Reason and Aesthetics between Modernity and Postmodernity

Habermas and Rorty

I

The past few centuries of secular Western thought present two main utopian strategies: the rule of reason with its measured, rationalizing improvement of life, and a libidinal aestheticism with its hedonistic promesse du bonheur. As the project of modernity (with its Enlightenment roots and rationalizing differentiation of cultural spheres) has been identified with reason, so the postmodern is contrastingly characterized as dominantly aesthetic. Though pragmatism may deploy these contrasting terms to make its points, it should not regard them as denoting dichotomous, inimical essences. The rational/aesthetic and modernity/postmodernity oppositions must not be taken too rashly. Modernity clearly has its aesthetic, while postmodernism has its reasons. As art typically displays a rationality of order, unity, and purpose, so reason reveals its own deep aesthetic dimension. For many of its central notions (coherence, balance, proportion, completeness, simplicity, fairness) not only have aesthetic connotations but, even when mechanically defined, require a kind of cultivated aesthetic perception or taste for their proper understanding and application.

A book advocating philosophy as the reasoned pursuit of aesthetic living cannot harbor an essential dualism between reason and aesthetics, reflected in an unbridgeable divide between the modern and postmodern. To explore and temper these oppositional notions, this chapter
confronts the influential theories of Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty, around whom much of the debate has centered: the former championing the claims of reason and modernity, the latter representing the aesthetic and postmodern.

Despite their apparent disagreements, Habermas and Rorty agree in choosing philosophical narrative (rather than synchronic analysis) as the method for theorizing the postmodern. Both also play the same central story line: the path from modernity to postmodernity is portrayed as the undermining of reason by the aesthetic. Rorty welcomes this aesthetic turn as liberating us from a stiflingly rigid, homogenizing, and ahistorical conception of reason; as instead encouraging the flexibility of creative imagination that seems better suited to our increasingly decentered contexts and rapidly changing times. Habermas, on the other hand, defends modernity by portraying postmodernism's aesthetic turn as an unnecessary, misguided, and subversive response to a false idea of reason—subject-centered reason. The malheurs of modernity can thus be remedied not by abandoning reason for the aesthetic but by replacing subject-centered reason with a communicative model of reason.

As Rorty and Habermas insist on the primacy of language, it is there that the reason/aesthetic debate is ultimately focused. Thus Habermas criticizes Rorty for “aestheticizing” language by privileging metaphor and rhetoric as semantically more central than truth and argument. This leads to a disastrous “leveling [of] the genre distinction between philosophy and literature” in which philosophy's long-standing commitment to truth and the rational consensus of problem-solving is replaced by the poetic quest for exciting new metaphors. Rorty responds not only by questioning the foundationalist “universalism” implicit in Habermas's theory of communicative reason, but by challenging the very distinction “between rationality and irrationality” as an “obsolete and clumsy” piece of rhetoric. Even in its historicized Habermsian form, the ideal of reason represents a restrictive remnant of religion's need to supply a redeeming, unifying human essence, while what we need instead is to give free play to aesthetic “fantasy” and its enriching multiplicities. Opposing modernity's “Enlightenment hope” for rationalized society, Rorty advocates that “culture as a whole ... be ‘poeticized.’”

Through such polemics, Habermas and Rorty project a misleading dualism between reason and aesthetics that seems inconsistent with their own basic pragmatism. This troubling dualism can be undone by showing that its duelling theorists actually agree on more than they differ, though such agreement is concealed by the rhetoric of contrast so central to our habits of philosophical thinking and reinforced by the institutional frameworks in which theory takes place. We should begin by seeing how the reason/aesthetic opposition arises in Habermas's and Rorty's narratives of postmodernism's aesthetic turn.

II

For Habermas, the story starts with Schiller's and Hegel's dissatisfaction with the tradition of subject-centered reason and its philosophy of reflection, a tradition that stems from Descartes and reaches its apotheosis in Kant. This concept of reason could not escape the self-referential dilemma of having to reflect critically on the subject's knowledge while basing such criticism wholly on the subject's own reason. Moreover, in focusing on the individual subject and thus neglecting the communicative dimension of human understanding, it heightened social fragmentation and prevented philosophy from fulfilling the role of promoting cultural unity, a role it had inherited from religion (PDM 19–22). Yet, for Habermas, reason—properly understood as communicative—constitutes "the absolute power of unification" (PDM 32). Philosophy's failure to grasp the idea of reason not in terms of subjectivity but in terms of communicative intersubjectivity—an idea implicit in Schiller's and the young Hegel's view of art "as the genuine embodiment of a communicative reason" and a noncoercive unifier—constitutes for Habermas the philosophical catastrophe of our epoch (PDM 48).

Blindness to this alternative model of reason has locked us in the relentless self-critique of subject-centered reason, so that we have become suspicious of reason altogether. To escape this divisive dialectic of Enlightenment—the self-critique of reason by its own immanent activity (complemented by its repressive self-control of the rational subject), Nietzsche turned instead to the aesthetic as "reason's absolute other" (PDM 94). Since Habermas affirms "the internal relationship between modernity and rationality," he sees Nietzsche's aestheticism as "the entry into postmodernity," and characterizes this aesthetic as an antirational, Dionysian "decentered subjectivity liberated from all constraints of cognition and purposive activity" (PDM 4, 94–96).
Of course, already in modernity's cultural economy of aesthetic autonomy (through the tripartite division of science, ethics-politics, and art), aesthetic experience was aimed at freeing subjectivity both from narrow self-centeredness and the constraints of scientific and moral-practical judgment. But such aesthetic freedom was essentially confined to the sphere of art. Hence aesthetic experience was not only directed by the rational discourse of art criticism, but also controlled in being framed by the regulative boundaries constituted by the corresponding autonomy of the more clearly reason-governed domains of science and morality. With Nietzschean postmodernism, however, the aesthetic no longer remains content with such rational limits. Displaying an irrational, limit-defying "anarchistic intention" of Dionysian will to power, it "reduces everything that is and should be to the aesthetic dimension," presenting itself as not only reason's other but its sovereign (PDM 95–96, 123).

Habermas's story thus contains two very different notions of the aesthetic, though often neglecting to distinguish between them. The first concerns the rational, compartmentalized, and disciplined domain of art. Embodying communicative reason, seeking artistic progress, and providing the pleasures of meaningful form, this classic aesthetic of modernity is, for Habermas, one of "aesthetic harmony" and "artistic truth" (PDM 207). In contrast, what Habermas typically identifies as the aesthetic is an antirational drive of unconstrained hedonism and radical transgression, an aesthetic of "body-centered experiences of a decentered subjectivity," aimed at "limit-experiences" of "mystical" "ecstasy," producing "dizzying effects of shock...and excitement without any proper object." As the dominating aesthetic in Habermas's polemic, it is demonized as "aesthetically inspired anarchism" and attacked as postmodernism's grave threat to modernity's project of progressive emancipation through reason (PDM 5, 306–310).

This aesthetic challenge is traced from Nietzsche to Georges Bataille's "aesthetically inspired" eroticism and then to Foucault's theory of biopower. It can also be seen in their idea of limit-experiences, which decenter the rationally controlled subject experientially, just as their genealogical critique decenters it theoretically (PDM 211–216, 221–93). Postmodern privileging of aesthetics over reason becomes, for Habermas, still clearer in Derrida's and Rorty's advocacy of "the primacy of rhetoric over logic," "world-disclosing" literary artistry over "problem-solving" argument, and metaphor over "normal" speech: all of this captured in their vision of philosophy as just a kind of writing (PDM 190–207). He also finds this dangerous aesthetic challenge in recent German philosophy. Most virulent in Heidegger's ecstatic appeal to an archaic disclosure of Being (an "ontologized art") through a poetic "thinking more rigorous than the conceptual," it can even be detected in a rational archmodernist like Adorno with his emphasis on the redemptive, nondiscursive truth of art's archaic "mimetic content" (PDM 104, 129, 136).

For Habermas, the antirational aesthetic derives its authority from the enormous power of aesthetic experience in modern times, particularly as it developed from romanticism to the modernist avant-garde. By seeming to surpass rationality (and overwhelm our self-possession), such experience seems to offer an alternative to reason and an escape from the self-centered critical self. Yet such potent aesthetic experience, he argues, is only the product of modernity's progress toward avant-garde art, and therefore depends on its rational discursive structures even while purporting to oppose and transcend reason. The aesthetic experiences employed by these antirational theorists "are due to the same process of differentiation [and rationalization] as science and morality" (PDM 339). Therefore, to appropriate aesthetic experience theoretically in order to escape or outflank rationality involves a performative contradiction. Moreover, to the extent that it negates the rationality embodied in modernity's artistic tradition, radical aesthetic experience loses all its meaning; "the contents get dispersed...and an emancipatory effect does not follow."5

Though plausible as _ad hominem_ arguments concerning the modernist taste of antirational champions of the aesthetic, these arguments fail to clinch the case for the primacy of reason. They wrongly assume that powerful aesthetic experience always needs modernity's rationalized, differentiated conception of art, that it never existed before nor is ever achievable outside the framework of modernity's aesthetics. This presumption not only unconvincingly excludes the passionate aesthetic experience of ancient Greece (so inspirational for Nietzsche), but that of African cultures where such experience is not prestructured by modernity's cultural divisions.6

Habermas, however, still has his master argument for the primacy of reason. There is no escaping reason, because there is no escaping language and because language is essentially and necessarily rational. Language is
the medium through which we live; and it is unavoidably rational because there is "an internal connection between meaning and validity," i.e. between meaning and the rational, communicative assessment of truth claims and truth-related judgments (PDM 313–314). Aligning himself with Peircean pragmatism, Habermas insists that this defense of communicative reason makes no appeal to a transcendent "pure reason that might don linguistic clothing only in the second place. Reason is by its very nature incarnated in contexts of communicative action and in structures of the lifeworld" (PDM 322).

But in viewing language as the essence of rationality and the ground of its primacy, Habermas must resist Derrida's and Rorty's deconstructive efforts to portray language as more fundamentally aesthetic, as more a matter of disseminating creativity, persuasive rhetoric, and world-making tropes than of logical validity. Their attempt to blur the distinctions between literature, literary criticism, and philosophy is likewise condemned as a strategy to undermine the primacy of reason by denying its rationalizing process of differentiation of disciplines, a differentiation Habermas sees as essential to the achievement and progress of those disciplines. "This aestheticizing of language," he claims, "is purchased with the twofold denial of the proper senses of normal and poetic discourse." Moreover, to deny all distinction "between the poetic world-disclosive function of language and its prosaic, innerworldly functions" obscures the crucial fact that it is ultimately on such normal "everyday communicative practice" that all "learning processes" (including those of poetic production) are based, and "in relation to which the world-disclosive force of ... language has in turn to prove its worth" (PDM 205). 8

Habermas further argues that privileging the aesthetic language of innovative world-disclosure (paradigmatically expressed in "the esoteric work of art") fosters not only an "elitist contempt for discursive thought" but similar disrespect for the more ordinary and essential lifeworld practices of problem-solving and for the ordinary people engaged in them (PDM 186). By endorsing the primacy of communicative reason through the ordinary linguistic practices of the lifeworld, by enlisting pragmatism's stress on consensual practice and Anglo-American philosophy's linguistic turn, Habermas seeks to overcome the Nietzschean–postmodern aesthetic turn that pervades so much contemporary continental theory—not only in France but closer to home in Heidegger and Adorno.

III

Rorty also advocates the primacy of language, but no longer sees it as the incarnation of reason or the expression of a deep human essence. Instead language is taken primarily as an aesthetic tool for new creation and self-fashioning; we revise science, self, and society by redescription, by retelling their respective histories through different vocabularies. Philosophy should therefore also "turn against theory and toward narrative" (CIS xvi). Rorty's narrative of the path to postmodernity's "ironist culture" is one of progressive liberation from the rule of reason through the advocacy and appeal of the aesthetic. This tale is structured on a series of parallel binary oppositions that elaborate the central contrast of reason versus the aesthetic. The oppositions can be lined up as follows: truth/metaphor, necessity/contingency, universal/particular, public/privacy, philosophy/poetry, inference/narrative, logic/rhetoric, discovery/creation, foundations/apologetics, deep reality/surface appearances, metaphysicians/ironists, theorists/novelists. Freedom and progress are functions of reversing the repressive privilege of the former terms.

Hegel began the aesthetic revolt against philosophy by historicizing it as narrative in his Phenomenology of Mind. However, he lapsed by taking his narrative as the definitive story with his own philosophy as the ultimate conclusion. Nietzsche advanced the cause of freedom by highlighting the aesthetic, by advocating an uncompromising perspectivism, and by rejecting truth and metaphysics for creative interpretation and genealogical redescription. But despite Nietzsche's professed antimetaphysical perspectivism, there lurks a vestigial metaphysics and privileged perspective in his theory of the will to power. 9 Similarly, his anti-authoritarianism masks an autocratic injunction that the only worthy life is the sublime heroic one of the creative, striving Übermensch.

Heidegger, despite his attempt to overcome all metaphysics (including Nietzsche's), still falls victim to the same metaphysical impulse of universalizing his own vocabulary and interpretive redescriptions as the authoritative lexicon, narrative, and destiny of Western civilization. Derrida makes the same mistake by presenting his early notions of "difference and the myth of presence" as (respectively) the necessary root of all writing and the definitive interpretation of the entire history of metaphysics. Instead, he should recognize that these notions are nothing more than apt new ways to redescribe his own self and thought in rela-
Nominalist and historicist, postmodern irony "thinks nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence" (CIS 74). Though privileging language as constitutive of the self and lifeworld, Rorty rejects the idea of "language in general" as a substantive universal, as some "entity" or "unity" "intervening between self and reality" that constitutes the common core of human experience (CIS 13–15). For such an idea amounts to an essentialism about language that is no better (if indeed different) than an essentialism about reason. Instead Rorty advocates the idea of very particular, contingent, historicized linguistic practices. These are simply tools for coping with experience, and their highest function is not the Habermasian one of cooperative problem-solving to promote mutual understanding and consensus. Instead, this function is aesthetic: individual, original creation, to make things new, "to make something that never had been dreamed of before." The most crucial goal is innovative "self creation": refashioning and mastering oneself and one's structuring world "by inventing a new language" that redescribes these things in one's "own terms," "in words never used before," so as to escape from "inherited descriptions" and free oneself from the "horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica" (CIS 13, 27–29).

One likely objection to Rorty's aesthetic view of language as a tool for constant novelty and the expression of private individuality is that language requires some stable commonalities and consensus in order to be at all effective. Wittgenstein makes this point in his famous private-language argument, and Habermas similarly urges that language-games cannot work (hence sentences cannot "mean") without a linguistic community sharing to some extent the same vocabulary and "the presupposition of intersubjectively identical ascriptions of meaning" (PDM 198).

Rorty has two possible ways of meeting this objection. One is by adopting Donald Davidson's account of metaphoric meaning and his "passing theory" of language in order to argue that we need no stable shared rules for linguistic understanding. We can simply proceed on intuitive predictions of meaning based on current context and our previous habits of linguistic understanding. The rejoinder is that those habits would be undermined and unprojectible if language were fully aestheticized, privatized, and innovationally protean in Rorty's recommended way.

Rorty's preferred response is to separate a private from a public use of language. While the latter is fully shared to serve the needs of consensual social life, the private use need not be fully shared and indeed should
not be, if the individual is to achieve autonomy. But this private rhetoric of self-creation can remain sufficiently anchored in shared public language so as to be comprehensible to others and thus avoid the problem of the private-language argument. Since effective communication and social functioning require some linguistic consensus and stability, Rorty admits that there can be no “culture whose public rhetoric is ironist... Irony seems an inherently private matter” and necessarily “reactive,” requiring “the contrast” of the public as a shared “inherited” base from which it can assert its novel difference, “something from which to be alienated.” Here (as elsewhere) Rorty's entire project avowedly “turns on a firm distinction between the private and the public” (CIS 83, 87–88).

This sharp “public–private split” (CIS 85) involves not only separating the language of consensus from the language of creation. It also means separating the political realm of “social organization” from the aesthetic realm of individual autonomy (which he wrongly equates with unique, distinctive self-creation.)

Privileging the private and aesthetic as what gives meaning to life, Rorty advocates political liberalism as merely a means to provide the necessary stability and negative liberty for pursuit of our private aims, a framework for “letting its citizens be as privatistic, ‘irrationalist,’ and aestheticist as they please so long as they do ... no harm to others” (CIS xiv).

But, as already noted, Rorty’s “firm distinction between the private and the public” is untenable, because the private self and the language it builds upon in self-creation are always already socially constituted and structured by a public field. Indeed, not only Rorty’s particular privatized ethic of linguistic, aestheticist self-styling, but his whole notion of privatizing ethics clearly reflect the particular public and wider society that shape his thinking—the intellectual field and consumerist world of late-capitalist liberalism.

Rorty’s very idea of self-constitution and self-creation through language not only confutes his strong public/private dichotomy; it also suggests a lurking linguistic essentialism that differs from the one he repudiates, but seems even more pernicious. His view that the self is nothing but a linguistic web or set of narratives comes uncomfortably close to an essentialist view of human nature as exclusively linguistic. All that matters for selfhood and human being—in-the-world is language: “human beings are simply incarnated vocabularies”; it is simply “words which ... made us what we are.” Thus Nietzsche is praised as one who “by describing himself in his own terms ... created himself,” since he “created the only part of himself that mattered by constructing his own mind. To create one’s mind is to create one’s own language.” For humans are “nothing more than sentential attitudes—nothing more than the presence or absence of dispositions toward the use of sentences phrased in some historically-conditioned vocabulary” (CIS 27, 88, 117).

The only nonlinguistic element of experience that Rorty is willing to recognize is brute physical pain. But in contrast to the essentially linguistic human pain of “humiliation,” it represents “the nonhuman, the nonlinguistic,” what “ties us to the nonlanguage-using beasts.” The power of such brute suffering even drives the antimetaphysical Rorty toward a seemingly metaphysical vision that pits human linguistic creation against a deeper, essentially cruel and inhuman ground-reality of “just power and pain ... to be found ‘out there’” (CIS 40, 92, 94).

In arguing that man is essentially mind and that mind is essentially linguistic, Rorty not only violates his antiessentialism but endorses a mentalistic view of human nature against Nietzsche’s own emphasis on the body’s formative role and value. This linguistic mentalism and somatic neglect is particularly problematic in a philosopher intent on advancing the aesthetic, whose crucial connection with bodily senses and pleasures should be obvious, were it not for the rationalistic bias that has enthralled so much traditional aesthetic theory and still seems to ensnare Rorty’s.

Rorty’s aesthetic is thus hardly different from Habermas’s. He exhibits none of that Dionysian aestheticism of Bataille or Foucault that Habermas condemns as postmodern. Nor does Rorty even affirm the more temperate forms of libidinal somatic aesthetics that I appreciate in certain forms of popular music and “body work.” He just likes to read books, and those he likes (notably Proust, Nabakov, Orwell, and Kundera) all belong to the refined modern canon of serious art rather than to wacky Dadaism, anarchistic postmodernism, or the hedonic works of popular culture. Moreover, he recommends his chosen forms of art not for the wild ecstacies they produce but because they may “help us become autonomous... [and] less cruel” (CIS 141).

In short, Rorty’s aestheticism is rationally melioristic, advocating art to improve the lifeworld by making the individual stronger in himself
and more tolerant of others. How different is this from Habermas’s strategy for continuing modernity’s project of progress while overcoming its cultural fragmentation? Both strategies seek to appropriate the achievements of our progressive, specialized high-art tradition by translating its contents, through expert interpretive criticism, into the language and experience of our lifeworld.

IV

To sum up, Habermas and Rorty see postmodernism as privileging the aesthetic over the Enlightenment tradition of reason, and both supply historico-philosophical narratives to explain this aesthetic turn. Moreover, both cherish the modernist aesthetic tradition of high art in its more formally disciplined and rational forms, prizing it for its useful contributions to the lifeworld. Finally, both identify this lifeworld with language, which thus becomes the essence of human nature and the battleground over which aesthetics and reason struggle for dominance. Here at last, in their contrasting privileging of the linguistic centrality of these terms, Rorty and Habermas exhibit real difference.

But how momentous is it? Habermas clearly affirms language’s important aesthetic dimensions: not simply “the world-creating capacity of language,” its special “poetic-world-disclosive function,” but also an “aesthetic-expressive” dimension that he recognizes in every speech act (PDM 313, 315). Conversely, Rorty readily admits the usefulness of the rational/irrational distinction within “the interior of a language game” and particularly within the domain of “public rhetoric”—which Habermas of course would call “public reason” (CIS 47, 87).

Rorty loves to shock old-fashioned rationalists by advocating aesthetic primacy even in “the language of theoretical science,” which he sees (like Mary Hesse) as “irreducibly metaphorical.” Metaphor “is essential to scientific progress,” because its innovative aesthetic imagination provides the necessary means to escape the entrenched vocabularies of old scientific paradigms, thus paving the way for more productive new theories (EHO 166; ORT 162). But Habermas also recognizes that “the specialized languages of science and technology … live off the illuminating power of metaphorical tropes.” He simply insists that these “rhetorical elements” are eventually submitted to argumentative and experimental disciplines of consensus-oriented discourse in the process of theory justification and in being “enlisted for the special purposes of problem-solving” (PDM 209; cf. PT 205). So if Rorty portrays the history of scientific progress “as the history of metaphor” (CIS 16), Habermas is simply objecting that this is not the whole story.

Yet Rorty clearly admits this too. In defending Habermas against Lyotard’s postmodern vision of science as pure innovational paralogy, Rorty recognizes the useful regulative role of “normal science,” arguing that science no more aims “at piling paralogy on paralogy” than politics “aims at piling revolution on revolution” (EHO 166). Likewise, though preferring to highlight science’s revolutionary moment as more interesting and inspiringly heroic through its creative difference, Rorty nonetheless shows great respect for normal science’s language of consensus. Celebrating it as the expression of “unforced agreement” through the discussion of wide-ranging “suggestions and arguments,” he recommends it as an exemplary “model of human solidarity” (ORT 39). Finally, even the privileged aesthetic moment of novel difference must in some way gain validation through public discourse and its normative (albeit revisable) justificational procedures. This convergence of “private” fantasy with shared public language and the community’s needs is recognized even by Rorty as what distinguishes “genius” from mad “eccentricity or perversity” (CIS 37).

The limits of Rortian aesthetic sovereignty become even clearer when we turn to the realm of politics and the public sphere. There, as we saw, the “public rhetoric” of consensus must prevail; there we don’t want idiosyncratic metaphors but shared norms, common categories, stable procedures and consistent rules of argument. There, even universalism is affirmed—not in the Habermasian sense of a foundational “idealizing presupposition of communicative action” (PDM 206), but as the goal of an ever wider, more inclusive community of reasonable, tolerant liberals. The aesthetic and its individualism dominate only in the private sphere, though this is the sphere that Rorty privileges in contrast to Habermas’s championing of the public.

We see here another reason why the public/private split is so important to Rorty. It performs his postmodern remapping of modernity’s tripartite schema of science, art, and the ethico-political into a dualism of public discourse based on normalcy and consensus versus a private dis-
cursive sphere aimed at radical innovation and individual fulfillment. If normal science and politics can be fit into the former, personal ethics joins art in the latter and becomes aestheticized.

But Rorty's postmodern mapping remains modern and Habermasian in compartmentalizing the aesthetic from the political and normal scientific, even if the aesthetic now includes the ethics of taste in lifestyles. On the other hand, Habermas's ideal of communicative reason is procedural and liberal enough to accept differences of taste in art and aesthetic lifestyles, as long as these differences do not endanger the essential social norms of the public sphere. So if they both insist on the primacy of language and share a taste for aesthetic modernism and liberal politics, why does the Rorty–Habermas debate seem so urgent to us philosophers?

Their question of privileging aesthetics or reason—the private or public—concerns our very conception of philosophy and our self-image as philosophers. For Rorty, philosophy gets aestheticized with ethics and is relegated to the private realm. It becomes an art of living one's own life with greater autonomy and fulfillment, and perhaps inspiring others to do likewise. But it should never pretend to determine general norms for improving the direction of science or the public sphere. For Habermas, in contrast, reason's primacy over the aesthetic means keeping philosophy firmly with science in the public domain of consensus and knowledge. Philosophy remains the unifying discipline of the public sphere, integrating and legitimating its scientific, social, and even aesthetic norms. If no longer the authoritarian arbiter of culture, it remains the crucial "stand-in [Platzhalter] and interpreter," "the guardian of reason."15

While Habermas presents himself as philosopher of the polis, Rorty more often assumes the modest role of campus philosopher, recreating himself through books and inspiring colleagues and students to do the same.16 It is easy to condemn the retreat from unification of public philosophy to individual aesthetics, particularly from the perspective of European cultures like France and Germany, where organic national publics are still thought to exist and philosophers may still have a visible role in determining their political culture. But current American society neither presents such a polis nor grants the philosopher the role of guiding it and securing its unity. In such conditions, which may soon become the conditions of a confederated Europe, one might reasonably concentrate philosophy on what it may do best: help the individual lead a better life. Just as Habermas's fear of noncompartmentalized aesthetics may reflect the horrid national memory of aestheticized Nazism, so Rorty's aesthetic turn may reflect not mere personal taste but recognition of the philosopher's rather limited role in American politics and culture.

Two points, however, must be recalled from chapter two. Between the center court of the national polis and one's private aesthetic theater, there remains for American philosophers a wide realm for effective political engagement. Besides, political action can be recommended also for its personal aesthetic rewards of self-enrichment through the satisfactions of solidarity and collaborative struggle. Conversely (as I argue in chapter five), the aesthetic power of an artwork or a life can be deeply enhanced by its political engagement, even if such aesthetic-political cocktails can have a dangerously binding power that necessitates an always vigilant philosophical critique. Forcing philosophy to choose narrowly between public reason and private aesthetics therefore makes no sense.

V

In trying to case the Rorty–Habermas, aesthetic–reason oppositions, I hope to have tempered the opposition between the modern and postmodern. Postmodern—aesthetically, politically, philosophically, and economically—should be conceived as largely continuous with its modern roots, though conspicuously lacking in modernity's faith in progress, compartmentalization, and in the purity, universality, and adequacy of reason.17 Postmodernism's critique of reason can thus be seen as a continuation of modernity's, while its advocacy of the aesthetic helps highlight dimensions of experience that modern reason could not adequately handle through strategies of compartmentalization and marginalization. The postmodern implosion of aesthetics into ethics and politics shows that modernity's rationalizing differentiation of culture into separate spheres has not been entirely successful.

Rorty's aestheticization of the ethical is a symptom of this postmodern reaction. But his aesthetic remains too constrained by the modern rationalist tradition: not simply in its taste and confinement to the private
sphere, but also through its exclusive concern for language, its denial of the somatic which is *alogon* in the sense of nondiscursivity, though not necessarily in the sense of rabid Dionysian excess. The conflation of these two senses, in thinkers like Bataille, Deleuze, and Foucault, comes only by coupling the idea of somatic aesthetics with the avant-garde ideology of radical transgression. One task for postmodern inquiry is to test the limits of reason by probing this nonlinguistic aesthetic realm, which though devoid of discursive rationality is not devoid of intelligent direction. Pervading the experience of our everyday lifeworld but also the activities of expert culture, such nondiscursive *aisthesis* presents a domain whose ameliorative care could enhance our science and politics, not just our ethics and aesthetics. I develop this notion of *somaesthetic* in chapter six, but a sense of its philosophical difficulty (even of its alleged perverse impossibility) should be faced already here.

All theoretical attempts to free the aesthetic from rationalist discursive dominion run against the power of tradition. The very concept of "aesthetics" was introduced by philosophers (originally by Baumgarten, a Leibnizian rationalist) precisely to rationalize the nonlogical dimension of aesthetic experience. Aesthetics of the nondiscursive must also face the dialectical dilemma that to discourse about the "other of reason" or "other of language" is already to inscribe that other within the ambit of reason and language. Habermas sees this as his trump card of performative contradiction against reason's critique by its other, while Rorty's equation of aesthetics with language only suggests a parallel reinforcing argument.

But surely one value of the aesthetic, through the intense pleasures and often overwhelming power of aesthetic experience, is to make us forget for a moment about language and reason, allowing us to revel, however briefly, in nondiscursive sensual joy. This crucial sensual dimension is sadly neglected by Rorty because of his global linguicism. As its denial makes his aestheticism joylessly eviscerate, his contrasting emphasis on pain is still more discouraging. Despite his emancipatory progress, Rorty remains the product of a puritan America. Ignoring somatic satisfactions, his aesthetic program is one-sidedly driven by the restless, relentless production of new vocabularies and narrative identities. It is more a toiling poetics, a theory of industrious verbal making, than an aesthetic of embodied delight.

Of course, as Foucault reminds us, the body is not free from the imprint of society's rationalizing practices. But it remains (as he also recognized) a promising place where discursive reason meets its limits, encounters its other, and can be given a therapeutic shock towards redirection. Nor should we heed the objection that somatic aesthetics is impossible because such experience is too subjective and individualistic. We share our bodies and bodily pleasures as much as we share our minds, and they are surely as public as our thoughts.

There remains the ultimate paradox that the very attempt to theorize the body as something outside our linguistic structures self-refutingly inscribes it in those structures. As T.S. Eliot's Sweeney complained, "I gotta use words when I talk to you." In one sense, this is a trivial sophism, but in another a deep truth. Discourse about the somatic is not enough, as even Socrates realized in advocating and practicing dance for his philosophical life. To understand the body as the "nondiscursive other," we have to stop pushing words and start moving limbs: stop talking and start dancing. Perhaps I should say no more. Though confined to discursivity, my next two chapters hope at least to point farther, through rap's dancing aesthetic and the reconstruction of somatic experience.
Practicing Philosophy

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