

RORTY, ROMANTICISM AND THE LITERARY ABSOLUTE

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years or so, debates surrounding the relationship between romanticism and pragmatism have opened up two particularly interesting avenues of inquiry. First, literary critics and intellectual historians have explored the possibility that the romantic period itself fostered a kind of proto-pragmatism.¹ Secondly, philosophers and theorists have thoroughly – and not always sympathetically – scrutinized Richard Rorty's interest in, and use of romantic themes and ideas.² This essay is, in part, an attempt to draw these lines of research together. Rorty himself was careful to distinguish between two distinct romanticisms: a

¹ See Russell B. Goodman, *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Jerome Christensen, *Romanticism at the End of History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Paul Hamilton, *Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Tim Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

² See Kathleen Wheeler, *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Richard Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Thomas Claviez, 'Pragmatism, Critical Theory, and the Search for Ecological Genealogies in American Culture,' in: *Pragmatism and Literary Studies*, vol. 15 of *REAL: The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, ed. Winfried Fluck (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), pp. 343-380. For less sympathetic commentary, see Nancy Fraser, 'Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy,' in: *Consequences of Theory*, eds. Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 93-110; Joan C. Williams, 'Rorty, Radicalism, Romanticism: The Politics of the Gaze,' in: *A Pragmatist's Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*, ed. John Pettegrew (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), pp. 61-84; Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 56.

'German' tradition of metaphysical idealism and an 'English' tradition of literary nature-worship.³

Foregrounding the latter, in this essay I shall compare Rorty's 'privatised' romanticism to Habermas's notion of the romantic aesthetic as a mediator between reflective thought and everyday communication. What emerges from this is a view of aesthetic engagement as not only essential to the worldview of 'romantic' writers generally, but also as incorporating a form of pragmatism *avant la lettre*. Under the sign of the 'Literary Absolute,' aesthetic engagement engenders a performative kind of writing, which, for a writer such as Wordsworth, undermines the boundaries between private and public, literature and philosophy.

Rorty on Romanticism

Broadly characterised, the sort of romanticism that Rorty prefers is the independent, muscular variety celebrated by his literary mentor, Harold Bloom.⁴ Throughout his career, Rorty embraced a number of ideas and attitudes associated with Bloom's picture of the romantic poet as engaged in a dialectical struggle for articulacy and autonomy. Rorty's romantic watchwords, accordingly, are imagination, spontaneity, freedom, contingency, plurality, power, and creativity – ideas that he pits against notions such as reason, receptivity, truth, necessity, commensurability, knowledge, and harmony. Most important, perhaps, is the notion of truth as created rather than discovered, enabled by the romantic inversion of the values assigned by Kant to the determinative and the reflective judgement in the third

³ Richard Rorty, 'Romanticism to Pragmatism: Notes for Introductory Lecture,' *Richard Rorty Born Digital Files*. <<http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/158>> (accessed June 11 2010).

⁴ See Richard Rorty, 'Letter to Michael Lind,' June 8, 1998. *Richard Rorty Born Digital Files, 1988-2003*. UCIspace, University of California at Irvine, <<http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/90>> (accessed June 11 2010): 'As a fervent disciple of Harold Bloom, I think that something new and wonderful came into the world with the Romantics, and so I find your view that "literature ... is a matter of decorum, rituals, traditions, allusions" disturbingly Eliotic.'

Critique.⁵ According to Rorty, by reconfiguring Kant's cognitive, determinative judgement as that which merely produces agreement, and reflective, lawless judgement as paradigm-shifting spontaneity, romanticism 'inaugurated an era in which we gradually came to appreciate the historical role of linguistic innovation.'⁶

In later work, Rorty connected this movement to a broader nineteenth-century shift away from foundationalist 'metaphysical comfort' and towards a future-directed sense of 'historical hope,' in which poets follow Percy Shelley's call to become the legislators of social progress.⁷ Shelley's writing encapsulates the secular utopianism that Rorty finds the most valuable element in the romantic elevation of poetical awe and sublimity over philosophical harmony and beauty. In this way, romantic enthusiasm becomes the opponent of Enlightenment and postmodern knowingness. It also partakes of Hegel's temporalisation of truth. On Rorty's reading, Shelley recommends that we poetically forget about the relation between eternity and time, between unconditioned truth and contingency, and instead 'concentrate on the relation between the human present and the human future.'⁸ Among the important corollaries of this exchange, Rorty believes, are the idea of 'freedom as the recognition of contingency' and what he calls 'romantic polytheism,' the romantics' Hellenistic rejection of the Hebraic-Enlightenment notion of a universal standard against which all human values should be measured.⁹

⁵ See Richard Rorty, 'Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism,' in: *Consequences of Pragmatism. Essays: 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 142-143.

⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 52.

⁷ Richard Rorty, 'Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism, and Postmodernism,' in: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin Books, 1999), p. 263.

⁸ Richard Rorty, 'Emancipating our Culture,' in: *Debating the State of Philosophy: Habermas, Rorty and Kolakowski*, ed. Jozef Niznik and John T. Sanders (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 25.

⁹ See Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 26, and idem, 'Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism,' in: *Philosophy as Cultural*

Romantic idealism, however, troubles Rorty. What is useful about the romantic claim that truth is made rather than found, he cautions, is the idea 'that languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences.'¹⁰ Thus, while he claims that both romanticism and pragmatism are the rebellious offspring of the Enlightenment, united as 'reactions against the idea that there is something non-human out there with which human beings need to get in touch,' Rorty objects to Coleridge's replacement of analytic reason with the numinous imagination as the 'decoder' of truth.¹¹ Kant's Copernican revolution, 'the idea that we receive but what we give,' means not, as Coleridge suggests, that we are God-like creators of ideal Truth, but that we should dispense with the idea of 'Truth' as something to which our beliefs must correspond.¹² Rorty advocates jettisoning the 'philosophical bad faith' of transcendental argument, or argument by way of necessary presuppositions, in favour of a narrative of human change according to which forms of normativity evolve through contingent and linguistic processes.¹³ However, '[t]his road couldn't be taken until Darwin and later thought helped us get rid of the idea of "Mind" and substituted "Language" – substituted Words for Ideas.'¹⁴ Pragmatism really sets out from Darwinian naturalism, from a picture of human beings as evolutionary accidents.

Rorty has a further agenda here. By embracing naturalism, he hopes to distinguish his own work from postmodern appropriations of romantic ideas, many of

Politics: Philosophical Papers Volume 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 29.

¹⁰ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 7.

¹¹ Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism and Romanticism,' in: *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 105.

¹² Rorty, 'Romanticism to Pragmatism.'

¹³ See Richard Rorty, 'Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?' in: *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Here, Rorty refers to transcendental argument as a Kantian 'gimmick' that encourages the thinker to take 'so many leaps into the darkness which surrounds the totality of everything previously illuminated' (p. 123).

¹⁴ Rorty, 'Romanticism to Pragmatism.'

which he sees, like Habermas, as perpetuating romantic idealism by transcendently hypostatizing others of reason.¹⁵ Thinking seriously about the self as constituted by intersubjectivity demands that we abandon the notion of an 'outside' of thought, an *unthought*. From this perspective, Derrida's 'trace' and other attempts to think the unthinkable are simply rehashing romantic sublimity, functioning as 'the name of the Ineffable, of what can be shown but not said, believed but not known, presupposed but not mentioned, that in which we move and have our being.'¹⁶ Romantic 'sublimity' and 'depth,' taken in this way, make Rorty suspicious. He sees himself as arguing on behalf of reform rather than revolution, for the beauty of intersubjectivity rather than the sublimity of incommensurable phrase-regimes. Following Davidson, he maintains that '[f]rom a Darwinian point of view, there is simply no way to give sense to the idea of our minds or our language as systematically out of phase with what lies beyond our skins.'¹⁷

All of this leads Rorty to distinguish between two romanticisms: one dangerous (or, at best, useless), and one useful. The first is metaphysical, hypostatizing and 'deep,' using imagination as a stand-in for reason in the creation of ideal Truth; the second is playful, metaphoric and utopian, celebrating imaginative power as the

natural engine of linguistic innovation. Maintaining this distinction means emphasising the possibilities of redescription implicit in 'the romantic notion of man as self-creative,' and downgrading the equally romantic but less laudable aspiration that the vocabulary for that redescription be final, grounded in the noncontingent foundations of a 'transcendental constitution.'¹⁸ Outmanoeuvring romantic idealism, in short, means embracing 'romantic utilitarianism.'¹⁹

In turn, Rorty's ironic, 'romantic utilitarianism' involves the separation of private and public spheres. It involves dropping 'the assumption, shared by Plato and Foucault, that there is a deep philosophical connection between private intellect and public behaviour.'²⁰ The idea that one must lead a pure and unified life, Rorty maintains, is an unwelcome hangover from Christianity, 'the quest for purity of heart – the attempt to will one thing – gone rancid.'²¹ Rorty accordingly celebrates romanticism, elitism, innovation, and sublimity in private and defends liberalism, democracy, reform, hope and beauty in public. But he denies that there is any connection between these attitudes. Indeed, he claims, public romanticism is rarely a good thing, since it is 'when a Romantic intellectual begins to want his private self to serve as a model for other human beings that his politics

¹⁵ See Richard Rorty, 'Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude,' in: *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*: 'Berlin, like Dewey, recognized that the Platonist hope of speaking with an authority that is not merely that of a certain time and place had survived within the bosom of romanticism, and engendered what Habermas calls "others of reason."' The most important of these, Rorty claims, is the infinite, figured by terms such as 'depth' and 'profundity': 'Depth does not produce agreement, but for romantics it trumps agreement' (pp. 83-84).

¹⁶ Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida,' in: *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 102. See also idem, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,' in: *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996): Because of his perceived transcendentalism, Rorty describes Derrida as 'a sentimental, hopeful, romantically idealistic writer' (p. 13).

¹⁷ Richard Rorty, 'Introduction: Antirepresentationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Liberalism,' in: *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 12.

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 358.

¹⁹ Rorty, 'Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism,' p. 27. In his 'Notes on Impressions of Kloppenberg,' Rorty writes: "'Pragmatism as Romantic Utilitarianism" means something like: (a) the utilitarians were right that nothing matters except human needs and human suffering (b) we have to expand our conception of what counts as a human need ... so as to make sure that past practices don't get in the way of a Romantic future (c) there is a utopian goal of Human Freedom to be attained at the End of History, but what that utopia will look like cannot be formulated in advance ... It will be attained experimentally, and will always recede before us.' (*Richard Rorty Born Digital Files*, <<http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/766>> (accessed June 11, 2010).

²⁰ Richard Rorty, 'Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault,' in: *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 196-197.

²¹ Richard Rorty, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,' in: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 13.

tend to become antiliberal.²² Instead, he maintains, private aesthetic self-creation and public justice should be treated as two different kinds of tools, 'as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars.'²³

Rorty and Habermas

Rorty's private/public distinction has proved controversial, with some arguing that it is at best unnecessary, and at worst out of step with his broader advocacy of playfulness and irony.²⁴ Rorty himself admitted to never quite having 'found a satisfactory way of reconciling my admiration for the romantic intellectual with the habits of a democratic society,' conceding that *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* 'doesn't do justice to the interplay between public and private.'²⁵

²² Rorty, 'Moral Identity and Private Autonomy,' p. 194.

²³ Rorty, *Contingency*, p. xiv.

²⁴ See especially Nancy Fraser, 'Solidarity or Singularity?' Fraser claims that the struggle between 'a Romantic impulse and a pragmatic impulse' (p. 94) – i.e. between a liberal pragmatism and the romantic 'impulse that thrills to the sublimity of metaphor,' is never satisfactorily resolved in Rorty's work (p. 96). Kathleen Wheeler accuses Rorty in *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction* of having 'gotten stuck' in a dualism between individual and community that his mentor Dewey managed to avoid (p. 280, n.9). Wheeler follows Derrida, who rejects Rorty's application of the public/private distinction to his own work (see Rorty, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,' pp. 78–80). See also Sterling Lynch, 'Romantic Longings, Moral Ideals, and Democratic Priorities: On Richard Rorty's Use of the Distinction Between the Private and the Public,' *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2007), pp. 97–120. Lynch argues that the private/public separation is unnecessary and inconsistent with the rest of Rorty's thought, since 'without the brute application of equal, competing, and *a priori* claims about moral priority, Rorty's moral problem will not arise' (p. 104). For a defence of the distinction, see Günter Leypoldt, 'Uses of Metaphor: Richard Rorty's Literary Criticism and the Poetics of World-Making,' *New Literary History*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2008), pp. 145–163. Even Leypoldt, however, defends the distinction on the grounds that it is not a dichotomy. On the contrary, he claims, for Rorty, sublime 'literary world-making' and 'the sort of empathetic identification that encourages human solidarity' are 'noncompetitive goods that should not be ranked within a single hierarchy of literary or narrative functions ...' (p. 156).

²⁵ Richard Rorty, 'Letter to Jacques Bouveresse, 3 Feb. 1992,' *Richard Rorty Born Digital Files*,

One way in which Rorty attempts to explore this 'interplay' is by introducing the idea that we should exchange the 'romance and idealistic hopes' of the pursuit of objective truth for 'a rhetoric that romanticizes the pursuit of intersubjective, unforced agreement among larger and larger groups of interlocutors.'²⁶ We should, he suggests, be romantic enthusiasts in promoting solidarity rather than idealists in obtaining objectivity. To the question: what is the normative basis of 'should' in this imperative? Rorty's reply is: we are. By generating our own forms of validity, we romantically create the norms by which we judge, and are judged.

There remains, however, an important difference between romanticising solidarity and hypostatizing the unconditioned. We make progress, Rorty maintains, 'by our lights ... But when we hypostatize the adjective "true" into "Truth" and ask about our relation to it, we have absolutely nothing to say.'²⁷ Instead, truth must be explained within a naturalistic framework. To be a 'naturalist' in Rorty's sense is not to privilege scientific or materialist accounts of causality; on the contrary, it simply involves refusing to 'divide things up into those which are what they are independent of context and those which are context-dependent.'²⁸ By accommodating pluralism in this way, '*holism takes the curse off naturalism.*'²⁹

From the 1980s onwards, Rorty engaged in a series of debates with other pragmatist thinkers over the coherence and consequences of his own brand of

<<http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/71>> (accessed June 11, 2010).

²⁶ Richard Rorty, 'Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Donald Davidson Versus Crispin Wright,' in: *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 41.

²⁷ Richard Rorty, 'Introduction' to *Truth and Progress*, p. 4.

²⁸ Richard Rorty, 'Inquiry as Recontextualization: An Anti-Dualist Account of Interpretation,' in: *Objectivity*, p. 98.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

'holistic' naturalism.³⁰ Among his many interlocutors, Jürgen Habermas criticised the attempt to eliminate even the presupposition of context-independent truth from dialogue. Rorty's naturalism, Habermas argues, fails to distinguish between the reflexivity of philosophical discourse, which suspends the preconditions of everyday thought, and the dialogue of the 'lifeworld,' for which a concept of objective truth is a necessary precondition. Naturalist or deflationary theories of truth are fine for reflective thinking, Habermas maintains, but 'in everyday life we cannot survive with hypotheses alone, that is, in a persistently fallibilist way.'³¹ Consequently, any pragmatic account of truth must accommodate 'the entwining of the two different pragmatic roles played by the Janus-faced concept of truth in action-contexts and in rational discourses respectively.'³² It is possible to preserve a notion of the *absoluteness* of truth within a pragmatic account of the speech-act situation without falling prey to the perils of hypostatization.

Rorty rejects this, countering that while it is possible to use idealisations in the same way that 'admirers of Plato have used ... hypostatizations—Beauty, Goodness, and Rightness ... the point of telling such stories is unclear.'³³ He is perplexed by Habermas's reluctance to embrace a playful romantic irony: 'Romanticism,' he notes, 'seems to make Habermas nervous.'³⁴ In Habermas's picture of truth as 'Janus-faced,' alternating between system and lifeworld, Rorty detects the vestiges of an essentially religious worldview, a yearning for an encounter with a nonhuman reality. Habermas, on the other hand, is puzzled by Rorty's refusal to acknowledge 'the *pragmatic dimension*' played by normativity in 'a particular deployment of the [truth] predicate.' This aversion to a strong notion of context-independent truth

is still more surprising, Habermas claims, when one realises that, in the notion of 'solidarity,' or extending the circle of dialogue and agreement, even Rorty smuggles a 'weak idealization into play.'³⁵ This in turn Habermas links to what he sees as a 'Platonist motivation' behind Rorty's outright rejection of any notion of unconditionality, a nostalgia for youthful idealism.³⁶ Even in Rorty's work, he suggests, hypostatization is not without its uses.

Romanticism and Pragmatism

Lurking behind the Rorty / Habermas debate on truth is a disagreement within neopragmatism over the legacy of romanticism. Rorty sets his romanticism at the level of 'least common denominator': creative, playful, future-oriented.³⁷ The aesthetic domain for Rorty is governed by 'play' only because it is securely privatized. Consequently, he sees Habermas as both too romantic (i.e. too transcendental and 'deep') in his hypostatizing of truth and not sufficiently romantic (i.e. not ironic) in his resistance to the role of play in human discourse. Viewed another way, however, Habermas's romanticism can be seen as playful precisely *because* it embodies the predicament of being between private and public spheres, between a recognition of truth as a human fiction and truth as the precondition of communication. For Habermas, accordingly, Rorty is both too romantic (i.e. secretly nostalgic and homesick) in his rejection of

³⁰ See especially the exchanges in *Rorty and his Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

³¹ Habermas, 'Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn,' in: *Rorty and his Critics*, pp. 43-44.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³³ Rorty, 'Introduction' to *Truth and Progress*, p. 4.

³⁴ Richard Rorty, 'Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy,' in: *Truth and Progress*, p. 311.

³⁵ Habermas, 'Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn,' p. 51.

³⁶ See Jürgen Habermas, "'...And to define America, her Athletic Democracy": The Philosopher and the Language Shaper; In Memory of Richard Rorty,' *New Literary History*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2008), pp. 3-12. Habermas observes that '[t]here is a streak of nostalgia about claiming to offer a philosophy that cleans up with all extant philosophy ...' (p. 8). See also Michael Fischer, 'Redefining Philosophy as Literature: Richard Rorty's "Defence" of Literary Culture,' in: *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature and Beyond*, ed. Alan Malachowski (London: Blackwell, 1990): Fischer argues that because 'Rorty's definition of literary discourse is fundamentally negative, generated by the philosophical tradition that he wants to subvert,' his own view of literature 'perpetuates what he sees as the Platonist's all-or-nothing outlook' (p. 241).

³⁷ Richard Rorty, 'Rationality and Cultural Difference,' in: *Truth and Progress*, p. 200.

idealism and not suitably romantic (i.e. not tolerant of equivocity) in his refusal to recognise the Janus-faced nature of the truth concept, which is both philosophically dubious *and* pragmatically indispensable.

Of the two thinkers, it is Rorty who makes the rehabilitation of romantic ideas a key component of neopragmatism. Any assessment of Rorty's romanticism, however, is beset by two problems. The first, perhaps surprisingly, is that he underestimates just how pragmatic the romantics already are. Until recently, it was still not uncommon to find critics broadly characterising the romantic revolt against the instrumental rationalism of the Enlightenment (Wordsworth's 'meddling intellect') as the idealisation of the 'other' of reason in the shape of the creative imagination. Romanticism, according to this picture, reacts against the reification of truth as object by producing, in turn, its own hypostatisation in the form of aesthetic plenitude. Accepting this narrative, Rorty remains concerned that insofar as they tried to say something 'about' truth, the romantics (particularly English, 'nature-worshipping' ones) were guilty of unnecessary and sometimes mischievous hypostatisation.

The main difficulty with this picture is that it disregards the relationship between the newly-forged concept of the aesthetic and the Enlightenment-romantic discourse of communicative reason. Habermas describes how early nineteenth-century culture develops a language of decentred, communicative rationality that forms a 'counterdiscourse' to the reifying tendencies of both empiricism and idealism. As I have argued elsewhere, in Britain this counterdiscourse emerges from a number of sources within linguistic and anthropological currents in late eighteenth-century empiricism.³⁸ Foremost amongst these were Thomas Reid's hermeneutics of perception, John Horne Tooke's linguistic deflation of 'Truth' and Jeremy Bentham's understanding of the role played by

³⁸ See Tim Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism*, chapter 2.

'logical fictions' in everyday communication. In developments such as these one finds a shift away from mentalism and representationalism and towards an interest in how beliefs are justified through norms embedded in the communicative practices of communities. This linguistic and proto-pragmatic turn is incorporated into the work of writers such as Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, where it re-emerges as the immanent critique of their own habits of idealism.³⁹ Rorty's conversational pragmatism is prefigured in romanticism, then, but not in the way that he supposes. As David Simpson has argued, Rorty's idea of truth as 'conversation' can be traced back to an eighteenth-century intellectual culture that elevated nonprofessionalism and politeness, ultimately feeding romantic conceptions of creativity, authorship, and the 'literary.'⁴⁰ The English romantics, in turn, *reconstruct* Enlightenment ideas of conversation, extending the public and dialogical mode of a writer like Pope *inwards*, so that the Lockean, punctual self *itself* becomes dialogical, exposed to the same 'conversations' that shape communities.

Unlike Rorty, however, Coleridge and Wordsworth maintain a concern with the role played by transcendental conditions embedded in the pragmatics of communication. This brings us to the second problem with Rorty's romanticism, which is that Rorty appears to strip romanticism of what makes it distinctive as an intellectual force in the first place: the idea of aesthetic *engagement* with the world and with other people. What is at stake in the romantic idea of the aesthetic is Kant's redescription of the thing-in-itself as a purely regulative category. The impossibility of reconciling the finite with the infinite, the conditioned with the unconditioned, produces romantic equivocity as truth becomes, in Habermas's terms, 'Janus-faced',

³⁹ This form of critique is what Paul Hamilton aptly terms 'metaromanticism.' See *Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 2.

⁴⁰ David Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A Report on Half-Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 47.

unknowable and yet always presupposed. Being in two minds about truth in this way drives the romantic interest in the aesthetic as mediator between everyday communicative practices and their transcendental conditions. This in turn means bringing private and public spheres, imagination and reason, literature and philosophy, into free play. For writers such as Schiller, Coleridge and Friedrich Schlegel, such free play does not occur outside the aesthetic; it *is* the aesthetic process itself. Romantic aesthetic mediation emerges as a form of self-critique rather than hypostasis, elevating, as Habermas puts it, the 'body-centred experiences of a decentred subjectivity that function as the placeholders for the other of reason.'⁴¹

Herein lies the romantic challenge to philosophy: to see itself as exhausted in artistic activity, what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy term the 'Literary Absolute.' By declaring that '[t]he actual infinite is the infinity of the work of art,' romanticism designates the work *in progress* as the 'infinite truth of the work' and invents the genre of 'Literature' as the interplay of spontaneity and reflection, poetry and philosophy.⁴² Lying indeterminately between a thing and an act, the aesthetic process is always becoming, which is another way of saying that it is always performed.⁴³ This notion of performativity, essential to romantic writers as the basis of an aesthetic means of *overcoming* contradiction, is inimical to pragmatists committed to *dismissing* contradiction. Consequently, Rorty's private ironism bears little resemblance to that of Coleridge and

Schlegel, for whom the ironic or performative features of aesthetic objects testify to an ineffable encounter with the unconditioned.⁴⁴ And yet, when Rorty attempts to evade dangerous hypostatizations in his own work by privatising the imagination, he transforms the romantic idea of the aesthetic, the very point of which was to mediate *between* the finite and infinite, between everyday pragmatism and regulative idealism, beyond recognition. While Rorty alternates between his romantic and naturalistic sides, the romantics mediate: since the Absolute is fundamentally 'literary', to think *at all* is to aestheticise. Only by understanding how the romantic idea of the aesthetic relates to absoluteness can we understand why the romantics write in the way that they do, that is, performatively.

Rorty and Wordsworth

At this point I should make it clear that none of this necessarily implies that Rorty's romantic utilitarianism is a *bad* idea, merely that it trades on a bad idea of romanticism. Nor is the point that Rorty's conception of romanticism is partial (that much he admits) but that in stripping the aesthetic imagination of its power to engage with a public world, Rorty stretches the idea of 'romanticism' beyond breaking point. In order to illustrate this, I would like finally and briefly to compare two 'romantic' autobiographical narratives. The first is Rorty's own. In his essay, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,' Rorty recounts how his upbringing by Trotskyite parents led him to view his non-political, 'private, weird, snobbish, incommunicable interests' with unease, particularly his enthusiasm for wild orchids. He recalls how the romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Yeats inspired him in the attempt to synthesise his sense of political duty with his botanical pursuits:

⁴¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 306.

⁴² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, 1978, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 48.

⁴³ See, for example, Angela Esterhammer, *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Esterhammer observes that for Coleridge, 'the verb "to be" functions "as a verb-substantive, thus as both an act and a state – and thus as a phenomenon that resembles *becoming* or even *performance*' (p. 8).

⁴⁴ See Adam Carter, "'Self-Creation and Self-Destruction": Irony, Ideology, and Politics in Richard Rorty and Friedrich Schlegel,' *Parallax*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1998), pp. 21-40. Carter maintains that by failing to heed Schlegel's account of irony as the 'dialectic of *self-creation* and *self-destruction*' (p. 23), Rorty's ironism 'is profoundly undialectical in its conceptualisation' (p. 34).

I wanted to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework which would let me – in a thrilling phrase which I came across in Yeats – ‘hold reality and justice in a single vision’. By *reality* I meant, more or less, the Wordsworthian moments in which, in the woods around Flatbrookville (and especially in the presence of certain coralroot orchids, and of the smaller yellow lady slipper), I had felt touched by something numinous, something of ineffable importance.⁴⁵

The young Rorty was rescued from his dilemma by reading Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, whose historicism taught him (once he had been immunized against pantheism by Dewey) a ‘cheerful commitment to irreducible temporality’⁴⁶ and thus that ‘there is no need to weave one’s personal equivalent of Trotsky and one’s personal equivalent of my wild orchids together.’⁴⁷ The adult Rorty’s solution to the paradox of Trotsky and the wild orchids, then, was to privatise his romantic enthusiasms. This involves ‘accepting that what matters most to you may well be something that may never matter much to most people ... But that is no reason to be ashamed of, or downgrade, or try to slough off, your Wordsworthian moments.’⁴⁸

Rorty’s use of the term ‘Wordsworthian moments’ is suggestive, particularly in light of the poet’s own association of flowers with epiphanic and renovating ‘spots of time’ recovered through the ‘inward eye’ of memory and imagination. Closer inspection, however, reveals that Wordsworth’s relationship with evocative flora bears little resemblance to Rorty’s. Take, for example, the memorable appearance of the pansy in ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, which confirms the poet’s deep sense of loss:

The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?
(54-57)⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Rorty, ‘Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,’ p. 9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁹ Text from William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 272.

Wordsworth chooses his flower with care. Traditionally likened to the human face, the pansy, whose name derives from the French term *pensée*, has a long association in Western culture with thought and memory – key themes in Wordsworth’s narratives of loss and recovery. Thus, in the ‘Intimations’ ode, the pansy echoes the forms of nature that ‘speak of something that is gone’ (53). As Paul de Man claims, however, images of plant life in romantic poetry generally carry the heavy (for de Man, impossible) burden of symbolically binding being and truth, metaphor and meaning, in an organic unity.⁵⁰ The romantic plant promises to overcome contingency and temporality; hence the numinous power of those suspended ‘moments.’ In the particular case of the ‘Intimations’ Ode, the flower offers the narrator the prospect of recovering a ‘visionary’ unity by reminding him of what he has lost since childhood. At the same time, the face of the flower suggests an interlocutor, an equivalent centre of self, and thus the possibility of dialogue. Seen this way, Wordsworth’s pansy is a metaphor for metaphoricality, signifying the dependence of ‘face-to-face’ conversation upon an act of imaginative projection that is itself fundamentally poetic or figurative.

More (much more than I can detail here) could be said about the role played by the pansy at this pivotal point in the ‘Ode.’⁵¹ The point I wish to make, however, is that, by imagining a dialogue with a corresponding form in nature, Wordsworth foregrounds the constitutive role of the aesthetic imagination in mediating one’s interaction with the world and with other people. From this

⁵⁰ See Paul de Man, ‘Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,’ in: *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). For de Man, in promising a natural unity of language and world, the plant becomes one of the most overdetermined romantic images, one whose failure is self-inscribed, since ‘it is in the essence of language to be capable of origination, but of never achieving the absolute identity with itself that exists in the natural object’ (p. 6).

⁵¹ The end of the fourth stanza marks the point at which Wordsworth laid down his pen in late March 1802. Thereafter he worked on the poem intermittently before completing it in June 1804. See Curtis’s notes on the composition of the ‘Ode’ (*Poems*, p. 271).

perspective, aesthetic idealisations (such as visualising the possibility of communication through the image of a pansy) and public behaviour cannot be divided. For Wordsworth, the relationship between the personal and the social is aesthetic insofar as the normative forms that our thoughts presuppose are shaped by complex relationships between sense, memory, emotion, and pleasure. Rorty's flowers, by contrast, are Platonic and remote, detached from everyday life. Initially collector's items, the wild orchids come to function to the teenaged Rorty as symbols of 'moral and philosophical absolutes,' insofar as they are 'numinous, hard to find, known only to a chosen few.'⁵² The pansy at Wordsworth's feet, however, is more than just a private curiosity. Always already humanised, the communicative face of the pansy figures the very aestheticisation of thought (the figuration of the Absolute) performed by the poem itself. It is this aestheticisation that, for Wordsworth, makes conversation and thought possible.

Conclusion

I have argued here that, insofar as they replace the romantic idea of an aesthetic dialectic between self and world with one bracketed within the private sphere, Rorty's numinous 'moments' are far from 'Wordsworthian'. By privatising a notion of the aesthetic that is always *more* than merely private, Rorty throws the romantic baby out with the bathwater. In this respect, he is closer to a naturalist thinker like Hume than to a romantic poet like Wordsworth. Rorty might have accepted this claim (he described himself as a 'neo-Humean').⁵³ Indeed, it could be argued that all this demonstrates is that, in coining the term 'romantic utilitarianism,' Rorty alighted on an unhelpful adjective,

⁵² Rorty, 'Trotzky and the Wild Orchids,' p. 8.

⁵³ See "'Relativism: Finding and Making'" and transcription of conversation with Juergen Habermas and other scholars,' *Richard Rorty Born Digital Files* <<http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/1002>>: '... I think of imagination and sentiment ... as the faculties which do most to make moral progress possible. I don't want to be a neo-Aristotelian, I want to be a neo-Humean.' (68).

a problem solved by simply replacing 'romantic' with a less loaded descriptor, such as 'creative' or 'linguistic.' There is an element of truth to this: again, I am claiming that Rorty's misprision of romanticism undermines not his neopragmatism, but merely his characterisation of the latter as *romantic* utilitarianism. That he chose to do so, especially when viewed in light of his wide-ranging writing on romanticism and pragmatism, tells us something interesting about his understanding of the relationship between the two.

In particular, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, it confirms that Rorty's image of romanticism is fundamentally Bloomian. Like Bloom in his early work, Rorty's interest in the romantics is based on notions of power. On this picture, the romantics are creative idealists committed to 'taking the world by the throat and insisting that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined.'⁵⁴ And yet, while this formulation goes some way to explaining why Rorty preferred to keep romantic enthusiasms indoors, it offers a rather limited account of philosophical romanticism. Habermas's work, by contrast, enables us to question the Bloomian model of the romantic imagination as centred in a powerful ego. What Habermas offers is an account of romantic aesthetics as rooted in ideas of sociability and conversation. Rather than relying upon hypostatised negations of reason, writers like Wordsworth located the condition of possibility for communication in a shared notion of truth as the unconditioned, or Absolute.

Rorty, of course, rejects such transcendental narratives, citing Donald Davidson's argument that '*the very absoluteness of truth is a good reason for thinking "true" indefinable and for thinking that no theory of the nature of truth is possible.*'⁵⁵ Davidson, however, did not go quite so far as to dismiss all stories about truth as pointless. Just because truth is an 'indefinable concept,'

⁵⁴ Richard Rorty, 'Appendix: The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature,' in: *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 137.

⁵⁵ Rorty, 'Introduction' to *Truth and Progress*, p. 3.

he maintains, 'does not mean we can say nothing revealing about it: we can, by relating it to other concepts like belief, desire, cause and action. Nor does the indefinability of truth imply that the concept is mysterious, ambiguous, or untrustworthy.'⁵⁶ Even Rorty is compelled to say something 'about' truth when he links its 'absoluteness' to its indefinability; this is one point, at least, upon which he and Wordsworth are in agreement. It is Habermas's and Davidson's idea of truth as the condition of possibility for communication that best reflects the philosophical accent of much romantic poetry. Davidson's own recommended method 'is to attempt to trace the connections between the concept of truth and the human attitudes and acts that give it body.'⁵⁷ For Wordsworth, tracing the connections between 'human attitudes and acts' and a concept that is both pragmatically indispensable and theoretically indefinable demands a narrative technique that can overcome contradiction by mediating the natural and the Absolute. Insofar as it incorporates an awareness of the impossibility of this task, and thus its own figurality, this kind of romantic narrative is *aesthetic*.⁵⁸ By 'conversing' with (rather than privately idealising) pansies and daffodils, Wordsworth's narratives aesthetically perform what cannot be sentenced without contradiction: the idea that the truth predicate upon which communication depends is both fictional and unconditional, figurative *and* absolute. In their persistent, obstinate engagement with the literary-

absoluteness of truth, the romantics were more pragmatic than Rorty allowed.

⁵⁶ Donald Davidson, 'The Folly of Trying to Define Truth,' in: *Truth, Language, and History* (London: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵⁸ See Charles Altieri, 'Practical Sense—Impractical Objects: Why Neo-Pragmatism Cannot Sustain an Aesthetics,' in: *Pragmatism and Literary Studies*, vol. XV of *REAL: The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, ed. Winfried Fluck (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), p. 116. Altieri argues that pragmatism like Rorty's emphasises propositional articulacy in literature at the expense of the kind of performative or non-sentenceable features that romanticism attributes to aesthetic objects. For a defence of Rorty's repudiation of the postmodern, 'romantic mythology' (p. 157) of otherness, see Isaac Nevo, 'Difference without the Flux: Pragmatic vs. Romantic Conceptions of Alterity', *Man and World*, vol. 25 (1992), pp. 149-64.