

After philosophy: the novelist as cultural hero of modernity? On Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism

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1.

Let us begin with a generalisation: Richard Rorty's approach to literature is consistently - to use his own opposition - "solidarity-related"; what he calls the "other side", literary self-creation, remains programmatically and intentionally undiscussed. One gets the impression that literature, and the novel in particular, is being burdened with an ("unbearable") heaviness of *responsibility*. Does the novel in Rorty's reflections appear as a source of multifarious metaphors, of whole worlds born out of a writer's imagination? Is there in it another dimension, where 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, where fiction itself is supposed first to build, and then defend, a democratic, liberal order. At the other extreme, there is philosophy with its right to choose self-creation (encapsulated, perhaps, in fragments of Derrida: telecommunicational fantasies from *The Post Card* or quasi-polemics from *Limited Inc.*). The situation as outlined by Rorty might be described in the following manner: while the writer has to be responsible (in a manner similar to Sartre's conception of *littérature engagée*), the philosopher may indulge in a certain amount of irresponsibility, or may cease trying always to say something relevant about social problems. It is as if, after more than twenty five centuries, the "poets" are being ordered back into the *polis* and made to think about the state and laws, which relieves 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 for philosophers than to contemplate placing some of the burden of responsibility for the success of what are, like it or not, contingent experiments in liberal democracy, on the shoulders of poets. In taking one step forward, Rorty seems to be taking two steps backwards, as his pragmatism does not permit the abandonment of society to the mercy of spiritless technocrats and social engineers of the future. (Interestingly, the opposite direction is taken by Derrida, who accords this "strange institution called literature" the right of *tout dire*, of saying everything, and 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, from the safety of an institutional zone protected against any censorship, since for Derrida the institution of literature is closely 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.) The picture one gets from Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, and related essays in *Philosophical Papers*, is that philosophy and poetry are, to a large extent, on the "private side", while on the "public" side one finds the novel together with politics. For Rorty, conceptual difficulties in philosophy and individual idioms in poetry do not seem to change the world; instead, the key to social reality is held by liberal politics and the novel that shapes human sensitivity. This very pragmatic solution rejects the roles and obligations which culture traditionally ascribes to literature and philosophy. What I wish to investigate here is what may have pushed Rorty to such conclusions (as I read them) and where he finds justification or support for them.

A pragmatic line of reasoning is seemingly simple, and certainly convincing: liberal society does not need "philosophical foundations" any more. The natural sciences are no longer, as Rorty 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. The 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, but turn 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, and compare redescrptions by various figures against each other rather than against their "originals". Finally, they read a lot of books (which is a guiding trait of intellectuals), "spend[ing] more of their time placing books than placing real live people".³ Literature, together with literary criticism, has more to say and more to do; traditional philosophy is culturally less interesting and in this account

offers less. Thus, various possibilities suggest themselves: either we deal only with literature, or we try to think of another possibility of the other, of philosophy, taken off the Kantian pedestal, or we think philosophy through with the help of a specific kind of literature (as Frenchmen do, from Bataille through Klossowski and Foucault to Derrida), or - finally - we remain silent in the manner of the young Wittgenstein, pretending that nothing has changed in philosophy in the time of postmodernity. And that last 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"⁴) which constantly have to be coined, developed, transformed and updated as the world changes. The Kantian idealistic morality of duty, with one side of moral philosophy falling to pieces (the other side being politics, as in Marx or Bentham), caused an essential pauperization of possibilities of moral deliberation. The result of this 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".⁵ Culture could not stand void - so it was filled with the nineteenth-century novel. And since then "literature" has cared 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 (an essence from which philosophers were the only ones entitled to deduce, and pass on to others, how one ought to behave) is believed.

So far I have made reference to the "self-creation"/"solidarity" and the "private"/"public" distinctions, but one can easily add to them other pairs, more or less metaphoric, coming from Rorty's work, such as "sublimity" and "decency", "private narcissism" and "public pragmatism", "private irony" and "liberal hope" or "Trotsky" and the "wild orchids".⁶ All of these seem to be different accounts of a fundamental Rortyan opposition between the romantic and the pragmatic ("romantic" as used in "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism", and "pragmatic" in the sense of "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 - Dewey's answer - or metaphor - the answer of Heidegger after his "turn" (to put the thought in the form of another of Rorty's essay titles, "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 metaphor political (suffice it to say that Walter Benjamin was afraid of the aestheticization of politics⁸;

and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in his *Heidegger, Art, and Politics* called National Socialism, "national-aestheticism"⁹). 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 this is a key point of my reading - both pragmatist and "strong poet", both utopian social engineer and visionary, so as to both serve his community and make use of the 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 advice as our ancestors turned to the priests: "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".¹⁰

Rorty consistently *avoids choosing* between the romanticism of the poet and the pragmatism of the politician and social engineer; we have to agree here with Nancy Fraser who says that "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".¹¹ It may be perhaps so that while the romantic need turns Rorty towards philosophy, the pragmatic one directs his attention to literature, and to the novel in particular. Philosophy, as inessential for and insignificant in today's culture and as devoid of transformative powers as it seems to be, is located by Rorty 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.¹² Philosophy - following Zygmunt Bauman in *Intimations of Postmodernity*¹³ - either hides behind the silent walls of the Academy, or allies itself to 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", much "as chemists have a certain familiarity with what happens when you mix various substances together",¹⁴ and nothing more.

To sum up briefly: the pragmatic impulse, the ideals of liberal democracy, and the priority of democracy over philosophy all push Rorty's thinking towards literature as a kind of democratic utopia (and towards 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 the self-creational kind of philosophy.¹⁵ There is no third way. *Tertium non datum*. Both impulses constitute at the same time his liberal sensitivity - what is important is other people's suffering, their pain and humiliation - *as well as* what he has referred to differently over the

years as "self-enlargement", "self-invention", or - in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* - "edification" (derived from Gadamer's *Bildung in Truth and Method*¹⁶). Both impulses are constantly present, and both give birth to confessions such as, on the one hand, "what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark",¹⁷ 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"¹⁸, or, to put it even more strongly: "nothing is more important than saving our liberal institutions"¹⁹ (the pragmatic impulse) and "re-describing ourselves is the most important thing we can do"²⁰ (the romantic impulse). It is difficult to abandon either of the two sides, nor can they be brought into agreement with each other: the only solution seems to be the public-private split. Hence, perhaps, Rorty's specific attitude towards literature (and the novel) that satisfies the need for communal thinking as opposed to a post-philosophical attitude to philosophy that satisfies the need for "privatized thinking". Let us add that this is merely a general tendency in his considerations rather than some rigid distinction. We will attempt now to place his philosophical reflections on literature in the wider context of his views on the role and place of philosophy in contemporary culture.

2.

Rorty, in asking - in a quite pragmatic manner - what literature and philosophy can give us, elevates the former by juxtaposing its usefulness with the apparent uselessness of traditional philosophy. He brings them close to each other, treating them as "two kinds of writing". He does not make use of criticism already traditional today, that is, showing the philosophical background of literary works (their themes, questions, oppositions and conceptuality) as if this were the second "bottom" of literature, nor does he seek the "literariness" of philosophical works. As a matter of fact, he does not change the status of literature; instead, together with his whole conception of philosophy as developed since *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), he takes off from philosophy in terms of the place accorded to it so far (at least since Kantian times).

For in the *cultural conversation* going on, the philosopher has so far had a privileged position: the first and the last word belonged to him; it was he who knew best as he knew the widest - philosophical - context of questions and answers. For it was he who used to decide, in the last instance, about the claims to knowledge of all the other domains of culture. Rorty says that the central concern of the all 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).²¹

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, since it was a "foundational" discipline, overwhelming and legitimating other domains. The abandonment of the Kantian perspective (still being reinforced in the twentieth century by Russell's and Husserl's ideal of a "scientific" and "exact" philosophy) would be an attack on the philosopher's self-image; it 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".²² To be more precise, this would cause the collapse of the idea that there is some "philosophical method" or some "philosophical point of view" which enables the philosopher, thanks to his profession, to express interesting opinions, *ex officio*, on the subjects of, for example, psychoanalysis, the moral dilemmas of humanity or the value of literary works. Philosophy in Rorty's account becomes less important and thereby the philosopher himself, the philosopher whose opinions have so far been important owing to the importance of the philosophical discipline itself, becomes less important. Philosophy cannot escape from history, which prompts Rorty to ask why it was assumed to be an autonomous discipline, foundational for the whole of culture? It was the case, he explains, because the German idealists of the nineteenth century told us that such a discipline was the "hope of mankind"²³, and we kept believing them. To sum up, Rorty, in elevating literature, places philosophy at the same time on an equal footing with other disciplines, devoid of any of its 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.

Rorty neither applies philosophical conceptuality to literature, nor seek its "philosophical core", "blind spots" or unsaid "margins" to which one can supposedly get by removing surface layers of vocabulary or style. He does not ask a question about the *essence* of literature, asking instead about what it is doing, or how it is working. For example, he suggests that the novel improves human sensitivity to suffering and cruelty (which is, incidentally, a peculiar, liberal-pragmatic reduction of the richness of literary senses and benefits). Here a question arises as to whether Rorty is interested in literature as literature or perhaps as a better, more effective tool

than - for instance - philosophy? Is not Rorty's writing about literature *instrumental* with respect to literature, since what is perhaps at stake is merely literature's juxtaposition to philosophy? That is, showing what post-Philosophical philosophy ought to be, or might be, by means of idealizing, or even caricaturing, literature and, in broader terms, so-called highbrow literary culture. Today's "supremacy of literary culture"²⁴, placing literature in the center of culture and treating both science and philosophy as literary genres (as did the philosophers he described as "textualists") may be a result of Rorty's new ideal (once the sciences - in philosophy and in culture - are not that ideal any more). Testimony to this is the way in which he accounts for the work of the literary critic - as *strong misreading*. What, according to Rorty, is the way of reading texts in literary criticism and in literature? Given Rorty's perception that there is no such method, that there are no general, ahistorical and permanent criteria of evaluation, he prefers self-creational possibilities (which may mean imposing one's own vocabulary on someone else's text, a redescription carried out in one's own terms rather than in terms of a given text or inherited ones).

Another question²⁵ - is not Rorty producing for his own pragmatic needs a picture of literary criticism that suits him, on the basis of, for example, philosophical conceptions or their application. Literary criticism would be an outlet for the self-creational desires of the critic or the philosopher. The text would serve only the critic's own aims. In this instance, Rorty's "method", following Harold Bloom, might be as follows: the critic shapes the text for his own needs, imposing onto it a vocabulary which "may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens".²⁶ Rorty applies that "method" - and admits it explicitly - in his discussions of Derrida. When Jacques Bouveresse (in a congenial volume 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*).²⁷ And he justifies this approach in terms of being a "strong misreader" endowed with the right to his own redescrptions. 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".²⁸ Literature replaces philosophy as a "presiding cultural discipline", as 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 that the Enlightenment lost its faith in God.²⁹ Rorty says that,

in the nineteenth century, "'philosophy' became, for the intellectuals, a substitute for religion", since

[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*.³⁰

In other words, as noted right at the beginning: philosophers are important, because philosophy is 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"³¹, the importance of philosophy began to be doubted. Consequently, scientists became isolated at the beginning of the twentieth century from the majority of intellectuals, just like theologians had been isolated before. Poets and novelists became, to use Rorty's favorite formulation, the moral teachers of the youth, 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 became its traditional claims to being a foundational discipline for the whole of culture.

Rorty, within the framework of C.P. Snow's dichotomy of "scientific culture" and "literary culture", seems to place philosophizing, together with literary criticism and poetry, within the latter culture, with all the consequences thereof.³² Who is the "literary intellectual" or - in the 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, one who has abandoned traditional pretensions to Philosophy (with the capital "P"). This is Rorty's 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".³³ He is a "name dropper", a master at using proper names as sets of descriptions or ways of seeing the world. He specializes in searching for similarities and differences between big visions of the world painted in the most general lines. Deprived of historical constants, doomed to redescrptions of redescrptions, he is doomed to be quickly forgotten. Not finding immortal sentences or 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.³⁴

Rorty's account of the relationship between philosophy and literature, while convincing, is perhaps too simple. It is similar to the approach taken by Zygmunt Bauman in *Intimations of Postmodernity*³⁵, where it is suggested that, in the past, philosophy and literature (when the former was still Philosophy) stood on *opposite sides of a dichotomy*, paradigmatic cases of the oppositions subjective/objective, rational/irrational, scientific/non-scientific, *doxa/episteme* (opinion and knowledge), contingent/universal, and historical/ahistorical (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 and rationality - philosophy would not stand on the side of the objective, the rational, and the atemporal. One side of the dichotomy would have to disappear, and the dichotomy itself would share its fate. So what might separate philosophy and literature today? The answer common to Rorty and Bauman is different books, different traditions, and, finally, a different history; for philosophy, like literature, cannot escape from its history and historicity, although it is sometimes difficult to remember that (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 daringly envisage only what Hegel so beautifully called "grasping one's time in thought".³⁶

Philosophy and literature see the present (and the past) in different *styles*, one could say (referring to Nietzsche, Deleuze and Derrida): in terms of their contingent vocabularies, which are endowed with different degrees of sensitivity and embedded in different conceptualizations shaped by their respective histories. But claims by both disciplines to be coining a neutral vocabulary (since discovering such a vocabulary is totally out of the question) are equally unjustified. What is significant is Rorty's attitude to the practical achievements of both spheres of culture. He advises us to compare the role played by novelists and literary critics in liberal democracies in the Western world with the apparently rather insignificant role played by philosophers.³⁷ Whose sensitivity to pain was changed by traditional philosophy? Did the latter manage to change the world for the better?

If one assumes all of Rorty's points of departure, it may turn out that philosophy is merely "a kind of writing". But all those who see some specific, universal and emancipatory tasks for philosophy, those who seek one never-changing "philosophical context" in which one can place in front of a philosophical tribunal of reason all other disciplines and all other participants in a cultural conversation, would find it very

difficult to agree with such a seemingly reductionist argument. As to whether philosophy is outdated as a profession, Rorty answers that "professions can survive the paradigms that gave them birth".³⁸ 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, for example, Heidegger tomorrow, or of 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"?³⁹

3.

What is required now is a brief excursus on 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. Rorty says that "the self-image of a philosopher - 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, he continues, an independent gesture on the part of every philosopher - "is motivated almost entirely by a perception of one's relation to the history of philosophy".⁴⁰ The choice, between Hegel or Plato⁴¹ (between, 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 philosophy and drawing a moral conclusion.⁴² A similar attitude to the history of the novel is taken by Milan Kundera, one of Rorty's recent favorites. Perhaps it would be easier to understand Rorty's attitude towards philosophy, as well as his account of the history of philosophy, by comparing it with Kundera's account of the novel and its history from *The Art of the Novel*. Let us first add, though, that what binds Rorty, Lyotard or Foucault so closely with Kundera, are *histories*, stories, micrologies, written narratives.⁴³ Without developing that theme, for there is not enough space for it here, let us use a couple of well chosen citations. Kundera's claim: "I am making stories, juxtaposing them and that is how I am asking questions"⁴⁴ is echoed by Lyotard when he says that he is merely "telling ... a story, unfolding a little story of my own"⁴⁵ and advising us to "set to work forging fictions rather than hypotheses and theories"⁴⁶. Rorty's response might be, as already noted, that he is telling stories about his most and least favored books, and Michel Foucault's agreement might be found in the following statement: "I am fully aware that I have never written anything other

than fictions" (and Maurice Blanchot elaborates, "I am a fabulist composing fables whose morals one would be unwise to wait for").⁴⁷

Rorty seems to want philosophy - together with the novel - 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 traditional philosophy, a world made of a different material than the "relative world of the novel". "Totalitarian truth excludes relativity, doubts, questions and can never accept what I would call the spirit of the novel".⁴⁸ The method of truth, of epistemologically-oriented traditional philosophy deriving from Kant, of the 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 the 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".⁴⁹ In the face of the dangers facing a fragile and unstable culture, it comes in handy to find that the "precious essence of the European spirit is, like in a silver jewelry box, in the history of the novel, in the wisdom of the novel".⁵⁰ 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 the West to shape itself in the way it is shaped today did not come from philosophers, nor was it defended by philosophers. It came mainly, according to Rorty, from a literary imagination, from the sensitivities and loud voices of writers, which was given to them only temporarily,⁵¹ even incidentally, by the project of modernity that may be coming to its completion.

4.

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

Philosophy with the capital "P")? It is worth noting that the attitude of Zygmunt Bauman to literature is similar: he does not investigate today's blurring of boundaries, the merging of the two genres, but uses the literary genre as an example, a case from history described by the pen of a man of letters, an object of a sociological deliberation (with reference, for example, to Kafka and his *Diaries* from *Modernity and Ambivalence*⁵²). 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".⁵³ 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*, of its benefits for developing liberal democracies. (He admits it explicitly in his polemic with Umberto Eco when he says that he imposes on each book his own "grid", which is the narrative of "the pragmatist's progress"⁵⁴). So he contrasts, for instance, the public uselessness of Heidegger's philosophy against the public benefits derived from reading Dickens' novels, and thus confronts a philosophical theory with a literary narrative. The novel, in his view, has turned out to have been more fruitful than philosophy in the history of the 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".⁵⁵ It is thanks more to "our novelists than to our philosophers or to our poets" that the West has worked out an "increased ability to tolerate diversity", by means of a realization of and a sensitivity to intolerance.⁵⁶

Perhaps the single most important approximation can be seen in Rorty's introductory statement that for ironists theory has become "a means to private perfection", rather than a tool for social communication.⁵⁷ Thus we are on the one side of Rorty's fundamental opposition between the private and the public,⁵⁸ 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 being socially totally "useless"). The former - writers like Proust - remain in their writings in relation to their own, private, idiosyncratic past, rewinding objects, people and events (using, for instance, that *memoire involontaire*), making redescrptions of their surrounding in their own vocabulary, in their own terms. They aim at autonomy, redescrbing in their

works those who once described themselves. They free themselves from foreign authorities, showing their relativity, their finiteness, their transitoriness.

Ironist theorists, on the other hand, still retain 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".⁵⁹ They want to remain in relation to a past which is broader than their own - preferably the past of a species, a race or a class. They are not content with merely ordering small things in their own way (details, accidents, or narratives); they also want to describe a big and important thing, and draw their power from it. To sum up, they prefer affiliation to self-creation. What is disharmonious in their works is their (immodest) feeling of 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 Proust's *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 to anybody but his narrator"; and "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*".⁶⁰ But, as a matter of fact, these words are not endowed with different significance - they are merely 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, comments Rorty. When one contrasts Nietzsche's or Heidegger's ironist theorizing with the modern novel, it turns out that the former is just "one of [several] great literary traditions" - 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.⁶¹

As Kundera tries to show, the novel has invented its own - imaginary - democratic utopia, 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. A democratic utopia would be a community in which the most important virtues of mind would be tolerance and curiosity - rather than the search for truth.⁶² In such a Utopia people would suffer and cause far less pain than they do today; it would be a utopia of brotherhood realized in many currently unimaginable ways.

5.

Thus, Rorty tends to write of such writers and of such literature which is (or in his reading can be) socially - not even only individually or self-creationally - useful. For even when he writes of Nabokov - and he does that superbly - he does it in order to show that although he was a writer aiming at autonomy (self-creation), nevertheless he studied the cruelty inherent in the search for that autonomy. So, paradoxical as it may seem, Orwell and Nabokov get closer and closer to each other in Rorty's reading - as he puts it, "both of them warn the liberal ironist intellectual against temptations to be cruel".⁶³ And the fear of causing pain, of being cruel, constitutes in his view the liberal sensitivity.

Let us say 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).⁶⁴ Since Mallarmé, literature has no longer wanted to reflect the world, to be "a copy of a copy", to stand on the other end from 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 reality - there is an awareness of a "fundamental inadequation" (as Barthes says in his "Inaugural Lecture" at Collège de France⁶⁵) between the linguistic order and the order of the world; the category of representation has become a banner-like object of a critical investigation - and rejection - in the French humanities in recent decades. The myth of *mimesis* that has constituted art (together with literature) since Ancient Greece, is violently questioned in the works of Bataille or Artaud - and in those of their post-war commentators. Rorty's thinking about 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. This is, to be sure, a philosophical (to be more precise, a pragmatic) choice on Rorty's part - "details" and "cruelty", the concern for pain hidden under the mask of aestheticism, as well as moral protest - and the "depreciated legacy of Cervantes" is 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 the abyss of *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. Philosophy can be seen as a "family romance"⁶⁶, and philosophers as commentators on certain writers of the past.

In Rorty's account of literature, one can focus on the importance of his 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 "merely aesthetic"). Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* draws a distinction between books that help us to become autonomous subjects and books that help us 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 ought to be: "*what purposes does this book serve?*"⁶⁷ The purposes to be considered are not the good and the beautiful, but either the maintenance of an old, existing absolute vocabulary or the working out of a new absolute vocabulary (there seem here to be remote analogies to the Kuhnian distinction between "normal science" and "revolutionary science"). Books that transform a final vocabulary form the tiniest but perhaps the most important part of all – for they can transform the most.

A reminder: there is no "nature of literature", Rorty stresses. The aim of some writers (Plato, Heidegger, Proust or Nabokov) is to find "private perfection", the aim of other writers (Dickens, Mill, Dewey, Orwell, Habermas or Rawls) is to serve "human freedom". They cannot be evaluated on a common scale, making some inferior or superior to others. Just like there is no "aim of writing", there is also no "aim of theorizing".⁶⁸ It does not help to contrast both kinds of "writers" (rather than philosophers and writers, let us add) with each other - writers of "self-creation" against writers 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 the search for such a "synoptic vision", a single account, that first brought about and then directed Rorty's interest in philosophy. How is one to bring one's "Trotsky" and one's "wild orchids" into agreement, he asks in an autobiographical text, how is one to be at the same time a "friend of humanity" and an "intellectual and spiritual snob"?⁶⁹ The answer to that pervasive question appears only in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, for in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* this question, fundamental to Rorty's thought, remained untouched (although that text contains many themes forecasting Rorty's solution to the problem).⁷⁰ The answer which is given simultaneously takes away from philosophy the hope of ever reaching such an account, such a vision (which is impossible on the level of theory): it states that the vocabulary of self-creation is private, non-shared and incompatible with

argumentation, whereas the vocabulary of justice is public and common, a means serving, precisely, argumentation. These two vocabularies, like the aims that Rorty's two kinds of writers have in common, as well as the requirements of self-creation and of solidarity, are "equally valid, yet forever incommensurable", in his memorable expression.⁷¹ Between the private and the public there seems to be no opposition, but instead a tension - and incommensurability.

Coming to the end of this little story, let us say that literature (and the novel in particular) has a settled position in Rorty's philosophical conception: in the face of the powerlessness of Continental philosophy on the one hand and the cultural demise of analytic philosophy on the other, in the face of the restricted influence of philosophy in general on delicate matters of social life in a time of the collapse of the traditional Enlightenment figure of the intellectual, the chance, perhaps the last chance, of shaping liberal sensitivity is provided by the novel (and let us bear in mind that we belong to a 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").⁷² That may be the reason why Rorty invests all his "pragmatic" hopes in literature, leaving philosophy with the role of adviser or of "Romantic", of individual self-creation. Thereby he replaces the critical and yet softened tooth of philosophical thinking (partially saved in Lyotard's idea of "resistance through writing"⁷³ or "bearing witness to differends" from *The Differend*, in the late Foucault's texts on Kant and the Enlightenment,⁷⁴ or in Derrida's attempted transcendence of both philosophy and literature in order to deconstruct their philosophical opposition by means of particular "acts of reading") with the sharpened and newly valued tooth of the novelist. Nevertheless, his general perspective is rather pessimistic: intellectuals cannot do much today, aside from those writers among them that are most needed by liberal society. As for the philosopher, well, let him for the moment just advise us that it is important to read novels...

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

² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p. 52.

Hereafter referred to as CIS.

³ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 80.

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- ⁴ Richard Rorty, "Freud and Moral Reflection" in his *Essays on Heidegger and Others, Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), p 156. Hereafter referred to as PP 2.
- ⁵ Richard Rorty, PP 2, p. 156.
- ⁶ Richard Rorty, CIS, pp. 73-96; "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids", "Common Knowledge", vol. 1 no. 3, 1992.
- ⁷ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 139-159, hereafter referred to as CP; "Pragmatism and Philosophy" in *After Philosophy. End or Transformation*, K. Baynes et al (eds.), pp. 26-66.
- ⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art. in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in his *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973).
- ⁹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics. The Fiction of the Political*, trans. Ch. Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 86.
- ¹⁰ Richard Rorty, PP 2, p. 26 - emphasis mine.
- ¹¹ Nancy Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy" in *Reading Rorty*, ed. A. Malachowski (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 311.
- ¹² Thomas McCarthy, "Ironie privée et décence publique" in *Lire Rorty. Le pragmatisme et ses conséquences*, éd. par J.-P. Cometti (Paris: Editions de l'éclat, 1992), p. 94.
- ¹³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 16.
- ¹⁴ Richard Rorty, "Trotsky...", p. 152.
- ¹⁵ See *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. by Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996) for a recent Rorty/Derrida encounter.
- ¹⁶ Richard Rorty, PMN, p. 360. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Routledge, 1975).
- ¹⁷ Richard Rorty, CP, p. 166.
- ¹⁸ Richard Rorty, "Texts and Lumps" in his *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, Philosophical Papers* vol. 1 (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), p. 82. Hereafter referred to as PP 1.
- ¹⁹ Richard Rorty, "Brigands et intellectuels", *Critique* 493-494, juin-juillet 1988, p. 485.
- ²⁰ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 358-359. Hereafter referred to as PMN.
- ²¹ Richard Rorty, PMN, p. 3.
- ²² Richard Rorty, PMN, p. 392.
- ²³ Richard Rorty, CP, p. 148.
- ²⁴ Richard Rorty, p. 150.
- ²⁵ See Michael Fischer, "Redefining Philosophy as Literature: Richard Rorty's 'Defence' of Literary Culture" in *Reading Rorty*, pp. 233-243.
- ²⁶ Richard Rorty, CP, p. 151.
- ²⁷ Richard Rorty, "Réponse à Jacques Bouveresse" in *Lire Rorty*, p. 156.
- ²⁸ Richard Rorty, CP, p. 152.

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- ²⁹ See Richard Rorty, CP, p. 228.
- ³⁰ Richard Rorty, PMN, p. 4 - emphasis mine.
- ³¹ Richard Rorty, PMN, p. 4.
- ³² See Thomas McCarthy, "Ironie privée et décence publique" in *Lire Rorty*, p. 91.
- ³³ Richard Rorty, CP, p. xl.
- ³⁴ Richard Rorty, CP, p. xli.
- ³⁵ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, p. 215. See also my essay "Zygmunt Bauman and the Figure of the Intellectual in Postmodernity" (Berkeley: Center for Western European Studies, 1997).
- ³⁶ See my text on relations between philosophy, literature and sciences in postmodernity "Postmodernity, Science, Philosophy", 2B. *A Journal of Ideas*, no 13-14, 1988 (Chicago).
- ³⁷ See e.g. Richard Rorty, "Brigands et intellectuels", p. 486.
- ³⁸ Richard Rorty, PMN, p. 393.
- ³⁹ Richard Rorty, CP, p. 41.
- ⁴⁰ Richard Rorty, CP, pp. 41, 41.
- ⁴¹ On Rorty's relations with Plato and Hegel see two chapters in my book, *Rorty's Elective Affinities. The New Pragmatism and Postmodern Thought* (Poznan: Adam Mickiewicz University Press, 1996).
- ⁴² Marek Kwiek, *Rorty's Elective Affinities*, p. 174.
- ⁴³ An excellent account of Rorty as a narrativist is presented in David Hall, *Richard Rorty. Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994).
- ⁴⁴ Milan Kundera in *Kundera. Materialy z sympozjum* (London: Polonia Book, 1988), p. 149 (in Polish).
- ⁴⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, "Lessons in Paganism" in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. A. Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 125.
- ⁴⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, "Lessons in Paganism", p. 118.
- ⁴⁷ *Foucault/Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), p. 94.
- ⁴⁸ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. L. Asher (New York: Grove Press, 1986), a Polish translation by M. Bińczyk (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1991), p. 19.
- ⁴⁹ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 130.
- ⁵⁰ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 130.
- ⁵¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Tombeau de l'intellectuel et autres papiers* (Paris: Galilée, 1984), pp. 9-23.
- ⁵² See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991) and Franz Kafka, *Die Tagebücher 1910-1923*, Max Brod (ed.), Frankfurt/M, 1967.
- ⁵³ Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), pp. 53, 53, 71.
- ⁵⁴ Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress" in Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 91.
- ⁵⁵ Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens" in PP 2, p. 80.
- ⁵⁶ Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens", p. 81.

⁵⁷ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 96.

⁵⁸ See Rorty's reaction in "Response to Marek Kwiek" to my discussion of his "private/public split" in "On Some Rorty's Evolution" (*Ruch Filozoficzny*, Warsaw, vol L, no. 2, 1995, pp.195-200).

⁵⁹ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 100.

⁶⁰ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 118 - emphasis mine.

⁶¹ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 120.

⁶² Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens", p. 75.

⁶³ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 144.

⁶⁴ See my text "Between the Community and the Text (French Philosophy, Politics, and the Figure of the Intellectual - from Sartre to Foucault)" in *Trames. A Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Tallin: the Academy of Sciences Press), no 2, 1998.

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France" in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), p. 465.

⁶⁶ Richard Rorty, CP, p. 92.

⁶⁷ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 142.

⁶⁸ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. 141.

⁶⁹ Richard Rorty, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids", p. 143.

⁷⁰ See prefigurations of "self-creational" themes in PMN, e.g. pp. 359-360.

⁷¹ Richard Rorty, CIS, p. xv.

⁷² Richard Rorty in *Lire Rorty*, p. 184.

⁷³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "An Interview", *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 5 (1988), p. 302.

⁷⁴ 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* (New York: Routledge, 1988), L.D. Kritzman (ed.), pp. 86-95.