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The Irruption of Words and the Voice of the Dead: Ramberg on Rorty's final vocabularies

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I can hardly begin this article without saying that Bjørn Ramberg is one of the most important intellectuals in the development of my philosophical life. Indeed, in the late 1990s and the early years of this century, after having held an undergraduate fellowship at the University of Buenos Aires devoted to the work of Donald Davidson, and having earned my bachelor's degree at the same university with a thesis on Richard Rorty—on the basis of which I was then preparing my doctoral dissertation, also centered on the author of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—coming across Bjørn's writings was one of the great theoretical illuminations that guided my work.

The deep admiration I felt for each of his texts was, in turn, the occasion for the development of new ideas that I always sensed to be in the lineage of the kind of theoretical concerns I discerned in Bjørn. That admiration was consolidated in 2013, on the First International Richard Rorty Symposium, which I had the honor of organizing in Buenos Aires (thanks to the support of the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, César Lorenzano, Verónica Tozzi, Chris Voparil, and Michael Williams). Bjørn visited my country, and I was able to meet him and realize that his extraordinary intelligence was not his greatest virtue.

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I found in him an exceptional human being, endowed with a profound intellectual and human curiosity that gave him an extraordinary capacity for empathy. I felt that his generosity made it possible for a sense of friendship to take shape almost immediately—something I was fortunate to see renewed in the various encounters we had in the following years. His generous invitation to travel to Oslo in 2019 to discuss the concept of “post-truth” was the culmination of that experience of theoretical and existential closeness that people like Bjørn make manifest so naturally, without any kind of calculation.

It is for this reason that taking part in this collective volume in his honor is, for me, both a great privilege and a profound responsibility: that of offering him a few philosophical words that he might read with at least a fraction of the enthusiasm with which I read each of his texts.

Writing for one of your teachers to read you is always an enormous challenge, and in Bjørn’s case, much of his work has always carried that same tone of respect toward his own philosophical mentors. Reading Bjørn is reading a collection of never-ending conversations with his two great masters, Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty—conversations in which, more than once, the disciple laid the groundwork for a deeper understanding and a widening of the conceptual and expressive horizons of his predecessors.

In this text, I will focus on certain aspects of the Rorty–Ramberg conversations, paying attention to some of the critical remarks Bjørn directed toward the author of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. In approaching that dialogue, I will give particular attention to the third great and omnipresent master in Bjørn’s work—one with whom he does not seem to have configured a conversation like the others, but who rather appears as an unavoidable philosophical ghost, a kind of basso continuo that profoundly accompanies all Bjørn’s writing: Hans-Georg Gadamer.

I

Throughout the years of the intellectual relationship between Rorty and Ramberg—and in the recurring reconsiderations the latter undertook after Rorty’s death—Ramberg has offered both innovative defenses of the general outlines of the American thinker’s philosophy and critical examinations of the blind spots he identified in his mentor’s neopragmatism. The most frequently revisited of these criticisms is the one developed in Ramberg (2000), concerning the viability of rehabilitating a non-merely

causal dimension when thinking about the relationship between language and the world within a non-representationalist framework. Drawing on Davidson's teachings about triangulation, Ramberg pointed out to Rorty that there would be no cost to his anti-representationalism if he made room for the idea of "getting things right." Notably, Rorty conceded this point in Rorty (2000), his famous reply to Ramberg's paper.

Less often revisited is Ramberg (2011), in which a severe critique is developed against certain aspects of Rorty's thought as presented in *CIS*—a critique that, in part, rests on questioning elements of Rorty's philosophical trajectory from the 1980s onward, insofar as he failed to take up what had been promised at the end of *PMN*: the work of Gadamer. Curiously, in his intellectual autobiography published posthumously a year before Ramberg's text, Rorty himself explicitly acknowledges and validates that abandonment of the promise, when he rejects the last part of *PMN*, stating that it "now strikes me as a false start: the contrast I drew there between 'systematic' and 'edifying' philosophy was not the one I wanted," concluding that "my invocation of Gadamerian hermeneutics was feeble and unproductive" (Rorty, 2010, 13). In what follows, I will return to Ramberg's critique of Rorty's de-Gadamerization in order to assess its scope.

I'd like to begin by quoting a striking passage from Dennett's autobiography, in which he recounts a conversation he had with Rorty—precisely in my hometown:

Dick didn't always discourage the most radical (mis?)readings of his words, I think it is fair to say, and this attitude earned him some serious enemies in analytic philosophy. We often discussed this, most memorably at a sumptuous lunch in Buenos Aires. [...] At one point, I allowed that I cared more about maintaining the respect and interest of cognitive scientists than of most philosophers, and he responded by confessing that he didn't give a damn about his reputation among scientists—or philosophers; he coveted the esteem of poets!

Dennett, 2023, 359

It was 1989, and Rorty had just published *CIS*, whose purpose was presented in the clearest possible terms: "this book tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable" (Rorty, 1989, xv). The possibility of leading an intellectual life that honored those demands

while remaining aware of the aforementioned incommensurability was presented in that book through the figure of the “liberal ironist”.

To be a liberal, following Shklar (1984), is to be the kind of person for whom committing acts of cruelty is the worst thing one can do. The characterization of the ironist, however, is more complex, since Rorty develops it throughout the book in an ambivalent way. At the very beginning of the book, Rorty introduces the ironist as “the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance” (Rorty, 1989, xv). But later, in Chapter 4, the ironist is presented as a special kind of nominalist historicist. It is for the configuration of this type that Rorty introduces the notion of *final vocabulary*. The concept is presented as follows

a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives.

Rorty, 1989, 73

And based on that concept, the ironist is characterized as

someone who fulfills three conditions : (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.

Rorty, 1989, 73

In this way, the ironist is not merely someone who acknowledges contingency, but rather someone who furthers her pursuit of authenticity by reinterpreting the inherited final vocabularies—either by making them her own or reshaping them into new expressions that hold personal significance. Ironism is, then, the historicist and nominalist mode of carry-

ing out the existential project of self-creation, self-enlargement, autonomy, and authenticity.

This is how we can understand the profession of faith that Rorty conveyed to Dennett in Buenos Aires. First, because there is an inescapable link between the nominalist-historicist and the one who places special value on poetry. For Rorty, the recognition of contingency leads us to see “the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species” (Rorty, 1989, 20). But more than that, it is the poet who is in the best position to perceive the ubiquity of contingency

the strong maker, the person who uses words as they have never before been used, is best able to appreciate her own contingency. For she can see, more clearly than the continuity-seeking historian, critic, or philosopher, that her language is as contingent as her parents or her historical epoch. She can appreciate the force of the claim that “truth is a mobile army of metaphors” because, by her own sheer strength, she has broken out of one perspective, one metaphoric, into another.

Rorty, 1989, 28

The ironist is thus the strong poet that Harold Bloom described in *The Anxiety of Influence*, *The Anatomy of Influence*, and other works—the one who pursues self-creation driven by “the horror of finding himself to be only a copy or a replica” (Bloom, 1973, 80). In this way, I sketched the general contours of the connections that Rorty establishes between historicist nominalism, ironism, and strong poetry.

Let us now return to Ramberg and his call for more Gadamer in Rorty's work. This claim is articulated precisely by paying attention to the way Rorty conceives of subjectivity through the notion of *final vocabulary*. However, this demand—present in the aforementioned 2011 paper by Ramberg—seems to be in tension with another text he published that same year, in which he highlights the deep Gadamerian legacy not only in PMN but also in CIS. Let us briefly examine how Ramberg reads Rorty through Gadamer in each of these texts.

In Ramberg (2013)², the starting point is Rorty's appropriation of Gadamer's hermeneutic historicism. Ramberg emphasizes that Rorty reads

² The first version of the paper was written in 2010 and it was published in German in 2011 (Ramberg, 2011a). For quotations I am using the version published in English two years later.

Truth and Method as a source for a notion of self-creation without reliance on a human essence, that is, a form of subjectivity that produces itself without depending on a fixed nature. Ramberg reminds us that, for Rorty, Gadamer “helps reconcile the ‘naturalistic’ point [...] that the ‘irreducibility of the *Geisteswissenschaften*’ is not a matter of a metaphysical dualism with our ‘existentialist’ intuition that redescribing ourselves is the most important thing we can do” (Rorty, 1979, 358–59). From this follows the idea that philosophy is not about knowledge but about creating possibilities of being.

Ramberg stresses that this reading turns the ontological core of Gadamer’s hermeneutics into an anti-metaphysical tool. If for Gadamer prejudices are the conditions of understanding and “*application* is a critical moment in all understanding” (Ramberg, 2013, 54), Rorty radicalizes the claim: understanding does not mirror a pre-given ontological structure but is historically constituted through linguistic practice. The “historicity of understanding” thus becomes an argument against philosophy’s claim to determine the general constraints on human thought and agency. Gadamer provides Rorty with the conceptual basis to replace the idea of knowledge with that of conversation, and truth with situated interpretation.

Ramberg calls this *semantic historicism*: all understanding is mediated by historical and linguistic practices that cannot be objectified. In this sense, Gadamer and Rorty share the critique of the subject–object dualism and the idea that the subject discovers itself as already immersed in the world. But whereas Gadamer formulates this in an ontological register, Rorty transforms it into an ethical one: an invitation to redescribe without claiming metaphysical authority.

Thus, Rorty’s notion of *edification* emerges as a pragmatist reinterpretation of Gadamerian *Bildung*. In *PMN*, edification is “the project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking” (Rorty, 1979, 360). The change from *PMN* to *CIS* is that the idea of edification, in the first book, helps Rorty to establish the metaphilosophical point that philosophy must be transformed into a creative rather than theoretical practice, and in the second one, the notion deepens (disappearing) through Rorty’s articulation of the relation between private autonomy and public solidarity: the individual’s self-creation (inspired by Gadamer’s hermeneutics) must coexist with the liberal commitment to avoid the humiliation of others.

These considerations by Ramberg are substantially qualified in the second of the papers specifically devoted to the connections between Rorty and hermeneutics. Ramberg (2011b) points out that the kind of herme-

neutics Rorty adopts is only partial: he takes from Gadamer the idea of the finitude and historicity of understanding but leaves aside the latter's deeper analysis of subjectivity and of the authority of meaning in the interpretive process.

In his new reading, Ramberg points out that when Rorty, concerned with dismantling representationalist epistemology and foundationalism, turns hermeneutics into a metaphor for a new way of doing philosophy, he ends up setting aside its phenomenological content. Instead of analyzing the concrete experience of understanding, he focuses on a broad historical narrative in which the main protagonists are systems of thought or "vocabularies" rather than subjects embodied in interpretive practices.

Ramberg particularly questions the way Rorty proposes a conception of the self as a self-creating being, defined through the contingency of its final vocabulary. Ramberg accepts Rorty's historicist and anti-representationalist starting point, but argues that the way Rorty conceives of *final vocabulary* inherits an impoverished notion of subjectivity. Ramberg begins with Rorty's Davidson-influenced view: the subject is not an autonomous entity but a node within an intersubjective network of beliefs, desires, and linguistic practices. From this perspective, meaning arises through processes of triangulation—the interaction between speakers and a shared world—which implies that all rationality and subjectivity are public and shared. However, according to Ramberg, the idea of *final vocabulary* reintroduces a residue of individualism incompatible with the Davidsonian view: the final vocabulary seems to mark the normative boundaries of an isolated subject, reinstating a kind of "closed" or "self-affirming" subjectivity. In his words, "a final vocabulary seems to inherit whatever arbitrariness may attach to any particular individual's commitments, rather than serve as a possible means for mitigating such arbitrariness" (Ramberg, 2011b, 45). For this reason, *final vocabulary* ends up appearing as the limit of the individual subject—an arbitrary and closed repertoire of discursive resources, without a living relation to something broader (tradition, community, experience). Ramberg argues that this version of subjectivity makes *final vocabulary* seem arbitrary, because it depends on an individual's repertoire; reinforce a subjectivist individualism, in which each person is trapped within their own language; and fail to explain how authority and normativity can arise beyond the subject (for instance, in tradition, dialogue, or the interpretive community).

At this point, Ramberg introduces Gadamer's hermeneutics as a possible way to overcome the impoverished conception of subjectivity that he

attributes to Rorty. Hermeneutic philosophy, he recalls, was conceived as a critique of the “philosophy of subjectivity,” both in its Enlightenment and Romantic versions. For Gadamer, we do not first understand ourselves and then the world: we always understand ourselves within the framework of traditions, languages, and institutions that precede us. Individual self-consciousness is not the foundation of reason, but a moment within a broader historical process. In this sense, hermeneutics does not seek to destroy reason but to rescue it from the limits of subjectivism, redefining it as a historically situated and socially mediated capacity. Understanding, far from being the act of a sovereign subject, is an event that occurs through the interaction among interpreter, text, and tradition.

One of the concepts Gadamer develops to express this idea is that of “play.” In play, the subject gives themselves over to a dynamic they do not fully control: the game absorbs them and shapes their actions. Analogously, in hermeneutic understanding, the individual allows themselves to be guided by the movement of meaning that arises in encounters with others or with tradition. This experience shows that the relationship between subject and object is not the most fundamental one; what is primary is the participatory relation in which meaning emerges as something that involves us. To understand is, in this sense, to be “played” by language and history as much as to act within them. In this structure lies an idea of reason that does not oppose historicity, but rather assumes it as its condition of possibility.

Through this reinterpretation, Gadamer introduces a new link between reason, authority, and tradition. All understanding relies on a background of prejudices that orient interpretation; far from being an obstacle, these prejudices make understanding possible. The critical task, then, is not to eliminate them but to subject them to dialogue—distinguishing those that open the horizon of meaning from those that close it. The authority of tradition is neither absolute nor irrational: it depends on an act of free recognition on the part of subjects, who both receive and transform that tradition. That is why Gadamer can affirm that all true authority is founded on an act of freedom. This dual relationship—of dependence and critique—is what defines hermeneutic rationality.

Ramberg maintains that this way of thinking about reason and subjectivity can help Rortian pragmatism solve some of its dilemmas. If we adopt the hermeneutic idea of participatory subjectivity, we can understand *final vocabularies* not as fixed boundaries of an individual, but as temporary configurations within a process of ongoing dialogue and trans-

formation. In this way, the authority of meaning does not originate in the subject but in their belonging to a community of interpretation and in their responsiveness to traditions that exceed them. Integrating this dimension would make possible a version of pragmatism that is less individualistic and more open to the living historicity of understanding.

To advance in this direction, Ramberg proposes modifying some naturalist assumptions that constrain Rorty's thought. Instead of identifying the mental exclusively with the linguistic, he suggests considering broader forms of subjectivity that are also manifested in other living beings. Here he introduces the concept of "animal subjectivity" as a way of extending the notion of agency beyond propositional discourse. Drawing on contemporary ethological studies—particularly Gordon Burghardt's research on animal play—Ramberg argues that the capacity for play reveals an elementary form of subjectivity, a combination of natural regularity and spontaneous freedom. Observing play in different species allows us to recognize an evolutionary continuity in the ways living beings relate to their environment and to one another. This continuity, he suggests, invites us to rethink human subjectivity as a natural phenomenon—yet one not reducible to the physical or the merely rational.

Attention to animal subjectivity serves a precise philosophical purpose: it helps to re-educate our intuition about what it means to be a subject. By studying other forms of life, we discover aspects of our own agency that do not depend on language but are still normative and relational. In this sense, Ramberg proposes a "gradualist naturalism"—an approach that recognizes different levels of subjectivity in the biological world and that avoids opposing the mental to the physical or the rational to the natural. This broadened naturalism would allow pragmatists to preserve their commitment to science without falling into conceptual dualisms or reductionisms. Moreover, it would restore the link between reason, body, and world that the hermeneutic tradition has long maintained.

From this perspective, Rorty's notion of *final vocabulary* can be reinterpreted. Rather than understanding it as the arbitrary limit of an individual, it can be seen as the momentary form taken by our rational responsiveness to the world. Final vocabularies are historical and revisable structures, sustained by shared interpretive practices. Their authority derives neither from the will of the subject nor from transcendent truth, but from mutual recognition and the openness to otherness that all understanding requires. Thus, pragmatism can incorporate the hermeneutic principle that understanding entails being affected by what one seeks to

understand. Rationality would no longer be an exercise of control or self-assertion, but a disposition to listen and to be transformed by the meaning that emerges in dialogue.

In what follows, I will aim to examine Ramberg's observations, making some considerations that may, in part, vindicate Rorty's position. To this end, I will distinguish two levels in Ramberg's critique: on the one hand, the reference to animal subjectivity, and on the other, the intertwining of the individual and tradition.

II

Ramberg defends the idea of *animal subjectivity* as a way of overcoming the excessive logocentrism that may underlie Rorty's articulation between subjectivity and the notion of a *final vocabulary*. In this regard, I believe there are two aspects of Ramberg's observation that should be distinguished: on the one hand, the need for a gradualist, emergentist account of our connection with other living beings—especially animals—and, on the other, the importance of incorporating the bodily dimension into the characterization of subjectivity.

Concerning the first point, I will only note that Rorty (and especially Brandom) can indeed be accused—precisely because of their emphasis on language—of failing, unlike the classical pragmatists, to remain faithful to Darwin, and of thereby advocating some form of discontinuity within natural history. Rorty would insist that the linguistic turn has given pragmatism the opportunity to come even closer to Darwin, insofar

when Darwinian evolutionary theory was brought together with the suggestion, [...] that it is language, rather than consciousness or mind, which is the distinguishing feature of our species, Darwinian evolutionary theory made it possible to see all of human behaviour [...] as continuous with animal behaviour. For the origin of language, unlike the origin of consciousness, or of a faculty called 'reason' capable of grasping the intrinsic nature of things, is intelligible in naturalistic terms. We can give what Locke called a 'plain historical account' of how animals came to talk. However, we cannot give a plain historical account of how they stopped coping with reality and began representing it.

Rorty, 1999, 68

The observation regarding corporeality seems to me of the utmost importance. However, although I acknowledge that Rorty himself was not sufficiently explicit in developing the bodily dimension implicit in his extraordinary description of what we are as “incarnated vocabularies,” I have argued on several occasions that the very appeal to vocabularies is the key to embodying his philosophy (Penelas, 2022; Penelas, 2025).³ Indeed, I believe that the *final* nature of final vocabularies, although Rorty associates it with the limits of justification, should be read in affective terms. The words of our final vocabularies—at least the most charged among them—are those that, when challenged, produce in us an emotional impact that leads either to fight with others or to redescription of our own cultural heritage. The causal dimension of both the encounter with other vocabularies and the metaphors that provide the starting point for a change in one’s final vocabulary cannot be understood without recognizing that our bond with the words that matter to us is emotional and bodily. Hence Rorty conceives humiliation as the distinctive way in which one can be cruel to a human being (that is, to an *incarnated* vocabulary); by devaluing the importance someone attaches to the words of their final vocabulary, we inflict a kind of pain that, obviously, has bodily dimensions. It suffices to think of the causal efficacy of insults—especially when uttered in our mother tongue—to see that emphasizing *words* rather than the propositional contents of our beliefs is the way in which, with Rorty, we can do justice to his emphasis on the *incarnation* of language. In turn, this embodiment of language implied by such a reading of final vocabularies makes it possible to further explore the viability of integrating animal subjectivity into Rorty’s aforementioned Darwinian continuism.

Let us now turn to Ramberg’s main objection to the notion of *final vocabulary*, namely, that it depends on Rorty’s overly individualistic conception of subjectivity. At this point, I will draw, to understand the scope of that critique, on the way it was interpreted by the philosopher Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi in a recent paper. Huetter-Almerigi (2022) presents Ramberg’s critique of Rorty regarding the concept of *final vocabulary* as framed around the tension between continuity and rupture in the relationship between the individual and shared normative and linguistic frameworks. It is difficult to attribute to Rorty a non-social conception of subjectivity. Indeed—as Ramberg himself points out, in Rorty’s Davidson-influenced view, the subject is not an autonomous entity, but rather

³ See also Santelli (2020).

a node within an intersubjective network of beliefs, desires, and linguistic practices. From this perspective, meaning arises through processes of triangulation—the interaction between speakers and a shared world—, which implies that all rationality and subjectivity are public and shared. Ramberg's rejection of Rorty's notion of *final vocabulary* (which is intrinsically social) thus seems to be more closely related to the fact that it is articulated in a virtuous way with the idea of the *strong poet*—an idea that entails the vindication of the possibility of rupture with tradition, rather than merely gradual change through the inherently transformative application of concepts within hermeneutic praxis. Instead of rupture, Ramberg emphasizes interpretive continuity: the change of vocabulary does not result from an individual decision or act of creative will, but from participation in shared processes of understanding. This reinterpretation seeks to avoid the risk of arbitrary individualism and the loss of normative authority that would follow from Rorty's more radical version.

Huetter-Almerigi offers a brilliant defense of Rorty. She acknowledges that his insistence on the "calling of the genius" or *strong poet* functions as an operative strategy, not merely a descriptive one: the *vocabulary of rupture* serves to keep open the possibility of radical change within the antirepresentationalist framework. Rorty does not deny the social continuity of language, but he stresses that every innovation—every new metaphor or "strong poetry"—requires a moment of rupture, a point of temporal dislocation in which something unprecedented emerges and can later, retrospectively, be reintegrated into the normative fabric.

In this sense, Ramberg and Rorty are not so much opposed as they represent two complementary moments of the same process: Ramberg privileges stability and the continuity of meaning, while Rorty insists on the creative and disruptive instant. Huetter-Almerigi suggests that the key to articulating both perspectives lies in introducing the temporal dimension: rupture is the moment of emergence of a new vocabulary, while continuity is its subsequent assimilation and survival within public discourse.

Thus, Ramberg's critique points out that Rorty's conception of *final vocabulary* needlessly breaks with the intersubjective continuity of linguistic experience. But reinterpreted through temporality and pragmatism, that rupture can be seen not as a negation of continuity, but as the condition of possibility for cultural and political change.

I fully agree with Huetter-Almerigi's reading and her vindication of Rorty's thought in *CRS* and in his later writings. Her description of Rorty's dialectic between continuity and rupture, between attachment to and dis-

tancing from what is inherited, between the irruption of the new and its subsequent socialization, seems to me to do full justice to Rorty's thought. For instance, it clearly accounts for the way in which the American philosopher (following in the footsteps of John Dewey and George H. Mead) conceived how educational policies should be developed. Since for Rorty education is nothing other than "the shaping of an animal into a human being by a process of socialization, followed (with luck) by the self-individualization and self-creation of that human being through his or her own later revolt against that very process" (Rorty, 1999, 118), what follows is that primary and secondary school constitute the spaces of socialization and consolidation of what is common, while university studies should have among their aims to confront individuals with doubts about what they have inherited, so that they may acquire the tools to transform themselves into beings capable of self-ascribing some form of autonomy and authenticity.

Socialization has to come before individuation, and education for freedom cannot begin before some constraints have been imposed. But, for quite different reasons, non-vocational higher education is also not a matter of inculcating or educating truth. It is, instead, a matter of inciting doubt and stimulating imagination, thereby challenging the prevailing consensus. If pre-college education produces literate citizens and college education produces self-creating individuals, then questions about whether students are being taught the truth can safely be neglected.

Rorty, 1999, 118

I especially value Huetter-Almerigi's appreciation of the role of metaphor (which, in Rorty, in turn draws on Davidson's approach to that trope) as the causal engine of disruption. It is there, I believe, that the greatest divergence from Ramberg's interpretation can be found. Let us pay attention to the following paragraph:

Final vocabularies, as structures of commitment and orientation, are—just as Gadamer says of language as such—something we as thinking agents operate in and through. They are not objects of reflective awareness to be endorsed or rejected or explicitly compared one with another. 'Reasoned modification' of final vocabularies happens not through choice, nor through analysis, but through the judicious, careful, and tentative 'application' of vocabularies, as something that we as thinking

creatures ‘are engaged in and engaged by’, in new ways, or in places where we have not before been.

Ramberg, 2011b, 58–59

The kind of change Ramberg envisions is the change mediated by the application of concepts and rational evaluation. Curiously, that emphasis seems to depend on the very sort of hyper-intellectualist approach to subjectivity that his appeal to the animal—with its bodily dimension as the main aspect to be considered—aims to question. Yet Rorty has repeatedly described the ironist’s experience in causal terms. The contact with other final vocabularies is what causes the experience of existential doubt about the inherited final vocabulary. Ramberg himself has described the experience of ironism in prodigious terms, as existential rather than epistemic (Ramberg, 2014). My own emphasis on paying close attention to the fact that Rorty speaks of lexicons (set of words), and not merely of networks of beliefs, attending to the bodily-affective dimension of words—that is, to his idea that we are “incarnated vocabularies”—provides the conditions for understanding Rorty’s description of some of the most significant changes in the history of individuals and communities as an appeal to the idea of metaphorical rupture, of playing with nonsense. Such changes are not the result of the application of concepts, but rather, at times, of the dislocated use of words. In Rorty’s own words:

There is no method or procedure to be followed except courageous and imaginative experimentation. [...] [M]eaninglessness is exactly what you have to flirt with when you are in between social, and in particular linguistic, practices—unwilling to take part in an old one but not yet having succeeded in creating a new one. [...] Drop the appeal to neutral criteria [...] Instead, just make invidious comparisons between the actual present and a possible, if inchoate, future. Rorty, 1998, 217

Moreover, when Rorty incorporates Gadamer’s work into his philosophical repertoire in *PMN*, and introduces through it the notion of *edification*, he already marks this double dimension of continuity and rupture that Huetter-Almerigi highlights in her text:

The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may consist in the *hermeneutic* activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems

to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the “poetic” activity of thinking up such new aims, *new words*, or new disciplines, followed by, so to speak, the *inverse of hermeneutics*: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions. Rorty, 1979, 360, *emphasis added*

In this passage, Rorty presents the dialectic of edification as comprising three moments: the “hermeneutic moment” of the fusion of horizons, understood as the incorporation of what is foreign into what is one’s own; the “poetic moment” of the irruption of the new (especially new words); and the moment of incorporating the old into the new (a moment that, strikingly, Rorty calls “the inverse of hermeneutics”). Ramberg already had considered the first of the three moments very early in his philosophical development, noting that

[t]he occurrence of incommensurability is actually an essential part of this hermeneutic process. For incommensurability is precisely a signal of a conflict of prejudgements and preconceptions. And it is only through conflict, through disruption, that it is possible ‘to become conscious of these prejudices as such’. We remain unaware of our basic assumptions until faced with someone who does not share them. Ramberg, 1989, 1989

But Rorty had already—also at a very early stage of his own self-affirmation as a pragmatist philosopher—anticipated the aspects of CIS that Ramberg overlooks and Huetter-Almerigi values: namely, that the assimilation of what is foreign differs from the adoption of what is new insofar as the latter—unlike the former—is often preceded by the poetic moment, which cannot be understood in terms of a fusion of horizons.

Huetter-Almerigi emphasizes in her text the political significance of what she calls the “vocabulary of rupture.” That is, she pays particular attention to the importance of the notions of *final vocabulary* and *strong poet* as tools for Rorty’s liberal project. I fully agree with her on this point. However, in what follows, I would like to focus on something she does not sufficiently highlight in her text: that the introduction of these tools is, in the first instance, made by Rorty to think through the figure of the ironist as one who is traversed by the anxiety of influence and the need to develop a project of self-creation. Attending to some of the specific features that

Rorty's conception of the strong poet entails will allow me to identify—finally, and somewhat unexpectedly—certain points of convergence with Ramberg's reading.

III

Let us return to the notion of the strong poet as presented by Bloom. Among all the operations a poet can undertake when dealing with the anxiety of influence, the most radical is that of the one who manages to imprint his mark upon the past. I cannot fail to mention that Bloom takes this idea from an Argentine writer: Jorge Luis Borges. Indeed, at the very beginning of Chapter 1 of *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom notes that "Borges remarks that poets create their precursors" (Bloom, 1997, 19). The Argentine writer expresses this idea in his 1951 essay "Kafka and His Precursors":

If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have enumerated resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This second fact is the more significant. In each of these texts we find Kafka's idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words, it would not exist. The poem "Fears and Scruples" by Browning foretells Kafka's work, but our reading of Kafka perceptibly sharpens and deflects our reading of the poem. Browning did not read it as we do now. [...] The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. Borges, 1989, 711–12

Thus, what fascinates Bloom is that the Borgesian insight "is not that the prior poet appears to have written the new poem, it is that the new poet appears to have written the prior poet's poem" (Bloom, 2011, 19). Yet Bloom makes a relevant observation to our discussion: "sadly, Borges idealized his account of literary influence by rejecting any idea of rivalry or competition in regard to precursors" (Bloom, 2011, 25). Indeed, in the same text cited, Borges notes: "in the critics' vocabulary, the word "precursor" is indispensable, but it should be cleansed of all connotation of polemics or rivalry" (Borges, 1989, 712). The difference between Borges and Bloom seems to lie in whether one must adopt a classical or a romantic conception of the phenomenon of influence. It is often overlooked that,

in fact, when Borges formulates his thesis of retroactive causality, he refers to T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which Eliot clearly states that:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. [...] [W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. [...] The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.[...] [T]he past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.

Eliot, 1941, 25–6

But the position Eliot adopts based on this—let us call it—"poetic holism" stands at the very antipodes of the Romantic exaltation of genius. On the contrary—and this is precisely what seems to have appealed to Borges, who understood influence as something that should be stripped of rivalry—Eliot embraces what he calls an "impersonal theory of poetry," according to which the poet's duty is to "depersonalize" himself, in the sense of giving priority to art over his own personality:

what happens [to the poet] is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

Eliot, 1941, 28

Bloom's image of the strong poet seems to stand in stark contrast to this depersonalization so dear to Eliot—and, perhaps, to Borges as well. The anxiety of influence is conceived by Bloom as a history of conflicts, struggles, appropriations, and reappropriations—a battle for the shaping of an individuality that leaves a mark. This is precisely the image that captivated Rorty when he sought to think of the figure of the victorious ironist in her process of self-creation, striving to detach herself from the inherited tradition.

This tension between Eliot–Borges and Bloom–Rorty seems to mirror the one Ramberg identifies between Gadamer and Rorty, when he emphasizes the ontological role of tradition in hermeneutics as a space of

collective transformation. Ramberg's recovery of Gadamer's appeal to the notion of play—as the process through which players are constituted even as they transform it by playing—clearly carries Eliotian resonances. The Rortyan focus on the process of de-socialization toward individuation that poiesis illuminates is precisely what Gadamer and Ramberg dismiss from the standpoint of a philosophical anthropology that, in Huetter-Almerigi's words, privileges the vocabulary of continuity.

At this point, we could recall Ralph W. Emerson's classic text "The Conservative", in which he distinguishes between the "Party of Memory" and the "Party of Hope" to describe two fundamental impulses that run through all social, political, and spiritual life (Emerson, 1841). The Party of Memory represents fidelity to the past, respect for tradition, continuity, institutions, and accumulated wisdom. Emerson associates it with *understanding*. The Party of Hope, by contrast, embodies the reformist or creative impulse, confidence in the future, moral and intellectual innovation, and the breaking with what is established. It is the principle driven by *imagination*. Emerson observes that in the United States, the Party of Hope prevails. According to him, unlike in Europe, the nation's youth and the absence of an entrenched aristocracy allow imagination and confidence in the future to dominate the political and cultural scene. We might say that, for an American, what "America" signifies is, more than "freedom," "future."

Undoubtedly, the entire pragmatist tradition (and paradigmatically, Dewey) is distinctly American in this regard. Although for pragmatism there is no action without memory—without the sediment of the past—it is the dimension of the future that shapes the focus on life privileged by the pragmatist image of the human. "Hope" is the most important word in its vocabulary. Rorty is thus a faithful heir of Dewey in choosing Bloom over Eliot in this respect.

However, although Rorty adopts Bloom's image of the strong poet as a champion of self-creation, he does not fully embrace with the same force the idea of the anxiety of influence. I believe that, in this sense, Rorty is closer to Borges who disdains the notion of conflict as governing the relation between the old and the new in the private sphere of constituting an autonomous self.

This can be seen, for example, in the way Rorty reads Freud—as proposing the idea of the unconscious as a conversational partner of our conscious self. Rorty privileges one of the two senses he finds in Freud's work as shaping the notion of the unconscious: the one according to

which “[the unconscious] stands for one or more well-articulated systems of beliefs and desires, systems that are just as complex, sophisticated, and internally consistent as the normal adult’s conscious beliefs and desires” (Rorty, 1991, 149). With this notion in view, Rorty concludes that “what is novel in Freud’s view of the unconscious is his claim that our unconscious selves are not dumb, sullen, lurching brutes, but rather the intellectual peers of our conscious selves, possible conversational partners for those selves” (Rorty, 1991b, 149). It is not hard to agree with Rorty when he himself acknowledges that “this way of stating the aim of psychoanalytic treatment may seem to make everything sound too *sweetly* reasonable” (Rorty, 1991, 150 n. 11, *emphasis added*). Conceiving of psychic life—our dealing with the blind traces that haunt us from the past—in conversational terms seems to reinforce Rorty’s reluctance to think of the dialectic between past, present, and future in terms of conflict. *Pace* Rorty, a large part of Freud’s teaching is that the history of our subjectivity can hardly be encompassed by the categories of inherited sediment/disruption of the new.

The great Argentine psychoanalyst Marcelo Barros once told me in a personal conversation that, in his view, it is very difficult for an American to grasp the full dimension of Freud’s work. According to him, one of Freud’s greatest lessons is that many of the inherited traces are inassimilable for a self which is conceived as autonomous and capable of self-creation. The nature of subjectivity is, therefore, tragic—and, Barros added, Americans in general are reluctant to accept the idea of tragedy. If we adopt this perspective, Bloom—perhaps by virtue of his profound knowledge of Jewish thought—is more receptive to the idea of tragedy and, in that sense, less American than Rorty. For although he believes in the possibility of strong poets, he acknowledges that their victory, if achieved, is the outcome of a hard-fought struggle with tradition. In contrast to that tragic dimension, Rorty has no difficulty in pointing out that “to emphasize idiosyncrasy is to emphasize the *comic* variety of human life rather than the *tragedies* that morality hopes to avert” (Rorty, 1991b, p. 153, *emphasis added*).

Thus, a point of affinity that I now find with Ramberg’s appeal to Rorty in terms of the vocabulary of continuity is that, at least when it comes to thinking about private projects of self-creation, Rorty should be more attentive to the tragic dimension of the anxiety of influence that Bloom was able to discern. I am not abandoning now my defense of the vocabulary of rupture, but now it seems to me that the figure of the ironist should be

presented in ways less tied to comedy than Rorty appears to assume. The idea of rupture is not merely the idea of change; it involves a tearing of the continuity that once constituted us. “Pain”, “mourning”, “break”, “guilt”, “betrayal” are words that always haunt the ironist. Ramberg’s insistence on the ontology of tradition may serve as a good antidote to the lightness that Rorty sometimes adopts when thinking about the contingency of the self.

This blind spot in Rorty’s conception of subjectivity can be exemplified through his own existential experience. It is time to return to the conversation he had with Dennett in Buenos Aires—the one in which Rorty admitted to his colleague that the intellectual figures he values most are poets (above scientists and philosophers). Faced with such a remark, Dennett felt compelled to ask:

Why? His father, he said, had been the poetry editor of *Dissent*, that worthy left-wing magazine, and as a high school student Dick had tried his hand at writing a sonnet. [...] He showed his sonnet to his father, who read it briskly and handed it back with a single comment: “Doggerel.” Dennett, 2023, 359

We thus learn that Rorty’s great poetic operation—taking Bloom’s strong poet as the model for the ironist, the one capable of leaving behind what is inherited to carry out his private self-enlargement—is tied to an act of paternal humiliation during his adolescence. One might say, in Rortyan fashion, that this was his way of working through the trauma and being able to say, “Thus I willed it”; others might insist that there is no *poiesis* capable of overcoming the reverberation of what we cannot, even if we wish to, leave behind. Perhaps Ramberg’s main point in his critique of Rorty is nothing other than the insistence that every genius, in seeking her idiosyncrasy, inevitably carries with her the voice—whether loving or humiliating—of her dead.⁴

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