

Joseph Margolis  
*All the Turns in »Aestheticizing« Life*

I

I find that I must begin at a great distance from the question of aestheticizing ordinary life. Bear with me, the gap closes of its own accord.

Modernity – or, better, that late phase of modernity, our own time at the close of the century, sometimes dubbed postmodernity – is a time of the greatest crisis and self-doubt among the cultures of the modern West. Certainly, it manifests itself already in the late nineteenth century in Nietzsche's improbable pronouncement, concocted in a Schopenhauerean dream, in *The Birth of Tragedy*: that is, the ensorcelled Oedipal warning about the meaning of the meaninglessness of life that plays itself out from *The Birth of Tragedy* to *The Gay Science* to *The Genealogy of Morals*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, down to the posthumous *The Will to Power*. In all of this, Nietzsche deepens his original inquiry – beyond all rational resolution – regarding the condition for »promoting [what he calls] *the faith in life*.«<sup>1</sup> Whatever succeeds in this way extends and transforms the account of tragedy (as much on the comic side as the tragic). But what, more ominously, Nietzsche claims to detect through his various genealogies or deconstructions of morality, is this: »What will not be built any more henceforth, and *cannot* be built anymore, is [he says] – a society in the old sense of that word: to build that, everything is lacking, above all the material. *All of us are no longer material for a society*: this is a truth for which the time has come. It is a matter of indifference to me [he adds] that at present the most myopic, perhaps most honest, but at any rate noisiest human type that we have today, our good socialists, believe, hope, dream, and above all shout and write almost the opposite.«<sup>2</sup>

This is the setting for the reading (advanced not many years ago by Alexander Nehamas) in which Nietzsche is said to aestheticize morality, to turn to the aestheticism of his own life shaped as a work of art against the

---

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), Bk. I, §1 (p. 74).

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Bk. V, §356 (p. 304).

futility of all the usual forms of politics and morality – perhaps even a hopeful exemplar for the rest of us.<sup>3</sup>

What Nietzsche means here – I dare suppose – is that the human preoccupation with our own words and theories, which hold to their deeper life-affirming function chiefly in the greatest of the arts, is now perhaps permanently risked (as the example of the liberal, rational, and literal-minded socialists confirm). The aestheticizing of life, in Nietzsche's most original sense, transformed from Schopenhauer's, repairs as well as possible the rift that the theorizing mentality deepens at our peril.<sup>4</sup> We draw away, through language, through cultural tradition, through our preoccupation with actual history, from the sources of instinctual animal affirmation. Art in its best moments reconciles the hubris of, say, linguistic communication – a late evolutionary development in any case – with the deeper adequacy of instinctual life, the original societal sources that Nietzsche claims can never be recovered at our peculiar stage of development. Seen thus, »aestheticizing« signifies our bringing our lives to art (as best we can) in the spirit in which art brings life to its instinctual affirmation.

But, if so, then Nehamas is very subtly off the mark when, comparing Nietzsche with Proust (with whatever caveats), he claims that »Nietzsche came to see perfect self-sufficiency [something like the Proustian recovery and coherent integration of every detail in the unending recovery of a single life] as a proper test for the perfect life [an individual life as a work of art] at least partly because his thinking so often concerned literary models.«<sup>5</sup> This is actually Nehamas's gloss on Nietzsche's recommendation that »we should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them the subtle power [as in Proust, according to Nehamas's reading] usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins: but we want to be the poets of our life – first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.«<sup>6</sup>

Nehamas links the endlessness of the literary recovery of the details of a life (the Proustian theme) with the doctrine of the eternal return. But Nietzsche means, as the context of the passage cited makes clear, to urge that we work to recover the »beauty« of life in the face of the distancing danger that things are not beautiful at all (that is, life-enhancing) either in themselves or through the specialized perspectives of our languaged skills.

<sup>3</sup> See Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche, Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); particularly, Introduction.

<sup>4</sup> I find this explained in one of the most remarkably up-to-date passages of Nietzsche's, in *The Gay Science*, Bk. V, §354.

<sup>5</sup> Nehamas, *Nietzsche, Life as Literature*, pp. 194-195; see, also, p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Bk. IV, §299 (pp. 239-240).

For precisely this reason, Richard Rorty, relying perhaps too much on Nehamas, offers the following diagnosis of Nietzsche – hence of aestheticizing life: »For Proust and Nietzsche... there is *nothing* more powerful or important than self-redescription. They are not trying to surmount time and chance, but to use them.... The greatest task of the ironist [Nietzsche in particular, though Nietzsche is not quite the liberal that ironists like Rorty tend to be] is [Rorty informs us] the one Coleridge recommended to the great and original poet: to create the taste by which he will be judged. But the judge the ironist has in mind is himself. He wants to be able to sum up his life in his own terms.«<sup>7</sup> The importance of these mistaken readings (of Nietzsche) is that they help to explain the growing tendency in our own time – possibly part of a natural declension from Nietzsche's very different conviction – to view »aestheticizing« as entrenching the propriety of individual autonomy, either the democratized or the would-be meritocratic authority for the meaning and validity of one's own life, the enlargement of the official privacy of each life (ironic and liberal in that sense at least), and the self-indulgence with which we deem ourselves entitled to pronounce our own lives »works of art.« I have no doubt that that too is part of the meaning of the aestheticizing of ordinary life. But surely it is a corruption of Nietzsche's original theme.

It is true enough that Nietzsche holds that no life is justified that cannot meet the test of the »eternal return.« But the point of that »test« – which is, of course, no test at all – is that success is entirely instinctual, not human at all, and that morality and tradition succeed only where they engage such incomprehensible energies. There's absolutely no room for optimism or reassurance there.<sup>8</sup> Certainly nothing to cheer us on regarding »Nietzsche's [supposed] effort to create an artwork out of himself,«<sup>9</sup> possibly something more convincing than Walter Pater's donnish pagan intensity or the effete energies of the *Yellow Book* or even the more charming dandyism of Wilde and Baudelaire; certainly nothing that would lead us to the kindly, democratic, consumerist aestheticism of John Dewey, in *Art and Experience*,<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, »Self-creating and Affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger,« *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 97-99.

<sup>8</sup> Compare Nehamas, *Nietzsche, Life as Literature*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Nehamas, *Nietzsche, Life as Literature*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Philadelphia: Minton, Balch, 1934); also, Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Shusterman attempts to redeem the Deweyan conception: »Pragmatism, as I conceive it after Dewey, [he says,] offers a distinctive way of defending the aesthetic model of philosophical life against these troubling questions [that is, questions that burden us with the defense of morality as opposed to 'lifestyles'] by



which, I may add, is not terribly distant from Rorty's treatment of Nietzsche's aestheticism, under the shadow of his own treatment of Dewey's liberalism. The essential difference between Nietzsche and his successors – whether Heidegger or Rorty or Nehamas – is simply that, for the latter, aestheticizing is invariably optimistic, forward-looking, and self-justifying, whereas, for Nietzsche, such considerations are entirely irrelevant. The current debate is entirely skewed in the direction of the former, whether inspired by Dewey or Adorno or Wittgenstein or, indeed, Rorty.

Are all these different currents really the same? No, it seems not. Aestheticism, or the aestheticization of life, if we may speak of Nietzsche thus, somehow prepared the way for a very strange series of incredible displacements, mainly in Germany, that redirected Nietzsche's themes into the brilliantly intuited nonsense fashioned by Ernst Jünger, Adolf Hitler, and Martin Heidegger, and that signified there a profound cry (regardless of its monstrous possibilities and irrelevancies) against the perceived vulgarity, glibness, vacuity, spreading power, acquisitiveness, anarchism, lack of nobility and heroism of the bourgeois market world that – to be sure – has now pretty well won hands down.

Aestheticism in that sense, as much in Nietzsche as in Wilde – and, crazily, in Jünger – is a protest against the self-congratulatory moralities of the West. It is also, therefore, a self-congratulatory morality of its own, what we now call aestheticizing. But it is only in Nietzsche that the metaphysical appeal to the instinct for life (curiously cobbled by Bernard Shaw) confirms the futility of any would-be rationally grounded morality and politics of any stripe, *a fortiori* any aestheticized »lifestyles« offered in place of known moralities – or, as the apotheosis of such moralities, in the familiar manner modeled by Pater or Jünger or endorsed by Dewey or proposed by Nehamas (interpreting Nietzsche) or, more pleasantly, by Richard Shusterman (interpreting Dewey) or Wolfgang Iser, or self-deceptively proclaimed by Heidegger (in his most Hölderlinesque moments).<sup>11</sup>

These are very different ways of coopting Nietzsche: some congenial to our sensibilities, some utterly impossible to defend. But the important point remains: (i) that Nietzsche's use of the notion (aestheticism, life as a work of art) presupposes the futility of ever completely legitimating our

---

undermining the traditional, stifling oppositions on which they are based»; hence, their exposé is supposed to lead to Shusterman's endorsement of »the aestheticization of ethics« pp. 5-6. See, also, Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> See Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), Division One.

moral and political norms, for instance against both Kant and Hegel; and (ii) that nearly all post-Nietzschean uses of Nietzsche's alleged aestheticism restore the eligibility of what Nietzsche expressly denies. The question of what we should now mean by the aestheticization of life hangs in the balance.

When, for instance, Nietzsche declares, in *The Birth of Tragedy* – a theme he never relinquished but only transformed: »the entire comedy of art is neither performed for our betterment or education, nor are we the true authors of this art world. On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections of the true author [the Will], and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally justified – while of course our consciousness of our own significance hardly differs from that which soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle represented.«<sup>12</sup>

As I read this, Nietzsche is affirming (in his arch way) that our lives, manifesting the »lifestyles« that collect a viable society, are for that reason an »aesthetic phenomenon« justified »eternally« but *not* in any human way. Nietzsche's aestheticism, even the literary shaping of his own life, is no more than the explanation of the irrelevance, as far as the Will to Power is concerned, of the would-be rational defense of any personal or societal lifestyle, including any devoted to making that same lesson clear and convincing through the irony of its own success. That is what is missing in Nehamas and Rorty – and what is freed from its moorings, naively but generously in Dewey, and also very cleverly but falsely in Heidegger.

There is no sense in which Nietzsche can be made to provide a criterial ground for choosing any one morality or politics over any other or, indeed, a ground for any deliberate aestheticism or aestheticization of ordinary life. I don't mean by that that it is impossible to reconcile Nietzsche's final reading of the Will to Power with the quotidian problems of justifying a way of life, but they are not linearly connected in any way.

More than that, when you separate aestheticism from Nietzsche's profound myth, you are left with nothing more than Dewey's consumerism, Jünger's madness, Wilde's dandyism, Heidegger's grandiosity, Rorty's wilful anarchy, and similar exotica. Stripped of that connection, the aestheticization of life is anything we please, somehow relieved – by a supposed authenticity mere moralities cannot claim – of any need for explicit validation.

Once you have this picture before you, you realize that, *for us*, for mere mortal humans attempting to justify one ideology or tradition or morality

---

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, §5, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1977, cited by Nehamas, *Nietzsche, Life as Literature*.



or lifestyle over another, it doesn't matter, initially, whether *we* believe »aestheticizing« morality is or is not an improvement over resisting any intended practical change. The contest takes the familiar form it always has; or (better) *if we could* improve the rigor of moral argument, we should have to do so across the board – that is, to include aestheticized judgments as well. There's no way to coopt Nietzsche's use of the expression »aesthetic phenomenon« (or its intended doctrine) to gain a dialectical advantage in choosing, for instance, between Dewey and Jünger – if you can imagine that ever making sense!

The idea is preposterous. Not only would such a choice invoke two radically different notions of aestheticizing life – for which, then, we would need a meta-aestheticizing rule and, for that, a meta-meta-rule – but the truth is: it makes no more sense to speak of correctly choosing aestheticized lifestyles than of making pedestrian moral choices. We cannot even fathom any principles or ordered distinctions between the moral and the aesthetic – *a fortiori*, between their respective grounds or criteria.<sup>13</sup>

My own view is that the whole business is a terrible muddle. I have never seen a convincing account of the disjunction between moral and aesthetic values or, I may as well say, any convincing account of the distinct extensions of »moral« and »aesthetic« values that would bear in any way on the precision or objectivity of pertinent judgments. I take the Kantian model to be a complete disaster, to have almost no bearing on either moral matters or matters regarding the quality of art or the sense in which aesthetic and artistic values differ or may be reconciled or graded. I have no confidence in universal norms of any of these sorts, except, trivially, in the sense of consistency of usage. I don't believe there are any obvious criteria for making a life a »work of art« in the normative sense Nehamas draws from Nietzsche, or in the romantic sense of ennobling experience that Schiller draws from Kant,<sup>14</sup> or even in the naive sense – hardly the equivalent of Roland Barthes's little joke – the »consummatory experience,« the lesser *jouissance* Dewey promises all of us.<sup>15</sup>

I don't see anything ennobling about art *tout court*, unless contact with anything human is ennobling. I don't see that art or morality is ever universally compelling (where the claim is not vacuous) or ever sufficiently uniform to encourage us to search for underlying universal values – perhaps,

---

<sup>13</sup> See J. O. Urmson, »What Makes a Situation Aesthetic?« *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. Vol. XXXI (1957).

<sup>14</sup> See Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).

<sup>15</sup> See Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Ch. 8.

then, for specifically democratic or anti-democratic values. I take all of that to be a fake. *If* we really lacked grounds for an objective moral debate between competing visions, we couldn't possibly expect to gain a better argument by drifting to aesthetic or artistic grounds: I don't even know what that would mean. There is no legible direction in art or aesthetic values.

I don't believe that Nietzsche's splendid criticisms of traditional moralities ever required his own grand doctrine of the Will to Power, or are for that reason particularly weak in any dialectically important sense. The only reason aestheticism or aestheticization cuts no moral ice and affords no distinctive lifestyle is simply that where it is relevant it has always been relevant – even if, under other labels and for every conceivable cause. If you mean, by »aestheticizing,« using or directing art in the service of democratizing our society more than it has been, or strengthening a fascist society, then your moral and political objectives will surely take precedence over the aesthetic and artistic; and, in any case, changes in the one will go hand in hand with the other. There is no convincing privileging in either direction, and there are no particular values that are assured, or known to be worth saving, by turning from the putatively moral or political to the artistic or the aesthetic – that is, in any sense beyond the sense in which we have no wish to impoverish the culture to which we belong.

## II

I have a very different reading of Nietzsche's aestheticism to offer. I mean a reading that is not merely bookish, a reading that bears rather on the real-world circumstances of moral and political life and does not pretend to snatch a conceptual privilege from any source. For, for one thing, the solution to the problem of the meaning of life is, actually, logically trivial (but not unimportant for that reason, and not assuredly sufficient for anyone who finds the question unnerving); *and*, for another, Nietzsche was plainly aware of that sense of the matter, since it's already embedded in his own account of Greek tragedy.

The doctrine runs as follows: life has no meaning apart from the entrenched traditions of one's own culture, where the question arises and is met *at* the level of instinct that Nietzsche himself invokes – but *not*, there, in recognizably human terms. That's all! It is the same doctrine that takes the form of the challenge of the »eternal return,« relative to which *any* cultural practice that survives over time and change counts as the successful aestheticization of ordinary life.



There are no differential human values at this level of instinctual life; hence, there are no differential values apt for assessing the functional adequacy of aestheticized or cultural life. »Whatever has *value* in our world [Nietzsche declares] now does not have value in itself, according to its nature – nature is always value-less, but has been *given* value at some time, as a present – and it was *we* who gave and bestowed it.«<sup>16</sup> If you take this literally, as Nietzsche apparently intends it to be, then the normative grounds on which moral, political, artistic, aesthetic, and similar *commitments and judgments* are regularly assessed have nothing to do in any pointed way with the function of aestheticization, except in the negative sense that no such appraisals have any relevance for life if they are not pertinently life-affirming. The famous wisdom of Silenus, for instance, makes sense as a countermove only against those who *affirm* that life and nature *have* intrinsic value.

Nietzsche is instructing us here about the inherent *deficiency* of all practical reasoning and judgment: it rests on »grounds« that cannot be converted into strict norms and, relative to that functionality in nature, no merely human norms could ever convincingly disqualify competing »aestheticizations« (read: diverging cultures or diverging histories) that similarly survive.

What Nietzsche obscures by this deliberate extravagance is the important point that the validation of moral and political and aesthetic arguments presupposes the life-enhancing viability such arguments cannot possibly provide; hence, that arguments about the right direction of life are, necessarily, rhetorically defective but not humanly irrelevant for that reason. That is also the lesson of the exemplary Greek tragedies, for aestheticization concerns the reasons for our loyalty to particular lifestyles, traditions, paradigmatic lives that we find compelling by our lights. To say that Nietzsche made a work of art of his own life is to say little more than that his philosophical objections to traditional moralities and ideologies cannot now be denied. We admit that we are taken with the relevance of his arguments, as we might be by the charm of an unexpected poem. Nietzsche is explicit enough about all this: »Gradually, man has become a fantastic animal,« he says, »that has to fulfill one more condition of existence than any other animal: man has to believe, to know, from time to time *why* he exists: his race cannot flourish without a periodic trust in life – without faith in *reason in life*.«<sup>17</sup>

If I understand this correctly, then, since any deliberately pursued mode of life, Nietzsche's life, say, viewed as an exemplar, or Nietzsche's own exemplar of Attic life construed in terms of Greek tragedy (that is, an entire

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Bk. IV, §301 (p. 242).

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Bk. I, §1 (p. 75).



society's tradition), counts as the aestheticization of life, there is no point to moral or political dispute that fails to come to terms with the protean nature of such »aesthetic« values; and no claimant can hope to vindicate the exclusive right of any single exemplar or state the conditions under which it has any differential right at all. In Nietzsche's terms, the inherent deficiency of practical legitimation answers to, and is made good in, the Will to Power. Nietzsche casts the idea of an approved life in terms of an ulteriorly inspired form of self-deception; in the human world, we debate the merits of alternative lives at a certain displaced level at which we demand a convincing rationale, entangling ourselves thereby in the imagined sufficiency and objectivity (hence, also, the exclusionary power) of our fine arguments.

I don't find this particularly alien to the conditions under which Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, speaks of the human *Lebensform*: except that Nietzsche favors the lesson of the threat of meaninglessness and Wittgenstein, the slimmer thesis that all argument must ultimately be grounded, not in propositions, but in our form of life.<sup>18</sup> The two doctrines go hand in hand. That is, the idea that theory is itself a form of practice signifies that human reasoning is largely ad hoc, occasional, contextually disciplined, logically informal, and incompletable in principle – in ways that go contrary to all the standard presumptions of systematic theory (closure, foundations, explanatory inclusiveness, and bivalence). That is certainly close to the heart of what Nietzsche means by aestheticism: something very far removed from all those other specimen views ranging, in however heterodox a way, from Schiller's to Adorno's to Rorty's.

What needs to be especially remarked is the entirely subordinate nature of distinctions drawn between the moral, the political, the artistic, and the aesthetic. The principal clue to all the variant taxa is that the judgments in question *are* all practical, all grounded in a viable tradition – a sense that is common, I suggest, to Nietzsche and Wittgenstein in an unexpected way. I don't mean to concede by that that there are theoretical judgments that have an entirely different cognitive source from practical judgments. On the contrary, the interesting possibility is that all judgments are practical (or grounded in the practical) in the same way. That is certainly a radical idea, but it is also thoroughly Nietzschean. For the moment, let me say that this small adjustment yields two benefits: for one, it opposes prioritizing the moral over the aesthetic or artistic, or vice versa, and it disallows any privileging of the validity of practical judgments in any way; and, for a second, by admitting the inherent deficiency of every »rational« effort to legitimate

---

<sup>18</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), for instance I, §§241-242, 479-481.

moralties or lifestyles, it concedes the inescapable role of the entire span of historically divergent traditions, which, accordingly, cannot fail to be »equal« in the eyes of the Will to Power.

The literal meaning of this last concession – to convert its lesson into terms that might reasonably belong to Wittgenstein's slimmer thesis – is simply that there are indefinitely many societal lifestyles to honor: no one choice could ever convincingly preclude the eligibility of the others, on grounds of divergence alone; and since no single lifestyle can expect to be exclusionary, practical arguments cannot adhere to an uncompromising bivalence or any principled privilege. Aestheticism signifies, in Nietzsche, a pagan respect for every powerful manifestation of human life. Some may see in it an implicit democracy, but that would betray the deeper doctrine: something akin to substituting Parsifal for Oedipus.

### III

All the foregoing is true enough. But the persistence of the aestheticizing move in our own late age has pretty well abandoned Nietzsche's sterner doctrine. It is now, I think, a kind of opportunism, conceptually released from all pretensions of modernist legitimation. Even in Heidegger, supreme philosophical opportunist that he was, the question of legitimation seems to have persisted. You find it, for instance, after the *Kehre*, when Heidegger is bent on recovering the themes of his early lectures on Hölderlin (1934-35), as in »The Question concerning Technology« (1953) and related papers, where Heidegger offers an ingenious subversion of Nietzsche's more innocent doctrine, where he aestheticizes the final destinal calling of the German *Volk*!<sup>19</sup> Extraordinary!

I don't doubt that Heidegger's final ontology – the one in which, *per* Hölderlin, the poet, like the *Führer* and, like Heidegger himself, is said to be gifted enough to receive the saving self-disclosure of Being that may yet reverse the entire Nazi blunder – is, by far, the most extreme form of the aestheticization of life that our end-of-century can boast. Nevertheless, its political opportunism is still soberly cast in terms of a kind of realism that, however mysterious and outrageous, is abandoned in turn by the post-war aestheticisms of the victorious West.

You see this in its most fantastic form in Rorty, if the juxtaposition will

---

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, »The Question concerning Technology« (trans. William Lovitt), in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). See, also, Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity*, Chs. 7-8.



not offend you. I can only plead that Rorty directly addresses the question in assessing Heidegger himself. Effectively, he dismisses Heidegger's *doctrine* by a sort of psychoanalysis, makes the entire tale of Heidegger's last version of aestheticization no more than a self-deceptive mask for his true ironism – according to the formula of ironism already cited. Which is to say, Rorty replaces Heidegger's aestheticization by his own more candidly opportunistic version: he returns us in a bolder way to the assertive, self-justifying, private or autonomous, even liberal, act of any of us by which we simply declare our lives to be a work of art. That is surely the last irony of all the turns of aestheticism.

»Dasein',« Rorty avers, »was, so to say, Heidegger's name for the ironist,« that is, himself. »But, in his later period, [he warns,] this word is replaced by 'Europe' or 'the West' – the personification of the place where Being played out a destiny which ended in ironism.«<sup>20</sup> Rorty thinks of Heidegger as »the greatest theoretical imagination of his time (outside the natural sciences).« But he failed »where Proust succeeded«; for, following Proust, Rorty finds that »novels are a safer medium than [philosophical] theory« for the aestheticization of private life.<sup>21</sup>

That is, Rorty returns us to something like Nehamas's equally commodified reading of Nietzsche. Heidegger somehow believed that, beginning with the project of *Being and Time*, he could remake himself as the sage of the West, by isolating the essential *words* – yes, the words – by which (by analogy with Hölderlin and even Nietzsche, but surpassing Nietzsche), we might vouchsafe the right receptive relationship to Being. There you have Rorty's gloss on that fateful line from *Being and Time*: »The ultimate business of philosophy is to preserve the *force of the most elementary words* in which Dasein expresses itself, and to keep the common understanding from leveling them off to that unintelligibility which functions... as a source of pseudo-problems.«<sup>22</sup>

»Heidegger,« Rorty claims, »had set himself the [impossible] problem of how to surpass, place, and set aside all past [philosophical] theory without oneself theorizing.« He thought he could replace explicit theory by poetic »'hints and gestures'« (Heidegger's own characterization) »distinct from the 'signs and chiffres' of metaphysics.«<sup>23</sup> But he failed, because he failed to see

---

<sup>20</sup> Rorty, »Self-creation and Affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger,« p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> Rorty, »Self-creation and Affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger,« pp. 107, 118.

<sup>22</sup> Rorty, »Self-creation and Affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger,« p. 112. The line is from Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), §44 (p. 262).

<sup>23</sup> Rorty, »Self-creation and Affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger,« pp. 112, 115.

that the right form of aestheticization required abandoning even that higher metaphysics, opting more frankly for literature and »conversation.« In short, Rorty suggests, Heidegger was really an »ironist« in Rorty's own sense but simply failed to recognize the fact.

This is a remarkable claim on Rorty's part, given the importance of the line from *Being and Time*. Heidegger had explicitly warned – in the very same passage – that »we must avoid uninhibited word-mysticism«; and, in offering this »definition« of »truth« and the associated account of »Being« and »the logos,« he adds that »we have not *shaken off* the tradition, but we have appropriated it *primordially*.«<sup>24</sup> I should say that this was not (yet) an aestheticization, in Heidegger's mind, but it surely counts as an anticipation of his eventual replacement of Nietzsche's version. But let that pass. It is closer to the truth to say that Rorty construes Heidegger and Dewey and Wittgenstein, his self-designated mentors, in ways congenial to his own variant of aestheticism, that is, closer to a liberal irony. On that reading, aestheticism is the *Geist* of history that brings Nietzsche home to bourgeois markets.

I cannot forebear, therefore, citing the following passage from Rorty's essay, »Private Irony and Liberal Hope,« because it may be the most succinct statement we are likely to find of Rorty's conception of what it is to aestheticize one's life, hence also a statement of his most focused reading of moral and political issues in the aestheticist manner; and because I very much doubt that you would believe a mere paraphrase that suggested that Rorty was playing out a liberal reading of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's very different aestheticisms. Well, see what you make of this:

We ironists treat these people [Hegel, Heine, Kierkegaard, Blake, Freud, D. H. Lawrence, George Orwell, Nietzsche, Proust, Lionel Trilling] not as anonymous channels for truth but as abbreviations for a certain final vocabulary and for the sorts of beliefs and desires typical of its users . . . . We treat the names of such people as the names of the heroes of their own books. We do not bother to distinguish Swift from *indignatio*, Hegel from *Geist*, Nietzsche from Zarathustra, Marcel Proust from Marcel the Narrator, or Trilling from *The Liberal Imagination*. We do not care whether these writers managed to live up to their own self-images. What we want to know is whether to adopt those images – to re-create ourselves, in whole or in part, in these people's image. We go about answering this question by experimenting with the vocabularies which these people concocted. We redescribe ourselves, our situation, our past, in those terms and compare the results with alternative redescriptions which are the vocabularies of alternative figures. We ironists hope, by this continual redescription, to make the best selves for ourselves that we can.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 262.



There is a danger here – which I would not willingly accuse Rorty of neglecting. Nevertheless, the plainly intended congruity between his own words and his ironist interpretation of Heidegger's words about »elementary words,« cited just above, raises the question how, if »theory« is to be altogether abandoned, should we ever be able to justify the exposé of Heidegger himself, or Paul de Man for that matter, who (in another sense of »irony«) insisted on an inseparable linkage between metaphysics and poetry (against the evidence of his own life and against the view of Harold Bloom, whom Rorty follows here<sup>26</sup>)?

What is it that keeps Rorty's aestheticism from yielding to self-congratulatory fictions that can now play themselves out – in a fantasy world of affluence at least – that has no real bearing on the constraints of the public world? Nothing that I can see.

Keep Rorty's words in view therefore:

We revise our own moral identity [he says] by revising our own final vocabulary. Literary criticism does for ironists what the search for universal moral principles is supposed to do for metaphysicians.

For us ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary [remember Heidegger!] save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription. Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original.<sup>27</sup>

The proper, perfectly simple answer to all this is, of course: although there are no final vocabularies, every vocabulary harbors a discipline of responsibility. »Final« must mean – for Rorty – »arbitrary,« free of all responsibility, aestheticized. But if that is the tail-end of aestheticism, as I'm afraid it is, then let's have an end of it. Rorty could not be more explicit: »irony is of little public use . . . . Ironists should reconcile themselves to a private-public split within their final vocabularies, to the fact that resolution of doubts about one's final vocabulary has nothing in particular to do with attempts to save other people from pain and humiliation.«<sup>28</sup> Rorty has made commodities out of Nietzsche and Heidegger; he is also of course entirely comfortable with hawking his own private ironism. But we ourselves are caught between the honest recognition of endlessly varied forms of viable

---

<sup>25</sup> See Richard Rorty, »Private Irony and Liberal Hope,« *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>26</sup> See Richard Rorty, »The Contingency of Selfhood,« *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 25nn2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Rorty, »Private Irony and Liberal Hope,« p. 80.

<sup>28</sup> Rorty, »Self-creation and Affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger,« p. 120.

life and the impossibility of accepting every alternative to our own. How can aestheticizing alter that?

Hardly anyone whom Rorty admires or takes to be his mentor – certainly not Heidegger or Dewey or Wittgenstein – had the least temptation to accept anything like a »private-public split.« Perhaps one finds it in Proust or Nabokov, but almost nowhere else: certainly *not* in Derrida or Foucault or de Man or Bloom for instance. The *private*, in any pertinent »ethical« sense, is a »space« set aside for public reasons, not a disjoint sector of life in which a »final« vocabulary separated from whatever holds in the public sector rightly (perhaps arbitrarily) obtains. Whatever else is true, the disjunction demands a defense, but the idea is finally incoherent. For if art is, as it is, part of a public culture, then Rorty's »private« self-discipline is little more than a pose that has nothing to do with defensible distinctions of any sort.

No. The final truth about aestheticism, or the aestheticization of everyday life, is simply that, if it has a message, it is a message of cultural generosity or a democracy of ideas (if saying that will not mislead you), perhaps a reminder of neglected or marginalized resources. I am not as sanguine for instance as Richard Shusterman about the possibilities of an aestheticism of rap, but I see no reason to exclude it.<sup>29</sup> I also grant the point, therefore, of Wolfgang Iser's tempered plea for extending our aesthetic concerns beyond art and traditional aesthetics to encompass the whole span of experience. But if you follow its logic, you see that it views the »aesthetic« as a way of defining the entire possible field of inquiry rather than as a criterion for assessing any elements that may be found in it.<sup>30</sup> Iser follows Adorno more than Schiller here, that is, in endorsing our transcending the aesthetic by finding the aesthetic in the whole of global experience and reality rather than in training up our sensibility and reason to a new unheard-of height.<sup>31</sup> The theme strikes me as conceptually therapeutic rather than as politically corrective – perhaps also, then, at least distantly Nietzschean. If so, then I find the same idea very widely favored and present in many guises.<sup>32</sup> I have no quarrel with it.

Also, then, aesthetic »self-enrichment and »perfection,« whether in Rorty's subversively democratic sense or in Shusterman's more optimistic

<sup>29</sup> See Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, Ch. 8, and Shusterman's generally congenial summary, in Ch. 9, of what he takes to be the lesson of aestheticization.

<sup>30</sup> See Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics*, trans. Andrew Inkpin (London: Sage, 1997), Ch. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics*, pp. 65-71.

<sup>32</sup> For example, I find it in F. R. Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), particularly pp. 16-18. Ankersmit expressly prefers Machiavelli to Schiller here.



sense, strikes me as as difficult to refuse as apple pie (whether eaten in secrecy or at the dinner table). Both are versions of a form of consumerism that either refuses to spell out, or sees no need to spell out, how ethical matters might be affected by admitting aestheticism's concerns. I am as willing as the next philosopher to reject, for reasons, the standard forms of »modernist« philosophies, extending to ethics and politics. But I cannot see how, apart from a plea for cultural openness, the doctrine of the »aesthetic life« cuts any ethical ice at all: how or why, in particular, »aesthetic considerations are or should be,« as Shusterman insists, »crucial and ultimately perhaps paramount in determining how we choose to lead or shape our lives and how we assess what a good life is.«

I'm afraid I don't really see how that actually »fleshes out Wittgenstein's ambiguous but well-known dictum that ethics and aesthetics are one by erecting the aesthetic as the proper ethical ideal, the preferred model and criterion of assessment for the good life.«<sup>33</sup> Wittgenstein, you remember, explicitly meant his proposition to apply to the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. That is of course precisely *not* what either Rorty or Shusterman have in mind. But, beyond that, *if*, on the supposed argument, the aesthetic *should be* the »model and criterion« of the good life, then we have a right to ask what the distinction had formerly been between the aesthetic and the ethical and how it would now be improved; and that would surely bring us back to the age-old questions that were to have been superseded. Lacking such a rationale, I cannot see how to escape the judgment that, now, at the end of the century, the aestheticization of everyday life can be anything but philosophical opportunism or anarchical or democratic consumerism. But, if so, I must admit that neither of these two pies suits me as well as apple pie.

#### IV

There's much more to the matter than can be discerned by laying out all the odd twists and turns of seeming theory along the lines collected. I have no doubt that a good deal of the aestheticizing issue is entirely straightforward. But it is also an eccentric form of political statement and, in some instances, for instance those involving Heidegger and Rorty, it is very difficult not to suppose that the aestheticizing formula may be interpreted

---

<sup>33</sup> Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, p. 237. The reference to Wittgenstein is to proposition 6.421 of the *Tractatus*, which makes an appearance in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, ed. B. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), p. 83e (7.10.16).

as a kind of Aesopian pronouncement. Quite frankly, in our own time, the aestheticizing issue is not unlike the dispute between modernism and postmodernism, that is, more a symptom of a deflected worry or concern than a legible dispute that is explicitly what it appears to be on its face.

The aestheticizing issue seems to have congealed in two principal ways: one, by opportunistically reversing Nietzsche's thesis about the meaninglessness of the meaning of life; the other, by opportunistically distorting Kant's intuition (in the Third *Critique*), that is, that the aesthetic may promote and enrich the realization of our moral concerns, now, however, by disorganizing the hitherto valid distinction between the two. If you listen closely to all the principal voices already collected, you cannot fail to find that, despite enormous differences, Jünger, Heidegger, Nehamas, and Rorty propose quite arbitrary, idiosyncratic, surprisingly upbeat visions of life as art, whether proto-fascist or extreme laissez-faire liberal, that gymnastically convert Nietzsche's utter contempt for self-congratulatory moralities into newer forms of self-congratulation. The pronouncements of these worthies are noticeably unconstrained by any would-be schema of objective assessment. That is the source of their charm: evidently we are blessed, as Jünger and Heidegger suppose, with high revelations that eclipse the merely mundane choices of the bourgeois world or, as Nehamas and Rorty suppose, we are entitled to affirm straightforwardly the autonomous near-anarchy of the private lives we choose to pursue. In either case, there are no independent legitimative constraints to invoke – beyond our *dicta*: that is, reading Nietzsche as seer or postmodernist, athletically or indulgently. It's in this sense that I take »aestheticizing« to be a political statement that either accuses capitalism and communism of moral exhaustion or exploits the advantages of affluent privacy within the capitalist protectorate.

Rorty is perhaps the most inventive of the »post-Nietzschean« and »post-Kantian« champions of aestheticizing, for Rorty manages to join Heidegger and Dewey in the liberal and democratic spirit he calls »irony.«<sup>34</sup> The Kantian thread is far less explicit than the Nietzschean; it is in any case mediated, in the liberal-democratic spirit, by theorists such as Schiller and Adorno, as may be seen in the analyses and generous proposals offered by Shusterman and Welsch. Here, benignly, conceptual arbitrariness appears as the affirmation of political equality and inclusiveness: rap music and environmental concerns, for instance, testify to the eclipse of elitist values. In a perfectly obvious sense, the liberal cast of postmodernism draws strength from Dewey's *Art and Experience*, which, in effect, is a democratized cousin of Schiller's vision of aesthetic education.

---

<sup>34</sup> See Rorty, »Private Irony and Liberal Hope.«



Dewey, however, is no postmodernist. Nor is Adorno, of course. Both, in different ways, mean to preserve the relevance of continuing to link the moral and the aesthetic, all the while subverting the strong compartmentalization of objective (or at least universalized) judgment, according to Kant. The demarcation between the moral and the aesthetic dissolves in Dewey and Adorno, but neither denies the prospects of objective practical judgment. The subversive possibilities appear most saliently in Nietzsche, of course, running from *The Birth of Tragedy* to *The Gay Science* to *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche's theme collects the artifactual, even self-deceptive (life-enhancing) nature of moral and aesthetic concerns. In Jünger and Heidegger, it turns imperiously prophetic and destinal; in Adorno and Dewey, it turns egalitarian, perhaps more critically in Adorno than in Dewey (though one must remember Adorno's misreading of jazz). In Nehamas and Shusterman and Welsch, it becomes benignly tolerant: Proustian, in Nehamas, not yet democratic; almost Whitmanesque, in Shusterman and Welsch.

In Rorty, the democratic theme takes a distinctly postmodernist turn – which, politically, means that it veers off in a conserving, if not conservative, direction in the name of an unspecified »patriotism« said to be more of the Left than of the Right.<sup>35</sup> That may even go some distance toward explaining Rorty's yoking Heidegger and Wittgenstein and Dewey, no one of whom is a proper postmodernist, in the name of aestheticizing life; in fact, each opposes anything like a Kantian rationale of practical judgment. I suspect that Rorty is genuinely postmodernist and the most prophetic of this company: he has a »philosophical« conviction of how to go on and has indeed prepared the ground for a liberalized – perhaps, better, a democratized – analogue (if you can imagine it) of Heidegger's *Volk* vision, now no longer ironic but merely patriotic.<sup>36</sup>

This helps to mark the slim sense in which the aestheticization of ordinary life is instinctively meant to reorient our political sensibilities. Postmodernism seems to relieve us of the need for legitimation; we yield in

---

<sup>35</sup> See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). See, particularly, »The Inspirational Work of Great Works of Literature.«

<sup>36</sup> Rorty actually invokes Hölderlin's inspirational role in a way that suggests that the democratically minded might use Hölderlin as well as Heidegger at his most benignly fascist moments: see *Achieving Our Country*, pp. 139-140. But that is of course the crazy quilt consequence of Rorty's separating »hope« from »understanding«; see pp. 11, 13, 30-31. See also, for a sense of the Soviet analogue of Nazi aestheticization, Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

the direction of our habituated impulses and are pleased to know that acting thus is self-certifying (revealed or privately autonomous) or simply no longer in need of the would-be objective scruple of the philosophically naive past. But that is a delusion – a dangerous oversimplification – that cannot be satisfactorily opposed by any linking of the moral and the aesthetic that does not recognize that legitimation cannot be more than (but is at least) a constructed projection from our own society's practices.

The aestheticizing theme is ultimately a piece of political opportunism that senses that we find ourselves, at the present time, somewhere between the repudiation of moral and political privilege and the bewilderment of skepticism and conceptual anarchy. What we face is the recovery of critical judgment under the condition of changing history – in effect, the restoration of a problem that had already dawned nearly two hundred years ago. Either aestheticizing bids us abandon the need for legitimation by way of refocusing the public impulses of the »people« (whether in Heidegger's way or Rorty's) or assures us without argument that the aestheticizing impulse is reliably generous in the best democratic sense (as with Shusterman and Welsch). I find myself unwilling to trust either tendency and believe, rather, that if there is a disciplined debate that may be mounted, we will find that we have reclaimed the question of moral or ethical direction (however altered from the Kantian reading), which would mean outflanking both the revelatory and the postmodernist options once again – without falling back to modernist assurances.