its "object" and "sharpens" its philosophical "tools" (Hegel) that lies the heart of the question; it may also lie in relations the two remain with each other. In Jacques Derrida deconstruction is an intended re-thinking of the two domains at the same time. Is Rorty's project similar to Derrida's? Or perhaps it is manifestly philosophical, instrumentally making use of literature for his pragmatic needs

⁴⁵ Milan Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, a Polish translation by M. Bieńczyk (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1991), p. 19.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 130.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 130.

⁴⁸ See Marek Kwiek, *Rorty and Lyotard. In the Labyrinths of Postmodernity* (in Polish), especially "Introduction". See also Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Tombeau de l'intellectuel et autres papiers* (Paris: Galilée, 1984), pp. 9-23.

(e.g. for devalorization and denigration of Philosophy with the capital "p")? It may be worth noting that the attitude of Zygmunt Bauman to literature is similar - he does not investigate today's blurring of boundaries, merging of the two genres, but uses the literary genre as an example, as a case from history described by the pen of a man of letters, as an object of a sociological deliberations (see e.g. Kafka and his *Diaries* from *Modernity and Ambivalence*). Derrida is different - his aim - as *Positions* explain - is to "deconstruct practically the *philosophical* opposition between philosophy and myth, between *logos* and *mythos*" which can be done only textually, with the help of an "other writing", neither "philosophical", nor "literary".⁴⁹ Deconstruction of the opposition between philosophy and literature gives birth to a metaphilosophical (for the very opposition is philosophical) or a no-longer-philosophical undertaking.

Rorty does not hide his intentions towards literature. He exposes its past, present and future to a simple test - to the question of its *utility*, benefits that can be derived for developing liberal democracies. (He admits it explicitly in his polemic with Umberto Eco when he says that he imposes to each book his own "grid" which is the narrative of "the pragmatist's progress"⁵⁰). So he opposes, for instance, public uselessness of Heidegger's philosophy - and public benefits coming from reading Dickens' novels, confronting a philosophical theory with a literary narrative. The novel turned out in his view to have been more fruitful than philosophy in the history of social transformations of modern West, which is to say that "when you weigh the good and the bad the social novelists have done against the good and the bad the social theorists have done, you find yourself wishing that there had been more novels and fewer theories", Rorty says.⁵¹ It is thanks to novels that the West has worked out an "increased ability to tolerate diversity" - by means of realization of and sensitivity to intolerance, which the West owes more to "our novelists than to our philosophers or to our poets".⁵² Like within the Heidegger - Dickens opposition (that is, a taste for "theory, simplicity, structure, abstraction, and essence" on the one hand, and a taste for "narrative, detail, diversity, and accident" on the other⁵³) Rorty sides with Dickens, similarly in the Heidegger - Proust opposition outlined in

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), pp. 53, 53, 71.

⁵⁰ Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress" in Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 91.

⁵¹ Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens" in *PP 2*, p. 80.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 81.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, that is in an already smaller group of "ironist" writers and theoreticians, Rorty decidedly sides with Proust. The choice in the latter case is between "self-creation" and "affiliation" (to greater powers than the one who writes). Let us try to outline briefly the opposition between ironist theoreticians (like Heidegger, but also Hegel and Nietzsche) and ironist writers.

Perhaps the single most important approximation will be an introductory Rorty's statement that for ironists theory has become "a means to private perfection" - rather than a tool for social communication.⁵⁴ Thus we are on the one side of the opposition between the private and the public, fundamental to Rorty, within which there appears still another opposition: ironist writers who are fully private and ironist theorists who do not totally abandon their public mission (despite socially being totally "useless"). The former writers - like Proust - remain in their writings in relation to their own, private, idiosyncratic past, rewind objects, people and events once again (using, for instance, that *memoire involontaire*), making redescrptions of their surrounding in their own vocabulary, in their own terms. They aim at autonomy (precisely, *auto* and *nomos*, as opposed in a Kantian manner to heteronomy, foreign laws, "foreign governance") redescrbing in their works those who once described themselves. They get free from foreign authorities, showing their relativity, finiteness, transitoriness.

Ironist theorists, on the other hand, still keep vestiges of public ambitions. They write about Europe, the march of the Spirit or Being, they invent - as Rorty puts it - "a larger-than-self hero".⁵⁵ They want to remain in relation to the past which is broader than their own - preferably to the past of a species, race or class. They are not content with merely ordering small things in their own way (details, accidents, narratives etc.) - they want to describe also a big and important thing, drawing their power from it. They prefer, to sum up, affiliation to self-creation. What is disharmonious in their works is their (immodest) feeling of their superiority as philosophers coming from the belief that it cannot be by any means so that certain beloved, philosophical words - words like "Aristotle", "physis" or "Parmenides" to Heidegger - are nothing more but their private counterparts of other words beloved by others (far more numerous, incidentally), such as "Combray" or "Gilbert" from *Remembrance of the Things Past*. "Proust succeeded because he had no public ambitions - no reason to believe that the sound of the name 'Guermantes' would mean anything

⁵⁴ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 96.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 100.

to anybody but his narrator". And he adds that "Heidegger thought he knew some words which had, or should have had, resonance for *everybody* in modern Europe, words which were relevant not just to the fate of people who happen to have read a lot of philosophy books but to *the public fate of the West*".⁵⁶ But as a matter of fact these are merely - not endowed with different significance - private sets of (favorite) words. Europe and its fate do not depend more on a list of books read by Heidegger or on any other list of any other books, Rorty comments. When one contrasts Nietzsche's or Heidegger's ironist theorizing with modern novel, it turns out that the former is just "one of great literary traditions" - possibly comparable to the novel if we take into consideration its achievements, but much less significant if we take into account its influence on politics, social hopes and solidarity.⁵⁷

As Kundera tries to show, the novel has invented its own - imaginary - democratic utopia. It is as if a future society in which nobody dreams of thinking that God, Truth or the Nature of Things is on his side. In such a utopia nobody would dream of thinking that there is something more real than pleasure or pain. Democratic utopia would be a community in which the most important virtues of mind would be tolerance and curiosity - rather than seeking truth.⁵⁸ In such Utopia people would suffer and make much less pain than they do today, it would be a utopia of brotherhood realized in many currently unimaginable ways. "The unifying social ideal of this utopia would be a balance between the minimizing of suffering and the maximizing of rationality³ [= tolerance] - a balance between pressure not to hurt others and tolerance of different ways of living, between vigilance against cruelty and reluctance to set up a panoptic state".⁵⁹

5.

Thus, as a matter of fact, Rorty writes of such writers and such literature which is (or in his reading can be) socially - not even only individually, self-creationally - useful. For even when he writes of Nabokov - and he does that in an absolutely superb manner - he does that in order to show that although he was a writer aiming at autonomy (self-creation), nevertheless he studied cruelty inherently included in search for that autonomy. So, paradoxically as it seems,

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 118, emphasis mine.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 120.

⁵⁸ Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens", p. 75.

⁵⁹ Richard Rorty, "A Pragmatist View of Rationality and Cultural Difference", *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 42, no. 4, October 1992, p. 587.

Orwell and Nabokov get closer and closer to each other in Rorty's reading - for, as he puts it, "both of them warn the liberal ironist intellectual against temptations to be cruel".⁶⁰ And the fear of causing pain, of being cruel, as is known, constitutes in his view the liberal sensitivity.

Let us say, somehow on the margin of the text, a couple of words about French postmodern thought: their engaging in discussions of (non-representational) literature was a wholly critical undertaking. French culture resisted the representational paradigm - so philosophers started to deal with "literature of illegibility" (Sollers) or "opaque speech" (Foucault). Since Mallarmé, literature has no longer wanted to reflect the world, to be "a copy of a copy", to stand on the other end than the world itself. It wants instead to become a full part of that world and not merely a mirror of nature. The language of literature does not want to represent the reality - there appears the awareness of a "fundamental inadequacy" (as Barthes says in his inaugural *Leçon*) between the linguistic order and that of the world; the category of representation becomes a banner-like object of a critical investigation - and rejection - in the French humanities of recent decades. The myth of *mimesis* that has constituted art (together with literature) since Ancient Greece, is violently questioned in works of Bataille or Artaud - and of their post-war commentators. Rorty's thinking of literature is of a completely different nature - and pertains to a completely different sort of literature. It is Dickens and Proust, Nabokov and Orwell, and finally Kundera - but Kundera the literary theorist and essayist, the author of *Art of the Novel* rather than as the author of his novels. That is, to be sure, a philosophical (to be more precise: pragmatic) choice on Rorty's part - i.e. "details" and "cruelty", the concern for pain hidden under the mask of aestheticism, as well as moral protest - and the "depreciated legacy of Cervantes" as an instance in the face of which one accounts for one's writing. Obviously, both philosophy and literature may be just literary genres, two kinds of writing; Rorty never said that philosophy *is* literature - they are separated by an abyss of, first of all, *tradition* and *history*, that is, on the one hand one has Father Parmenides, on the other Father Cervantes, on the one Kant and on the other Flaubert etc. etc. Philosophy can be seen as a "family romance"⁶¹, philosophers - as commentators on certain (mainly) writing past figures.

In Rorty's account of literature, one can focus on the importance of attempts to blur the traditional opposition: the moral and the aesthetic (that is, by way of an example, literature with a "moral message" and literature that is

⁶⁰ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 144.

⁶¹ Richard Rorty, CP, p. 92.

"merely aesthetic"). Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* draws a distinction between books that help to become autonomous subjects and books that help to become less cruel. Among the latter - those referring to cruelty rather than to autonomy - there are books treating of the influence of practices and social institutions on other people and those pertaining to the influence of our personal idiosyncrasies on others. Instead of the traditional distinction between "moralists" and "aesthetes", Rorty suggests the basic question to determine a genre of a given work: "*what purposes does this book serve?*".⁶² The purposes taken into consideration are not the good and the beautiful, but either maintaining an old, existing final vocabulary or working out of a new final vocabulary (there seem to be here remote analogies to Kuhnian "normal science" and "revolutionary science"). Books that transform a final vocabulary form a tiny but perhaps the most important part of all - they can transform more. It is to them that Rorty applies his private-public distinction. He namely says that there belong books which

aimed at working out a new *private* final vocabulary and those aimed at working out a new *public* final vocabulary. The former is a vocabulary deployed to answer questions like "What shall I be?" "What can I become?" "What have I been?" The latter is a vocabulary deployed to answer the question "What sorts of things about what sorts of people do I need to notice?"⁶³

Let us remind here: there is no "nature of literature", Rorty stresses. The aim of some writers (Plato, Heidegger, Proust, Nabokov) is search for "private perfection", the aim of other writers (Dickens, Mill, Dewey, Orwell, Habermas, Rawls) is serving "human freedom". They cannot be evaluated on a common scale, by making some inferior, or superior, to others. Just like there is no "aim of writing", there is also no "aim of theorizing".⁶⁴ It does not lead anywhere to contrast both kinds of "writers" (rather than philosophers and writers, let us add) with each other - as, for instance, writers of "self-creation" and those of "solidarity", as there is no higher, synthesizing account that could grasp self-creation and justice, private perfection and solidarity, in a single view. It was precisely looking for such a "synoptic vision" - such a single account - that first brought about and then directed Rorty's interest in philosophy. How is one to

⁶² Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 142.

⁶³ Ibidem, p. 143.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, p. 141.

agree one's "Trotsky" and one's "wild orchids", he would ask in an autobiographical text, how is one to be at the same time a "friend of humanity" and an "intellectual and spiritual snob".⁶⁵ The answer to that pervading question is brought no sooner than in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, for it was still in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that this question fundamental to Rorty's thought was untouched (although there are already in it many themes forecasting such a solution to the problem⁶⁶). The answer Rorty gives at the same time takes away from philosophy the hope to reach such an account, such a vision (being impossible on the level of theory) stating that the vocabulary of self-creation is private, non-shared and incompatible with argumentation, whereas the vocabulary of justice is public and common, is a means serving precisely to argumentation. These two vocabularies, like aims that the aforementioned two kinds of writers have in common, as well as requirements of self-creation and solidarity, are "equally valid, yet forever incommensurable", in his memorable expression.⁶⁷ Between the private and the public there seems to be no opposition, there is a tension instead - and incommensurability.

Coming to an end to that little story, let us say that literature (and the novel in particular) has a settled position in Rorty's philosophical conceptions: in the face of powerlessness of Continental philosophy on the one hand and a cultural demise of analytic philosophy on the other, in the face of a restricted influence of philosophy as such on a delicate matter of social life in the times of collapse of a traditional Enlightenment figure of the intellectual - the chance, perhaps the last one, of shaping liberal sensitivity is provided by the novel (and let us bear in mind that we belong to culture that was not only nourished by the "Bible, Socrates, Plato, and the Enlightenment" but also, as Rorty says, by "Rabelais, Montaigne, Sterne, Hogarth and Mark Twain").⁶⁸ That may be the reason for which Rorty invests all his "pragmatic" hopes in literature, leaving philosophy with a role of advising or of "Romantic" (in the opposition suggested here), individual self-creation. Thereby he replaces a critical and yet softened tooth of philosophical thinking (partially saved in Lyotard - e.g. in his idea of the "resistance through writing"⁶⁹ or "bearing witness to differends"

⁶⁵ Richard Rorty, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids", p. 143.

⁶⁶ See prefigurations of "self-creational" themes in PMN, e.g. pp. 359-360.

⁶⁷ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. xv.

⁶⁸ Richard Rorty in *Lire Rorty*, p. 184.

⁶⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "An Interview", *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 5 (1988), p. 302.

from *The Differend*, in the late Foucault - e.g. in his texts on Kant and the Enlightenment⁷⁰ or in Derrida - in the form of transcending both philosophy and literature in order to deconstruct their philosophical opposition by means of particular "acts of reading") - with a sharpened and well valued tooth of the novelist. Nevertheless, his general perspective is rather pessimistic: intellectuals cannot do much today - from among them perhaps writers are most needed by liberal society. And the philosopher, well, let he just advise at the moment that it is important to read novels...

⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?", *Magazine littéraire*, No 309, Avril 1993, pp. 63-73; Michel Foucault, "The Art of Telling the Truth" in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, L.D. Kritzman (ed.), pp. 86-95.