

The Provocative Polemics of Richard Rorty

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Abstract

This paper explores the importance of writing style to the philosophical achievement of Richard Rorty. Famously contending that philosophy is not delimited by subject matter or genre but is “a kind of writing”, Rorty wishes to view philosophy as a mode of discourse that amounts to re-describing and narrating the history of philosophy. The very fact that these rhetorical perspectives (“writing”, “style”, “re-description”, “narrative” and so forth) are so privileged encourages us to consider the possibly figural dimension of Rorty’s own writing, the metaphorical investments that make his critical position possible as well as the literary inflections of his prose. The key question, of course, is whether these rhetorical perspectives are *constitutive* of his writing; whether Rorty’s style, in fact, is as important as he claims. Beginning with an examination of the importance of “the literary moment” and “the poetic” as Rorty conceives of them, I question whether these theoretical emphases are borne out in the practice of his writing. The possible tensions between the style of Rorty’s writing and the foundational claims of his philosophy are my primary concern.

Introduction

Richard Rorty is well-known for his provocative prose. From his ground-breaking *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) to the latest volume of his *Philosophical Papers* (2007), he has written with rhetorical flair and colourful elegance, prompting Harold Bloom to describe him as “the most interesting philosopher in the world” (book jacket, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*) and Ian Hacking to review his most recent book as “so blissfully right or infuriatingly wrong” (book jacket, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Volume 4*). Few philosophers are as engaging to read as Rorty, and few can boast his happy knack for presenting radical views (among them, his outright rejection of truth and objectivity) as an easy and agreeable shift of one’s current perspective. A voice that is urbane, witty, lively and eloquent, and characteristically inflected by American cadence and idiom, Rorty’s stirring prose is one of his supreme philosophical achievements.

Rorty is always keen to sidestep standard modes of logical rigour. As his thought has changed, so has his style, moving increasingly from an argumentative to a narrative

and “re-descriptive” mode. It is important to clarify at this point, however, that Rorty *does* argue on occasion. His general position, however, is that argument is not the be all and the end all of philosophy. Consequently, he has increasingly attempted to move away from argument towards “re-description” and to replace the language of logical reasoning with one of presentation and comparison. Instead of invoking premises and conclusions or drawing on inference, consistency or refutation, Rorty “urges” and “recommends”, he “offers”, “nudges” and “suggests”. My analysis of his work will focus on this stylistic development.

Attending to his language of presentation and comparison, together with the elements of humour and informality that mark his work, I question how the style of Rorty’s prose ties in with his broader philosophical aims. More specifically, I explore how his theoretical concerns to preserve “the poetic” within the philosophical and to highlight the role of “the literary moment” in intellectual change are allied to his methodological turn away from argument and towards re-description. Rorty’s use of the terms “poetic” and “literary”, together with his conception of their role in intellectual discourse, are crucial to a full understanding of his vision for philosophy, particularly to an understanding of his famous claim that philosophy should be understood on the model of literary criticism. However, it is less clear how exactly these theoretical concerns, when filtered through the methodological imperatives of re-description and narrative, manifest themselves at the level of writing. It is unclear, in other words, whether Rorty sees narrative and re-description (both terms with literary connotations) as “poetic” or “literary” practices. Beginning with Rorty’s consideration of these concepts, in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume 2* (hereafter *EHO*) and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (hereafter *CIS*), I move to a consideration of Rorty’s writing style in general; to the curious blend of sprightly rhetoric that has distinguished his work from the beginning.

I

In the essay “Deconstruction and Circumvention” (*EHO*, 85-107), Rorty explores the concept of “philosophical closure”. Beginning with the definition of literature suggested by Geoffrey Hartman (that literary language is one where words stand out

as words rather than being, at once, “assimilable meanings”), Rorty defines the literary moment as a conversational situation in which “everything is up for grabs at once” (88), where the very motives and terms of discussion are the central subject of argument. This way of drawing the contrast between literary and non-literary language, he writes, permits us to think of a “literary” or “poetic” moment as occurring periodically in many different areas of culture: science, philosophy, painting and politics, as well as the lyric and the drama. Literary moments, then, are not confined to literature. They are moments when a new start is needed, when the new generation identify the existing, working methods and frameworks as that which maintains “hackwork”. “In such periods”, Rorty writes,

people begin to toss around old words in new senses, to throw in the occasional neologism, and thus to hammer out a new idiom which initially attracts attention to itself and only later gets put to work. In this initial stage, words stand out as words, colors as encrusted pigments, chords as dissonances. Half-formed materiality becomes the mark of the avant-garde (88).

The informality of Rorty’s prose here (“tossing” around new words, “throwing” in neologisms, “hammering” out new idioms) underlines the unpredictable nature of intellectual change. Intellectual developments are conceived as illogical, whimsical, almost capricious. On Rorty’s model, the jargon or style of development that “wins out” in turn becomes the bearer of “assimilable meanings” and ceases to be conspicuous. It is not noticed again until the next dissatisfied generation comes along and “problematizes” anew (88).

The central point of Rorty’s discussion is that philosophy, traditionally, has not been open to these “literary moments”. From Parmenides’ distinction between the Way of Truth and the Way of Opinion to Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal to Logical Positivism’s attempt to distinguish between the “cognitively meaningful” and the “cognitively meaningless”, the “dream at the heart of philosophy” has always been to find a vocabulary which is intrinsically and self-evidently *final*. Philosophy has always attempted, Rorty argues, to find one true metaphor and to isolate the conditions that make an expression intelligible. The upshot of this attempt is that philosophy always aims for a closed and total

vocabulary. This is in direct contrast, of course, to Rorty's own emphasis on the need for continually revisable "re-descriptions". It contrasts also with his idea of "literary openness", an openness he identifies and champions, here as elsewhere, in the work of Derrida.¹

For Rorty, Derrida is an exemplary figure because he writes for writing's sake without a claim to truth. Kantian philosophers, according to Rorty, write because they want to show how things really are. For these philosophers, "writing is an unfortunate necessity; what is really wanted is to show, to demonstrate, to point out, to exhibit, to make one's interlocutor stand at gaze before the world" (*CP*, 94). For Derrida, however, writing should not attempt to bring us in touch with something outside of writing but should only reinterpret one's predecessors' reinterpretation of *their* predecessors' reinterpretation in order to demonstrate that there is simply no reality we can refer to, but sheer possibility. "For Derrida", Rorty writes, "writing always leads to more writing, and more, and still more – just as history does not lead to Absolute Knowledge and the Final Struggle, but to more history, and more, and still more" (94). As a "strong textualist", Derrida does not aim at an accurate or adequate description. He does not want, Rorty writes, "to comprehend Hegel's books; he wants to play with Hegel. He doesn't want to write a book about the nature of language; he wants to play with the texts which other people have thought they were writing about language" (96). The desire to understand a text is still based on the metaphysical idea that there is something beyond the text, but reading, Derrida writes, "cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward the referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical)" (96). Reading and writing, for Derrida, must always take place in a spirit of playfulness and irony.

Derrida's writing, according to Rorty, is marked by "self-conscious interminability, self-conscious openness, self-conscious lack of philosophical closure" (93). However, Rorty is keen to point out that Derrida's wish to write in this way places him in a dilemma. On the one hand, if Derrida forgets entirely about philosophy (i.e. if he indulges in "uncaring spontaneous activity"), his writing loses focus and point. On the other, if he "remembers" philosophy, he is in danger of propounding his own

generalization, in this case, of the form: “The attempt to formulate a unique, total, closed vocabulary will *necessarily*...” (93). Derrida is in danger of doing this, Rorty writes, when he produces a new metalinguistic jargon, full of words like “trace” and “différance”. Grasping the first horn of the dilemma, Rorty concludes, will give us openness, but “more openness than we really want” (96); grasping the second horn will merely produce one more philosophical closure, one more metavocabulary which claims superior status. Notably, Rorty’s stance on “Literature”, which concludes this section, is critical of its own philosophical pretensions. The philosophical, he seems to be arguing, must not be subsumed by the literary:

Literature which does not connect with anything, which has no subject and no theme, which does not have a moral tucked up its sleeve, which lacks a dialectical context, is just babble. You can’t have a ground without a figure, a margin without a page of text (96).

The idea that literature without “a moral tucked up its sleeve” is merely babble is a strong claim. In light of Rorty’s anti-essentialist and anti-theoretical stance, indeed, it seems contradictory. His claim in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* that “there is nothing called ‘the aim of writing’ any more than there is something called ‘the aim of theorizing’” (101) would seem to problematize even further the reductive elements of this paragraph. It is precisely this unsophisticated dichotomy (between ‘art for art’s sake’ and art as moral mediator), indeed, that Rorty criticizes in Orwell and Nabokov.

Seeking a way out of this dilemma, Rorty continues, Derrida differentiates himself from Heidegger. Of particular relevance here is Derrida’s discussion of Heidegger’s “magic words”. These words, like “Sein” and “Ereignis” and “Aletheia”, are Heidegger’s attempts, according to Derrida, “to carry the climactic ecstasy of the [philosophical] dream into waking life” (95), to obtain the satisfaction of philosophical closure by retreating to the sheer *sounds* of words, “words which are not given sense by use but possess force precisely by lack of use” (95). This emphasis on the sound of words (which Derrida emphasizes in Heidegger and Rorty emphasizes in Derrida) is central.

Rorty interprets Derrida as proposing not to go between the horns of the dilemma but rather “to twine the horns together in an interminably elongated double helix” (97). The upshot of this manoeuvre, according to Rorty, is a deconstruction of the philosophy/literature opposition by means of particular “acts of reading”. As Rorty is quick to point out, however, it is hardly clear why this would help. Continuing with the earlier emphasis on the *sounds* of words, however, Rorty explores a key distinction between “inferential” and “non-inferential” connections. This distinction is crucial to his reading of Derrida, and to his evaluation of the “literary” in philosophical discourse. Rorty writes:

Derrida [...] wants to invoke the distinction between *inferential connections* between *sentences*, the connections which give the words used in those sentences their meaning, and *non-inferential associations* between *words*, associations which are not dependent upon their use in sentences. Like Heidegger, he seems to think that if we attend only to the former, we will be trapped in our current ontotheological form of life. So, he may infer, we must break away from meaning, thought of in the Wittgensteinian-Saussure way as a play of *inferential* differences, to something like what Heidegger called “force”, the result of a play of *noninferential* differences, the play of *sounds* – or, concomitantly with the shift from the phonic to the written, the play of inscriptional features, of chirography and typography (97).

Still guided by the Hartman framework of literary and non-literary language, Rorty positively appraises Derrida for his movement away from use-value and “assimilable meanings” towards the sounds of words and their ability to resonate with one another. These “non-assimilable” meanings and “non-inferential” differences liberate their writer from meaning and metaphysics, a liberation that is achieved both on the scriptural and the phonic level. As with poetry, the visual appearance of the word on the page together with its audible resonances, are central.

This idea of the poetic dimension of philosophical writing is developed further in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, where Rorty’s philosophical hero is not Derrida, but Heidegger. Heidegger’s quest in *Being and Time*, as Rorty conceives of it, is to find a vocabulary which cannot be “levelled off”, a vocabulary which cannot be used as if it were the right “final vocabulary”. “For Heidegger“, Rorty writes,

“philosophical truth depends upon the very choice of *phonemes*, on the very *sounds* of words” (*CIS*, 114). Invoking Heidegger’s endless wordplay, his baffling use of archaic German, Rorty reads Heidegger as saying that philosophy, like poetry, is untranslatable – that sounds *matter*. Interested not in etymologies but in resonances, Heidegger insists that the only way to avoid the identification of truth with power is to conceive of our final vocabularies not as means to ends but as “houses of Being“. This claim requires him to “poetize” philosophical language by letting the phonemes themselves, and not just their uses, be consequential. Heidegger’s stress on the pertinence of individual words (on their graphic and phonic elements as well as their meanings) is closely allied to Rorty’s desire to stress the poetic within the philosophical,² to emphasize the decidedly *written* nature of philosophical discourse.

This inferential/non-inferential distinction, which Derrida and Rorty both identify in the work of Heidegger, is central to Rorty’s work. Indeed, the passage immediately following the discussion of Heidegger plays on the inferential/non-inferential distinction in order to point up the difference between the procedures of the analytic tradition and Rorty’s own brand of re-descriptive conversational philosophy:

The distinction between these two sorts of play of difference is the distinction between the sort of abilities you need to write a grammar and a lexicon for a language and the sort you would need to make jokes in a language, to construct metaphors in it, or to write it in a distinguished and original style rather than simply writing *clearly*. The clarity and transparency sought after by argumentative macho metaphysicians can be thought of as a way of implying that only inferential connections matter, because only those are relevant to argumentation. In this view, words matter only because one makes propositions, and thus *arguments*, out of them. Conversely, within Hartman’s “frame of reference ... such that the words stand out as words (even as sounds),” they matter even if they are never used in an indicative sentence (*CIS*, 98).

It is clear from this passage that Rorty does not rate the ability to write “clearly” as the ultimate ambition of philosophical prose. Given the non-rational nature of intellectual development, indeed, non-inferential and “literary” language has far more potential. The point is not to involve oneself in the current language game, but to inspire a new one. Rorty concludes,

Important, revolutionary physics, and metaphysics, has always been “literary” in the sense that it has faced the problem of introducing new jargon and nudging aside the language games currently in place (99).

The crucial point here is that Rorty’s emphasis on the non-rational development of scientific knowledge ties in with his model of literary invention. If rigour, agreement, rational argument and so on are the necessary attributes of science which gets things done, they themselves are traceable back to the success of abnormal (or literary) descriptions which have become normal. This process is one of invention, rather than discovery.

An important corollary of Rorty’s reclamation of the poetic within the philosophical is his contention that the motor of philosophical discourse is metaphor rather than statement. As he writes in the introduction to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, “it is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical commitments” (*Mirror*, 12). Rorty’s championing of metaphor is continued in his essay “Philosophy as Science, Metaphor and Politics”, from the second volume of his *Philosophical Papers*:

A metaphor is, so to speak, a voice from outside logical space, rather than an empirical filling-up of a portion of that space, or a logical-philosophical clarification of the structure of that space. It is a call to change one’s language and one’s life, rather than a proposal about how to systematize either (*Heidegger*, 13).

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty’s distinction between “the literal” and “the metaphorical” is most clearly drawn. Similar to the emphasis in “Deconstruction and Circumvention” on the ability of users of non-inferential language to make jokes, to construct metaphors and to write in an original style, Rorty’s distinction between literal and metaphorical language hinges on the difference between the familiar or hackneyed and the novel or surprising. Building on Davidson’s idea of the history of language being a history of developing and superseding metaphors, Rorty follows up this Kuhnian point of thinking by conceiving of the literal-metaphorical distinction as

one between old language and new language (rather than in terms of a distinction between words which latch on to the world and those which do not):

The literal uses of noises and marks are the uses we can handle by our old theories about what people will say under various conditions. Their metaphorical use is the sort which makes us get busy developing a new theory (16).

Thus, for Rorty, metaphoricity depends not on what the words in question *mean*, but on their *force*, or what they are used to do: the thoughts (or “tingles”) they provoke and the analogies they enable us to construct. This is comparable to his reading of Heidegger, where force of writing is privileged over clarity.

Once we conceive of the literal/metaphorical in this manner, Rorty urges, we can see the point of Bloom’s and Nietzsche’s claim that the “strong poet”, the person that uses words as they have never before been used, is best able to appreciate her own contingency. The figure of the “strong poet” plays a central role in Rorty’s model of intellectual development. Bloom’s phrase is much indebted (as, indeed, is “the anxiety of influence”) to Emerson and it is enthusiastically adopted by Rorty to elucidate his own version of pragmatism. With reference to the “strong poet” or to “strong poetry”, Bloom wrote in 1976 that “Pragmatically, a trope’s revenge is against an earlier trope... We can define a strong poet”, he goes on, “as one who will not tolerate words that intervene between him and the Word, or precursors that stand between him and the Muse” (*PR*, 10). Ten years later, citing “Bloom’s notion of the strong poet”, Rorty goes on to make two stipulations crucial to his own adaptations of it. First, that “a sense of human history as the history of successive metaphors would let us see the poet, in the generic sense of the term, as the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species” (*CIS*, 20); second, that “central to what I have been saying [is] that the world does not provide us with any criterion of choice between alternative metaphors, that we can only compare languages and metaphors with one another, not with something beyond language called ‘fact’ (20).

Only poets, Rorty suspects, can truly appreciate contingency. The rest of us are doomed to remain philosophers, to insist that there is really only one true description

of the human situation, one universal context of our lives. We are doomed to spend our conscious lives trying to escape from contingency, rather than, like the poet, acknowledging and appropriating contingency. Dropping the claim to continuity, the strong poet can appreciate that her language is as contingent as her parents or her historical epoch. Breaking out of one metaphoric into another, she is best able to appreciate, finally, the Nietzschean claim that “truth is a mobile army of metaphors.” (CIS, 28) As Rorty writes,

The final victory of poetry in its ancient quarrel with philosophy — the final victory of metaphors of self-creation with metaphors of self-discovery — would consist in our becoming reconciled to the thought that this is the only sort of power over the world which we can hope to have (40).

As with the inferential/non-inferential distinction, Rorty’s distinction between the literal and the metaphorical and his consequent emphasis on the strong poet as “the vanguard of the species”, ties in with his emphasis on innovation and originality as the driving force of intellectual progress. Crucially, innovation on a linguistic level (the ability to make jokes, to use words in unexpected ways, to construct metaphors, to emphasize not only the meanings of words but their “non-assimilable”, i.e. phonic and scriptorial, elements) is conceived by Rorty as having meta-linguistic implications. Linguistic innovation (the “literalizing” of selected metaphors) is the ultimate source of originality; “metaphoric re-description” is the ultimate mark of genius.

II

To summarize so far, Rorty argues that text-based “writerly” philosophy has richer resources available for “keeping in touch with reality” than the traditional philosophy it seeks to replace. It is the latter, with its austere delusions of getting behind language to finally figure out how it hooks onto things, to at last “represent *representing itself*” (96) that runs the greater risk of losing itself in fantasy. Writerly philosophy, Rorty urges, has richer resources available, not just in the sense of availing itself of a much wider stock of words and linguistic ploys, but also in the sense that it can interact with a broader range of texts. Furthermore, and as established earlier, Rorty’s emphasis on

“the poetic within the philosophical” is fundamental to his central claim that metaphoric re-description is the motor of intellectual change. This claim leads, in turn, to his privileging of re-description and metaphor over argument and statement. It is less clear, however, whether these emphases on “the literary” and “the poetic” play themselves out at the scriptorial level of Rorty’s work. It is less clear, in other words, whether Rorty’s re-descriptions are “poetic” or “literary” in the manner suggested by his own distinctions, whether his philosophy is as “writerly” as his polemics might suggest. I turn now to an analysis of these questions.

Rorty’s prose is distinguished by its rhetorical force, the numerous techniques he employs in order to convince his reader of his position. Rorty “urges” and “recommends”, “suggests” and “offers”, caricatures and jostles, often reducing his opponents’ positions to a rigid singularity that directly contrasts the flexibility of his own neo-pragmatism. Consonant with this practice, he continually invokes the voice of common sense, appeals to his audience’s distrust of scientific jargon, comes down firmly on the side of “reasonableness” over reason. Added to these techniques is his unmistakable self-presentation, the tone of dry sardonicism which has always permeated his work. As Jonathan Rée recalls in his obituary for Rorty in *Prospect* magazine, Rorty has always presented his views “in a tone of droll intellectual self-deprecation” (137).

Although it transcends the scientism of the analytic school, however, it is unclear whether one could describe Rorty’s writing as “poetic” or “literary” in any strict sense. Writing of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Rorty claims that these “post-Nietzschean” philosophers wrote philosophy in order to exhibit the universality and necessity of the individual and the contingent. He continues,

Both philosophers become caught up in the quarrel between philosophy and poetry which Plato began, and both ended by trying to work out honourable terms on which philosophy might surrender to poetry (*CIS*, 26).

It would be very difficult to establish, however, that Rorty’s own writing constitutes “a surrender” of the philosophical to the poetic. Rorty doesn’t use “magic words” (i.e.

words which cannot be easily accommodated within the current philosophical vocabulary, Heidegger's "onto-theological" framework) or pay attention to language's phonic or scriptorial elements. His re-descriptions continually introduce new jargon (and so satisfy the primary condition for the strong poet), but Rorty rarely, if ever, pays extended attention to tropes of language or figures of speech. Indeed, the metaphorical density of his own writing is relatively low. And although he denounces the model of transparency and clarity that has marked Philosophy's presumptions from the beginning, it seems eminently possible to "paraphrase" his writing. Rorty's procedures, on the somewhat outdated Heideggarian model, certainly don't "poetize" philosophical discourse. The upshot of these related contradictions is that Rorty's awareness of the importance of the literary and the poetic (on the conceptual level at least) simply doesn't translate to a "literary" or "writerly" use of language in his own writing, the kind of writing that he identifies and champions in Heidegger and Derrida. There is a major discrepancy, it seems, between Rorty's claims for the literary and the "non-literariness" of his own enterprise.

In defence of Rorty, however, perhaps this "non-literariness" points not to an irresolvable tension in his work but to his peculiar discursive position, somewhere "between" philosophy and cultural politics. It is important to remember that although Rorty champions the strong poet as "the maker of new words" and "the shaper of new languages", he is equally aware that the strongest poet has to be understood by "non-poets", by ordinary people who feel at home in the old metaphors. In his reference to "new words" and "new languages" (and the parallel emphasis on Derrida's "non-inferential" and Hartman's "non-assimilable"), Rorty, then, is perhaps being slightly over-enthusiastic. As he concedes in a later chapter of *Contingency*, "metaphors are familiar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of old words being used in familiar ways" (41). We might take this as Rorty's admission – independent of his wish to establish the contingency of language - that the metaphoric genius of the poet must be matched by his ability to communicate.

Returning to his essay on Heidegger in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty writes:

Heidegger was quite right in saying that poetry shows what language can be when it is not a means to an end, but quite wrong in thinking that there could be a universal poem – something which combined the best features of philosophy and poetry, something which lay beyond both metaphysics and ironism. Phonemes do matter, but no one phoneme matters to very many people for very long (119).

Theory, in other words, cannot be saved by merely “poetizing” it. With characteristic wit, Rorty deflates the universalizing grandeur of this claim:

Some people will find Heidegger’s *andenkendes Denken* no more urgent a project than Uncle Toby’s attempt to construct a model of the fortifications of Namur (119).

It is the desire of Rorty’s poet-pragmatist to recognize the contingency of language (saving it from the “onto-theological” frameworks that Heidegger abhorred) while at the same time acknowledging that “ironist theory” doesn’t offer a way out either. The upshot of this incommensurability is that philosophical writing must be responsive to the political; philosophical writing must recognize language as a medium of communication, as a tool for social interaction, as a mode of “tying oneself up with other human beings” (41).

It is this broadly political dimension of Rorty’s work, we might suggest, that justifies its “paraphrasability”. On this view, the eminently readable nature of his prose is illustrative not of the “non-literariness” of an avowed literary enterprise (or an insoluble tension between theory and practice) but of Rorty’s desire to keep his strong poet conversant with the members of his liberal utopia. “Philosophy as a kind of writing”, on this model, emerges as a secondary concern to that articulated in Rorty’s final book, his avowed desire “to view philosophy as cultural politics.”

The political dimension of Rorty’s work is undoubtedly a consideration in defending (or, at least, partly accounting for) the “paraphrasability” of his prose. There is a transparency to Rorty’s writing which both underscores his liberal commitments and complements their buoyant optimism. While this optimism, in turn, distinguishes his

voice from the continental thinkers he most admires, Rorty's lightness of touch is one of his supreme philosophical achievements. Few philosophers are as charming to read as Rorty, and few have his flair for presenting radical views as eminently plausible philosophical positions. Rorty's radicalism, when filtered through his easy style, turns out to be surprisingly disarming.

The question of style, of course, is fundamental. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty had argued that the quest for knowledge and epistemological certitude had always been captive to its own engrossing metaphors (chief among these, famously, is that of the mind as mirror, the "glassy essence" of the soul, wherein all the representations of external reality are to be found). It thus became the task of philosophy to legitimate this picture of its work by forgetting the swerve into metaphor which first produced, and still sustains, its discourse. It became the task of philosophy, in other words, to ignore the salient fact of its textual (or rhetorical) constitution. Derrida's "White Mythology" (1979) endorses Rorty's position. Far from delivering us from metaphor in the name of reason, metaphysics (on Derrida's model) actually practices a style of thinking which merely succeeds in concealing from itself, by exiling metaphor to the margins of its "official" activity, its own profound metaphoricity. The idea that there is a sharp distinction between philosophy and literature is thus a "white mythology", a myth that philosophy uses pure language and poetry uses metaphor. Philosophy, it turns out, has been blind to its own metaphors.

Commenting on Derrida's essay in 2004, Rorty writes:

In his witty and brilliant essay, Derrida describes what happens when philosophers obsessed with purity turn their attention to language. They typically try to cleanse discourse of any trace of metaphor. Derrida thought this ludicrous. His essay shows that the Western philosophical tradition itself was a tissue of imaginative metaphors, and none the worse for that.

Rorty thus embraces the Derridean contention that metaphysics is *constituted* by metaphor, and expands on this idea to consider philosophy as just one more literary

genre. For pragmatists and poststructuralists alike, Rorty contends, philosophy amounts to a style of writing, a literary genre and language practice. On this model, there is simply no discipline or method capable of transcending its own discourse, no way of getting beneath language to the thought it expresses, nothing to free us from the contingency of our vocabularies. This idea of language as contingent, indeed, problematizes the very notion of what it means to be literal. Once we concede the metaphoricity of all metaphysical discourse, the distinction between the literal and the figural collapses. The discipline of thought is always and everywhere bound up with the practice of style - philosophy, as Rorty puts it, is “a kind of writing” – and this admission cannot but seem a subversive idea to those engaged (as they believe) in pure conceptual analysis. As he writes in *Consequences of Pragmatism*,

The twentieth century attempt to purify Kant’s general theory about the relation between representations and their objects by turning it into philosophy of language is, for Derrida, to be countered by making philosophy even more impure – more unprofessional, funnier, more allusive, sexier, and above all, more “written” (93).

Like Derrida, Rorty thus rejects the protocols of orthodox linguistic philosophy in favour of a conscious, even artful, play with stylistic possibilities. The point can be made from a slightly different angle by taking up, once again, Rorty’s tentative distinction between “normal” and “abnormal” styles of philosophical discourse. The hallmarks of “abnormal” philosophy are a conscious virtuosity of style, a conscious dealing in paradox and a will to problematize the relation between language and thought. The corresponding features of its normative counterpart are a disregard of style except as a means of efficient communication, a mistrust of paradox unless firmly held within argumentative bounds. For Rorty, then, the central issue has always been that of philosophical style, in a sense more crucial and encompassing than most philosophers are willing to entertain.

III

It is clear from these considerations that style and “a kind of writing” is where Rorty wants to end up regarding the nature of philosophy, but just what kind of writing does he himself practice? Bearing in mind the earlier tension between his claims for the literary and the poetic and the “non-literariness” of his own procedures, together with the apparent friction between his Derridean recognition of metaphysics’ “metaphoricity” and the lack of metaphorical density in his own writing (the fact, as highlighted earlier, that Rorty’s work is paraphrasable in a manner quite alien to the work of Derrida or Heidegger, or even Cavell), Rorty’s largely instrumental use of language seems at odds with his guiding emphasis on its “non-inferential” or poetic capacities. These tensions, in turn, seem to heavily contradict the burden that he wishes to place on philosophical *style*. At the very least, they problematize a rhetorical analysis of his writing. How is it possible, we are led to ask, to reconcile the Rorty who seeks to champion a more “writerly” and “textualist” philosophy and the Rorty who delights in a transparent and paraphrasable discourse, a writer famed for readability and “lightness of touch”?

If we attempt a rhetorical analysis of Rorty, the most obvious candidates for constitutive metaphors of his work are those of “narrative” and “re-description”. Every critical discourse has its lexical emphases: in the work of early Derrida, for example, “trace”, “écriture” and “différance” are key terms; in the work of Stanley Cavell, “acknowledgement” and “the ordinary” are pivotal. In Rorty’s work, similarly, “re-description” and “narrative” become the most recognizable and general terms; invariably, all other names for discourse of all kinds are re-defined from their perspective. By revising philosophy in this manner, Rorty comes up with a startling metaphoricity; he replaces the scientific and inferential procedures of the analytic philosopher with the more aesthetic and re-descriptive practices of the strong poet. I use the word “metaphoricity” here as Rorty’s new pragmatism consistently privileges certain words over others. It is precisely the modification of sense that the terms “re-description” and “narrative” bring upon more familiar words – like “argument” or

“theory” (or even “metaphor” itself) – that makes them metaphors.

When Rorty describes philosophy as a kind of narrative or re-descriptive practice, our conception of philosophy in general is tempered by the rhetorical perspectives invoked by this diction. For example, when Rorty writes that “we would do well to see philosophy as just one more literary genre” (*EHO*, 20) and understand that Derrida explains Heidegger’s “handling of the metaphysical tradition as a brilliantly original narrative rather than an epochal transformation” (20), these sentences conceptualize philosophical subjects from the perspective of “themes” and “tropes”, “philosophy” from the perspective of a “literary genre”, and “argument” from the perspective of “narrative”. All of these rhetorical emphases are calculated to make “narrative” a metaphor for “philosophy” and, in consequence, Rorty’s new pragmatism a new kind of philosophical writing.

Rorty relies largely on these rhetorical generalizations to get us believing in the necessity of his neo-pragmatist project. The words “narrative” and “re-description” always win out in his discussions of how best to describe critical writing, and philosophers who argue that philosophy “finds” and literature “invents” end up looking very poor indeed. However, the metaphors of “narrative” and “re-description” are used by Rorty to over-totalize an enormous amount of very different textual material. These terms are used so frequently and so generally that it becomes increasingly difficult to pinpoint their precise meaning. If we compare Rorty’s use of “narrative” and “re-description”, for example, with the carefully qualified meanings of “acknowledgment” or “the ordinary” in Cavell’s lexicon, or the complex etymologies of Derrida’s “trace” or “différance”, Rorty’s metaphoric emerges as an extremely general one, where sweeping and vaguely defined terms are expected to carry an enormous amount of referential weight.

Perhaps we could account for this generality by suggesting that the terms “re-description” and “narrative” are metaphors that work only at the conceptual level of Rorty’s discourse. On this reading, the difficulty of exposing their figural dimension (the difficulty, in other words, of subjecting these terms to a rhetorical analysis) is

explained by the fact that these concepts lack a correspondingly linguistic dimension. Viewing rhetoric as a system of tropes, figures of speech are seen by deconstructionists as microcosms of the more substantive topic of invention. And so, in Rorty's case, one might expect the concepts of "narrative" and "re-description" to be attended by correspondents at the linguistic level; turns of phrase based on the idea of "telling stories", for example, or figures of speech that connote renaming and displacing. However, in actual fact, the turns of phrase that most frequently pepper Rorty's discourse are based on related notions of "unburdening" and "therapy". Furthermore, these figures of speech, far from suggesting innovation or invention (the primary role of metaphoric re-description, as Rorty conceives of it) more clearly voice a colloquial and homely, a decidedly "American", idiom; what we might term (and thinking here of Derrida's "rhetoric of demystification"), "a rhetoric of common sense".

Skilfully embodying the larger intellectual and moral attitudes he is recommending, Rorty's Implied Pragmatist speaks in an informal, "down home", American idiom, a self-consciously pragmatist cultivation that is intended to undercut more portentous vocabularies and return human purposes to the centre of the stage. From *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty's writing has always been accented by a pacy colloquialism, a style of address that is most pronounced in the third and fourth volumes of his *Philosophical Papers* (1997 and 2007, respectively) and in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1998), what Rorty terms "a collection of more occasional pieces." These books are replete with Americanisms: "it didn't pan out", "put a different spin on it", "gee-whizz", "gypped", "jump-started", "pretty much", "handy ways", "pin down", "lay my cards on the table", "earn their keep", "boondoggle", "gotten some",³ to mention but a few.

The most insistent of Rorty's colloquialisms, however, are those which invoke a vaguely defined notion of personal liberation or "unburdening". Time and again, in embracing Rorty's neo-pragmatism, we are encouraged to "slough off", "sluff off", "get along without", "shrug off", "get rid of", "get off this seesaw", "drop the demand for", "stop trying for", "drop the idea of", "throw away the ladder". Much of Rorty's

suasive power inheres in these idioms, suggesting, as they do, that philosophical conundrums are largely of our own construction. The Wittgensteinian inflection of the last idiom⁴ relates Rorty's project of "unburdening" with that of ordinary language philosophy, the attempt to "dissolve" (rather than solve) philosophical problems. His rhetorical emphases also relate philosophy to a kind of therapy (again, a Wittgensteinian trope), underscored by Rorty's insistent sanctions to "stop worrying about" and "get beyond".

Rorty's anti-representationalist emphasis on outdated and stultifying epistemologies, his repeated contentions that "we have no need for this theory" and "no use for that idea", that we are merely "scratching where it does not itch", "wriggling out of a dialectical corner" and, most memorably of all, "inventing spooks in order to provide work for ghost-busters", all contribute to this broader picture of philosophy as therapy, and to the smaller-scale account of pragmatism as an unburdening and liberating posture, a happy release from unnecessary problems. In the final volume of his *Philosophical Papers*, writing of the analytic-continental divide, and hoping to replace the idea of continental with "conversational" philosophy, Rorty writes:

I am quite willing to give up the goal of getting things right, and to substitute that of enlarging our repertoire of individual and cultural self-descriptions. The point of philosophy, on this view, is not to find out what anything is "really" like, but to help us to grow up – to make us happier, freer, and more flexible (124).

Writing candidly of "the point of philosophy", Rorty here invokes the idea of "growing up" to further his earlier figurations of "unburdening" and liberation. Once again, the rhetorical emphases present pragmatism as an enabling and edifying activity; its therapeutic practice allows us to become increasingly "happier, freer and more flexible."

Conclusion

From his formative break with the analytic tradition, the general thrust of Rorty's

thinking has always been to direct us away from abstractions, principles and grand theories and towards narrative, re-description and imaginative possibility. Rorty's "edifying philosophy" is marked by its invention of new, interesting and more fruitful self-descriptions; it is not merely a worldview, but a vision, an imaginative way of talking about how things hang together. Similarly, his self-conception as a literary critic is grounded in his conviction that pertinent answers to most inquiries are created rather than found, hence "poetic" rather than "philosophical". As he writes,

I think that all of us — Derrideans and pragmatists alike — should try to work ourselves out of our jobs by conscientiously blurring the literature-philosophy distinction and promoting the idea of a seamless, undifferentiated, "general text" (*EHO*).

Like Derrida, Rorty rejects the protocols of orthodox linguistic philosophy in favour of a conscious, even artful, play with stylistic possibilities. At the same time, he implies that it is not just a matter of choosing one's tradition, siding (say) with Nietzsche and Heidegger as against the normative regime of stylistic oppression. Rather, it is a question of seeing that both these options come down to a choice of philosophical style, a commitment to certain operative metaphors and modes of representation. The concept of "poesis" (the creative production of meaning) is central to Rorty's philosophy.

Rorty's pronouncements on the importance of style are attended by a marked emphasis on the importance of the literary and the metaphorical in intellectual change, together with a profound emphasis on "re-description" and "narrative" as the primary modes of philosophical discourse. The interesting thing about Rorty's position is his claim that novel scientific and philosophical theories are metaphors, a position he derives from Donald Davidson's theory of metaphors as unusual use of familiar words. Because language is very much alive with metaphor, Rorty argues, intellectual history, philosophy and science are radically contingent and subject to no rational order of progression and change. What is important, he urges, is the "attractiveness" of certain metaphors, as well as their practical benefits. Rorty thus grants to the aesthetic a profound role in how change occurs in the realm of philosophical ideas. A corresponding consequence of his turn to narrative, moreover, is its reversal of the

Platonic prejudice which elevates philosophical truth above the merely diverting, storytelling interests of literature. What if it turned out that philosophers had always been interested in the business of constructing plausible fictions, even when convinced most firmly that their object was the one, inviolable truth? Ironically, it was largely by means of fictions, parables and set-pieces of imaginary dialogue that Plato pressed home his case against the poets. Metaphor and simile were likewise deployed in texts (like the *Phaedrus*) which ostensibly warned against their dangerous, irrational character. Rorty is not the first to turn the tables on philosophy by asking whether its own privileged truth-claims (along with corresponding developments in science and culture) might also be products of the figurative realm.

It seems, however, that it is in Rorty's formal pronouncements, rather than his actual writing, that his insistence on the aesthetic and the literary is most evident. Just as the seeming transparency of his own writing complicates the claims he wishes to make for the literary and the poetic moment (complicating, in turn, his wish for a more "writerly" or "textualist" philosophy), Rorty's pragmatist literary criticism, though overtly championing the importance of the detailed and the singular, is not especially attuned to questions of style or form; indeed, his pragmatist "grid" leaves little room for textual analysis.⁵ There is very little close reading in Rorty's criticism, just as the metaphorical density of his own writing is relatively low. This last contradiction, moreover, points to a broader irony in his conception of literature: Rorty's reliance on literature for moral instruction assumes a representational and thematic reading of novels, a reliance which is in direct tension with his criticism of philosophy's past because of its representational form.

None of these tensions, however, allow us to dismiss completely the importance of style to Rorty's broader philosophical enterprise. Although his writing may not achieve the "writerly" complexity of a Cavell or a Derrida, it is central to Rorty's philosophical achievement that he writes in the specific ways that he does. His language of "presentation and comparison", together with his array of rhetorical and mnemonic devices (his talent for summary, his practice of "listing", his use of repetition, his invocation of the congenial "we"), are central to his practice of re-

description. The elements of humour and informality which characterize his prose, moreover, combine with a self-consciously American idiom to voice a rhetoric of reasonableness and common sense, a voice he considers singularly appropriate for the pragmatist intellectual.

While the density and complexity of certain types of writing (that of Heidegger and Derrida, for example) align them more closely with the German idea of poetry as “Dichten” (or “thickening”), the emphasis on clarity and simplicity that one finds in Rorty’s writing (together with the pragmatist bent of his literary criticism) does not simply align it with Dichten’s opposite, the realm of the transparent or the simply literal. The distinction between a figural and literal language here (the distinction often invoked to preserve poetry from prose) might better be thought of in terms of degree. On this view, different types of writing are not defined as either poetry or prose but as illustrative of differing degrees of metaphorical density. Rorty’s writing thus allow us to re-conceive the simple dichotomy between logic and rhetoric, between the literal and the figural, and so problematize any simple distinctions between philosophical and literary writing. Even considering the tensions between his claims for philosophy and the “non-literariness” of his own writing, therefore, there is still an integral and unavoidable relationship, I conclude, between the style of Rorty’s writing and the substantive work of his philosophy.

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NOTES

¹ See, for example, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. 90-110, “Derrida and the Philosophical Tradition” in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*, pp. 327-351 and “A Spectre is Haunting the Intellectuals: Derrida on Marx” in *Philosophy And Social Hope*, pp. 210-233.

² And here I am thinking not only of the attention Rorty draws to Heidegger’s “poetizing”, but also to the role of the “poetic moment” and the “strong poet” in his conception of intellectual change, together with his repeated references, in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, to “the quarrel between poetry and philosophy” (25), “the surrender of philosophy to poetry” (26) and “the final victory of poetry over philosophy” (40).

³ This phrase is used in Rorty’s playful “re-imagining” of Nietzsche’s biography. In *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*, he writes: “Could [Nietzsche] have written so well against resentment if he had experienced it less often? Could he have written *The Will to Power* if he had gotten some? Maybe not.” (p. 327).

⁴ On the final page of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes: “He who understands me finally recognizes [my propositions] as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it) then he sees the world rightly.” (T #6.54).

⁵ See Rorty’s polemic with Umberto Eco in *Philosophy And Social Hope* (131-148).

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