“Becoming the Poets of Our Own Lives”: Pragmatism and Romanticism

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Would it be too frivolous to advance the idea that John Dewey’s version of pragmatism, often considered to be somewhat anemic, at least to a certain extent was influenced by P.B. Shelley’s radical Romanticism? And what about the relation between the early Wordsworth and William James? The role of Romanticism is crucial if one seeks to grasp the significance of pragmatism and its much-debated renaissance. This paper concentrates on Richard Rorty’s reading of Romanticism. From the early 1980s until his death in 2007, Rorty developed his own Romanticized pragmatism which relied on his notorious private-public split. While calling attention to the provocative and stimulating nature of Rorty’s notion of a literary or poeticized culture and to the similarities between the Romantics and Rortyan liberal ironists, the paper argues that a Romanticized pragmatism which is true to its Romantic heritage ought to present itself as incompatible with an abstract and unmediated opposition between poetry and politics.

In the context of the much-debated revival or renaissance of pragmatism, which was initiated by Richard Rorty in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the crucial role of Romanticism has often been neglected. Instead of underscoring the importance of the line which runs from Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* and its definition of the future role of the poet to Rorty’s postmetaphysical scenario of a literary or poeticized culture, or from the English Romantics to the rather ‘literary’ pragmatism of William James, philosophers, theorists, and antitheorists have called attention to other aspects of (neo)pragmatism: its antifoundationalism and antiessentialism, Hegelian historicism, Darwinian naturalism, Nietzschean and Proustian perspectivism, Freudian understanding of the self, late-Wittgensteinian and Davidsonian nominalism, as well as its Kuhnian understanding of the function of science. All of these aspects can of course be found in Rorty’s brand of neopragmatism. One might feel
tempted to advance the idea that pragmatists have often seemed to move between two extremes (which are sometimes presented as caricatures): on the one hand, a somewhat anemic social democratic version of pragmatism which has its origin in Dewey, and on the other, an aestheticized version governed by languid Proustian aesthetes who are brought to the brink of ecstasy by the beautiful sound of the word ‘Guermantes’ and who spend hours discussing the contingency of the ‘mémoire involontaire’.

Undoubtedly, other discussions of the history of pragmatism have sought to illustrate its radical character, think of Cornel West’s version of neopragmatism which he developed in the 1980s, and its Emersonian and Whitmanian future-orientation and optimism. What ought to be of primary concern for us today, I think, are not the ideological differences between those who focus their interest on Proust’s world of small contingencies and those, mostly Americanists, who seek to turn Emerson and Whitman into important precursors of pragmatism. A new and interesting perspective, I submit, is offered by asking the following questions: What role has Romanticism played for the development of pragmatism, and especially for the renaissance of pragmatism? Is it possible, in other words, to grasp the significance of pragmatism without considering the impact Romanticism has had on it? Is it simply the Romantic idea of the priority of imagination over reason, which the pragmatists would later interpret as a first step in the direction of a severe critique of the correspondence theory of truth and thus of antirepresentationalism, which should be of interest here? In order to approach these and other questions, I shall concentrate on the thinker who did more than anyone else to elucidate the role Romanticism has played for a renewed understanding of pragmatism: Richard Rorty.

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, I shall discuss Rorty’s reading of Romanticism. I shall try to illustrate why Romanticism plays such a crucial role for Rorty’s version of neopragmatism. His discussion of Romanticism covers more than 25 years – from “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism” (1981) to “Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude” and “Pragmatism and Romanticism” (both in his final volume of Philosophical Papers, which was published in 2007). I shall direct attention to the fact that Rorty considers Romanticism an important phase of a development which culminates in (neo)pragmatism. In other words, Rorty avers that (his) pragmatism goes further than Romanticism in the attempt to establish an utterly dedivinized, postmetaphysical, and genuinely nominalist and historicist culture – a literary culture. In order to further explain Rorty’s critique of Romanticism, which concentrates on the Romantic notions of

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1 For a discussion of the renaissance of pragmatism, see the contributions to Dickstein (1998) and Sandbothe (2000). Russell B. Goodman (1990) discusses the relation between Romanticism and the thinking of Emerson, William James, and Dewey.
In the second part of my paper, I will show what role Romanticism plays in a Rortyan literary or poeticized culture and I will also explain the parallels between the Romantic poet and the figure Rorty calls the ‘liberal ironist’. Most presumably, this idea of a postmetaphysical literary culture, in which the creative and innovative work of the (Bloomian) strong poet is no longer unacknowledged but on the contrary of utmost importance, is one of the most important, and most stimulating, aspects of Rorty’s legacy (cf. Schulenberg 2007). At the end of the second part of my paper, I shall call attention to the difficulties that inevitably arise in connection with Rorty’s interpretation of Romanticism. Following Rorty, “at the heart of pragmatism is the refusal to accept the correspondence theory of truth and the idea that true beliefs are accurate representations of reality. At the heart of Romanticism is the thesis of the priority of imagination over reason – the claim that reason can only follow paths that the imagination has broken” (2007a: 105). To him, who at least since Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979) always felt closer to the poet than to the (analytic) philosopher or the scientist, the attempt to expand the present limits of the human imagination is one of the main characteristics of a literary culture. Imagination, the idea of (radical) novelty, the idea of poetic genius, and the idea of the contingency of our (final) vocabularies – on Rorty’s account, these characteristics of Romanticism are crucial if one wants to tell a story of the origin and destiny of the modern age.

However, in view of Rorty’s fascination with the Romantics the question arises as to whether his notion of a pragmatist and liberal poeticized culture, which is governed by the possibility of self-creation and which promises to offer Western societies an improved self-description, really demystifies the Romantic impulse. To put this differently, Rorty’s Romancitized pragmatism seems somewhat too Romantic, too focused on the notion of imagination, and too much concerned with offering the possibility of idiosyncratic private self-creations. Consequently, it tends to neglect the task of developing effective tools which might initiate change in the public sphere. As a self-proclaimed Deweyan leftist intellectual, Rorty’s demystification of Romanticism relies too much on his problematic private-public split. His privileging of the private over the public sphere has resulted in a truly fascinating and stimulating postmetaphyscial scenario. However, it has also led to a paradoxical position insofar as, on the one hand, one might advance the argument that Rorty is too Romantic in the sense of too preoccupied with the desire for private self-creation and self-overcoming and with the power of the imagination. On the other hand, he is not Romantic enough since in order to make his liberal postmetaphysical scenario look convincing and attractive he has to ignore the Romantics’ desire for radical social and political change.
(for instance, in Blake, the early Wordsworth, and, of course, Shelley and Whitman).

It is crucial to understand that this is not a paper on Romanticism, but on pragmatism's use of Romanticism. For the purposes of this paper, I shall not discuss the various twentieth-century attempts to conceptually grasp the multilayered complexity of Romantic literature, from René Wellek, Arthur Lovejoy, and Meyer Abrams to Paul de Man and Harold Bloom, but I shall concentrate on pragmatism's attempt to make Romanticism part of a modern antifoundationalist tradition, as it were. This endeavor, I submit, promises interesting results and will lead to new insights. In order to focus on those stimulating theoretical questions, I shall refrain from discussing any Romantic poems or novels in detail. I agree with Rorty that there are many fascinating parallels between Romanticism and pragmatism and that these need to be further illuminated. Moreover, I also agree with him when he suggests that pragmatism goes further than Romanticism as regards the desire for a postmetaphysical literary culture. Concerning my critique of Rorty's reading of Romanticism, it is indeed true that a problematization of his public-private dichotomy is not very new and that this kind of critique has been repeatedly advanced in the confrontation with his texts. However, this does not make it less valid. As we shall see, Rorty's public-private split is of utmost importance if one seeks to understand his antifoundationalist reading of Romanticism.

1 Richard Rorty's Reading of Romanticism

If one seeks to understand Rorty's interpretation of Romanticism, one has to see that many of the ideas which he developed in his later texts had already been present in one of the most important essays in his *Consequences of Pragmatism*, namely, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism." At the beginning of the part which discusses the significance of Romanticism for the narrative he is telling in this piece, Rorty defines Romanticism "as the thesis that the one thing needful was to discover not which propositions are true but rather what vocabulary we should use" (Rorty 1982: 148). By insisting on the importance of new ways of speaking, new vocabularies, or new and stimulating sets of metaphors, the Romantics made (Kantian) metaphysical idealism and the correspondence theory of truth look bad and hopelessly obsolete. However, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism" is not only an important essay because Rorty demonstrates how crucial the idea of the use of new vocabularies was for the Romantics, but also because of the role he attributes to Hegel. Rorty's judgment of Hegel as far as the narrative about the origin of the modern age is concerned would not change very much in his later texts.
Interestingly enough, Rorty maintains that metaphysical idealism ought to be seen as only a brief interlude on the way to Romanticism and thus to a pragmatist literary culture. Rorty is not at all interested in Hegel's system-building, but he concentrates exclusively on Hegel's historicism. It goes without saying that it is the early Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) which is of primary concern in this context. It was the idealist Hegel who contributed enormously to the establishment of a literary culture shaped by a Romanticism which replaced the pursuit of truth with the search for new vocabularies. According to Rorty, Hegel was of great importance for the development of a postmetaphysical literary culture since he not only celebrated the invention of radically new vocabularies, but he at the same time underscored their transitoriness and finality, the fact that any certainty a new vocabulary seems to offer lasts but a moment. Hegel prepared us, as Rorty seems to hold, for the recognition of the contingency of the vocabularies which constitute our beliefs and desires: "Hegel left Kant's ideal of philosophy-as-science a shambles, but he did, as I have said, create a new literary genre, a genre which exhibited the relativity of significance to choice of vocabulary, the bewildering variety of vocabularies from which we can choose, and the intrinsic instability of each" (1982: 148).

Referring to C.P. Snow's idea of the "two cultures," Rorty proposes that Hegel knew all about the literary culture before its birth (cf. Snow 1964; the introduction by Stefan Collini is particularly suggestive). Hegel exemplified, like no one before him had done, what such a radically new culture could offer, "namely, the historical sense of the relativity of principles and vocabularies to a place and time, the Romantic sense that everything can be changed by talking in new terms" (1982: 149). Contrary to his own intentions, Hegel wrote the charter of our modern literary culture. Rorty defines this new culture thus: "This culture stretches from Carlyle to Isaiah [sic] Berlin, from Matthew Arnold to Lionel Trilling, from Heine to Sartre, from Baudelaire to Nabokov, from Dostoievsky to Doris Lessing, from Emerson to Harold Bloom. Its luxuriant complexity cannot be conveyed simply by conjoining words like 'poetry', 'the novel', and 'literary criticism'. This culture is a phenomenon the Enlightenment could not have anticipated" (1982: 149). In later texts Rorty would emphasize the antifoundationalist and antiessentialist character of this kind of culture and the fact that its main aim is the production of two different vocabularies: novel vocabularies of self-creation and self-transformation and new vocabularies for the enrichment of public life and the strengthening of solidarity. In "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," Rorty argues that the final step in the process of establishing a literary or poeticized culture was the replacement of Romanticism by pragmatism. He particularly underscores the contribution of Nietzsche and William James in this context. I shall further elaborate on this final step in the second part of my paper.
Romanticism also plays a decisive role in Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. At the beginning of the first chapter (“The Contingency of Language”), Rorty advances the argument that what unites the German idealists, the French revolutionaries, and the Romantic poets is that they understood, at the end of the eighteenth century, “that anything could be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed” (1989: 7). Furthermore, what the German idealists, the utopian revolutionaries, and the Romantic poets had in common was “a dim sense that human beings whose language changed so that they no longer spoke of themselves as responsible to nonhuman powers would thereby become a new kind of human beings” (1989: 7). At the end of the eighteenth century redescriptions became ever more radical in nature, European linguistic practices changed at an increasingly fast rate, and more and more people seemed willing to accept the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. This suggestion has to be seen in connection with the idea that a human self is not adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary but that it is rather created by the use of a vocabulary. By introducing new sets of metaphors, and by making the idea of constant gestalt switches look attractive, the Romantic poets initiated a new way of speaking which no longer had use for notions like ‘foundation’, ‘reality’, ‘real essence’, ‘intrinsic nature’, ‘fitting the world,’ and ‘correspondence of language to reality.’ In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty stresses once more that he thinks of “Hegel’s *Phenomenology* both as the beginning of the end of the Plato-Kant tradition and as a paradigm of the ironist’s ability to exploit the possibilities of massive redescription” (1989: 78). Truly scandalous for every materialist theoretician is Rorty’s redescription of Hegel’s dialectical method, which in Rorty’s opinion “is not an argumentative procedure or a way of unifying subject and object, but simply a literary skill – skill at producing surprising gestalt switches by making smooth, rapid transitions from one terminology to another” (1989: 78).

Apart from Hegel’s dialectical method, these notions of surprising gestalt switches and changing terminologies or new sets of metaphors are also useful, for instance, when one seeks to understand the radical nature of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798, 1800). *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 and 1800 were subversive volumes not only because of the experimentalism of the language and style and the depiction of the life of the lower classes as a new content, but also because they urged their readers to consider together a plurality of utterly different vocabularies and speakers – from Wordsworth’s “The Female Vagrant”, “Simon Lee”, “The Last of the Flock”, and “The Idiot Boy” to his Lucy poems; or from his “We are Seven” to “Tintern Abbey.” Even more obvious is of course the difference between Wordsworth’s rustic ballads and Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” This stimulating plurality of genuinely new ways of speaking, which did not pretend to offer a single, firm, unequivocal, and transhistorical truth,
While I concentrate on the attempt to elucidate the relation between pragmatism and Romanticism, one could also try to analyze how Rorty views the relation between pragmatism and antifoundationalist poeticized culture.

Rorty introduces his idea of a poeticized culture in chapter 3 of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: “The Contingency of a Liberal Community.” He states that what is needed is “a redescriptions of liberalism as the hope that culture as a whole can be ‘poeticized’ rather than as the Enlightenment hope that it can be ‘rationalized’ or ‘scientized.’ That is, we need to substitute the hope that chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized for the hope that everyone will replace ‘passion’ or fantasy with ‘reason’” (1989: 53). The culture hero of this kind of liberal polity would no longer be the priest or the scientist striving for objective truth, but the (Bloomian) strong poet. Following Rorty, a postmetaphysical and poeticized culture “would be one which would not insist we find the real wall behind the painted ones, the real touchstones of truth as opposed to touchstones which are merely cultural artifacts. It would be a culture which, precisely by appreciating that all touchstones are such artifacts, would take as its goal the creation of ever more various and multicolored artifacts” (1989: 53–4). It becomes clear from Rorty’s description of a literary or poeticized culture, his story of progress, that his main concern are the aforementioned chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies in the private sphere and not so much the Romantic desire for radical political change. As we shall see further below, what this boils down to is the rather simple suggestion that Rorty holds that American liberal democracy is the best political system we can get, in spite of its numerous shortcomings and insufficiencies, and that all we really need are piecemeal reforms. As he puts it very clearly: “I think that contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement […]. Indeed, my hunch is that Western social and political thought may have had the last conceptual revolution it needs” (1989: 63).

Rorty’s attempt to demystify or deromanticize Romanticism has to be regarded as a crucial part of his pragmatist endeavor to dedivinize the world and the self and thus of his attempt to complete the process of secularization. On his account, the Romantic poets did not radically break with man’s deep metaphysical need. As I have suggested above, they only prepared the establishment of a postmetaphysical culture. Rorty develops his critique of Romanticism in two of his last pieces: “Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude” and “Pragmatism and Romanticism.” The latter essay is especially
important as far as Rorty’s notion of imagination is concerned. We already saw that Rorty thinks that at the heart of Romanticism “is the thesis of the priority of imagination over reason – the claim that reason can only follow paths that the imagination has broken” (2007a: 105). In the context of the quarrel between the two cultures he draws attention to “the fear of both philosophers and scientists that the imagination may indeed go all the way down. This fear is entirely justified, for the imagination is the source of language, and thought is impossible without language” (2007a: 106–7). Further below in his paper he formulates even more pointedly: “No imagination, no language. No linguistic change, no moral or intellectual progress. Rationality is a matter of making allowed moves within language games. Imagination creates the games that reason proceeds to play” (2007a: 115). What this signifies is that imagination and imaginativeness go all the way back. It is in “Pragmatism and Romanticism” that Rorty makes particularly clear that his understanding of Romanticism profoundly differs from traditional ones. On his account, Romanticism “is a thesis about the nature of human progress” (2007a: 108). Most presumably, this is Rorty’s central idea as regards Romanticism’s contemporary significance and the role it plays in his liberal story of progress. When Rorty maintains that “the Romantic movement marked the beginning of the attempt to replace the tale told by the Greek philosophers with a better tale” (2007a: 117), it becomes obvious that the Romantics initiated a process of creative redescription and imaginative recontextualization that would eventually allow us to recognize the possibility of establishing a postmetaphysical culture characterized by anti-Platonism and antirepresentationalism.

Thinking of imagination “as the ability to change social practices by proposing new uses of marks and noises,” that is, “the ability to come up with socially useful novelties” (2007a: 107, 115), Rorty underlines the significance of Nietzsche and Shelley for his thought. Nietzsche’s Romantic anti-Platonism not only prophesied the coming of a postmetaphysical age, but he also urged us, in The Gay Science, to become “the poets of our own lives” (“die Dichter unseres Lebens”) (2007a: 110). Imagination, linguistic novelty,
ties and progress (that is, new vocabularies and new sets of metaphors), self-creation or self-fashioning, and the idea that one should not strive to represent things accurately or adequately, but rather try to replace a good old poem with a radically new better poem or an old tale with a creative new tale – all of these various aspects, which are central to Rorty’s reading of Romanticism, direct attention to the innovative potential of the private sphere and only indirectly illustrate the role the Romantics’ radical gestures might play regarding change in the public sphere.

The Nietzschean idea of becoming the poets of our own lives is of course also central to Shelley. Especially in the *Defence of Poetry* Shelley enlarged the meaning of the terms ‘poetry’ and ‘poet’. Analogously, Rorty’s Bloomian notion of ‘strong poet’ also comprises those who do not write verse, for instance, Newton, Darwin, Marx, Freud, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov. He defines the poet as “the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages” (1989: 20). Clearly, Rorty agrees with Shelley’s suggestion that it is not too difficult to imagine what the world’s moral and intellectual improvement would have been like, if philosophers such as Locke, Hume, Voltaire, and Rousseau had never lived. However, according to Shelley, “it exceeds all imagination to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderon, Lord Bacon, nor Milton, had ever existed [. . .]” (2002: 530). Rorty also approvingly quotes the following famous sentences from the *Defence*, where Shelley expands on his understanding of the meaning of poetry:

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought: it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life. (Shelley 2002: 531)

In spite of Rorty’s approval of Shelley’s characterization of poetry’s power, the adjective “divine” must have irritated him. Equally problematic is certainly Shelley’s suggestion that a poet “participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not” (2002: 513). Furthermore, Shelley also avers that a poem “is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (2002: 515). These are only three
examples which indicate that Shelley’s vocabulary is still that of a poet with a metaphysical need, someone who, in spite of his desire for self-creation and his emphasis on the autonomy of the poet as prophet, still finds himself captured by Platonism. ‘Divinity’, ‘the eternal’, ‘the infinite’, and ‘eternal truth’ – these terms belong to a way of speaking whose uselessness, insufficiencies, and dangers Rorty, the Romantic pragmatist and radical atheist, wants us to recognize.

Rorty’s critique of the Romantic poets in “Pragmatism and Romanticism” is less direct in comparison with “Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude.” In the former piece he writes: “Just as the Enlightenment had capitalized and deified Reason, so Shelley and other Romantics capitalized and deified Imagination” (2007a: 109). Rorty, as should be clear by now, wants us to no longer deify anything and to continue the process of secularization which ought to eventually culminate in a postmetaphysical poeticized culture. To put this somewhat differently, he wants us to “try to get to the point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, where we treat everything – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance” (1989: 22). In “Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude,” Rorty argues that the Romantic poets only took the first necessary steps in this direction. Concerning his attempt to demystify or deromanticize Romanticism, this essay is particularly suggestive. Moreover, it also shows how important Isaiah Berlin’s interpretation of Romanticism, in The Roots of Romanticism (1999), is for Rorty’s approach. Rorty concentrates his critique on two points: the Romantics’ passionate commitment and their metaphors of depth and profundity. One might feel tempted to surmise that a poeticized culture, whose hero is the strong poet and whose virtues and advantages are praised by antirepresentationalists, nominalist historicists, and other anti-Platonists, is perfectly compatible with passionate gestures and commitments. However, as a Deweyan liberal, Rorty questions the necessity of the attempt to seek what Habermas has termed “an other to reason.” Exalting passion at the expense of reason, as Rorty claims, can be seen as part of “the Platonist hope of speaking with an authority that is not merely that of a certain time and place” (2007b: 83).

In contrast to the Romantics’ passionate commitment, their search for new realms beyond the ordinary and for something deep within the subject, pragmatists want us to understand that we are “finite creatures, the children of specific times and specific places” (2007b: 82). Furthermore, they call attention to the fact that this Romantic desire, the harmful Platonist search for what is more than another human invention, threatens to end the conversation of humanity, while Rorty seeks to convince us that this conversation goes “its unpredictable way for as long as our species lasts – solving particular problems as they happen to arise, and, by working through the consequences of those solutions, generating new problems” (2007b: 79).
Rorty always vehemently rejected traditional understandings of subjectivity. To him, there is no such thing as a core self whose real inner nature might be discovered and accurately represented. He holds that we are best described as centerless webs of beliefs and desires or as sentential attitudes. Consequently, he rejects “the Romantic metaphor of descent to the very bottom of the human soul” (2007b: 80). Rorty wants to deromanticize Romanticism by critiquing these metaphors of depth and profundity, as well as the ideas of the infinite, the ineffable, and the attempt to save us from finitude. Trying to help us get away from Platonist representationalism with its appearance-reality distinction or from what Heidegger called the ontotheological tradition, of which Romanticism has proven to be still a part, Rorty puts a premium on the pragmatist idea (unbearably frivolous to many) of experimentalist tinkering. Universalist grandeur, that is, the appeal to something permanent, transhistorical, and overarching, and Romantic depth, that is, the appeal to something which is ineffable and poetically sublime, do not find their place in a pragmatist vocabulary: “If one thinks that experimentalist tinkering is all we shall ever manage, then one will be suspicious of both universalist metaphors of grandeur and Romantic metaphors of depth. For both suggest that a suggestion for further tinkering can gain strength by being tied in with something that is not, in Russell’s words, merely of here and now – something like the intrinsic nature of reality or the uttermost depths of the human soul” (2007b: 86).

It is interesting to see to what extent the eminent historian of ideas, Isaiah Berlin, influenced Rorty’s critique of Romanticism. In his A.W. Mellon Lectures, given in 1965 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, Berlin does of course not criticize the Romantics for still being Platonists, metaphysicians, and epistemological foundationalists. But he impressively illustrates to what degree their thinking was dominated by the notions of depth, inexhaustibility, infinity, and inexpressibility. Regarding the idea of profundity, for instance, Berlin points out:

But in the case of works which are profound the more I say the more remains to be said. There is no doubt that, although I attempt to describe what their profundity consists in, as soon as I speak it becomes quite clear that, no matter how long I speak, new chasms open. No matter what I say I always have to leave three dots at the end. Whatever description I give always opens the doors to something further, something even darker, perhaps, but certainly something which is in principle incapable of being reduced to precise, clear, verifiable, objective prose. (1999: 103)

Berlin correctly maintains that the Romantics thought that their relation to the universe was inexpressible, and that they at the same time strove to absorb the infinite into themselves or to dissolve themselves into it. The Romantics’ Sehnsucht not only stands for their narrative desire to express their inner
nature and thus their relationship to the universe, but also for their perpetually renewed attempt to create themselves by means of their new vocabularies or sets of metaphors. The Romantics’ self-creation plays a crucial role in *The Roots of Romanticism*. Following Berlin, the Romantics abhorred anything static, the rigidity of moral, political, or artistic principles, as well as the oppressive nature of institutions and stable structures. Berlin reads the Romantics’ refusal to accept all this as a necessary given as “the beginning of the vast drive forward on the part of inspired individuals, or inspired nations, constantly creating themselves afresh, constantly aspiring to purify themselves, and to reach some unheard-of height of endless self-transformation, endless self-creation, works of art constantly engaged in creating themselves, forward, forward, like a kind of vast cosmic design perpetually renewing itself” (1999: 91). What is important in the context of our discussion is that Berlin sometimes seems more inclined than Rorty to underscore the Romantics’ antirepresentationalism, antifoundationalism, and antiessentialism, and thus their anti-Platonist gesture in general. In other words, Berlin seems to hold that they are further down the road to a postmetaphysical culture than Rorty thinks or is willing to admit (remember that Rorty’s narrative of the modern age culminates in pragmatism). Berlin, for instance, sees Fichte’s theory of knowledge “as a kind of early but extremely far-reaching pragmatism” (1999: 89). Moreover, he underlines that the Romantics for the first time in the history of human thought taught man “that ideals are not to be discovered at all, they are to be invented; not to be found but to be generated, generated as art is generated” (1999: 87).

Apart from this made-found distinction, which is of utmost importance for pragmatists from James to Rorty, Berlin also elucidates the Romantics’ severe critique of “objective criteria” and “objective truth,” as well as their rejection of “any kind of general theory” (1999: 140, 144). From Dewey’s *The Quest for Certainty* (1929) to Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels’s notorious neopragmatist manifesto “Against Theory” (published in 1982 in *Critical Inquiry*) and Stanley Fish’s rhetoricized antifoundationalism, this attack on theory accompanied us throughout the twentieth century. That Berlin thinks that the Romantics bring together a certain kind of antirepresentationalism and the notion of (endless) self-creation, becomes clear in the following important passage:

Those are the fundamental bases of Romanticism: will, the fact that there is no structure to things, that you can mould things as you will – they come into being only as a result of your moulding activity – and therefore opposition to any view which tried to represent reality as having some kind of form which could be studied, written down, learnt, communicated to others, and in other respects treated in a scientific manner. (1999: 127)
In the second part of my paper, I shall discuss three points. First, I shall seek to clarify to what extent Rorty’s ‘liberal ironist’ is also a Romantic. Second, I shall illustrate why Rorty is of the opinion that pragmatism goes further in the establishment of a postmetaphysical culture than Romanticism. Finally, I shall develop my critique of Rorty by asking to what extent a genuinely nominalist and historicist poeticized culture would affect the public sphere.

2 Romantics, Liberal Ironists, and the Idea of a Literary or Poeticized Culture

In one of his last pieces, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” Rorty states a thesis which is central to many of his texts: “It is that the intellectuals of the West have, since the Renaissance, progressed through three stages: they have hoped for redemption first from God, then from philosophy, and now from literature” (2004: 8). According to Rorty, we live in a (not fully realized) literary culture. As we have seen in the first part of this paper, Rorty’s contention is that the transition from a philosophical to a literary culture began with Hegel. It was with Hegel that philosophy reached its most ambitious and presumptuous form which almost instantly turned into its dialectical opposite, that is, the Hegelian system eventually turned out to be a kind of utterly unironical self-consuming artifact. Hegel’s system was serious in its desire to depict things as they really were and it sought to fit everything into a single context. This also signifies, of course, that it pretended to represent the totality. Rorty writes: “Since Hegel’s time, the intellectuals have been losing faith in philosophy. This amounts to losing faith in the idea that redemption can come in the form of true beliefs. In the literary culture that has been emerging during the last two hundred years, the question ‘Is it true?’ has yielded to the question ‘What’s new?’” (2004: 9).

In today’s literary culture philosophy and religion have become marginal, they appear as only optional literary genres. A literary culture still offers the possibility of redemption, but the kind of redemption has changed. As Rorty points out:

As I am using the terms “literature” and “literary culture,” a culture that has substituted literature for both religion and philosophy finds redemption neither in a noncognitive relation to a nonhuman person nor in a cognitive relation to propositions, but in noncognitive relations to other human beings, relations mediated by human artifacts such as books and buildings, paintings and songs. These artifacts provide a sense of alternative ways of being human. (2004: 10)

What this also means is that the search for God was replaced by the striving for Truth, and that the latter has finally been replaced by the search for
Rorty uses generic she in the original.

novelty and by the recognition that redemption can only be found in human creations and artifacts and not in the escape from the temporal to the eternal or transcendental.

How does Rorty define the members of a literary culture, the literary intellectuals? His understanding of the function of the literary intellectual combines a Bloomian interpretation of the autonomy of the self with Emersonian self-reliance. A literary intellectual has constant doubts about the (final) vocabulary she is currently using, she does not want to get stuck in it. She longs to become acquainted with other ways of speaking, other ways of interpreting the purpose of life. For that reason she reads as many books as possible. By becoming acquainted with so many alternative vocabularies and ways of being human, the literary intellectual enlarges her self. Because of her reading she is introduced to a great number of alternative purposes, and ways of expressing those purposes, and she is thus given the possibility of radically questioning traditional vocabularies and explanations. To put it simply, the literary intellectual's reading leads to her self-creation, it offers her the possibility of creating an autonomous self. Rorty apparently agrees with Harold Bloom that the more books you have read, the more descriptions and redescriptions you have come across, the more human and at the same time autonomous you become. A Rortyan and Bloomian autonomous self puts a premium on the attempt to creatively expand the present limits of the human imagination, and it also seeks to demonstrate that the development from religion (God) to philosophy (Truth) to literature (novelty, imagination, redecoration) is a story of increasing self-reliance.

So far I have called the members of a Rortyan literary culture ironist literary intellectuals. In Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, Rorty advances the idea that the ideal member of a postmetaphysical poeticized culture is a figure he calls the 'liberal ironist'. The notion of liberal ironism is central to Rorty's neopragmatist thinking. He borrows his definition of 'liberal' from Judith Shklar, who says, as he understands her, “that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do” (1989: xv). Rorty's understanding of liberalism was of course also very much influenced by Mill, Berlin, Habermas, and Rawls, but for his explanation of what the term 'liberal ironist' means Shklar's definition is sufficient. For our purposes Rorty's illustration of the implications of 'ironist' is of crucial importance. He uses ‘ironist' to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance” (1989: xv). That the liberal ironist, who is – together with the strong poet –
the hero of Rorty’s liberal utopia, has no problem to accept the contingency of his or her web of beliefs and desires also implies that he or she is perfectly aware of the contingency of his or her final vocabulary. Ironists, if one follows Rorty, are “never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves” (1989: 73–4).

The ironist, in contrast to the metaphysician (as Platonist), is a nominalist and historicist who radically rejects the notion of intrinsic nature, who dismisses the correspondence theory of truth as outdated and useless, and who constantly calls attention to the contingency, historicity, and creativity of the various vocabularies she uses. As I have already pointed out with regard to what Rorty calls the literary intellectual in “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” his heroes abhor the idea of stasis in the sense of getting stuck in one final vocabulary. They constantly look for new possibilities of creatively and imaginatively redescribing and recontextualizing things and persons, that is, their desire for novelty, new sets of metaphors, and surprising gestalt switches has them contribute to the establishment of a radically new kind of postmetaphysical culture in which the notion of correct representation no longer plays a role and in which final vocabularies are considered as “poetic achievements.” According to Rorty, the ironist’s search for a new and better final vocabulary “is dominated by metaphors of making rather than finding, of diversification and novelty rather than convergence to the antecedently present. She thinks of final vocabularies as poetic achievements rather than as fruits of diligent inquiry according to antecedently formulated criteria” (1989: 77). Instead of the metaphysician’s reality, objectivity, and essence, the universalist’s grandeur and transcendence, and the Romantic’s depth, the ironist is happy to admit that all she has to offer is the idea of “continual redescriptions” (1989: 80). The ironist’s realization of the contingency of her final vocabulary, her awareness of the power of redescriptions, and her search for the most elegant way of combining certain vocabularies are characteristics of an aestheticized culture in which books are continually placed in new combinations, in which exciting new vocabularies kill off old ways of speaking, and in which persons and cultures are seen as “incarnated vocabularies” (1989: 80).

In Rorty’s postmetaphysical literary or poeticized culture final vocabularies, as poetic achievements, are all we have, and there is thus no possibility of comparing our current way of speaking with things as they really are. In this kind of culture critique can only have the form of an imaginative redescriptions which makes the old vocabulary look bad and rather useless: “For us ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescriptions save a re-re-redescriptions” (1989: 80).
In view of what I have been saying so far in this second part it should have become clear that Rorty’s ‘liberal ironist’ is also a Romantic. Rorty calls attention to a crucial parallel when he writes that “[t]he generic task of the ironist is the one Coleridge recommended to the great and original poet: to create the taste by which he will be judged” (1989: 97). This idea of creating the taste by which one will be judged is a profoundly Nietzschean gesture, of course, which illuminates, once again, the importance of the line which runs from the Romantics to the modern writers of the twentieth century. What exactly are the parallels between the Romantics, as Rorty sees them, and the liberal ironists? Both put a strong emphasis on the power of imagination and hence on the invention and introduction of new vocabularies or new sets of metaphors. This also signifies that both regard the adoption of new vocabularies by human beings and institutions as the motor of history. Both, in other words, make us understand that a story of progress has to focus primarily on linguistic change, the change of linguistic practices or the replacement of one (final) vocabulary by another. Furthermore, both draw attention to the contingency and fragility of our final vocabularies as poetic achievements, or to the transitory nature of our webs of beliefs and desires. Both make us realize the importance of creative and imaginative redescriptions and of the idea that these are all we have. What also unites the Romantics and the liberal ironists is the notion of self-creation, self-invention, and Nietzschean self-overcoming – the infinite malleability of human beings as emphasized by James in his lectures on pragmatism. Moreover, both certainly help us grasp the new kind of ‘redemption’ offered by a culture which has substituted literature for both religion and philosophy. The last parallel I want to mention is that both underscore the distinctly aesthetic component of modern subjectivity and thus the diversity of private purposes and the radically poetic character of individual lives. In this context, think of, for instance, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Baudelaire, Wilde, Nietzsche, Huymans, Mallarmé, and Nabokov.

In spite of these crucial parallels between the Romantics and the liberal ironists, one also has to see that Rorty repeatedly advanced the argument that pragmatism went further than Romanticism in the establishment of a literary culture. On his account, Nietzsche and William James were enormously important concerning this replacement of Romanticism by pragmatism since “[i]nstead of saying that the discovery of vocabularies could bring hidden secrets to light, they said that new ways of speaking could help us get what we want” (1982: 150). Furthermore, Rorty’s contention is that “Romanticism was aufgehoben in pragmatism, the claim that the significance of new vocabularies was not their ability to decode but their mere utility” (1982: 153). The Romantic notions of depth, profundity, the ineffable, and the poetically sublime, as I explained them in the first part of this paper, are almost diametrically opposed to this pragmatist utilitarian understanding.
of art. New and stimulating vocabularies are useful because they open another chapter in the modern story of progress, but they must not be seen as offering a sudden unmediated vision of what is deep down inside us and what defines who we really are. As David Hall correctly points out: “Art does not reach for the ineffable or the sublime; art lets us get what we want” (1994: 40). Further below in his text Hall explains that Rorty regards pragmatism as “that movement which sublates Hegel’s Romanticism and historicism into a single manner of thinking allowing for the desire to perfect the self by appeal to literary sources while leaving a space, the public sphere, for getting on with the practical affairs of social life” (1994: 121).

It was left to the pragmatists to radically reject the correspondence theory of truth and, moreover, to make their fellow human beings understand that in a world of blind, contingent, and mechanical forces they must not expect, and do not need, any kind of metaphysical comfort. What Rorty’s discussion of Romanticism boils down to, I suggest, is that he sees the Romantics “as toolmakers rather than discoverers” (1989: 55). Not yet fully escaped from Platonism and still governed by a metaphysical need or urge, the Romantics creatively, and passionately, contributed to the development of conceptual tools (for instance, imagination, redescrioption, vocabulary, plurality, metaphor, and self-creation) which would eventually offer the possibility of establishing a postmetaphysical poeticized culture. To put it differently, it was the Romantics’ position between metaphysical need and imaginative conceptual innovation that initiated a process which would eventually lead to man’s realization that he or she no longer needs the reliability, certainty, and purity of what is more than another human invention.

It has been repeatedly pointed out that one of Rorty’s most provocative ideas is that of a private-public split. This distinction, as it has been argued above, also concerns his reading of Romanticism. For an understanding of a Rortyan literary or poeticized culture the private-public split is of great importance. Rorty writes: “My ‘poeticized’ culture is one which has given up the attempt to unite one’s private ways of dealing with one’s finitude and one’s sense of obligation to other human beings” (1989: 68). While we can be playful and creative ironists or strong poets at home, Rorty wants to persuade us that it is crucial to concentrate all our energies on the attempt to establish a liberal bourgeois consensus in the public realm. The Rortyan emphasis on the necessity to strengthen the relation between liberal democracy and harmony, and between late-capitalist free-market economies and the development of more tolerant attitudes, completely neglects the highly productive dialectical tension between consensus and dissent. Rorty’s notion of liberal democracy and his understanding of reformist piecemeal social engineering, I propose, do not leave room for dissent, resistance, antagonism, and the desire for radical social change, or at least for the radical questioning of liberal institutions and practices. Rorty’s ‘we liberals’,
longing for the establishment of a powerful liberal consensus in the public sphere and constantly advocating the beauty of shared vocabularies, do not want to see the importance of conflicting interests, desires, and values for democratic politics. Consigning sublimity and the dark forces of radical redescription and theory to the private sphere, the public sphere in its liberal version will finally present itself as governed by harmony, tolerance, and undistorted communication. It can never be more than beautiful.\(^5\)

Concerning Rorty’s interpretation of the significance of Romanticism, it is crucial to see that he avers that “poetic, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need” (1989: 37). He also speaks of “idiosyncrasies which just happen to catch on with other people – happen because of the contingencies of some historical situation, some particular need which a given community happens to have at a given time” (1989: 37). Again, it is contingency all the way down. Inevitably the question arises as to whether this idea of an “accidental coincidence” is useful and sufficient in order to describe the Romantics’ radical political desires. For Rorty’s liberal attempt to deromanticize Romanticism the idea of grasping the relation between the private and public spheres as contingent is crucial since it questions the possibility of radical energies becoming immediately effective in the public sphere and since it thus might be interpreted as a warning against the vulgarizations of leftist (read: Marxist) thinking.

Part of the complexity of Romanticism is the desire for social and political change – from reforms to the call for a proletarian revolution. Blake’s depiction of child labor, prostitution, woeful faces, and an increasingly powerful capitalist system in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Wordsworth’s description of the life of what in “Simon Lee” he calls “the poorest of the poor” (60; 2003: 44), a representation which is as evocative of poverty, misery, desperation, and frugality as Van Gogh’s “A Pair of Boots” (think of Heidegger’s reading of this painting in “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks”). As regards the Romantics’ radical political desire, some of the most impressive examples are certainly the poems which Shelley wrote shortly after the Peterloo Massacre in 1819 and in which he declared himself in solidarity with the radical aspects of the reform movement. At the end of “England in 1819”, for instance, the speaker calls for a (bloodless) proletarian revolution when he speaks of “graves from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day” (13–14; 2002: 327). The same gesture governs the famous last stanza of *The Mask of Anarchy* when the speaker tells the oppressed and exploited to “Rise like lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number – / Shake your chains to earth like dew / Which in sleep had

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fallen on you – / Ye are many – they are few” (368–70; 2002: 326). In this context one should of course also mention Whitman’s notion of a radical and multicultural democracy as he develops it in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and *Democratic Vistas* (1871).

Rorty’s liberal Romanticized pragmatism, in its attempt to deromanticize or demystify Romanticism, consigns the Romantics’ radical desires and energies to the private sphere and proposes that the poets’ power of imagination and their radically idiosyncratic vocabularies, their new sets of metaphors as poetic achievements, only accidentally and in the long run affect and change the public sphere. Behind this stands Rorty’s idea, as I have mentioned above, that American liberal democracy does not need radical change, that another conceptual revolution is not needed, and that his fellow Americans, in a Deweyan manner, should rather focus their attention on developing effective methods of social engineering and experimentalist tinkering.

Contrary to Rorty’s suggestions, I would propose that a Romanticized pragmatism which is true to its Romantic heritage must not consign radical desires to the private sphere, and thereby tend to aestheticize them, but it ought to let those decidedly nonliberal, oppositional discourses become part of the conversation in the public sphere. A truly Romanticized pragmatism ought to show that the private sphere can be more than a realm of hyper-individualization, of excessive forms of self-creation, and of the opacity of idiosyncratic vocabularies. Furthermore, a Romanticized pragmatism might also demonstrate that the public sphere can be more than a realm of disconnected and experimentalist tinkering, social engineering, and piecemeal reform. Fully realizing the potential and multilayered complexity of its Romantic heritage (from the power of imagination to the desire for social and political change), a Romanticized pragmatism ought to present itself as incompatible with an abstract and unmediated opposition between poetry and politics.

3 Conclusion

In my paper, I have sought to show that Rorty denies the necessity of mediating between the private and public spheres, and that this denial inevitably leads to a reductionist reading of Romanticism. Mediation as a conceptual tool is often associated with Marxism, whether one thinks of Althusser’s structural Marxism or Jameson’s version of Hegelian Marxism. My suggestion that Rorty’s Romanticized pragmatism would profit from a less unmediated opposition between (Romantic) poetry and (liberal reformist) politics is indirectly confirmed when one considers his attitude toward Marxism. Rorty radically rejects Marxism and its conceptual tools. Concerning Rorty’s
understanding of Marxism, one of the most important articles is his “The End of Leninism, Havel, and Social Hope.” Right at the beginning of this text, Rorty not only stresses that we should drop the terms ‘capitalism’ and ‘socialism’ from the political vocabulary of the Left, but he also expresses his hope that “we can banalize the entire vocabulary of leftist political deliberation” (1998: 229). He clearly points out, moreover, that the longing for total (Marxist) revolution seems utterly pointless after the events of 1989. Rorty apparently agrees with the main ideas of Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). He agrees, for example, with Fukuyama’s suggestion “that no more Romantic prospect stretches before the Left than an attempt to create bourgeois democratic welfare states and to equalize life chances among the citizens of those states by redistributing the surplus produced by market economies” (1998: 229). As a friend of small patchwork solutions, temporary stopgaps, and small experimental ways of relieving misery and overcoming injustice, Rorty’s dismissal of Marxism and Marxist theory becomes very obvious in this essay. Marxism as a metanarrative (in the Lyotardian sense) has become a large blurry fantasy for him, an over-theorized and ineffective way of thinking that only pretends to be capable of conceptually grasping ‘objects’ such as ‘History’, ‘Freedom’, and ‘Capitalism’. We simply have to stop using the old Marxist vocabulary, to weed out world-historical and eschatological terms: “The events of 1989 have convinced those who were still trying to hold on to Marxism that we need a way of holding our time in thought, and a plan for making the future better than the present, which drops reference to capitalism, bourgeois ways of life, bourgeois ideology, and the working class. We must give up on the Marxist blur, as Marx and Dewey gave up on the Hegelian blur” (1998: 233). Rorty obviously has no use for Marxism anymore, and he also warns against the danger of hoping for a successor to Marxist theory. In view of this Rortyan reading of Marxism, the question inevitably arises (and this question seems to be the standard question when discussing his texts): What are we left with? His answer is unequivocal: “The old large blurry fantasies are gone, and we are left with only the small concrete ones – the ones we used to view as symptoms of petit bourgeois reformism” (1998: 235).

The Romantics help us see the limitations of Rorty’s fascinating scenario of a postmetaphysical literary or poeticized culture. The poets’ desire for social and political change refuses to be consigned to the private sphere. One could of course see the Romantic poets as the first heroes of a modern story of emancipation since they teach us, *pace* Rorty, that one must not be satisfied with the notions of ‘small concrete fantasies’, ‘reformism’, or ‘experimentalist tinkering’ as far as the shaping of the public sphere is concerned. However, this story is relatively well-known. A truly stimulating endeavor, I think, would be the attempt to creatively use Rorty’s pragmatist heritage and to retell the story of the development of a postmetaphysical
culture, the story about the metaphysicians, idealists, Romantic poets, strong poets, and liberal ironists, only this time without relying on the private-public distinction. This narrative would no longer be Rorty’s narrative, but it would remind us that Rorty, as storyteller, redescriber, and shaper of new languages, never intended to tell a ‘true’ story. Rather, his primary concern was to continue the conversation.

References


