RICHARD RORTY AND THE LITERARY CULTURE

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The intervention of post-analytic philosopher Richard Rorty in the field of literary studies in recent years may be seen as a sign of the times: the philosophers turn to the rhetorical strategies or discursive practices of their trade, which are generally considered to be the domain of literary studies; while the literary critics, at the same time, show greater interest in the more or less philosophical (mainly epistemological) aspects of literary production and consumtpion.

To a certain degree, Rorty's efforts consist in a reconceptualization of the historicity and contingency of the professional concerns of his field. Rorty finds the project of philosophical formalism—namely, Anglo-American analytical philosophy—a problematic one and embarks upon an examination of the historical origins and developments of such representationalist and linguistic interests. In his narrative, he emphasizes the contextuality of the discursive practices that make up his professional field and advocates such a critical move as a means to resist the isolating and de-historicizing tendencies in philosophical formalism. In that respect, Rorty's efforts converge nicely with the developing concerns of literary studies. To be more precise, the relevance of Rorty's writings lies in its deconstruction of the systematic view of knowledge (Truth) that has provided justification and foundation for those dominant and formalistic modes of perception and interpretation that have lodged themselves in the field of literary studies. In the following pages, I hope to trace Rorty's emergence in the field of philosophy, placing special emphasis upon those aspects of his thought that carry implications for literary studies; then I will examine Rorty's timely intervention in the debate surrounding the status of literary theory, which provided the gateway for his enry into the field of literary studies.

I

From early on, Rorty's concern for the profession of philosophy has always revolved around his reflections on the status of philosophy itself. These reflections take the form of a consistent qualification of the theories of absolute or universal objective truth that have become mainstream in Anglo-American philosophy. Dissolved in Rorty's continuous efforts are not only philosophy's own privileged status or the absolute objectivity of its claims, but also widely accepted traditional concepts of truth and knowledge.

Rorty first demonstrates himself as a contender to the field of philosophy in his

Introduction to the collection of essays he edits, titled *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (1967), an insightful Introduction that signals his concerns for the profession of philosophy and presents his diagnosis of the difficulties the profession has run itself into. The title of this collection refers to a then popular trend in philosophy, what Rorty terms "linguistic philosophy" or more generally "analytical philosophy." It is a trend that optimistically announces: "philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use" (Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn* 3). Such an optimistic argument has its basis in an interpretation of an early theory of Wittgenstein's which treats language as a mirror picture of reality and thus claims that all philosophical problems result from a lack of clarity in language. The analytical philosophers are thus fiercely formalistic as well as hopeful that the truth of the matter can be attained through a scrutiny of the ways in which language has been used in the formulation of philosophical problems.

While the linguistic method of analysis has been quite fruitful in clearing away some of the unnecessary entanglements in philosophical discussions, Rorty does not hesitate to point out that this attempt carries with it a thrust that aims to turn philosophy into a strict science through the adoption of an allegedly purified and thus presuppositionless methodology, and as such, Rorty holds, this attempt is doomed to fail. For late-comers will always rise by discursively articulating the presuppositions of those who think they have none—that's how philosophers find new issues to debate. Rorty then comes to the conclusion that under these circumstances, philosophy's prospects may not be what the analytical philosophers expect.

For one thing, Rorty envisions a very different future for philosophy: instead of seeing itself as finally approaching the end of its pursuit of truth through constantly sharpening and thus strengthening its analytical power, philosophy would no longer hold such an illusion as its goal. In fact, as Rorty maintains, though philosophy would go on building systems, "the systems built would no longer be considered *descriptions* of the nature of things or of human consciousness, but rather *proposals* about how to talk." That is to say, "Philosophy would then cease to be an argumentative discipline, and grow closer to poetry" (*The Linguistic Turn* 34).

What "poetry" means here is to be inferred from Rorty's description of the profession of philosophy and its practitioners. Instead of seeing philosophy as "discovery," Rorty believes philosophy in the future would simply be "the creation of new, interesting and fruitful ways of thinking about things in general" (*The Linguistic Turn* 34). To put it bluntly, philosophical theories are no longer to be seen as correct or incorrect answers to the perennial questions of philosophy; instead, they are to be seen as sets of metaphors, distinctions, problems that are invented to capture the imagination of philosophy's followers—in other words, philosophy would be very much like poetry. In that sense, philosophers would no longer be people who discover the Truth about the world, but people who construct narratives that present things as "hanging together." Deconstructed here is philosophy's traditional status of authority as well as philoso-

phers' privileged status as Truth-finders, both resting on philosophy's claims of approximation to Truth.

Such a view of philosophy as narrating and proposing, rather than discovering and asserting, not only affects the way we view the profession and its practitioners, but also questions our traditional conception of knowledge/Truth. Previously, knowledge is viewed as a reflection of how things "really" are, and all discoveries or assertions are subject to a test of truthfulness or accuracy by comparison with the observed (*de facto*) reality. Rorty refers to such conceptions as the representationalist view of knowledge: "the acquisition of knowledge presupposes the presentation of something 'immediately given' to the mind, where the mind is conceived of as a sort of 'immaterial eye,' and where 'immediately' means, at a minimum, 'without the mediation of language.' This 'spectorial' account of knowledge is the common target of philosophers as different as Dewey, Hampshire, Sartre, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein" (*The Linguistic Turn*, 39, note 75). Rorty would of course happily include himself among the members of this group in its critique of such a representational view of knowledge. At this early stage, though, little further explanation is provided for the spectorial account of knowledge or for its critique.

II

It is not until a decade later in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) that Rorty comes up with a full-fledged scrutiny of the latest form of the spectorial account of knowledge, the analytical philosophers' dream to find a transparent linguistic medium which would let Truth shine its face unto the mirror of our mind. Rorty's strategy in this major work is, above all, a historicist one. As Rorty's best commentator Richard Bernstein characterizes it, Rorty "systematically exposes the historical origins of what we now take to be standard philosophical problems and he searches for the historical roots of those philosophical 'intuitions' that play such a primary role in philosophical debate" (56).[1] Rorty shows how—as a result of a series of historical accidents, options, and confusions—Descartes' and Locke's assumptions about the mind ("our glassy essence") and consciousness (the "mirroring" that takes place between our mind and the world and makes up our knowledge of the world) come to dominate the seventeenth century as the only viable frame of reference for philosophical inquiries. He goes on to describe how in the hands of Kant these assumptions about the mind and consciousness are transformed into an elevation of epistemology as the only viable domain of philosophy, an elevation that has since dominated the field. The cumulative work of these philosophers makes up the current foundation of philosophy: "To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind" (Rorty, *Philosophy* 3). Rorty's historicizing effort then demonstrates how philosophy's seemingly perennial problems are actually born of a specific and select philosophico-historical process and their validity established

through the work of a select community of philosphers in which these problems are given epistemic authority.

As Rorty sees it, the implicit consequence of this spectorial-representational tradition of philosophical inquiries is no less than a purposeful (re-)arrangement of the cultural map. In the above historical process, philosophers come to believe that "Philosophy's central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so)" (Rorty, *Philosophy* 3). Based on this premise, it is only too obvious that the natural sciences and philosophy would rank among the most desirable areas of culture, and literature and the arts would rank among the least desirable. Exposed here in Rorty's narration is philosophy's self-imposed and self-justified primacy as well as the historical origin of the spectorial-representational theory of knowledge.

Having delimited the formation of philosophy's present state by exposing its historicity, Rorty then takes another look at the future of philosophy by examining the interesting work of some contemporary analytical philosophers such as Wilfrid Sellars, W. V. O. Quine, and Donald Davidson who are moving beyond the spectorial theory of knowledge. Refraining from taking representation as the "foundation of knowledge," these philosophers have developed an "epistemological behaviorism" (Rorty's new term in place of the overburdened word "pragmatism") that "explain[s] rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say" (Rorty, *Philosophy* 174). And if knowledge is to be understood in the context of discursive practices set up by the society, then the central but thorny question of philosophical justification becomes none other than a question of social sanction.

As Rorty characterizes it later, by giving up the spectorial-representational theory of knowledge and cognition, these radical philosophers "successfully, and rightly, blur the positivist distinctions between the semantic and the pragmatic, the analytic and the synthetic, the linguistic and the empirical, theory and observation" (*Consequences* xviii). That is to say, in the work of these philosophers of epistemological behaviorism the first items in this series of binary oppositions can no longer enjoy the privileged status designated to them since representational theory began to dominate the field of philosophy. And Rorty favors these renegade philosophers because their work shows that, contrary to the analytical philosophers' hopes, "attempts to get back behind language to something which 'grounds' it, or which it 'expresses,' or to which it might hope to be 'adequate,' have not worked" (*Consequences* xx). Rorty puts it summarily: "justification is no longer a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice" (*Philosophy* 170). With this realization, Rorty has now reached the heart of the pragmatic position:

> ... to say that truth and knowledge can only be judged by the standards of the inquires of our own day is not to say that human knowledge is less noble or important, or more 'cut off from the world,' than we had thought. It is merely to say that nothing

> counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and that there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence. (*Philosophy* 178)

It is clear that this historicization of philosophical premises entails a localization of validity and objectivity in knowledge-claims. That is why Rorty announces: " 'Objective truth' is no more and no less than the best idea we *currently* have about how to explain what is going on." Likewise, the foundations of knowledge that so many philosophers (including Kant and Habermas) have tried to determine "are just the facts about what a given society, or profession, or other group, takes to be good ground for assertions of a certain sort" (*Philosophy* 385).[2] As such historicized and localized efforts, any discussion of knowledge is to be made in reference to the specific community involved, rather than being treated as a universal or eternal law. In short, local validity is all that a knowledge statement or any objective truth can enjoy; validity is established only within the relevant context of the community(ies) involved; and justification is established if this truth "hangs well" with what the community(ies) already holds as viable or true.

III

The historicization of philosophical approaches and the localization of validity in knowledge-claims bring forth another important implication of Rorty's pragmatism: the socialization of philosophical inquiries. After all, as Rorty states later, "the test of philosophical truth consists neither in 'correct analyses' of individual concepts (for example, 'meaning' or 'intentionality') nor in the internal coherence among hundreds of such analyses linked together in a philosophical system, but only in the coherence of such a system with the rest of culture" ("Texts and Lumps" 14). That is to say, truth/knowledge cannot be created in a vacuum by philosophers; it has to *work* well with the rest of culture. This significant point is most clearly reflected in Rorty's choice of a new vocabulary, which has come to dominate his language since the 1980s.

In his previous work, Rorty employs the categories of "proposal" and "discovery" to contrast the mission of philosophy as it is conceived by Rorty himself and as it is conceived by traditional philosophers. Ironically, the choice of vocabulary in both cases characterizes philosophy as one-way discursive efforts initiated by philosophers (to propose or to discover), and thus maintains the traditional and special status that philosophy and philosophers command in helping ordinary people understand the world. Likewise, as Rorty explains it in this context, poetry, philosophy's destiny, refers to narratives that are constructed to "propose" to people what the world is like and how things hang together. Yet even with Rorty's preference for "proposal" over "discovery," philosophers are still revered for "knowing something about knowing

which nobody else knows so well" (Rorty, *Philosophy* 392). That is why philosophers are entrusted with the power to propose, and the common people having little input or power to negotiate in the process are left only to choose which proposal(s)/narrative(s) to accept. No room for discussion or debate is needed among philosophers as they work separately to construct their own narratives in the "proposal" model. This absence of communication is symptomatic of a presupposition which treats knowledge as the product of the inquiries and efforts of privileged individual geniuses who do not need consultation or discussion. Be it proposal or discovery, the unique status of philosophy and philosophers are still maintained.

Rorty's new category of "conversation," on the other hand, highlights the social nature of the activities of philosophy. It is no accident that Rorty himself ends *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* with an allusion to Michael Oakeshott's essay titled "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" because "it catches the tone in which, I [Rorty] think, philosophy should be discussed" (389). In Rorty's conception, philosophy, like poetry, is best understood as one of the many voices in the conversation of mankind, "as one discourse among others, one among many projects we engage in" (*Philosophy* 382). That is to say, first of all, philosophy (now included in the domain of poetry) is only one voice among many. Secondly, there is no hierarchical difference between philosophy and the sciences and literary criticism. As Rorty states it, they are all "equal comrades with diverse interests, distinguished *only* by these interests, not by cognitive status"; in other words, "the difference is between the rules of one institution ... and those of another . . ." ("Texts and Lumps" 7). Thirdly, philosophy (included in poetry) is to be conceived as multi-way discussions rather than one-way proposing/describing/preaching. In other words, how things hang together is not to be monopolized by the specialized work of a specialized person -i.e. a philosopher or by that of a group of specialized people i.e. philosophers, but to be open to the discretion and the participation of various voices representing various social groups.

In short, as "proposal" or "discovery," philosophy has focused on "the relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry" (Rorty, *Philosophy* 389). As "conversation," however, philosophy is no longer object-oriented. The goal is no longer to reach the most accurate depiction or the most plausible proposal, but to keep the social practice of conversation going by constantly coming up with new and workable descriptions. Philosophy, like the literary culture in Rorty's conception, thus aims at the continuation of the multi-faceted discursive activities among human beings who happen to be engaged in those activities.[3] In fact, such possibilities of conversation are the basis upon which communities are formed. In this sense, philosophy is no longer some objective scientific experiment to whose results everyone must capitulate. If there is any consensus at all, it is reached by negotiation and compromise—through conversation—rather than by means of comparing with an absolute objective criterion. Furthermore, once that consensus is established in the community, it becomes the unquestioned presupposition by which the members operate, until it is challenged and changed later on. In short, philosophies, or for that matter Truth and knowledge, are

no longer the product of individual construction by a select group of geniuses but the result of social interaction among various social groups.

IV

Rorty's continuous efforts aim at a re-characterization of the nature of philosophy and a re-conceptualization of the nature of truth-knowledge. Yet such efforts also have much to contribute to the field of literary studies as the latter reflects upon its own status as well as the status of (literary) theory.

For one thing, considering the fact that literary studies have long been marginalized by the sciences for not being scientific enough and by philosophy for being too emotional and personal, one might expect Rorty's comparison of philosophy to literature to be welcomed by the field of literary studies. After all, such a leveling effort on Rorty's part to deflate philosophy and the sciences, treating them as "genres" of writing rather than as privileged subjects, ought to be perceived as a friendly move. Yet, not all in the literary field are enthusiastic or grateful for it. Michael Fischer, for one, sees Rorty's effort to equalize philosophy and literature as a damaging one:

> Rorty's point, in short, is not that literature is cognitive, serious, powerful, and responsible but that philosophy (without admitting it) is like literature: imprecise, capricious, and methodologically dishevelled. Instead of strengthening literature, Rorty leaves it impotent, which is why, among the consequences of Rorty's pragmatism, I do not find a convincing rationale for literary study. (322)

Here Fischer is using, out of his own word choice rather than Rorty's, two sets of descriptive adjectives which are heavily laden with value judgments. The first set lists what Fischer values as desirable qualities, which he thinks Rorty has unfortunately withheld from the field of literature. The second set Fischer sees as undesirable qualities, which Rorty is allegedly using to describe the literary culture. To Fischer, this deliberate downgrading of literary culture on Rorty's part is intolerable.

Yet such a characterization of Rorty exposes more of Fischer's own hidden agenda than it does Rorty's position: Fischer still wishes literature could be—and that means literature is not "cognitive, serious, powerful, and responsible" like the sciences or philosophy. In fact, it is Fischer's persistence in upholding these values that keeps him from truly appreciating Rorty's effort.

To start with, the desirable qualities that Fishcer wishes Rorty had awarded literature - "cognitive, serious, powerful, and responsible"—are exactly what Rorty is asking us to forsake because they remain within an absolutist frame of reference that would probably still privilege a certain methodology as well as acknolwedge the qualitative

difference between the natural sciences and literature. Furthermore, when Rorty describes literary culture as "operating without rules" or refusing to be "bothered by realistic questions" (Fischer 315), he does not mean, as Fischer would have readers believe, that these absences in any way diminish the value of literary studies. Instead, Rorty's tone is that of a victorious compliment, seeing that literature can do without the tyranny of rules and the entanglement of unnecessary demands. Fischer, on the other hand, coming from an absolutist frame of mind which remains true to traditional philosophy's value systems, reads these descriptions as a condemnation of literary culture. That is why he accuses Rorty of giving literary discourse a definition that is "fundamentally negative" (Fischer 322). Ironically, this negativity stems only from Fischer's own values. Failing to appreciate the subversive challenges issued from Rorty's new pragmatic position, Fischer ends up with only misreadings of Rorty.

Rorty's preference for literary culture shows up most clearly in his camaraderie with (a certain branch of) literary culture. In one place, as he compares philosophy to literature, Rorty even steps forward to compare his brand of new pragmatism to literary modernism. As he sees it, "Pragmatism is the philosophical counterpart of literary modernism, the kind of literature which prides itself on its autonomy and novelty rather than its truthfulness to experience or its discovery of preexisting significance" ("Nineteenth-Century Idealism" 153). Though Rorty does not elaborate on this point, such a comparison is not without good reason. To a certain degree, literary modernism's high aesthetic self-consciousness matches up with new pragmatism's high epistemological self-consciousness. Literary modernism's non-representationalism agrees with new pragmatism's anti-Cartesian and anti-Kantian thrust. And literary modernism's exaltation of the poet (the maker of new vocabularies, new descriptions, and new genres) above the philosopher (the knower) happily fits into new pragmatism's program to dethrone traditional Philosophy.

Yet such camaraderie is not without its qualifications. Rorty's new pragmatism would have quickly cautioned against stretching the analogy too far. For one thing, modernists often boast of a deeper penetration and thus a deeper perception of the real meaning and essence of life. Only with such claims of profoundness can they justify and dignify their turning away from allegedly superficial realism or shallow humanistic representation, and towards (seemingly difficult) style, technique, and spatial form. Yet, for Rorty, new pragmatic-minded philosophers do not need such honorific terms to justify what they are doing. Their aversion from representationalism does not entail a simultaneous affirmation that they themselves are closer to a deeper truth. In Rorty's characterization, the new pragmatists simply find other styles, techniques, and spatial forms more workable for their current purposes. This is a major difference in posture between literary modernism and Rorty's new pragmatism.

V

Rorty's aversion from appealing to honorific first principales as justification for priactice also prompts him to take a stand in the debate on the status of literary theory in the field of literary studies. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels' highly provocatie essay titled "Against Theory"[4] in the summer 1982 issue of *Critical Inquiry* provided the occasion for Rorty's convergence with the pragmatic-minded members of the literary field.

Knapp and Michaels' essay was overtly critical of (literary) theory in tone, yet written in a discursive style congruent with as well as familiar to theory-minded scholars. It sought to dispel theorists' self-appointed task to govern or validate interpretations of particular texts by resorting to accounts of interpretation in general. "The meaning of a text is simply identical to the author's intended meaning," Knapp and Michaels claim (12), thus there is no need to turn to theory in order to "ground" meaning in intention. They end their essay by saying "the theoretical enterprise should therefore come to an end" (30).

The essay invited so many heated and unfriendly responses that *Critical Inquiry* decided to devote its June 1983 issue to these voices as well as to Knapp and Michaels' reply to their critics. Yet the matter was not to stop then and there. In the March 1985 issue, Rorty joined the discussion. While he applauds Kanpp and Michaels' effort to undermine theory's attempt to regulate practice from a position outside the latter, Rorty urges Knapp and Michaels not to hang on to privileged terms such as "authorial intention" to justify "meaning" to their opponents. After all, "the importance of narrative philosophy is that persuasion is as frequently a matter of getting people to drop a vocabulary (and the questions they phrase within it) as of deductive argument" (Rorty, "Philosophy Without Principles" 136).

Many, especially certain proponents of (literary) theory, tend to speak in a way that implies that somehow we have to decide on our theoretical first principles before we can proceed to deal with literary works; that is, we have to understand our own position on "meta" - criticism before we can do criticism properly. Rorty's point of view on this issue is that "meta" suggests there are some practices that are on a higher level than others. Yet, as Rorty sees it, theory "is just more practice of the same sort, using a slightly different set of raw materials," and it is merely "an attempt to weave toether . . . your favorite critics, novelists, poets, and such, and your favorite philosophers" ("Philosophy Without Principles" 136). Theory, in other words, is merely a discursive operation that aims to achieve certain goals, just like other discursive operations, be they scientific or philosophical or literary.

Yet, while Rorty sides with up-coming anti-theory new pragmatists in their efforts to dampen theory's soaring popularity, he is not hesitant to express his displeasure when he notices the last vestige of foundationalism in Knapp and Michaels:

> Knapp and Michaels' claim that meaning is identical with intention suggests that we put the text in whatever context we find useful and then call the result a discovery of the author's intention. But why call it anything in particular? Why not just put in a context, describe

> the advantages of having done so, and forget the question of whether one has got at either its "meaning" or "the author's intention"? ("Philosophy Without Principles" 134).

What Rorty would like to see then is that people go on doing whatever they are doing without appealing to a general theory or any other foundation to justify their practice.

Rorty's aversion of honorific first principles is so thorough-going that he even finds fault with the arch champion of anti-representationalism and anti-foundationalism, namely Jacques Derrida, when the latter seems to be slipping from those positions. Rorty approves of Derrida's advocacy of "a writing marked by self-conscious interminability, self-conscious openness, self-conscious lack of philosophical closure" ("Deconstruction and Circumvention" 8), because such writing fits in nicely with Rorty's anti-representational thrust. Yet Rorty warns that this self-consciousness need not be accompanied by a false sense of urgency that does nothing but reaffirm the central place of philosphy in our culture. "Derrida (like Heidegger) would have no writing to do unless there were a 'metaphysics of presence' to overcome" ("Philosophy as a Kind of Writing" 108); thus, the more urgently Derrida deconstructs, the more his efforts betray "a self-deceptive attempt to magnify the importance of an academic speciality" ("Deconstruction and Circumvention" 3). What Rorty would like to see instead is Derrida going on doing what he is doing but without that sense of urgency which signals an implied self-importance. After all, as Rorty points out, since readers have always been reading various genres together, Derrida is merely "doing brilliantly and at length something most of his readers have been doing spasmodically and awkwardly in their heads" ("Deconstruction and Circumvention" 15). In that sense, there is really nothing too unusual about what Derrida is doing. Once the sense of urgency is removed, once Derrida refrains from becoming "one more claimant to the title of discoverer of the primal, deepest vocabulary" ("Deconstruction and Circumvention" 16), then he can embark upon his re-reading of all texts (literary or philosophical) without any strings attached.

While being critical about Derrida's occasional slippage into foundational talk, Rorty's overall attitude toward Derrida is a favorable one. Pragmatism's doubt of all first principles and foundations chips away at the absoluteness and independence of objective truth(s), and can be linked up nicely with the Derridean tendency to deflate any kind of privileging. Thus Rorty extends a welcoming hand to the deconstructionists for alliance: "Pragmatists and Derrideans are, indeed, natural allies. Their strategies supplement each other admirably" ("Philosophy Without Principles" 135). Rorty declares that, like Derrida, the pragmatist also aims to blur "the literature-philosophy distinction and promot[e] the idea of a seamless, undifferentiated 'general text' " ("Deconstruction and Circumvention" 3), and "wants to abandon a certain framework of interconnected ideas -truth as correspondence, language as picture, literature as imitation" ("Nineteenth-Century Idealism" 140). As such, pragmatism, like Derridean deconstruction, is "a thorough-going abandonment of the notion of discovering the

truth which is common to theology and science" ("Nineteenth-Century Idealism" 150-51).

Rorty may be eager to establish an alliance between his version of pragmatism and deconstruction, yet deconstruction's most famous popularizer Jonathan Culler has reservations. Culler acknowledges that there are obvious similarities between the two approaches: a critique of representation theory, a questioning of first principles and truths, an emphasis on discursive practices, etc. But he objects to identifying deconstruction with pragmatism on two grounds. First of all, he objects to pragmatism's "appeal to consensus and convention" because it suggests "the norm as a foundation," thus excluding those things that are not considered normal or conventional, which happen to be what deconstruction focuses upon (*On Deconstruction* 153). Second, Culler finds pragmatism's attitude toward reflexive inquiry problematic. When pragmatism is heard as saying that "we cannot by an effort of self-scrutiny or theoretical enquiry get outside the framework of beliefs and assumptions within which we operate," Culler calls it "complacency" and insists that "even if in principle we cannot get outside conceptual frameworks to criticize and evaluate, the practice of self-reflexivity, the attempt to theorize one's practice, works to produce change" (*On Deconstruction* 154). Be it the question of consensus or that of reflexive thinking, Culler aims to draw Rorty out from a seeming lack of sincerity to institute change. The question is: are Culler's complaints justified?

Let us take the second point first. While Culler agrees with Rorty that we can never get out of our skins, he reads in Rorty's statement an implication that discourages reflexive thinking as well as the possibility of change. That is not a fair reading of Rorty. If Rorty circumscribes the power of reflexive thinking at all, he is aiming at that Enlightenment-based view of a specific kind of thinking process that promises to see through existent mistakes or misconceptions so as to reach a truer or more correct picture of how things should be. Such a privileged view of *certain* thinking processes or of the thinking processes of *certain* specialized people is what Rorty is against. And if Culler's idea of reflexive thinking is the privileged Enlightenment kind, then Culler himself, as an advocate of the deprivileging that deconstruction is famous for, needs to reflect upon his own privileging tendency. To Rorty, of course reflexive thinking, like other kinds of thinking, is valuable and to be encouraged. But reflexive thinking is just a kind of thinking or evaluating that anyone does; it does not enjoy any privileged status at all. Furthermore, while reflexive thinking may produce change, it in no way monopolizes the sources of change. A lot of other things could produce change too. And more than likely, these other factors may have created the context in which reflexive thinking takes place.

Thus, if we follow the pragmatic spirit of contextualization one step further, instead of pondering, as Culler does, the question of *whether* reflexive thinking is valuable or not, a more interesting question, for Culler as well as for Rorty, would be *how or why* people come to take the initiative to conduct this self-examination in the first place. After all, why would someone suddenly get the urge to be critical of or to change

his/her own views? Under what contextual factors does this urge surface? With what efforts can this urge be amplified and linked up with various social issues? By thus shifting the topic of discussion from contemplative, metaphysical questions to the pragmatic, practical questions of social practice, Rortyean new pragmatic stance offers inspirations and possibly new strategies for instituting change.

Now we can go back to the first complaint. Being true to the radical spirit of deconstruction, Culler accuses Rorty of putting too much emphasis on the steadfastness and exclusivity of the norm so as to leave no room for anything outside the norm. Viewed in a certain light, this observation may be justified, since Rorty does put great emphasis on the stability and uniformity within communities, to the extent that he says very little about the possibility of unorthodox tactics or dramatic changes. As a matter of fact, this is exactly the thorny point on which most of Rorty's other critics launch their criticism of his conservative leanings. Yet instead of harping upon Rorty's conservative tendencies, it might be more beneficial to adopt the pragmatic stance and drive Rorty's liberalism to its logical and radical conclusions. In other words, we need to investigate the ways in which the radical possibilities in Rorty's thoughts can be articulated.

VI

Most challenges to Rorty's political stance are best understood as efforts to amplify the radical possibilities in new pragmatism. One friendly commentator, Alexander Nehamas, recognizes that "there is a strong political element in Rorty's pragmatism, in his willingness to isolate epistemology from the rest of the culture of the Englishtenment, and in his message of social hope"; thus Nehamas suggests that Rorty go further to "show how the institutional connections between the various aspects of the Englightenment can, as a matter of fact, be lossened" (412). In other words, he hopes Rorty will explore and maybe even induce change in the politics of epistemological investigations.

Other challengers are more specific in their demands. Charles Eric Reeves, for one, hopes Rorty would go beyond the level of language (or philosophy) to look at the broader context in which discourses take place. Coming from a Wittgensteinian background, Rorty of course understands that "to imagine a language means to imagine a fom of life." Yet as Reeves notices, "Too often what we find in Rorty is language alone, language as a self-generated and entirely reflexive phenomenon—language, in other words, identified *as* (not with) forms of life" (352). That is to say, Reeves thinks Rorty puts so much emphasis upon the diversity and playfulness of language games that it often seems that language has become all there is between communicating subjects. And subjects seem to get involved in discursive games merely because they want to keep the language games going and to increase variety by constantly switching topics and

vocabularies. In pointing these things out, Reeves hopes Rorty will become more Wittgensteinian and explore the forms of life that inform or motivate discoursing subjects and their language activities.

A third challenger hopes to move Rorty beyond the level of theorizing about the power maneuvers among communities and into examining the actual social practices that make up these power maneuvers. Richard Bernstein thus zeroes in on Rorty's prevalent use of the concept of "social practices," as demonstrated in Rorty's saying such things as "the True and Right are matters of social practice" and "justification is a matter of social practice" (*Philosophy* 178, 186). The vagueness of "social practices" and its frequent appearance without much explanation in Rorty's writings worry Bernstein, because "social practices" are treated as if they are given, as if they just take place by themselves. What Bernstein urges Rorty to reflect upon is how social practices "are generated, sustained, and pass away"; furthermore, he also wants to know "how they are to be *criticized*," for it is the criticisms that constitute oppositional social practices which may induce more change (83).

The persistence of these challenges highlights Rorty's rising importance as well as his resilience to such radical criticism. It seems that some of Rorty's points are so salient and have produced such effects on the overall practices in the humanities that the literary critics just could not afford not paying attention to him.[5] And they are probably wise in perceiving in Rortyean new pragmatism a relevance for their own field. For all its worth, new pragmatism's attention to the social, the political, the local, the communal, the contingent, etc. holds out remarkable points of connection with present tendencies in literary studies.

In an age that is becoming accustomed to notions of decentralized Truth, or of the relativized and historicized nature of knowledge, Rorty's efforts to emphasize the social construction of knowledge, the need to dispense with the reign of Truth/theory, and the problematic relationship between knowledge and practice, offer to literary critics new strategies and new vocabularies to conduct their practice in manners relevant to the postmodern world. Furthermore, Rorty alerts us to the observation that truth statemets involve a lot more than innocent epistemological questions, that when arguments over truth take place, they take place within contexts of competing or opposing communities. That is to say, it is because of the different interests, and thus views, of involved communities that truth becomes a question/problem; a problem not to be resolved by insisting on privileged postures or resorting to specific correspondence theories of truth, but to be negotiated through power maneuvers such as Rorty's "conversation."

Endnotes

1. This strategy of historicizing philosophical problematics is written in the spirit of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1967), and to a great extent, Rorty's historical account of the formation of the representational theory of knowledge remains more or less within Kuhn's terms. That is to say, despite Bernstein's characterization of Rorty as someone who is deeply concerned with general social practices, when it comes to historical explanations, Rorty limits himself to what happens in the field of philosophy rather than going on to the social context in which philosophical discourses take place, which is what Bernstein would have liked to see Rorty do.
2. Words such as "good" or "best" do not carry the metaphysical or ontological connotations that traditional philosophy has granted them. In the language of the American classical pragmatists, these words simply meant "whatever works." In the language of Rorty, this rather vague description is given a philosophical shade: " ... the test of a philosophical theory ... is how well it coheres with the best work currently being done ... " ("Texts and Lumps" 14). That is to say, "the best idea" is the one that enjoys the highest degree of coherence in association with other ideas that the community currently holds, and "good grounds for assertions" are those that cohere with other assertions that the community might presently hold concerning the world.
3. It needs to be pointed out here that Rorty's characterization of literary culture and poetry is of course an idealistic one. For, like philosophy, literature culture and poetry are also social institutions, subject to social sanction. In fact, the long-standing formalistic tendencies in literary studies and their search for the "real" meaning of a text or its most accurate interpretation are likewise in desperate need of Rorty's demystifying effort.
4. The title of the article is obviously a reference to Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method* (1978) in the hope that it may produce the same iconoclastic impact on literary studies as Feyerabend's book has done in the field of analytical philosophy.
5. Cornel West terms Rorty's neopragmatism "a form of ethnocentric posthumanism" (205) because Rorty seems to assert the value and supremacy of (American White) bourgeois capitalist society as the best form of society actualized to far. Such a celebration of the existing power structure is distasteful to those who seek and work toward change. But this does not mean that Rorty's brand of new pragmatism is conservative *by nature*. As a matter of fact, it is the contention of this paper that new pragmatism can offer many valuable strategies for literary critics in such a time of increasing marginality. Similarly, by linking up with radical politics, new pragmatism may very well be transformed in the process. Such notions of transient positions and revisable practices are strongly implied in Rorty's concepts of "conversation" and "alliances."

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