OBITUARIES

No single vision

Richard Rorty, 1931–2007

Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown.

Friedrich Nietzsche

The American philosophy Richard Rorty died in Palo Alto, California on 8 June 2007. He was seventy-five. The cause of death was given as complications arising from pancreatic cancer, the disease that killed Derrida a little under three years ago. In his notice in the Süddeutsche Zeitung, Habermas reported that Rorty’s daughter had joked that this kind of cancer must come from ‘reading too much Heidegger’.

As readers will know, ‘Heidegger’ is just one of an increasing profusion of proper names that swirl about a typical page taken from Rorty’s urbane essays: names juxtaposed to startling, indeed at times disorientating, effect. In the great pantheon of Rorty’s prose, one is as likely to bump into a ‘Brandom’, a ‘Davidson’, or a ‘Rawls’ as a ‘Foucault’, a ‘Derrida’ or a ‘Habermas’; to career off a ‘Wittgenstein’ or a ‘Badiou’ only to find oneself rubbing noses with a ‘Sartre’ or a ‘Proust’.

The story of how Rorty came to be so permissive in his choice of characters is the story of his disenchantment with ‘Philosophy’. In a piece written in the early 1990s, which has proven something of a boon to obituarists, he offered an artfully disarming account of part of that story. ‘Trotsky and the Wild Orchids’ tells the story of how a ‘clever, snotty, nerdy only child[’s]’ attempt to combine his adolescent passion for orchids with his inherited belief in social justice led to philosophy:

I grew up knowing that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists. … So, at 12, I knew that the point of being human was to spend one’s life fighting social injustice. But I also had private, weird, incommunicable interests. In earlier years these had been in Tibet. … A few years later… these switched to orchids … I was not quite sure why those orchids were so important, but I was convinced that they were … I was uneasy aware, however, that there was something a bit dubious about this esotericism – this interest in socially useless flowers … I was afraid that Trotsky … would not have approved of my interest in orchids.

At 15 I escaped from the bullies who regularly beat me up… by going to the so-called Hutchens College of the University of Chicago. … Insofar as I had any project in mind, it was to reconcile Trotsky and the orchids. I wanted to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework which would let me – in a thrilling phrase which I came across in Yeats – ‘hold reality and justice in a single vision’. By reality I meant, more or less, the Wordsworthian moments in which, in the woods around Flatbookville… I had felt touched by something numinous, something of ineffable importance. By justice I meant what Norman Thomas and Trotsky both stood for, the liberation of the weak from the strong. I wanted a way to be both an intellectual and spiritual snob and a friend of humanity – a nerdy recluse and a fighter for justice. (Philosophy and Social Hope, Penguin, 1999, pp. 6–8)

In 1946 the University of Chicago was dominated by neo-Thomists and refugees from Europe like Leo Strauss. These shared a disdain for the pragmatism of John
Dewey, whose ‘relativistic’ rejection of absolute values and deflation of truth to what ‘worked’ seemed to leave no standpoint from which to justify one’s moral rejection of the barbarism that had enveloped Europe. To Rorty’s ‘15-year old ears’, the view that ‘something deeper and weightier than Dewey’ was needed to explain why ‘it would be better to be dead than a Nazi’ sounded ‘pretty good’. Talk of moral and philosophical absolutes recalls those orchidaceous numina; and since Dewey was a hero to his parents and their friends, scorning him is ‘a convenient form of adolescent revolt’. Lacking ‘the humility which Christianity demanded, of which,’ he continues, ‘I was apparently incapable’, absolutist philosophy in the form of Platonism beckoned as the most promising way in which to combine the contemplative life towards which the orchids gestured with the ‘ability to convince bullies that they should not beat one up, the ability to convince rich capitalists that they must cede their power to a cooperative, egalitarian, commonwealth’. However, the failure to make good on the Platonic–Socratic identification of virtue with knowledge was an original disillusionment with the discipline that accompanied him on to Yale, where he acquired his doctorate, and thence (after a spell teaching at Wellesley College) to Princeton and the University of Virginia (ending up at Stanford).

The leitmotif of the ensuing forty years is a response to that original disenchantment: the search ‘for a coherent and convincing way of formulating my worries about what, if anything, philosophy is good for’. Rorty’s account of his intellectual progress ends with the publication of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* in 1989. That work constitutes the fullest expression of how philosophy’s task is exhausted largely in the recognition that the absolutist, Platonic desire for a single vision is deceptive, and aims to give intellectuals a model of self-understanding that is free from such illusions. That is to say, it is written from the perspective that the autobiographical fragment reveals as the one its author achieved at the point when the repressed urge was unmasked and which thereby allowed what Habermas called his ‘narrative of maturation’ to be written.

Although Rorty remarks the appearance of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979, he says nothing about his contributions to analytic philosophy in the 1960s, among which can be counted what Robert Brandom has described as ‘the first genuinely new response to the traditional mind–body problem that anyone had seen in a long time’. By wedding Quine’s eliminativist approach to philosophical problems to Sellars’s attack on the ‘myth of the given’, Rorty argued that the normative authority of first-person reports of mental states (*everyone* was into pain in the 1960s) can be reconstrued in terms of what our peers let us get away with saying. Since this does not require acquaintance with some ‘queer’ mental object, it recasts what was taken to be a (necessary) metaphysical problem as a (contingent) linguistic affair. If mindedness is merely a matter of socially authorized practices, nothing rules out the possibility that those practices might not change in the future as a result of conceptual innovation. However unlikely, ‘minds’ might well go the way of the Dodo (or at least Phlogiston).

The clearest indication that Rorty’s concerns were primarily metaphilosophical even at this time is apparent from his introduction to the influential collection *The Linguistic Turn* (written in 1965). Reflecting on the legacy of Oxford philosophy and the positivist turn, he concludes with some hearty prognostications on what philosophy might be like...
if it managed to escape its apparently defining (and yet unrealizable) need for foundations – what is sometimes referred to as the problem of ‘self-reference’. The intuition he pursues is that each attempt to escape metaphysics (he mentions Waisman as well as the later Heidegger and Wittgenstein) is controlled by the idea that philosophy either is a science or defines itself as science’s other. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* uses the social practice account of normativity (now called ‘epistemological behaviourism’) to generalize to all discourse Kuhn’s post-positivistic talk of incommensurable paradigms and the normal–abnormal science distinction. Without a criterion for discriminating the Natur- from the Geisteswissenschaften, epistemology collapses into a generalized hermeneutics. There can be no method for dealing with the strange new ways of talking people come up with. But we can try and keep the ‘conversation’ as exciting as possible by maximizing the conditions under which such linguistic innovations appear.

Although Rorty ends *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* with the homily that ‘philosophers’ moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West’, he gives no hint what moral means in this context, and is equally silent on the question of politics. This is all the more surprising since Dewey appears alongside Wittgenstein and Heidegger as one of Rorty’s heroes. Soon after the book appeared, however, he gave a talk at Johns Hopkins in which the shape of his thinking would take became clear. The problem, he said, is that since pragmatism holds truths to be made rather than found, and thus treats ‘both science and philosophy as… literary genres’, it challenges the philosopher’s moral self-image as someone who seeks the truth (political, moral) on behalf of humanity in the name of progress. In its place it seems to offer no more than the aesthete’s romantic desire for self-creation, for making a poem of themselves, for constructing their own truth. But this search for ‘sacred wisdom is purchased at the price of his separation from his fellow-humans’.

The task, then, is to offer an image for the intellectual that insulates one’s moral commitment to oneself from one’s ‘sense of our common human lot’. This project is pursued throughout the 1980s, running in parallel with an increasing focus on how Davidson’s developing account of language and subjectivity lend support to the pragmatic view of truth (basically, that ‘truth’ has several uses, only one of which is normative and which in turn equates with justification to one’s peers). The two come together in *Contingency*, where Rorty proffers the figure of the ‘liberal ironist’, someone who has rejected the siren call of the quest for a single vision. Adopting this self-image, we can redeem the existential intuition that, lacking an essence, we are ‘condemned to be free’ by redescribing it as a private moral freedom to create a self ‘whom we can respect’; and we can re-energize our sense of human solidarity by seeing that it too must be worked for – that solace should not be sought in thinking that whatever appertains in the world, at least we know what’s right in theory.

Rorty’s requirement for a strict demarcation of public and private morality has been subject to wide criticism, as has his claim that liberalism is the only game worth playing. What motivates that conclusion, in brief, is the thought that the political views he claims to share with (for example) Habermas and Richard Bernstein can be given no philosophical foundation unless one can preserve the idea of the ‘centred’ rational (more-or-less Kantian) subject from attack by, on the one hand, ‘ironist’ theorists like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Bataille, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida and, on the other, com-
munitarian critics like Sandel, Taylor and MacIntyre. Since Rorty thinks that these critics have (collectively) more or less got it right about the subject (at least in so far as what they tell us chimes with Davidson’s ostensibly politically neutral account) the game is up for political theory.

That is to say, Rorty is committed to the view that with the aestheticization of subjectivity and the rejection of its correlate, the subject-centred conception of reason, no useful theoretical interventions can be made in politics – neither those that seek to justify liberal institutions, nor those (‘ironists’ on the ‘cultural left’) desirous of a more radical critique of Western culture. As Nancy Fraser put it:

This privatized, narcissistic conception of radical theory has two important social consequences. First there can be no legitimate cultural politics, no genuinely political struggle for cultural hegemony. … Second, there can be no politically relevant radical theory, no link between theory and political practice; there can only be apolitical ironist theory and atheoretical reformist practice. Thus both culture and theory get depoliticized … and politics gets dethetoreticized. (in A. Malachowski, ed., Reading Rorty, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, pp. 314–15)

What has been left unstated here, though it is implied in the above, is that everything turns on the concept of truth. Politics is ‘detheticized’ because Rorty takes it that only a strongly realist, correspondence theory of truth can underwrite such ‘inter-
vention’. When he objects (merely philosophically) to Habermas’s attempt to reformulate rationality along lines that avoid the fact that ‘the totalizing self-critique of reason gets caught in a performative contradiction’, it is to Habermas’s attempt to milk something (along with Apel and Putnam) from Peirce’s view of truth that he takes exception. For Rorty, this is an unsatisfactory half-way house between subject-centred reason and a fully pragmatized notion of truth. Like the realist’s disdained talk of ‘correspondence to’, ‘representation of’, or ‘matching’ reality, he regards Habermas’s invocation of a context-independent validity as a cog that does no pragmatic work beyond reminding us that what is justified now might not be at some time in the future. As such, it cannot be used to parlay philosophy into a discipline that has an emancipatory function. ‘If I had to define “critical theory”’, he concludes, ‘I should say that it is the attempt of philosophy professors to make the study of Kant, Hegel, and various other books intelligible only to philosophy professors, relevant to the struggle for social justice.’

Although Rorty’s work provoked something close to loathing from some on the Left, a more judicious evaluation comes from one of his classmates from Chicago, who later followed him to Yale. During the course of their parallel careers, Richard Bernstein criticized Rorty’s eliminative materialism in the 1960s, and in the 1980s and 1990s he argued that his liberalism was not much more than an ‘apologia for the status quo’, an ‘old-fashioned version of cold war liberalism dressed up in fashionable “postmodern” discourse’. (Rorty’s laconic response was that the cold war was ‘a good war’.) However he ends ‘Rorty’s Liberal Utopia’ on a more celebratory note, likening him to that ancestor who didn’t ‘write such good books’:

There are many ways of evaluating the contribution of a thinker. One of the best is to ask whether he has found a way – invented a vocabulary – that cuts through clichés and the defenses we use to avoid facing sharp challenges … Ironically, Rorty has thereby helped to keep philosophical reflection alive and to fulfil what he once called the ‘philosophers’ moral concern’ – ‘continuing the conversation of the West. (Bernstein, The New Constellation, MIT Press, Boston MA, 1991, p. 291)

As Alexander Nehamas implied in an essay in Raritan Quarterly Review, Rorty did indeed have more than ‘a touch of the poet’.

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