

Aesthetics/Ethics: Two Modern Views

by

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the degree of Master of Arts**

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Abstract

My study is a critical examination of Richard Rorty's account of the transition between 19th idealism and what he calls 20th century textualism. In particular, I examine the "aesthetics" of moral reflection offered in Rorty's more recent thought. According to Rorty, as well as some admirers of the "anti-theory" perspective he advances, the historicist and pragmatist critique of foundations should lead us to "an alternative conception of moral agency," one that promises not only to lift us out of standard difficulties of moral theory, but that contributes "in the process ... to our understanding of how literature enhances moral reflection" (Furrow, 1995: 104). Against Rorty, I juxtapose the unlikely figure of John Stuart Mill, who in the 1830s articulated a pioneering example of what is commonly known as the "expression" theory of art. His great devotion to Wordsworth and Coleridge establishes Mill as one of the earliest examples of an Enlightenment naturalist view that seeks to accommodate the counter-thrust of romanticism. Mill prefigures Rorty's aims of forging an ethics of aesthetic existence and is an exemplary reference point for understanding Rorty's own identification with "liberal hope" and the ideal of self-creation and perfection through art. The structure of Mill's liberalism is remarkably similar to Rorty's, both in the deployment of the notoriously unstable public/private distinction and in the common recognition of romanticism as a defining feature of the modern view.

In Chapter One, I illustrate the striking degree to which Rorty and Mill share a common critical task and a mutual spirit of historical sensibility and liberal utopianism, noting some challenges that artistic modernism raises for the project of uniting moral and aesthetic goals in their respective accounts of modern individualism. The second chapter is a detailed examination of Mill's early poetic theory, illustrating how he raises challenges for contemporary efforts to conjoin ethics and aesthetics such as Rorty's. Chapter Three examines the core issues that bring Mill into genuine dialogue with the present – namely, authentic individualism, expressive agency, and style. In the final chapter, I set out Rorty's postmodern alternative to moral agency governed by a radically aesthetic sensibility. The conclusion summarizes Mill's romantic-Victorian liberalism and Rorty's romantic-postmodern liberalism by showing how they converge on our issue of aestheticized ethics and stylistic individualism. The thesis concludes by raising further questions for the place of art in modern moral reflection.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter One: The last conceptual revolution	10
Chapter Two: J. S. Mill, expressivism, authenticity, and aesthetic individualism	27
Chapter Three: Theatricality and style in moral agency	40
Chapter Four: Rorty's postmodern ethics: the aesthetic life	56
Conclusion: Art and morality in Victorian and postmodern liberalism	83
Appendix A. "Portrait of a Lady," by T. S. Eliot	89
Appendix B. "Mariana," by Alfred Tennyson	93
Selected Bibliography	95
Vita	99

Introduction

What should we make of the relation between the moral and the aesthetic? Two theses come to mind. The first asserts, following Schiller, that morality realizes part of us and only art and the free-play of the aesthetic can make us whole. The vocabularies of duty and utility simply cannot capture the whole of moral life. Since romanticism, art has been the source of refined moral education; it makes life more complete and fulfilling by adding substance to bare utility. Out of the aesthetic, the moral develops.¹ The second thesis holds the contrary view: art is potentially dangerous; too much preoccupation with art breeds affectation, substitutes artificial feeling for genuine moral concern. Out of the aesthetic, a self-deceptive substitute for the moral develops. Thinkers from Aristotle to Martha Nussbaum defend the first thesis; thinkers as varied as Plato and Bentham hold the second. Postmodern thought tries to supercede the dualism expressed by these two theses and stakes itself instead on the very collapse of the moral-aesthetic distinction. How is this?

This dissertation presents Richard Rorty's controversial claims as representative of the contemporary drive to articulate an aesthetic moral orientation. Our point of departure is his account of the transition from 19th century idealism to the position he calls 20th century "textualism". Rorty begins with the claim that "all problems, topics, and distinctions are language-relative – the results of having chosen to use a certain vocabulary, to play a certain language-game" (1982, 140). He argues that thinkers such as Wittgenstein and Heidegger have taught us above all that we are self-interpreting beings who must draw our self-image from the languages and vocabularies circulating in culture at large. Textualism insists that the language of science is no more fundamental than everyday language; there is no language that will bring us closer to the grounds of our existence or closer to reality; and, thus, no vocabulary will give us a basis for a "truer, better" insight into reality than any other vocabulary.

Given this lack of theoretical closure, Rorty portrays textualism as a reactionary romantic exaltation of the languages of art over those of science. Modernism in the arts seems to best capture

¹In philosophy, 'aesthetics' is commonly taken as the philosophical study of art. But it should be obvious that art has no unique relation to aesthetics and aesthetics has no necessarily special relation to art. These distinctions will become clear in what follows.

the spirit behind the leading textualist point that we respond to texts, rather than things, and that we make rather than find reality. Rorty claims his own pragmatist-textualist position is a result of following a preference for playful, ironic aesthetic modernism (in contrast to the sober-minded and perhaps painful realization that the scientific self-image does not, after all, have the privileged connection to reality that it was always assumed to have) (1982, 140) .

Rorty is something of an enigma in contemporary Western philosophy. He is at once the subject of praise and derision. Admirers of the so-called “anti-theory” position he advocates claim that his historicist critique of foundationalist epistemology brings before us “an alternative conception of moral agency,” one that promises not only to lift us out of standard difficulties of moral theory, but also contributes “in the process ... to our understanding of how literature enhances moral reflection” (Furrow, 1995, 104). Some critics argue, however, that rather than undermining the tradition of epistemology, Rorty actually is the “crowning” culmination of that tradition (Ankersmit, 1996; Taylor, 1990). Others have questioned the reactionary romantic “impulse” behind the aesthetic life he advocates at the end of epistemology (Fraser, 1990; Wolterstorff, 1989). Still others claim that Rorty’s romanticism is not merely a strategic (i.e. pragmatic) move, but is actually a capital “P” philosophical determination that we ought to challenge (Nevo, 1995).

To amplify this critical orientation, I examine that consequence of pragmatism expressed by Rorty’s desire to dispense with the “moral-aesthetic” contrast (1989, 142) and the related program he charts out for an individualist ethics of the “aesthetic life” (1991b, 151). Rorty’s account of the role of modern literary art in moral reflection is an important aspect of his liberal utopianism; and, in a broad sense, this liberal utopia is connected to his critique of metaphysics and epistemology. However, Rorty is not merely advocating sentimental education, the view that impassioned works of art are the best vehicles of moral progress, better at creating the right sort of moral sensitization than other genres. Without foundational or transcendental recourse to truth or reason, Rorty advocates a kind of moral reflection that explicitly recognizes creation rather than discovery, making rather than finding, aestheticism rather than scientism: in short, a kind of moral perspective that becomes

equivalent to an aesthetic perspective. This goes beyond sentimental education – the use of art as a tool for refining moral perception; although this too is an important part of Rorty’s thinking. It asserts that moral reflection itself is substantively creative; that creative linguistic innovation rather than rationalist-minded systemisation is the best goal of moral life.

I will challenge the cogency and progressiveness of Rorty’s aestheticism. To situate his specific claims and to show what is involved in the contemporary notion of aestheticized ethics, I shall establish a rather unlikely juxtaposition: I will set the Victorian liberalism of John Stuart Mill, with particular focus on his early theories of poetry, next to the postmodern liberalism of Rorty, with his view of “poeticized culture” and aestheticized private moral reflection. The political wisdom of Mill, and the subtlety of his views in philosophical aesthetics, allows for a different level of critical examination. For one thing, we can by-pass the temptation to ascend from the socio-political to conclude that there *must* be some fatal flaw in Rorty’s metaphilosophical assault on truth and reason. Rorty’s profoundly conservative outlook is separable from and not dictated by his metaphilosophical commitments, as critics such as Nancy Fraser show us. Instead, as kindred liberals, Mill-as-modern and Rorty-as-postmodern will provide a contrast sufficient to show that Rorty’s picture of the aesthetic life is not uniquely determined by what he understands as pragmatism. Another avenue of critique is therefore available. This consists in calling into question Rorty’s decentring of the subject, a key to his claims about art, morality, ethics and aesthetics in the so-called postmodern world. In the remainder of this chapter, I will cast this apparently improbable pairing of Mill and Rorty into a common frame and context.

According to Rorty, literary modernism responds to a crisis in the individual morality of Victorian liberalism (1980, 177f). In the nineteenth century, moral authority became torn between a scientific perspective it could not deny and a Christian perspective it could not give up. With the rise of “liberal secular morality,” “explicit and unmetaphysical secularists” such as “Feuerbach, Arnold, Mill, [and] Zola” accommodate the replacement of religious spirituality with the “relatively unironical” moralizing literature of “secular social hope and secular moral courage” characteristic of the Victorian

novel. Literature assumes a vast role in self-formation, orienting the moral subject by “connecting abstract precepts and ideals with particular occasions and lives” and serving as “the principal means of moral education, the place where the young can find self-descriptions” (1980, 179; cf. 1979, 168n.6). The novelistic narration of particular lives replaces classic archetypes with autobiography and *Bildungsroman*. Narrational ordering of circumstances and details of particular lives supply examples of how a self can negotiate the contingencies of modern life to achieve a meaningful order. The novel has since been a prime technique in moral self-formation (cf. 1989, 142n.2).

The apparent harmony of the Victorian subject, however, falls apart after the interventions of both Freud and Nietzsche. As Rorty sees it, it is the serenely pre-Freudian unified self that sustains the possibility of a “secular liberal morality”. Freud instigates a reflexive decentring of the self and a concomitant change in moral aims. The competing perspectives of Victorian self-stability and Freudian decentring create a peculiar kind of indeterminacy, provoking “a sense of the historicity, transience, and general chanciness of *all* vocabularies” (1980, 181). And this puts moral reflection in a state of virtual paralysis: “[N]either the religious nor the secular and liberal morality seems possible, and no third alternative has emerged” (1980, 180). Modernism, as it turns out, provides Rorty’s story with just such an alternative, illustrating in the process how art provides a *naturalist-ironist* model of moral deliberation designed to bring the self in line with the recognition of its contingency.

Relations among competing vocabularies or historical transitions from one to another leave philosophy with little to say, since philosophy on Rorty’s view is an attempt to escape time and chance by plumbing ahistorical truths. By abandoning the perceived need to convert contingency to necessity, “textualism” is held to be better suited for playing dissimilar texts and vocabularies against one another. At the same time, modernism in the arts expresses the basis for an ethics of creativity based on individuals’ powers of “redescription”. Rorty goes on to flesh out the aesthetic life as a distinctly private domain of the “ironist” aesthete, essentially insulated from the public and civic ethics of social life. Nonetheless, Rorty’s romantic and textual image of the self has a distinctive ethico-political

context in his later writings. It is this subsequent development of liberal utopianism in Rorty's assimilation of art into ethical life that raises the unique (and to my knowledge, unexplored) opportunity to bring Rorty into dialogue with his Victorian counterpart: namely, John Stuart Mill.

While it is John Dewey that is Rorty's most favoured icon of pragmatist authority, a liberal exemplar who championed both solidarity and aesthetic self-creation, J. S. Mill's early thought prefigures both Dewey and Rorty with his proposed a marriage of Benthamite and Coleridgean "half-truths": an alliance of liberalism's faith in progress with romanticism's insistence on the sanctity of the individual and its ethically grounded faith in continuing harmony with nature (despite the disruptions wrought by liberalism's instrumentalized and commodified progress). In the place of Coleridge and Bentham, Rorty offers us Foucault and Habermas (cf. 1989, 85). His claim that these are necessary if unwilling bedfellows proves somewhat unwittingly that we remain contemporaries of the Victorians more than we may be aware. It is as a Victorian "contemporary" that the unlikely voice of Mill prophetically anticipates current descriptions of our situation as resting between liberalism and romanticism, solidarity and self-creation.

Rorty sees Mill as one of those thinkers who is "honoured in the abstract but forgotten in the particular" (1989, 152). However, it is becoming more widely known that the young Mill gave traditional aesthetics a decisive statement of the "expression" theory of art. His great devotion to Wordsworth and Coleridge establishes Mill as one of the earliest prefigurations of the broadly Rortyan perspective: a fundamentally Enlightenment naturalist view that strives to accommodate the counter-thrust of romanticism. Through a series of false starts and transformations Mill can be seen as passing through a number of distinct stages that reflect different problems for his attempt to infuse moral life with a vitality he found in romantic lyrical poetry. To be sure, Mill does not appreciate Rorty's post-Freudian "sense of the historicity, transience, and general chanciness of *all* vocabularies," yet Mill does have a broad sense of tragic irony about his own rationalist ideals. His early entry into the English Romantics and lyrical poetry was possible precisely because he was able to hold up his ideals to ironic reservation. Just as Rorty takes Freud to have ironized secular liberal morality into

obsolescence only to have it reconstituted in a richer aestheticism, Mill's defiance of Bentham with Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the English Romantics leads him to a richer picture of moral life enhanced by lyric expressivism.

Mill's ethico-political vocabulary is, Rorty maintains, "pretty much the last word" on the liberal's sense of balance between individual expressions of freedom and intersubjective justice. Western social and political thought may have had its "last conceptual revolution" with Mill. There is no shortage of critics who take remarks like these as evidence for a profoundly conservative and intellectually pacifying streak running through Rorty's thought. Rorty thinks liberal society "already contains the institutions for its own improvement," which occurs when we make new "discoveries about who is made to suffer" (1989, 63). Note how Rorty's language of "suffering" suggests utility as the basis of moral obligation. But, of course, he does not want to stop here. Moral life will not reduce to utility or any other theoretical procedure. Indeed, the oft-invoked notion of the poetic creates an essential trope for Rorty's liberal utopia: a "poetic culture" consisting of both the "radically poetic character of individual lives" and "the merely poetic foundations of the 'we-consciousness' which lies behind our social institutions" (1989, 67-68). Mill is thus a "mere" poet (with emphasis on the "mere") who best articulated the "merely poetic foundations" behind liberal institutions, but who falls short of articulating the kind of radical individuality Rorty likes to think of as "really" poetic.

For Rorty, Mill's writings are socially useful, but Mill is not one who produces what Nabokov called "aesthetic bliss" (1989, 158). Even so, the early Mill remains both instructive and exemplary, a common reference to pragmatism's liberal hope and to the textualist ideal of self-perfection through art and creative activity. The structure of Mill's liberalism is remarkably similar to Rorty's, both in the common deployment of the notoriously unstable public/private distinction and in the common need to identify with romanticism as an inescapable feature of the modern perspective. Both share in Enlightenment materialist naturalism whose evident partiality as a basis undergirding moral life is then supplemented by appeals to what they identify as romantic notions of creativity. Romanticism allows both to ground their conviction that individual uniqueness is something like a moral duty. Moreover,

both evolve through similar stages of hesitancy and confidence concerning how their innovations with respect to art and moral reflection support their broader goals. The wedding of romantic doctrines to a fundamental naturalism is not seen in the Mill-Rorty perspective as conflicting in any fatal sense, but there are clear signs of strain in this marriage. Their respective manner of coping with these strains are surprisingly symmetrical.

In the end, neither Rorty nor Mill think that a satisfactory synthesis can be achieved to unify self-creation and intersubjective justice in *theory*. The threefold pressures of inescapable moral demands, the need for expressive autonomy and authenticity, and the social contexts in which authentic selves are expressed render the prospects of a comprehensive account dim indeed. Yet even if there can be no comprehensive theory of our expressive agency, both hold there are still practices of the self's expression from which we might learn. By sorting through some of the details in Mill's early thought on poetry and how he conceived of its nature and role in expressing and sustaining personhood, I hope to illustrate how.

By presenting a diptych consisting of Mill and Rorty, this thesis examines some aspects of the historical basis behind the contemporary effort to rethink the relationship between art and ethics with particular emphasis on the expressivist and stylistic dimensions of moral agency. Chapter One outlines the common critical task between Rorty and Mill that I hope will show them to be not merely analogous nineteenth and twentieth century counterparts, but "fellow citizens" that can be brought together in meaningful dialogue. The ensuing dialogue is necessarily partial and incomplete; and while it is certainly unlikely in many ways, such a dialogue is more, I hope, than simply a forced juxtaposition. My aim is to illustrate the emergence in the last century of the perspective Rorty inherits in order to better appreciate the difficulties he leaves unresolved. Rorty's effort to rethink pragmatist ethics in the romantic-aesthetic terms of private irony and the utilitarian terms of public solidarity is a twentieth-century continuation of Mill's project. This claim gives substance to Rorty's own assertion about the definitiveness of Mill's vocabulary as "the last word" on harmonizing private perfection and social justice. Yet standing between Mill and Rorty loom the figures of Freud and

Nietzsche. These are the intellectual sources guiding Rorty's view of the aesthetic life. They are beacons of postmodern enlightenment, guides to living without transcendent truth or reason. The question that persists is whether the postmodern rhetoric of irony and contingency adds to our understanding of the role art plays for moral reflection within this matrix of modernity.

In Chapter Two, I follow M.H. Abrams in taking Mill as exemplary of an "expressivist" view of poetry and art. Special attention is given to Mill's literary theory and its evolution into his mature moral and political thought. I examine Mill's view of the "anti-self-consciousness theory of Carlyle", the conflicting influence of Wordsworth and Tennyson on Mill's early literary theory, and the ramifications of Mill's efforts to locate the aesthetic dimension within his utilitarianism. Mill helps us appreciate the emergence early in the last century of individualism as a *category* of modern art. I draw from recent re-readings of Mill and examine what has been variously dubbed Mill's "theatrical" view of moral character and his individualist "ethics of style". I go on in Chapter Three to develop an argument that works elements of Mill's early poetic theory into his account of individuality in On Liberty. The result is a view of stylistic moral agency that defies the static antithesis between public and private spheres of interest central to Rorty's thought. It is on the topic of individual style and expressivist action, I argue, that Mill most forcefully speaks to the presumptions of Rorty's claims to the aesthetic life. Rorty's postmodern version of aestheticized ethics forms the topic of Chapter Four.

Despite the sophistication of Rorty's view relative to Mill's – that is, despite Rorty's Nietzschean ironism and Freudian naturalism, Rorty's pragmatist progress over his Victorian counterpart is marginal at best, if at all. Thus, I argue in Chapter Four that Rorty's sophisticated naturalism – what he calls "non-reductive naturalism" – and his decentred view of the self, do not fundamentally alter the issues that persist concerning the relation of literature to social and individual morality. The postmodern rhetoric of contingency, I conclude, simply fails to deliver on its promise to take the substantive issues concerning the collapse of the moral-aesthetic distinction and the expressivist dimension of moral agency to new ground. Irony and contingency remain continuous with the Victorian context which spawned these concepts as tempting coordinates for an ethics of the

aesthetic life; they do not reflect the sort of break Rorty envisions.

Grouping together Mill and Rorty, the Victorian and the Postmodern, may appear idiosyncratic and out of step with contemporary efforts to conjoin ethics and aesthetics, but the burden undertaken here is to draw out how the problems of establishing languages of value for art and morality, aesthetics and ethics, are at once both more topical and more historical than might be supposed. Thinkers such as Matthew Arnold, Lionel Trilling, and I.A. Richards all attempted to grapple with the ambiguities that modern art poses for modern moral life, the aspirations for individualism, and the demands of community (Stone 1997; Wellek 1968)². In this thesis I begin to pay tribute to the endurance of John Stuart Mill's thought.

I agree with Dan Burnstone that it is simply wrongheaded to take Mill as a prophet of postmodern extravagances; he is not (1997, 57). Yet, Mill speaks frankly and promisingly to Rorty's over-extended effort to aestheticize ethics while challenging the latter's conviction that his aspirations may be coherently realized without recourse to concepts like truth and reason. If so, sophisticated naturalism still leaves Rorty vulnerable to standard complaints against naturalist-based accounts of moral action such as Mill's. Thus, far from an uncritical defence of Mill against Rorty, I suggest that they both suffer from a common inability to acknowledge their own determinations. My central aim is to show that Mill challenges Rorty's historicist sense of where philosophy and modern art have taken moral reflection for modern subjects. The thesis concludes by returning to the place of art in ethical life.

²D. Stone (1997 ch.V), for example, connects Arnold's thought to early pragmatism and its revisionist perspective offered by Rorty. Matthew Arnold's attempt to work through his concept of "culture" with both the "love of private perfection" and the "affirmation of our ordinary selves", or Lionel Trilling's sense of tension between the jarring and unsettling insights of Proust, Joyce, Kafka, and Eliot (among others) and "the rationality of [his] political convictions" also chime with Rorty – in particular, his dictum that no philosophy or theory will synthesize the "private" goal of self-creation and perfection with the public one of social solidarity (1989, xiii-xiv). Similarly, Rorty's defence of I.A. Richard's non-cognitive theory of the self-sufficiency of poetry for moral reflection and "mere self-fashioning" as his chief complaint against cognitive critiques, also invites further inquiry (see Rorty, 1994b, 20). Indeed, there are filial lines that are now widely acknowledged linking Arnold and Pater of last century to Richards to Trilling in ours (Abrams, 1971) – and an interesting future project might consist in adding Rorty to this genealogy.

Chapter One: The last conceptual revolution

In this chapter, I explore the parallels between J. S. Mill and Richard Rorty mentioned in the introduction. A brief anticipation of my approach would be to say that the manner in which Mill refracts his Benthamite intellectual origins through the medium of romanticism is roughly the manner in which Mill's liberalism itself is later refracted through Freud and Nietzsche, the leading intellectual figures underpinning Rorty's view of modernism. Mill's intellectual transition from 18th century rationalism to 19th century romanticism culminates in his mature Victorian thought: a combination of the legislative concern of Bentham together with its universal application and indifference to the idiosyncrasies of the individual, and an insistence on the primacy of individual character typical of Wordsworthian and Coleridgean romanticism. These influences and aspirations are in deep tension with one another, a situation that recalls the most oft-repeated moral of Rorty's provocative Contingency, Irony, Solidarity : the claim that no theoretical perspective will harmonize the sets of tensions engendered by the attempt to combine a concern for private, romantic self-development and a concern for intersubjective justice and solidarity. Yet, as I argue, Rorty's account of the transition from 19th century romantic idealism through aesthetic modernism to the critical stance of 20th century "textualism" takes us no further ahead than the original Millian position. That position poses, but by no means solves, the dilemma of self- and other-regarding action set out in On Liberty. Is Rorty's postmodern alternative a progressive means of coping with this lack of moral-theoretic closure? Can textualism improve our ability to cope with the ambiguities of moral life that arise between the conflicting needs for expressive autonomy and individualistic self-development on the one hand, and on the other, the expressive unity (or 'solidarity') with a wider moral community? Mill's attempt to balance utility as a common currency of moral evaluation with an aesthetic concern for irreducible stylistic difference reveals a breathtaking effort to articulate an expressivist view of moral agency that aims to balance these moral and aesthetic-expressive demands. First, let us examine some key points that are shared by Mill and Rorty.

Rorty often invokes Mill to characterize pragmatism's common-sense appeal. More and more, we approach a point that acknowledges no better expression of political aspiration than Mill (1983, 3). This is because Mill's language has enjoyed wide circulation and has become a good part of our inherited normal discourse. Mill's social usefulness is a function of the lifelessness of his metaphors: the details of Mill's writings are largely buried under quotidian terms like "democracy", "culture", "liberty", "happiness", "freedom", and "utility". We need no fancier theoretical notions to produce positive social change: "My hunch," Rorty says with reference to Mill, "is that Western social and political thought may have had the last *conceptual* revolution it needs" (1989, 63). Liberal society already has the "institutions for its own improvement" and, therefore, there are no conceptual or institutional obstacles to moral progress. Moral progress is a matter of urging people to make use of mechanisms already available. There is no need, according to Rorty to reinvent the wheel with better theories of moral reality.

What is alive in Mill is thus honoured in the abstract (1989, 152). What is dead in Mill is his shallow rationalism, his dogmatic naturalism, and his scientism – his belief in a unified determination of "logical space". For his part, Mill believed that social change is change primarily in beliefs and opinions of individuals. This was a theme he brought to his System of Logic (1841) and as early as 1831, Mill insisted on a historicist sensibility in order to appreciate the present (cf. 1962, 28). Mill found support for this attitude in Carlyle and Coleridge, and this was certainly one point of contention with Bentham (1838). Moral progress for Mill required an understanding of the historical and social reasons for changes in belief and opinion; progress depends on their malleability. Like Rorty, Mill ascribes a primacy to understanding historical change as a requirement for moral and political progress. Such was his motive in conducting the seven-volume System: If a law of social change could be discerned, then we would better able to complete sociology and attend to the laws that govern social change with an aim to political and moral improvement.

This is at least the spirit in which those for whom philosophy and radical social theory are more than just means to "private perfection" continue their activity. In harmony with Mill, there

remains a deep conviction today that theory and philosophy can illuminate our practices and recommend ways by which we may be emancipated from their deficiencies. One difference here is Rorty's sound rejection of the importance accorded to social theory evident in Mill. Rorty wants to effect a replacement of social and philosophical theories with various forms of narrative art as the principal vehicles of moral progress (1989, xvi).

So while between Mill and Rorty a faith in liberal institutions appears undimmed, the means of triggering wider, more inclusive applications of those institutions differ considerably. The pragmatic role Rorty assigns to certain literary forms encompasses a wide spectrum of writing including ethnography, journalism, and especially novels. These forms address crucial matters of importance for the public sphere and are thus key triggers of moral reflection and motivation. We might contrast Rorty's upbeat assessment of the social role of certain forms of literature with Mill's more dismal picture of art and "the regeneration of the world". Mill writes:

...Verse is Art applied to the language of words; it is speech made musical; the most flexible and precise expression of thoughts and feelings, thrown into beautiful poems. Verse, therefore, I take to be eternal; but it ought, as well as every other attempt at public Art, to be suspended at the present time. In a militant age, when those who have thoughts and feelings to impress upon the world have a great deal of hard work to do, and very little time to do it in, and those who are to be impressed need to be told in the most direct and plainest way possible what those that address them are driving at – otherwise they will not listen – it is foppery to waste time in studying beauty of form in the conveyance of meaning. The shortest and straightest way is best. The regeneration of the world in its present stage is a matter of business, and it would be as rational to keep account or write invoices in verse as to attempt to do the work of human improvement in it (1962, 350).

This is a utilitarian preference concerning what form social sentimental manipulation should take toward "human improvement". Social impressions on this view ought to be made with simple, direct statements targeting those who are to be "impressed" and telling them plainly what they "need to be told". This might be read as a plea for criticism to abandon the study of works from the point of view of formal beauty and deal more with what the artist that addresses them is actually "driving at". The expedient critic would not waste time with a baroque interest in form, but rather get straight to the conveyance of meaning. Mill's taste for brevity and simplicity in meaning is an understandable proto-

analytic tendency, even if his impassioned way of putting things is not ideally clear itself. For it is not clear that the “shortest” route is always the “straightest”. But his general point is quite clear: work on poetry should be suspended, at least until the urgent “business of human reform” has gained sufficient ground. The required tools for much needed reform are already at hand: they do not need sophistication or further fine-tuning. Nor do we need to invent radically new ways of summarizing social reality. Urgent needs, Mill is saying, are staring us in the face. Mill’s claim, in short, is that art serves to divert our attention from real social and moral issues. The language of wild outsiders like Carlyle and Shelley is simply not suited to address the urgent need for social improvement. Mill is decidedly impatient with what does not get to the point of human improvement head-on, with activity that privileges originality over goals, purposes, and results. Poetry, beauty, form: these are backgrounded in favour the straight talk of “work” and “business”. We might surmise that Mill would have soundly objected to the lengthy novelistic form of, say, Dickens, even though the latter was as moved as Mill by the urgent needs for social reform.

As a view of the social role of art, this is dismal to say the least. It is perhaps a consequence of taking art to be a sacrosanct withdrawal from what Mill referred to as the “vulgar, outward and everyday world”. Here, art is privatized, made the domain of individuals on their own time. An important homology between Mill and Rorty originates at this point. Both share the reformist sense of importance in getting straight to the point in addressing public matters concerning social progress. It is the valuation of the forms that are to perform this role of addressing that have changed. Everything Mill says above about public Art captures Rorty’s attitude about theory. And the latter’s rejection of theory as a hindrance to social progress brings about his parallel claim that it is the novelist, not the radical theorist, that will best accomplish the work of human improvement. Theorists, according to Rorty, insist that we need to keep polishing our linguistic tools for better use. Rorty thinks we should spend less time refining old language or creating new and spend more time with the practical descriptive political language already available. Literary art, then, is not a quest for a new political or moral language, but specializes instead in moral psychology – the triggering of

empathy and action coordinated around our already adequate political and moral language of analysis. The role of literary art for individual morality is, as we shall see, quite another story.

Similarly, Rorty shares the attitude witnessed above in Mill's diary that the public sphere of interest ought to be "untheoretical and simpleminded" in style (cf. 1989, 121). Political discourse needs to be conducted in plain, simple terms. Mill's concern that social progress may be side-tracked and distracted by 'public Art' is echoed in Richard Rorty's anti-theory polemic. Theory for Rorty, like art for Mill, is not useful for provoking social progress. A Rortyan liberal future hinges on individuals' ability to privatize theories and poetic visions. He sums up: "one of the most important changes for the better in recent centuries is our increasing willingness to see our poets as edifying examples of how to be mere human self-fashioners, rather than as people who open us up to something other than themselves, other than human" (1994a, 20). This poetic perspective on the human condition is valuable but it cannot advance social and political goals. Poetry, and its chief devices – irony and metaphor – are intrinsically private (1989, 87).

Rorty often invokes "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" to describe the difference in attitude between progressive "political" and self-absorbed philosophical views. Politically minded thinkers such as Dewey affirm the greatest happiness principle while ascetic theorists such as Heidegger are characteristically indifferent to this maxim as they carry out their obsessive researches. Pragmatism takes this detached slogan as indicating the "priority of democracy over philosophy", the direction of socially and politically-minded philosophy. A minimalist ethic captured in simple slogans will not gratify the deep need of thinkers like Heidegger who want to see philosophy instead as a series of sublime "poetic achievements" (1991b, 17). The poetic perspective on post-foundationalist philosophy raises a concern for Rorty that "our private obsessions, our private fantasies of purity, novelty, and autonomy" will become proffered as "something larger than ourselves, ... something hidden and underlying which secretly determines the course of human affairs" (1991b, 74). The confusion of the private sphere of interest, where redescription is of great value, with the public sphere constitutes a totalitarian threat. Instead, Rorty thinks poetry and radically innovative language

facilitates “mere human self-fashioning”, where radical innovation is limited to the sphere of private interest.

The crux of Rorty’s recent proposals is to split the difference between Heideggerean-poetic and Millian-pragmatic orientations by prioritizing the poetic self-redescription in the private sphere of interest, while accepting the pragmatist emphasis on social utility insofar as public interests are concerned. Of course, this presupposes a distinction between public and private that is hard to sustain, as Nancy Fraser for one has argued (1990). Nonetheless, Rorty finds support for this proposal in the liberal tradition, particularly in Mill. “J.S. Mill’s suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people’s lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word” (1989, 63). Rorty’s “hunch” is that philosophical theories of truth or deep underlying structures will hinder rather than help progress. Indeed, the overriding theme of Rorty’s recent work is the ironic lesson that moral ideals – aspirations to do and be good – can themselves become the source of moral failure, cruelty, and tragedy. Given this atmosphere of tragic irony in moral life, moral and political progress is best attained by making better use of mechanisms already in place.

The apparent ambiguity about the function of art in liberal culture becomes clarified once we recall the way Rorty maps out that culture. While poetry and theory are poorly suited for advancing social and moral progress, Rorty believes literature can do this by promoting a genuine sense of human solidarity. Specifically, it is novelists such as Orwell and Nabokov who succeed in awakening us to the cruelty of particular social practices and individual attitudes. Thus, a truly liberal culture would balance the private, individual freedom of the ironic philosophical perspective with the public project of human solidarity as it is engendered through the insights and sensibilities of great writers.

Social progress is threatened, according to Rorty, in a culture that confuses private and public morality in persisting with vain attempts to unite them (1989, 68). Liberal institutions survive by keeping public discourse as simple and direct as possible (1989, 121). Sophistication and radical linguistic innovation ought to be restricted to projects of self-creation. These coordinates harken back

to the passage from Mill: for public-minded progress, “the shortest and straightest way is best”. If public Art subverts that goal, then art has value in a “militant age”, if at all, in its serving private purposes.

One, but certainly not the only, point of indeterminacy in Rorty’s recent thought lies between “poetic” self-fashioning as the happy result of utopia gained, and the novel as the premier genre of democracy, “the genre most closely associated with the struggle for freedom and equality” (1991b, 68). The “poetic” has a shifting, unsteady place – between a self-conscious activity of “writing” against or within a canonical set of references and poems – and a form of experience associated with self-conscious contingency.

“[L]iterary interest,” Rorty claims, “will always be parasitic on moral interest. In particular, you cannot create a memorable character without thereby making a suggestion about how your reader should act” (1989, 167). The “merely poetic” nature of self-fashioning invokes his aestheticized ethic of private perfection – and the mark of a “just and free society” is one in which its citizens may be “as privatistic, ‘irrationalist,’ and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time”, so long as they are not, as Mill insisted, causing harm to others or squandering scarce resources or otherwise making nuisances of themselves (Rorty, 1989, xiv). Literature, by contrast, carries a moral message. Novels and memorable characters are meant to be instructive, didactic. They convey the insights and sensibilities of “great writers”, fostering greater solidarity. Thus, Rorty continues in a very old pragmatist tradition on the nature of art, known by its purposes, and defined long ago by Sir Philip Sidney: “to teach and delight”.

How tenable is this division between didactic, socially responsible literature, and ‘irrationalistic’ private poetic aestheticism? And, given the fairly standard and straightforward conception of the role of art in moral reflection, how does Rorty’s proposal differ or compare to earlier models? Rorty clearly privileges the aestheticized private ethic as giving real content to life, while liberalism merely provides the context in which such an ethic can flourish. The private life of the liberal aesthete is one of “private perfection” and “self-creation,” a life encouraged by the “desire to

enlarge oneself,” “the desire to embrace more and more possibilities” and escape the limitations of “inherited descriptions” (1991b, 154-55). The good life is expressed by “the aesthetic search for novel experiences and novel language” (1991b, 159; 1989, xiv, 29). Where does this stand in comparison to standard conceptions of moral obligation?

As Bernard Williams, Charles Taylor and others have argued, moral obligation is derived by a prior procedure which is then made to apply to all respects concerning how one should live, what one should do, and what projects one ought to undertake. It is widely acknowledged that the classic philosophical vocabularies of utility and duty fail to capture the whole of moral life. Indeed, the notion of “obligation”, while inescapable (according to Williams), is misunderstood if it is placed at the core of moral life or made to overrule in every instance other considerations arising in the course of life. Non-obligational choices, forms of devotion to friends and family, style, or aesthetic preferences are just a few of the many factors that often conflict with obligations deriving from notions of duty or utility. Demoting moral obligation to merely one factor in ethical orientation is certainly a step Rorty has taken in describing a good life as one in which deliberation should be more like an aesthetic judgement than a universally binding procedural deduction.

Just as standard moral theory aims for a core vocabulary that can provide an anchor for coping with conflictual differences in moral life, the standard conceptions of modern literature similarly feed into an ideology of “right” and “proper” conduct. In particular, Victorian literature, especially the novel, depicts characters struggling within easily identifiable contexts, succeeding or failing to become both fully moral and thereby fully actualized. Victorian literature is moral testimony. Yet, “[c]an anybody write as George Eliot or Henry James wrote once they have a Freudian vocabulary in the back of their minds?”, Rorty asks (1980, 179). Our literature will “never be the same” after Freud (179).

Rorty’s advocacy of the aesthetic life as the prime means of ethical orientation builds on his conviction that traditional moral theory and the Victorian sense of “memorable” characters as morally-centered must be rejected on account of the presumption of a unified, or ‘meta’-self that all moral

agents supposedly possess as a common essence. Victorian literature (especially the novel) suffers a loss in credibility where, after Freud, it is increasingly difficult to believe in the integrity of ordinary characters and their presumed centeredness. The moral value built up and invested into literature quickly evaporates as Freud's decentering of the self and Nietzsche's perspectivism gain increasing attention. (Joyce sardonically described himself and other early modernists as "Jung and Freudened"). Rorty interprets the Freudian decentering, multiplication, and randomization of the self as having "opened up new possibilities for the aesthetic life" as the fulcrum of ethical existence (1991b, 155).

Instead of "ordinary" moral characters grappling with traditional moral temptations, Rorty advocates that we see ourselves as products of random contingencies, concluding that we must create ourselves by self-enriching aesthetic redescription. The rejection of the "Platonic" search for "purity" leads to an affirmation of "self-enlargement," "self-enrichment," and "self-creation". Embracing the image of the self as a "centerless web of historically conditioned beliefs and desires" implies giving up all attempts to speak of enduring values existing within or outside the self as a waste of time. Those who best master these demands are represented by the character types of the "strong-poet," and the "curious ironist". If values disappear from idealist Victorian "literature", they will later re-emerge in the aggressive self-enlarging artist.

Rorty justifies Millian-like "experiments in living"³ and a private aestheticism as the expression of freedom defined as "the recognition of contingency" (1989, 46). Private aestheticism, in turn, is driven by "irony", once the favoured literary instrument of classic rhetoricians and (Schlegelian) romantics, now made into the chief moral instrument of the new, disenchanted thinker. The "ironic liberal" employs "continuous and radical" irony so as to arrive at the "sufficiently

³This is Mill's phrase in "On Liberty," in Chapter III (1962, 185), where he adds that such experiments cultivate the ground on which "individuality should assert itself". Rorty's belief in "individual liberation" is wedded to his faith in liberal democracy as affording "experiments in cooperation" (1991a, 196). The communitarian, "cooperative" thrust and the individualist streak remain somewhat interchangeable for Rorty, thereby making "living" an ambiguous process lying somewhere between normal, communal discourse and transgressive, or revolutionary individualising, novel uses of language. He takes us, as I will argue, roughly back to Mill but unlike Mill, Rorty has no "arguments" to back up his various different conceptions of how these are to be brought into manageable or optimal balance.

historicist and nominalist” attitude required to realize the contingency of one’s deepest convictions. Together, contingency and irony lead Rorty to celebrate an avant-gardist production, exemplified in such luminaries as Michel Foucault. Rigorous individualism and a technical regimen of the “mechanization of moral motivation” underpin Rorty’s aestheticized ethos. The “de-humanization of the springs of action” and the “mechanization” of moral motivation amplifies the sense of contingency, conceived as such, *sui generis*, pure form. Rorty urges the view that this formalistic, naturalistic, and decentred view of the self enhances the “aesthetic life” of modern subjectivity, providing as well a model of moral reflection. This is roughly the context in which Rorty makes his claim to dispense with the “moral-aesthetic distinction” (1989, 141).

However, recent scholars such as Michael Levenson, Roger Shattuck, Meyer Abrams, and Sanford Schwartz as well as Rorty’s philosophical peer, Charles Taylor, have all noted persistent ambiguities in early (Nietzschean/Freudian) modernism. One important conflict is evident between the desire for autonomy of form in art – aiming to render its best manifestations pointless for moral reflection – and the claim that the root source and justification for art is individual expression.

This observation helps account for the evident battles in theory and criticism between ‘artist’ and ‘work’ as the decisive grounding for value. (Now, the locus of value has shifted fully to the reader, replacing the romantic preoccupation with the author as the source of creative power). The focus on form seems to overturn some conventional associations of art and value, while reinforcing others. For example, one key claim of aesthetic modernism consists in remapping art by locating its value in the work’s technical properties; art is no longer obliged to rest its technical experiments on the grounds of a greater realism. At the same time, modernism’s movement away from empathetic representational depictions and toward an art of abstraction plays straight into the myth of art’s autonomy and the presumed purity of great works.

Because some dominant threads of modernism abandon the aim of weaving ontological anthropocentricity into its art – that is, casting morally self-centring value into its manifestations –

philosophy is somewhat pressed to think of what takes its place.⁴ Indeed, a central question lingers around what modernist works do with older notions of human value. Of course, modernism is complex and multifaceted; no one single analysis will cover its sweeping range. The particular aspect of the modernist self-understanding that stakes itself on the claim of the pointlessness of art for moral reflection is in one important sense strangely counter-intuitive: Art often aspires to be morally-orienting; and we often say that we learn from art, or that it inspires, makes us take note of certain aspects of the world that are usually made recessive by entrenched modes of perception. Even its most abstract manifestations strive to amplify aspects of the world (necessities, possibilities, impossibilities, properties, actions, and kinds of states of affairs) that usually escape ordinary perception. All of this is obvious once stated. This is the substance of the first thesis set out in the introduction: the romantic view of the aesthetic as source of moral education and art as lending power to our self-understanding and practical action.

On the other hand, as T.E.Hulme fiercely put it on behalf of a host of early modernists, art has (or should have) nothing to do with human/ist concerns. This brings out that thread in modernism that adopts the second of our two theses on an aesthetic moral orientation. For Hulme, art does not bring human beings into a more intense, fuller relation to the world as such. The world that art reveals is not, or should not be, the romantic one in which we take delight in our naturally good talents for creativity and imagination. For Hulme, this anthropological myth must be rejected, along with all romantic myths, in favour of a view of humans as forever cut off from the world, a world which thus stands to us as an awesome, yet “anti-vital” structure. We are creatures of deficiency and need to return to Classicist order and discipline so that “something good might be gotten out of [us]”. Art does not disclose anything but this single moral, so it really is pointless for moral reflection. It is simply wrong, not to mention wimpish, to use art as a means of channelling humanist sympathies and

⁴ Proposals for modern, post-anthropocentric art include: Wittgenstein’s *Tractarian* sense of silent “mystical awe”, G.E. Moore’s ethic of pursuing beauty in people and things, A.J. Ayer’s decomposition of aesthetically conditioned propositions into *pseudo-concepts* and I. A. Richards’ view of poetry as self-sufficient for the self-interpretive project of individual emotional characterization, but requiring none of the cognitive commitments of formerly theistic or secularized liberal moralities.

emotions. A striking example that nicely illustrates Hulme's view is given by his one-time disciple, T. S. Eliot, in "Portrait of a Lady".

"Portrait of a Lady" exhibits many of the attributes Rorty attaches to the novel genre. It confronts the themes of cruelty and aesthetic bliss that Rorty draws out through Nabokov (1989, ch.7). The poem is a narrative of a young man who is an artist and describes his awkward relationship with a sentimental older woman. The poem reveals Eliot in "dramatic monologue". It is rich in detail and creates two highly memorable characters. However, the poem departs from Rorty's equation linking the memorableness of literary characters and the recommendations they are thought to offer for practical action: Eliot does not give us any concrete recommendation for how to act. Indeed the point of the poem seems to be just this region of indeterminacy. A central theme of the poem is a failure or avoidance of communication and recognition, an avoidance of friendship and love. Eliot manages to depict both of the opposing theses that introduced our topic: the older woman holds to a rather overdone romantic view of art's ability to educate, refine, and heighten life; Eliot, the young and promising modernist, despises this view. The woman listens to the romantic Chopin and twirls the stem of a lilac, like a dowser's wand, to "Transmit the Preludes". She talks of Chopin's soul while he muses privately that "hair and fingertips" conduct and channel Chopin's music. She surrounds herself with predictable symbols of bourgeois beauty; he would rather be reading comics and the sporting pages in the park.

Eliot, despite his muted contempt for his older friend, nevertheless shares with her a compulsion to art. Eliot is, after all, an aspiring artist – made evident in the poem – and he turns to poetic portraiture to express their failure to communicate candidly. Yet the narrator – the artist who in fact is creating the portraiture – has, for all his remarkable and memorable concreteness, nothing in the way of recommendations for how his readers might act. Richard Schusterman remarks that Eliot's narrator remains "morally savage by being aesthetically refined" (Schusterman, 1988, 165; cf. Taylor, 1989, 459). He is incapable of assuming a stance of reciprocal caring and mutual recognition in his relation with this older, "dying" lady on account of his superior aesthetic sense. Her artificial

moral feelings, nourished on Chopin and exotic flowers, constitute a polemic within the poem against the romantic view of aesthetic education. The poet-narrator even finds himself smiling at the event of her death as the poem winds down, the death of a life propped up on the illusion of “high art” and deep feeling. The modernist is wiser than this; as the “lady” dies, so does any connection between art and moral feeling. Indeed, this is the moral the poem attempts to communicate, shrouded in the irony of its self-designation as a “portrait”, a form clearly belonging to the tradition of high art the young Eliot mocks.

There is much that could be said about modern irony, then, in Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady”. But it is not clear that it is a Freudian vocabulary rather than a contempt for bourgeois values and the sense of refined aesthetic-moral feeling, that moves Eliot. Such contempt, rather than an awareness of the complexities of the unconscious, moves the narrator to escape the artificial setting of his lady’s world to go off to the park and read comics and news scandals. This poem challenges Rorty’s critical terms, since it is at once true that the poem has much to feed moral reflection, yet it is not at all clear how to be pragmatic about its moral, not clear how it is relevant to our sense of what we should do with ourselves. There is something very unpragmatic about this poem, despite its ability to provoke moral reflection. It manages to depict a tragic result of the narrator’s manner of screening his private thoughts from his public demeanor, challenging the ease with which Rorty upholds that distinction. As I argue in the next chapter, Tennyson’s “Mariana” manages to confound the critical terms Rorty sets out for us in strangely similar ways as Eliot’s “Portrait”, despite all their evident surface differences (cf. Langbaum 1963, 91-93).

The ironic is the chief characteristic Rorty finds basic to modernism. Formerly a favoured device among rhetoricians and poets, irony is now a kind of moral aim in itself for Rorty. Indeed, irony is dislodged from its regional status in figurative writing and made the core of free self-determination. Irony works by asserting the self’s excess beyond any adventitious or contingent content. To be free is to be perpetually more than any descriptive content. The self’s freedom is asserted by its disengagement from content, by its “continual and radical” negation of all descriptions

and all vocabularies by which the self situates itself among others. Irony is in Rorty's hands a kind of wheel that turns though nothing in particular, yet everything and anything whatever, moves it. It is a wheel for which any gear will suffice to turn it. We will have more to say about this in the final chapter.

There is, however, something problematic about Rorty's reduction of modernism in all its rich variety to instances of irony. On the one hand, Rorty wants to say with common sense that art does provide a channel for moral feeling, can heighten our sense of the "suffering of others", or galvanize our sympathies to unexplored terrain. On the other hand, a thorough-going aesthetic education can leave one with a smug sense of superiority, an uncaring attitude toward those other suckers who are moved by standard emotions and traditional moral impulses. Consider Rorty's claim:

The opposite of irony is common sense. ... [...] ... Ironism ... results from awareness of the power of redescription. But most people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms – taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless (1989, 74; 89. cf.150, 152).

The worry Rorty addresses concerns the condemnation of the ironist as needlessly rebellious and disruptive (cf. Mill, 1962, 186). People don't like to be redescribed (especially in unflattering terms); things are fine as they are. The activity of redescription is self-empowering; but it can also lead to the disempowerment of those redescribed. This, in turn, becomes a worry for Rorty, since the hallmark of a free healthy society is one in which irony is a value held in common among its individual citizens. Irony is essentially private and individual, not public and social; it is a "common selfish hope" rather than an objectively and intersubjectively binding truth. Straightlaced liberal metaphysicians require only what Mill called "ape-like imitation", not perpetual and self-wrought irony and redescription (1962, 187). Both Mill and Rorty look upon the herd-like as vainly taking refuge in necessities, pasting over their own inability for thought and self-determination with a sedated satisfaction with things "as they are now" (1962, 185).

Improbably, Rorty states that some people are not ironists, those “people who have never had any doubts about the final vocabulary they employ” (1989, 144). Mill expressed this problem in On Liberty, when he despaired for the “indifference of persons in general to the end itself [of individual liberty]... the evil is, that individual spontaneity is hardly recognized by the common modes of thinking as having any intrinsic worth” (1962, 185). This is for Mill the most significant obstacle to progress – the unwillingness of individuals to hold their beliefs up to scrutiny and critical examination.

The antidote for Mill, and the analogue to Rorty’s irony, was a perpetual process of a skilful and doubt-inducing devil’s advocacy regarding opinion and belief, or what Rorty calls “final vocabularies” (1962, 164). In her Memories of Old Friends, Caroline Fox describes On Liberty as “... so clear, and calm, and cold: He lays it on one as a tremendous duty to get one’s self well contradicted, and admit always a devil’s advocate into the presence of your dearest, most sacred truths, as they are apt to grow windy and worthless without such tests, if indeed they can stand the shock of argument at all” (quoted in Skorupski, 337). There is a tremendous difference, however, in what they take the point of this to be. Mill argued that skilful devil’s advocacy was healthy for the public realm and the ideal of a society of fully and variously developed participants. Rorty’s irony, as we have seen, is “inherently private”. Not only is Rorty’s irony a metaphorical re-tooling of the meaning of freedom – the literalised meaning of Mill’s that continues to organize liberal public discourse – but Rorty’s advocacy of irony in private moral reflection can be critically contrasted against Mill’s defence of freedom in On Liberty. The following chapters will chart Mill’s view of poetic language and suggest how that discourse merges with his insistence in On Liberty on experiment, idiosyncrasy, and individual difference. However, Mill’s thought finds a way of resisting the univocal alignment of individuality with narrowly personal uniqueness and idiosyncrasy. Whereas for Rorty, linguistic style is the means of self-transformation and perfection in private moral life, Mill’s sense of moral agency breaks the static antithesis of private and public by making individual style, under the right conditions, the embodiment of desired moral traits that have a tangible life beyond the narrowly personal and the personally peculiar.

On Liberty is one of the great statements on modern individualism. There, Mill rightly insists that individualism requires that a life be chosen and not merely given: “If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself but because it is his own mode” (1858, v.X, p.x; 1962, 197). The defence of individuality as one of the “elements of well-being” brings together two powerful strands in Mill’s thought. He defends the negative enlightenment conception of liberty as freedom from interference precisely in terms of the positive romantic conception of self-realization.

Mill emphasizes the subjective basis of personal commitment and implies that in the end, a choice has worth and value not because it amounts to an objective discovery, but because it has the quality and structure of being “right for me”. Mill is acutely sensitive to the imperative for self-creation as it becomes ever more firmly implanted with the rise of romantic ideals of the sanctity of the individual. In such a culture, a sense of inwardness predominates. The self is seen as bound up within stylized practices, “modes” of “laying out existence”; and it is also understood as having various possibilities of expressing itself. Both a fact of modern cultural life and a source of deep value, autonomy and the expression of subjectivity are among our most cherished values.

A qualitative contrast can be drawn between a life of self-creation through expression and the life of conformity to convention. Mill’s notion of character held up the former as incomparably more central to the life worth living than conformism (1962, 186; 189). Yet, at the same time, and as countless critics have remarked, Mill’s mature utilitarianism takes it as a foregone conclusion that, at bottom, human agency is governed by nothing more than an amoral egoism rooted in self-interest. The romantic notion of our unity with nature and humankind as the subject of interesting and morally-orienting expression of feeling is abandoned in favour of a neutral doctrine of our amoral nature.

The sanctity of the individual is clearly enshrined in On Liberty published in 1859, but its evolution in Mill’s early thought from Romantic doctrines of expression are less widely understood. Mill’s early thought – taken up in detail in the next chapter – reflects a concern for what he felt was the expressive deadness of eighteenth-century utilitarian rationality. His work through the early 1830’s

contains intimations of a unique kind of engagement with language and self. Yet this creates some important tensions (symbolic, I would claim, of modernity in general) between Mill's philosophical adherence to utility and his practical recognition of divergent expressivist values, first among them the need for autonomy and self-creation.

While there are passages in Mill's works, such as his diary entry quoted earlier, that show leanings toward a rejection of his youthful venture into romantic philosophy and poetry, we should not read them as final. Representations of Mill's thought naturally, and not always self-consciously, adopt the Victorian trope of progress following Mill's own autobiographical narrative of self-development. As a result, Mill's early writings on art are not deemed in any sense central to his thought and his philosophical legacy is not taken to include philosophical aesthetics. Although On Liberty (published in 1859) makes cautiously suggestive analogies between works of art and strong individualistic character, its evolution from romantic doctrines of expression is not regarded as important or illuminating. However, it is best not to assume that the young Mill arrived at a definitive view on expression and its relation to individual character and morality, beauty and social responsibility, only to reject it. Rather, the young Mill is best read as holding in creative tension a number of elements of modern expressivism, tensions moreover that persist in his later work. Mill can be read as working through issues that will remain central, so I claim, to his later thought on ethics and liberty. Expressivism in art and life raises philosophical themes that are not confined to his early essays. Indeed, the variety of uncertainties in his thought continues to speak frankly to contemporary philosophical discourses aiming to conjoin ethics and aesthetics.⁵

⁵The inevitably biographical nature of any examination of Mill's philosophy, especially his early literary theory, should already indicate a bias for supposing that Mill naturally evolves into a fitter, more coherent picture in his mature thought, for example, in On Utilitarianism and On Liberty. After his System of Logic (7 vols., 1841), Mill made no further attempt to work out his poetic theory, but there is little to show that Mill had actually resolved or settled any of the issues we are now canvassing. As systematic as he was, Mill's insights over his life are not exactly "systematic". None of the problems raised in our analysis disappear altogether in these later works, and the precise issue of Mill's individualism is made more perspicuous if we rethink the matter in terms of conflicting aesthetic imperatives that stood as the real problems of his early essays. Moreover, the fact that Mill's own autobiography concisely underlines his early insights within his own narrative of self-development makes it tempting to think that the absence of a concern for poetry in the later Mill meant that he had not just

Chapter Two: J.S. Mill, Expressivism, Authenticity, and Aesthetic Individualism.

Mill recalls in his Autobiography how, “in a dull state of nerves,” he considered his received Benthamite radicalism and asked: “Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?” Realizing his answer, “No!”, he recalls, “my heart sank ... I seemed to have nothing to live for.” (Mill, v.I, 137).⁶ In the throes of his youthful “crisis” Mill managed to call into doubt his most cherished final vocabulary, turning the general happiness principle into its stark, depressing opposite. Recovering from his “dull state”, Mill sought to work out a new foundation for utilitarianism. As famously recounted in Chapter V of his Autobiography, Mill’s eventual recovery from despair was to a significant degree attributed to his discovery of the English Romantic poets. From Wordsworth, Mill claimed that poetry is “the expression and uttering forth of feeling.” (v.I, 348). Mill’s concise formulation expresses a fundamental distinction between poetry and “mere eloquence”:

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling. But if we may be excused the seeming affection of the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself forth to other minds, courting their sympathy, or

articulated a problem of modern “poetic” individualism but had also somehow solved it, and thus had no need to give it further thought. Mill’s account of his recovery from his youthful despair makes it nearly irresistible to adopt a “progressivist” model of all of Mill’s thought. But this assumption is not a given.

⁶All references to Mill are indexed to The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, general editor John M. Robson, 33 vols. (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1963-1991). All quotations from the collected works are identified by volume and page number. All other quotations cite collections in Warnock (1962) and Schneewind (1965). The key sources for Mill’s early critical theory are his unrevised articles, “What is Poetry” (i) and “The Two Kinds of Poetry” (ii) both published in 1833. These two essays were later combined in a single piece entitled “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties” which appeared in the first volume of Mill’s Dissertations and Discussions (1859, 2vols.). References made to the original and unrevised essays cite Mill’s Essays on Literature and Society, ed. J. B. Schneewind (New York: Collier, 1965) (i) pp.102-117; (ii) pp.117-130; (iii) “Tennyson’s Poems”, pp. 132-147.

endeavouring to influence their belief, or to move them to passion or to action (v.I, 348).

From our contemporary perspective, these remarks come across as rather quaint, suggesting an almost Cartesian-like self-transparency. Thought and emotion “exist” in the “mind” of the poet, and are given stylised expression in “symbols” that “represent” these states. Pure and immediate, such symbols are made in private, solitary contexts – a self-“confession”. Mill’s language makes it tempting to attribute an antiquated and unbelievable notion of “representation” into his view of poetic expression. His seemingly naive fixation on the “emotional state of mind” of the artist could be taken as ready evidence of the influence of early romantic (and nearly elegiac) sentimentalism, typical of the German Storm and Stress movement which exerted considerable influence on Mill. Most philosophers today are highly suspicious of any talk of “the nature of poetry,” or the “essence of the poetic temperament,” and Mill’s style here might be taken as sufficient grounds for dismissing this early stage in his thought altogether. That judgement would be over-hasty, however. Mill’s notion of expression is not exactly a simple one; and given the myriad of distinctions he develops, it is of some importance to appreciate Mill’s attempt to rethink art in expressivist terms.⁷

In the ‘Preface’ to the Lyrical Ballads (1798, 1800), Wordsworth twice claims that “poetry is the spontaneous overflow of feelings” and this statement is the cornerstone of Mill’s own theory. Poetry is *not* distinguished from science or prose, nor is it distinguished by genre. For Mill, poetry as emotive expression inheres in non-literary arts as well – in music, painting, architecture, as well as in other forms of verse and prose such as the novel. (1965i, 110-116). Even in the ordinary, non-artistic expression of emotion, or perhaps most of all there, Mill allows for the possibility of “genuine poetry”: “One may write genuine poetry, and not be a poet; for whosoever writes out truly any one

⁷The residual mimetic metaphors of “representation” need not be taken in a traditional “mirror of nature” sense – at least in the sense that the combined force of Aristotelian and eighteenth century classicism made as the dominant image of high art. Poetic symbols are expressed; and yet, while they are said by Mill to “represent” the “state of mind” of the artist, their mimetic fidelity is not a sign of the artist’s skill or choosing any more than spontaneous emotion and feeling are skilfully chosen or crafted. As we shall see, the development Mill undergoes led him to claim that poetry did not in fact interfere with “correct” description; rather, it was merely an alternative form of representation (1965i, 116).

human feeling, writes poetry. All persons, even the most imaginative, in moments of strong emotion, speak poetry..." (1965ii, 118). Mill then reorders the poetic genres on the basis of the kinds of feeling expressed, placing lyric as the form of spontaneously expressed feeling.

On related grounds, Mill proposes a fundamental distinction between "poets by nature" and "poets by culture". As he draws this distinction, Mill criticizes Wordsworth for, of all things, not being sufficiently Wordsworthian.⁸ Mill felt that Wordsworth over-intellectualized his compositions, giving too much weight to restraint and judgement. Conscious stylistic choice afforded by intellectual culture resulted in a forced style, a flattening of the natural spontaneity which, undistorted, was to simply body itself forth in feeling ("overflow", as Wordsworth himself put it), uncoerced by ratiocination. In contrast, Mill looked on Shelley as a "natural poet" and praised his "unrepressed ... exuberance of imagery". Wordsworth struck Mill instead as a poet "by culture" whom for Mill unduly "economized" his imagery (1965ii, 124-5). Mill's initial literary theory, then, expounds a view he considered genuinely "Wordsworthian".

On such a view, Mill contends that "pure" experience of the poetic, as self-directed expression of emotion, should constitute the "end in itself" of art and artistic practice. He draws the distinction between poetry and eloquence we saw above: "When the act of utterance is not an end in itself, but as a means to an end," for example, the desire to make "an impression on another mind ... to work upon the belief, or the will of another," then the utterance is not pure poetry, but "mere eloquence" (I, 349). As soon as a public effect is "calculated" or anticipated, the intrinsic *self*-directed nature of unreflected expression becomes "economized" and worked over into excessive, self-defeating "contemplation". "Narrative," "description," "incident" are seen by Mill as mere technical devices deployed for an audience's gratification, but which cheapen the purity of the work/poem itself (v.I, 347-8). "All poetry is the nature of soliloquy," for Mill, and "accordingly, is the natural fruit of solitude and meditation; eloquence, of intercourse with the world" (v.I, 349). Private soliloquy is closed off from the consensus-forming resources necessary for utilitarianism to work; expressive needs can be optimally

⁸See also Mill's letter to John Sterling of 1831 (1965, p.79f).

satisfied only while marking them off from their *search* for public contexts:

But when [the poet] turns around and addresses himself to another person; when the act of utterance is not itself the end, but a means to an end – viz., by the feelings he himself expresses to work upon the feelings, or upon the belief or will of another – when the expression of his emotions or of his thoughts, tinged by his emotions is also tinged by that purpose, by that desire of making an impression upon another mind, then it ceases to be poetry, and becomes eloquence (v.I, 349).

Noteworthy here is the strikingly anti-utilitarian stance these remarks reflect. Mill's Wordsworthian theory reveals his desire to protest against what he perceived to be an unnecessarily harsh and extreme evaluation of poetry along the pragmatic and utilitarian lines of classic utilitarian rationalism. In his Autobiography, Mill recounts how Bentham shared with earlier philosophers a distrust of rhetoric as a method for marshalling the passions against reason, a view which led to a distrust of all literary uses of language. Bentham accepted the view, typical of eighteenth-century rationalism, that art was conscientiously directed to an audience by mimetic and pragmatic means. Art represents things in the world they mirror (as in the reigning Aristotelian view that "Art holds a mirror up to nature"), while works also influence their audiences pragmatically (as with Sir Philip Sidney's claim that art aims to "teach and delight").

The basic neo-classical frame of reference held that language is the "dress" of thought: figurative expressions are the "ornaments" of language (Abrams 1971, 111-112). Bentham's attitude is a response to 18th century poetry seen in terms of such characteristic rhetorical devices as "narrative," "imagination," "personification," and "figuration". Such "poetic figuration" could be taken, as indeed Bentham did, as always a "misrepresentation" of truth. Bentham held all things figurative in suspicion and denounced poetry's special status on account of the false claims represented in its imagery. Rocks and trees are not (in a relevant sense) alive, and Bentham felt it irresponsible to intimate poetically that they were, even in a figurative sense. On the other hand, taking utility as poetry's warrant, Bentham notoriously trivialized the aims of poetry. Bentham engaged a uniform levelling of intrinsic value to mere effect: from the perspective of utility, "pushpin is as good as poetry," as he is said to have put it (Mill, v. X, 113). Indeed, while pushpin was almost always an

innocent and harmless activity anyone could enjoy, poetry for Bentham was necessarily deceptive and very much the undertaking of a magisterial few.

Bentham sought to purge language of all metaphorical, poetic, and figurative forms as mere “fictions” which had no place in moral and political thought. But the effort to purify language merely led to confirming the ubiquity of the figurative, a point Mill delighted in ridiculing.⁹ Mill takes it as a *reductio* that Bentham’s radical linguistic reformism in the name of clarity resulted at times in the very “utter unreadableness” Bentham often attributed to poetry (115). A more forceful critical departure is Mill’s adoption of the “incarnational” view of language taken over from Wordsworth. Against the notion of style as mere “dress” or “separable ornament”, Wordsworth’s sees style as the “incarnation of thoughts” (cf. Abrams, 291). Thus, Mill’s expression theory of poetry insists on a non-instrumental view of pure expressive poetry – a forceful break from Bentham’s conviction that the poetic is trivial and even pernicious because fundamentally built on “misrepresentation”. Mill, in effect, rejects these two assumptions that poetry is a vehicle of truth or utility. Poetry is an expression of feeling not to provoke some belief or action, but as an end in itself. Poetry is not fundamentally about truth; rather, it is related to the “state of mind” in which truth could be considered or pursued (1965, i, 107). The Wordsworthian formulation departs further from classic utilitarianism in attempting to draw a qualitative distinction between kinds of experience. Recurring phrases such as “state of feeling/mind” used to characterize the poetic temperament indicate this effort. As will become apparent in the next chapter, Mill takes poetry as a necessary mode for the exploration and cultivation of personal character and thus is given a unique value for individual morality. Put another way, the cultivation, articulation, and refinement of individual character is “poetic” in that it results in unique and individual “incarnations” of private moral thought. M.H. Abrams draws just this point from Mill to illustrate the changing conceptions of romantic art. He makes the case that Mill’s poetic

⁹Mill writes: “Did Bentham really suppose that it was in poetry only that propositions cannot be exactly true, cannot contain in themselves all the limitations and qualifications with which they require to be taken when applied to practice? We have seen how far his own prose propositions are from realizing this Utopia ...” (v.X, 114).

theory is a radical reduction of the critical and aesthetic value of art to individual differences in character or “cultivated feeling”. The expression of character results in unique, irreducible stylistic forms to which no substitute can do full justice.

Wordsworth denied that the warrant for poetic figurations could be adequately grounded in either rhetoric or utility. The experiences that led him poetically to animate the world around him gained value from the creative imagination. Abrams sums up: “The genetic reference to the poet's own affective state, together with that to the creative operations of the poet's mind, are now the sole warrant for all valid poetic figures of speech.” (1971: 293). Even within this orientation, Mill could have conceded Bentham's point that such poetic devices were necessarily manipulative and potentially deceptive, given that works of art invariably end up acting on the “minds of others”. In critical contrast to Bentham, who tended toward a pragmatic view of criticism that related a poem/work to the perlocutionary effects elicited from an audience, Mill's rehabilitation of poetry on expressivist grounds reflects a unique condition for the production of romantic poetry. For Mill, the poem refers chiefly to the individual artist, and not as Bentham saw it, to the audience that the poet putatively addresses. In short, individualism is available to Mill, but not to Bentham, as a *category* of art.

Mill aspires for a poetry that is both natural and unconventional. In joining the commanding romantic desire to usurp classic hierarchies and genres, Mill also adopted the desire to bring poetry closer to the condition of music (a condition Walter Pater would later claim that all art aspires to. cf Rosen et al 1984, Ch.1). On this view of poetry, the creative products of the artist appear to be above suspicion only when a quality of immediacy and transparency has been achieved. That is, if the poetic creation is forced, contrived, calculated, or otherwise insincere, the worth of the creation qua creation is compromised. For Mill, the case where transparency could always be guaranteed is in private moments of “soliloquy”. In such moments, the tension between emotional expression and speculation about how such expression might be received or interpreted by others is abandoned. Genuine poetry has individual and solitary origins, as against social contexts of expression (cf. Langabum 1963, p.160).

Mill quickly came to see an untenability in his strict opposition between feeling and reflection in poetic self-expression. Wanting to affirm more of the actual cultural production of poetry than simply the non-instrumental “utterance of feeling”, the terms of his original expressivism proved limiting. Surely there is a great deal of poetry that Mill would have to characterize as “mere eloquence” but which nonetheless holds great literary and aesthetic value or moral insight. In 1834, Mill published a review of Tennyson’s poetry in the London Review (1965iii, pp.132-147). Mill’s critical and rhetorical aims fell in line with the editorial vision of the journal, directed as it was to a Benthamite audience, and Mill set out to convince classic utilitarians of the unique *social* merits of poetry. With his utilitarian readers in clear view, Mill significantly reformed his Wordsworthian position. Now, it is the poet’s “habitual association” and the “growth and perfection of his thinking faculty” that are essential to poetry which, in the revision, finds expression in public contexts. Solitary, self-reflexive expression no longer conflicts with its public contexts in respect of the value of poetry now understood as an “intellectual pursuit” whose “noblest end” is “that of acting upon the desires and characters of mankind through their emotions, to raise them towards the perfection of their nature” (1965iii, 141). This goal is now unproblematically identified with the classic doctrine of utility: “This, like every other adaptation of means to end, is the work of cultivated reason; and the poet’s success in it will be in proportion to the intrinsic value of his thoughts, and to the command which he has acquired over the materials of his imagination” (1965iii, 141). A striking transformation has taken place.

Without departing entirely from his earlier view that private emotional life characterizes a non-utilitarian realm of independent value, Mill nonetheless effects a dramatic shift in the nature of “intrinsic” valuation. It is as if in the two years that transpired since his initial Wordsworthian position, Mill had come to see that private expression only in relation to the effort made at public expression. It is the “acquired command” of the “thinking faculty”, and not spontaneously expressed emotion, that is central to the value of poetry. With apparent ease, Mill includes practical means alongside the non-instrumental utterance of feeling. Where he formerly prized emotional purity

(uncommanded, uneconomized) and spontaneity, imagination and emotion are now raw material to be commanded by the “great poet” who “is necessarily a great thinker”. In contrast, though his Wordsworthian formulation did not altogether neglect the intellectual and contemplative characteristics of expression, these are clearly subordinated to spontaneous and unrehearsed expression of emotion (see Mill, 1965ii, 128).

We can briefly summarize Mill’s shift in critical orientation. Having formerly distinguished poetry from eloquence, Mill’s analysis of Tennyson seems to attribute to him all of the features that fall on the side of “mere eloquence” (and thus, of failed poetry). The Tennyson review shows Mill prizing social stability, moral consensus, and intellectual reflection as the mark of good poetry. An altogether distinct critical position takes shape with the idea that genuine poets will contribute to overall happiness by somehow laying bare “human nature” and its ideal “perfection” for an appreciative audience. The poet in the Tennysonian frame clearly acts on “the desires and characters of mankind through their emotions,” the precise opposite of Mill’s former insistence that there should be nothing in the poem to indicate any intent to act on, court favour, or otherwise manipulate the desires of others (1965 i, 109; ii, 121). In urging that poetry does in fact facilitate social utility, Mill abandons one crucial part of his former anti-Benthamite theory only to face Bentham’s objection against poetry’s special status: for if poetry is indeed about social utility, it is not therefore a special pursuit. Of course, Mill wants poetry to be thought of as somehow unique among forms of expression; but in that case, he is then vulnerable to Bentham’s critique of the rhetorical power of poetry to act on and manipulate others. This is, we recall, the impetus behind Bentham’s claim that not only was poetry trivial, but potentially dangerous also.

Clearly, Mill has evolved beyond his initial expressivism. The union of “practical ends” with the non-instrumental “utterance of feeling” blurs the distinction between self-regarding “soliloquy” and other-regarding “eloquence” that was the very basis of his Wordsworthian reflections on poetry and expression. Since, as Mill believes, Tennyson communicates powerful, affective imagery, he must in some way have a refined understanding of the contemporary audience he addresses, a mark of

eloquence Mill would have formerly rejected as proper to genuine poetry. Ought we to conclude that Mill had reached a limit with his original critical terms? Or is the review of Tennyson simply a rhetorical piece, designed only to persuade utilitarians of the social and progressive utility of poetry? Or, as I would argue, does this realignment of critical orientation reflect a response to an anxiety that Mill could not help but address?

Let us take up one consequence of Mill's shift in critical orientation. This has to do with what we can call the tension between poetic uniqueness and affiliation. If the fundamental grounding of poetry in the expression of feeling provides the basis for Mill's Wordsworthian theory, the new Tennysonian perspective distances itself from the risk of excessive sentimentalism and a naive fixation on inner emotional needs. While Wordsworthian spontaneity (best illustrated by Shelley's "unrepressed" mode of natural expression) was meant to exclude what Carlyle called the "spasmodic" – utterly uncontrolled expressive outbursts – the value of spontaneity that marked poets "by nature" is potentially at odds with the value of being understood by others:

Where the poetic temperament exists in its greatest degree, while the systematic culture of the intellect has been neglected, we may expect to find ... vivid representations ... fitted to give extreme pleasure to persons of similar organization to the poet, but not likely to be sympathized in, because not understood, by others" (1965iii, 141).

The worry Mill expresses here is of a poetic intelligibility that is reduced to at most one person: the poet. The poetic temperament that placed Shelley as a *natural* poet above Wordsworth as a poet by culture is now faced with the threat of a kind of uncomprehending solitude – the solitude engendered by not being understood before others. (Recall the narrator's solitude in Eliot's "Portrait"). There is, then, no easy equation between a meaningful and workable individualism and *unique* feeling. Where Tennyson is an "insider" who articulates a common moral consciousness, Shelley, we might say, is for Mill a wild "outsider", who risks alienation from the ordinary *sensus communis* of moral feeling. For Mill, individualism both requires solitude and is threatened by it. Solitude is a prerequisite for both poetic expression and the cultivation of individual authenticity; yet, authenticity faces the threat of an impoverished subjectivity owing to the absence of common understanding and mutuality of

recognition required for individualism to acquire more than a merely subjective significance. Let us examine some moments where this tension becomes evident in Mill.

One reason why Mill thought Tennyson succeeded, where he did, was because he created impassioned scenes that elicit ready and widespread appreciation. Tennyson's poems for Mill were highly conducive to strong liberal affiliation: "Simple, genuine pathos, arising out of the situations and feelings common to mankind generally, is of kinds of poetic beauty that which can be most universally appreciated." (1965 iii, 136). Elsewhere in this review, Mill says of Tennyson's best poems that they are not just "picturesque", but "statuesque" (ibid., 135, 137). This suggests something like monumental art, open to common and public appreciation, like memorial statues. The bronze soldiers in Arlington Park, for example, clearly make plain what we are supposed to feel – it is plain, in other words, what the function of the work is. Mill's remarks may strike us as a point of minor significance, a thin form of critical praise. Yet the discourses of poetry at the time of Mill's writing reveal a particular controversy concerning the popular reception of poetry. For instance, Keats complained that Wordsworth took poetry in a dangerous direction of subjectivity and particularity. The anxiety Keats faced is that the poet's formerly unproblematic position as a "magisterial" public figure (Milton or Pope) was an obsolete post, no longer available in modern culture. Unable to return to the station afforded by the older intellectual world, and faced with the new demands for originality, a Wordsworthian turn to subjectivity and particularity seemed the unavoidable destiny of the modern romantic poet. Within this critical context, Mill responds by raising Tennyson to the status of the "Great Figure", as Madox Ford would later put it, a symbol of Victorian stability where the poet could express values on behalf of an appreciative public. Identifying the good poet with the moral model of liberal citizenship, Mill idealizes the work of poets, like Tennyson, whose self-expression becomes emblematic of the socially held values Mill endorses. Tennyson's is a socially responsible poetry, a poetry that speaks to genuine human concerns that are easily appreciated by all. Poetry, it turns out, has a definitively progressive role to play in modern culture, even if it could no longer claim its former magisterial status. This perspective demotes and undermines the specific relation to private character

Mill had envisaged for aesthetic experience, a relation that capitalized on *individualism* as a category of modern art.

Next to this, consider an image of Tennyson's that Mill found particularly inspiring: The theme of modern solitude. We have already seen the importance of individualistic solitude in Mill's original poetic theory. His remarks in the Tennyson review are significant because they dramatize an evident *anxiety* that is raised alongside Mill's *valuation* of solitude. Of his "Mariana," a poem Mill points to as illustrating Tennyson's success, Mill writes that Tennyson invokes a "physical and spiritual dreariness: and not dreariness alone – for that might be felt under many other circumstances of solitude – but dreariness which speaks not merely of being far from human converse and sympathy, but of being *deserted* by it." (1965 iii, 135). These provocative remarks not only invoke one of the implicit themes of our present discussion – the tension between individual vision and social solidarity – but they also raise the issue of solitude, formerly heralded as the true mark of poetic expression, only now in the form of a modern anxiety.

Some clarifying points will help make sense of Mill's high estimation of this poem. For example, it aims to accomplish a particular kind of epiphanic moment where the content triggering the insight is not strictly relevant for what the work attempts to reveal. Thus, we do not need to focus on the central figure in order to glean the feeling of modern solitude – of being abandoned by the conversation of humankind – from the work (cf. Mill, 143).¹⁰ In other words, the love drama/tragedy depicted in the poem's story has nothing to do with the realization Mill finds Tennyson bringing about for us with the poem. The poem helps us access a kind of realization for something only dimly felt,

¹⁰Mill suggests that we forget the Mariana of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure and focus instead on the solitary figure, forgotten by humanity, in the "moated grange". The suggestion works as well with other of Tennyson's poems, for example "Ulysses", where our interest is less with the immortal literary figure of Homer and directed instead at the mortal, less heroic (but no less important or worthy) struggles of ordinary contemporaries. ("We are not now that strength which in old days/Moved earth and heaven..."). In this way, Tennyson seems to be using literary icons gleaned from the canonical tradition as the initiating occasion for expressing matters that fall out of the ambit for which the occasioning work was properly (or at least initially) anchored on. This is one thing that impresses Mill, and we ought to agree with him that the Mariana of Measure for Measure is probably not the best source for exploring the theme of modern solitude, though it does well to raise and provoke the theme.

and thereby we might be able to gain more articulacy, more semantic authority to meet with our emotional awareness; we may begin to forge a new language for modern moral experience that will include this experience of this form of solitude.

The “physical and spiritual” desertion that Tennyson’s “Mariana” provokes denotes for Mill not individual idiosyncrasy, not the authentic deepening of character by individualistic Wordsworthian expressivism with its characteristic disregard for the audience; instead, Mill emphasises how Tennyson creates a “scene” (in Mill’s terms) and thereby plots a perspective in which a “common feeling”, one dimly understood and only meekly articulatable, might be recognized. So recognized, it might become genuinely *shared* and thus something that may be worked into our moral perception rather than remaining commonly, but contingently and inarticulately felt. The Wordsworthian private poetics of solitary soliloquy are transformed in Tennyson into a scenic description of a common experience: the experience of modern solitude. In emphasising the common experience – indeed, (paradoxically) the *social* basis of solitude, we can see how Mill struggles to address the anxiety that attends realizing the ideal of genuinely expressive individualism, for attaining that ideal can bring with it an unintelligible and alienating state of detachment and misunderstanding among others, a form of solitude not courageously and freely chosen, but rather suffered as alienation from human conversation.¹¹

The realignment in critical position from Wordsworth to Tennyson allows Mill to begin to address this anxiety as it emerges dialectically from his earlier valuation of solitude as the condition of true poetry. Tennyson represents a means of recognizing “common feeling” and moral consciousness. Mill clearly wanted to affirm poetry as bearing social value; but the poetic framing of moral feelings that we dimly feel but do not have adequate expressions for is not obviously an *instrumental* value. Coming to see what Tennyson’s poem can convey marks for Mill a new form of semantic authority over inarticulate emotional feeling. The emotional responses Mill finds this poem

¹¹There is something paradoxical about invoking the subjective and individual feeling of ‘solitude’ as something that might be appreciated in intersubjective understanding. Mill’s treatment of “individual good taken as a whole” raises similar questions about the very idea of “social feelings” which are so fundamental to the ‘sanctions’ of the principle of utility (cf. Mill 1962, 284f; 287).

eliciting are clearly not *functional* as are, say, the public monument or statues of religious figures. In such cases, the feelings that the work attempts to trigger serve a function – patriotism, or spiritual reverence. The way Mill accounts for this poem and its role is quite different. It is more on the order of discovery. By reconstructing sets of older canonical references, which index to a definite situation (i.e. the abandoned lover in Measure for Measure), Mill finds Tennyson performing the role of *pointing something out to us*, something about aspects of our present circumstances, or reminding us about what we commonly experience but have no adequate common language with which to express it.

“Mariana” on Mill’s own account is hard to shore up as just another adaptation of means to ends; for it is hard to see, after the realization Mill thinks it provokes, what further end the poem could serve. Solitude retains its role as an aspect of modern individualism and a key condition of expressivism; but it is best seen as a value *distinct* from the utilitarian mould Mill forces it through. On the argument I shall pursue, solitude clearly merges with the “individuality” of On Liberty as a prized ethical trait. The successful attainment of individuality, however, depends on the absence of a self-conscious scrutiny bent on that attainment as an explicit goal. What’s more – and the main point I want to make – is that solitude, so valued as a Wordsworthian condition for the production of poetic utterances, is now poised as a permanently possible threat to actively pursued individualism. Structured by prior intentions, the pursuit of individuality can actually result in the defeat of that ideal. In other words, solitude can be a healthy precondition for authentically expressed individualism; but it can also be the unwanted tragic outcome when that trait is made a principal object for which strategic, instrumental structures of intentions are the explicit means.

Chapter Three: Theatricality and Style in Moral Agency.

At different stages in Mill's early thought, authenticity and the integrity of individualism come under threat by different forces. The Wordsworthian distinction between poetry and eloquence puts genuine expression vulnerable to the self's attention to, or awareness of others. Moral reflection (and poetic expression) is to be "pure", unaffected by the voices of others with whom we engage in conversation. Moral reflection ceases to have the requisite poetic-aesthetic aspect and degenerates into mere eloquence if the "self-confession" model becomes tainted by the presence of the voices of others. We must not respond to the call of others or conspire to make others respond to us, even in private moments of reflection, if our moral imagination is to be genuinely poetic. Autonomy is the undisputed value asserted here. Its achievement rests on some form of voluntary or natural withdrawal from the "vulgar, everyday" world. It is the freedom to be alone with ourselves, free in our "spontaneity of consciousness" from the burdens and demands imposed by others.

In Mill's Tennysonian view, in contrast, the threat to individualism now appears as isolation, of desertion and of abandonment from the conversation of humankind. This modern experience reflects a new condition for the production of lyricist poetry, namely its nature as soliloquy. Solitude, so valued in Mill's initial poetic theory, is in other contexts a threat to the integrity of individualism and autonomy. Individualism and autonomy may be attained, but if in the process one remains detached from social conversation; if expression gives rise to misunderstanding, one is left alone with oneself – but not in the self-determined and courageous manner described above. Here, solitude means abandonment, dejection, misunderstanding – "desertion" from human interaction. The value implicit here is that of expressive unity and integrity. So while poetic language is a means to fulfilment of a new aspiration to authenticity and originality, a demand not simply of works of art but of individuals as well, it carries with it at the same time the threat of failure and defeat.

Mill does not resolve the conflict implied by these opposing tendencies. Indeed, the residue of such a conflict arguably survives in On Liberty with its explicit effort to reconcile the public language of utility with the private language of poetic expression. We ought to resist, however, over-

schematized correlations between “soliloquy” and “self-regarding” action, “eloquence” and “other-regarding” action, between private “poetry” and public “eloquence”. Mill’s work finds a way of enriching the static antithesis between public and private that On Liberty is commonly thought to sustain.

Mill’s own expressivism problematises any simple imposition of the public/private divide. The apparent stability of such a distinction undermines itself. Take the privateness of self-directed expression: soliloquy, “feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude”. Mill’s Wordsworthian notion of private character, which ties poetic expression to feeling, naturally assumes a *public* aspect. Poetry as the solitary act of self-directed utterance is supposed to *contrast* with its public expression as “mere eloquence”. But it is by no means clear that genuine poetry cannot have a public context. Returning again to Mill’s formulation, “eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*” (v.I, 348). Clearly, both kinds of case require audiences. In the case of poetic expression, it is the transparent, because uncontrived, connection between thought, feeling, and utterance that makes the difference. Poetic expression occurs when we are *unaware* of our own emotional transparency, when “feeling declares itself by such signs as escape from us when we are unconscious of being seen”(v.I, 352). It is to this last claim that Mill associates personal character defined as “only a certain state of feeling grown habitual” (v.I, 348). Poetic expression is meant to enrich, if not to define, this process of character development. Most importantly, the public and the private are intertwined in a way that renders any simple distinction *unstable* and misleading.

More familiar is the conflict engendered by a commitment to the philosophical language of utility as a means of pinning down common meaning amidst stylistic diversity on the one hand, and Mill’s evident endorsement of the incarnational view of poetic language on the other. “I regard utility,” Mill writes some twenty years later in On Liberty, “as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions” (v.VII, ...1962, 136). The Benthamite sense of utility is significantly modified, now understood “in the largest sense,” expanded by a continuing commitment to the Wordsworthian aim of the deliberate “cultivation of feelings” in his philosophical creed. Since utility continues to be the “ultimate appeal”

even in its expanded “largest sense,” Mill arguably reverts to his classic utilitarian strictures. His faith in the principle of utility can be seen as an attempt to provide an anchor for diversity in linguistic expression. But, as we have seen, finding a common currency for expressive diversity conflicts with the Wordsworthian view of poetic language which holds that there is a *natural* relation between meaning and expression. As Carlyle put it, glossing Wordsworth’s notion of poetic language as an “incarnation of thought,” “Language is called the Garment of Thought: however, it should rather be Language is the Flesh-Garment, the Body of Thought.”¹² As we know, this is key to Mill’s felt need to challenge Bentham’s expressively dead picture. Poetry for Mill attaches to character as the natural expression of emotion; but the implication of irreducible diversity in stylistic expression is unavoidable as the ever present ambiguity in interpretation. On the other hand, an overriding commitment to utility seems to mitigate against the opacity that expressive diversity imposes on moral evaluation. Indeed, this is often taken to be an advantage of anchoring moral evaluation to the common denominator of utility – namely, the elimination of opacity implied in such expressive diversity.

This conflict – between the common currency afforded by utility and the commitment to an expressive diversity that seems to elude such anchoring – is all the more urgent in On Liberty. For although Mill shows less and less concern with poetry as such, the link between poetic expression and moral character is firmly established and cannot be retracted so long as individualism is considered a category of poetic art. Moreover, we have examined how expression involves an unavoidable public aspect that gives individual expression a different tone from the sorts of freedoms of thought, discussion, and opinion taken up in On Liberty. To be sure, On Liberty defends self-expression as a public good that helps promote the best setting for truth by creating variable contexts for the argumentative pro and con of public discourse. But autonomy must be seen in light of our discussion of poetic-expression as a categorical value, coordinate with utility but distinct from it.¹³ We need not

¹²See Wordsworth’s “Style” in Collected Writings, v.X, 229-230.; Carlyle, Works, v.I, 57. Quoted in Abrams, 385.

¹³Skorupski makes the critical point of understanding autonomy as a “categorical goal, coordinate with, and not simply a part of, happiness”, but he finds no reason to see Mill’s early thoughts on

follow Mill's urge for the reduction of values to a single measure and his early essays on poetry suggest how.

Mill's ideal of poetry rests on the achievement of a transparent relation between emotion and thought and its observable expression. But moral action, as is plainly obvious, takes agents from private motives to public contexts. What can Mill's thought tell us when the transparency of poetic expression is extended to expressive action within his framework?

The contemporary observation that in Mill's early poetic theories, the work of art (at least its aesthetic and critical aspects) shrinks to surface idiosyncrasies in the behaviour and utterances of individuals is primarily owing to M.H.Abrams's seminal study of English romanticism (Abrams 1971). In this classic work, Abrams characterizes Mill and expressivism more generally by making this observation about the work of art: "The work ceases ... to be regarded primarily a reflection of nature, actual or improved; the mirror held up to nature becomes transparent and yields the reader insights into the mind and heart of the poet himself. ... it is the inevitable consequence of the expressive point of view" (1971, 23). Not altogether consistently, Abrams goes on to state that in Mill, the "audience is reduced to a single member, consisting of the poet himself" (25). The glaring inconsistency – between the work as bearing evidence to an audience of an artist's displayed character, and the simultaneous disappearance of that very audience – is not only Abrams's, but Mill's as well. More recent attempts to describe this mixed orientation with respect to expression and art invoke the suggestive concepts of Mill's "theatrical" view of character (Gould, 1993) and his individualistic "ethics of style" (Burnstone 1997). These are alternative ways of characterizing what Mill calls the "anti-self-consciousness theory of Carlyle" (v.I, 145). This phrase clearly marries with a related claim made in the same place, where Mill declares that happiness cannot be made into a self-conscious goal:

I never ... wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the

poetic expression as helping to facilitate this point. I am in agreement with Skorupski's substantive point, but differ in finding the early essays of Mill's we have been examining as having something important to teach us about how we can read his later work, in particular the third chapter in On Liberty.

end of life. But I now [after his crisis] thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness ... Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way (v.I, 145-6).

Here Mill imparts a sense in which spontaneity in action, like happiness, cannot be a perspicuous goal, but must be attained as a by-product of less explicitly self-conscious activity. We admire the trait of spontaneity – as Mill himself did. But if we make this a self-avowed aim, the results are often self-defeating. The injunction, “be spontaneous!” cannot be made an explicit goal. As Mill insisted for poetry, the self-conscious pursuit of beautiful expression often results in a gratuitous effort and overt contrivance, and plainly shows inauthenticity at work.

The performative aspect in Mill's poetic theory has been recently characterized in terms of the “innocent performance of qualities of character,” in a distinctly Millian theory of style. Dan Burnstone concludes: “Involuntary indications of character bypass the histrionic potential of voluntary acts. They are a transitive form of the intransitive and authentic activity which carries no designs. Stylist *activity* might here be contradistinguished from deliberate stylistic acts, as the unselfconscious mode of being ‘in character’” (Burnstone 1997, 55). Similarly, Timothy Gould has explored Mill's notion of eloquence in terms of “theatricality”, arguing that as Mill asserts an antagonism between poetry and eloquence, he comes to focus on the latter as a form of theatricalised self-consciousness. Gould explores a sense in which poetry for Mill is to be understood as a form of “genuine solitude”, a form of protected aloneness that is forever threatened by the turn of thought toward the “vulgar, everyday world” of strategic eloquence and means-end thinking. This kind of solitude is a non-theatrical state of individual authenticity; it is clearly performative, yet not in any sense “staged” or conscientiously scripted.

The idea that there are contexts of expressive acts, poetic or other, in which we are unaware of the possible notice others may take in us, oblivious of an audience, may take us beyond the narrowly poetic-expressive. Homely examples readily come to mind: Think of watching someone groove to headphone music, or of children absorbed in imaginative play, or of someone talking or whistling to

themselves. In such ordinary cases, there is a fundamental lack of awareness or an ignorance about the attention others are giving to these most natural and ordinary actions. There is a basic discrepancy, then, between our self-perception and how we come across to others. Obsessive traits and idiosyncrasies suggest countless mundane examples that illustrate such self-absorption which, from an observer's perspective, exhibits a kind of natural theatricality. If we are to follow Mill's cue beyond the narrowly poetic-expressive, it would be disappointing, however, to end up merely with the narrowly personal and idiosyncratic (an identification that plagues Rorty's thought). More germane for our purposes are expressive forms of activity that reveal or betray the possession or absence of some virtue.

As we have seen, the significance of Mill's review of Tennyson amounts to a blurring of the poetry/eloquence distinction that sustained his Wordsworthian view of poetic expression. He unassumingly brings together strategic "means-end" thinking typical of eloquence with the non-instrumental "utterance of feeling". His review of "Tennyson's Poems" opens up with a reflection on two other critical pieces on the relatively unknown young Tennyson: One in the Blackwood's Magazine and one in the Quarterly Review. These, the only reviews of Tennyson Mill is aware of, are both highly critical. Mill feels this is not entirely without warrant; but the mode in which the two reviewers issue their critiques are revealing. Set next to each other, they form "a contrast, characteristic of the two journals" (1965, 133). The former journal exhibits traits of "the usual flippancy and levity" and its review in particular contains "a strain of mocking exaggeration", an "audacious sporting" with the reader (132). Even still, despite these traits displayed in Blackwood's, "it is impossible to deny to its principal writers (or writer) a certain susceptibility of sense, a geniality of temperament. Their mode of writing about works of genius is that of a person who derives much enjoyment from them, and is grateful for it." Though Blackwood's may mock or make light of a subject, underneath it is, Mill says, a "response and recognition" of the subject's meriting a review (133). The Quarterly Review, on the other hand, displays qualities "directly the reverse of these". For Mill, its editorial choice of review material is governed by a more suspect motive: "[T]he critic (as we

figure him to ourselves) taking up the book, in trusting anticipation of pleasure, not from the book, but from the contemplation of his own cleverness in making it contemptible. He has not missed the opportunity of admiring himself at the expense of Mr. Tennyson". (133). Both reviewers rake Tennyson over the coals, as it were. But in the one unredeeming case, there is an evident intentional structure – a desire on the critic's part for opportunistic self-aggrandisement. The critic assumes a style made an end in itself. In the other case, even despite the "flippancy" and "mocking exaggeration", there is a transparency evident in the practice of criticism that is a genuine expression of "enjoyment," "recognition" and "response" in confronting Tennyson as a fit subject for critique. In the one case, the "enjoyment" and gratitude is not announced or intentionally displayed in the criticism – the enjoyment is spontaneously embodied in the review; in the other, the motive of reducing Tennyson to ridicule is evident as an intentional performance.

More important cases of commitment and value in life can be seen in an analogous way. The successful embodiment of prized values or traits reveals a surplus of character that cannot be contained simply by an individual's prior intention to acquire these traits. While our freedom may be reflected in our choices and intentions, our capacity for autonomy is realized derivatively, the result of successfully integrating commitments and values in life. The paradox of hedonism that Mill discovered (namely: that the goal of happiness is rendered self-defeating if woven into a structure of prior explicit intentions, that happiness must be attained "by the way" as a development of other activity) can just as well apply to autonomy. Autonomy, like happiness, is achieved "by the way" as the transparent manifestation of a life conducted in accordance with one's "own mode of laying out [one's] existence".

Character and motives can be made transparent in stylistic action in the same way that emotion and thought can be made transparent in poetic expression. It is the "capacity for strong feeling" that is the "material out of which all motives [and by extension, character] are made" (1965ii, 128). If the capacity for strong feeling is the material of motives, the poetic expression of feeling renders those motives transparent. This innocent and transparent view of expressive soliloquy can be

extended to moral agency, reflected by the parenthetical addition in the foregoing quote. The result is that moral character acquires a public aspect that is realized in an individual's unique mode of unselfconscious comportment in action. As with genuine poetry, authentic individual character manifests itself before an audience or a community for whom the agent is oblivious or otherwise successfully manages to suppress awareness of. Authenticity in character can be witnessed by an audience or an observer as a kind of eavesdropping; indeed the condition for the manifestation of genuine character seems to be the natural, straightforward performances of agency, unaffected by the knowledge of the presence of others as auditors of behaviour. In this way, human lives come to be appreciated as stylized and artistic. What would detract from this appreciation is evidence of a structure of intent to display one's motives in action, as was the case Mill made against the article in the Quarterly Review.

The ever present ambiguity of self-interpretation can be illustrated with a fact about modern literary art in general: namely, its capacity for telling several stories at once. The ambiguity evident in Mill concerns the possibility of at least two ways of saying what is going on in poetic expression (our own, or others'). The desire to bring divergent stories or accounts into harmony is characteristic of the disengaged particular self (Taylor 1989, 289). Such a self finds orientation through discipline and rational self-mastery. Mill's attempt to safeguard authenticity and solidarity by ironically deepening the instrumental view of the self are evident in two subsequent distinctions Mill draws, each with a lasting and mutually unsteady place in his mature thought. These distinctions should be interpreted as Mill's tacit effort to harmonize the tensions arising between his Wordsworthian and Tennysonian demands. The first distinction divides "morality" into "two co-equal parts":

One of these is self-education; the training, by the human being himself, of his affections and will. That department is a blank in Bentham's system. The other and co-equal part, the regulation of his outward actions, must be altogether halting and imperfect without the first; for how can we judge in what manner many an action will affect even the worldly interests of ourselves or others, unless we take in, as part of the question, its influence on the regulation of our, or their affections and desires? (1962, 103-4).

Mill makes an impressive claim for sentimental education. We need to understand the interaction of

action and moral motivation, and how self-education is implicated in the way we conduct ourselves. Individuals cultivate through the self-wrought practice of solitary poetic expression their own authentic “habit of feeling,” their own character. This belongs to the “first” of two parts of morality: namely, “the training, by the human being himself,” which according to Mill’s critique, is totally lost on Bentham (v.X, 98). The second, “co-equal” part of morality is the “regulation of outward actions.” Importantly, Mill makes “self-training” a necessary condition for the full development of regulated outward actions. The punctual nature of the expressive self-cultivation of character and feeling is made paradoxically evident in Mill’s disciplinary terminology (education, training). These disciplinary terms suggest a self-consciousness that is at odds with the romantic notion of expressive self-abandonment, in for instance, the “spontaneous overflow of feeling”. If we read the disciplinary terminology of self-education and self-training together with Mill’s earlier view of self-expression (spontaneous overflow of feeling), we get a strangely instrumentalist view of self-expression. Expression becomes a principal means of “self-training”, a first step in conditioning desire and resolve in outward conduct. Self-expression becomes a moral practice, a cultivation of feeling. By insisting on two parts to moral conduct, and on the importance of genuinely expressed feeling, Mill can be interpreted as combining the aesthetic, defined as a conditioning of affect and desire through expression, with morality – as a part of it. Self-creation, the cultivation of character via poetic expression, is only apparently antithetical to the self-disciplining “training” and “education”. Indeed, something like this collusion of self-abstracting instrumentalism and a conception of creativity optimally guided by its dictates survives well into the artistic aims of this century. But Mill’s notion is more geared to a form of sentimental education fixed on conditioning desire and regulating action.

This “morality in two-parts” distinction resurfaces some thirty years later in On Utilitarianism as one way he addresses the myriad of objections considered on behalf of his doctrinal “assailants”. One of the most important aims of the self’s “cultivation of feeling” is the indoctrination “in the mind of every individual [of] an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole” so that “a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the

habitual motives of action.” (1962, 269). The regulative social role for the arts as a technology of self-formation suggests a correlative conception of the “ideal” engagement with works of art, as they give impetus to moral reflection: Genuine moral reflection is a form of self-cultivation; it is itself a form of lyrical self-expression. Indeed, a poem may well be the impetus for moral reflection, but that is not the most interesting or novel point. We can say further that moral reflection, genuinely expressed, is itself substantively a form of poetry. For Mill, poetic expression is a display of moral motivation.

The second, more familiar distinction involves a tripartite analysis of actions into their moral, aesthetic, and sympathetic aspects. As Mill outlines his view of moral character in “On Bentham” utility in the “largest sense” applies only the one “aspect” of action – the moral aspect. Actions, Mill explains, have “three aspects”: the moral, which concerns the rightness or wrongness of conduct; the aesthetic, which concerns grace and beauty in action; and the sympathetic, which concerns the loveableness of character. Again in On Utilitarianism Mill famously asserts that Utilitarianism demands precisely what its critics often complain about: namely, a strict separation between the evaluation of actions and the estimation of character, between motives and consequences (v.X, 219f.). Thus, there can be characters who fail in all relevant senses to bring about any utility (who are thus amoral or antimoral), but who nonetheless are tolerated or even admired for the naturalness and authenticity of their behaviour. As Mill says, the utilitarian knows full well “that a right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and actions which are blameable often proceed from qualities entitled to praise” (1962, 271). Ideally, these three aspects of action and character would coincide so that actions taken as patterns of regulated conduct have a quality beyond their being more – being beautiful also, perhaps. But the important point is that judgements about aesthetic and sympathetic qualities of character can vary independently of the evaluation of actions as moral.

The directions marked by these distinctions might appear to leave us to choose between an aesthetic concern for moral character and a utilitarian attention to consequences of actions. On the one hand, the self-regulation of outward action results in stylistic activity that exhibits the same transparency with respect to motives that romantic lyric poetry exhibits with respect to emotion. On

the other hand, the tripartite analysis makes action an opaque medium for revealing character. By making moral reflection an explicit element of poetry, Mill aestheticized a key part of moral reflection. It is the aesthetic condition of style that regulates instrumental thinking as self-conscious moral action.

The aesthetic conditioning of desire imparts a regulatory effect on action by strengthening the capacity for feeling, which in turn generates the right habits and impulses. The picture of morality in “two-parts” consists of a reciprocating, interactive relation between self-cultivated feeling and action. But while *we*, as moral actors, try to bring moral motivation in line with aesthetic form as embodied, expressed emotional feeling, the interpreters of our actions can wrest them apart again in the three-fold analysis of action. On our analysis of “theatricality” and unselfconscious “style” expression has an unavoidable public aspect (and not merely a “regulative” conditioning of outward action toward desired ends). The tripartite analysis, on the other hand, reinstates a strict moral-aesthetic distinction, leaving Mill stuck not only with the unresolved problem of self-interpretive ambiguity and plurality, but also unable to articulate the relation between poetry and moral self-orientation that he only confusedly grasped. To give but one example, the condition of genuine expression is precisely the successful “effort of voluntary abstraction” from our “social” state (1962, 284). Such self-abstraction is a key element in private moral reflection. But it is not clear how this solitary context of moral reflection regulates outward action. Moreover, the actual failure to achieve the requisite stance need not be understood as an abandonment of real feeling or “genuine private affections”. We have an extraordinary ability to occupy both a radically first-person stance and a tentative third-person stance at alternating moments. To suggest that only a first-person stance promotes an appropriately regulated autonomy is to oversimplify this extraordinary fact with a troubling genuine/artificial distinction. This in turn reinforces the weakness in Mill’s idea of private moral reflection as monological.

The tendency to think that there has to be one aim, or a harmony among aims of poetry tempts many who are committed to its value to construct simplistic, comprehensive schemes, including Mill (and, as I argue below, Rorty). One possible way the conflicts of Chapter Two might find resolution

would consist in consigning Wordsworthian poetry to the cultivation of moral character and Tennysonian “scene” poetry to solidarity and community making. The cultivation of character would remain a private pursuit; the composition of community-binding words of power, a public pursuit. This, in fact, presents a fairly standard reading that neatly gels with Mill's mature thought and the Victorian temper more generally. Mill's public/private distinction comes about, I would argue, as an expression of the conflicting pressures he has inadvertently raised for an expressivist view of poetry. This he does in “On Bentham” (1838) and in later works, notably, On Utilitarianism.

The driving idea in the previous chapter is the notion that moral agents become impoverished if merely directed so as to court the favour of others in eloquent speech and action. Rather, Mill aspires to preserve a space of “genuine” solitude, unaffected by the self-conscious awareness of others, a space of genuine self-expression. This imposes a radically anti-utilitarian element at the core of Mill's poetic theory. The idea is that *some* utterances and actions have to issue not as a response to others or as a call for others to respond to our desires. In other words, the means-end rationality of the everyday, outward world is entirely subverted by Mill's notion of poetic expression. Mill would regard individuals as worse off for acting only with the awareness of others in mind. Such action would never be above suspicion since “traces of consciousness” bearing the evident structure of some prior intent would potentially always be detectable in one's behaviour.

Yet, isn't this preserve of “solitude” itself simply given and merely contingent? In his early essays, Mill writes as though self-directed poetic expression were not something that could be the object of human aspiration, but something that we must contend with as a sheer matter of fact. For Mill, it is a fact about human nature that we have genuine moments of solitude, moments of unselfconsciousness, sincere and effortless self-expression. But what is crucial here, and easy to lose sight of, is how this reflects a strongly-evaluated *stance* for Mill. It is a normative orienting view. This fact is reflected in the very designation of individual expression as “poetic”. We should not see this term “poetry” as denoting a neutral domain for which Mill is search out the “essence” (as the title of his earliest essay, “*What is poetry?*” misleadingly suggests). Rather, poetry is already heavily

invested with cultural and moral significance to which Mill attaches the aspiration (the strongly evaluated stance) for authentic individualism.

Mill's thought represents one early attempt to raise individual authenticity to the status of a moral aspiration. The desire for authenticity is closely connected with evolving notions of individual autonomy. Mill presents an aspect of modern individualism that remains a staple in modern thought: Creativity is entirely connected with authenticity, and Mill's procedure as we have traced it consists in linking the discourses of art to facts about individuals. Yet, there is a troubling sense in which authenticity for Mill is "anti-conversational" and therefore at potential odds with fellow feeling. The act of poetic creation is also the point of greatest tension with the utilitarian hope for a harmonization of social conversation, for a congruence of public and private interests and needs. The pursuit of authenticity (or, more generally, the cultivation of individual moral character) bears an ever-present risk of becoming an anti-conversational endeavour. It can be seen as a refusal to remain bound to the eternally imposed demand to perform in certain ways. For Mill, we are all acting, playing out a role before and among others. Under such thorough-going instrumentalized conditions utilitarianism represents, Mill makes his goal the pursuit of a naturally enacted mode of character, one that doesn't respond to or uncritically engage with socially imposed and instrumentalized scripts. At the same time, authenticity, like sincerity and genuinely poetic expression, cannot be made into its own perspicuous goal. In this respect, these qualities of character share the same predicament Mill discovered of happiness. One cannot make it a self-declared aim; for Mill, happiness (and authenticity) has to be arrived at "by the way," as an unselfconsciously acquired by-product of other pursuits.

Authenticity, in becoming in some sense a goal, ideal, or aspiration, poses a delicate problem for the utilitarian framework. If the above analysis is sound, Mill's self-confessional model of emotive expression and creativity exceeds (or better, gets beneath) conversation. Either as a form of refusal, a resistance against the encroachment upon the authentic self by social conversation (eloquent discourse) or as an active suppression of our dialogical nature by willfully bracketing out the unavoidable presence of other voices in individual moral reflection, (viz., that "the eyes of others are

upon us”), the result is a continual battle against moral thinking as constituted by an internal dialogue involving other significant voices.

The dialogical constitution of identity and moral reflection has received a great deal of attention in recent philosophical thought. In the context of moral reflection, dialogue refers to the structure of moral thinking as a conversation between our egos and a host of other voices. On a broad view of constitutive dialogical identity, it seems as if moral reflection will always suffer the threat of never fully attaining the aspirations of authenticity and real solitude – at least, on one inadequate formulation of moral reflection. As Mill frames them, these aspirations strive for a condition in which we are supposed to be in full possession of our own voice, unaffected by others. We have reason to think that something is deeply wrong with Mill’s model, predicated on an unrealistic, monological model of moral reflection. And there is a related concern. Though we can rightly question the adequacy of Mill’s self-confessional model of expressive-poetic morality over a more realistic dialogical and conversational model, the hope of reaching a clearer sense of oneself via self-directed expression still has to contend with the unsettling fact that the very process of cultivating character (as Mill conceives it) in sentimental self-education can fail (1962, 284)]. That is, Mill anticipates Rorty’s claim that the pursuit of autonomy (or prized ethical values generally) carries with it the risk of inflicting cruelty. How is this?

Mill insists that “no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible *in the work itself*,” and, we may freely expand “work” here to include stylistic acts and other forms of expressive behaviour, as well as poetic expression. What is required is an active disregard of those others who, out of care, concern or paternal or intimate love, or simply out of curiosity, boredom, or happenstance, choose to fix their attention on us. Mill’s sense of autonomy requires this if genuine poetic expression is the aim. While not all of my actions can or should be reactions or manipulations via others, and while autonomy in a fundamental sense requires acting for oneself, there is no sense for Mill in which I have access to important aspects of my identity where someone else’s voice (or my dialoguing with it) makes this access possible. That is, without such other voices, we lack the means

to access what is latent in us. Autonomy is in at least this crucial sense *not* dialogically feasible for Mill. The pursuit of self-expressed authenticity might be seen as indulgent and self-absorbed, as an irresponsible abandonment or withdrawal from life and duties to others.

Moreover, Mill's sense of authenticity demands a revolt or turning away from convention in some manner. So the threat of standing defeat of the ideal has to be compared with the anxiety that attends *achieving* the ideal, since the pursuit of Millian expressive authenticity means dropping out of the wider conversation (i.e. Shelley, again), or possibly destabilizing or offending the participants in the conversation through radical acts of self-expression.¹⁴ Thirdly, in addition to anti-conventionalism and the anti-conversational nature of creative moral reflection, Mill's sense of the solitude of being abandoned by the conversation of humanity reflects a fact about language that sharply brings out the risks associated with building ethical relations on creative principles. The pursuit of autonomy via the creative power of language raises the risk that our self-serving purposes may implicate others by their very exclusion (abandonment) from our purposes. There is always something left out of refined and polished language. Making something more radiant and brilliant in linguistic innovation usually (if not necessarily) means making other things and people more recessive in the process. Mill's analysis of Tennyson's "Mariana" was driving at something like this: That we all at times feel excluded from some language games or social facets of language; that in their pursuit of radiant and beautiful language, others will pass over us, or see through us, or forget us, or fail to see our needs – fail, in short, to recognize us. Mill clearly identified this feeling of solitude as something that all modern individuals experience to some degree. As Mill's Victorian successor,

¹⁴The early Mill does, in fact, have the resources to respond to this concern which draw from his model of artistic creation. We can hazard the following: Creativity for Mill does not follow after any determinate model; yet it must "harmonize" with some shared feeling (1962, 127). Mill's brief account of artistic creativity has the provocative implication that creativity, but not necessarily expression *per se*, is always *addressed*. Creativity is on Mill's early view a fundamentally conversational process, aiming in creation to harmonize with the outward world of others, but expression does not necessarily share in this. If this is correct, then Mill has to hold that "harmonizing" is not the same as desiring to "work on the mind of another" in the sense that would render utterances and other forms of expressive behaviour as mere eloquence. The notion of gearing a creative work into a harmonious relation with one's social setting somehow has to be construed differently from an instrumentalist conception of manipulation of the will of others.

Matthew Arnold would say, “we mortal millions live alone” (in Stone 1997, 107). Refining our moral feelings thus always carries the risk of imparting hurt upon others who fall outside the necessarily partial range of our linguistic focus.

Now this is one of the acknowledged hallmarks of Rorty’s aestheticized ethic, modelled on metaphor as a growing point of language and irony as the aesthetic attitude appropriate to moral reflection. Rorty’s vision of how autonomy is flexed through innovative language begets a dialectic of success and failure: The winning over to liberal autonomy in what he calls the “aesthetic life” is always accompanied by the perpetual fallenness of such a condition owing to the fact that aesthetic self-transformation necessarily excludes attention to other people. Moral failure in what one commentator calls Rorty’s “minimalist ethic”, captured in the injunction to “avoid cruelty”, is woven into the fabric of our moral world (cf. Furrow, 127). The conditions of postmodern redemptive aestheticism are exactly the conditions for fallenness in Rorty’s liberal utopia. Thus, he does more than impart the lesson that idiosyncratic personal ideals leading to a quest for perfection can themselves be a source of moral blindness. He infuses a new kind of original sin into our achievements in individual autonomy.

Chapter Four: Rorty's Postmodern Ethics – the aesthetic life.

The juxtaposition of Mill's early poetic theory and Rorty's postmodern aesthetics helps organize several interconnected issues. There is a rich, if largely tacit, dialogue which continues between post-romantic Victorians and post-modern contemporaries in the common search to integrate art and morality. Mill anticipates Rorty's strategy on several levels, not least of which is the tendency to interpret changes in artistic form as moral progress. For Mill, the overthrow of neo-Classicism in, for instance, Wordsworthian expressivism raises the tenor of protest against 18th century rationalism while redefining its version of the moral subject now conceived as expressivist. Similarly, Rorty interprets the modernist reaction to the humanist and "unironical" art and criticism of the Victorian period as instituting decentred moral subjectivity and further establishing a new textualist moral agenda defined by modernism's revolutionary style. A certain assumption linking innovative artistic form with progressive politics is conveyed in Rorty's recurring conjunction of the "political revolutionary" and the "poet" (see 1989, .3-4). Both Mill and Rorty illustrate this tendency, as they both demonstrate how a movement of putative protest can wind up colluding with what it originally sought to overtake.

Mill's meditations on poetry as soliloquy and its contrast with strategic eloquence anticipate Rorty's attempt to aestheticize private moral reflection with the self-directed aims of the "curious ironist" and the "strong-poet". More specifically, the Victorian background of Mill casts light on two positions Rorty has drafted for a conjunction of art and ethics: namely, his "textualist" position and his "liberal-utopian" position. These two views raise compelling parallels between Rorty's and Mill's efforts to forge a language for aesthetic individualism. In conclusion, I want to summarize these observations and indicate what they can tell us about how literary art carries over into moral agency.

Rorty's view of the relationship between disenchantment and irony is a striking inversion of a pattern of Victorian thought represented in figures such as Mill, Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, and

others.¹⁵ They responded to the undermining of traditional sources of moral authority by positivism by reconstituting these sources in private consciousness and personal experience. Determined to create a morality that stands to Arnold, Pater, Yeats, and secularized Victorian liberalism generally, as they themselves stood in relation to the eighteenth-century traditional belief, Rorty discovers a profound moral purpose in the modernist overthrow of “nineteenth century literary *genres*” (1980, 180). This “successor” spirit is quite telling. Some of his more memorable slogans are stated as tacit negations of their pre-modernist counterparts. For example, Rorty stakes out his anti-theory polemic around the negation of W. B. Yeats’s hope of holding “justice and reality in a single vision” (1992, 143, 147). Philosophy cannot provide such an Archimedean view. Variations on this phrase lead Rorty to take issue with any attempt of holding “self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision” (1989, xiv). The objection Rorty raises is similarly expressed as a negation of Matthew Arnold’s injunction to “see things steady and to see them whole” (1991b, 152). Moral perception for Rorty is best captured in metaphors that express a partial and shifting perception, in place of older metaphors of wholeness and stability.

Happily, it is a Millian perspective that follows from these modernist leaps out of the old, secular, liberal existence of the nineteenth century, for “[t]he closest we will come to joining [justice/reality/self-creation/solidarity] is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, ‘irrationalist’, and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time...” (1989, xiv). This is, as we know, the only remaining maxim Rorty will countenance once we give up trying to unite social responsibility and self-creation in a single, steady vision (cf. 1991b, 75).

I argued that Mill teaches us quite a lot about the “partiality” of our vision on things. Shifting first and third-person perspectives made it difficult for Mill to characterize where in moral life the poetic was to insinuate itself, given its undisputed importance. Because Mill, like Rorty, views the

¹⁵My reading is informed principally by Abrams (1971). Richard Schusterman (1992) likewise draws on these figures in his account of pragmatist aesthetics. Michael H. Levenson (1984, Part I) provides excellent background to the Victorian temper that precedes modernism. See also Kermode (1961) and Schwartz (1985). Incidentally, Schwartz’s book began from his dissertation which was co-supervised by Rorty. Many of these references are cited in Taylor (1989).

poetic not as a genre but as a form of experience, the role of such experience in self-interpretation could not be trivial. And like Rorty, Mill had trouble deciding whether the poetic belonged mainly to private self-interpretation or to identificatory, community- building “we” interpretation. This ambiguity for Mill is followed by an ambiguity concerning “morality” itself.

As we saw in the last chapter, one side of Mill emphasizes morality as divided into two interconnected parts. Rorty’s statement of his own view also coincides with Mill on this matter. Morality “can mean either the attempt to be just in one’s treatment of others or the search for perfection in oneself. The former is public morality, codifiable in statutes and maxims. The latter is private morality, the development of character” (Rorty 1991b, 153). Since we are mainly concerned with what Rorty has to say about private morality, we may be comparatively brief with the “public” part. Mill’s statement of his own view sharply captures the tenor of Rorty’s stance. In evaluating the legislative, codifying, and maxim-making tendencies of Bentham, Mill summarized his reservations: “A moralist on Bentham’s principles may get as far as this, that he ought not to slay, burn, or steal,” but what are we to say about the ethical dimension, the “nicer shades of human behaviour” ? He continues by asking how the jurisprudential indifference of public maxims to individual differences can speak to ethical conduct in those matters “which tend to influence the depths of character...” (Mill 1838 in 1962, 104). Both Mill and Rorty want an ethical view that will round out the “relatively simple and obvious side of morality”. Hence, Rorty’s conception of private morality, the domain of the “aesthetic life”. My reading shows how two opposing tendencies became apparent as Mill set out to correct the one-sidedness of a legislative view of morality. Here, I want to examine the same phenomenon in Rorty’s like-minded effort.

Rorty has been praised for giving us an “alternative conception of moral agency,” one that promises not only to lift us out of standard difficulties of moral theory, but contributes “in the process ... to our understanding of how literature enhances moral reflection” (Furrow 1995, p.105 and Ch.5 passim). Rorty is described as making important contributions “on the ethical role of literature”

(Schusterman 1992, ix).¹⁶ The recent re-readings of Rorty describe him as succeeding in locating the “tragic dimension to moral life,” developing insights that the old humanist views cannot contend with. These insights appreciate the ethical role that literature and the creative imagination play for an ethics poised as an aestheticist reaction to contingency.

In Chapter One I raised one important region of indeterminacy in Rorty’s recent thought. On the one hand, there is the notion of art and literature as an *aid* to moral reflection, as something that provokes and enhances moral reflection. This leaves us with the thought that moral reflection itself might be governed by non-artistic and non-aesthetic categories. On the other hand, private moral life is guided by a more substantive notion of the “poetic”. On this view, poetry is not an aid to moral reflection; rather moral reflection is radically poetic. Poetry is less a genre whose best examples carry over into the moral realm; rather, poetry is a form – indeed the preeminent form – of the private moral experience of individual lives. Before broaching this topic, we need to examine some key tenets of Rorty’s Mirror of Nature, beginning with anti-foundationalism.

A good point of entry into Rorty’s historicist deconstruction of epistemological foundations might well be Mill’s claim that “the capacity for strong feeling” is the “material out of which all motives are made” – especially “the motives ... which lead human beings to the pursuit of truth” (1965ii, 128). Rorty rejects the humanist notion that truth is beyond reproach as a value of inquiry or that it should be life’s highest aim; for claims to truth are not necessarily progressive and liberating as Enlightenment humanism supposes, but can be the source of dogmatic exclusions suffered by those who do not reach the desired conclusions. Claims to truth privilege the claimant and subordinate other perspectives. Perhaps even more fervently, Rorty has also denied that “strong-feeling” should be the basis for anything, especially foundational truth-claims.

Behind the idea of the “foundations of knowledge” is an essentially pre- or non-rational element bound up in the notion of unmediated, brute “contact” with reality. In his Mirror of Nature,

¹⁶ I acknowledge that both Schusterman and Furrow take issue with Rorty on various specifics, but the overriding conviction that his pragmatism moves us forward in the current effort to work out the relation between ethics and literature is precisely what needs to be challenged and rethought.

Rorty takes this mythic kind of unmediated contact as the common thread connecting Plato to Kant (though he recognizes that Kant internalized this mind-world relation in a unique way by denying that we are acquainted with or can know the “thing-in-itself” of hard-hitting reality; but differences are not his main focus). In Plato, Descartes, Locke, and Kant, Rorty discerns a postulate in the form of an experiential dimension that is not part of an argument whose premises are publically available in the “logical space of reasons” but which are rather a matter of pre-linguistic and therefore pre-argumentative states of feeling. Such states of feeling require of themselves no argument, yet they are called on to *ground* argument. (1979, 159). Rorty pathologizes this feature of philosophy as an “urge” and a “compulsion” to view knowledge as a privileged connection to reality which in turn reveals the essential relations between knowers and objects of knowledge. Such pathos over the history of philosophy are attempts to take us “behind reasons to causes, beyond argument to compulsion from the object known, to a situation in which argument would not just be silly but impossible, for anyone gripped by the object in the required way will be *unable* to doubt or see an alternative” (1979, 159). Overcoming the epistemological tradition requires giving up this crippling urge, common from Plato to Kant and beyond. For Rorty, the foundationalist wish for head-on confrontation with reality cannot form the basis, or excuse, for circumventing cultural conversation by rendering argument strictly unnecessary.

It is this perceived non-rationality of the Given in what we ultimately confront that concerns Rorty. His anti-Kantian arguments effectively make all awareness a linguistic affair and thus aim for the “demystification” of experience at the same time. By taking all experiences-under-a-description within what Wilfred Sellars calls the “logical space of reasons,” Rorty feels assured of the rationality of different, incompatible accounts of experience. Cases of irrationality can be then explained by reference to a background of shared rationality. A result of this stance is that there is or can be no incongruity between experience and expressions of experience in language. We can rest assured, Rorty claims, that we are never “out of phase” with reality (1991a, 81). After Kant, there is no way to separate our describing activity from the role played by the rest of the world in accounting for the truth

of our beliefs. This is the basic outcome of ditching the “third dogma of empiricism”, the scheme/content distinction.

The conclusion Rorty draws from his historicist deconstruction of foundations is that *feeling*, or experience, is useless as an epistemological concept. Attempts by phenomenologists and hermeneuticians to resurrect a workable account of subjective feeling are doomed to failure. The attempt to orient oneself with reason is seen as futile, prompting a new direction for moral questioning. Since feeling is no sign or guide to truth, Reason does not provide any orienting potential for modern moral subjectivity. Rorty in effect has tried to expose a tacit appeal to an ungroundable aesthetics (unargued states of feeling) lurking behind the very notion of Reason.

There is, then, one possibly misleading way in which Rorty’s ethical views may be seen as “aestheticized”. This is the sense in which the aesthetic refers to subjective, pre-linguistic experience. Rorty wants to draw the decisive conclusion in Mirror that there is no argumentative basis to be found in non-propositional (or propositionalized) experience. *Ineffable feeling* simply cannot be assigned a role in mental life, for to do so is to conceptualize it, and therefore, to render it no longer part of an ineffable remainder. There is, therefore, no such thing as a uniquely appreciable realm of “aesthetic experience” as such. The very idea of aesthetic experience smacks of the various Kantian and empiricist dualisms that Rorty rejects: between receptivity and spontaneity, between organizing scheme and experiential content, the “given” in experience and its “expression” in language. For Rorty, “all awareness,” including what commonly falls under the heading of aesthetic sensibility, “is linguistic,” and so *aesthetic* experience as such cannot be seen as a *distinctive* mode of the subject’s access to reality. (One might be led to suppose that “linguistic awareness” in Rorty’s sense does not feel like *anything*. But, as we shall soon see, Rorty will go on to argue that linguistic ability is an awesome power that commands our delight and fascination).

Nevertheless, there are some fairly standard and familiar threads typically associated with the aesthetic that characterize for Rorty aspects of our ubiquitous linguistic awareness. A more adequate characterization might put it that the aesthetic for Rorty consists in a particular kind of *attitude* toward

our exclusively linguistic awareness. In fact, there is a discernable logic to this attitude that is evident in Rorty's account of how the subject is brought to recognize its contingency.

For Kant, aesthetic appreciation is essentially *disinterested*. But for Rorty, the values of the aesthetic appreciation of language depend on adopting a decisive stance with respect to language, an aim which is made possible by the disenchantment, or as Rorty puts it, 'de-divinization' of world and self (1989, 39). In an extreme and fully disenchanted context, neither world nor self have anything to express. As Rorty sees it, this stark realization is supposed to galvanize our attention fully toward "language" as such itself. Free and unencumbered by rules, our aims turn to creating "an expanding repertoire of alternative descriptions" (1989, 39-40). By adopting proliferate linguistic expansionism as a goal, we gain an aesthetic sense of "the power of redescription, the power of language to make new and different things possible and important" (39). In other words, raw ineffable experience returns after its rejection in *Mirror*, only now as raw, the brute, affective "power" of language itself. For Rorty, sheer delight in the power of language brings a sense of "playfulness" and "irony" (39).¹⁷

This inevitable slide back into not just the language of experience, but experience itself, is evident in Rorty's view of metaphor. Metaphor comes to be the lynchpin to Rorty's overcoming of the scientism of the philosophical tradition. Instead of a scientific conception of logical space as rigidly determined, Rorty emphasizes metaphor as a "growing point of language". Linguistic innovation via fresh metaphors guarantees the open-endedness of logical space and thus motivates a rejection of the scientific attitude. But when we examine Rorty's language on metaphor, the metaphors of experience loom large. For example:

A metaphor is, so to speak, a voice from outside logical space, rather than an empirical filling up of a portion of that space, or a logical philosophical clarification of the structure of that space. It is a call to change one's language and one's life, rather than a proposal about how

¹⁷See Rorty's statement in "The Contingency of Selfhood" (1989): "This [playfulness/irony] is the product of their [sc. Nietzsche, Freud, Proust, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and James] shared ability to appreciate the power of redescription, the power of language to make new and different things possible and important – an appreciation which becomes possible only when one's aim becomes an expanding repertoire of alternative descriptions ... Such a shift in aim is possible only to the extent that both the world and the self have been de-divinized." (39-40). This nicely sets out the conditions of possibility building up the link Rorty draws between disenchantment and irony.

to systematize them (1991b, 13).

Logical space is underdetermined by inspiration, not simply by perception and inference. Metaphors are a motive – a “call” – to change our beliefs. This inspirational view of language change is another way in which experience reappears after its epistemological banishment as an unwarranted device of foundationalism.

Aside from smuggling brute “feeling” back into the game, the most striking aspect of the ubiquity and power of language is the role that disenchantment of world and self plays. On Rorty’s view, fascination with the power of redescription occurs only after drafting radically new and important purposes for ourselves. But these new aims issue from the prior thought that the world and self have no essential centres, no intrinsic purposes, and no intrinsically right language. Indeed, this thought gives the project of articulating new, non-essentialist aims its impetus and urgency. To bring oneself to this point is to believe that the self’s presumed centre is expressively dead. It is to conclude that there is nothing ontologically interesting about the self. From this apparently despairing and metaphysically discomfoting stance (sometimes referred to as a stance of “humiliation”) that the self’s reconstitution takes aim for (and feels that it needs) increased alternative descriptions. Once we formulate new aims, the power of redescription itself becomes the source of aesthetic delight. The aesthetic attitude toward language, then, is a result of having reformulated for ourselves new aims and a new sense of purpose despite, or in the face of, self-inflicted disenchantment.

Here, then, are the chain of inferences Rorty makes: The symbolic suicide of the centred-self begets new purposes and aims, rather than, say, aimlessness or defeat; the self’s reconstitution in a proliferation of alternative redescriptions brings the contingently self-constituted self before the power of language; aesthetic appreciation of the power of language brings with it the attitudes of playfulness and irony. This, I claim, is the basic logic to the aesthetic attitude Rorty enjoins us to adopt. Irony is derived from disenchantment and becomes a strategy for attaining moral goals suited to postmodern culture. But should we take on a moral goal derived from an unexamined supposition?

It should now be more obvious why Rorty wants to abandon the “moral-aesthetic”

distinction.¹⁸ Defining the aesthetic as an attitude to the ubiquity and power of language also establishes the self's moral aims. For Rorty, to see ourselves as "tissues of contingencies" is at the same time to recognize a moral imperative to self-creation. The self has no choice but to *choose* its vocabularies and alternative descriptions. With this strange mix of choice and compulsion, the self might just as well make a beautiful collage of various alternative redescriptions as a means of asserting its freedom. Thus, private aesthetic delight in the power of redescription sets up the "radically poetic character" of individuals, and stakes out individual moral aims. The aesthetic pleasures of irony and playfulness have a relevance to our sense of what we should do with ourselves once we have abandoned the essentialist conception of human nature or of selves. This is the poetic conjunction of aesthetics and ethics.

There are, of course, competing ideals as to what art brings to moral reflection. We have raised in Chapter Two the idea that art can be seen as a key means of self-formation and moral sensitivity. The contrary thesis, illustrated by Hulme and Eliot, holds that art can be a self-deceptive substitute, a holdover from humanist ideals that can leave us morally savage in becoming aesthetically refined. Rorty's manner of addressing these conflicting views consists in adopting a shifting allegiance to *both*.

Toward the end of his Mirror of Nature, Rorty speculated that the historicist critique of foundations would help institute a new image of philosophy and inquiry as a "voice in the conversation" of humanity. Shortly after that work (1979), Rorty set out an account of pragmatism that understood its aims as realized in modernist literature and criticism. Pragmatism is philosophy in the style of modernist criticism (1982, 143). According to Rorty, "philosophy has already been displaced by literary criticism in its principal cultural function – as a source for youth's self-description of its own difference from the past" (1979, 168n.6). Literary modernism held out the promise of a radical stylistic individualism that aimed to satisfy more rigorous demands for difference

¹⁸See Rorty, 1989, 142n.2, where he objects to Habermas's classification of modern consciousness into the autonomous spheres of the aesthetic, the moral, and the scientific.

and distinction. At the same time, modernist criticism appeared to offer a model of inquiry that embodied the communal image of a “conversation” of humankind. In Rorty’s estimation, modernist artists and critics demonstrate a willingness to accept “the contingency of starting points,” thereby mustering the means to cope without conventional needs for foundational agreement. The process of holding up different texts for contrast and comparison flourished in the literary critical arts, while neighbouring philosophy (at least in the analytic tradition) remained steeped in scientism. Whereas modernism in the arts could abandon stubborn metaphysical doctrines, such as Baudelaire’s “correspondences”, philosophy in the analytic stream became an insulated and vain effort to “mirror nature” and, as a result, became an even more defective mirror of the actual cultural battles waged in neighbouring non-scientific fields.

Underpinning serious philosophy is the belief “that there is some way of breaking out of language in order to compare it with something else. But there is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using our language” (1982, xix). Rorty’s thesis on the “ubiquity of language”, then, establishes his notion of philosophy as just another “kind of writing”. Rorty rejects the idea that philosophy can somehow find the privileged links that portend to discover a real unity amidst apparent variety. Philosophy may be just another kind of writing, but it is particularly ill-suited for self-fashioning. Just as Mill came to think of poetry as “the better part of all art whatever, and of real life too” (1965i, 103), Rorty finds poetry best suited for “mere human self-fashioning.” Poetry is not a “part” of life, nor a mere literary form; rather, poetry is a form of lived experience itself. Philosophy, not art, is a self-indulgent retreat from life and a vain effort to escape time and chance. As a new source of moral consciousness, aesthetic modernism’s disruptive impact on received notions of morality brought Rorty into a struggle between his conversational ideals together with the need to institutionalize expressed freedom and his valorisation of avant-guardist innovation and provocation with all its subversive drive. Charles B. Guignon has examined Rorty’s more recent work with the observation that “Rorty’s pragmatism is woven together from two central but not always harmonious strands ...”: On the one hand, there is his “communitarian confidence” in a stable

background of normal moral discourse and rationality; on the other hand, there is his “existentialist strand that follows from Rorty’s textualism” (Guignon 1991, 91). The existentialist strand foregrounds the “poetic” side of moral consciousness, that side which is idiosyncratic, individualizing, and not suited to intersubjective agreement.

We have already seen how, in Mill’s case, a combination of these existentialist (Wordsworthian) and communitarian (Tennysonian) strands makes for a rhetorically effective doctrine integrating culturally innovative poetic/linguistic expression into general intellectual and cultural life without upsetting the stability of the latter. We saw how Mill took a corresponding turn by invoking the Tennysonian poet as one who could rectify the possible alienation from common moral consciousness that radical innovators sometimes face. The main point I want to emphasize is the very structure of Rorty’s coordinates that Mill in fact obviates.

For Rorty, the ethico-political tenor of pragmatism is succinctly expressed in the hopes and aspirations of Mill.¹⁹ Nancy Fraser has astutely fixed on Rorty’s affiliation with Mill’s *On Liberty*, arguing that it is Rorty’s “romantic impulse” that problematizes his efforts at articulating a workable anti-foundationalist ethic (Fraser 1990). Fraser observes that the textualist-romantic drive for individual distinction, and the liberal desire for conversational harmony are at odds with each other. Each takes priority over the other at different stages in Rorty’s thought, but neither perspective succeeds in generating the stability Rorty needs for his utopian vision to gain credibility. Fraser’s diagnosis identifies three distinct positions occupied by Rorty at different stages and her analysis parallels the pattern we have witnessed in Mill’s Wordsworth/Tennyson dialectic. These two contradictory tendencies present a difficulty for the liberal framework and its ideology of the individual. It is not surprising that Rorty’s postmodern liberalism remains enmeshed in these tensions.

¹⁹The main difference between Habermas and Rorty can be clearly seen in this context about liberal hope. For Habermas, modernity has largely failed fully to institute the democratic promise of the Enlightenment, whereas for Rorty modernity is just the successful development of that promise. For both, the formation of Enlightenment reason and its development (or lack thereof) assumes that the history of the conflict between public and private interests in Western capitalist Europe is the sum total of what modernity is.

According to Fraser, Rorty understands the romantic temper to be perfectly compatible with pragmatism and textualism; but then, Rorty recognizes the romanticist impulse as a source of danger in the form of a potential confusion between creative freedom and cruelty. The success of the strong poet in achieving individual distinction has no necessary connection with progressive social change. Rorty says a lot to suggest that merely by breaking the “crust of convention” in and of itself, the literary artist provokes a step toward social improvement (eg., 1989, 167). Indeed, creative innovations associated with radical pursuits of autonomy may be emancipatory; but they may not be. There is no necessity linking cultural innovation and social justice. This confounds the otherwise upbeat spirit of Rorty’s programme, so that, finally, he settles for a compromise position, aiming for the comprehensive affirmation of both romanticism and instrumentalist pragmatism by apportioning each to the private and public domains of modern life respectively. Rorty pairs up pragmatism with public rationality and romanticism with private, individual fantasy. So long as private fantasies remain private, then the valorization of romantic self-creation should swing free of cruel consequences. Rorty thus alternates between exercising irony on the one hand, and hoping for solidarity on the other. He declares that the “urge” to hold irony and solidarity, self-creation and intersubjective justice in a “single vision” is fundamentally askew. Rorty’s framework consists simply in splitting the urge for a “single vision” into a public/private divide, mapping the terrain of liberal moral life into two discursive regions.

Rorty’s conjunction of art and ethics takes two alternating lines of response to the recognition of contingency. The textualist response is modelled on the polylogical practices of modernist criticism, a willingness to forego “grounding” the terms of creation and criticism and instead to engage in redescriptive, retextualizing practices. The emphasis on open-endedness, lack of closure, and textual juxtaposition promotes techniques of self-creation not founded on ahistorical moral categories, but on mutable conceptual change and renewal. The positive thrust Rorty ascribes to textualism is its inherent ability to downplay practices – such as science – which attempt to arrest the open-ended nature of language or to reduce other vocabularies to itself. As a result, textualism has an inherently

anti-dogmatic streak, and a natural preference for plurality and diffuseness in vocabularies. The virtue of ironic modernism is its standing as a practice that promotes cultural renewal by continually undermining the power of a vocabulary to finalize aspects of moral and political culture.

Textualism has a recognizable downside, however. Too strong a commitment to radically individual distinction in a textualist spirit may be the unwitting source of the suffering and humiliation of others who are implicated in our practices of redescription. Cruelty, we might say, is textualism's reality principle; cruelty is not a textual problem for which creative re-texting is an answer. Indeed, Rorty comes to recognize the romantic impulse to self-creation through ironic textualism as a permanently potential part of the problem, an obstacle to moral and social progress.

If the textualist response leads to moral diversity by dint of continual ironic juxtaposition and its refusal to settle on final terms of moral discourse, the utopian political response aims for moral synonymy between diverse contexts, a common currency that can "pay its way" through stylistic diversity. Textualism is mainly motivated by the hope for autonomy and individual distinction; utopian politics is mainly about expressive unity in the form what Rorty calls "solidarity".

The political perspective of pragmatism prioritizes the vocabulary of the "social democratic future". It is an attempt to calibrate the terms by which the future will describe us. Since such semantic dictation of the future is not entirely under our control, Rorty's liberal utopianism adopts the attitude of "social hope". This conjunction of perspectives on language and ethics is here anchored to a political attitude hedged by American tradition. The prior foregrounding of radically subjective choice is here subsumed under a more comprehensive perspective of liberal utopianism. This itself is governed by Rorty's historicist conviction that liberalism needs no *further* conceptual innovation. His "hunch" is that political thought underwent its last conceptual revolution, summed up in On Liberty, yielding a culture that already has a workable vocabulary of liberation and reform.

While the political-utopian perspective repudiates the aim of holding reality or self-creation with intersubjective justice in a "single vision", the view from this utopia is surprisingly complete, and strangely "final" in a way that confounds the spirit of textualism. It closely resembles what

Dostoevsky dubbed “schillerizing”, a form of imaginative narration of humanity’s progressive development as the realization of our creative capacities (cf. Eldridge 1996, 180). Our late twentieth century perspective affords a more complex picture of modernism, including its sense of historical exceptionalism and the deeply felt need to reject the vocabulary of bourgeois liberalism – sometimes with disastrous consequences. The positive romanticist valuation of expressive individualism can gear itself into reactionary, even fascistic movements. Rorty is at times quite anxious to record this threat rising from the combined tendencies of pragmatism and romanticism (1991b, 196). In short, modernist renewal came with the risks and costs associated with conceptual revolution; poetic innovation in and of itself does not secure normativity. Textualism’s promise to secure normative content through sheer contextual change fails without the ultimate recourse to the vocabularies modernism sought to displace – the vocabularies, for instance, of liberalism and individualism.

Rorty’s “solution” amounts to little else than a reiteration of the public/private distinction that Mill formulated in the last century. His strategy amounts to reentrenching the Victorian concept of private affection and public solidarity as a matter of historicist fiat: It just so happens that we employ a simple, non-theoretical public discourse that splits culture down the middle, dividing it into public and private regions. Similarly, it just happens to be the case that, according to Rorty, our concepts of progress, freedom, utility and the like are “final” in the sense that there is no further appeal to their moral normativity than the fact that we happen to live by them.

As Fraser reminds us, formulations of this distinction are notoriously unstable. Moreover, Mill’s distinction between private, self-regarding actions and public, other-regarding actions in On Liberty came with no final means for deciding in advance how an action’s ramifications would distribute across the public/private divide. And we have seen how Mill’s expressivism problematises any static antithesis between public and private.

Mill’s reflections on poetic solitude cast light on how Rorty deploys his concept of “cruelty”. Poetic solitude is a condition of genuine expression, but it may also bring about unintended moral failure reflected in a disjunction between aesthetic evaluation of character and moral estimation of

action. Mill, in short, frames a moral point of view that is compatible with the notion that good moral character might be a source of moral failure. There is a striking homology between Rorty and Mill at this point.

For Rorty, cruelty is at once linguistic and nonlinguistic. The view that “cruelty is the worst thing we do” sums up the liberal point of view while the view that such a claim neither finds nor needs a “non-circular theoretical backup” defines the ironist perspective (1989, xv). Moral progress is a process of coming to be sensitized to the experience of pain suffered by others. That process – sentimental education – is for Rorty a matter of broadening our empathetic projection of the first-person plural. Sentimental moral education in a cultural liberal utopia explicitly “recognizes” the replacement of theory by forms of narrative as the vehicles of moral progress. Increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of others’ suffering and pain is not a task for theory, according to Rorty, but “for genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and especially the novel.” (1989, xvi).²⁰ Clear-cut distinctions between normal and abnormal discourses lose their point as far as moral progress is concerned. More importantly, a strangely anti-pragmatic feature of this opposition to moral theory becomes evident. The power of the novel lies in making the anecdotal details trigger the right sensitization and bring us to notice social situations and configurations that ordinarily escape us. But how does this power become dissociated from the aims of social and moral theory? One response might pick up Rorty’s rhetorical account of the difference between the theorist and the novelist as a difference in taste. Theorists, he says, are naturally ascetic, preferring the virtues of “simplicity, structure, abstraction, and essence” whereas the novelist prefers empathetic virtues of “narrative, detail, diversity, and accident” (1991b, 73). Abstraction and empathy are thus two styles of apprehending contingent social and moral reality. Pragmatically, they might

²⁰Such a hodge-podge of material for liberal sentimental education cuts across Rorty’s distinction between normal and abnormal discourse, which he takes to generalize Kuhn’s distinction between normal and revolutionary science (1979, 320). For the pragmatist, there ought to be no clear distinction between taking normal vocabularies to new cases and bringing new metaphors to redescribe old cases. Rorty apparently thinks of novelistic creation as the valorisation of familiar descriptions in new ways for new cases.

be construed on as two poles on a redescriptive continuum. But this polarity misconstrues their interaction. Sensitization as such may occur as a response to the barrage of novelistic mechanisms that force us to take particular notice, detail by detail; but from the point of view of moral reflection, we organize details into patterns of likeness and delineate types.

The activity of linking descriptions is not then adequately captured by the characterisations Rorty makes of theory and narrative. Forms of tragic literature of the sort Rorty finds typified by Henry James and Nabokov can bring about a reflexive awareness of the various forms of cruelty that we are capable of, despite and often because of the prized ethical values and goods we pursue. Again, it is difficult to imagine how sharpening our moral vision in these ways is antithetical to the aims of moral and social theory. For progress to obtain, empathetic details need to be brought into alignment with the conventions governing public morality – the process of linking descriptions that convert “them” to “us”. The process of delineating such person-types is neither exactly a matter of narrative detail or theoretical abstraction. And this takes us to a related concern about liberal sentimental education.

For Rorty, the novel is the premier genre of democracy, the main vehicle of moral progress. Novels trade on our ability to be moved by details to notice configurations of likenesses we had not previously noticed. They encourage as well assimilation of these likenesses as redescriptions of the moral world. This process is an intersubjective and public process of argument pro and con. In this way, novels are “socially useful – [they] help us attend to the springs of cruelty in ourselves, as well as to the fact of its occurrence in areas where we had not noticed it” (1989, 95). The focus on literary art as a contribution to public conversation rightly elevates perceptiveness and imagination alongside standardly theoretical modes of thinking. But this is to go no further than to claim that literary art can help in moral reflection. That claim is neither controversial nor novel. Rorty’s more controversial thesis makes moral reflection a substantively aesthetic enterprise. Given Rorty’s claim that all reflection and all experience is a linguistic affair, moral reflection on this view must itself be a form of literary art. Cruelty is the term that brings unity amidst this variety.

Rorty's historicism forces the conclusion that, like everything else, what gets counted as cruel or humiliating or painful – is a matter of time, chance, and description. On the other hand, the suffering and infliction of cruelty has to do with what we may call “semantic command”, the ordinary capacity of speakers to give linguistic expression to experience (1989, 94). To suffer cruelty is to diminish the ability to put words together. Inarticulate pain takes the place of linguistic articulacy.

In Mill's framework, alienation from the conversation is alienation from solidarity afforded by shared language. The tentative and cautionary tone behind Mill's insight that the cultivation of character in quest for autonomy can be at odds with feelings of solidarity comes to acquire a normative dimension with Rorty. In fact, he argues for a kind of self-induced “solitude”, a solitude forced upon oneself precisely in order to assert one's private autonomy. We may be geared into all kinds of descriptions and vocabularies that identify us; but our moral identity does not stop here. It so happens that our private ability to make up new descriptions exceeds all socially conferred identities. Our identities are not exhausted by public description.

In this, Mill and Rorty share the common goal of autonomy. Mill's On Liberty, read in the light of his early poetic theory, gives his thought an impressive edge over Rorty. Rorty understands autonomy as the redescriptive potential agents possess independently of socially-conferred aspects of identity. Such redescriptive potential allows one to become a radical ironist and a strong poet. The embodiment of these values is guided by a structure of intentions – to adopt a new vocabulary, for example. Mill, on the other hand, enables us to see that autonomy is not the prior ability to flex a set of intentions in choosing this or that vocabulary; rather, autonomy is a result, or the by-product, of having successfully embodied the values and commitments implied by a chosen vocabulary. Autonomy is a result, not a prior cause, of “pursuing our own good in our own way” (Mill, XVIII, 226). Mill's defence of autonomy in On Liberty can be read through the paradox of hedonism central to Mill's poetic theory to his later valuation of autonomy. Autonomy, like happiness, cannot be regulated by holding it up as an explicit goal. It becomes self-defeating. This is all the more true if we overemphasise linguistic innovation as the leading trait of autonomy, as Rorty does. For this is to

accomplish what Rorty rightly argues we cannot do: dictate the literal terms by which others must describe us. In this sense, autonomy is judged in a life only retrospectively. However, autonomy, like happiness, may be had “by the way” – the result of successfully “pursuing our own good in our own way”. Individuals have, Mill says, the freedom for such pursuits. This bare freedom doesn’t render autonomy an a priori given in a life. But autonomy as a capacity is achieved or made manifest as a by-product of successful embodiment of the values and commitments that we adopt as “our good” pursued in “our way”.²¹

If Mill and Rorty are contending with a common structure consisting of “existentialist” individuality and “communitarian” expressive unity, we still might expect that the intervention of Freud and Nietzsche would render any further similarities illusory and far-fetched. Perhaps the unavoidable philosophical differences inevitably centre here. For Rorty, these thinkers are as much literary as they are scientific and philosophical, spearheading the intellectual roots behind a successor moral orientation while demolishing the pretensions of the liberal-moral discourse that Mill here represents (1980, 181). Indeed, the idea of an essential distinction between the scientific and the literary has no purchase for Rorty. Arguing down objectivity and truth gives rise to a notion of science as that domain of inquiry which enjoys widespread agreement; whereas literary matters have only sporadic and quickly shifting agreement. Yet, given this, where do we place Freud? Does his widely shared vocabulary foster solidarity, once we accept that terms like “objectivity” and “truth” do not apply as Freud thought? Or, as Rorty believes, does Freud’s vocabulary only have a point in the individual search for autonomy – a realm which is necessarily private and unsuited to argumentation and conversation? Here, Rorty might shift to the Nietzschean-ironic stance and claim that Freud’s innovative language may indeed become extinct in the near future, or that it make no difference what status his vocabulary has for us. Rorty is neutral on the matter, claiming that Freud neither helps nor hinders the public sphere.

²¹Skorupski (1989, ch.10) distinguishes between autonomy as freedom and as capacity. The distinction is not Mill’s.

Rorty's appreciation of literary textualist modernism combines Freudian naturalism and Nietzschean ironism. In a crucial stage in the framing of his aesthetic conception of moral reflection, Rorty weds Davidson's holistic linguistic naturalism to a reading of Freud that results not in the reduction of the self to inarticulate mechanisms, but to its decentring. The self's lack of centeredness thus challenges claims that the self is directed by authentic valuations of its desires in terms of higher/lower, admirable/base status. But the decentring of the self dispenses with this necessity and at the same time accounts for (what else?) the self-deceptive picture of an authentic self standing in judgement over its de facto desires. Nietzsche provides Rorty with the "ironist" creed together with a valorization of art, rather than science, as the most noble human activity. An aestheticized ethics for Rorty, then, pits his *naturalist-ironism* against the unironical notion of a work as potentially morally grounding or orienting for a self. Rather than taking concrete art works as vehicles for moral consciousness, Rorty's ethical orientation is aestheticist in converting irony from a device of literature and wit to an attitude all its own. Hence, the celebrated figure he calls the 'ironist'. The ironist is able to recognize the "contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus of their selves" (1989, 73). An ironist "does not think her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself" (1989, 73).

By adopting a Freudian/Nietzschean naturalism, Rorty extrapolates a normative understanding of the moral predicament of the subject in terms of its creative surplus talents for linguistic innovation and redescriptive powers. This view of creativity, however, reveals Rorty's impoverished sense of our alternatives (between Cartesian self-centeredness and Freudian/Nietzschean self-dispersal). This stance of decentredness, although it can surely alter our way of describing ourselves, is not simply another "mere" alternative. The underlying assumption, according to our reading, is that a fundamental stance is required, one that seems to swing free of fortuitous redescription and yet underpins them. I have tried to capture this stance with the notion of a "symbolic suicide", committed when a language user is brought to see the self's utterly uninteresting, unexpressive and ontologically dead nature. Under such conditions, Rorty believes that a particular kind of fascination with the power

of redescription galvanizes us back to life, now in a thorough-going picture of “self-reweaving webs of belief”. This takes us through alternating moments of boredom or despair and ritualistic fascination; but it also leaves us with a confusion that lingers in Rorty’s work. He sometimes talks as though the focus on self-reweaving across holistic webs of belief, and reweaving between sub-personal “quasi-agents” comprised of alternative, but equally coherent sets of belief, is all brought about through simply adopting more “decentred talk” of our actual common sense, first-person self-descriptions. Often, Rorty speaks of simply “dropping” one vocabulary and taking up a new one. But there is no way I can continually describe (or be “linguistically aware” of) my webs of belief as weaving their own way to centrelessness. From what perspective would I be able to do this? To be sure, this might be a sort of recreational exercise, one of the many modes of inwardness modern art and literature have helped make accessible. But why should this regional achievement be made into a global thesis about what humans essentially are? Moreover, it would be surprising if we were to sustain it as a chosen mode of aesthetically founded moral life. Since the very nature of Rorty’s picture of self-reweaving consists in replacing ordinary first-person Cartesian-like talk, it would be remarkable if this could be done without taking leave altogether of ordinary life. It is precisely at this point where an unspoken difference between linguistic awareness and aesthetic feeling asserts itself in Rorty’s picture.

Through Mill, we are able to see how a public aspect inheres in the private cultivation of moral character through poetic self-expression. Our analysis of Mill shows that his need to affirm an aesthetic basis to moral character in his expressive theory of poetry already provided enough resources for understanding at least one crucial way in which public and private blend into and implicate each other. Autonomy is evident as the embodiment of chosen values and commitments in a life. Such embodiment is a public manifestation, and subject to the interpretation of others and the constraint this places on identity. Mill’s “cultivation of character” through poetic self-expression, we recall, cannot be exhaustively regulated by explicit and prior intentions. Instead, poetic character enacts the appropriate regulation on the instrumentalist means of achieving some prized end – say, happiness.

This is the relevance that Mill's early literary theory bears for his mature defence of individuality in On Liberty. Variety in individual style indicates the widespread and plural realization of autonomy. If Mill's argument is read, as Dan Burnstone suggests, as a "fervent defence of personal style", we can resist the tendency Mill is more commonly known for, of reducing values to a single denominator.

Despite his strict separation of morality into a "firm distinction" of private and public, Rorty sometimes acknowledges this "regulatory" conception, where our individual efforts at creating character in turn become material by which we can "tinker with our behaviour" (1991b, 162). So aestheticist pursuits of novel language and the curious ironist quest for ever more descriptions does have an impact on public morality – the morality suited to argumentation and conversation. Yet like Mill, or at least one aspect of him, Rorty ironically shows here how poeticized existence is not necessarily a "freer" or more liberated state but can rather become a form of strict, regimented, and impossible self-monitoring and disengagement. Indeed, the ironist's "radical and continuing doubt" concerning the final vocabulary of the day is a mechanical operation, more so when it is not merely moral *reflection* that is at stake, but also the intentional manipulation of moral *behaviour*. The continual checking of moral reflection is meant to ensure that we are not merely aping someone else's language of self-description, that we are not simply copying others – that we are, in Rorty's terms "strong", and for Mill, "genuine" poets.

Rorty's model of moral agency involves going outside the ordinary first-person descriptive level and taking on board some global suppositions about how language works. The global supposition is the Davidsonian-inspired thesis that language is an undifferentiated holistic web that naturally tends to coherence and equilibrium. Instead of trumping experience with the "correct method" of classic epistemology, Rorty holds to this view of language as the basis for sidelining countervailing experience. Our Cartesian-sounding talk of centred selves is just an illusion; it can't be right because it contradicts the view of interpretation that Rorty wants us to resolve to live by. His sense of the "radically and continuing" effort to sustain the self-reweaving, self-enlarging picture supplies him, moreover, with a moral equivalent to Cartesian dignity of rational self-mastery. And,

as with Descartes, the disenchantment basic to the standard reductive naturalistic views does not relinquish its original purpose when naturalism goes “non-reductive”. The point made in virtue of taking disenchantment for granted is the same: It helps establish a framework within which we can, for each and any case, give an *ex ante* answer about what knowledge claims *have* to be like. For Rorty, since all we can know is interpretive, it follows that reality itself is based on interpretation. And this is the root of Charles Taylor’s claim that the great legacy of the epistemological tradition, including recent attempts to negate it all together, is the willingness to allow epistemology to dictate to ontology (Taylor 1975, Ch.1; 1995, pp.1-19; and 1990).

Once we decentre ourselves and no longer live in our common sense descriptions, the self-adjusting nature of holistic webs of belief takes up the interpretive slack. Anything can be made to fit the picture of autopoietic reweaving, so Rorty’s holism concludes that the subject is unencumbered by any special self-interpretive demands or limits. Since this view conflicts with ordinary conceptions of moral reflection, we may ask what ideals does Rorty draw from to compensate for the deficit in common sense? Two such ideals are the drive for radical individual distinction through the novel and creative use of language and the communal ideal of inquiry as constrained only by the limits of conversation. And, as we saw in the example of Mill, the artificial sense of unity among these ideals points to its own undoing: The public feature of inquiry as social conversation provokes the view that textualist innovation could throw up so many ungrounded examples of moral agency by recontextualizing its various possible contexts in modernist literature. But in fact, modernism resulted in the undermining of the consensus building resources needed for a sufficiently reliable social conversation. It has become less believable that modernity’s literature favoured conversation and conformity as its radical and frequently hostile individualism became more evident (Levenson, 1984). Textualism, as Rorty had framed it, was forced to confront a “moral objection” to the counter-conversational and elitist tendencies in modernist aesthetic culture. The romantic exaltation of the ‘poet’ threatens to alienate the textualist from common moral consciousness. Its effects are confined to the “private moral imagination” only by exacting too high a moral cost in “separation from ... fellow

humans” (Rorty, 1982:158). Rorty echoes Mill’s anxiety about the unconstrained poetry of Shelley, which Mill thought, inevitably brings about alienation from others who could not understand such highly individualized manners of expression. For Rorty, the subject of expression is a conjunction of boundless creative potential with language and an imperative to create oneself with uniqueness and novelty. The conception of autonomy as a purely private search cannot help much in grounding our the moral relation we have with others. To accomplish that, Rorty thought, would require “combining private fulfilment, self-realization, with public morality, a concern for justice” (1982, 158). Rorty’s conviction that no such combination was possible or desirable is the basis for his contingency, irony, and solidarity programme. This approach marks a realignment of pragmatism now as a “political” (rather than merely textualist) response to philosophy (1991b, 21). The political perspective encourages the priority of democracy over theory. Its political orientation differs from poetic-textualism in its attitude toward the political attempt to secure “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (1991b, 20). In all other respects, textualism and political pragmatism are alike. In rejecting scientism, that is, the belief in a rigid determination of logical space, the political-liberal thread in pragmatism is the attempt to foreground the greatest happiness principle while textualism aims to subordinate that principle in favour of the self-regarding activity of redescription.

Rorty’s proposal splits the differences between textualism and pragmatism by prioritizing the preference for poetic self-redescription in matters relating to the private sphere of interest, while endorsing the pragmatist emphasis on social utility insofar as public interests are concerned. That proposal is too narrowly focussed on the personal and the idiosyncratic. Read through his theories of poetic language, Mill’s defence of individualism, on the other hand, gives a more promising picture of how private moral reflection acquires a public aspect in exemplary stylistic agency.

Other problems beset Rorty’s aestheticist model of moral reflection based on his understanding of decentred subjectivity. Consider the role that Freud and Davidson conjointly play in Rorty’s narrative, with the model of the Unconscious as “rational conversation partner”. The basic theme is a staple of romantic thought: that we have a plurality of voices, of differing degrees of

articulacy and significance, is the *sin qua non* of the romantic temperament (Freud himself acknowledges as much). Yet we needn't get embroiled in a priority dispute about who (the romantics or Rorty) owns this insight: after all, the ancient Egyptians postulated seven souls, each with its own mode and character and severally subjected to the intrigue and sometimes treachery of the others. So the "plural voices" thesis is nothing new. Rorty's innovation seems to be (i) the definition of "person" in terms of linguistic coherence within a web of beliefs and; (ii) that, for any such web, it must exhibit rationality. Now (ii) conflicts with the romanticist conception of an inarticulate, and therefore apparently irrational remainder exceeding all efforts at rational articulacy. The dialogue between Rorty's "person-analogues" departs in this important sense from its romantic origins: that the dialogue, by fiat and without effort, is a rational one, where every belief-set deserves a hearing because, for Davidsonian reasons, any web of belief will share so much with other, differing and contending web-sets as to be never completely "out of phase with reality" (1991a, 86). This sounds comforting if you are predisposed to believe that reality is never treacherous or the setting for deception and danger. But if moral reality is at times treacherous and dangerous, which of the person-analogues in your corporal frame is to be trusted? Rorty does not arrive at such considerations, largely because his notion of person-analogues are devoid of character and personality. Person-analogues cannot be more honest, or kind, or vain, or deceptive than other person-analogues because each are, in Rorty's preferred terms, "random assemblages of contingent idiosyncratic needs". Person-analogues, in short, have no personality.

The romantic imagination, on the other hand, exists within a frame that is in part set by a horizon of unintelligibility and which must be brought into ever more linguistic articulacy, though never with full success. This romantic tenet actually resists the implication that Rorty seems to want to draw out, viz., that differences among different belief-sets reflect as much or as little reality as any other one of the parts (belief-sets, person-analogues) between which differences arise. Thus, any vocabulary is as connected or disconnected as any other with respect to reality. Differences, where they emerge, are worked out according to stock pragmatist and instrumentalist criteria, according to

Rorty. But romantic thought locates the warrant for belief or assent (as far as Rortyan-type vocabularies go) in the receding remainder that always lies beyond the bounds of any linguistic vista.

The autorationality of belief/vocabulary, understood in its proper holistic sense, leaves us with no account for why in fact we do *not* give equal hearing to any vocabulary whatever. We cannot be pressured into “democratizing” vocabularies as an ethos unless we have good reasons to scrutinize and hold up to doubt exactly why it is that we do not in fact give credence to any and every vocabulary, but instead find ourselves having to choose (often painfully) between them. Rorty cannot appeal to irrational impulses or impersonal forces to explain why it is that we are forever disregarding, losing interest in, rejecting, refuting, and otherwise “dropping” vocabularies. “Because it helps us get more of what we want” (pragmatism), or “because we are constitutionally deficient in attention – we can only hold so many vocabularies in view at once”, or “human finitude”: None of these are good reasons for picking up one rather than another vocabulary; nor are they good explanations for why we choose, or find ourselves choosing, to focus on some things and not others. The orientation that romanticism supplies would have it that our activity of appreciating, assessing, choosing, and creating vocabularies depends on bringing into view (and not exhaustively or exhaustively with linguistic focus) some reality that lies outside our range of articulacy. On this view, there is something that makes our focus on *this*, rather than *that* vocabulary better warranted and less-deluding; in short, more truthful and truth-tracking. Rorty’s way of making persons into “incarnate vocabularies” is not as simply a solution as it sounds for the purposes of explaining how we actually live and act. From the perspective of romantic-expressivism, it matters little how many “quasi-voices” or “person-analogues” we inevitably have to contend with in our single corporeal frame, and navigate through in moral reflection; what matters is the feeling of attunement or grounding that comes with harmonizing our embodiment (with its always recessive, inarticulate remainder) with a measure of articulacy, clarity, orientation, and mobility. Let a single body be as crowded with distinct vocabularies as you like: the romantic sight is not set on which One Vocabulary is True, nor which of them give us more of what we really want (and we’d surely pay to know what that is). Rather, the romantic question is: Which among

vocabularies helps me come to be what I have it in me to be? What vocabularies put me in touch with more of the world, more of the moral universe?

Moreover, it is not clear how biographical transitions are to be made out on Rorty's model. One only begins a conversation with oneself (as Mill likened his "self-confessional" model, or, as with Rorty, a conversation among "quasi-selves") because some feelings do have a highly significant role in orienting the self. On Rorty's model, the body plays no role: It is all a matter of the coherence of belief, never of the force, style, grace, skill, or radiance of the self's action. Furthermore, the dominance of one over another quasi-self has to be able to justify the changes it issues in rational self-conversation as changes for the better, not merely as fortuitous change. In other words, there is no role for a self-critical aspect to moral reflection on Rorty's model. The aesthetic goal of "self-enlargement" cannot replace self-clarification as a central aim of moral reflection unless Rorty is willing to defend it as a good that exerts its appeal in contrast to something less noble or fulfilling. If Rorty does think that self-clarity (what he calls "Platonic purity") is less noble, he is already exploiting a qualitative contrast here. We would want critical conversation with quasi-selves because they are subject to critique. The reason they are is because their contrasting stances are strongly-evaluated. The movement from one language or self to another is therefore explicable on the basis of reasons. To acknowledge this is to reach one limit of contingency.

Rorty's claim that we have only *causal* and not *semantic* ties to the world guarantees an insularity of language that threatens to cut us off from reality (cf. McDowell 1994). Worse still, the epistemological conclusion Rorty proposes dictates an ontological denial that only dogmatic claims to the full-reign of linguistic and semantic autonomy vis-a-vis its world-like content can uphold. Countervailing experience is too abundant to warrant upholding this thesis. Mill's thought, on the other hand, can be seen as an attempt to work out the consequences of expressivism as a union between emotional and semantic meaning. But there are other more pertinent considerations, related to moral experience that can be marshalled against the picture Rorty is advocating. Consider his claim that 'pain' is the only non-linguistic connection we have to the world (and what we share with animals).

Suffering, either in a Millian-Tennysonian sense of being abandoned by human conversation, or in a later Wittgensteinian sense of ‘inarticulate groaning’, is a loss of semantic command. If so, then semantic authority does and must tie us in to the world as well. And, on the expressivist view, cries of pain *are* expressed meanings.

This last argument raises an issue about which Rorty is deeply familiar – the failure to relate one descriptive language to another. A cry of pain places an observer in the field-linguist’s position: Does the cry mean “pain in tooth”, “pain in chest” or something else? Perhaps the cry was from an actor, or delivered in jest? This failure to nail expressions down to the fact of the matter poses no issues amenable to truth or reason, for Rorty. Indeed, irreconcilable descriptions pose no interesting problems at all. We choose among competing descriptions for contingent social or pragmatic reasons, not because one description approximates The World’s Own Language. The World does not decide between irreconcilable descriptions. The lesson Rorty draws from this assertion is that conceptual change proceeds blindly, without argument. Since there is for Rorty no relation of making-true between non-beliefs or non-sentences, subsisting in a physical realm of causes, and beliefs and sentences circulating in the logical space of reasons, our “causal” tie to the world is empty and trivial (Rorty, 1994b, 29-30).

It is Rorty who is trapped in a genuinely discreditable Kantian picture, only now it is a materialist version of transcendental metaphysics (cf. Putnam 1994, p.287). We are trapped in language, and there is no back road from experience to language via attempts at “grounding” language to reality. Rorty’s materialist stance cheerfully accepts the simultaneous loss of the world. The “world” becomes the trivial, but transcendent idea of an inarticulable space of causality that at the same time mirrors Kant’s “thing-in-itself” by remaining forever out of reach. Thus, Rorty’s account of the self and world cannot be as transparent as he supposes.

Conclusion: Art and morality in Victorian and postmodern liberalism

In the last chapter, we have seen how Rorty's postmodern rhetoric of contingency and irony, together with his Freudian naturalistic de-centring of the moral self, aims for an aesthetics of self-made existence. In Rorty's framework, we are fundamentally self-making; but this is distinct from our outward practice and action (1991b, 193). Indeed, when we are not consciously aware of the language that we are mindlessly gearing into social use, we may discover that some of our vocabularies, even under the best of social-liberal conditions, may play "into the hands of the bureaucrats" (1991a, 175).

Morally reflective subjects who recognize their own contingency may still be unaware of these unexpected outcomes brought on by a kind moral blindness that the notion of "playing-into" invokes. Rorty accepts that while publically regulated vocabularies do contribute to defining identity, they do not exhaust our resources for self-making. There is also private moral reflection based on capacities for self-making that exceed the public organization of identity (1991b, 196).

It is not at all clear, however, that the distinction between public and private can sustain itself when brought before various strands in modern art. In Chapter One, we noted how T.S. Eliot's poem problematised the terms Rorty favours and took as its point the shortcomings of strictly dividing oneself up in the manner Rorty proposes. Moreover, the poem manages to convey the ambiguities between Rorty's doctrine of the redeeming power of art and the contrary doctrine of art's "morally savage" and self-indulgent retreat from the "vulgar, ordinary" world. In a related but quite different manner, we saw in Chapter Three how Tennyson's "Mariana" indicates that the aesthetic life need not uphold radically individualistic, avant-gardist originality as its highest achievement. There is no reason why freedom gained through creativity must preclude sharing a great deal with other people. Moreover, "Mariana" is built upon old references and themes and thus defies Rorty's ethic of forging new languages which "the past never knew". Again, take Rorty's language of "quasi-selves", which parallels the form of the modern novel which breaks up a single narrative into several stories told at once. The language of quasi-selves speaks to a concern that we have witnessed in Mill, namely the

intuition that we are not fully transparent to our selves in moral reflection; that there is a basic opacity to private moral reflection. Mill also raises, though only dimly grasps, the fact of interpretive ambiguity: Actions and utterances have a surplus of meaning which, moreover, alternate between third-person observer and first-person self-interpretive standpoints. Mill works through with only partial success the implications of his own early poetic theory, but it is clear from our analysis that the Victorian notions of public and private could not withstand the insights Mill continued to develop. In a final gesture that crowns our comparison of Mill as Rorty's Victorian contemporary, Mill abandons his earlier aesthetic researches, declaring later in life that as far as social hope and human improvement is concerned, "the shortest way is best" in contrast to "public Art". Rorty too, frustrated by the instability his simplistic imposition of public and private onto his quest for an aestheticized ethic, reigns in considerably the possibility of art's role in a progressive and pragmatic liberal intellectual culture: Not art, but journalistic reportage is the appropriate genre for our times. Once again, after striving to conjoin perspectives on art and ethics within a naturalistic Enlightenment liberal framework, "the shortest way" – in other words, a means not suited to aesthetic creation, is deemed in the end as the most appropriate stance to adopt in order to meet with the inescapable demands of morality.

If the public-private distinction fails to hold water when the aims of morality and aesthetics are combined, neither will the terms compromising the distinction stand on their own. Not only does private moral reflection, on either Mill's or Rorty's view of it, fail to remain strictly private, but the processes respectively envisaged in the public/private framework do not withstand scrutiny. We saw how with Mill, the intrinsically dialogical nature of moral reflection could not be sustained on account of his valuation of an unrealistic notion of pure expression, the value of which could be safeguarded to the extent that it neither called forth, nor responded, to the vulgar, outward world. But moral reflection is constitutively dialogical, a call-response to others' voices by whom we feel challenged or empowered by. Charles Taylor notes how we carry on the conversation with our loved ones in moments of private moral reflection long after they have died.

In Rorty's case, the plurality of quasi-agents does not help illuminate what private moral

reflection involves, though it gains credibility in his quest for an aestheticized ethic of “self-enlargement” by virtue of the aesthetic means of much modern art which issues a challenge to the presumed unity of the self over linear time. The Freudian leveraging of naturalism to “de-humanize” the springs of human action only gain a moral point, however, when these springs are once again humanized as quasi-persons, as “rational conversational partners” housed in a single body. Yet to emphasize contingency here means that the conversational partners cannot really assume character and personality too much, for that would make them something we would have to *recognize* and possibly respect – as we would if we wanted to converse with actual persons. So the conversational model of decentred, plural quasi-agents does not really capture the dialogical nature of moral reflection either.

Rorty’s suggestion seems to be that we can undertake a metareflection of our ordinary language in order to evaluate the various uses it gets taken up in through art, literature and other genres. Yet this implication cannot be made to fit with the rest of his picture. This suggestion is tantamount to admitting a strong evaluator into the process; and, as we know, Rorty rejects this possibility on account of its presumed transcendental stance.

The assumption of masses of shared belief between different vocabularies and the related claim that, as he puts it, “we are never out of phase with reality” does not chime well with other key aspects of his project. Rorty valorizes dramatic and tragic fiction precisely because it helps infuse moral reflection with a sense of danger and instability. Nabokov and Orwell are selected as examples of artists who help “dramatize the tension between private irony and liberal hope” (1989, 142). Moral life is treacherous and often tragic and Rorty develops this category of “the literature of moral blindness” and of “cruelty” to show how aesthetic creations have moral relevance. The aim of these authors is not timeless truth, but the production of “tingles” to fascinate our imaginations. For Rorty, the literature of social criticism and social hope addresses the unsettling fact that the unreflecting insertion of ourselves into the going languages of the public imagination can mask an unwillingness to see the unjust and cruel effects of that language (1989, 141; xiv). In addition to the “delight” of Nabokov’s or Orwell’s “tingles”, the literature of social criticism and social hope aims to teach. This

genre is written by “insiders,” “fellow citizens” who endeavour to “make our institutions more just and less cruel” (1989, 141). It does not aim to replace the terms of public moral discourse and is essentially reformist; its effectiveness depends on emphatically stressing the moral commitments that we already on reflection commit to. Sometimes, our official commitments to social justice and the eradication of cruelty fail to “pay their way”.

The basic moral behind Rorty’s reflections on an ethics fashioned on aesthetic principles is that we can make “imaginative identifications” with strange people so as to see them as “fellow sufferers”. Another leading idea that brings art into the moral realm is that, through specific, detail-invoking works – particularly novels – we can recognize ourselves as victimizers first and moral victims second. Once we are persuaded that there is distant suffering and that we are victimizers, then we will curb our taste for autonomy.

Yet has Rorty really made good on his claim that we have crawled out of classicist and Victorian genres? After all, he is basically adopting Sir Philip Sidney’s pragmatism, where the aim of art is to teach and delight. More importantly, it is by no means clear that we have a radically new vocabulary for moral reflection. In fact, we seem to have familiar and standard terms of moral discourse such as justice and cruelty. Returning again to Mill, we might say that Tennyson is an “insider” fellow-citizen, while Shelley is a wild outsider. While the former works by extending ordinary language to more consistent and widespread applications of justice and utility, the latter is insulated from public, worldly rhetoric. Outsiders aim for what Rorty calls “private perfection” and “self-enlargement”.

It is by now clear how little we have ventured beyond Mill’s division of the public language of utility from the private language of poetic expression. The latter cultivates autonomy, while the former has our relations with others in mind. Mill, however, is one who labours under what Rorty calls the “moral-aesthetic contrast” (1989, 142). This contrast is rejected on account of its inability to contend with the real complexities arising between the demands of duties to oneself and duties to others (141). But there is even reason to think that Rorty has not yet succeeded in fully collapsing this

distinction. He does, after all, adopt Mill's division of morality into two parts. As we saw in Chapter Three, Mill distinguishes the first part of morality into a self-training for which poetry and literature gain relevance for the cultivation of moral character, and an outward regulation of the self's actions in public space, for which the language of utility is fundamental and final.

To wrap up: The early Mill allows us to see several interconnecting themes: Authenticity as a moral aspiration realized in the exercise of human creativity; the aspiration for harmony between socially integrated expression and individual autonomy, and awareness that social responsibility and individual vision may forever be in conflict; the simultaneous clarity and opacity of the creative imagination; the non-Cartesian transparency of self-interpretation and the role expression has for it. Mill wrote at a historical juncture, where the received canonical notions of art-as-mimesis gave way to expressivism. The individual artist, and by extension the moral agent, comes to be the index of art while individualism and authenticity as we now appreciate them are taken up as categories of art. Since Mill's time, the analogies between the increasingly subtler languages of art and of individualism have vastly multiplied.

Given this multiplication, we ought to question Rorty's radical over-simplification of modernism. Indeed, Rorty appears to have achieved a perspective he denies to others in assuming a stance that summarily captures the essence of modern poetry, reducing its variety to so many examples of pragmatism's playfulness and ironic style. Couched in his own behaviourist terms, Rorty appears to merely be commenting on "our increasing willingness" to see poets in the service of mere human self-fashioning. When speaking in this voice, Rorty brings his historicism to a level of incredible generality, making a sweeping moral point for which the particularity of the very subjects and agents of "change for the better" are themselves not exactly relevant. It would be pointless to pursue Rorty by trotting out various texts (such as Eliot's) to confront his reading of modernism. This is not to say that a different approach to philosophical historicism in the evaluation of aesthetic modernism is irrelevant for addressing Rorty's most contentious claims, but it shows that we must also judge Rorty's aestheticized ethics on its own.

A consequence of Mill's early poetic theory is the view of personal character as having a publically visible aspect which he calls "aesthetic". Mill does not have the resources to articulate the embodied nature of expression, but there does remain for him a background of opacity within which we act in social contexts. This, I submit, is the Victorian idea that speaks most clearly to Rorty's claim that our attempts to *realize moral good* sometimes results in the unintended production of surplus effects that lie beyond our attempts to bring everything into rational self-presence. For Mill, this "aesthetic" surplus can cause self-alienation or "abandonment" from social conversation so long as there are others who are unable to sympathize or relate to our efforts at authentic expression. Rorty calls this the unintended "cruelty" that can attend our search for languages of our individualism. In our efforts to be both moral and beautiful in life, the fact that we sometimes end up cruel and ugly is the tragic dimension to moral life. The tragic is the meeting place of both moral life and art, ethics and aesthetics. The tragic signals the possibility that moral aspirations can themselves be a source of unwitting failure. Mill's early effort to live and articulate a philosophical stance helps us to recognize this insight. This fact should give pause to any sense of exceptionalist vision.

That Mill did stake out, however ambiguously, conclusions that could be redeemed as progress bearing on why we are compelled to see forms of art and creative practice not simply as enhancers or moral pep-pills, but rather as potential modes of ethical existence, should cast doubt on the current postmodern rhetoric of contingency and irony. He speaks to contemporary attempts to model our options for living a life that is no longer satisfied with strict distinctions between the moral and the aesthetic. In our age of exceptionalist historicist, speculative postmodernism, of interpretation and individual expression, the collapse of the moral-aesthetic distinction may not be distinctively modern or postmodern.

Appendix A

Portrait of a Lady

*Thou hast committed –
Fornication: but that was in another country,
And besides, the wench is dead.*

The Jew of Malta

I

Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon
You have the scene arrange itself – as it will seem to do –
With ‘I have saved this afternoon for you’;
And four was candles in the darkened room,
Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
An atmosphere of Juliet’s tomb
Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid.
We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole
Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and fingertips.
‘So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul
Should be resurrected only among friends
Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom
That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room.’
– And so the conversation slips
Among vellicities and carefully caught regrets
Through attenuated tones of violins
Mingled with remote cornets
And begins.

‘You do not know how much they mean to me, my friends,
And how, how rare and strange it is, to find
In a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends,
For indeed I do not love it ... you knew? you are not blind!
How keen you are!
To find a friend upon which friendship lives.
How much it means that I say this to you –
Without these friendships – life, what *cauchemar!*’

Among the windings of the violins
And the ariettes
Of cracked cornets
Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins
Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own,
Capricious monotone

That is at least one definite 'false note.'
 – Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance,
 Admire the monuments,
 Discuss the late events,
 Correct our watches by the public clocks.
 Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks.

II

Now that lilacs are in bloom
 She has a bowl of lilacs in her room
 And twists one in her fingers while she talks.
 'Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
 What life is, you who hold it in your hands';
 Slowly twisting the lilac stalks
 'You let it flow from you, you let it flow,
 And youth is cruel, and has no remorse
 And smiles at situations which it cannot see.'
 I smile, of course,
 And go on drinking tea.
 'Yet with these April sunsets, that somehow recall
 My buried life, and Paris in the Spring,
 I feel immeasurably at peace, and find the world
 To be wonderful and youthful, after all.'

The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune
 Of a broken violin on an August afternoon:
 'I am always sure that you understand
 My feelings, always sure that you feel,
 Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand.

You are invulnerable, you have no Achilles' heel.
 You will go on, and when you have prevailed
 You can say: at this point many a one has failed.
 But what have I, but what have I, my friend,
 To give you, what can you receive from me?
 Only the friendship and the sympathy
 Of one about to reach her journey's end.

I shall sit here, serving tea to friends....'

I take my hat: how can I make a cowardly amends
 For what she has said to me?
 You will see me any morning in the park
 reading the comics and the sporting page.
 Particularly I remark
 An English countess goes upon the stage.

A Greek was murdered at a Polish dance,
 Another bank defaulter has confessed.
 I keep my countenance,
 I remain self-possessed
 Except when a street-piano, mechanical and tired
 Reiterates some worn-out common song
 With the smell of hyacinths across the garden
 Recalling things that other people have desired.
 Are these things right or wrong?

III

The October night comes down; returning as before
 Except for a slight sensation of being ill at ease
 I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door
 And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees.
 'And so you are going abroad; and when do you return?
 But that's a useless question.
 You hardly know when you are coming back,
 You will find so much to learn.'
 My smile falls heavily among the bric-a-brac.

'Perhaps you can write to me.'
 My self-possession flares up for a second;
This is as I had reckoned.
 'I have been wondering frequently of late
 (But our beginnings never know our ends!)
 Why we have not developed into friends.'
 I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark
 Suddenly, his expression in a glass.
 My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark.

'For everybody said so, all our friends,
 They all were sure our feelings would relate
 So closely! I myself can hardly understand.
 We must leave it now to fate.
 You will write, at any rate.
 Perhaps it is not too late.
 I shall sit here, serving tea to friends.'

And I must borrow every changing shape
 To find expression ... dance, dance
 Like a dancing bear,
 Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.
 Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance –
 Well! and what if she should die some afternoon,

Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;
Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand
With the smoke coming down above the housetops;
Doubtful, for a while
Not know what to feel or if I understand
Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon...
Would she not have the advantage, after all?
This music is successful with a 'dying fall'
Now that we talk of dying –
And should I have the right to smile?

Appendix B

Mariana

WITH BLACKEST moss the flower-plots
 Were thickly crusted, one and all:
 The rusted nails fell from the knots
 That held the pear to the gable-wall.
 The broken sheds look'd sad and strange:
 Unlifted was the clinking latch;
 Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
 Upon the lonely moated grange.
 She only said, "My life is dreary,
 He cometh not," she said;
 She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
 I would that I were dead!"

Her tears fell with the dews at even;
 Her tears fell ere the dews were dried;
 She could not look on the sweet heaven,
 Either at morn or eventide.
 After the flitting of the bats,
 When thickest dark did trance the sky,
 She drew her casement-curtain by,
 And glanced athwart the glooming flats.
 She only said, "My life is dreary,
 He cometh not," she said;
 She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
 I would that I were dead!"

Upon the middle of the night,
 Waking she heard the night-fowl crow:
 The cock sung out an hour ere light:
 From the dark fen the oxen's low
 Came to her: without hope of change,
 In sleep she seem'd to walk forlorn,
 Till cold winds woke the gray-eyed morn
 About the lonely moated grange.
 She only said, "The day is dreary,
 He cometh not," she said;
 She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
 I would that I were dead!"

About a stone-cast from the wall
 A sluice with blacken'd waters slept,
 And o'er it many, round and small,
 The cluster'd marish-mosses crept.

Hard by a poplar shook alway,
 All silver-green with gnarled bark:
 For leagues no other tree did mark
 The level waste, the rounding gray.
 She only said, "My life is dreary,
 He cometh not," she said;
 She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
 I would that I were dead!"

And ever when the moon was low,
 And the shrill winds were up and away
 In the white curtain, to and fro,
 She saw the gusty shadow sway.
 But when the moon was very low,
 And wild winds bound within their cell,
 The shadow of the poplar fell
 Upon her bed, across her brow.
 She only said, "The night is dreary,
 He cometh not," she said;
 She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
 I would that I were dead!"

All day within the dreamy house,
 The doors upon their hinges creak'd;
 The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse
 Behind the mouldering wainscot shriek'd,
 Or from the crevice peer'd about.
 Old faces glimmer'd thro' the doors,
 Old footsteps trod the upper floors,
 Old voices call'd her from without.
 She only said, "My life is dreary,
 He cometh not," she said;
 She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
 I would that I were dead!"

The sparrow's chirrup on the roof,
 The slow clock ticking, and the sound
 Which to the wooing wind aloof
 The poplar made, did all confound
 Her sense; but most she loath'd the hour
 When the thick-moted sunbeam lay
 Athwart the chambers, and the day
 Was sloping toward his western bower.
 Then, said she, "I am very dreary,
 He will not come," she said;
 She wept, "I am aweary, aweary,
 O God, that I were dead!"

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