Áine Mahon’s first monograph *The Ironist and the Romantic. Reading Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell* starts from a tonal discord. Richard Rorty (1931–2007) and Stanley Cavell (b. 1926-2018) are arguably two of the most interesting but also the most idiosyncratic voices in contemporary American philosophy. Furthermore they both concern themselves with topics such as epistemology, morality, philosophy and politics and philosophy and literature. It is therefore surprising that no one has compared their works yet. Mahon intends to close that gap. In five chapters she summarizes some of Cavell’s and Rorty’s core ideas and compares them to each other, showing that they work on similar themes but with different register. As a guideline she introduces the intellectual categories of irony and romanticism and loosely identifies the first with Rorty and the second with Cavell. These categories serve as a bracket, since she only comes back to them at the end of her study.

In chapter 1 Mahon takes a look at Cavell’s and Rorty’s approaches to epistemology. Cavell turns out to be a very engaged and serious thinker, who takes the epistemological tradition head on and works himself off on the problem of scepticism, which he reinterprets as not only an epistemological but rather a cultural, existential problem. In his view, scepticism remains “a standing threat […] and a continuous necessity […]” (23) for human interaction. Rorty on the other hand dismisses not only scepticism but the whole of epistemology, since his analysis brings him to the conclusion that the whole discipline relies on old metaphors of mind as a mirror of nature. Instead of solving epistemological problems such as scepticism, one needs to find other ways of speaking. Cavell and Rorty not only differ in their take on epistemology, but also in their interpretation of Wittgenstein: idiosyncratically they read Wittgenstein either as an anxious romantic, who is concerned with finding a new philosophical method of self-knowledge in the face of the threat of scepticism or as a cheerful satirist, who sees “language as instrumental social practice” (37).

In chapter 2 Mahon takes a look at what makes Rorty and Cavell distinctly American philosophers. She calls this, borrowing a word from Cavell, their (American) inheritance. Rorty is presented as he presented himself: in line with American pragmatism and its “hopeful and melioristic strain” (46) in general and John Dewey’s pragmatism in particular. Mahon notes, though, that Rorty’s reading of Dewey sounds more like Rorty himself and that his appropriation has been met with some criticism, a criticism that Rorty meritorily accepted and asserted. Cavell’s inheritance lies somewhat different with
thinkers such as J. L. Austin and Emerson and Thoreau. Austin and Emerson are especially prominent and important for Cavell and in his readings of the latter, Cavell wants not only to find his own voice but also to recover Emerson as the “founding (or rather, ‘finding’) philosophical voice of America” (55).

In chapter 3 Mahon deals with Rorty’s turn to literature and Cavell’s literary philosophy. She finds that Rorty’s literary criticism can be separated from his philosophical engagement, while in Cavell’s case he is always already doing philosophy when reading literary texts. Rorty furthermore emerges as “quite a conservative literary critic” (80) that does rely too much on authorial intentions and intrinsic text meaning, which places him in stark contrast to his own polemics of innovative and radical redescription. Cavell on the other hand seems extremely attuned to the linguistic and poetological nuances of a text. When he reads texts such as Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* he takes them to be exemplifications of already stated philosophical problems. His philosophical engagement is always also concerned with the literary. Mahon summarizes this comparison, when she says, that Rorty reads and interprets on the macro-level, whereas Cavell reads and interprets on the micro-level. A comparison of Cavell’s and Rorty’s engagement with French post-structuralist theory and especially Derrida, which concludes the chapter, demonstrates this claim. Rorty appropriates Derrida for his own aims and takes him to be an ally for a post-philosophical literary culture, while Cavell reads Derrida very carefully and lastly disagrees with him. He turns the emphasis on language as something quoted or imitated on its head by stressing the inheritance of language. Language is not only imitated but also inherited. As inheritance it brings a certain responsibility with it: language is a communal resource that “acquires meaning in and through the everyday and unending negotiations constituting our lives together in language” (96).

In chapter 4 Mahon deals extensively with the writing styles of Rorty and Cavell. Her guiding question is, whether their respective styles are ornament or constitutive for the content of their philosophical reflections. Cavell’s style in this regard is not only extremely hard to understand, but cannot fulfil his own claims. The very preliminarity of his language use finds its expression in always internalizing, questioning, elaborating, complicating his own philosophical

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1 Cf. the Mrs William Beckman Lectures (1983) in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, especially 40ff.: “Accordingly I am not saying that when he [Coleridge, AK] wrote the poem [Rime of the Ancient Mariner, AK] he meant it to exemplify Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, merely that it does so, and that there are passages in the *Biographia* [Literaria; Coleridge’s autobiography, AK] where Coleridge is summarizing his hopes for philosophy in the form of post-Kantian idealism, primarily in Schelling, in which he virtually states as much.” (47).
ideals. More to it, Cavell’s dealings with other texts can be classified as a strategy of excess. Although he is aware of his over-reading, this awareness of the outrageousness of his writing “does not itself constitute an overcoming” (109), writes Mahon. Rorty’s style, on the other hand, has “rhetorical flair and colourful elegance” (ibid.), there is an “accessibility to his prose that nicely complements his democratic commitments” (110). As Rorty little by little moves away from writing for a specific audience trained and versed in analytic philosophy, especially from Contingency, Irony and Solidarity onwards, and more towards writing for the demos, he sometimes sidesteps standard models of philosophical rigour, giving way to “elements of humour and informality” (ibid.). Instead of arguing, he rather urges, recommends, suggests, nudges. Especially in his later writings there is a “methodological turn from argument and towards redescription” (ibid.) and a turn form philosophy to literature. His conception of using language (and writing and philosophical as a certain kind of writing for that matter) is best exemplified by the liberal ironist, someone who creates himself in the private sphere, while he tries to reduce cruelty in the public sphere by sensitive language use. In this combination of private self-creation and public “no-nonsense transparency” (118) and clarity of style in Rorty’s pragmatism lies a necessary tension, but a tension that “shows not so much a lack of stylistic pzazz, but a keen attunement of cultural audience” (ibid.). Mahon closes the chapter with a comparison of the “styles of American and French philosophical writing” (119), arguing that American philosophy sounds different and that within American philosophy Cavell is even more attuned to the intricacies of language. She writes that “[t]he sound of Anglo-American philosophy is [...]” a central preoccupation of Cavell. Although the overall feature of American philosophy seems to be a kind of “desperate insecurity” (123), Cavell’s struggle with language and an “authentic mode of philosophical expression” (ibid.) is far more pronounced than Rorty’s celebration of contingency. As Mahon aptly summarises: “Rorty [quite contrary to Cavell, AK] is sprightly before he is anxious” (124).

In chapter 5 Mahon deals with Rorty’s and Cavell’s preoccupation with the personal/private and the public/political. Cavell’s take on morality tries to guard itself against the emotivist picture and tries to re-establish a different sense of rationality concerning moral argument. Rationality in his sense is not agreement but rather commitment to certain kinds of modes and procedures in which agreement can be reached. Instead of proposing a new meta-ethical theory, Cavell tries to uncover how his specific conception of rationality “underscores our everyday practices of morality” (130). Rorty on the other hand, in tune with his anti-foundationalism, proposes to go without
theoretical underscoring of questions such as morality. This does not mean that we can do what we want, it simply means that we can be moral beings without recourse to philosophical principles. We don't even need a fixed conception of self. Morality comes into play, when our relatedness to other people can be or needs to be expanded. We simply extend our we-group by telling stories about who we want to be and hoping that others take up these redescriptions. This has brought him charges of emotivism, which for Rorty only makes sense insofar as we speak in the current old vocabulary. A redescription of moral vocabularies “will illuminate emotivism as unintelligible” (135). Turning to Cavell and his moral perfectionism, Mahon summarizes Cavell’s project as the defence of a moral register that places enormous value on and prioritizes self-examination, self-education and self-transformation. This perfectionism that Cavell takes from Emerson is the basis for his conception of liberal democracy. Only in the moment of revealing oneself to another, in speaking authentically as and for oneself, one gains the possibility of speaking representatively for others. Against the claims of moral perfectionism being anti-democratic and elitist, Cavell argues that conceptions that want to theorize democracy as something pertaining to objective ahistorical principles run a greater danger to fall trap to such charges. One needs constant self-transformation and constant dialogue for a democratic community to work. The matter stands differently with Rorty. For him self-perfection, self-creation is an activity that needs to be restrained to the private realm. Rorty’s conception relies on a split between the public and the private. Self-creation and human solidarity are equally valid, but they don’t need a unifying theory to bind them together. Rorty simply urges that we are private and autonomous ironists, and public and solidary liberals. His public-private-distinction allows him to decouple philosophy from politics, suggesting that value and democracy should come first, while theory and philosophy should come second.

In her conclusion Mahon argues that the “cheerful pragmatism” (153) of Rorty is at odds with Cavell’s “anxious romanticism” (ibid.). While Rorty light-footedly seems to do away with problems such as scepticism, not by engaging with and solving the problem but rather by dismissing it as a problem to discuss, Cavell on the other hand seems to be too sincere and serious to take a Rortyan redescription as an offer. For Cavell, redescription and Rortyan irony might seem as a cop-out, an inability to deal with the very real problem of scepticism. Since scepticism in Cavell’s terms is not merely an epistemological

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problem, we might see now where a hypothetical dialogue between the two thinkers might go amiss. Rorty relies too much on categories of analytical philosophy and topical specialization in its critique of epistemology. Cavell from the beginning takes a different route and identifies scepticism not as an epistemological per se but as a cultural theme that needs to be reworked, recovered, but nevertheless taken very seriously. Rorty’s irony negates stable personhood, Cavell’s romanticism is premised on the human; although not a fixed but a perfectionist self. Rorty’s irony has a sense of detachment and archness, while Cavell’s romanticism a serious and anxious struggle. Lastly, the sharp distinction between public and private realm in Rorty, cannot be upheld from a Cavellian perspective. Cavellian self-creation is not an end in itself but the very foundation of a responsible democratic community (153).

Returning to her framework of the ironist and the romantic, Mahon elucidates that there are overtones of romanticism in Rorty as well as overtones of irony in Cavell, although the latter seem to be far less pronounced. In Rorty’s later writings, from *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* onward, we find a turn towards more romantic ideas. This does not only reflect itself in essays titled *Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism* or *Pragmatism and Romanticism* but most prominently in his vision of a post-philosophical, poeticized culture as described in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. For Rorty, such a culture values self-creation, re-description and de-divinization above everything else; common traits of a romantic *Lebensform*. Although Cavell is far from celebrating the ironic attitude as Rorty does, treating it as the modus operandi of the inhabitants of his liberal utopia, there are nevertheless “notes of careful *contingency* – audible admissions of the human as somehow never settled, never finally secure” (155). Mahon, as any careful reader has already noticed in her employment of musical metaphors (a stylistic idiosyncrasy one finds in Cavell, as well), lastly sides with Cavell, since his “romanticized scepticism [...] offers an edifying alternative to the contingency blues [...] on Rorty and in others” (162).

Starting from a tonal discord Mahon has produced a consonant, lucidly written and extremely informed study on Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell that serves not only as an introduction to both thinkers, but hopefully also awakens interest in Cavell’s works within the philosophical discipline at large. As the matter stands, the tonal discord has been resolved by isolating two overlapping but ultimately diverging tunes. I suspect that choosing which one to sing and

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3 Both of them can be found in Rorty (2009).
dance to might require more than philosophy or philosophical argument can offer at the moment.

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