

Introduction

*“Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take
Care of Itself”: Toward a Postphilosophical Politics*

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I

If Richard Rorty did not exist he would have to be invented. Americans, above all, would have to invent him. But philosophers, leftists, cultural critics, theorists, intellectual historians, novelists, preachers, politicians, apocalyptic soothsayers, lawyers, and even comics the world over would also have to invent him. Fortunately, Rorty exists. In fact, the existing Rorty has far outstripped what anyone could have dreamed up for the role of consummate critic, unnostalgic outsider, Socratic gadfly, irreverent demystifier, perpetual noncontemporaneous dreamer, heroic prophet of the new dawns, ingenious mixer and masterful producer of modern bricolage, and patriotic critic of an unfinished country. He is a nemesis to many, and is claimed as a friend by only very few. His works are denounced everywhere across the country, in every discipline, and in each of the Ivy League universities. Yet he is one of the most read philosophers in the United States. Richard Rorty is a uniquely American anomaly. Amazingly, his work stands athwart most of what has come to represent America at the end of the “American century.” His work is cosmopolitan, ecumenical, multilateralist, trans-American, anti-imperial, and confessedly ethnocentric, so that it can be critical of his moral community, both antischolastic

and antidisciplinary. He is utopian, hopeful, and optimistic without being reckless, unrealistic, and antidemocratic.

Rorty's work is above all guided by two central virtues: respect and hope. His work is animated by profound respect for ordinary citizens. This respect is enshrined in the priority that he gives to the primacy of the agent's point of view. In turn, this respect is matched by his utopian hopefulness that social justice is a worthy project to devote our lives to, even if we have no guarantees that we will succeed and that our gains will not be rolled back.¹ In a country famously short on memory, Rorty's work always advocates the *long durée* of social movements and millennial intellectual traditions. His work, while deeply informed by the most recent developments in what is called Continental and analytic philosophy, is unabashedly antidisciplinary and postprofessionalization. One of the central aims of his writing has been to liberate philosophy from the ivory towers of the Ivy League, where it has been sequestered since Immanuel Kant began to turn philosophy into an academic discipline. Rorty's work is refreshingly new precisely because it has taken a stand against the kind of professional deformation that results in sterile forms of scholasticism—especially the esoteric writing that makes philosophy frivolous, irrelevant to the public life of a democracy. While he is dismissed, denounced, derided, and ridiculed by every major representative across the political spectrum, from the reddest of the left to the bluest of the right, he is still the most quoted living American philosopher. He has influenced and invigorated many fields within the humanities and social sciences. While he has been read by some as advocating the end of philosophy, his work has in fact led to the renewal of debates about the public role of philosophy. He is surely the most appealing and honoring public intellectual that the United States could have as a cultural ambassador, abroad and across the continental United States. In this age, in which the United States is perceived as an imperial Leviathan, stumbling blindly, rapaciously, and disastrously across the world,

1. I have benefited greatly from Mark Dooley's sympathetic engagement with Rorty's work. See in particular his "Private Irony vs. Social Hope: Derrida, Rorty, and the Political," *Cultural Values* 3:3 (1999): 263–90; "A Civic Religion of Social Hope: A Reply to Simon Critchley," *Philosophy and Social Hope* 27:5 (September 2001): 35–58. See especially his essay on Rorty and John Caputo, "In Praise of Prophecy," in *A Passion for the Impossible: John Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Dooley, 201–28 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

Richard Rorty's criticism of the recent administration's policies are all the more remarkable because it comes from someone who has also eloquently advocated an American patriotism and recalled for the American public the importance of Emerson's and Whitman's country, one that is still yet to be achieved.² Along with John Dewey, the philosopher of education and democracy, and John Rawls, the philosopher of justice and political liberalism, Richard Rorty will stand as one of the most important American philosophers of the twentieth century. Like Dewey and Rawls, he will also be remembered as a philosopher of what he has so beautifully called a "larger loyalty."³ Like every major philosopher who is remembered by one or two philosophemes that embody the spirit of their philosophical quest and contribution, Rorty will be remembered by the words *irony*, *contingency*, and *solidarity*.

II

Richard Rorty has pursued one philosophical aim over the past thirty years or so, namely, to demonstrate that pragmatism is not only one of the most important philosophical traditions to have emerged from the American experience, but that it synthesizes the philosophical and scientific advances made in the West over the past few centuries. In this sense, Rorty's work has been concerned mainly with the rehabilitation, rediscovery, and renewal of pragmatism. Many have accused Rorty of not interpreting the pragmatist canon correctly, arguing that he has not accurately understood the philosophers he has sought to rehabilitate.⁴ Rorty's version of pragmatism is indeed unique and distinct, but pragmatism has always meant

2. I am thinking particularly of two pieces, "Fighting Terrorism with Democracy," *The Nation* (October 21, 2002), 11–14; and "Postdemocracy: Richard Rorty on Anti-Terrorism and the National Security State," in *London Review of Books* (April 1, 2004), 10–11.

3. Richard Rorty, "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, ed. Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson, 223–37 (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

4. See the essays collected in Herman J. Staatskamp, Jr., ed., *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995); and Robert B. Brandom, *Rorty and His Critics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000).

different things to different thinkers and philosophers. Even people who identify themselves as pragmatists, or who acknowledge that they share in the pragmatist approach to such a degree that they see themselves as part of a historical movement that aims to revive pragmatism, disagree on who are the central figures within the tradition and who are not. Thinkers of many persuasions and fields—Marxists, socialists, feminists, liberals, political conservatives, literary critics, legal thinkers, historians, philosophers, and so on—have called themselves pragmatists. Such individuals name John Dewey, Charles S. Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Alain Locke, Sidney Hook, George Herbert Mead, W. E. B. DuBois, William James, and Josiah Royce, to name some of the main figures in the pragmatist pantheon, as their predecessors and intellectual sources of inspiration. Richard Rorty has done more than any other contemporary U.S. philosopher to revive and reclaim the name and tradition of pragmatism. But he has also, more than anyone else, destabilized, blurred, jostled, and reinscribed the meaning of pragmatism. In Rorty's hands, pragmatism has not just been revived but also transformed into a formidable and venerable Western philosophical tradition.

To get at what Rorty means by pragmatism, I would like to split the difference between what he is against and what he approves of, and summarize what he advocates. In this way, we can outline how Rorty thinks we ought to be talking about what concerns human beings and their relations with one another, instead of giving a Rortian definition of pragmatism, and we can isolate what he thinks isn't worth our attention and concern.

Rorty's style is disarmingly chatty and colloquial, and what he says is expressed in terms of oppositions. The structure of his essays hinges on rhetorical and mnemonic devices; he does not demonstrate. He leads us to new insights not by syllogisms but through the force of narrative in his irreverent and original stories. Still, Rorty is anti-Platonist, that is, he rejects the appearance-essence, or contingent-eternal distinction that is fundamental to Platonism. He is anti-Aristotelian, that is, he rejects the convention-nature distinction. He is also anti-Thomist, that is, he rejects the natural law-human law, distinction. He is also an anti-Kantian, that is, he rejects the noumena-phenomena, analytic-synthetic, a priori-a posteriori distinctions. He is also anti-Cartesian, that is, he rejects the mind-matter, innate-acquired distinctions. He is anti-Hegelian, that is, he rejects the notion that there is a logic of history, and that this logic is the nature of rea-

son, and that this reason is tied to freedom. He is also anti-Marxist, that is, he rejects the idea that all history is the history of class struggle, and the notion that the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling classes. All of this can be translated into anti-essentialism, antirealism, antimentalism, anti-subjectivism, anticognitivism, anti-historical materialism—in short anti-metaphysics and antifoundationalism. In Rorty's view, pragmatism is the name for the kind of philosophical approach that has sought to dispense with some of the most obdurate and entrenched philosophical obsessions and sacred cows.

Rorty's form of talking is also characterized by what it endorses. Each sentence that rejects a particular philosophical mythology or problematic is invariably followed by a sentence that puts forward some thinker and a particular argumentative breakthrough that allows us to dispense with what was rejected in the prior sentence. In this way, Rorty is able to split the difference between two extremes.⁵ Thus, Rorty is avowedly pro-Humean, that is, he endorses Hume's emphasis of the education of moral sentiment over the alleged power of reason.⁶ He is pro-Derridean, that is, he endorses the ways in which deconstruction is another name for jostling

5. I think that as one reads across Rorty's corpus, one notices that over the last decade or so, Rorty's early juxtaposition of Dewey and Heidegger has been replaced by the juxtaposition of Habermas and Derrida. I think that as Heidegger has become more suspect and untenable for Rorty, he has been replaced by Derrida, and as Dewey recedes in time, he has been replaced by Habermas. Furthermore, while Rorty has continued to attach names to the kinds of positions he espouses himself, it is quite evident that the extremes these two figures represent are the positions of, on the one hand, private irony or contingency, and social hope or solidarity on the other. Rorty writes as if he has read most everything important that has been published in the last hundred years, but only in order to achieve a kind of philosophical multilateralism.

6. Sociological analyses are not proofs for philosophical arguments. Yet, one cannot but side with Hume and Rorty in light of the 2004 National Endowment for the Arts report entitled *Reading at Risk*. The report is based on information mined from a survey conducted by the Census Bureau in 2002, "The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts." The report indicates that reading has declined in the United States; at the same time, it correlates the level of social engagement and reading habits. Thus, those who read more are also more likely to do volunteer and charity work. See Bruce Weber, "Fewer Noses Stuck in Books in America, Survey Finds," *New York Times* (July 8, 2004). I am thankful to Martin Woessner for bringing to my attention these articles.

and redescription, brilliant bricolage, and a form of polytheistic criticism. He is pro-Davidsonian, that is, he endorses the ways in which Davidson's view of language is a form of pan-relationalism, in which triangulation means submitting to the authority of reasons that are offered as justifications rather than as ways of finding something outside and beside what is merely human. He is also pro-Wittgensteinian, that is, he endorses the ways in which language use is tied to forms of life, and how changing ways of talking and describing the world entail changing practical relations. He is also pro-Heideggerian, but he endorses only the Heidegger who is interested in language as poetic novelty, the one who offers metanarratives that allow us to see how we may begin to be disenchanted with old mythologies and begin to articulate new languages and narratives. He is also pro-Habermasian, that is, he endorses the kind of shift from monological subjectivity to intersubjectivity and communicative rationality that Habermas has so eloquently described. Thus, Rorty advocates a pragmatism that is unequivocally and unwaveringly historicist, emotivist, deconstructivist, dialogic, linguistic, contextualist, and pan-relationalist.

Rortian discourse, not to be confused with either Heideggerianese or Derridean deconstructionism, both forms of language and description that began as heresies but which eventually became orthodoxies par excellence, generally includes a third type of sentence, after the rejections and endorsements, that articulates directly Rorty's own views.⁷ Rorty's pragmatism is a form of thinking that is obsessively focused on the practical, or praxis, above theory or contemplation. The goal of philosophizing is not to discover eternal truths, or truths that can stand as ultimate alibis for theoretical claims, but rather, the instrumental character of ideas. Not whether ideas are right in accordance with something of which they are a copy or to which they refer, but instead whether ideas or narratives allow us to transform our world. In this way, Rorty's pragmatism is forward-looking and meliorative. Rorty's brand of pragmatism is profoundly antidogmatic; it is skeptical of received wisdom and canons, as well as of common sense. It is irreverent and suspicious of any authority, be it intellectual, philosophical,

7. The following list of positive goals that Rorty's type of pragmatism endorses was partly gathered from Richard A. Posner's description of the "pragmatic approach," in the introduction to his *Overcoming Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 4–10.

or religious, especially if it has not been submitted to the test of the court of public justification. Rorty's pragmatism is polytheistic, or rather, it is a secularism to the nth degree. For the same reasons, Rorty's pragmatism is experimentalist and revolutionary. In this way, it is a form of thinking that gives primacy to the social over the natural and that therefore advocates the richest form of pluralism. In its political instantiation, this pluralism takes the form of political liberalism, or what Rorty has also called postmodern bourgeois liberalism.

From a third-person perspective, it may be tempting to describe Rorty's pragmatism in the following way. Epistemologically, it is antirepresentationalist; metaphysically, it is anti-essentialist; ethically, it is antifoundationalist, or anticognitivist. Metaphilosophically, it is antiphilosophical, that is, it seems to advocate the end of professionalized philosophy. Politically, it is antinormative. While this may help the philosophical spectator place Rorty on the philosophical map, it would also misconstrue Rorty's unsettling and unorthodox views. He is not trying to rearrange the furniture within the edifice of philosophy. He wants the whole edifice to be opened up, aired out, and restructured. In fact, he wants philosophy to stop occupying the central role that has been given to it, a role that has been predicated on an elaborate misunderstanding of what philosophy is about, what it can deliver. Rorty does not so much want to reform as to transform philosophy. Philosophy can help transform the world only if it first transforms itself, and it transforms itself by ceasing to be deluded about its royal mission. In the end, Rorty's adamant skepticism and antidogmatism are simply ways to be anti-authoritarian and irreverently antifetishistic.⁸ There is no supreme power that can offer an alibi, warrant, or proof for our claims and beliefs, nothing except fallible human authority. There is no supreme authority, other than the authority of human justifications and reasons, whose only power is the power of persuasion.

8. Rorty has provided an explicit and elaborate defense of this analysis in his 1996 Ferrater Mora lectures at the University of Girona, published in Spanish as *El pragmatismo, una versión: Antiautoritarismo en epistemología y ética*, trans. Joan Verges Gifra (Barcelona: Ariel, 2000).

III

Rorty's articulation of his version of pragmatism has been fairly consistent since the early seventies, at least since 1974, when he published "Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey," an essay that anticipated many themes and approaches that would characterize Rorty's work.⁹ It could also be argued that Rorty's call to transform, rather than to reform, philosophy was already announced in the introduction to the book he edited in 1967, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*.¹⁰ In this introductory essay, entitled "Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy," Rorty discusses the ways in which so-called analytic philosophy had driven itself into a cul-de-sac. The introduction begins with the sentence, "The history of philosophy is punctuated by revolts against the practices of previous philosophers and by attempts to transform philosophy into a science—a discipline in which universally recognized decision-procedures are available for testing philosophical theses." And then proceeds to argue that in the face of the recent debates that bare this prior affirmation, "one is tempted to *define* philosophy as that discipline in which knowledge is sought but only opinion can be had."¹¹ Rorty, however, came into the academic limelight with the publication of his major book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, published in 1979,¹² an eloquent, carefully argued, and sweeping analysis of the origins and demise of

9. Richard Rorty, "Overcoming the Tradition: Dewey and Heidegger," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 37–59. For an appreciative but critical engagement with this book, see Don Ihde, *Consequences of Phenomenology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986). For a short but fairly accurate overview of Rorty's work, see the "Richard McKay Rorty" entry by Michael David Rohr in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8, 352–56. Two excellent overviews of Rorty philosophy are David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); and Alan Malachowski, *Richard Rorty* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

10. Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

11. *Ibid.*, pages 1 and 2, respectively.

12. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

contemporary analytic philosophy.¹³ This book offered a “quasi-Heideggerian” narrative of the origins and the flawed approach of most of modern philosophy. The book rejects realism, representationalism, subjectivism, and essentialism, all of which had plagued epistemologically obsessed analytic philosophy. In addition, Rorty argues that while Anglo-American analytic philosophy had made a linguistic turn, it had failed to follow through on what this meant for arguments about mind, statements, language itself, and most importantly, what this linguistic turn entailed for the very discipline of philosophy. What made this a crossover book in philosophy probably is part 3 of the book, simply entitled “Philosophy,” which is composed of two chapters, “From Epistemology to Hermeneutics” and “Philosophy Without Mirrors.” Here, Rorty lays out his famous distinction between systematic and edifying philosophy. Where the former is “constructive and offer[s] arguments” and builds for eternity, the latter is “reactive and offer[s] satires, parodies, aphorisms,” and “destroy[s] for the sake of their own generation.”¹⁴ Whereas systematic philosophers seek to find a truth outside history and beyond human language, and thus seek to bring an end to philosophy by turning it into a science, edifying philosophers are simply “conversation partners,” philosophers “who can never end philosophy, but they can help prevent it from attaining the secure path of a science.”¹⁵ The book ends with Rorty appropriating Michael Oakeshott’s idea of the “conversation of mankind.” With this appropriation, Rorty urges that philosophy should be rescued from its professional deformation at the hands of epistemologically obsessed academics. Instead, philosophy should become a partner in the conversation of humankind, and as such, Rorty concludes, the “philosopher’s moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation.”¹⁶ Philosophy contributes to this conversation not by insist-

13. One of my favorite reviews of this book remains Joe McCarney’s in the British leftist journal *Radical Philosophy*. Joe McCarney, “Edifying Discourses,” in *Radical Philosophy Reader*, ed. Roy Edgley and Richard Osborne (London: Verso, 1985), 398–405. See also the critical collection of essays on this book edited by Alan Malachowski, *Reading Rorty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

14. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 369.

15. *Ibid.*, 372.

16. *Ibid.*, 394.

ing on its problems, problems that turn out to be misunderstandings and misguided ways of understanding the relationship between humans, the world, and their languages. Instead, it contributes to the conversation of humankind by insisting on its edifying role, that is, by “finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking.”¹⁷

Rorty’s next book was the now classic *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, the publication that brought Rorty international attention.¹⁸ Though published in 1989, this book is based on a series of lectures Rorty delivered in England in 1986 and 1987. The many memorable phrases in this book have been quoted and misquoted extensively. Essentially, it calls us to abjure the notions that have been associated with Western philosophy since the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the French and American revolutions; notions that have to do with truths that are found and discovered, with fundamental human essence and real selfhoods, and with norms and principles that serve as foundations for our political institutions and moral practices. Rorty argues that we should abandon talk about discovering truths, heeding the call of human essence, and discerning the true logic and meaning of history. Such talk, such projects, such heedings are impossible, irretrievable, and intractably condemned to failure. Our staunch pursuit of these mirrors, fictions, and philosophemes only perpetuates our inattention to our own power, the power of human action, creativity, and solidarity. Truths, which are neither to be discovered nor found, ought to be replaced by compelling, transformative, generative narratives, or stories, in other words, that provide us with far more interesting ways of seeing ourselves, of reimagining ourselves in new personas, characters, goals, solidarities, and more expansive loyalties. For this reason, Rorty offers counternarratives that reinscribe and redescribe the ways in which we can and should understand those moments that have punctuated the moral and social evolution of the West. Instead of saying that the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the American and French revolutions were about putting reason on a scientific grounding, discovering the norms and principles of rationality, and grounding our political institutions and moral practices on the unshakable ground of the truly good and just, we should see these historical events as a series of processes that have yet to be carried through

17. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 360.

18. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

to their conclusion. In this way, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is a major project of reinscription, a reinscription of Western intellectual history itself. Still, one of the central themes of the book is the contingency of our beliefs, whether they are moral or political. But this form of radical historical contingency does not result in ethical relativism. As Rorty wrote, “the fundamental premise of the book is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance.”¹⁹ But, if our beliefs have no other guarantee than the strength of our socialization into these beliefs, what holds society together? Rorty is jostling us so that we may begin to move away from obsession with the putative power of ethical norms and principles, to the actual power of solidarity that makes us act respectfully, morally, with empathy toward others. In this way, along with the radical historical contingency of our beliefs, Rorty’s book articulates another central claim, namely, that “our responsibilities to others constitute *only* the public side of our lives, a side which competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation, and which has no *automatic* priority over such private motives.”²⁰ In other words, we must uncouple the private from the public life of citizens. Whereas in private life citizens pursue their dream of perfection, in public they are bound by solidarity, by mutual respect. If in our private lives we aspire to sublimity, in public we seek to “avoid cruelty and pain.”²¹ In this way, since there is no God, no history other than the one we make, and no real human essence, other than how we imagine humans to be creatures that suffer, all our beliefs are radically contingent, and thus disposable, or rather, transformable. In the face of this, the mature, inconsolably disappointed attitude of the citizen is to become ironic.

Irony is the name Rorty gives to the attitude that the only power our beliefs have is the power to inscribe us, make us see ourselves in a certain way. The ironist thus names “the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond reach of time and chance.”²² The ironist, therefore,

19. *Ibid.*, 189.

20. *Ibid.*, 194.

21. *Ibid.*, 197.

22. *Ibid.*, xv.

spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness. So, the more she is driven to articulate her situation in philosophical terms, the more she reminds herself of her rootlessness by constantly using terms like “Weltanschauung,” “perspective,” “dialectic,” “conceptual framework,” “historical epoch,” “language game,” “redescription,” “vocabulary,” and “irony.”²³

Irony, however, is not the same as quietude, letting things be, passiveness, irresponsible and cruel derogation toward one’s own and other people’s final vocabularies. Irony reflects the power that we all have to reinscribe and redescribe. In this way, ironism is active, activist, critical, forward-looking. It is the power of irony that turns our confessed ethnocentrism into the imperative to create ever more critical pictures of what we have turned into and what we have failed to become. Irony, which is often seen as a form of cruelty, disdain, and derogation, is really linked to solidarity. Irony liberates us to a greater humanity. Irony grants us the power to abandon narrow, cruel, exclusivist, versions of our old and inherited “we.” It grants us the power to create a larger “we,” whose outer perimeter is drawn and redrawn from the perspective of marginalized people, from the perspective of those we have been socialized to think of as “they” rather than “us.”

Rorty’s next major work, based on the William E. Massey Lectures in the History of American Civilization he gave at Harvard, was *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*.²⁴ Not unlike his earlier books, *Achieving Our Country* occasioned vociferous and animated criticism.²⁵ Unlike the earlier books, however, the theme of this book was not philosophical, but rather political and cultural. Paralleling the moves he makes in his earlier works, Rorty proceeds to reinterpret the role of the “left” in the United States. There is the old left, which he calls the “reformist left,” one that was engaged with actual campaigns and movements, what Rorty sometimes calls the “real politics” of concrete po-

23. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 75.

24. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

25. See John Pettegrew, ed., *A Pragmatist’s Progress: Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

litical goals. This socialist and social democratic left was engaged and immersed in everyday politics, not merely reflecting or contemplating social reality. Most importantly, this engaged and reformist left was not mired in self-loathing, for it sought to transform “America” precisely because it still had pride in the country whose moral character was not set but still to be made. While the reformist left actively sought to transform contemporary America, its eyes were on a future America, one which is yet to be achieved. For this reason, this left is the party of “hope.” In contrast, the postsixties left, or what Rorty sometimes calls the “cultural left” and other times the “academic left,” has eclipsed the *modus operandi* and also the spirit of the reformist left. This cultural left is caught in endless debates about identity, about cultural differences, about recognition and symbolic representation. It is overly theoretical, and most of its energy is consumed in theoretical or philosophical pursuits. Instead of storming city hall, it rushes for the English department or the dean’s office. Its struggles are not labor struggles, but curricular debates. The cultural left has become spectatorial and thus disengaged from concrete campaigns and movements. In contrast to the reformist left, the cultural left has no pride in America. It is emotionally disengaged from it. In fact, it is motivated by a deep anti-Americanism and self-loathing. As Rorty put it elsewhere, “This over-philosophized and self-obsessed left is the mirror image of the over-philosophized and self-obsessed Straussians. The contempt of both groups for contemporary American society is so great that both have rendered themselves impotent when it comes to national, state or local politics. This means that they get to spend *all* their energy on academic politics.”²⁶ Instead of aiming at a new America, this left is immobilized by its unsparing retrospective gaze. The racist, genocidal, imperial past of America weighs heavy on the cultural left. It cannot see what is worth preserving or achieving in this country. Rorty puts it succinctly in this way:

Insofar as a left becomes spectatorial and retrospective, it ceases to be a Left. I shall be claiming in these lectures that the American Left, once the old alliance between the intellectuals and the unions broke-down in the course of the Sixties, began to sink into an attitude like Henry Adams’. Leftists in the academy have permitted cultural politics to supplant real politics, and have collaborated with the Right

26. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 129.

in making cultural issues central to public debate. . . . The academic Left has no projects to propose to America, no vision of a country to be achieved by building a consensus on the need for specific reforms.²⁷

For this reason, Rorty calls for a “moratorium” on theory. Rorty admonishes that the academic and cultural left “kick its philosophy habit.”²⁸ Just as importantly, Rorty urges the left to abandon its apocalyptic self-loathing and to become emotionally engaged in the nation by feeling, at the very least, shame.

You can feel shame over your country’s behavior only to the extent to which you feel it is your country. If we fail such identification, we fail in national hope. If American leftists cease to be proud of being the heirs of Emerson, Lincoln and King, Irving Howe’s prophecy that “the ‘newness’ will come again”—that we shall once again experience the joyous self-confidence which fills Emerson’s “American Scholar”—is unlikely to come true. . . . A left that refuses to take pride in its country will have no impact on that country’s politics, and will eventually become an object of contempt.²⁹

Achieving Our Country is a masterful reinscription and redescription of the history of the left in America. It argues that the left, the reformist left, has inherited the ideals of the poets and great politicians of the country. As the party of hope it is on the side of an America that is yet to be made. It is emotionally engaged with the struggles of the country that have as their aim the spread of economic and social justice. Rorty is arguing that we should cease to attempt to make politics more philosophical, or to be guided by philosophy. Instead, he wants politics to be more concerned with the real lives of citizens. Rorty is thus advocating, as Rorty scholar Alan Malachowski notes, that instead of assuming a philosophical attitude toward politics we should assume an overtly political attitude toward politics.³⁰

It is indeed difficult not to be moved by Rorty’s eulogy of the leftist tradition in the United States.³¹ Many specialists, of course, have con-

27. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 15.

28. *Ibid.*, 91.

29. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 254.

30. Alan Malachowski, *Richard Rorty* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 129.

31. See Richard J. Bernstein, “Rorty’s Inspirational Liberalism,” in *Richard Rorty*, ed. Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 124–38.

tested the details of Rorty's counternarrative. Yet it is difficult not to appreciate Rorty's central point. The academic left has become so focused on theoretical and philosophical debates that it has become entirely alienated from the social reality of average Americans. The cultural left has made critical thought irrelevant to politics. In many ways, this book retraces similar steps to those Rorty made in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. If the systematic philosophers of analytic philosophy, the children of Plato, Descartes, Kant, and Husserl, have made philosophy so arcane and obtuse that it has become irrelevant to the ethical aims of the great conversation of humanity, the children of the countercultural sixties and poststructuralist turn of thought of the fifties have made philosophy so theoretical and self-obsessed that it no longer recognizes the concerns and needs of the American public. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty is urging us to move philosophy to the center of the public square, where its work can be of some use. The academization and professionalization of philosophy that got underway with Kant, and which achieved its denouement with the academic left of the postsixties generations of philosophers, has imprisoned philosophy in the ivory tower of the university. This call to transform philosophy is hardly a call to abolish or abandon it. For while Rorty has pursued engaged cultural and philosophical criticism, he has not ceased to produce analytically rigorous and encyclopedically expansive essays on current debates within professional philosophy. He has published in English three volumes of collected philosophical papers;³² a fourth volume has appeared only in Spanish, as the Ferrater Mora lectures;³³ plus he has published *Philosophy and Social Hope*, a smaller collection of more popular pieces from the print media. This is hardly the output of a philosopher who wants to see the "end of philosophy." If we read Rorty as a reformer, a critic, and even a prophet who calls for philosophy's renewal and relevance to our social lives, we can see that his work resembles Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. Philosophy, as the thesis goes, is not about contemplation, interpretation, deconstruction, or description, but about transformation. Rorty's work aims at a similar redescription of philosophy. For as much as Rorty dismisses the Marx of "historical materialism," and the Marx of the

32. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

33. Rorty, *El pragmatismo, una versión*.

“logic of history,” he remains committed to the notion that philosophy can contribute to the utopia of social justice so long as it remains engaged with the world. In a passage that merits lengthy citation, Rorty places himself in this Romantic tradition:

The combined influence of Hegel and Darwin moved philosophy away from the question “What are we?” to the question “What might we try to become?” This shift has had consequences for the philosophers’ image of themselves. Whereas Plato and even Kant hoped to survey the society and the culture within which they lived from an outside standpoint, the standpoint of ineluctable and changeless truth, later philosophers have gradually abandoned such hopes just insofar as we take time to think seriously, we philosophers have to give up the priority of contemplation over action. We have to agree with Marx that our job is to help make the future different from the past, rather than claiming to know what the future must necessarily have in common with the past. We have to shift from the kind of role that philosophers have shared with priests and sages to a social role that has more in common with the engineer or the lawyer. Whereas priests and sages can set their own agendas, contemporary philosophers, like engineers and lawyers, must find out what their clients need. . . . We can add that philosophy cannot possibly end until social and cultural change ends. For such changes gradually render large-scale descriptions of ourselves and our situation obsolete. They create the need for new language in which to formulate new descriptions. Only a society without politics—that is to say, a society run by tyrants who prevented social and cultural change from occurring—would no longer require philosophers. In such societies, where there is no politics, philosophers can only be priests in the service of a state religion. In free societies, there will always be a need for their services, for such societies never stop changing, and hence never stop making old vocabularies obsolete.³⁴

A society with politics, as opposed to a society whose politics would have been extinguished by a despot, would have philosophy as a dialogue partner in the great conversation about what that society should become. A philosophy that would seek to rule over politics, on the other hand, would betray not just politics but itself. Gary Gutting put it eloquently when he wrote, “What makes for poetry in the soul begets fascism in the city.”³⁵ This

34. Richard Rorty, “Philosophy and the Future,” in *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, ed. Herman J. Staatskamp (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), 197–98.

35. Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 59.

is not a non sequitur. Philosophy has only poetry to offer, a type of inspirational jostling that foments a type of utopia that is generally expressed in literary terms. Philosophy's utopia is not unlike "Kundera's utopia [which] is carnivalesque, Dickensian, a crowd of eccentrics rejoicing in each other's idiosyncrasies, curious for novelty rather [than] nostalgic for primordiality."³⁶ When it is not instigating our moral and social imaginaries, trying to expand our loyalties, it is performing the humble job of clearing the pathways to a better society. Philosophy renders well its service to this political society by helping to retire obsolete vocabularies, ideas, and languages, and by dreaming up new, ever more appealing, ever more interesting vocabularies, images, and utopias. Philosophy can only do this, however, as a dialogue partner and not as a director or Führer. For "when it comes to political deliberation, philosophy is a good servant but a bad master."³⁷ Philosophy is a servant of the utopian dream of social justice, which can only be achieved by political means and not philosophical ones.

IV

It would be tempting to say that the genre of the interview has come into its own, that it has finally become respectable and even acceptable as a scholarly vehicle and tool. Yet the interview is antischolastic. That it may

36. Anindita Niyogi Balslev, *Cultural Otherness: Correspondence with Richard Rorty*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 114. This book, made up of a nice introduction by Balslev and the epistolary exchange between her and Rorty, is one of the most intimate and insightful looks at Rorty's work. It is particularly interesting when thinking about the imputation that Rorty is a hopeless ethnocentric and Eurocentric Pax Americana thinker. I think that there is no greater insight into what a global multicultural dialogue would look like, or sound like, than when Rorty writes: "My hunch is that our sense of where to connect up Indian and Western texts will change dramatically when and if people who have read quite a few of both begin to write books which are not clearly identifiable as belonging to any particular genre, and are not clearly identifiable as either Western or Eastern" (68). As Rorty and Balslev note, Salman Rushdie is an example of this type of writer who is neither/nor. Post-Orientalism is not just anti-Occidentalism. Nor is post-Occidentalism just pro-Orientalism. Beyond both pro- and anti-, a third evolves, something that is part of global culture, part each culture, but does not belong to any culture exclusively.

37. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 232.

have become an academic tool may also spell its death. Its fundamental inspiration and function is public dialogue and public debate. The interview is invariably conducted by a servant of open discussion and its audience is a broad public. Its role is not just to translate an arcane or potentially obtuse area of research. Its role is to register the zeitgeist and to instigate public debate. The interview is a barometer of the cultural life of a discipline and a nation. By agreeing to be interviewed the interviewee agrees to step outside his or her role as an expert and to speak *as a citizen*, outside an official role. Of course, he or she is being interviewed because of possessing authority in some area(s) of expertise. Yet, agreeing to be interviewed means agreeing to speak beyond the parameters of expertise. By agreeing to do this, the interviewee is put in a vulnerable position, speaking with authority but also humbly; allegedly objective and representing truth, but also speaking spontaneously and informally, caught in the evanescence of the moment. Like the diary, the interview is intimate and ephemeral, personal and temporally marked.

This collection of interviews with Richard Rorty spans more than two decades. The interviews were generally occasioned by the publication of one Rorty's books, but they were also brought about because of particular political events that some thought deserved Rorty's unique commentary. Although they are widely spread out in time, and over a fairly intense period of publishing and thinking in Rorty's philosophical itinerary, these interviews are also intensely focused. In Rorty's words, "they seem to say the same thing over and over." Although this is unfair and off the mark, it is not entirely inaccurate. They indeed tell us something about how consistently Rorty has taught and pursued his politics. They exhibit for us one of Rorty's central propositions: that the pursuit of private sublimity should be disengaged from the public pursuit of solidarity. Yet, as my remarks above should make evident, Rorty has been consistent in his views on politics, on the role of philosophy in politics, and on the role of politics in American society. If we are to believe Rorty's own autobiographical musings, his leftist views have been fairly consistent over the span of his life. What is also made patently evident in these interviews is that Rorty's postmodern bourgeois liberalism and postphilosophical politics are not motivated by either conservatism or anarchism. Nor are his views relativistic or frivolous. Rather, it is clear that Rorty's work is motivated by the hope and a utopia of social justice. There is a heroic dimension to Rorty's nominalist

historicism.³⁸ He wants to hold on to the hope for social transformation, but without either a religious or historical alibi to guarantee either its success or its preservation.

Stories transform, and they transform us into tools of social transformation. Freedom, both economic and political, is indispensable if we want to allow stories to transform us. Stories thus need freedom. Above all, freedom is entwined with the narratives that allow us to weave a story about what we were and what we may become. The power to reinscribe, to redescribe, to say something new and different, something shocking and unexpected, unscripted and unimposed, is what Rorty is defending when he argues that “if we take care of freedom, truth will take care of itself.” To take care of freedom means, as we read in these interviews and in most of Rorty’s public and occasional pieces, giving priority to the political, for the political is the horizon of solidarity and where our expanded loyalties dwell. The political, understood in this way, is dependent on the power of stories to transform it, to keep it ever expanding and broadening. Rorty’s democracy is indeed that of Thomas Jefferson, Walt Whitman, John Dewey, James Baldwin, and principally, I would say, that of Abraham Lincoln. In fact, Lincoln both embodies and illustrates Rorty’s democratic pragmatism and postphilosophical politics. For Lincoln transformed America by regrounding it in a new narrative, a new proposition. On November 19, 1863, at the dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln opened with the following words: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” With barely two more paragraphs, and with a total of 272 words, Lincoln closed with these words:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.³⁹

38. David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 14.

39. Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 263.

With these words, Lincoln performed a “stunning verbal coup,” one that refunded and regrounded the nation in a new narrative and self-understanding. The great American historian Garry Wills, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*, articulated this verbal feat in the following way:

For most people now, the Declaration means what Lincoln told us it means, as a way of correcting the Constitution itself without overthrowing it. It is this correction of the spirit, this intellectual revolution, that makes attempts to go back beyond Lincoln to some earlier version so feckless. The proponents of states’ rights may have arguments, but they have lost their force, in courts as well as in the popular mind. By accepting the Gettysburg Address, its concept of a single people dedicated to a proposition, we have been changed. Because of it, we live in a different America.⁴⁰

Rorty’s America is Lincoln’s America, and what Rorty hopes to do with American pragmatism, and the party of hope, the American left, is not unlike what Lincoln did with the Declaration of Independence, namely, to provide us with new ways of reading it so that we could become a different America, one with more expansive and generous loyalties.

40. Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 147.