SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION, ANTI-AUTHORITARIANISM, AND FORM: RICHARD RORTY'S LITERARY CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT: In many of his texts, Richard Rorty endeavors to bring together philosophy and literature. When he talks about literature he primarily means the novel. He intends to use the novel for purposes of moral education and orientation. Seeking to elucidate the novelty of what he terms a literary or poeticized culture, Rorty advances the idea that in this anti-authoritarian and antirepresentationalist culture literature is more important than philosophy as regards the formation of future intellectuals. Rorty's proposal is significant insofar as the much-debated renaissance of pragmatism has not yet entailed the development of a sophisticated pragmatist literary criticism. A literary criticism, that is, which illuminates the insufficiency of the against-theory gesture, directs attention to the vulgarity of the instrumentalization of the novel for moral purposes, and thus does not refrain from discussing aesthetic questions. When literature plays such a central role for Rorty's version of pragmatism, then it seems interesting to ask whether his understanding of the novel can prepare the ground for the development of a pragmatist literary criticism. The essay is divided into three parts. The first part explains what Rorty means by "sentimental education" when he talks about the novel. It also briefly discusses the main difference between Rorty's understanding of the relation between literature and morality and Martha Nussbaum's literary ethics. The second part concentrates on anti-authoritarianism and the novel. It tries to clarify the following question: Why is the novel important for Rorty's anti-authoritarianism? In Rorty studies, giving a detailed answer to this question is still a desideratum. One can say the same about the following question: What role can aesthetic form play for a pragmatist literary criticism that positions itself within a broader anti-authoritarian framework? The final part of this essay seeks to answer this important question.

Keywords: Richard Rorty, Pragmatist Literary Criticism, Pragmatist Aesthetics, Anti-Authoritarianism, Aesthetic Form, Literature and Ethics

For philosophers as different as Heidegger, Sartre, Lukács, Adorno, and Cavell, literature played a central role. They demonstrated that the endeavor to bring together philosophy and literature produced highly interesting results. The same can be said about Richard Rorty. Seeking to elucidate the novelty of what he termed a literary or "poeticized culture" (Rorty 1989, 53), Rorty advanced the idea that in this anti-authoritarian and antirepresentationalist culture literature was more important than philosophy for the formation of future intellectuals.[1] Rorty's proposal is significant insofar as the much-debated renaissance of pragmatism has not yet entailed the development of a sophisticated pragmatist literary criticism. A literary criticism, that is, which illuminates the insufficiency of the against-theory gesture, directs attention to the vulgarity of the instrumentalization of the novel for moral purposes, and thus does not refrain from discussing aesthetic questions. Rorty's pragmatist humanism as anti-authoritarianism plays a crucial role in this context. There are three reasons for this. First, what he says about literature, primarily the novel, is sometimes stimulating and thought-provoking. Second, his version of literary criticism offers the unique possibility of discussing the novel within an anti-authoritarian framework. Finally, Rorty's unwillingness to confront aesthetic problems urges one to pose a question that is of the utmost importance for the development of a pragmatist literary criticism: What role can aesthetic form play for pragmatist anti-authoritarianism?[2]

In many of his texts, Rorty tells a story that is full of replacements and transitions. Religion was replaced by philosophy, Kant's transcendental idealism and its ideal of philosophy-as-science was replaced by Hegel's historicism, Romanticism was replaced by pragmatism, and philosophy has finally been replaced by literature. Highlighting the humanistic character of his notion of a literary culture, Rorty asserts that this culture "drops a presupposition common to religion and philosophy – that redemption must come from one's relation to something that is not just one more human creation" (Rorty 2004, 11). Moreover, he states a thesis that is central to many of his texts: "It is that the intellectuals of the West have, since the Renaissance, progressed through three stages:

[1] For a detailed discussion of the Rortyan idea of a poeticized culture, see Schulenberg 2015.
[2] For a discussion of Rorty's anti-authoritarianism, see Bacon 2023, Rondel 2011 and 2021, and Schulenberg 2023.

they have hoped for redemption first from God, then from philosophy, and now from literature" (ibid., 8). In a Rortyan de-divinized culture, a culture that is humanist, anti-authoritarian, and historicist, one must no longer strive to enter into a relation with a nonhuman entity or power; instead, one should seek to get in touch with the present limits of one's imagination. When literature plays such a central role for Rorty's version of pragmatism, then it seems interesting to ask whether his understanding of the novel can prepare the ground for the development of a pragmatist literary criticism. We will see that this is only partly the case and that his refusal to address the question of form, and aesthetics in general, has far-reaching consequences.[3]

This essay is divided into three parts. In the first part, I will explain what Rorty means by "sentimental education" (Rorty 1998a, 176) when he talks about the novel. I will also briefly discuss the main difference between Rorty's understanding of the relation between literature and morality and Martha Nussbaum's literary ethics. The second part concentrates on anti-authoritarianism and the novel. It tries to clarify the following question: Why is the novel important for Rorty's anti-authoritarianism? In Rorty studies, giving a detailed answer to this question is still a desideratum. One can say the same about the following question: What role can aesthetic form play for a pragmatist literary criticism that positions itself within a broader anti-authoritarian framework? I will discuss this important question in the final part of this essay.

Sentimental Education

When Rorty talks about literature he primarily means the novel. He intends to use the novel for purposes of moral education and orientation. It is his contention that reading novels can offer one the possibility of transcending one's background and thus of achieving greater self-reliance and a more complex individuality. By reading novels, one gets a detailed knowledge of other people; that is, one learns about their actions, their motivations, their idiosyncrasies, their needs, and self-descriptions. Rorty maintains that we have a more developed and educated moral outlook when we are capable of grasping more of these needs and desires and when we become more curious about these self-descriptions. By reading novels, if one follows this American pragmatist, readers become more inclined to worry about whether they are sufficiently aware of the needs and problems of others. Some novel readers might achieve spiritual growth in the sense of an increased flexibility, empathy, and sympathy in the making of moral decisions. Novels by, for instance, Proust and Henry James can fuel the desire to transform oneself into a different and morally better sort of person by changing one's sense of what matters most. In his posthumously published essay, "Redemption from Egotism," Rorty claims that "the novel is the genre which gives us most help in grasping the variety of human life and the contingency of our own moral vocabulary" (Rorty 2010, 393). Furthermore, he states that he wants "to see the rise of the novel in the last two centuries as something new under the sun, something that may help initiate a new form of cultural life […]" (ibid., 404).[4] When he presents himself as an intellectual historian (a field that always profoundly fascinated him), he lets his anti-authoritarian and antirepresentationalist stories of progress and emancipation begin with the Romantics. This is also crucial to see when one seeks to fully appreciate what he writes about the novel and moral progress. Rorty argues that the past two centuries ought not to be regarded as a period in which humans have achieved a deeper and more complex understanding of the core of morality and the real nature of rationality. Rather, they should be seen

[3] As regards the future of pragmatist aesthetics, see Dreon 2022 and Koczanowicz and Liszka 2014.

[4] For interesting discussions of Rorty's understanding of the novel, see the chapter "The Politics of the Novel" in Voparil 2006, 61-88; and the chapter "Richard Rorty's 'cultural politics': Ironist philosophy and the ethics of reading" in Doran 2017, 79-95. On Rorty's ethics, see Malachowski 2021 and Marchetti 2022.

as a time in which we finally grasped the significance of telling and listening to sentimental stories: "These two centuries are most easily understood not as a period of deepening understanding of the nature of rationality or of morality, but rather as one in which there occurred an astonishingly rapid progress of sentiments, in which it has become much easier for us to be moved to action by sad and sentimental stories" (Rorty 1998a, 185).

In Rorty's aforementioned poeticized and postmetaphysical culture, strong poets, creative redescribers, nominalist historicists, and other anti-Platonists would delight in the stimulating plurality of new ways of speaking that do not pretend to offer a single, firm, unequivocal, and transhistorical truth and that contribute to the critique of the idea that there is a permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances. The members of this literary culture, the literary intellectuals, would be capable of elegantly combining a Shelleyan emphasis on the significance of the imagination, a Nietzschean perspectivism and radical antifoundationalism, and a Kunderian stress on the strict incompatibility between the plurality of the novel and the traditional conception of truth. In this kind of culture it becomes obvious that one should see moral progress as a history of making rather than finding. For Rorty, moral progress is a history of poetic achievements that stresses the importance of an increase in imaginative power, instead of claiming that one has gotten ever closer to the Good or the Right.[5]

In the famous last sentence of the preface to *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), Lionel Trilling avers that "literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty" (Trilling 2000, 548). This is also Rorty's opinion. Both American liberals also agree that literature, particularly the novel, can shape our morality. Novels that offer detailed descriptions of forms of cruelty, pain, and humiliation might increase their readers' sensitivity and their responsiveness to the needs of others. Hence, they ought to be regarded as contributing to moral progress. Faithful to his anti-Kantianism, Rorty maintains that we do not need theoretical abstraction, formalist analysis, or firm and transhistorical moral principles, but as malleable human beings we need storytelling. By speaking of "sentimental education" (Rorty 1998a, 181) in this context, he also proposes that a pragmatist literary criticism ought to refrain from becoming interested in aesthetic theory and the question of form. The abstraction of form, as he seems to hold, is incompatible with pragmatist anti-authoritarianism. I will expand on this in part 3 of this essay.

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty develops his notorious private-public distinction. According to him, it is one of the consequences of this dichotomy that one ought to distinguish books that help one become autonomous from books that help one become less cruel in one's behavior toward other people. There is, of course, no need to discuss this Rortyan idea once more. However, for our purposes it ought to be noted that his differentiation between the poet and the novelist goes back to this private-public split. The Nietzschean strong poet serves as a model for the pursuit of private perfection; that is, he has created himself by creating a vocabulary that completely belongs to him. Furthermore, in an Emersonian manner he has demonstrated that he will never imitate, while in a Coleridgean manner he has created the taste by which he will be judged by posterity. The strong poet's self-creation and self-renewal should lead us to reweave our webs of beliefs and desires in a way that results in the same kind of originality. By contrast, the novelist serves as a moral exemplar. There are certain novelists who are primarily useful for purposes of

[5] On the ethical turn, see Adamson, Freadman, and Parker 1998, Doran 2017, Davis and Womack 2001, and Garber, Hansen, and Walkowitz 2000. For an illuminating discussion of the ethics of the novel and the question of form, see Hale 2020. In this context, it is interesting to see what Nussbaum writes about texts that discuss the moral task of the novel: "For much of this writing has understandably given ethical writing about literature a bad name, by its neglect of literary form and its reductive moralizing manner" (Nussbaum 1990, 172).

self-creation. Proust, for instance, increases his readers' skill at recognizing and describing the little mortal things around which individuals center their lives. Rorty reads Proust as an ironist novelist. He submits that this French writer does not desire to escape from contingency, but rather uses it in order to redescribe and rearrange all the people he has met and all those little things, from the madeleine to the hawthorn bushes and Vinteuil's little phrase, which have been a part of his former life.

By contrast, novelists like, for instance, Stowe, Dickens, Zola, Wright, and Orwell are supposed to sensitize their readers to the pain, suffering, and humiliation of others. On Rorty's account, literature offers models of self-description that call attention to the suffering of others and seek to avoid humiliation. He claims that the novel ought to be regarded as a principal medium of a liberal democratic culture, since it allows the reader to recognize that cruelty is the worst thing we do (think of Judith Shklar's influence on Rorty's understanding of what it means to be a liberal here). Literature, ethnography, and journalism are supposed to offer a "thick description of the private and the idiosyncratic" (Rorty 1989, 94), and by doing so, they sensitize us to the pain and suffering of those who otherwise would be ignored since they do not speak our language. One of the central sentences of Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* concerns the role of literature in a nominalist and historicist liberal culture: "The metaphysician's association of theory with social hope and of literature with private perfection is, in an ironist liberal culture, reversed" (ibid.).[6]

The novel for Rorty is the ideal medium for what he terms sentimental education, since it draws attention to the possibility of developing an antiessentialist understanding of morality and moral progress. Offering a plurality of perspectives, viewpoints, descriptions, self-descriptions, characterizations, contingent belief systems, and moral outlooks, the novel prevents one from asking big questions about human nature or the meaning of life. Rather, it focuses on more practical questions. In "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," Rorty expands on this aspect thus:

> A society which took its moral vocabulary from novels rather than from ontotheological or onti-co-moral treatises would not ask itself questions about human nature, the point of human existence, or the meaning of human life. Rather, it would ask itself what we can do so as to get along with each other, how we can arrange things so as to be comfortable with one another, how institutions can be changed so that everyone's right to be understood has a better chance of being gratified. (Rorty 1991b, 78)

As regards the endeavor to use the novel for the attempt to confront moral problems, the work of Martha Nussbaum is of particular significance. In *Love's Knowledge* (1990) and *Poetic Justice* (1995), she develops some thought-provoking arguments. Nussbaum should be seen as part of a liberal humanist tradition of literary criticism that reaches back to such important critics as F.R. Leavis (*The Great Tradition*, 1948), Lionel Trilling, and Wayne Booth, whose work in ethical criticism culminated in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988). Henry James's *The Art of the Novel* (1907), to a certain degree, might be seen as a kind of urtext in this context. Like Rorty, Nussbaum is a liberal philosopher who argues for a different way of doing philosophy, who is dissatisfied with the limitations of analytic philosophy, and who therefore contends that an exploration of the connections between philosophy and literature might be an interesting and fruitful task. In her discussion of the moral potential of the novel, she avers that "the novel is itself a moral achievement, and the well-lived life is a work of literary art" (Nussbaum 1990, 148). Her contention is, as she unequivocally formulates it, "that certain novels are, irreplaceably, works of moral philosophy," and that "the novel can be a paradigm of moral activity" (ibid.). The use of novels and the storytelling imagination should lead to

[6] One should note that Rorty in many texts argues that in Western liberal societies moral progress is in the direction of greater human solidarity. However, faithful to his Deweyan anti-Platonism as antiessentialism, he stresses that solidarity must not be "thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings" (Rorty 1989, 192).

"a merely human nontranscending philosophy" (ibid., 388). Throughout *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum insists on the idea that literature ought to play "a part in our search for truth" and that, moreover, "the right way for literary discourse to be philosophical is to be more, not less, in love with truth" (ibid., 228). In contrast to Rorty's radical rejection of the concept of truth and of the correspondence theory of truth, Nussbaum holds on to a modified understanding of truth.

On Rorty's account, Nussbaum refuses to accept fully the necessity, or desirability, of a transition from philosophy to literature. She uses novels to strengthen her philosophical arguments. To her mind, both poetry and philosophy have something to do with truth, but the poets are capable of offering a different kind of truth (instead of helping us to break radically with Platonism, representationalism, and authoritarianism).[7] Rorty writes in this context: "On her view poetry and philosophy are both truth-seeking activities, and the truths they find help us answer some of the same questions" (Rorty 2010, 398). Nussbaum, as Rorty reads her, wants more than a plurality of perspectives, descriptions, and self-descriptions that call attention to the contingency of our moral vocabulary. Still under the influence of the quest for certainty (to use Dewey's term), Nussbaum never questions the idea of a (Aristotelian) moral philosophy, but rather strives to enhance it by adding the poet's truth.

Rorty's critique of Nussbaum helps one to further grasp his notion of a poeticized culture. This kind of culture is supposed to illustrate the full implications of the idea that the search for God was replaced by the striving for truth and that the latter has finally been replaced by the search for novelty, by an emphasis on the power of the imagination, and by the recognition that redemption can be found only in human creations and artifacts, not in the escape from the temporal to the eternal or transcendental. Preparing the ground for the establishment of this kind of postmetaphysical and anti-authoritarian culture, Rorty underscores that he holds that literary criticism is not a cognitive activity and is not a form of knowledge. Rather, his pragmatist literary criticism centers on terms such as redescription, self-creation, sentimental education, hope, inspiration, and the avoidance of cruelty and egotism. Particularly as regards the question about the task of literary criticism, Rorty radically rejects any attempt to make the intellect sovereign over the imagination. It is with his romantic and humanist version of literary criticism that his critique of the endeavor to give priority to the intellect over the imagination begins. This critique would later shape his cultural criticism.[8]

Anti-Authoritarianism and the Novel

The posthumous publication of Rorty's *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism* (2021) illuminated how thought-provoking the idea that pragmatism will contribute to a Second Enlightenment is. In his "Foreword: Achieving the Enlightenment" to Rorty's volume and in *Pragmatism and Idealism: Rorty and Hegel on Reason and Representation* (2022), Robert Brandom underscores how important the work of his *Doktorvater* is in this context.[9] According to Brandom, the Rortyan notion of anti-authoritarianism is central to the idea of a pragmatist enlightenment. Brandom writes:

> The theme of *Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism* is that pragmatism should be understood as defined by its commitment to bringing about a *second* Enlightenment. Its task is to broaden the anti-authoritarian lesson of the first Enlightenment beyond the practical sphere, applying it to the theoretical sphere. It is to be applied not only to ethics and politics, but to epistemology. (Brandom 2021, x)

The idea of a pragmatist enlightenment should be of primary concern in any discussion that seeks to clarify the significance of pragmatism in the twenty-first centu-

[7] For stimulating discussions of Nussbaum's literary ethics, see Diamond 1998, Harpham 2006, and Stow 2007.

[8] In this context, see Koopman 2013.

[9] See also Brandom 2000.

ry. For four decades, from the 1970s until his death in 2007, Rorty demonstrated how his combination of anti-authoritarianism and Darwinism enabled him to tell his antifoundationalist and antirepresentationalist story of progress and emancipation. The later Rorty's anti-authoritarianism is central to his version of pragmatism as humanism.[10] Brandom comments on the development of Rorty's thought thus: "During the last decade of his life Rorty formulated a new line of attack: seeing anti-representationalism in semantics as a version of pragmatist anti-*authoritarianism*. This more overtly political line both drew on and, in an important sense, brought to a logical conclusion the evolution of his thought in the intervening decades" (Brandom 2022, 10-11).

If one is capable of appreciating the implications of Rorty's proposal that "[w]e have no duties to anything nonhuman" (Rorty 1998a, 127), then one is in a better position to grasp the multilayered complexity of his brand of pragmatism. In most of his texts, Rorty teaches the same lessons: there is no nonhuman authority whose commands human beings have to obey (neither the Will of God, the Intrinsic Nature of Reality, the notion of an Objective Reality, nor the Truth). There is no such thing as human answerability to something nonhuman. Furthermore, we should radically question the gesture of a convergence to the antecedently real, true, or pure. Instead of questing for the certainty, reliability, solidity, transhistoricity, immutability, or purity of something that would be more than another human creation or invention, humans should finally appreciate that they have no duties to anything nonhuman, that their norms for beliefs and actions are solely their doing and responsibility, that normative statuses thus are ultimately social statuses, and that they should strive to reach a point where they no longer experience the desire to humble themselves before a nonhuman authority. Rorty's anti-authoritarianism as part of his humanism teaches us that there is nothing to be responsible to except ourselves and that our self-understanding and self-description should no longer be intimately linked to the idea of human nature or essence, but should rather be constructed around a relation to a particular collection of human beings. In other words, Rorty's anti-authoritarian and humanist thought is directed against the picture of a common nature that is oriented toward correspondence to reality as it is in itself, and it insists that we have to start from where we are (without metaphysical crutches) and that we moreover must work by our own lights.

Radically demetaphysicizing the world, Rorty's anti-authoritarianism suggests that instead of losing themselves in theoretical abstractions, philosophers should focus on the practices of real live humans who are engaged in causal interactions with the environment. Rorty's texts are governed by the endeavor to call attention to the significance of making, creating, inventing, poeticizing, dreaming up, or imagining; that is, his emphasis on *poiesis*, imagination, and creativity seeks to convince his readers that they ought to develop a new understanding of intellectual progress. According to Rorty, we ought to switch from the authoritarian Cartesian-Kantian picture of intellectual progress, which is dominated by the correspondence theory of truth and the notion of an increasingly better fit between mind and world, to a Darwinian picture. The latter would help us reject the alleged necessity of arriving at some goal nature has set for us, it would aid us in grasping that we no longer need the nonlocal and noncontingent rightness or the noncausal condition of possibility with which religion and traditional philosophy provided us, and, above all, it would let us see intellectual progress as an increasing ability to shape the tools that are needed for the species' survival and permanent transformation. Rortyan anti-authoritarianism constantly stresses humans' creativity and their desire for novelty: new vocabularies, new metaphors, new tools, new logical spaces, and new practices. As we have seen, Rorty's anti-authoritarian and antirepresentation-

[10] For a detailed discussion of Rorty's humanism, see Visnovsky 2020.

alist story of progress culminates in his idea of a literary or poeticized culture, whose members, as postmetaphysicians, concentrate on the contingent plurality of acts of *poiesis*, who understand Nietzsche's lesson that once God and his view go, there is just us and our idiosyncratic and ethnocentric view, and who have stopped to ask for noncausal, nonempirical, and nonhistorical conditions and thus for a human language that corresponds to some nonhuman, eternal entity.

By showing that the only possibility human beings have of getting beyond their current practices is dreaming up and creating better practices, a Rortyan poeticized culture makes clear that the notions of "answering" and "representing" are still governed by the image of the relation between humans and nonhuman entities that can be termed authoritarian; that is, an image of human beings as subject to a judgment of an authority that would trump the consensus and free exchange of justifications of other humans. In this new anti-authoritarian and postmetaphysical culture, we would finally be capable of realizing the full implications of the attempt to give up world-directedness and rational answerability to the world. Moreover, by grasping that the hope for a noncontingent, nonhistorial, and powerful ally is the common core of Platonism, most religions and their notion of divine omnipotence, as well as Kantian moral philosophy, Rortyan postmetaphysicians would be in a position to continue the secularism of the Enlightenment by underscoring that human beings are on their own and have no supernatural light that guides them to the Truth or the Real. When pragmatists interpret the quest for certainty as an attempt to escape from the world of praxis, they simultaneously argue that there is no such thing as ultimate justification; that is, justification before God, Reason, or timeless moral imperatives, but only men and women's attempts to justify their beliefs and actions to a finite human audience in a historical world. On Rorty's account, the process of de-divinization or demetaphysicization "would, ideally, culminate in our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings" (Rorty 1989, 45).

Rorty's pragmatist humanism is an anti-authoritarian philosophy of human freedom and social justice that proposes that progress is possible without reliance on a nonhuman power and that moreover suggests that talk about humans' responsibility to Truth, Nature, or Reason must be replaced with talk about their responsibility to their fellow human beings. In Rorty's opinion, for humans, there is no duty that would supersede their duty to cooperate with one another in order to reach free consensus, to replace force with persuasion in the public sphere, and to make room for the Nietzschean and Proustian idea that the unpredictable contingency of self-creation can take the place once occupied by obedience in the private sphere. In Rorty studies, clarifying the connection between Rorty's anti-authoritarianism and his appreciation of the task of the novel still is a desideratum.

Concerning Rorty's understanding of the novel, it is crucial to note to what degree he had been influenced by the work of the Franco-Czech novelist and essayist Milan Kundera. The latter's *The Art of the Novel* (2000) plays a particularly significant role in this context. However, there are also some passages in, for instance, *Testaments Betrayed* (2001) that confirm the influence Kundera had on Rorty's approach to novelistic questions. It is Kundera's contention that the European novel "teaches the reader to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his own," and that it moreover demonstrates that "uncertainty is the ground of man's very existence" (Kundera 2001, 8, 22). In a central passage, Kundera makes clear that what he terms humor governs the novel and that it urges its readers to confront moral ambiguity, relativity, and the lack of certainty: "Humor: the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others; humor: the intoxicating relativity

of human things; the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty" (ibid., 32). In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera, in a manner that most presumably delighted Rorty, opposes what he terms "the spirit of the novel" to the singularity of Truth; that is, the Platonist yearning for a transcultural and transhistorical Truth: "The world of one single Truth and the relative, ambiguous world of the novel are molded of entirely different substances. Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accommodate what I would call the *spirit of the novel*" (Kundera 2003, 14). Moreover, Kundera stresses that the novel, with its plurality of perspectives, its ambivalences and ironies, is incompatible with ideological and theoretical closure. He writes of the novel that "it does not by nature serve ideological certitudes, it contradicts them. Like Penelope, it undoes each night the tapestry that the theologians, philosophers, and learned men have woven the day before" (ibid., 160).

In his reading of Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*, Rorty pays particular attention to the notion of plurality. To Rorty, Kundera's essay is crucial since it is useful in the attempt to bring postmetaphysics, plurality, and morality together. Rorty describes Kundera's anti-Platonist emphasis on a plurality of perspectives, descriptions, and redescriptions as follows:

> The novelist's substitute for the appearance-reality distinction is a display of diversity of viewpoints, a plurality of descriptions of the same events. What the novelist finds especially comic is the attempt to privilege one of these descriptions, to take it as an excuse for ignoring all the others. What he finds most heroic is not the ability sternly to reject all descriptions save one, but rather the ability to move back and forth between them. (Rorty 1991b, 74)

Kundera, as Rorty understands him, makes the term "the novel" "roughly synonymous with the 'democratic utopia' – with an imaginary future society in which nobody dreams of thinking that God, or the Truth, or the Nature of Things, is on their side" (ibid., 75). What this boils down to is that Rorty reads the Franco-Czech novelist as someone who also realizes the possibility, and the necessity, of developing a postmetaphysical culture. Rorty speaks of "Kundera's utopia," which is "carnevalesque, Dickensian, a crowd of eccentrics rejoicing in each other's idiosyncrasies" (ibid.). Kundera, it seems, strengthens Rorty's idea of the necessity of developing a literary or poeticized culture; and he is also important for Rorty's argument that the novel is the ideal medium for what he calls sentimental education, since it draws attention to the possibility of introducing an antifoundationalist and antiessentialist understanding of morality and moral progress.[11]

Concerning the relationship between anti-authoritarianism and the novel, it is of the utmost importance to see that Rorty avers that the novel does not offer what in "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" he calls "redemptive truth." He highlights the fact that this idea of "redemptive truth" is incompatible with an anti-authoritarian and postmetaphysical culture. It is the kind of truth that philosophy has traditionally hoped to offer; a truth that provides one with a firm set of beliefs. Once one is in possession of those beliefs, one would no longer see the necessity of imaginatively reflecting on what to do with oneself; that is, one would no longer desire new kinds of self-description and redescription. "Redemptive truth," in other words, would fulfill the philosophical need "to fit everything – every thing, person, event, idea, and poem – into a single context, a context that will somehow reveal itself as natural, destined, and unique" (Rorty 2004, 7). To believe in redemptive truth, if one follows Rorty, is to believe in "something that is the reality behind the appearance, the one true description of what is going on, the final secret" (ibid.). Redemptive truth, governed by a "desire for completeness," would produce "maximal clarity and maximal coherence" (Rorty 2010, 392, 391).

Rorty not only holds that the novel does not offer redemptive truth. He also thinks that it critiques the notion that there is only one context that would matter for purposes of shaping humans' lives; only one context, that is,

[11] Rorty's ignores the darker aspects of Kundera's analysis of the novel. They become obvious in Kundera 2007.

in which those lives appear as they really are. In Rorty's view, novels depict human attempts to meet human needs, they are about concrete cases of particular people being insensitive to or even ignoring the suffering of other particular people in specific historical circumstances. Hence, they (indirectly) contribute to the critique of the alleged necessity of acknowledging the power of a nonhuman being that is what it is apart from human needs and desires. The novel expands our sense of solidarity and of the diversity and variety of human life, and it strengthens the notions of historicity, particularity, and contingency. Novels can be useful when we seek to balance our needs against those who are unlike ourselves, whose values differ profoundly from ours, and whose actions we thought we would never understand or be able to justify. As we have seen, Rorty is of the opinion that the novel has contributed enormously to the attempt to replace religion and philosophy with literature, since it has helped young intellectuals grasp that one might enlarge one's self by becoming acquainted with other ways of being human and that this imaginative and creative enlargement of self is preferable to the idea that the subject should strive to be adequate to the demands and imperatives of a nonhuman, noncontingent authority. Rorty states that the "great virtue of the literary culture that is gradually coming into being is that it tells young intellectuals that the only source of redemption is the human imagination, and that this fact should occasion pride rather than despair" (Rorty 2004, 13).

"Accuracy of representation" is characteristic of realistic, mimetic art and literature. In *Contingency*, Rorty maintains that there is no place for this in an anti-authoritarian, literary culture. In a Deweyan manner, he formulates as follows: "Literary art, the nonstandard, nonpredictable use of words, cannot, indeed, be gauged in terms of accuracy of representation. For such accuracy is a matter of conformity to convention, and the point of writing well is precisely to break the crust of convention" (Rorty 1989, 167). Furthermore, Rorty underscores that the main lesson Proust's *Recherche* teaches him "is that novels are a safer medium than theory for expressing one's recognition of the relativity and contingency of authority figures. For novels are usually about people – things which are, unlike general ideas and final vocabularies, quite evidently time-bound, embedded in a web of contingencies" (ibid., 107). In order to further grasp the link between Rortyan anti-authoritarianism and the novel, one should bring Rorty's fascination with the Proustian (and Nietzschean) emphasis on contingency, historicity, finitude, particularity, plurality, and perspective together with Rorty's following suggestion in *Philosophy as Poetry*: "If we have a plausible narrative of how we became what we are, and why we use the words we do as we do, we have all we need in the way of self-understanding" (Rorty 2016, 40).[12] From Rorty's anti-authoritarian standpoint, novelists are very important for cultures because they tell stories that help us appreciate who we are and "how we became what we are," and who those are that are utterly unlike us. A Rortyan pragmatist story of progress and emancipation has to rely on novelists, since their tales are more complex, unpredictable, and exciting than the stories humans usually tell each other. From what we have discussed thus far, it should be obvious that Rorty instrumentalizes the novel primarily for moral purposes. He almost completely ignores aesthetic questions. This has far-reaching consequences for his literary criticism.

Anti-Authoritarianism and Form

Pragmatist aesthetics has never offered a thought-provoking or stimulating conception of form. This is deplorable. The significance of aesthetic form preoccupied crit-

[12] In "Texts and Lumps," Rorty writes: "There is no synoptic view of culture which is more than a narrative account of how various cultures managed to get to where they now are. All of us who want big broad pictures are contributing to such an account. If we could see ourselves *as* doing that, then we would worry less about having general principles which justify our procedures. Pragmatism declines to provide us with such principles, and it offers some suggestions about what a culture might be like in which we did *not* think this" (Rorty 1991a, 92).

ics and theorists throughout the twentieth century, and there has been a revival of interest in form in the past two decades.[13] By contrast, for most pragmatist aestheticians form means abstraction, formal analysis is synonymous with the rigidity of method, and a focus on form-content dialectics too easily degenerates into another version of the scheme-content distinction. There is always the danger that the abstraction of form transforms problems that have their origin in experience and the contingent practical world, the problems of men and women in the Deweyan sense, into purely formal issues. Moreover, form does not signify particularity, plurality, and idiosyncrasy; rather, it is ahistorical and acontextual, without connection to the particulars it seeks to govern. Behind this, it seems, is the Aristotelian idea that form is immutable and permanent. Refusing to reconcile the world of pure reason with the concrete order of experience, form transcends life and descends from without upon material. Form is the general and universal, it categorizes and, moreover, strives to separate purely intellectual studies from the pragmatic and from action. One should also see that most pragmatists and pragmatist aestheticians would advance the idea that form is static, immutable, and necessary and hence directly opposed to the empirical world that is governed by contingency and the unpredictability of humans' actions. What this boils down to is that form belongs to a world of thought that is completely removed from the world of experience and ordinary life.

Most pragmatist aestheticians will be inclined to assert that the form-content dualism in aesthetics confirms the pernicious subject-object dichotomy and is diametrically opposed to the Deweyan notion of continuity. Form and formal analysis as strict method reinforce the distinction between knowing and doing and thus the prestige of the theoretical over the practical. Form is central to what Dewey termed the quest for certainty, since it helps one to grasp that only the systematic discipline of philosophy, employing reason and logical form, can apprehend the absolute, noumenal, transcendent, or ultimate reality. In other words, a concentration on form is of the utmost importance if one intends to demonstrate that only the realm governed by philosophy is marked by a superior dignity, since only philosophy is capable of going beyond the ordinary, empirical, and phenomenal world of everyday experience. As Dewey pointedly puts it in *The Quest for Certainty*: "In form, the quest for absolute certainty has reached its goal" (Dewey 1988, 16). Form, as pure thought, offers a higher knowledge.

It should be clear from what I have argued thus far that pragmatists hold that aesthetic form is a metaphysical concept that will not find its place within a pragmatist framework. Because of the intimate connection between form, transcendence, and the desire for the certainty, reliability, firmness, immutability, transhistoricity, and purity of what would be more than another human invention or creation, pragmatists think that the use of this concept would inevitably lead to many undesired consequences. By contrast, form plays an important role in what is still the most thought-provoking text in pragmatist aesthetics, Dewey's *Art as Experience.* At the same time, however, one has to see that while his naturalist aesthetics has gained in importance in the past two or three decades, particularly after the aberrations of poststructuralism and postmodernism, his understanding of aesthetic form is highly problematic. *Art as Experience*, which was published in 1934, is not a theory of aesthetic modernism or the avant-garde. Dewey's text does not try to explain the multilayered complexity of artworks by, for instance, Flaubert, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, Eliot, Picasso, Kandinsky, or Schönberg. Instead of illuminating this often hermetic and formally complex modernism, Dewey intends to make clear why one can speak of a continuity between ordinary, everyday experience and "intensified forms of experience that are works of art" (Dewey 2008a, 9).

Regarding Dewey's understanding of aesthetic form,

[13] Concerning this revival of interest in aesthetic form, see Hale 2020, Leighton 2007, Levine 2015, and Wolfson and Brown 2006.

one of the most important passages can be found near the end of *Experience and Nature*, where he avers: "'Forms' are not the peculiar property or creation of the esthetic and artistic; they are characters in virtue of which anything meets the requirements of an enjoyable perception. 'Art' does not create the forms; it is their selection and organization in such ways as to enhance, prolong and purify the perceptual experience" (Dewey 2008b, 292). Do Dewey's suggestions that forms "are not the peculiar property or creation of the esthetic and artistic" and that art "does not create the forms" offer the possibility of approaching the complexity of modernism from Flaubert to Joyce and Picasso or from aestheticism to the historical avant-garde (surrealism, dadaism, futurism, and constructivism)? Or is modern art and literature the limit, as it were, of Dewey's naturalist aesthetics?[14]

As far as the form-content dialectics of the work of art is concerned, Dewey clearly reduces the significance of form (which should also be regarded as a gesture directed against the formalism of the New Critics and some analytic philosophers). This becomes obvious, for instance, in the chapter "The Common Substance of the Arts" in *Art as Experience*. Dewey goes very far when he avers: "Apart from some special interest, every product of art is matter and matter only, so that the contrast is not between matter and form but between matter relatively unformed and matter adequately formed" (Dewey 2008a, 195). Further below he formulates even more pointedly: "'Stuff' is everything, and form a name for certain aspects of the matter when attention goes primarily to these aspects" (ibid., 195). Throughout *Art as Experience*, Dewey places a stress on the notions of wholeness, organicity, union, coherence, balance, and harmony. In a manner that reminds one of idealist aesthetics, he maintains: "The *form* of the whole is therefore present in every member" (ibid., 62). Moreover, he advances the idea that "[m]utual adaptation of parts to one another in constituting a whole is the relation which, formally speaking, characterizes a work of art" (ibid., 140). It is crucial to understand that Dewey does not see the necessity of historicizing his concept of aesthetic form. Rather, it is one of his primary concerns to make clear that one should not regard aesthetic form as a transcendent term, that is, as something that descends "from without": "Is 'beauty' another name for form descending from without, as a transcendent essence, upon material, or is it a name for the esthetic quality that appears whenever *material is formed* in a way that renders it adequately expressive?" (ibid., 112).

A discussion of the Deweyan conception of form offers one the possibility of bringing together his critique of traditional epistemology in *The Quest for Certainty* with his analysis of the function of art in *Art as Experience*. Dewey's antidualism calls attention to how problematic it is to identify form with the rational and intelligible and matter with the irrational, unpredictable, and contingent. His anti-Platonism, and anti-Kantianism, radically critiques this metaphysical understanding of the form-content dialectics. There is no room in Dewey's thought for the notion that form has a dignity and necessity that matter or content lacks. In the chapter "Substance and Form," he contends:

> Moreover, since things are rendered knowable by these forms, it was concluded that form is the rational, the intelligible, element in the objects and events of the world. Then it was set over against "matter," the latter being the irrational, the inherently chaotic and fluctuating, stuff upon which form was impressed. It was as eternal as the latter was shifting. This metaphysical distinction of matter and form was embodied in the philosophy that ruled European thought for centuries. Because of this fact it still affects the esthetic philosophy of form in relation to matter. It is the source of the bias in favor of their separation, especially when that takes the shape of assuming that form has a dignity and stability lacking to matter. (ibid., 120-21)

For our purposes, it is crucial to note that both Dewey and Rorty tell their anti-authoritarian and antirepresentationalist stories of progress without granting significance to

[14] On Dewey's aesthetics, see Eldridge 2010, Hildebrand 2008, Jacob 2018, and Stroud 2011. The most thought-provoking interpretation is still Shusterman 2000.

the modern conception of aesthetic form. While Dewey at least saw the necessity of discussing the question of form within his pragmatist framework, Rorty clearly has no use for the notion of aesthetic form. As we have seen, the latter's contention is that pragmatist literary critics should concentrate on highlighting the moral task of the novel and that this does not necessitate an analysis of aesthetic form. Rorty proposes that one must not regard the aesthetic as a "matter of form and language," but rather as being governed by "content and life." In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he puts this as follows:

> This idea that somehow language can be separated from authors, that literary technique is a godlike power operating independently of mortal contingencies, and in particular from the author's contingent notion of what goodness is, is the root of "aestheticism" in the bad sense of the term, the sense in which the aesthetic is a matter of form and language rather than of content and life. (Rorty 1989, 166-67)[15]

Why does Rorty speak of "the disastrous Kantian distinction between form and content" (Rorty 1989, 168n)? In his opinion, most literary and cultural critics refuse to ignore the question of form. He holds that this refusal confirms that professional literary critics and scholars, using abstract categories such as form and narrative technique, too often assume that their task has something to do with knowledge. By contrast, Rorty's notion of a literary or poeticized culture stands for the pragmatist move against theory and toward narrative. Literary and aesthetic theory that insists that literary criticism and aesthetics are forms of knowledge that can elucidate the real structure and meaning of a text or an artwork belongs to an old way of speaking. Theorists claim that one has to step back from the literary text and analyze it by means of conceptual tools, and this would eventually allow one to penetrate the text's depth. The direction of this process is vertical (like that of the metaphysician's perspective).

It has been argued in this essay that Rorty is convinced that humans do not need theoretical abstraction, formal analysis, and transhistorical moral principles. Rather, as malleable human beings in a historical and contingent world they need sentimental education and storytelling. They certainly do no need aesthetic theory. Underscoring his "scepticism about 'aesthetics' as a field of inquiry," he makes clear that he is "not sure that we need an aesthetic theory, or an aesthetic programme, at all. I doubt that there is much to be said about what unites painting, literature, music, sex and birdwatching while distinguishing all these from science, morals, politics, philosophy and religion" (Rorty 2001, 156). Rorty's aversion to method plays a central role here. In his critique of Sidney Hook in "Pragmatism without Method," Rorty advises his readers to try to "fulfill the mission of the syncretic and holistic side of pragmatism – the side that tries to see human beings doing much the same sort of problem-solving across the whole spectrum of their activities (*already* doing it and so not needing to be urged to start doing it)" (Rorty 1991a, 76). Radically rejecting the use-interpretation distinction, he maintains that "all anybody ever does with anything is use it" (Rorty 1999, 134). As pragmatist literary critics, we do not need aesthetic theory or a rigorous method with predictable results. Rather, we can be shamelessly unmethodical.[16] Rorty describes unmethodical literary criticism thus:

> Unmethodical criticism of the sort which one occasionally wants to call "inspired" is the result of an encounter with an author, character, plot, stanza, line or archaic torso which has made a difference to the critic's conception of who she is, what she is good for, what she wants to do with herself: an encounter which has rearranged her priorities and purposes. (Rorty 1999, 145)

In what most literary scholars would consider an unspeakably frivolous gesture, Rorty advances the idea that read-

[15] In this context, see Shusterman 2019.

[16] Interesting discussions of twentieth-century literary theory and criticism are Cunningham 2002, Elliott and Attridge 2011, and North 2017.

ing texts "is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens" (ibid., 144).[17]

Rorty repeatedly mentions in his texts that he has no problem with the idea that we simply hammer the text we analyze into the shape that we need for our specific purpose. Undoubtedly, this is not exactly the way of approaching literary analysis that is taught in grad schools. Rorty was influenced by the Bloomian notion of "strong misreading." In one of his most important early pieces, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," Rorty explains this notion as follows:

> The critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose. He makes the text refer to whatever is relevant to that purpose. He does this by imposing a vocabulary […] on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens. (Rorty 1982, 151)

There is, of course, a line that connects the Bloomian idea of a strong misreading with what Dr. Charles Kinbote does with John Shade's poem in Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962). Kinbote is one of the most radical and fascinating strong misreaders ever invented. Most presumably, this is one of the reasons why *Pale Fire* was one of Rorty's favorite novels.[18]

In an important passage, Rorty argues that pragmatism "is the philosophical counterpart of literary modernism, the kind of literature which prides itself on its autonomy and novelty rather than its truthfulness to experience or its discovery of pre-existing significance" (ibid., 153). I think he is right in advancing this idea. In contrast to Rorty, however, I would maintain that the idea of pragmatism presenting itself as "the philosophical counterpart of literary modernism" necessitates an interest in the practice of form-giving and hence a refusal to consign aesthetic theory to the dustbin of history. Particularly pragmatist literary critics should appreciate what aesthetic theory has to offer. It can explain the significance of poetic agency and the role of form-giving for a pragmatist humanism. This also signifies that aesthetic theory adds to the pragmatist's understanding of the development from finding to making and to his or her endeavor to grasp the role of poetic agency and form-giving for the anti-authoritarian story of progress and emancipation. Theory here should not be understood as a definition of necessary and sufficient conditions, or as defining rules and universal, necessary, and eternal principles in an abstract manner.[19] I think that pragmatist humanists could use aesthetic theory pragmatically; that is, by recognizing that pragmatist aesthetics has certain limitations, they could become interested in attempts at mediation with other approaches. An interest in aesthetics could show them that their toolbox needs additional tools. A more complex notion of aesthetic form, as I have argued, would offer them new possibilities of approaching modern and avant-garde art and of grasping the significance of poetic agency. For pragmatist literary critics and aestheticians, one of the most stimulating ways of confronting the task of reorganizing and refunctioning their tools is by establishing a dialogue with other versions of literary criticism and aesthetics. One only has to think of what Adorno's late *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970) has to offer in this context, particularly as far as the social nature or register of aesthetic form is concerned.[20]

When Rorty's brand of literary criticism and Dewey's naturalist aesthetics do not offer the possibility of regarding the practice of form-giving, as poetic agency, as an anti-authoritarian gesture, then pragmatist literary criticism and aesthetics have a serious problem. Both Dewey and Rorty refuse to see that in modernism, the idiosyncrasy and particularity of form-giving often

[17] In this context, see also Rorty 2002.
[18] In this context, see Rorty 1992.
[19] A good overview of theory's development in the twentieth century can be found in Birns 2010.
[20] See, for instance, the chapter "'Kunst hat soviel Chance wie die Form': Theodor W. Adorno and the Idea of a Poeticized Culture" in Schulenberg 2019, 69-95.

defy aesthetic norms and standards; that is, form often is associated with nonorganicity, fragmentation, and dissonance. Form-giving urges one to confront the dialectics of wholeness (or unity) and fragment (or difference). Moreover, in modernism, the act of form-giving problematizes the link between unity, meaning, and totality. New forms offer new perspectives, new constellations and relations, new symmetries and dissonances, and a new appreciation of harmony and fragmentation or linearity and nonlinearity. Form-giving is a creative practice that expands our imagination and hence may provoke new vocabularies; the novelty of forming draws attention to the indefinite expansibility of the human imagination. Like the imagination, form-giving keeps proposing new candidates for belief, new things to desire, or it may reinforce the wish to begin practical work from a radically new position and perspective. What this boils down to is that the radical nature of new forms can undermine or criticize traditional authorities in society and politics. They have the potential to urge the artwork's recipients to change their ways of thinking and of approaching social questions, and eventually to question their wish to subordinate themselves to something larger and nonhuman. Form-giving is an anti-authoritarian and humanist practice whose analysis seems more promising than the instrumentalization of the novel for moral purposes, the idea of offering a strong misreading, or the suggestion that one ought to focus on literature's "inspirational value."[21]

According to Rorty, it is an important feature of literature "that one can achieve success by introducing a quite new genre of poem or novel or critical essay *without* argument. It succeeds simply by its success, not because there are good reasons why poems or novels or essays should be written in the new way rather the old" (Rorty 1982, 142). From what I have argued in this essay, it should be clear that in my view Rorty's suggestion that a new literary genre "succeeds simply by its success" is highly problematic. This is one of the many passages where he completely ignores the question of aesthetic form. The fact that he refrains from discussing aesthetic questions severely weakens his version of literary criticism. Pragmatist aestheticians and literary critics need more than Rorty has to offer.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed three aspects of Rorty's pragmatist version of literary criticism. First, I have endeavored to elucidate what he means by sentimental education and how he establishes a firm link between the novel and morality or moral progress. Second, I have discussed the question of why the novel is important for Rorty's anti-authoritarianism. Finally, I have illuminated the significance of aesthetic form when one intends to consider pragmatist literary criticism within a broader anti-authoritarian framework. I have advanced the argument that it is problematic that Rorty's literary criticism does not offer the possibility of regarding the practice of form-giving, the idiosyncrasy, particularity, and contingency of the act of forming, as an anti-authoritarian gesture. In the confrontation with modern or avant-garde artworks, pragmatist literary critics need more than his instrumentalization of the novel for moral purposes has to offer.

Rorty states that pragmatists "hope to fill out the self-image sketched by the Romantic poets and partially filled in by Nietzsche and James" (Rorty 2021, 191). The Western novel is of great significance in this context. Rorty associates the attempt to abolish the idea that there is something nonhuman that has authority over humans with the notion of a decidedly more beautiful future. In the preface to *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism*, he formulates thus: "In the last two centuries, it has become possible to describe the human situation not by describing our relation to something ineffably different from ourselves, but by drawing a contrast between our ugly past

[21] See "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature" in Rorty 1998b, 125-40.

and present and the more beautiful future in which our descendants may live" (ibid., xxix). Highlighting the centrality of "the project of fashioning institutions and customs which will make human life, finite and mortal life, more beautiful" (ibid.), Rorty proposes that it is literature, primarily the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel, which expands our imagination, forces us to experience doubts about ourselves, and which eventually transforms us into a better sort of person by changing our sense of what matters most. As we have seen, even though it does not really add something new to the liberal humanist tradition that runs from Leavis and Trilling to Nussbaum, this is a valuable suggestion. However, I have argued that a pragmatist literary criticism that operates within an anti-authoritarian framework needs more. If it desires to approach the formal and narratological complexity of modern and avant-garde works of art, it should refrain from radically rejecting aesthetic theory. It is time for pragmatist literary criticism and aesthetics to become interested in the anti-authoritarian potential of aesthetic form.

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