

REPLIES TO RICHARD RORTY'S 'FEMINISM AND PRAGMATISM'



How Did the Dinosaurs Die Out? How Did the Poets Survive?

Catherine Wilson

In 'Feminism and Pragmatism' (*Radical Philosophy* 59, pp. 3-14), Richard Rorty offers feminists an arrangement of convenience. In exchange for their support of his philosophical programme, which involves the rejection of a representationalist account of knowledge and an appearance-reality distinction, he will supply them with what he describes as 'a few pieces of special purpose ammunition – for example, some additional replies to charges that their aims are unnatural, their demands irrational, or their claims hyperbolic'. They may not, the implication is, be able to dismiss those charges, but they will at least have a good defence of their unnaturalness, irrationality, and hyperbola to hand. Is the proposed deal a good one or not? Should feminists agree to drop abstract talk of rights and equality and appeals to transcendental concepts of justice and stop trying to fit in? Or is Rorty's offer, even if well-motivated, only self-serving? Feminists have, I will argue here, something to learn from Rorty's frank confession that he regards the state of being a woman with a kind of horror, and from his comparisons between such initially oppressed or isolated communities as early Christians and eighteenth-century Romantic poets and modern females. But his construction of the problem and its solution is open to two main charges: first, his scorn for demystifying sociopolitical analyses, which he regards as appealing to untenable notions of truth and justice, leaves him blind on one side to the entire issue; second, his positive theory of social change, which is irrationalist and evolutionist, remains in the realm of the mythico-poetic. Of course it may be said that, for Rorty, the mythico-poetic is as good as it gets in social theory. But that is a position he needs to convince us of: in the meantime, why should anyone drop a philosophical commitment – thereby giving Rorty a good bit of philosophical capital – and be satisfied with a non-negotiable myth in return? If a bargain is to be struck between feminism and pragmatism, feminists need to take care that they are not left holding a sadly empty bag.

Let us begin with Rorty's analysis of the predicament of

women, and the predicament of those who purport to represent them, in our society. In Rorty's presentation, women are, just as feminists, and misogynists too, have often complained, really incomplete and defective, and they are regarded by successful, middle-aged white males, in consequence, with a sort of horror, not on account of their primal stickiness perhaps, but because they exemplify a kind of failure of being and acting: any such male person aware of the contingency of his own place in the world must think there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I.¹ Women, he says, do not have, and have never had, full moral identity, identity as creative and destructive agents. At best, they are now in the process of achieving it. Echoing Freud, who found women strangely vague and unfinished at twenty-one except in their sexual ripeness, Rorty finds that, unlike their young male counterparts, young women are divided by their sexual needs and expectations from intellectual and social success.

On one hand, it is good to know that Rorty and his male contemporaries are under no illusion that women have it good or that their position is an enviable one. More problematic is the fact that Rorty's confession does not point simply to the professional, economic, etc. disadvantages of being female which alert persons now recognise, but to a mysterious force – the 'horror of women', related in some non-accidental ways perhaps to the 'horror of the vacuum' of the old scholastics. One might have wished for a confession of a fleeting wish, a faint curiosity, a suppressed weakness, anything which suggested that, even in our society, there are rewards, dignities and pleasures associated with being female. One might suspect on Rortian grounds that this barricading of oneself in pure maleness is in fact an act of self-creation, not an avowal from the depths of the heart. In any case, here we have stated by a philosopher what we have had hitherto to infer – albeit not with much difficulty – from the modern novel and the modern cinema, as well as popular media: that male reflective subjectivity and male agency are often experienced against the foil of objectified, conquered,

violated, or merely surpassed and transcended, women. But this 'instinctive and ineffable horror' can, if essentialism is rejected, only be a feature of time, place, and circumstances. Do we believe that modernism and popular culture only reflect the depth of feeling against women or that they have also had a hand in creating it? Rorty ignores this question; he writes as though this horror is as deep and irrational as any essentialist could imagine, as immune to any sort of self-questioning and alterable only by the application of external force, albeit semantic force. Yet by his own lights, he should recognise it as just involving another way of being – one perhaps towards which it should always be possible to adopt a self-challenging, ironic stance.

Much of what men do and think, Rorty says, which gives them courage and satisfaction, has to do with their telling themselves that they are men, and not women. Whereas women have regarded it (we are in the realm here of stories people tell themselves) as a liability to be women. As a historical generalisation, this one is questionable, for there have been cheerful, contented, and even powerful and influential women: exceptional women. But if we are talking about comparative achievements and satisfactions on the broad scale, we have to admit that Rorty is right. By and large, women have either given up the ambitions of their youth, and resigned themselves to confinement and limitation, achieving a limited sort of status as wives and mothers or Christian saints; or they have tried but come out second best in the wider spheres of politics, arts, and science; or they have cracked under the strain, becoming erratic, suicidal ranters-and-ravers. There have been women who accomplished this or that, wrote this or that book or screenplay, discovered this or that chemical element, or some other creditable thing, but there have been no hugely successful females who lived life on the heroic scale. Young women, Rorty suggests, know this in their innards. A young female poet knows the world is not at her feet; she does not have the confidence of a Goethe or a Byron but remains anxious, browbeaten – and housebound.

Again Rorty does not admit to making, as indeed he cannot, an essentialist claim, true in virtue of some facts about the female psyche, as Freud thought. He leaves it open that the state of affairs he is describing arises in the course of the interplay between self-description and social reality. What about the role of parental investment in young female poets, one might wonder in this connection, and the role of parental tolerance for an unsettled life for their daughters? What about the exaggerated urge in young women, felt as something inward, but produced by outward pressure, to marry and settle down, and the corresponding pressure on young men not to do so too soon? It might seem a bit deflationary to talk about Goethe or Byron in terms of parental permissions, but readers of Goethe's biography are in a position to explain at length how poetic geniuses are helped along in life. Rorty is not interested in this kind of analysis, or in the fact that when few people want any young girl to be a genius, she probably does not want to be one either. Actually he is not interested at all in the question why young women do not become strong poets, and this ultimately makes his theory about how they can become so spurious.

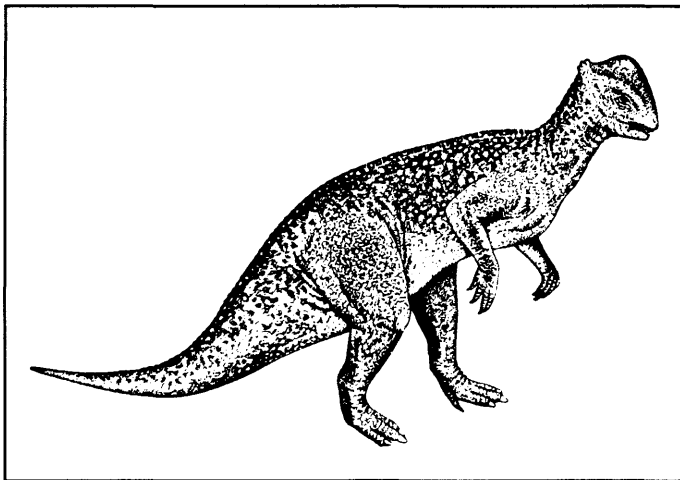
Must Rorty's instinctive and ineffable horror be taken as

the starting point of the discussion, or are we permitted to speculate on its causes? It is probably correct to say that, in other periods of human history, women have had more scope, more influence, and more moral self-consciousness than they did in what I imagine were Rorty's most sensitive and formative years after the Second World War. On one side, economic growth in the publishing and entertainment industries brought about a relaxation of censorship and an increase in sadistic expression and in exaggerated role divisions. The alternately fascinating and repulsive 'feminine mystique' of the 1950s was created by sex-typed magazines, with their ethical-social propaganda and their imaginary 'psychology' and domestic and erotic advertising imagery. On the other side, we saw the completion of the transfer – which began in the eighteenth century – of scientific, literary and cultural life out of the hands of private patrons and a leisured class into the universities and professional societies, construed as fraternal organisations, with membership determined fraternally, and cultural power consolidated accordingly in the hands of men. Rorty rejects such analyses, as we have seen, as futile attempts at demystification and critique of ideology. But how can anyone not recognise the role that demystifying criticism has played in its exposure of the assumptions of sexist society, in the laying bare of the fraudulence of the meritocracy, in which generations of academically, politically, artistically, mediocre men have been given preference, been regarded as brilliant, knew themselves as brilliant – just because they were not women? If ideology-critique does not imply representationalism, we all have nothing to fear. If it does, that is a good reason to think whether some form of representationalism might not have a good deal to recommend it.

Rorty finds women's writing 'crazy', and he commends it for being so. He is thinking mainly, I imagine, of the experimentalism of the protest literature, which takes structure, syntax and 'taste' to be oppressive manifestations of the patriarchy. At the same time, he seems put off by the emotionality of some feminist writing; he does not recognise its wails and cries as an authentic literary voice, as the voice of the poet. On his scheme, moreover, feminism really is a crazy idea, for it represents the aspirations of people whom he would be horrified either in some sense to become him – to have the cultural standing and authority and presence that he does, to be, unthinkable, his rivals – or to become, equally disturbingly, something absolutely other.

So Rorty seems to praise the craziness of radical feminist writing, which he prefers to the dry-as-dust analysis of the boring rights-and-justice people. Yet he has not really been impressed by it – not yet. But now, instead of concluding that feminism has got off on the wrong track here, and that crazy writing only reinforces the perception of women as hysterical, obsessed with biological and domestic concerns, etc., Rorty decides that the genre needs to be better developed and more intensively practised. The solution he sees for us accordingly is separatism, the elicitation of maximum difference as a prelude to future integration. It is futile, he thinks, to harp on the discrepancy between Enlightenment ideals and the actual situation of women, futile to be pacing up and down before the doors of the club of whole beings,

which does not want or need women amongst its membership, and trying to reason with people who will let them in only if hammered on the head. 'People in search of such authority need to form clubs,' Rorty says, their own, exclusive clubs. Women must not accept the universe as described by men – especially not the delusive Enlightenment universe of autonomous, equal, atomic agents – as the real one. They must show that there are other ways of conceiving reality and so set everyone free. Crazy, if segregated, will produce, not truth, but acceptance. Like the early Christians and early Romantic poets, women need to meet secretly, forming a group identity. For full personhood, integrity and solidarity are formed in these cells, or cocoons, from which their members may then emerge prepared to dominate in the wider world on the basis of their semantic authority, as a new species with some genetic advantage gains a foothold and broadens its habitat, displacing weaker members.



The problem here is that this science-fiction story of the secret breeding of a powerful world-upsetting being, through an artificially sped-up process which nevertheless mimics normal evolution, blurs the role of facts and values, of the natural and the normative. One question is: will these crippled and crazy women in fact develop in their solitude into a big organism with sharp teeth? But another question is whether we can accept this as the proper mode of formulating the question about the future development of feminism. Note that the outcome is anyway contingent – as an evolutionist, you leave things up to chance and evolutionary change has no teleology, as everyone knows by now. Clumsy, inefficient monsters will flourish if the conjunction of conditions happens to be just what they need. Indeed Rorty thinks we do not need to know whether the oppression of women is an evil, or based in error or ignorance. We do not need to know what is monstrous and what is handsome. If, as a power-movement, liberation is, under the circumstances which obtain, viable, it will win; if not, there is nothing to regret. We do not mourn all the beautiful species which have never existed and never will. His position is thus one of a strange neutrality towards the question of female suffering. The evolutionary model is not appropriate: once the question of aims and goals has been introduced there is no point in talking about natural selection and getting confused about the survival of the fittest.

And here we face the problem of inside and outside. When women themselves see in withdrawal and consolidation a potential advantage to themselves it is one thing. As a solution prescribed to them by one who has already explained that his innermost feelings prevent him from identifying with them, it is another. Rorty plays here, however inadvertently, into the hands of those who would like to wash their hands of the whole thing and wish the women would keep to their own journals, their own universities, their own conferences. But even if it is not always possible to determine where Rorty is speaking from – from a position within the movement, from the point of view of someone who does not like women much, or from a position above the fray – it seems to me that there is nevertheless something right about what he says.

For in fact women have not thought out and told their story; they have been cowardly and confused in this respect. They took on discipline without risk, or risk without discipline. And the group would have helped them, by making risk less risky and by enforcing discipline, as it did for poets and Christians. There is no true female *Bildungsroman*, there are no triumphal narratives, though there are plenty of anguished ones, and we can read Rorty as saying that this is not so for essentialist reasons. But as a result we do not really know what success for women is, and we do not know what is perhaps more important, what moral vision lies beyond success or takes the place of success. We have a neo-picaresque of sorts created by female writers: unfortunately the most popular and available versions either consist of idiotic sexual adventurism, or involve supposedly probing treatments of the love-versus-work conflicts of supposedly successful 'career' women. One genre is supposed to work by imitating and subsuming, the other by counterbalancing, male-exploitation narratives. But what is needed is a story which does not even seek to orient itself by reference to these power-and-gratification narratives. So here, I am with Rorty. But if he is right to think that change comes after there is telling, there can also be no telling without change. And this means that to create, or to allow to emerge, the female poet and the female genius, there must be a diagnosis of the question why women are not poets, and a challenge to the institutions and social practices that prevent them from coming into being. Literary works of transcendent originality and genius, mad reinterpretations, visions and delusions will all have a role to play. But so will the grindings of the grey legal world in which principle is boringly compared with fact, and history, sociology, and other forms of fact- and statistic-based analysis. And so will the efforts of individual women, mothers and daughters, to understand better how the world operates.

Astonishing, finally, is Rorty's confusion between feminism and lesbianism. The cultivation of a separate sphere of existence may involve severing erotic, affective, or intellectual ties, or all of them. Some women want to sever some or all of these ties, and no one should prevent them. For some feminists, there is no room for a distinction between the figurative kicks and slaps we female academics have suffered at the hands of institutions and the real ones of women who are physically beaten, or for a distinction between individual men and those men who run the world.

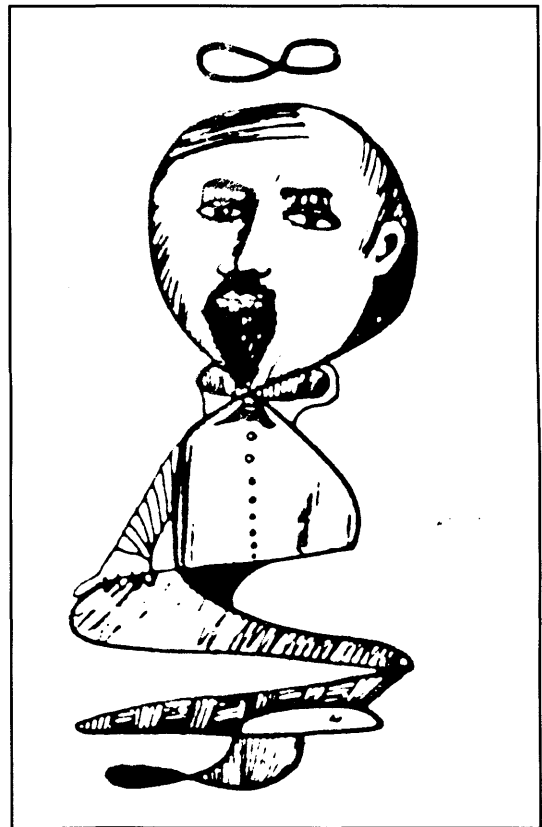
For others, these issues are not clear cut: some individual men have done more for us than we should ever have thought of asking for ourselves, and where love and affection are spontaneous it would be cruel to insist that they be cut off. And let no one think that Rorty himself has not gone against the grain in his interventions on behalf of individual women. We therefore distinguish between the humiliations of life in the public sphere, which men can suffer too, and domestic violence, between the institutional and the individual.

Now it may seem that men were successful because they cut themselves off from women, intellectually, and sometimes affectively. One might think that they have had a successful separatist movement, and that without ever lacking for female company. So why should not women pull off the same trick? But the sad reality is that men did not do it on their own, even through the magic reinforcement provided by their cultivation of an image of maleness. Throughout history, men have used the intellectual talents, the acuteness and brainpower, as well as the emotional support, of women, in ways we are only now beginning to document and understand. They have used women as critics and listeners, they have taken the credit for their pseudonymous and anonymous productions, they have plagiarized them, they have drawn their readership and their correspondents from women. Men did not really withdraw to themselves to create, except when this meant avoiding pitching in with the housework: only they told a story about how they did which denied these amanuenses, listeners, critics, and composers, a share of the glory and the influence. That women should ever be in a position to, or want to, use men in this way, is inconceivable, so that separatism for women could only be reduction and deprivation.

Rorty compares the horror men feel at the thought of being women to that which he says noble children used to feel at the thought of having been born to non-noble parents. More common, perhaps, is the fantasy of many young non-noble persons of being noble persons mistakenly installed in the wrong family: the imaginative pleasure of being born in the right sex perhaps resembles these fantasies better. But as long as Rorty is not pronouncing in favour of snobbery, we have to ask: what changes horror to respect? What makes former patricians impatient with the vapidity of their own class and teaches them that talents and virtues are better distributed than they thought? This is not accomplished by segregation: some slumming helps; in general, a bit of vertical travel. Christianity and Romanticism, to return to Rorty's favoured examples, did not change horror into acceptance; they tapped a potential which was already there. The hope of feminists is that they can describe oppressive structures so pervasive and so sanctioned by time and custom that they did not strike anyone as intolerable. And they hope to appeal to something buried in men – who are, after all, still in charge – which is capable, despite the obstructions of self-interest, of recognising the realities and so the iniquity of women's situation. Rorty is right to say that it is only by organising and properly expressing their thoughts and reactions that feminists will get men and women too to feel indifference or satisfaction where they once recoiled, and revulsion and rage where they once felt

indifference or resignation. And this takes us back to telling and narrative, to rhetoric, persuasion, and pressure. But Rorty's binary logic – in which representationalism and universalism are the foil to pragmatism and separatism – is inadequate to a description of how this is to be done.

Prophecy is important: it is important to envision a society you do not yet know how to describe and cannot yet represent as the ideal behind the corrupted appearance. But, in focussing on the praised but also worrying madness of feminists, Rorty overstates the inchoateness of their vision of the future. We know, for example, how the workings of the meritocracy could be normalised by insisting on proportional representation, and we know why it is difficult but need not be for any but very well-off women with young children to participate in it. There is much that we do not



know: we do not know whether women in general will continue to regard early marriage, childbearing, and domesticity as preferable to wage-earning and worldly accomplishments, or what society will look like if men come to adopt those values, a development which economists have hinted at. The attractions of one's own sphere appear in a different light as one learns something about the other. As the disclosure of the absurd and repetitive nature of housework drove women to seek alternatives, so the disclosure that the managerial and bureaucratic work which, now that women can do it too, no longer functions to reinforce male identity, is also absurd and repetitive, may drive men out of it again. We do not know what a world would look like in which the female love of social harmony set tighter limits on male aggression; we do not know how much this whole idea partakes of myth: who knows what men are really 'like', or women either, outside of the set of actual circumstances in

which they live and express themselves? Aggression, arrogance, and appropriation drive discovery, as we are in no danger of forgetting with this article of Rorty's, but so do subtlety and patience. There is no reason not to leave these matters blurred and the future accordingly hazy, but it would be wrong to echo Freud again in suggesting that women do not yet know what they want.

Rorty wanted, I think, to stand the usual approach of feminists on its head. Theoretical feminism of the more orthodox sort has been, explicitly or implicitly, underpinned by social constructivism. It has taken male and female attitudes to be the unidirectional effect of policies and practices, and it has supposed that legislative policies ensuring equal access and treatment would gradually change those attitudes. Rorty's view is that we need, as philosophers, to begin with the 'horror of women' rather than deriving it as an end product, and that we need, as social activists, to hit it harder and more directly rather than waiting for it gradually to decompose. Changes in policies and practices cannot be a precondition of liberation but must follow it. This conviction leads him to shift the discussion from its normal situs into the realm of the imagination. But the move which took us into the realm of evolutionary fictions, semantic authority, and the eighteenth-century theory of genius, also took us into certain philo-

sophical incoherences and practical deceptions. Rather than arguing that the relation between emotions and institutions is bidirectional, Rorty has simply replaced the old unidirectional analysis with an equally problematic unidirectional analysis of his own, and that in order to maintain his critique of representationalism. We have to conclude in the end that if, in order to benefit from Rorty's reconfiguration of the problem, they must give up their analytical work, their effort at laying bare and morally evaluating the actual operations of their society, the bargain is a poor one for feminists.

Notes

1. Thus Rorty writes: 'In our society, straight white males of my generation – even earnestly egalitarian straight white males – cannot easily stop themselves from feeling guilty relief that they were not born women or gay or black, any more than they can stop themselves from being glad that they were not born mentally retarded or schizophrenic. This is in part because of a calculation of the obvious socio-economic disadvantages of being so born, but not entirely. It is also the sort of instinctive and ineffable horror which noble children used to feel at the thought of having been born to non-noble parents, even very rich non-noble parents' (p. 10).



Richard Rorty: Knight Errant

Tony Skillen

If dominant ideologies bury uncomfortable truths, oppositional ideas, just because they are against the stream, bring with them their own ideological shelterings. These generalities, combined with awareness of the present-day discomforts of the Left, help in understanding the attractions of turning from realism to doctrines more, or less, 'pragmatist' or 'relativist'. It seems to me that, at an extreme level, Richard Rorty's article in *Radical Philosophy* 59 encourages this retreat.

Some years ago *Radical Philosophy* was flushed with discourse fever, whose symptoms included the idea that since, to all intents and purposes, there was no reality outside discourse, political ideas had no other test than 'practical' consequences. I argued, against this, that the issue of 'truth', supposedly buried by discursive pragmatism, quickly resurfaces as the questions *What* will be those consequences?, and *Will* they advance the causes and inter-

ests they appear to promote? Pragmatism, in other words, can itself hardly be formulated without inconsistent 'realist' commitments.¹

Richard Rorty counterposes Pragmatism's concern with 'special purposes ammunition' to the 'realist's' preoccupation with 'truth',² with 'accuracy'. It is worth contrasting this vulgarisation, this particularistic utilitarianism, with the Pragmatism of Peirce, James and Dewey, who, respecting the dedicated pursuit of truth they engaged in themselves, set out (I think unsuccessfully) to give an adequate account of that pursuit. In his 1896 notes on 'The Scientific Attitude', for example, Peirce describes it as the 'diligent inquiry' into truth for truth's sake from an impulse 'to penetrate into the reason of things'. Imagination, praised by Rorty as the exciting alternative to the realist 'truth tracker's' dreary and slavish urge to 'accurately describe reality' (like some infant with tracing paper), is treated by Peirce as

essential to the scientist's struggle to grasp this 'reason'. In a passage that Rorty could 'usefully' pin above his desk, Peirce writes:

The effect of mixing speculative inquiry with questions of conduct results finally in a sort of make-believe reasoning which deceives itself in regard to its real character ... it is no longer the reasoning which determines what the conclusion shall be, but the conclusion which determines what the reasoning shall be.³

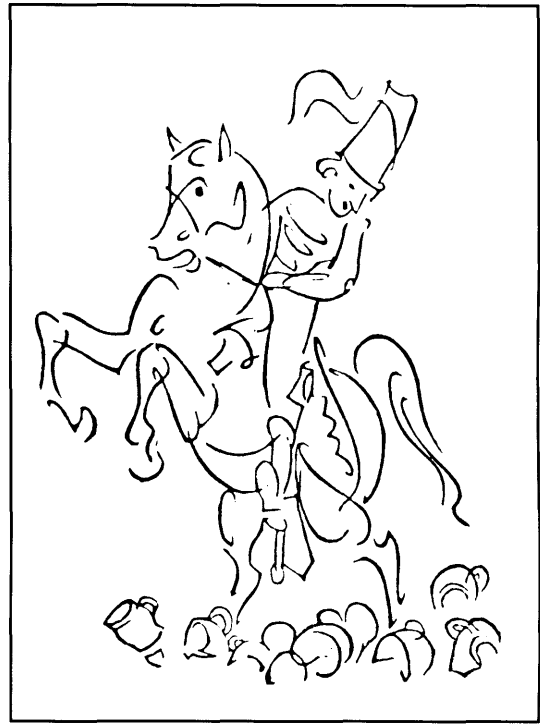
So I suspect that the great Pragmatists rolled in their grave when Rorty's article invoking the movement appeared.

As to morals, Peirce quotes Dewey both in opposition to 'moral universalism' and in support of an ethics and politics for 'women as women'.⁴ But Dewey's moral thought, well articulated in the excellent *Ethics* (with Tufts), is (optimistically) evolutionary and 'realist', in its depiction of 'progress' from tribalism to the democratic state. Christianity, for example, is represented as going beyond the quasi-tribal outlook of the Old Testament, itself seen as evolving, especially through its monotheism, new conceptions of righteousness and justice. Generally,

The socializing side of the progress of development stands for an increased capacity to enter into relations with other human beings ... co-operation, in all kinds of enterprises, interchange of services and goods, participation in social arts, associations for various purposes, institutions of blood, family, government and religion, all add enormously to the individual's power... Psychologically the process is one of building up a social self.⁵

Though old Dewey had little to say about gender (despite the relative gender-neutrality of his marvellous school),⁶ this eminently 'materialist' perspective would imply that women's distinctive lives would imply distinctive 'social selves' and, with that, distinctive perspectives on life. It could also (and here Dewey and Tufts' chapter on the Hebrews would be a model) foster a tendency to separatism in reflective women. But, rightly or not, Dewey also regarded separatisms as (understandably) blinkering the moral imagination and constricting the moral self. Closer to the Deweyan mind than Rorty's narrow perspectives would be the universalist humanist idea that feminism has the potential not only to help force gender equality, but to enrich the very terms in which that equality is shared.⁷ This would include a proper place for feeling in our working sense of values.

Some things that Rorty says are in line with this 'realist' perspective, albeit that a utilitarian opportunism, and voluntarism absent from Dewey, pervades the Rortyan picture. For Rorty half-says that aggressive feminist separatism is a necessary mind-stretching phase wherein what seems (to many) 'crazy', gains intelligibility⁸ that is politico-cultural currency and clout. (These ideas will be familiar to readers of the ill-fated *Revolution in the Revolution* (Debray), *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon) and the Black Muslim period of Malcolm X.) For, despite his rubbishing of realism, it is vital to Rorty's position that



women really are oppressed, and that this both permits and partly consists in the silencing of alternative voices. To repeat, discursive domination is presented as part of *real* oppression, not just oppression according-to-the-excluded-vision in the vapid perspectivist idiom Rorty recurrently asserts. Thus, Rorty hopes, 'at some future point in our society ... males and females (may have) forgotten the traditional androcentric language. 'Had there been no stage of separatism there would have been no subsequent stage of assimilation.'⁹ So here is Rorty playing the Owl of Minerva in the morning: endorsing the separatist anti-humanism of 'Women-as-Womenism' as the 'antithesis' necessary to produce a 'synthesis', which such separatists (who, as Lynne Segal shows in *Is The Future Female?*, deem males *essentially* a write-off) often regard as a pie-in-the-sky, and a rotten one at that. So it looks as if the 'historicist' Rorty thinks (pragmatically) that history is on his side (and where is Mr Rorty coming from?), and is adopting on pragmatic grounds an uncritical attitude to whatever the favoured separatist groups dream up. Shades of Trotskyist groups (in the name of the class as class) backing this or, next week, that in accordance with their own historical agenda! Rorty's in a bind. Does he, *as a* contemporary male, find the utterances he praises 'crazy'? Does he support what he cannot but fail to understand? Or does he, *as a* reasonable, sensitive, and imaginative person of liberal temper, responsive to the currents around and within him, find their so-called 'insanities' both intelligible and in many ways right? In which case, why not say so and, rather than lump feminism with Nazism, Jonestown, the Exclusive Brethren or any other movement that has sustained itself, throw such weight as he has behind the separatists' indictment of the oppressor sex. Sad for Pragmatism, sad for men, sad for women too, I'd say, given that separatist sectarianism, like racism, essentialises the contingent and erects insights into dogmatic axioms that are divisive within as well as between

genders. But at least that would be a coherent position. It would not leave him in the ridiculous position of both, as independent social critic trying to 'describe' the stifling of women's potential identities, and at the same time, as neo-Pragmatist Philosopher, treating such descriptions' force as a matter of their social uptake, 'attractiveness' and power – as if, from a 'meta-political' perspective, feminism was on a par with some chauvinistic nationalism, racism, sexism or speciesism – 'my favourite passages in MacKinnon: "we are not pretending to be objective about it"'.¹⁰

Rorty mocks realism by ascribing to it the need to postulate a truth-tracking faculty called 'reason'.¹¹ He thereby condemns himself of course in that he is implicitly saying that there is in truth no such faculty (mightn't it 'help' some 'groups' to imagine such a 'crazy' idea?) and by offering reasons (appealing to which groups?) against realism. But the idea of such a faculty psychology's being needed by realists is a joke anyway: a piece of rhetorical roughing-up in the 'popularising' of neo-Pragmatism. If I recognise a tree, do I exercise my tree-tracking 'faculty' as well, perhaps, as my truth-tracking faculty?

Rorty counterposes the idea of a utopian 'imagining of possibilities' to the realists' dead representation of supposed 'realities'.¹² He urges that such realists cannot appreciate that conceptual frameworks may be bent and busted as movements realise new human potentials and gain new levels of integration. But science and the realistic temper generally require imagination. A concern with 'the nature of things' is necessarily a concern with potentials, with possibilities, sometimes grasped by leaps of imagination that earlier generations could not have even lined up for. In gender politics, for example, as works like Janet Sayers' *Biological Politics* or John Nicholson's *Men and Women* illustrate, the struggle against sexism is *in part* a struggle against false theories and assumptions and the assertion (vulnerable, like any assertion, to testing) of possibilities which can be represented, as 'imagined future practices'. Utopian visions (take Marge Piercy's *Women on the Edge of Time*, for example) stand or fall not only on their visions of embodied values, but on the 'realism' of their sense of what would happen under what conditions. The counterfactual involves an epistemic discipline that Rorty would raunchily subvert. And likewise, it seems to me, for poetry, which, at its best, bends language to get at truth.

Rorty takes it to be a neo-Pragmatist thesis that social movements do not advance on the basis of the truth of their ideas.¹³ Much less plausible would have been the different claim that movements do not advance on the basis of the *believed* truth of their ideas. Rorty's equivocation here allows him to back conscious myth-making and to envisage this 'woven into the language taught to children', who will of course believe such ideas (not realising that all beliefs are strictly for the birds and 'truth' just 'the nominalisation of an approbative attitude').

Realists 'realistically' realise their own tendencies to special pleading and the limitation imposed by their own historical creatureliness on their powers of understanding. But they also (see any decent and sociologically informed history, even of science, or medicine) recognise the numerous determinants of cultural survival and success. Gender

equality and the slackening of the bonds of gender identifications ('boys don't cry' etc.) may be advanced by theories and philosophies, but their prospects are much more powerfully dependent on such things as employment practices. It is a horrible gutlessness that induces intellectuals, aware of the relative importance of inquiry, to chuck it in for pragmatist micro-populism.

Rorty counterposes moral commitment to a concern with truth. But, although it is not necessarily a scientific detachment which is entailed, a capacity for objectivity – to question one's preferred course and see through one's own bullshit – is 'universally' esteemed. Rorty's notion of 'moral courage' is one that seems to stop short of this.¹⁴ Indeed it seems to amount to nothing but the ability to stand out against the currently most powerful positions, whatever they are – to dare to be different, even 'crazily' so. Yet this courage seems to then be dissipated in the uncritical clustering with fellow feelers; with the prospect of becoming oneself one of the big guns one day. Having sharply demarcated 'practical' from 'realist' values, then, Rorty gives a feeble account of the moral dimension of social movement. Hence his notion of integrity and wholeness as ideals, though it depends on a humanistic tradition, is vitiated by a truth-scorning contentment with practice and comfort-promoting 'self-descriptions'. This is a low-level notion of integrity and wholeness.

Rorty makes numerous anti-realist gestures and certainly sets out to discourage critical inquiry as an important dimension of gender politics. Yet, as we have seen, he inevitably stakes claims of a normal 'truth-tracking' sort about oppression, about the role of ideas in history, and so on. It's tough at the surface!

Notes

- 1 See 'Discourse Fever', *Radical Philosophy Reader*.
- 2 Rorty, RP59, p. 6. Truth, says Rorty on page 10, 'is just the nominalisation of an approbative attitude'. How can he specify which 'approbative attitude' without circularity? What account would he give of the Devil's praise of lying?
- 3 Peirce, *Collected Papers*, Vol. 1, p. 25.
- 4 Rorty, p. 3 (quoting Catherine MacKinnon).
- 5 Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, Holt, 1908, 1932, p. 9.
- 6 See Dewey's *The School and Society*.
- 7 I would argue that separatism tends to hold this painful development up. Whereas, for example, sexual harassment needs to be contested in part by a mutual understanding, and especially by males coming to recognise and appreciate women's viewpoint, as well as to respect simple justice, separatism, by writing males off, retreats to the comforts of a despair that plays into unreconstructed masculinity's hands.
- 8 The examples of perceived 'craziness' that Rorty gives are unconvincing, e.g. the idea that homosexual anal intercourse could be loving, seems to me simply an example of prejudice – Rorty's – not of the 'unintelligibility' that Rorty's anti-universalism requires.
- 9 Rorty, p. 10.
- 10 Rorty, p. 5.
- 11 Rorty, pp. 7, 10.
- 12 Rorty, p. 6 and elsewhere.
- 13 Rorty, p. 10.
- 14 Rorty, p. 7 etc.