On the Very Idea of Romantic Irony

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It can be said that the main concern of Rortian pragmatics of language consists in trying to reconcile ethnocentrism and ironism with the romantic and imaginative horizon of culture. In this essay I’m trying to call attention to a crucial link, rarely analyzed, that leads from Gadamerian Bildung to irony, and thence to the metaphorical rupture in pursuit of a romantic perspective of our social world. In sum, I propose to show how Rorty, using the figures of Bildung, irony and metaphorical romance, has helped us to have a different conception of the very idea of romantic irony.

Nature I loved, and next to nature, art
I warmed both hands before the fire of life
it sinks, and I’m ready to depart.

The life of man is an ever-expanding circle, which, from a ring
imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new
and larger circles, and that without end...
There is no outside, no enclosing wall, no circumference to us.
–Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Circles,” 1841

1. Landor or the Missing Verse

In one of his last writings, “The Fire of Life,” Richard Rorty makes a poignant, brief and devastating journey that leads from the mention of his terminal illness, up to the recognition of the place and importance of poetry in culture. Poets (in the sense of Bloom – “the strong poets” like Plato, Hegel, Marx, and Freud, as well as Milton or Blake) invent for us lexicons, textures of life in which we inhabit. Textures of a full life, that opens to new lexicons, and becomes more varied, as we enrich ourselves when we make new friends. “Cultures with richer vocabularies are more fully human – farther removed from the beasts – than those with poorer ones.”

In this context I refer to the first epigraph quoted above: the epitaph that Landor wrote for himself, and that Rorty inserted into his text, with the notable exception of the first verse. That line, excluded by Rorty, reads: “I strove with
none, for none was worth my strife.” It is easy to see why it was not included in the poetic-philosophical epitaph of Rorty.

The new realities we can imagine, in the process of shaping our lives, and be farther removed from the beasts, are certainly worth the effort, and that’s why the first line of Landor cannot appear in Rorty’s emotive text. The full life enrichment through “strong” poetry, the enlightenment through the fire of life, cannot be exercised appealing to the haughty look of those who observe with disdain a foreign territory, but from the effective embedding of those who are engaged in the task of reshaping culture and hope.

The fire of life might be consumed and go out, and still we could be ready to depart. But that fire also is oriented, or so we may think, in the direction of contributing to the “ever expanding circle” we inhabit. The figure of the circle, as in the second epigraph that opens this text, does not denote here the idea of an area surrounded by a limit, beyond which lies the ineffable, the ominous reality that cannot be captured by appearances. “There is no outside, no enclosing wall,” says Emerson, quoted by Rorty in “Pragmatism and Romanticism.” This figure implies all the known Rortian references to the spaces of malleable practices, to beliefs as habits of action, as networks of allusions and reverberations, that follow the many and varied purposes inside the frame of the contingency of language.

It also involves the idea of an incremental space in the articulation of meanings. Like a tree that adds rings, we link habits, beliefs, desires, words, vocabularies, purposes, weaving and reweaving our practical orientations. It is a network that multiplies itself in webs, without assuming more than two things: a previous system of beliefs and the desire to use old and emerging beliefs in response to new challenges.

Landor’s missing verse is one that cannot be in the epitaph of that immense re-weaver that was Rorty because in that line is discredited the value of an effort to enlarge the circle of life that we are constantly broadening, in pursuit of the collective self-creation of a species. This little omission of Rorty in one of his last philosophical gestures serves to clarify my main goal here: to emphasize that what we could call a Rortian pragmatics of language involves the combination of two complex images. On the one hand, the image of the constant re-weaving and widening of experiential circles, a sort of material, fallible and creative vision of culture and thought, and, on the other, the idea of a collective destination self-created and self-assigned, which does not require joining or connecting with something eminently non-human.

Seen this way, what elsewhere I’ve termed “the paradox of Rorty” consists in trying to reconcile ethnocentrism and irony with the romantic and imaginative horizon of culture. Put more simply, the ethnocentric irony (that which separates Rorty from Landor) is not necessarily consistent with the edifying purposes of a self-creative Bildung with romantic attributes. In this essay, then, I’m trying to call attention to a crucial link, rarely analyzed, that leads from Bildung to irony, and thence to the metaphorical rupture in pursuit of