

## **Hanging by a Narrative Thread: Dewey and Rorty on Aesthetic Self-Creation**

What exactly *self-creation* entails has been batted around by existentialists, poststructuralists, psychoanalysts, and thinkers from just about every other sub-discipline of philosophy since Nietzsche first proposed that one *becomes who one is* and does not unlock her destiny by simply tapping into some ahistorical essence underlying her existence. Fueled by questions such as how much artistic license we actually have in the process of constructing our life's narrative or what even constitutes a "beautiful" self, many authors have wholeheartedly engaged the issues surrounding the aestheticization of ethics. Richard Rorty is indeed one such thinker who celebrates the idea of describing oneself in poetic verse rather than pre-conceived and unimaginative prose. Within the framework of his "metaphysics" of contingency, whereby the only universal is the individual and particular,<sup>1</sup> Rorty is keen to discuss this idea of self-creation, as our very nature, who we are, "is not definitively there to be discovered, but instead open to be made and shaped, and should therefore be shaped aesthetically."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, as Richard Shusterman rightly points out, Rorty seems to articulate two distinct ways of aesthetically responding to this contingency of selfhood. Shusterman also, however, raises some worthy concerns against these accounts of an aestheticized life. Yet I believe Rorty's conception of the "strong poet" is somewhat distorted by the focus placed on his often ridiculed philosophical heroine, the "ironist." This figure of the strong poet is certainly not helped either by the absence of a detailed aesthetic within Rorty's corpus that might offer insight

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 26, hereafter abbreviated *CIS*.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 242, hereafter abbreviated *PA*.

into what constitutes an aesthetically-pleasing self.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Rorty never clearly elucidates how art might be of use for us in organizing our individual life-stories.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, one of Rorty's most admired intellectual influences, John Dewey, articulates a wonderfully rich aesthetic theory that actually supplements Rorty's account of self-creation nicely in showing how art can serve as a model for how we might unify our fragmented selves. Thus, in this paper, I will argue that in defending Rorty's account of self-creation, in particular his notion of the strong poet, the profound influence that Dewey has on his disciple will be further illuminated, as Rorty's aestheticized ethics proves to be incredibly enriched by his predecessor's theory of art.<sup>5</sup>

But first we ought to ask how exactly this strong poet is distinct from the *mere* ironist? While the strong poet grants the same philosophical assumptions as the ironist, Shusterman points out that she seemingly avoids the latter's "denial of self-coherence" (*PA*, 250). So whereas the *aesthetic* element of the ironist focuses primarily on the mere consumption of aesthetic possibilities, the strong poet is geared more towards forging her existence itself into an aesthetically-organized object. The strong poet is thus not content with simply accumulating possibilities to deploy in the never-ending process of self-redescription, but rather seeks to somehow weave those possibilities and various redescriptions together into a beautiful, coherent narrative – one that is not simply an inherited replica. For, "To fail as a poet," writes Rorty, "is to accept somebody else's description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most, elegant variations on previously written poems," while to succeed as a poet, on the other hand, "would be to tell a story about one's causes in a new language" (*CIS*, 28). It is

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<sup>3</sup> It is only fair to note that Rorty consciously avoided propounding anything under the guise of a "theory" on any particular topic.

<sup>4</sup> Rorty does, however, often laud what art can do for awakening a sense of wonder and making us aware of previously concealed possibilities for describing ourselves and our world, as well as for its role in sentimental education, which is at the heart of his views regarding social/moral progress. The question here, though, is whether the formal organization of an artwork might be of use in our process of narrative self-creation.

<sup>5</sup> In other words, this paper will seek to not only enrich Rorty's account of self-creation, but also articulate a "private" function related to the task of self-creation for an otherwise "public" thinker, John Dewey.

against Shusterman's understanding of the strong poet that I wish to defend Rorty, although in articulating my interpretation of this figure's originality, we can see how Rorty's conception of self-creation is lacking a sort of aesthetic measure by which to judge whether one's personal narrative is closer to a "beautiful" life than any other, or to use Hume's well-known example, within the arena of self-creative poets, we seem to have no way of differentiating between the Miltons and the Ogilvys.<sup>6</sup>

Now, it is this hyperbolic claim that the strong poet uses a "new language" in her project of self-creation that is the lynchpin of Shusterman's disparaging reading of this version of the aestheticized life, for he charges that Rorty "confuses the aesthetic with the radically novel, just as he conflates artistic creation with unique originality" (*PA*, 253). If radical novelty is indeed the mark of Rorty's conception of an ideal aesthetic life, Shusterman is right to be wary of such counterexamples as "beautiful" works of art lacking in such originality or "good" lives that could be construed as aesthetically-simplified when viewed as a work of art. Looking at other passages where Rorty discusses such a "new language," however, somewhat dampens the charge that his model of self-creation hinges on the radically novel. In his essay "Feminism and Pragmatism," for instance, Rorty argues that social progress is rooted in altering people's intuitional responses, and one way he believes feminists could facilitate such a change is through employing a "new language." By "new language," though, Rorty qualifies that he means "not *just* new words, *but also* creative misuses of language"<sup>7</sup> – familiar words used in unfamiliar, yet meaningful ways. Coupling this understanding of just what a "new language" entails with Rorty's theory of metaphor reveals a view of novelty that is not that extreme. Rorty writes:

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<sup>6</sup> Again, Rorty would more than likely be wary of establishing any *a priori* standards, no matter how generic they are, that could settle such a dispute. All that can be said in defense of this project, then, is that the basic framework for self-creation derived from Dewey's aesthetics is presented here merely as a hypothesis, as one possible set of considerations for one engaged in a process of constructing her narrative sense of selfhood.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 204 (emphasis added).

Metaphors are unfamiliar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways. A language which was “all metaphor” would be a language which had no use, hence not a language but just babble. For even if we agree that languages are not media for representation or expression, they will remain a media of communication, tools for social interaction, ways of tying oneself up with other human beings. (*CIS*, 41)

Just as one cannot control the language-games one inhabits, but can, through metaphor, form meaningful new connections and relations within the already existing semantic catalogue, Rorty’s conception of aesthetic novelty appears to have more to do with how creatively one weaves together all of the idiosyncratic contingencies making up her life, than simply inventing entirely new content for her self-narrative. In terms of artistic self-creation, then, the strong poet’s skill really lies in how she forms connections in relating the various contingent pieces of her life with one another.<sup>8</sup>

We can, in fact, transpose onto his account of self-creation Rorty’s prescription that the philosopher should humble herself to the task of simply describing “how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.”<sup>9</sup> This normative view of philosophy is predicated on Rorty’s denial that the true nature of reality could ever be captured in a philosopher’s description, and in similar fashion his anti-essentialism in regards to selfhood rejects the idea that one could ever uncover (or even create) her “True” self. Thus, one can *become* who one is by artfully organizing the qualitative relations between the various elements making up the whole that is her existence. But if Rorty, the admitted syncretist, does see self-creation as a matter of constructing a narrative describing how the things in one’s life are interrelated, the question then shifts to one of aesthetic value concerning better and worse ways of “hanging things together.”

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that Rorty doesn’t praise the invention of new words, but in order for metaphorical redescriptions to get any traction they must be communicable and, thus, involve the familiar.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xiv. Rorty is quoting Wilfrid Sellars here to express his own view of how he thinks philosophers ought to approach their projects.

And it is indeed this very question that I believe Dewey's naturalized formalist aesthetic answers quite well. For art, according to Dewey, is a concentrated example of how the fragmentation of experience can be intelligently and triumphantly overcome through just such a focus on relationality. Despite Shusterman's criticisms against his ironist, Rorty appears genuinely interested in the formation of a coherent and unfragmented self, since the presence of an integral self is an inevitable result of the process of self-creation and can be the only basis for the self-distinction Rorty admires. Despite Rorty's claim that after granting his Wittgensteinian view of language that a poem can no longer be seen as "a formed, unified, present, self-contained substance, something capable of being seen steadily and whole" (*CIS*, 41), he does grant the poem a certain dynamic unity. Thus the life-as-poem, instead of having a static, *a priori* essence, is actually "a tissue of contingent relations, a web which stretches backward and forward through past and future time" (*CIS*, 41).<sup>10</sup> And within the framework of Dewey's reconstructed formalism, *just* how organically-unified and continuous one's existence is serves as a most worthy candidate for an aesthetic standard by which to guide the self-creative project. Through the lens of Dewey's views on art, Rorty's strong poet acquires some much needed substance, thus illuminating how art can actually serve as a transformative blueprint for how we might weave together the fragmented contingencies of our lives into an aesthetically-pleasing narrative.

If an aestheticized ethics, then, is based primarily on how one pieces together disjointed facets of her existence, a few fundamental difficulties rear their heads. Dewey's aesthetic theory, however, seeks to articulate how art offers us a glimpse into how such existential discontinuities might be recuperated. On Dewey's account, the very stance we take towards our own

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<sup>10</sup> Moreover, considering Rorty's emphasis on a redescription's (either of the world or of ourselves) ability to help us cope with experience as the pragmatic measure by which to weigh such descriptions against one another, I find it hard to believe that the fragmented mode of experience Dewey is continually combating is one that Rorty thinks is beneficial to our existential coping. Thus I assume that Rorty does think a unified (although not fixed) self-narrative is something worth striving for.

contingency, how we deal with our past selves and the onus of regret, as well as the continuity we feel with our future self all can benefit from the insight aesthetic experience has to offer.

Recall that it is Rorty's "metaphysics" of contingency that gives rise to the need for artistic self-creation in the first place. Therefore, it is crucial for the strong poet to first of all recognize the aesthetic possibilities opened up by there not being any essence of her person for which to search. This is not supposed to be an effortless acceptance, though, as Rorty ascribes the popularity of grand, universalizing narratives such as religion, systematic "Philosophy," and scientific reductionism to the seemingly innate desire to somehow transcend the individual and particular. If one can admit to being an amalgam of historical, cultural, and radically idiosyncratic contingencies, however, one is thereby also granted the artistic license to then unite those elements together. On a generic level, the strong poet is she who gives *form* to the *matter* that is all of the contingent aspects of her life by describing and redescribing the relations between them into an organically-unified self-narrative.<sup>11</sup>

Well, one of the features of art's brilliance, for Dewey, is how form and matter are coalesced within it to such an extent that the rigid distinction between the two dissolves. As Dewey puts it:

The *material* out of which a work of art is composed belongs to the common world rather than to the self, and yet there is self-expression in art because the self assimilates that material in a distinctive way to reissue it into the public world in a form that builds a new object.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Although Rorty is adamant about self-redescription never ceasing, his point seems to be that one must never believe she has created her "True" self. This lack of consummation would seem to rub against Dewey's description of aesthetic experience, yet we must consider that each self-redescription comes complete with what Rorty refers to as one's *final vocabulary*. It is my contention that one's personal narrative is inextricably bound up with her final vocabulary (i.e. her perspective within the context of Nietzschean-Rortian perspectivism), thus each self-description, if done artfully, can constitute a consummatory aesthetic experience. In other words, any given moment in the strong poet's life can be considered a consummatory moment in her self-narrative based on her current perspective of herself and the world.

<sup>12</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 112, hereafter abbreviated *AE*.

The creation of a self involves just this assimilation of those elements of our life which are “given” to us by the “world.”<sup>13</sup> This creative uptake of one’s contingent causes bears resemblance to certain existentialist ethics, whereby genuine existential freedom consists in the acceptance of one’s facticity in the attempt to transform it. Besides our historical, cultural, and familial circumstance, we can also include our entrenched habits and tendencies as part of the matter we imbue with form in the act of self-creation. This does not entail the dissolution of any conflicts that might arise between competing drives, however, as Dewey emphasizes that the artist actually cultivates certain tensions in enhancing the meaning of a work whose organic unity strives to redeem any superficial incompatibilities.

In embracing the contingencies making up her life as the matter with which she will create her intimate narrative self, the strong poet is also primed to overcome another type of self-disintegration that can occur on account of the “will’s ill will against the ‘it was.’”<sup>14</sup> The onus of regret that can plague one’s interpretation of her past history is often a disruptive force within the organic unity of our lives. Consequently, a crucial step in recovering the discontinuities of one’s existence is the incorporation into the whole of her self-description those past “selves” that seem upon reflection as though they were completely different beings from the person one currently feels she is. Dewey’s aesthetic illustrates, though, how art’s consummatory nature discloses a way for us to transform the “it was” into a “thus I willed it” by emphasizing the temporal-unity essential to aesthetic experience.

There are actually two ways in which Dewey’s aesthetics offer us a model for how to incorporate our personal history into our current narrative in a manner that enriches the present

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<sup>13</sup> “World” here seems to connote simply that which we have to cope with in our experience (i.e. our environment and its plenitude of contingent factors).

<sup>14</sup> Rorty is quite fond of quoting this Nietzschean phrase as a mantra for his “strong poet.” For Rorty’s use of it see the chapter “Contingency of Selfhood” in *CIS*. For Nietzsche’s discussion of this problem see such chapters as “On Redemption” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in Walter Kaufmann’s *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 139.

while highlighting the past's essential relation to the whole. The first way, then, is on the superficial level of an actual art product. More noticeable in certain media than others, but surely relevant to some extent in all art, is a consideration of more than just what is immediately present or in the fore. In music, for instance, there has been much written on listener expectations and how significant they are for the aesthetic effects produced by playing with these anticipations. Such expectations would not exist, though, without the established patterns that had already been rhythmically set. Moreover, as Bertram Morris points out, because aesthetic perception is, for Dewey, "not an instantaneous event but a complicated process come to fulfillment, perception contains antecedents which ... make experience far richer than we can ever quite realize."<sup>15</sup> Consequently, even the perception of visuospatial arts such as painting, sculpture, and architecture can make us more vitally aware of the past's dynamic interaction with the present as our senses tour a specific work and its various elements take their turns in the foreground of our consciousness.

The second way art can help us incorporate the past into our current self-narrative involves the unavoidable participation of one's stockpile of accrued meanings and values within a consummatory aesthetic experience. Not just in artistic creation, but even in perception, "a beholder must create his own experience" and "there must be an ordering of elements of the whole that is in form" (*AE*, 56). In sharp contrast with drier formalist accounts of aesthetic experience such as Kant's, Dewey contends that such ordering is and *should* be inevitably bound up in *qualitative* relations. Thus even when simply appreciating a work of art we are engaging in a process similar to that of weaving our own self-narrative and selecting, simplifying, clarifying, abridging and condensing according to our interest (*AE*, 56). Yet our interest is far more than a

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<sup>15</sup> Bertram Morris, "Dewey's Aesthetics: The Tragic Encounter with Nature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 30, no. 2 (1971), 192.



matter of the here and now, as it is ineluctably shaped by the accumulated meaning, habits, and tendencies stemming from past experience.

If we can treat our past not as the occurrence of some discontinuous “other selves” which have been overcome and bear no relation to the present, but rather as integral background conditions of our current self-description, we will thereby be living a more aestheticized life. As a hindrance to the goal of hanging things together in self-creation, Dewey notes:

Most mortals are conscious that a split often occurs between their present living and their past and future. Then the past hangs upon them as a burden; it invades the present with a sense of regret, or opportunities not used, and of consequences we wish undone...instead of being a storehouse of resources by which to move confidently forward (*AE*, 17).

It is this split that almost certainly prompts Rorty’s emphasis on the strong poet’s attempt to transform the “it was” into a “thus I willed it.” Crafting relations between the background that is our past and our current self-description is one of the crucial steps in hanging things together in Rorty’s account of selfhood and Dewey’s aesthetic theory illustrates why we should look to art for inspiration and guidance.

The last line of the previously cited passage from Dewey reveals a third major factor contributing to the fragmentation of our selves and again involves how we incorporate a temporally-distinct self into our current narrative. The significance of the imagination within not only his aesthetics, but within Dewey’s entire philosophical project cannot be emphasized enough. Dewey is quick to lament, however, that most philosophies of aesthetics have treated the imagination as merely one particular faculty among the rest, as opposed to how he views it – as that which holds all of these supposed “faculties” together (*AE*, 286). For Dewey, imaginative work is “the fusion of old meanings and new situations that transfigures both” (*AE*, 287). Therefore it is critical that we cultivate our imagination in striving for an organically-unified and coherent self. For without a strong confidence in our imaginative capacity, “we exist in

apprehensions of what the future may bring, and are divided within ourselves,” when instead the future should be intuited as consisting “of possibilities that are felt as a possession of what is now and here” (*AE*, 17).

In avoiding such a division between her present and future self, the strong poet cultivates an imagination that is open to the wealth of possibilities extant in experience. Recalling Rorty’s praise of poets, artists, and edifying philosophers, it is clear he lauds such figures for their ability to awaken us to unseen possibilities, evoking a sense of “wonder that there is something new under the sun.”<sup>16</sup> Rorty indeed seems thoroughly concerned with what an impoverished palette of possibilities means for the strong poet’s self-creation, for without an awareness of the possibilities inherent in experience it is quite likely that we will adopt a previously conceived way of hanging things together in our lives and thus fail in achieving the originality Rorty is calling for in his aestheticized ethics. This originality, I repeat, is not the radical novelty Shusterman thinks Rorty is advocating, however, but a novelty based on the recognition of the incredibly vast number of ways one can connect the various contingencies of her life.

All too often, our experience of ourselves is fragmented, as we feel entirely disconnected from what the past contains and future might hold. Our reliance on entrenched conceptual systems for coping with experience has the detrimental effect of making it difficult to see the wealth of possibilities available to us for our self-narratives. Kant himself recognized the artist’s ability to manifest certain aesthetic ideas which contain more qualitative meaning than can be captured by any concept, and Dewey similarly believes that art can somewhat loosen the grip the conceptual world has on us. Yet Dewey contends that this release comes not “by way of anodyne or by transfer to a radically different realm of things,” but rather “is accomplished by

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 370.

manifesting what actual existence actually becomes when its possibilities are fully expressed” (AE, 292).

Following a long line of thinkers who believed that art offers us a glimpse into the ineffable side of being, Dewey contends that aesthetic experience puts us in touch with the ideal as it is found in our material existence. Although Rorty would no doubt balk at any appeal to the “ineffable,” his admiration of Dewey seems primarily rooted in the latter’s appreciation of what art can do for lives. If we approach aesthetic experience from a Deweyan perspective, then, we can see how art serves as a wonderful guide for Rorty’s strong poet in disclosing how we might hang things together in our lives in the most beautiful way possible.

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