

2008

# Richard Rorty's map of political misreading

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RICHARD RORTY'S MAP OF POLITICAL MISREADING

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Political Science

by  
Shaun King  
B.A., Campbell University, 2005  
August, 2008

FOR DANIELLE

## **Acknowledgements**

This master's thesis would not have been possible without the trust, support, and direction that Dr. Cecil Eubanks has given me for over a year. His thoughtful criticisms and provocations have helped me connect ideas and transition between them better than I could ever have done without him. Dr. James Stoner and Dr. William Clark were kind enough to provide commentary and questions that I hope to pursue further as I extend this project. Dr. Neil Gross and Dr. Stanley Fish corresponded with me briefly, but their contributions confirmed my intuitions. As an editor, Ms. Susanna Dixon combed through the fibers of my thesis with a meticulousness I cherish.

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## **Abstract**

For more than a quarter century, Richard Rorty was one of the most controversial writers. Critics of Rorty have often clustered their remarks around distinct themes within Rorty's body of literature. Is Rorty's criticism of the correspondence theory of truth valid and what standard of validity could confirm that? Does Rorty's treatment of pragmatists such as William James and John Dewey accurately reflect their writings? Is Rorty's brand of liberalism defensible when it assumes no non-circular form of justification can be proffered? These are the questions most often addressed by Rorty's critics. He responded to their objections for two decades.

By taking a synoptic view of Rorty's literary corpus, my goal is to change a few of the questions being asked and offer criticism of Rorty's texts predicated on the validity of a new cluster of questions. I offer a reading of Rorty's political theories that places Rorty's debt to the literary critic Harold Bloom's concepts higher than his avowed affiliation with pragmatism. I argue that in order to understand the nature of Rorty's affiliation with pragmatism it is best to understand how Rorty was profoundly influenced by a cluster of Bloom's concepts. These concepts include, "belatedness," "anxiety," "influence," "strong poet," "precursor," and "misreading."

I propose a reading of Rorty's text which, when taken together, make Bloom's influence on Rorty central. I describe five features that make Rorty's pragmatism peculiar. Next, I move to a discussion of Rorty's exchanges with Donald Davidson revealing Rorty's adaptations, contradictions, and peculiar allegiance to pragmatism. Next, I explain that allegiance by placing Bloom as the central figure in the late development of Rorty's writings on the division of the private realm of self-creation and the public realm of solidarity. Finally, I discuss how Bloom's concepts help explain how Rorty has wedged himself in a peculiar way between Rawlsian

liberalism and communitarianism. Although Bloom is central, his centrality does not make Rorty's writings more coherent. Placing Bloom at the center explains some of Rorty's peculiarities while it raises other problems.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

If Frederick Nietzsche wanted to be considered philosophy's Hamlet, then we may want to consider Richard Rorty as philosophy's Shakespeare. Just as Nehamas argues, "Nietzsche created a character out of himself,"<sup>1</sup> so too does Rorty. At the height of his career, Rorty embraced a kind of poetic playfulness which opened itself up to both inconsistency and multiplicity.

Marjorie Garber writes, "Every age creates its own Shakespeare."<sup>2</sup> Every age does this by finding in Shakespeare something right for that age. What makes Shakespeare endlessly present is his multiplicity. Shakespeare's only coherence is the world of possibilities he unleashes.<sup>3</sup> In Nietzsche's words, "the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity' be."<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty presents himself as the stage writer for the philosopher-as-actor. They all audition for philosophy's Shakespeare. Rorty's writings are meta-philosophical, in that, they concern themselves with the conditions under which philosophy is either possible or relevant. Unsatisfied with metaphilosophical criticism, Rorty wrote substantively and controversially about democratic discourse. By the end of his career, Rorty knowingly embraced inconsistency. He may have believed that inconsistency was akin to multiplicity and that multiplicity would keep his writings relevant in the future's uncertainty.

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<sup>1</sup> Nehamas, Alexander. *Nietzsche: Life As Literature*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 233.

<sup>2</sup> Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare After All*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 28.

<sup>3</sup> For a more an approach that tries to balance philosophical realism with something closer to Harold Bloom's theory that Shakespeare is the strongest of 'strong poets' see, McGinn, Colin. *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006). Note especially his reflections on Harold Bloom's interpretation of Shakespeare (202-04).

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, Frederick. *On the Genealogy of Morals* reprinted in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kauffman. (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 555.



Nehamas has been reading Rorty and writing about him since Rorty wrote *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. At some time, around the publication of Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Nehamas lost track of Rorty. In reviewing the latter publication, Nehamas notes that Rorty has "A touch of the poet," and is "writing with vision."<sup>5</sup> However, Nehamas makes two errors in reviewing Rorty that I want to expose as part of my argument about recasting Rorty in the proper light. First, Nehamas quotes Rorty who writes, "Since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths."<sup>6</sup> However, Nehamas criticizes it without considering the context within which it is presented. Nehamas says in response to Rorty, "reasons don't seem to be created in the same way words are," but this is exactly what Rorty leaves open for us when he writes, "Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false."<sup>7</sup> Giving descriptions that can either be true or false is another way of saying that reasons can be true or false, but Rorty's explanation of descriptions are that they can be true or false and their truth or falsity is appraised as such, not by checking them against the world or reality or the forms or nature or God, but rather by the way they fit within our vocabulary. Our vocabulary as a whole is more or less useful in coping with the world. This is something that Nehamas agrees with, yet seen in this context, Nehamas is objecting to Rorty's phrasing of the syllogism in question. Why – the question needs to be asked – does Rorty phrase it that way?

Nehamas' criticism capitalizes on the pithiness of Rorty's syllogism: "since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and

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<sup>5</sup> Nehamas, Alexander. "A touch of the poet." *Raritan* 10, no. 1 (1990):104-25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.; Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.; Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 5.

since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths.” Eight years earlier, before Rorty aligned with the poets against philosophers (something I will explain in chapter four), Nehamas was calling Rorty’s writings, “understated eloquence, argumentative depth and moral seriousness, with vision as well as with style.”<sup>8</sup> Yet eight years later, Nehamas still refers to Rorty as someone who has a “vision,” but now Nehamas has reversed much of what he said earlier. Instead of “depth and moral seriousness,” the Rorty of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* “tends to take too many things at face value;” Rorty gives us a “hermeneutics of credulity.”<sup>9</sup>

More than any philosopher of the twentieth century, Rorty has been reviled. He recounts much of his criticisms in an autobiographical reflection:

If there is anything to the idea that the best intellectual position is one which is attacked with equal vigor from the political right and the political left, then I am in good shape. I am often cited by conservative culture warriors as one of the relativistic, irrationalist, deconstructing, sneering, smirking, intellectuals whose writings are weakening the moral fiber of the young. Neal Kozody, writing in the monthly bulletin of the Committee for the Free World, an organization known for its vigilance against symptoms of moral weakness, denounces my ‘cynical and nihilistic view’ and says ‘it is not enough for him [Rorty] that American students should be merely mindless; he would have them positively mobilized for mindlessness.’ Richard Neuhaus, a theologian who doubts that atheists can be good American citizens, says that the ‘ironist vocabulary’ I advocate ‘can neither provide a public language for the citizens of a democracy, nor contend intellectually against enemies of democracy, nor transmit the reasons for democracy to the next generation.’ My criticisms of Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* led Harvey Mansfield – recently appointed by President Bush to the National Council for the Humanities – to say that I have ‘given up on America’ and that I ‘manage to diminish even Dewey.’ (Mansfield recently described Dewey as a ‘medium-sized malefactor’.) His colleague on the council, my fellow philosopher John Searle, thinks that standards can only be restored to American higher education if people abandon the views of truth, knowledge and objectivity that I do my best to inculcate.

Yet Sheldon Wolin, speaking from the Left, sees a lot of similarity between me and Allan Bloom: both of us, he says, are intellectual snobs who care only about the leisured, cultural elite to which we belong. Neither of us has anything to say to blacks, or to other groups who have been shunted aside by American society. Wolin’s view is

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<sup>8</sup> Nehamas, Alexander. “Can We Ever Quite Change the Subject?: Richard Rorty on Science, Literature, Culture, and the Future of Philosophy.” *boundary2* 10, no. 3 (1982): 396.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

echoed by Terry Eagleton, Britain's leading Marxist thinker. Eagleton says that 'in [Rorty's] ideal society the intellectuals will be 'ironists,' practicing a suitably cavalier laid back attitude to their own belief, while the masses, for whom such self-ironizing might prove to subversive a weapon, will continue to salute the flag and take life seriously.' Der Spiegel said that I 'attempt to make the yuppie regression look good.' Jonathan Culler, one of Derrida's chief disciples and expositors, says that my version of pragmatism 'seems all together appropriate to the age of Reagan.' Richard Bernstein says that my views are 'little more than an ideological *apologia* for an old-fashioned version of Cold War liberalism dressed up in fashionable 'post-modern' discourse.' The Left's favorite word for me is 'complacent,' just as the Right's is 'irresponsible.'<sup>10</sup>

All these criticisms that Rorty recounts are the ones that occur *after* the publication of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. All of these criticisms relate to the political implications of Rorty's post-philosophical proposals. I call these proposals post-philosophical because Rorty's criticisms of philosophy have given him a sensationalized status that he embraces. An example of this embrace is shown by Rorty's willingness to appear in the BBC Four documentary film dedicated to him titled, *Richard Rorty: The Man Who Killed Truth*.<sup>11</sup> The sensational nature of documentary film making is usefully set in contrast to John Rawls' criticism of such behavior. Rawls' behavior was quite different, as recounted by his former student Samuel Freeman, "He [Rawls] regularly declined requests for interviews, and chose not to take an active role in public life. He conscientiously avoided celebrity status. Rawls believed that philosophers are normally misunderstood when they address the public."<sup>12</sup> In contrast to Rawls, Rorty has purposely conducted controversies towards him, as Charles Guignon and David Hiley note in their use of the metaphor of a "lightning rod" to describe Rorty's effect.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rorty, Richard. "Trotsky and the Wild Orchid," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Recounted in, the first biography of Richard Rorty: Gross, Neil. *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 25.

<sup>12</sup> Freeman, Samuel. *Rawls*. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Guignon, Charles and David R. Hiley. "Introduction: Richard Rorty and Contemporary Philosophy," in *Richard Rorty. Contemporary Philosophy in Focus*. Edited by Guignon, Charles and David R. Hiley. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

I said at the beginning that Nehamas lost track of Rorty. The purpose of this essay is to track Rorty in a way that does not analyze any particular work of Rorty's without considering the whole in which it partakes. There are many consequences of this approach which manifest themselves in a cluster of different questions I hope to answer through this essay. Why is Rorty's pragmatism so peculiar? Why does Rorty affiliate himself with pragmatism at all? Why does Rorty write in different literary genres? Why does Rorty sensationalize conclusions which seem much more mundane under different descriptions? Why does Rorty drop some descriptions and pick up new ones when he has not changed the subject at all? Why does Rorty call himself a philosopher and at the same time reject the title?

Sifting through Rorty's writings, I have concluded that the influence of Harold Bloom on Richard Rorty is more important than John Dewey's influence on Rorty. But this seems immediately wrong, considering that Rorty is understood as the reviver of pragmatism in the late twentieth century. Most historians and philosophers agree that Rorty has a central place in reviving pragmatism. Yet, I argue that in order to understand Rorty, it is better to understand how Harold Bloom has influenced him, rather than how John Dewey has influenced him. Again this seems immediately wrong, because Rorty has the highest affections for Dewey calling him his "principle philosophical hero." Yet, I argue that to see why Rorty would even consider having a hero, it is better to understand Bloom's influence on Rorty more than Dewey's influence on Rorty. Again this seems immediately wrong, because Neil Gross, Rorty's principle biographer, presents Rorty's intellectual development through 1982 (Rorty had already at this point written glowingly about Bloom) as having pragmatism as Rorty's core intellectual interest.<sup>14</sup> Yet, I argue that Rorty's early writing on Bloom seem innocuous until it is set in the later context of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, and then later still in interviews where Rorty

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<sup>14</sup> See, Gross, Neil. *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*.

unfolds descriptions of Bloom that challenge the interpretation that Dewey is the “principle philosophical hero.”

There is a fine line between arguing that Bloom is more important to understand Rorty than Dewey and arguing that Bloom is equally important to understand Rorty as Dewey. As Donald Davidson will later argue disputing Rorty: “Importance is a hard thing to argue about.” Equalizing Bloom with Dewey seems contentious but less controversial than arguing that Bloom is more important in understanding Rorty than Dewey. “Important” here means “influence” and this cannot be quantified. I will be the first to admit that Rorty writes more about Dewey than about Bloom. However, quantity is not indicative of centrality since what I am going to argue is that Rorty picked up a style and disposition from Bloom which he did not pick up from the pragmatists. More narrowly, Rorty did not so much “pick up” a style from Bloom but rather, “crafted from.” Rorty did not model a philosophical program by reading and adopting Bloom’s ideas but instead he crafted a self-image through Bloom, adopted some of the literary strategies (or confirmed his strategies by deferring to Bloom’s concepts), and extended Bloom’s ideas as far into the political realm as he thought they would go. This extension is part of the meaning behind Bloom’s idea of “misreading.” I argue that the more controversial Rorty became the more seriously he was considering and internalizing Bloom’s idea of misreading. What is misreading? Before I describe Bloom’s concepts, I want to elaborate and affirm the centrality of Bloom for Rorty.

Rorty’s fame stems from his criticism of philosophy, Rorty’s infamy stems from his post-philosophical proposals.<sup>15</sup> After Rorty’s criticisms of philosophy are taken seriously (as I recount in chapter three) there is not much left for philosophers to do. The epitome of what

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<sup>15</sup> This distinction is not a dichotomy. It is just generally the case that he has been praised more for his work in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* than his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Nehamas served as the example in earlier paragraphs.

philosophers are barred from doing if they take Rorty seriously is creating a philosophical research program. The philosopher Paul Boghossian remarked on Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that, "whatever there is that's still worth doing in philosophy is best done by literary critics rather than philosophers."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, and if that is the case, then Harold Bloom wears the crown. "Perhaps the Yale literary critic Harold Bloom does it best," Rorty says in an interview, "[because Bloom helps] us see how we live in story after story after story."<sup>17</sup> Bloom's ideas do not lend themselves to departmental research programs: "He [Bloom] doesn't give anybody any work to do . . . and I admire that."<sup>18</sup> In another interview, Rorty says, "It is far from easy to imitate Bloom. There are no little Bloomians."<sup>19</sup> What then is the meaning of Bloom concepts?

Harold Bloom sets out in two books, *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*, to describe a phenomenology of poetry; or, to describe the history of poetry as the history of poetic influence. Poets like John Milton and Ralph Waldo Emerson are not just creative. Creativity has a phenomenological, psychological, and historical dimension. The sequence is not necessarily temporal. René Arcilla summarizes a portrait of Bloom's concept of strong poet in a compelling yet simple manner:

According to Bloom, every poet was a reader before a writer, one who learned to appreciate poetry through the compelling work of one or more (but not indiscriminately many) precursors. Such precursors impress the initiate with what it is possible to accomplish. As soon as the reader of poetry is filled with the desire to write herself comparably accomplished poetry, however, her attitude to the precursors becomes

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in, Ryerson, James. "The Quest for Uncertainty: Richard Rorty's Pilgrimage," in *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself*, Edited by Eduardo Mendieta. (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2006.), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty, Richard. "From Philosophy to Postphilosophy," Interviewed by Wayne Hudson and Wim van Reijen. *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself*, 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> Rorty, Richard. "Toward a Postmetaphysical Culture," Interviewed by Michael O'Shea. *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself*, 50.

<sup>19</sup> Rorty, Richard. "Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies," Interviewed by Edward Ragg. *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself*, 137. Indeed, but there is a difference between being a little Bloomian and imitating Bloom. Imitating Bloom is not possible once Rorty took seriously Bloom's idea of "strong poet" and "misreading," because in the very act of imitation is an act of overcoming.

charged with ambivalence. On the one hand, her love of (a certain kind of) poetry remains bound to a formative love of the precursors' poems; this love continues to shape her sense of what in her efforts could compel. On the other hand, her sense of her own originality, her conviction that her poetry is not superfluous and can make a difference to some audience, depends on her ability to keep her precursors from completely anticipating her, alienating her from her own inspiration, and rendering her work a belated copy of what has already been done better. Bloom calls this ambivalence the poet's "anxiety of influence." He tries to show how strong poets, such as Milton, Shelley, Hardy, and others defeat such anxiety by contriving unconsciously, as in a dreamwork, to trope the sentences, perceptions, sentiments, and ideas of their precursors in new but equally compelling ways, much as one might symbolically gratify a repressed desire in an ingenious fashion. Against the myth of genius who creates *ex nihilo*, he counterposes the conception of the "revisionary agonist," one who struggles with her precursors to wrest innovative, "strong misreadings" of their work that she could claim as her own.<sup>20</sup>

These themes are presented, in Bloom's writings, as six tropes that the poet goes through on his way to creativity. First, the poet writes in a corrective measure, implying the existence of a precursor and that the precursor swerved away from something sublime. Second, the poet writes as a culmination of the precursor. Third, in the exercising of the previous tropes of correction and completion the poet is enacting a "defense mechanism" which Bloom coins as a "breaking device." This third trope is the trope of repetition and discontinuity. The poet is now so obsessed with correction and completion that the precursor emerges again and again in the poet's writings and therefore repetition and discontinuity abound. In the fourth trope, the poet produces a "counter-sublime" that he found within the precursor that the precursor specifically did not see. In the fifth trope, the poet now embraces his own revision and thus embraces his solitude of creativity. However, in the sixth trope, the poet returns to the precursor and holds his poetry up against the precursor's poetry in the kind of light that forces future readers of the precursor to

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<sup>20</sup> René, Arcilla V. *For the Love of Perfection: Richard Rorty and Liberal Education*. (New York: Routledge, Inc., 1995), 94.

read the precursor in light of his successor.<sup>21</sup> Poets who drive through these six tropes, or six “revisionary ratios,” are called “strong poets.”

Bloom both collapses and expands those six tropes as he grapples with the nearly ineffable qualities of creativity. Collapsing the tropes, Bloom summarizes them writing,

Poetic influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets, - always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, as an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.<sup>22</sup>

On my reading of Bloom, the first two tropes of correction and culmination are constitutive of misreading. This misreading reaches the closest point of concretization in the counter-sublime of the fourth trope. In this fourth trope the poet has opened a door to his own creativity; he has walked through the door. In the fifth trope the poet recognizes the solitude on the other side of the door and in the sixth trope he turns back to the door – realizing the door is the key – and determines to keep the door always open. By doing this he is responsible for illuminating the room where the precursor resides. The strong poet wants us to see the precursor through his door and by his light. In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom writes, “Poems . . . are neither about ‘subjects’ nor about ‘themselves.’ They are necessarily about *other poems*.”<sup>23</sup> By turning around and forcing the door to stay open, the poet preserves his sense of autonomy while securing that *we* in the future will see the past through his door by his light. The strong poet is rebelling against his precursor; angry that he first had to confine himself to the precursor’s room (Bloom’s concept for this is a “misprison”). In the room, he suffers from a kind of anxiety called “belatedness.”

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<sup>21</sup> Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1997), 14-16. Bloom titles these collectively as the “six revisionary ratios” and titles the first as “clinamen,” the second as, “tessera,” the third as, “kenosis,” the fourth as “daemonization,” the fifth as “askesis,” and the sixth as “apophrades.”

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 30. The original quote from Bloom is in italics.

<sup>23</sup> Bloom, Harold. *A Map of Misreading*. (New York: Oxford University, 2003), 18.



This is the worry that the strong poet has arrived too late to create: the room is too large and beautiful and, in turn, too distracting that the strong poet has trouble making a door. By staying in the precursor's room too long the poet feels as if the room is suffocating him; his death is imminent and the room is to blame. "A poem is written to escape dying," Bloom muses, "Poems are refusals of mortality. Every poem therefore has two makers: the precursor, and the ephebe's [strong poet's] rejected mortality."<sup>24</sup> He adds, "A poet, I argue in consequence, is not so much a man speaking to men as a man rebelling against being spoken to by a dead man (the precursor) outrageously more alive than himself. A poet dare not regard himself as being *late*, yet cannot accept a substitute for the first vision he reflectively judges to have been his precursor's also."<sup>25</sup> Bloom fits within the "linguistic turn" of philosophical discourse which is typified by Wilfrid Sellars' conclusion that "all awareness . . . is a linguistic affair."<sup>26</sup> To this effect, Bloom writes, "Influence as I conceive it, means that there are *no* texts, but only relationships *between* texts."<sup>27</sup>

Richard Rorty is a misreader. In chapter four I will argue that he knows he is a misreader but, in this regard, he does not exactly explain himself to us. As Bloom notes, no misreader wants to admit to the process; Bloom here reveals a Freudian Oedipal moment as a (partial) analogy with the strong poet.<sup>28</sup> When Rorty writes, "I see Davidson as rewriting in terms of language the same thing that James and Dewey did in terms of experience," he is misreading. This becomes clear by the end of chapter four. But there is more than one example in Rorty's literary corpus. I hope to map many of them. While Rorty's critique of philosophy requires him to marshal pragmatists and analytic philosophers who are critics of their own tradition (e.g. Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine, and Davidson), his post-philosophical proposals are largely due to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Rorty, Richard. "Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy," in *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xx.

<sup>27</sup> Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 10, 90. See also, Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 8.

his extensions of Bloom. As I will argue, in chapter three and four for example, Rorty's support of liberalism is parasitic on the desire to create the conditions for strong poets to flourish.

Ironically, his strong affiliation with pragmatism is also due to his reading of Bloom.

In my second chapter, titled, "Rorty's Peculiar Pragmatism," I summarize five ways that make Rorty's association with pragmatism peculiar. These five peculiar facets of Rorty's pragmatism are part of themes that his critics raise in objection to him. These five are not all the facets which make Rorty's pragmatism peculiar, but they are the five most outstanding ways that serve the purpose of casting doubt on the relative importance Rorty places on pragmatism. By casting doubt on the relative importance of pragmatism, I hope to create an explanatory gap where the relative importance of Bloom's influence fills to explain what Rorty is doing.

Of the five peculiar facets, the first is that while Rorty's pragmatism prioritizes practical political solutions, his writings show an aversion to detailing solutions. The second peculiarity is that while Rorty is mostly responsible for the revival in academic interest in pragmatism since the 1980s, his writings show an aversion to detailed analysis of any of the original pragmatists (e.g. Pierce, James, Holmes, Dewey, etc.). Third, while Rorty associates himself mostly with Dewey, who is Rorty's "principle philosophical hero," Rorty is a sharp critic of Dewey. In fact, Rorty is critical of all the original pragmatists. He explains that they all have inconsistencies. The fourth peculiar feature of Rorty's pragmatism is that not only does he avoid detailed analysis of the original pragmatists (as in my description of his "second peculiarity") but in addition, Rorty has written in more detail and shows more interest in continental philosophers particularly Heidegger and Derrida. Lastly, by focusing on analyticity and language, Rorty's pragmatism begins with a different critique of philosophy than the original pragmatists who focused on experience. By following through with the "linguistic turn" in philosophy Rorty is often

described as a neo-pragmatist to differentiate the pragmatists interested in language philosophy from the original pragmatists like Dewey who focused on the nature of experience. The aim of here is to cast doubt on the narrative that Rorty is best summarized by his affiliation with pragmatism.

It will be clear by the end of the second chapter that the criticisms of Rorty's pragmatism are well founded. However, the consequence of this chapter should be to shift the kind of questions being asked about Rorty's pragmatism from, "Why does Rorty appropriate John Dewey and the pragmatists in this manner?" to "Why does Rorty align himself with pragmatism at all?" The answer to this question will become clear once the influence of Harold Bloom is viewed as central to Rorty's philosophical development and political affiliations.

In my third chapter, titled, "Rorty and Analytic Philosophy," I argue that there is another important preface to explaining the central importance of Bloom on Rorty. Rorty was not trained as an analytic philosopher analyzing language, but his writings on analytic philosophy are both more extensive than his writings on pragmatism (assuming the analysis of language and philosophical pragmatism can be seen separately for the moment), and they are an important filter in seeing how Rorty understands pragmatism. In my third chapter, I primarily follow the published exchanges between Donald Davidson and Rorty. Davidson is Rorty's favorite analytic philosopher and his contemporary.

The exchanges bring out a few points that are central to an understanding of Rorty's philosophy and political affiliations. First, the exchanges clarify the nature and detail of Rorty's pragmatism. More central to this chapter, the exchanges between these two philosophers clarify the nature and status of Rorty's critique of truth. Since pragmatists see themselves as critics of philosophical realism and representationalism, it is important to discuss the status of truth.

Rorty's pragmatism has not been consistently expressed by his writings. Instead, by tracking the exchanges between Davidson and Rorty, I describe the ways Rorty's pragmatism has changed over the years by his reading of philosophers in the analytic tradition. I will be discussing and explaining the details of Rorty's critique of realism and representationalism. The consequences of this chapter are three fold. First, the centrality of language, which separates the neo-pragmatists from the original pragmatists, is clarified by this discussion of Rorty's critique of truth. Second, and a consequence of the first, is that Rorty's interest in metaphors (influenced here by both Davidson and Bloom) both defines his pragmatism and shrinks it. Third, by tracking the exchanges between Davidson and Rorty, one question should emerge not previously asked in the literature on Rorty, "Why does Rorty express explicit requests for Davidson to affiliate himself with pragmatism?"

So far I have created two questions that emerge from reading Rorty. First, "Why does Rorty align himself with pragmatism at all?" Second, "Why does Rorty express explicit requests for Davidson to affiliate himself with pragmatism?" The only way to answer these questions is to focus on the way Harold Bloom has influenced Rorty. I answer these questions in my fourth chapter, titled, "The Priority of Harold Bloom." In all of Rorty's writings, Bloom is discussed most extensively in two pieces: first, in an essay about literary criticism where Rorty describes many different kinds of literary criticisms and in concluding the essay he describes Bloom as emerging in the best light, and second, in Rorty's book, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Unlike the other authors Rorty discusses in his writings, Bloom is never criticized. Rorty is critical of others, including fellow and former pragmatists, but not Bloom. Like his treatment of Davidson, Rorty calls Bloom a pragmatist, though neither Bloom nor Davidson refer to themselves that way. Rorty draws heavily on Bloom's discussion of the "strong poet." This poet

desires to be creative but recognizes that creativity does not occur in a vacuum, instead, strong poets all struggle with strong precursors. The relative genius and creativity of the strong precursor creates a condition in the strong poet known as belatedness: the feeling that he has arrived too late to be creative. This belatedness constrains and directs the possibilities of creativity because the way strong poets create is by misreading their precursor. Misreading is presented as an inevitable precondition for creativity.

Rorty does a few important things with Bloom's theories. First, Rorty presents Bloom's strong poet as the "archetypal," "cultural hero," in a "liberal polity." In other words, the strong poet requires liberalism: a distinction between the public realm of solidarity and unity and the private realm of self-creation, in order to flourish. The purpose of politics, then, is to create a space of privacy for self-creation.<sup>29</sup> Rorty adds that this space where self-creation flourishes will inevitably cause suffering and reacting, adjusting, and reducing this suffering is the aim of the public realm of solidarity. In addition, Rorty says the strong poet uses words in a new way (here is where the importance of Davidson's discussion on metaphors comes in) and this new way is presented as an experiment (here is where the importance of the pragmatists becomes relevant). The consequence is that Rorty's pragmatism is *only* interested in the conditions of experimentation with new vocabularies. Explaining *that*, helps set in context the five ways that Rorty's pragmatism is peculiar.

The second important thing that results from Rorty's use of Bloom's concepts is related to the Bloomian theory that strong poets need strong precursors in order to appraise their relative

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<sup>29</sup> For a critique, predating Rorty, that politics should not be a means to an end of creating conditions for a private realm of self-creation see Arendt's argument that politics is the meaning of its own end. In other words, the meaning of politics is the action in speech and deeds of sustaining the space of freedom for the sake of the continuation of politics itself; see Arendt, Hannah. "Introduction *into* Politics," in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 93-200.

creativity. In other words, Rorty has a “felt need”<sup>30</sup> to associate himself with pragmatism. The reason why Davidson writes that he is dumbfounded by Rorty’s insistence on calling both Davidson and himself a pragmatist is because Davidson does not have Bloom on his radar. *That* is why Davidson is confused at the felt need Rorty has with associating the two of them with pragmatism. The third important thing that results from Rorty’s use of Bloom’s concepts is that Rorty’s association with pragmatism has communitarian implications (I discuss this in the fifth chapter). The fourth important thing that results from Rorty’s use of Bloom’s concepts is that Rorty is engaged in misreading. Misreading, for example, *requires* Rorty to avoid a detailed discussion of the original pragmatists. Ironically, Rorty does to Bloom what Bloom says poets do to each other: Rorty misreads Bloom’s discussion of misreading.

In my fifth chapter, titled, “Rorty’s Wedge between Liberalism and Communitarianism,” I describe Rorty’s peculiar affiliation with both liberalism and communitarianism. To do this, I draw on Rorty’s essay on John Rawls and Michael Sandel’s writing on Rawls. Sandel, a communitarian, is critical of Rawls in a way Rorty is not. His criticism can just as well be leveled against Rorty. Rorty, in an important sense, misreads Rawls for his own purposes. In order to explain this misreading, I use Sandel’s term, “the unencumbered self” to describe what the Rorty of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* has in common with the Rawls of *A Theory of Justice*. Sandel describes Rawls’ self in the original position behind the veil of ignorance as an unencumbered self in the Kantian tradition. I want to argue that Rorty’s version of Bloom’s strong poet is an unencumbered self in the pragmatist tradition. This strong poet both distances himself from the original pragmatists while claiming the newness is an inheritance and part of a tradition. Rorty misreads Rawls in a way that Rawls later explicitly rejects. Rorty’s desire to reread *A Theory of Justice* as if it were meant to be part of the later works of *Political Liberalism*

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<sup>30</sup> “Felt need” is my phrase.

and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* is the same desire as the one Rorty has to incorporate Davidson into the pragmatist tradition. This desire is explained by Bloom's psychology of the strong poet: the strong poet needs strong precursors to use and misuse in order to have influence. In addition, the "political liberalism" which Rawls later coins to describe his shift away from his earlier book, *A Theory of Justice*, leaves public discourse morally impoverished, according to Sandel. Some of the very things that Sandel diagnoses as a problem for Rawls' political liberalism are the same things that Rorty's liberalism suffers. In the final chapter, I conclude that Rorty's writings are profound yet inconsistent. Coherence, though, on Rorty's reading, is overrated.

## Chapter 2: Rorty's Peculiar Pragmatism

As the historian John Pettegrew notes, Rorty is in large part responsible for the revival of the study of pragmatism.<sup>1</sup> Pragmatism began to decline immediately after World War II as American philosophy departments began to shift their interests towards positivism and the philosophy of science indicative of a legacy from Britain. The philosopher, Richard J. Bernstein, has described the decline in the interest in pragmatism reaching its lowest points through the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Bernstein describes Rorty at the center of the revival of pragmatism:

It was primarily due to the provocative intervention of a single individual that the interest in pragmatism began to change. Richard Rorty, a philosopher from Princeton who made his reputation as a bright, analytic philosopher, began to question the foundations and pretensions of analytic philosophy. He shocked many of his colleagues when he declared that Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey were the three most important philosophers of the twentieth century. Analytic philosophers might concur with his judgment about Wittgenstein, just as Continental philosophers might endorse Rorty's judgment about the significance of Heidegger. But virtually no one (except a few dedicated followers) would have even dared to claim that Dewey was one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. Since the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979, Rorty has identified himself (and his controversial views) with the pragmatic tradition.<sup>3</sup>

The historian, James T. Kloppenberg, describes Rorty as the “Trojan Horse of analytic philosophy,” because Rorty “attacked the citadel of philosophy from within.”<sup>4</sup> Rorty, however, was not trained as an analytic philosopher but began studying and publishing in that vein after he

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<sup>1</sup> Pettegrew, John. ed. “Introduction,” in *A Pragmatist's Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*. (Boston Way, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Bernstein, “The Pragmatic Century,” in *The Pragmatic Century: Conversations with Richard J. Bernstein*. Edited by Davaney, Sheila Greeve, and Warren G. Frisina. (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2006), 2. Neil Gross, however, would dispute this narrative about pragmatism. Gross writes that the idea that pragmatism was in decline is a “founding myth of the recent revival of interest in American pragmatism.” He argues that, “An analysis of data on philosophy dissertations shows that this was not the case and that Yale [where Rorty received his doctorate] was an epicenter of pragmatist activity.” Gross, Neil. *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*, 140.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2-3. Bernstein continues by arguing that the story of Rorty as the central figure in the revival of pragmatism is complicated by a larger trend within analytic philosophy of criticizing the epistemological foundations of analytic philosophy. This trend is largely the same that Rorty describes in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979). Here Rorty describes trends that link Sellars, Quine, Kuhn, Wittgenstein, and Davidson, with Nietzsche, Hegel, Heidegger, and Gadamer.

<sup>4</sup> Kloppenberg, James T., “Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking?” in *A Pragmatist's Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*, 26-27.



began teaching at Wellesley and then at Princeton. Bernstein's argument that Rorty has identified himself with pragmatism since 1979 is slightly misleading. Rorty began to trumpet pragmatism as early as 1961, where in a published essay titled, "Pragmatism, Categories, and Language," Rorty wrote, "Pragmatism is getting respectable again. Some philosophers are still content to think of it as a sort of muddle-headed first approximation to logical positivism . . . But those who have taken a closer look have realized that the movement of thought involved here is more like a pendulum than like an arrow."<sup>5</sup> Rorty's former student, Cornel West, has written that after 1961, and "For the next seventeen years, Rorty labored in the academic vineyard attempting to convince fellow philosophic analysts . . . that some form of pragmatism lay waiting."<sup>6</sup> At this early point in Rorty's career, his initial interest in pragmatism were related to the way, for example, Charles Sanders Peirce may have predated Wittgenstein's critique of positivism. As West describes Rorty's development, "After 1972, Dewey moves to the center stage in Rorty's writings . . . Rorty conducts a kind of crusade to resurrect the image and impact of Dewey in contemporary philosophy."<sup>7</sup>

One initially surprising consequence of Rorty's foremost place in the revival of pragmatism is that while partly responsible for this revival, he has not been considered an authority on pragmatism. Pettegrew writes, "Pragmatism is flourishing both through and in spite of Rorty."<sup>8</sup> More specifically, Bernstein writes, "There is now a virtual industry of scholarship showing how Rorty misunderstands, distorts, and betrays the pragmatic tradition."<sup>9</sup> Rorty is quoted everywhere as saying that John Dewey was his "principle philosophical hero." Rorty would have us believe that to understand him it would be profitable to understand Dewey.

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<sup>5</sup> Rorty, Richard. "Pragmatism, Categories, and Language." *The Philosophical Review*. Vol. 70:2 (April, 1961), 197.

<sup>6</sup> West, Cornel. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 194.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>8</sup> Pettegrew, John. "Introduction," in *A Pragmatist's Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Bernstein, "The Pragmatic Century," in *The Pragmatic Century*, 3.

Indeed, that is true, but my argument is that to understand Rorty it is best to understand Harold Bloom first.

In order to argue that the influence of Harold Bloom on Rorty is more important than the influence of Rorty's favorite pragmatist, I need to point out the peculiarities of Rorty's pragmatism. By casting doubt on the relative importance of pragmatism, I hope to create an explanatory gap that the relative importance of Bloom's influence fills to explain what Rorty is doing. I argue there are five features of Rorty's pragmatism that make his pragmatism both controversial and negligible. Of the five peculiar facets, the first is that while Rorty's pragmatism prioritizes practical political solutions, his writings show an aversion to detailing solutions. The second peculiarity is that while Rorty is mostly responsible for the revival in academic interest in pragmatism since the 1980s, his writings show an aversion to detailed analysis of any of the original pragmatists (e.g. Peirce, James, Holmes, Dewey, etc.). Third, while Rorty associates himself primarily with Dewey, who is Rorty's "principle philosophical hero," Rorty is a sharp critic of Dewey. In fact, Rorty is critical of all the original pragmatists. He explains that they all have inconsistencies. The fourth peculiar feature of Rorty's pragmatism is that not only does he avoid detailed analysis of the original pragmatists (as in my description of his "second peculiarity") but in addition, Rorty has written in more detail and shows more interest in continental philosophers particularly – Heidegger and Derrida. Finally, by focusing on analyticity and language Rorty's pragmatism begins with a different critique of philosophy than the original pragmatists who focused on experience. By following through with the "linguistic turn" in philosophy Rorty is often described as a neo-pragmatist in order to differentiate the pragmatists interested in language philosophy from the original pragmatists like

Dewey, who focused on the nature of experience. The aim of this chapter is to cast doubt on the narrative that Rorty is best summarized by his affiliation with pragmatism.

The first peculiarity is that his pragmatism does not lead to anything very practical. An ironic note about his writings is that as a philosophical pragmatist and a liberal who argues “Nothing would do more to resurrect the American left than agreement on a concrete political platform, a People’s Charter, a list of specific reforms,” Rorty does not write a sustained treatment of a list of specific reforms.<sup>10</sup> The closest Rorty gets to a specific platform is not so much a list of reforms but rather a list of beliefs conducive to producing “humanistic intellectuals.”<sup>11</sup> This criticism, that Rorty’s pragmatism values practice but that Rorty’s pragmatism is impractical, is leveled against Rorty by a fellow pragmatist, Richard Posner. Posner summarizes Rorty’s disposition towards practical solutions as at times vacuous and at other times clearly wrongheaded.

Rorty thinks that all we need to understand our social problems is a muckraking journalist’s vocabulary that will equip us to talk about the rich ripping off the poor, the strong trampling on the weak, the excessive greed of the upper class, the selfish indifference of the middle class, and the control of government and the media by thugs and millionaires. For some purposes this vocabulary is adequate, as Orwell, a great journalist, proved. But it is an impoverished vocabulary for the description and solution of our social problems, which is why Orwell’s advocacy of democratic socialism falls so flat today . . . I see no evidence that Rorty, or his critics on the left, have studied any of the political or social or economic problems about which they write.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rorty, Richard. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 99. In an endnote, He says only that the first reform on the list would be campaign finance reform; see *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>11</sup> See his brief essay, “The Humanist Intellectual: Eleven Theses,” in Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 127-130. It is interesting to note that Rorty’s list for humanistic intellectuals presupposes the capabilities in Nussbaum’s list of “Central Human Capabilities.” See, Nussbaum, Martha. *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 76-78.

<sup>12</sup> Posner, Richard. “What are Philosophers Good For?” in *Overcoming Law*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 457-58.

Posner says Rorty's writings show a "deficient sense of fact, which is related to Rorty's lack of interest in science, and therefore in social science, and therefore in economics."<sup>13</sup> Rorty calls vocabularies "tools," invoking the instrumental nature of the way we describe the world. Posner writes that "economics is the instrumental science par excellence" and sees an important consequence that Rorty misses.<sup>14</sup> Rorty, who calls for social experimentation without nuance, is naive according to Posner who argues that "social experimentation should not be thought costless, or always cost-justified. The deeper point is that a pragmatist ought to be interested in the results of previous experiments, and not just in more experimenting."<sup>15</sup> Not only is Rorty calling for more experimentation but he is calling for specialists to become generalists. Rorty's ideal utopia is filled with dilettantes who use vocabularies as tools and know enough vocabularies to come to the conclusion that each vocabulary refers back to itself, accepting that there is no way of getting between the vocabulary and the "World" in a way that corresponds in a philosophically interesting way. Posner writes about the problems of Rorty's dilettantes and Rorty's own shortcomings:

Rorty hopes that philosophers might become "all-purpose intellectuals"...but is insensitive to the limitations of generalist social criticism in an age of science, including social science. The problem is not that Rorty has no *proposals*. He has many, such as universal health insurance, a prohibition against political candidates' buying time on television, and an end to local financing of public education. They are not *practical* proposals, however, not only because they have no political support but also because Rorty does not expound them in sufficient detail to make them persuasive. They raise complicated issues and invite multitudinous objections, which might or might not be answerable; but to describe and defend each proposal in a few sentences, which is Rorty's approach, is useless.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 454.

<sup>16</sup> Posner, Richard. *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 341-42. Richard J. Bernstein is an example of someone between Posner's rigidity and Rorty's aloofness. Bernstein's *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005) is a brief yet focused look on the way a cultural embrace of pragmatism would change the dynamics around the way we use terms like "evil." Bernstein does not propose socioeconomic solutions.

While Rorty's pragmatism calls for generalization, Posner's pragmatism calls for specialization, particularly in the fields of economics and social science. Rorty's response would be that Posner wrongly privileges two vocabularies. Posner would respond that the two vocabularies he privileges are privileged not because they correspond to the world in the kind of representational way that is true, final, and complete. Instead, he privileges them because they are the best vocabularies for predicting, controlling, and explaining. Posner, as a pragmatist, does not believe the question as to whether, for example, predictability is indicative of truth-conditions has a practically important answer. Posner's criticisms did not distract Rorty. Rorty said once in an interview, "I'll tell you one line you could use for a title which I intend to use as a blurb for some book sometime. Richard Posner has always said that philosophically I'm on the right track, it's just that I had no sense of concrete economic or socioeconomic policy: 'Rorty is still talking about 'oligarchy' and 'the bosses.'" I want to use that."<sup>17</sup>

In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty argues that the "cultural left," are "spectators" in the sense that they theorize about the inevitability of domination and power in the realm of politics and consequently remove themselves from political activism. The American cultural left has been reading too much Foucault, according to Rorty. In their reading of Foucault on the topic of power they attach the connotation of "repression" with power.<sup>18</sup> Their fear of being repressive is part of why political activism has lost its luster. This new political left has lost the ungrounded hope of Dewey. The consequence is that leftist intellectuals no longer associate their political concerns with the poor and laboring class. Rorty calls for a revival of the "reformist left," who

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<sup>17</sup> Rorty, Richard. *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies*. Interviewed by Nystrom, Derek and Kent Puckett. (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002), 66.

<sup>18</sup> See Rorty's description of the interpretation of Foucault making him ineffectual for pragmatist politics as a precursor to *Achieving Our Country* in "Method, Social Science, and Social Hope," in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 208.

associated with the poor and working class during the Progressive Era.<sup>19</sup> However, whereas Rorty wanted to live the life as a leftist reformist, he never wrote extensively (or even briefly yet substantively) on leftist reformist literature. I will discuss *Achieving Our Country* again later.

Rorty's contemporaries, Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin, argue in their book *Deliberation Day* for a comprehensive and strategic reevaluation of democratic electoral deliberation processes. When Ackerman and Fishkin write, "This is an essay in realistic utopianism,"<sup>20</sup> they mean utopian in a sense agreeable with Rorty who also describes what he considers to be a realistic utopia.<sup>21</sup> Discussions revolving around the conditions for a "Deliberation Day" or the conditions for the flourishing of liberal ironists are what John Rawls would call one of the roles of political philosophy. Rawls calls this role the "realistically utopian: that is, probing the limits of practicable possibility."<sup>22</sup>

Rorty, however, has nothing to say about creating appropriate conditions or procedures for democratic deliberation apart from the rather abstract conclusion that claims of metaphysical truth automatically end conversations.<sup>23</sup> Rorty would rather give us pithy maxims like "take care

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<sup>19</sup> For broad and recent histories of the kind of leftist politics Rorty lionizes see Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); and McGerr, Michael. *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Ackerman, Bruce, and James S. Fishkin. *Deliberation Day*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), 13. As a critic of Ackerman's earlier works, Michael Walzer might demur, arguing a restated form of his essay, "A Critique of Philosophical Conversation," where he notes that Ackerman designs the flow of a deliberative narrative to the extent that "The whole purpose of the construction or design is to produce conversational endings." See Walzer, Michael. "A Critique of Philosophical Conversation," in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*. Edited by David Miller. (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 2007), 22. Rorty would agree with Walzer about the need to reject designed or idealized conversations in so far as these designs structure the ending of conversations. Rorty affiliated himself with the endlessness of conversation as far back as 1979 in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 389. However, the design of *Deliberation Day* is neither an ideal speech situation, nor a hypothetical situation. It fits with "real-world standards," and it is a designed and organized opportunity for debate rather than a "designed conversation" (Walzer's term). See *Deliberation Day*, 182-184.

<sup>21</sup> Rorty's realistic utopia is achieved when a country is populated by his "liberal ironists" who doubts the finality of their vocabulary and therefore all democratic conclusions are provisional until a new and better (better for them but not necessarily better for humanity) vocabulary is created. See Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. xvi.

<sup>22</sup> Rawls, John. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>23</sup> See Rorty's essay, "Religion as Conversation-stopper" in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 168-174.

of freedom and truth will take care of itself,” rather than write in any sustained way on liberal issues like homelessness and poverty.<sup>24</sup>

Rorty is largely responsible for the revival in academic interest in pragmatism but since the 1980s, his writings show an aversion to detailed analysis of any of the original pragmatists (e.g. Peirce, James, Holmes, Dewey, etc.). This is the second peculiarity of Rorty’s pragmatism. Indeed, there are swarms of critics of Rorty concerning his interpretation of pragmatism. It is sufficient for my purposes to point out that whereas Rorty is described by many as “America’s leading pragmatist” he does not dedicate any extensive treatment to any of the previous pragmatists. Rorty is utterly uninterested in the history of pragmatism. His writings on pragmatism are different in nature than, for example, Louis Menand’s Pulitzer Prize winning book on pragmatism.<sup>25</sup> The closer Rorty affiliated himself with pragmatism the less he wanted to be an academic specialist. Menand writes, “He transformed himself, in short, from a philosopher into an intellectual. In this his model has clearly been Dewey.”<sup>26</sup> Rorty’s favorite philosopher and pragmatist was John Dewey,<sup>27</sup> but Rorty’s writings on Dewey are puzzling to many readers. Michael J. Sandel has argued that Rorty is doing “creative rewriting” of Dewey’s

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<sup>24</sup> For examples see the essay by Jeremy Waldon, “Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom,” and Thomas Pogge, “Migration and Poverty,” and Richard J. Arneson, “Egalitarianism and the Undeserving Poor,” in *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*. Edited by Goodin, Robert E., and Philip Pettit. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007). See also Ezorsky, Gertrude. *Freedom in the Workplace?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Rorty is uninterested in the way William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Oliver Wedell Holmes influenced each other as the idea of pragmatism came into being through their gatherings, aptly called the “metaphysical club;” see, Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club*. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001). Menand edited a collection of writings by past and present pragmatists where he says that Rorty is a “far more exciting writer than Dewey” See, Menand, Louis. ed. *Pragmatism: A Reader*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), xxxiv.

<sup>26</sup> Menand, *Pragmatism: A Reader*, xxxiii.

<sup>27</sup> Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser write, “These two writers [Rorty and Richard J. Bernstein] have been battling for Dewey’s soul ever since they were students together at the University of Chicago in the 1950s. See Benhabib, Seyla and Nancy Fraser. eds. “Introduction,” in *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*. (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2004), ix. This recount of pragmatism by Benhabib and Fraser is historically misleading. First, this retelling does not match the narrative that Rorty’s student, Cornel West, recounts. Second, it is not how Bernstein himself remembers the way the revival of pragmatism germinated. Bernstein writes, “When we were at Yale together, I do not ever recall discussing pragmatism with Rorty. Coming from Chicago, we both were ‘taught’ that pragmatism represented everything that Chicago intellectuals thought was vulgar and decadent. It was only in later years that Rorty and I discovered how much we had in common.” See Bernstein, Richard J. “Richard J. Bernstein’s Response to Nancy Frankenberg,” in *The Pragmatic Century*, 99-100.

liberalism which borders on “hijacking.”<sup>28</sup> Sometimes Rorty uses Dewey like a piece of furniture: something you sit on but it is not the thing itself that receives your attention. An example would be his essay “Kant and Dewey: The current situation of moral philosophy” where Rorty only quotes Dewey one time throughout the entire essay. In all Rorty’s essays it seems his longest sustained look at Dewey occurs in the essays, “Dewey’s Metaphysics,” and “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin;” his longest sustained look at William James is in the essay, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” and his longest sustained look at Charles Sanders Peirce is in his essay “Pragmatism, Categories, and Language.”<sup>29</sup> Those four essays have a significant number of quotations from four founding pragmatists. Quotations are important because they at least minimally allow those original pragmatists to speak for themselves. Rorty began his essay “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism” by claiming,

‘Pragmatism’ is a vague, ambiguous, and overworked word. Nevertheless, it names the chief glory of our country’s intellectual tradition. No other American writers have offered so radical a suggestion for making our future different from our past, as have James and Dewey. At present, however, these two writers are neglected.<sup>30</sup>

Ironically, Rorty continued to neglect those writers, in at least one sense of the word neglect, because nowhere in that essay does he quote those pragmatists.<sup>31</sup>

Even more intriguing, Rorty never agrees with Dewey, James, or Peirce, in all they wrote. This is the third peculiar facet of Rorty’s pragmatism; this third facet is parasitic on the

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<sup>28</sup> Sandel, Michael J. *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 192.

<sup>29</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Dewey’s Metaphysics,” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 72-89.; “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin,” in *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers Volume 3*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 290-306.; “Religion as Conversation-stopper,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 168-174; “Pragmatism, Categories, and Language.” *The Philosophical Review*. Vol. 70:2 (April, 1961), 197-223.

<sup>30</sup> Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 160.

<sup>31</sup> This claim I am making, that Rorty nowhere quotes pragmatists in this essay, can be misleading, in that, he does quote James once at the end of the essay, however, this one quote is treated in fashion uncharacteristic of Rorty. James’s quote is given no citation (Rorty, unlike Harold Bloom, is deliberately consistent in citing quotations through his career). So the point still stands that Rorty *neglects* these authors (at least in the sense that we are given no way to continue his research). I am not claiming that Rorty is plagiarizing as a form of fraud; see Rorty’s fellow pragmatist on this point; Posner, Richard. *The Little Book of Plagiarism*. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2007).



second. Dewey, Rorty writes, occasionally “came down with the disease he was trying to cure.”<sup>32</sup> “The recurrent flaw in Dewey’s work,” Rorty writes, is Dewey’s “habit of announcing a bold new positive program when all he offers, and all he needs to offer, is criticism of the tradition.”<sup>33</sup> Rorty here laments how Dewey affiliated himself with programs of “scientific method in philosophy” and “experimentalism in metaphysics.”<sup>34</sup> Commenting on Rorty’s treatment of Dewey, Cornell West writes,

This interpretation of Dewey’s intellectual style and sensibility reveals more about Rorty than about Dewey. The fact that it was published while Rorty was writing *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* seems to indicate that Rorty is invoking the authority of Dewey in order to encourage and empower himself in his emerging antiprofessionalism . . . Dewey certainly saw himself as being closer to scientists than to artists.<sup>35</sup>

As for William James, Rorty laments James’s “highly unpragmatic claim that ‘in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers of the truth.’”<sup>36</sup> Rorty also laments James’s definition of religion that, in Rorty’s words, “associates religion with the conviction that a power that is not ourselves will do unimaginably vast good, rather than with the hope that we ourselves will do such good.”<sup>37</sup>

Susan Haack has called Rorty’s pragmatism, “vulgar pragmatism.” She means to challenge Rorty’s status as an heir of the “classical pragmatists.” She spends a considerable amount of time disputing Rorty’s writings on James. She gives examples noting,

In James’ urging that philosophers pay more attention to concrete truths and curb their obsession with abstract Truth, one might hear something akin to Rorty’s impatience with

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<sup>32</sup> Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 88.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>35</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 198-99. Indeed, it is true that Rorty appropriates a literary Dewey and drops the scientific and quasi-positivistic Dewey. In that sense, West is correct, in diagnosing the origins of this kind of misreading (West does not use Bloom’s word “misreading”), West misses the source and instead draws a parallel. West writes that this misreading is an “exemplary Emersonian instance of being provoked (not instructed) for purposes of personal empowerment,” 199. The source is Bloom’s concept of “belatedness” which is the phenomenology of strong poets. Bloom writes that Emerson is an exemplar. I argue the same about Rorty.

<sup>36</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 155.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

anything supposedly grounding what is presently defensible. But this would be to forget that James maintains that the notion of concrete truth depends on the notion of abstract Truth, and could not stand alone. Again, in James' defense of the "will to believe," of the propriety of believing without evidence if belief will enable one to live one's life better, one might hear something akin to [Stephen] Stich's identification of "justified belief" with "belief that conduces to what one values." But this would be to forget that James also says, not only that this doctrine applies only to propositions, e.g., of a religious character, in principle incapable of settlement by evidence, but also that it is distinct from, and independent of, pragmatism. It would also be to forget that, when he says that "the true is only the good in the way of belief," James is stressing – exaggerating – the instrumental value of true belief. James used to complain about critics who "put the silliest possible interpretation" on his words; now, it seems, the "friends" of pragmatism are doing the same.<sup>38</sup>

By the mid-1980s, Rorty distances himself from Peirce by calling Peirce's method "end of inquiry' pragmatism." Earlier in Rorty's scholarship, he strongly affiliated himself with Peirce. He wrote as late as 1979 that, "The only sense in which we are constrained to truth is that, as Peirce suggested, we can make no sense of the notion that the view which can survive all objections might be false."<sup>39</sup> Rorty quotes Michael Williams as challenging him that "we have no idea what it would be for a theory to be ideally complete and comprehensive...or of what it would be for inquiry to have an end."<sup>40</sup> In summary, what sets Rorty's pragmatism apart from the original pragmatists is, at least in part, Rorty's criticisms of the original pragmatists, which sets his own pragmatism as either restorative, culminating in, or novel to the narrative of pragmatism.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, Rorty spends more time writing on thinkers associated with "Continental Philosophy" than on American pragmatism. The fourth peculiar feature of Rorty's pragmatism

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<sup>38</sup> Haack, Susan. "Vulgar Pragmatism: An Unedifying Project," in *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*. Edited by Saatkamp, Herman J. (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), 147.

<sup>39</sup> Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 165.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Rorty, Richard. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers Volume 1*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 130.

<sup>41</sup> Richard J. Bernstein would add here (possibly disagreeing with part of my sentiment), that pragmatism is and has always been the conflict of narratives and metanarratives about itself. See Bernstein, Richard J. "American Pragmatism: The Conflict of Narratives" in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, 55. While that may be true, it seems no current pragmatist lionizes the past pragmatists as much as Rorty while at the same time demarcating himself as their philosophically consistent and non-contradictory successor.

is that not only does he avoid detailed analysis of the original pragmatists (as in my description of his “second peculiarity”) but in addition, Rorty has written in more detail and shows more interest in continental philosophers particularly Heidegger and Derrida. A large portion of one of Rorty’s volumes of collected papers is dedicated to Heidegger, the results of which are “an abortive abandoned attempt to write a book about him.”<sup>42</sup> Beginning in the 1960s and ending in 1978, Daniel Dennett created a joke dictionary of philosophers’ names published for the benefit and amusement of the American Philosophical Association. He solicited entries from members of the association. The last edition of the dictionary had two entries for Richard Rorty. The second entry was “**a rortiori**, adj., true for even more fashionable continental reasons.”<sup>43</sup> What makes this entry amusing is that Rorty here is considered to be interested in European philosophy, not because he is pursuing Truth but because it is popular. Also, this entry is amusing because of what is absent, which is Rorty’s connection to pragmatism. Richard J. Bernstein says that Rorty’s political views are “little more than an ideological *apologia* for an old-fashioned version of Cold War liberalism dressed up in fashionable ‘post-modern’ discourse.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Rorty once called himself a “postmodernist bourgeois liberal.” At the time, he wrote that Dewey too, was a “postmodernist before his time.” Rorty meant to use the word postmodern in only the sense that Lyotard meant it when writing that postmodernism was a “distrust of metanarratives.”<sup>45</sup> This self-identification with postmodernism through continental

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<sup>42</sup> Rorty, Richard. *Essays on Heidegger and others. Philosophical Papers, Volume 2.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>43</sup> Dennett, Daniel. “The Case for Rorts,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B Brandom. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 91.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Postmodernist Bourgeoisie Liberal,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 199, 201.

philosophers increases the likelihood that Rorty's pragmatism would be associated with Nietzschean perspectivism.<sup>46</sup>

For over a decade, the philosopher Roger Scruton has been affiliating Rorty with postmodernism.<sup>47</sup> Scruton argues,

Rorty eschews the old respectable pragmatism of Peirce, Dewey, and Quine, who attempted to reconcile theory with practice, and truth with success. For him 'pragmatism' is another name for the postmodernist project, which consists in the search for a community...[where] 'We' make up our minds as to the meaning of texts, by creating through our words the consensus that includes us. There is no constraint on us, beyond the community to which we have chosen to belong. And because there is no objective truth but only our own self-engendered consensus, our position is unassailable from any point of view outside it...The many 'methods' of postmodernist curriculum have one thing in common, which is that they do not argue for their political posture but assume it, and at the same time conceal that assumption deep within a protective carapace of nonsense. In this respect they are theological, rather than scientific, theories: theories designed not to establish some belief but to protect that belief from rational criticism.<sup>48</sup>

Scruton continues by noting that Rorty would be without an argument to the Islamic *Ummah* who "expressly recognize consensus (*ijma*'), as a criterion of, and indeed substitute for, truth, and is engaged in a never-ceasing endeavor to include as many as possible in its comprehensive, first-person plural, while punishing apostasy as a crime."<sup>49</sup> What keeps these communities from the good that follows from homogenization? The answer to that question is discussed in my fourth chapter and it is related to Bloom's concept of "strong poet." For now, it is sufficient to note that while Rorty has affiliated himself with postmodernism he does not consider himself a relativist in its self-refuting sense. Rorty writes,

Relativism certainly is self-refuting, but there is a difference between saying that every community is as good as every other as saying that we have to work from the network we are, from the communities with which we presently identify. Postmodernism is no more relativistic than Hilary Putnam's suggestion that we stop trying for a "God's-eye view"

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<sup>46</sup> For a defense of Nietzschean perspectivism that does *not*, arguably, collapse into relativism, see Nehamas, Alexander. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, 65-68.

<sup>47</sup> Scruton, Roger. *Modern Philosophy: An Introduction and Survey*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 105.

<sup>48</sup> Scruton, Roger. *A Political Philosophy*. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 113-14, 53-54.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

and realize that “We can only hope to produce a more rational conception of rationality or a better conception of morality if we operate from within our tradition.”<sup>50</sup>

The philosopher, Simon Blackburn, writes that it “sounds cheap” when Rorty denigrates his rival realists as referring to a God’s-eye view or “Nature’s own” vocabulary.<sup>51</sup> “To many of us,” Blackburn adds, “the solution looks worse than the problem: language is not there to represent how things stand – how ridiculous! It is as if Rorty has inferred from there being no innocent eye that there is no eye at all.”<sup>52</sup> Thus the fourth facet of Rorty’s peculiar pragmatism is that his self-identification with postmodernism via continental philosophy dramatizes the likelihood that Rorty’s pragmatism will be equated with Nietzschean perspectivism and, consequently, relativism.

By focusing on analyticity and language Rorty’s pragmatism begins with a different critique of philosophy than the original pragmatists who focused on experience. By following through with the “linguistic turn” in philosophy, Rorty is often described as a neo-pragmatist to differentiate the pragmatists interested in language philosophy from the original pragmatists like Dewey who focused on the nature of experience. The aim of this chapter is to cast doubt on the narrative that Rorty is best summarized by his affiliation with pragmatism. Rorty began his philosophical career publishing articles in the vein of analytic philosophy. Rorty’s seminal overview and critique of the correspondence theory of truth was his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, followed by *Consequences of Pragmatism*, and *Objectivity, Relativism, and*

<sup>50</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Postmodernist Bourgeoisie Liberal,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 202.

<sup>51</sup> Wrongly, Blackburn lists Rorty’s use of “Nature’s own vocabulary” as if Rorty had not repudiated his use of that phrase. In response to Charles Taylor, Rorty writes, “Taylor deplores my use of ‘rhetorical flourishes’ such as ‘Nature’s Own Language’ to describe the view of my realist opponents . . . I am prepared henceforth to abjure all references to ‘Nature’s Own Language.’ I should insist, however that this was . . . just . . . saying that correspondence theorists need to have criteria for the adequacy of vocabularies as well as of statements, need the notion of one vocabulary somehow ‘fitting’ the world better than another.” In other words, Newton’s vocabulary not only has to work better than Aristotle’s but has to represent reality more adequately. Rorty does not think that representing reality more adequately can be given any sense. See “Charles Taylor on Truth,” in *Truth and Progress*, 85. Exactly *why* Rorty rescinds his use of “Nature’s Own Language” is *not* discussed by Rorty, but it is part of my argument in chapter four.

<sup>52</sup> Blackburn, Simon. *Truth: A Guide*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 153.

*Truth*. Taken together, these works focus on the nature of language, the status of vocabularies, and the meaning of words. Although focusing on language, Rorty believes he is doing nothing the original pragmatists would not agree with. “Davidson seems to me to be doing the same job within the vocabulary of analytic philosophy (roughly, the vocabulary which has replaced “thoughts” by “sentences” and “ideas” by “words”) which Dewey did within an earlier philosophical vocabulary.”<sup>53</sup> Many philosophers have argued that Rorty’s break with the analytic tradition in philosophy has never been clean and complete.<sup>54</sup> Some call Rorty a neo-pragmatist.<sup>55</sup> This last feature of Rorty’s pragmatism can be captured by noting that he and fellow pragmatist Stanley Fish emphasize language, while the founding pragmatists emphasized experience.<sup>56</sup> I pursue the implications of emphasizing language in an account of pragmatism for the next two chapters.

To conclude, I want to review the five facets that make Rorty’s pragmatism peculiar. First, recall his pragmatism prioritizes practical political solutions but his writings show an aversion to detailing them. Second, while he is partly responsible for the revival in interest in pragmatism since the 1980s, his writings show an aversion to detailed analysis of any of the classical pragmatists. Third, Rorty associates himself most with Dewey, who is Rorty’s “principle philosophical hero” yet he is critical of all the founders of pragmatism including

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<sup>53</sup> Rorty, “Inquiry as Recontextualization,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 103.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Taylor, for example, argues that Rorty is still trapped in the representationalism he purports to reject. See, Taylor, Charles. “Rorty and Philosophy,” in *Richard Rorty Contemporary Philosophy in Focus*, 168-171.

<sup>55</sup> Cornel West calls Rorty’s “neopragmatism a form of ethnocentric posthumanism;” see, West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 205. According to Kloppenberg, “West distances his position from Rorty’s pragmatism, which he judges as too narrowly focused on language and insufficiently attuned to the pressing need for political activism.” Kloppenberg, “Pragmatism: Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking?” in *A Pragmatist’s Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*, 40.

<sup>56</sup> This argument is made by James Kloppenberg in his essay, “Pragmatism: An Old Name for some New Ways of Thinking” in *A Pragmatist’s Progress*, 19-60. Rorty’s response would be that which he gave to Giovanna Borradori in an interview. Rorty said, “I don’t think [the Linguistic Turn in philosophy] adds anything much to Dewey: it is just adapting what Dewey said for a different audience, for people with different expectations.” See, “After philosophy, democracy” in *Take Care of Freedom and Truth will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, 35. In that same collection of essays, see also Rorty’s interview with Michael O’Shea, when Rorty says, “I see Davidson as rewriting in terms of language the same things that James and Dewey did in terms of experience” 53.

Dewey. Fourth, Rorty has written in more detail about continental philosophers than of the pragmatists and has consequently been linked more directly to perspectivism than other pragmatists like Posner. Finally, by focusing on analyticity and language, Rorty's pragmatism begins with a completely different critique of philosophy than the original pragmatists who focused on experience. In addition, there is debatably something new in shifting the focus from experience to language. Taken together these five features create a peculiar relationship between Rorty and pragmatism. In order to argue that the influence of Harold Bloom on Rorty is more important than the influence of Rorty's favorite pragmatist, I needed to collect and describe the peculiarities of Rorty's pragmatism. By casting doubt on the relative importance of pragmatism, I hope to create a gap that the relative importance of Bloom's influence fills.

## Chapter 3: Rorty and Analytic Philosophy

### Introduction

This chapter is in part a digression and in part central to my argument. It is not possible to understand anything Rorty concludes without seeing its context as either part of his criticism of philosophy or part of his post-philosophic proposals. Take one example of unpacking Rorty's phrase, "take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself,"<sup>1</sup> which typifies the idea that understanding anything Rorty concludes requires seeing its context as either part of his criticism of philosophy or part of his post-philosophic proposals.

"Truth will take care of itself," denotes Rorty's belief that there is nothing philosophically interesting to say about truth. Truth does not have any explanatory power that a pragmatist or instrumentalist theory of knowledge does not also have. Truth will take care of itself because it will inevitably crop up with practical features in a community of language users. On Rorty's reading of the history of philosophy, the threat the philosopher poses to the community is not the clarity with which he offers up ideas to a community; this the philosopher shares with the sophists. Nor is the threat the profundity the philosopher offers to a community; this he shares with the poets. Instead, the philosopher offers reality, "Nature's Own Language," knowledge not opinion. However – and here is Rorty's controversial conclusion – there is no need for philosophers in a community who adjudicate claims based on a theory of truth. Truth will take care of itself because it will inevitably crop up with practical features in a community of language users, and where philosophers go wrong is in beginning to ask questions about whether those practical features have features which transcend their use in their given context.

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase has become the title of a collection of interviews. Rorty, Richard. *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*.



Stripping Rorty's conception of truth to the simplest summary, Noëlle McAfee writes, "Truth is right here, in our midst."<sup>2</sup>

Theories of truth convey ideas about the basic structures of reality and the knowable (e.g. Plato's Forms, Descartes' clear and distinct ideas, etc.); subsequently, discussions about truth take the form of its own knowability, its epistemic status (e.g. Plato's Myth of the Cave ascension, Cartesian methodology, etc.).<sup>3</sup> But if truth will take care of itself, then truth is not a goal of inquiry. "We are not conversing because we have a goal," Rorty writes, "but because Socratic conversation is an activity which is its *own* end."<sup>4</sup> Because truth is not a goal, the only role left for the philosopher is one who "edifies." Rorty writes in 1979, "Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause."<sup>5</sup> Here it seems Rorty holds out some space for the philosopher. Later, Rorty came to the conclusion that poets are better at edifying than philosophers, unless there could be a hybrid. I will carry this latter point into my fourth chapter.

Rorty's rejection of truth is not the leisurely postmodern view of perspectivism. Indeed, he has said infamously, "truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with." Crispin Wright has called this formulation "a mockery" for "maximal provocation" and Simon Blackburn has called it "deeply shocking."<sup>6</sup> It is easy to see in Rorty's phrase, the idea of getting away with something as, to borrow a Wittgensteinian phrase, a "family resemblance" with the

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<sup>2</sup> McAfee, Noëlle. *Habermas, Kristeva, and Citizenship*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 165.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of how "our future may depend on how profoundly we manage to respond to *Republic*;" See, Blackburn, Simon. *Plato's Republic: A Biography*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 161. For a discussion on how our future may depend on whether we are able to "recover the idea of rationality that was current before Descartes," meaning the rationality in Montaigne's writings; see, Toulmin, Stephen. *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 200.

<sup>4</sup> Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 172.

<sup>5</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 370.

<sup>6</sup> Sartwell, Crispin. "The Provocateur's Philosopher" *LATimes.com*, June 12, 2007.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-sartwell12jun12,0,3550603.story?coll=la-opinion-righttrail>. Blackburn, Simon. "Portrait: Richard Rorty." *Prospect* [http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article\\_details.php?id=5545/](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=5545/) (accessed June 20, 2007).

idea of lying, cheating, and fraud. In other words, the idea that “truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with” has a family resemblance to the kind of social consequences of fraudulent behavior that Machiavelli mused over. Harvey Mansfield, explaining a Machiavellian tactic, writes, “Fraud creates and conceals a force against the existing order that does not seem to oppose it openly because the fraud does not seem to challenge the power of the ruling prince or government.”<sup>7</sup> This family resemblance is brought out more explicitly by Jerry Weinberger who dismisses the pragmatists as ethical nihilists: “that if the truth of a proposition depends on the practical outcome, then truth and lying go hand in hand.”<sup>8</sup> Weinberger’s conclusion (among other things) is that “Men in general are not and never will be ‘pragmatists.’”<sup>9</sup>

Rorty does open himself up for criticism when he says, “truth is what your contemporaries let you get away,” and yet, Rorty’s rejection of truth is a sophisticated understanding of how language works. Although it is sophisticated, it is not necessarily consistent, and although it is not always consistent it is still a profound reading of the trends in twentieth century philosophy. It would not be enough to quote Rorty’s sensationalized conclusions and then offer criticisms on those quotations.

## **Rorty Caught between Wittgenstein and Sellars**

Anglo-American philosophy was not Rorty’s concern when he graduated from University of Chicago with an M.A. in philosophy. Rorty says, “My encounter with analytic philosophy

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<sup>7</sup> Mansfield, Harvey C. *Machiavelli’s Virtue*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 62.

<sup>8</sup> Weinberger, Jerry. *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought*. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2005), 289. Weinberger’s goal here in discussing pragmatism is to dispute Isaacson’s argument of affiliating Benjamin Franklin directly with the later development of pragmatism. Isaacson, Walter. *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), 480. Interestingly, Rorty never incorporates Franklin into the pragmatic tradition. Of the founding fathers, Rorty is only interested in Thomas Jefferson. See, Rorty, “The priority of democracy to philosophy,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 175-196.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

took place at Princeton, when I was already teaching.”<sup>10</sup> As Rorty’s biographer, Neil Gross writes, “[Rorty] became committed to a version of analytic philosophy around the time he defended his doctoral dissertation and . . . what enabled this to occur was Rorty’s encounter with the work of a philosopher – Wilfrid Sellars.”<sup>11</sup> Rorty writes, “[Sellars] quickly became my new philosophical hero, and for the next twenty years most of what I published was parasitic on his ideas.”<sup>12</sup> After organizing his thoughts on analytic philosophy, Rorty writes in 1982, “I think that analytic philosophy culminates in Quine, the later Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Davidson – which is to say that it transcends and cancels itself.”<sup>13</sup> In the previous chapter, I discussed five facets that make Rorty’s pragmatism peculiar. The fifth facet was that Rorty can be called a neopragmatist to demarcate the sense in which he focuses on language while the classical pragmatists focused on experience. I have not yet discussed the implications of this demarcation, but the *influence* of it is in analytic philosophy. Rorty writes, “The Wittgenstein-Sellars-Quine-Davidson attack on distinctions between classes of sentences is the special contribution of analytic philosophy to the anti-Platonic insistence on the ubiquity of language.”<sup>14</sup>

In what follows, I am going to discuss first Wittgenstein, and then Sellars. Finally, I will focus on Davidson. First, I will discuss how Wittgenstein’s therapy of language-games can be pitted against atomistic representational theorists of language like Bertrand Russell. Second, Wittgenstein brings to light ideas that, on a particular construal, may be related to the kind of conservatism that Rorty is uncomfortable with. Next in discussing Sellars, I note that Rorty overcomes the inherent conservatism of Wittgenstein by explicitly dropping the idea of

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<sup>10</sup> Borradori, Giovanna. *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 106-107. See also, Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 8, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*, 160.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in, *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xviii.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

experience and only speaking about language. Sellar's influence on Rorty directly affects the status of Rorty as a neopragmatist, who focuses on language and not experience.

Wittgenstein gave Rorty the idea that language was instrumental rather than representational; therefore the core of language could not be reduced to propositions mapping the world. Wittgenstein writes, "If it is asked: 'How do sentences manage to represent?' – the answer might be: 'Don't you know? You certainly see it when you use them.' For nothing is concealed. How do sentences do it? – Don't you know? For nothing is hidden."<sup>15</sup> Rorty followed Wittgenstein's conclusion by focusing on the problem of fictional discourse for philosophers like Bertrand Russell. Rorty expresses Russell's linguistic representationalism as "semantics as epistemology," which creates problems that need answers for the possibility of referring to nonexistent objects like Sherlock Holmes. "But if one holds a *pure* 'language-game' view of language, so that questions about 'ties with the world do not arise," Rorty writes, summarizing Wittgenstein's critique of Russell, "then to know methods of verification would be to know *all* there was to know about the semantical features of statements. Such knowledge would not be a matter of semantical *theory*, but simply 'know-how.'"<sup>16</sup> Simple know-how amounts to knowing how to play a particular language-game. The implication of Wittgenstein's language game is, according to Ray Monk that, "In most cases, Wittgenstein does not offer an *argument*, but rather a kind of *therapy*."<sup>17</sup> Philosophy arises from confusions about the everyday use of language and, in addition, from the temptation to fall into a trap: "a picture held us captive," Wittgenstein famously remarked. Rorty tries something similar in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: "[This] book, like the writings of the philosophers I most admire, is

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Stroll, Avrum. *Wittgenstein*. Oneworld Thinkers series. (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2002), 90.

<sup>16</sup> Rorty, "Is There a Problem about Fictional Discourse?" in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 114.

<sup>17</sup> Monk, Ray. *How to Read Wittgenstein*. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), 74.

therapeutic rather than constructive. The therapy offered is, nevertheless, parasitic upon the constructive efforts of the very analytic philosophers whose frame of reference I am trying to put in question.”<sup>18</sup>

As I mentioned in chapter one and will detail in chapters four and five, Rorty’s post-philosophic proposals raise the most ire. Just as Rorty’s post-philosophic proposals are controversial, in a similar vein, Wittgenstein’s proposals are unclear. Wittgenstein’s biographer, Monk, writes, “What is required to free us from the picture that held us captive is an enriched *imagination*, and this cannot be given to us through argument, it must be acquired through, as it were, therapy.”<sup>19</sup> Whereas Monk’s Wittgenstein is one who frees us by an enriched imagination as opposed to the picture that held us captive, Scott Soames’ Wittgenstein is one who frees us by looking at particular cases of language use carefully as opposed to the picture that held us captive. Soames summarizes Wittgenstein writing,

For the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*, sentences and other expressions don’t have to stand in any special justificatory relation to the world or to experience in order to be meaningful; any expression for which there are socially useful agreed-upon conditions of correct application qualifies as meaningful. What philosophers need to do, he insisted, is not to construct models of what they think meaning must be, but to look carefully at particular cases to see what the conventions governing the correct application of our words really are.<sup>20</sup>

Between Monk and Soames, Rorty sides with Monk’s Wittgenstein – the therapeutic philosopher – who wants to keep “space open for the sense of wonder that the poets can sometimes cause.”<sup>21</sup>

This digression into Wittgenstein and his connection with Rorty illuminates two things. First, on Rorty’s reading of Wittgenstein, philosophy as therapy is in competition with poets. Second, once language is seen as know-how, then, representation will not conceal and nothing

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<sup>18</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Monk, *How to Read Wittgenstein*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Soames, Scott. *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century. Volume 2. The Age of Meaning*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), xxi.

<sup>21</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 370.

will be hidden. Wittgenstein has another way of phrasing it: “Philosophy puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything, since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us.”<sup>22</sup> As Bernard Williams follows it, Wittgenstein’s understanding of language has “distinctively conservative” implications in two ways.<sup>23</sup> According to Williams, first,

Even if you do not think that the Wittgensteinian picture encourages an extravagantly organic picture of the synchronic state of society, it certainly encourages the view that changes in our thought and practice must essentially be piecemeal if they are to be comprehensible at all, and not merely arbitrary: even if society as a whole is not one organic item, each conceptual tendril in the interwoven mass is itself a living thing and can be directed in a certain way only if that is the way in which, in that context of social vegetation, it finds it easy to grow.<sup>24</sup>

The second way Williams sees Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language bearing on conservative politics is that “it involves an indiscriminating acceptance of whatever conceptual resources of the society actually exist.”<sup>25</sup> These two features of Wittgensteinian conservatism seem to emanate from Rorty’s alignment with campaigns, which he considers piecemeal reforms with finite goals, against movements, which he considers typified by Marxism and have the goals of transforming everything.<sup>26</sup> The reason why Rorty affiliates himself with campaigns over movements is not because the former is more likely to work and the latter more likely to fail; it is because his criticism of movements is not based on success and failure rates, but rather because of a philosophical critique. Rorty writes, “Movements are suited to onto-theological Platonists, campaigns to many-minded men of letters.”<sup>27</sup> Rorty’s affinity for campaigns over movements is

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Soames, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, Bernard. “Pluralism, Community and Left Wittgensteinianism,” in *In the Beginning was the Deed. Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Edited by Geoffrey Hawthorn. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 34.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>26</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 111-24.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 118. Charles Tilly may respond that Rorty idealizes the rhetoric and distinction between campaigns and movements. Tilly writes, “most social movements remain far more contingent and volatile than their mystification

Wittgensteinian in consequence rather than a practically minded disposition towards successful and unsuccessful political action.<sup>28</sup>

If Williams is right, then Wittgenstein's critique of philosophy as representation and support of language-games as part of our *prima facie* working social practices would have tended to move Rorty towards, for example, the conservative direction of the philosopher Roger Scruton whose favorite philosopher is Wittgenstein.<sup>29</sup> Another reason why it seems Rorty would have tended towards conservatism is that in both *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty quotes approvingly the conservative Michael Oakeshott because of Oakeshott's openness to the continuation of a conversation in politics against "rationalism in politics," and also because language does not represent the world but provides only with an "intimation."<sup>30</sup> I argue that Rorty avoids the conservative consequences of Wittgenstein's philosophy by undervaluing our practice and instead focusing on language.

Wilfrid Sellars dichotomized language, on the one hand, and experience, on the other hand more vividly than Wittgenstein, and Rorty's acceptance of Sellars' critique of philosophy lead Rorty to repudiate the language of experience used by the original pragmatists. Rorty quotes Sellars approvingly who concluded, "all awareness of abstract entities – indeed, all

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allow," in Tilly, Charles. *Stories, Identity, and Political Change*. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 90.

<sup>28</sup> In other words, Rorty is not interested in whether the distinction between campaigns and movements can be empirically classified as a distinction between the use of nonviolent tactics, on the one hand, and violent tactics on the other; see, Schock, Kurt. *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). Nor is Rorty distinction between campaigns and movements concerned more broadly with "contentious" tactics that are used in a struggle for control over diverse political and social institutions; see, Tarrow, Sidney. *Power and Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); also see, Tilly, Charles. *Social Movements: 1768-2004*. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004). Thus, it seems most plausible that Rorty distinctions remain orientated toward the relationship between contingent, we-intentions, campaigns, on the one hand, and transcendent, inevitable, movements, on the other.

<sup>29</sup> Scruton, *A Political Philosophy*, ix, 103-4.

<sup>30</sup> See, Oakeshott, Michael. "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," in *Rationalism in Politics*. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 488-541, this essay influenced the final chapter in Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 357-394, Oakeshott also influenced Rorty's chapter, "The contingency of a liberal community" in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 44-69.

awareness even of particulars – is a linguistic affair.”<sup>31</sup> Sellars’ conclusion grew out of a critique of the nature of experience as the “Myth of the Given.” The myth of the given is the myth that experiential episodes (like qualia – “qualitative experiences”)<sup>32</sup> are given prior to and outside of any linguistic construal. Charles Guignon and David Hiley provide a summary of Sellars’ critique of the “Given” writing that Sellars,

draws a distinction between (1) awareness as discriminative behavior (the raw ability of sentient creatures to register inputs from the environment, a capacity common to humans and amoebas) and (2) awareness that involves the ability to notice what *sort of* thing something is (the ability of sapient beings to perceive something *as* such and such). The first type of awareness is a matter of causal interaction with the world . . . [Sellars] holds that they have no role to play in grounding knowledge. This is because knowledge, that is, justified true belief, always has a propositional structure.<sup>33</sup>

Rorty concludes,

Sellars is not offering a theory about inner episodes. Rather, he is noting that the traditional, nonbehaviorist notion of “epistemology” is the confusion of an account of such episodes with an account of the right to make certain assertions . . . [thus] even the nonconceptual, nonlinguistic knowledge of what a raw feel is like is attributed to beings on the basis of their potential membership in [a given] community.<sup>34</sup>

Consequently, and to return to the fifth facet of Rorty’s peculiar pragmatism, Rorty’s acceptance of Sellars’ psychological nominalism makes Rorty a neopragmatist distinct from a pragmatist.

Rorty admits as much, writing,

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xx.

<sup>32</sup> “Qualia” as “qualitative experiences” is found in Searle, John *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1992), 42. For summary of the debate currently in the philosophy of mind between eliminative materialists such as Daniel Dennett and Searle’s position which rejects Sellars’ argument and takes qualia seriously – concluding with Searle remarking – “All I can do is remind the readers of the facts of their own experiences,” see Searle, John. *The Mystery of Consciousness*. (New York: The New York Review of Books, Inc., 1997), 130.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Guignon and David H. Riley, “Introduction: Richard Rorty and Contemporary Philosophy,” in *Richard Rorty. Contemporary Philosophy in Focus*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 188. For the political extension of this relationship between the knowledge of raw feelings and their attributability only to potential members in a community see, Rorty, Richard. “Justice as Larger Loyalty,” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics. Philosophical Papers, Volume 4*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 42-55. As to Rorty’s idea that Sellars offers strictly no theory, see Rorty’s biographer who disagrees writing, “Unlike the later Wittgenstein, whose program for philosophy was largely deconstructive. Sellars’ analysis had the added benefit of pointing the way toward new, constructive solutions to philosophical puzzles” in Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Marking of an American Philosopher*, 161.



The new pragmatists differ from the old in just two respects . . . The first is that we pragmatists talk about language instead of experience, or mind, or consciousness, as the old pragmatists did. The second respect is that we have all read Kuhn, Hanson, Toulmin and Feyerabend, and have thereby become suspicious of the term ‘scientific method.’ New pragmatists wish Dewey . . . had not insisted on using this term as a catchphrase . . . [The] switch from experience to language – has offered philosophy professors some fruitful ways to pose old issues of atomism vs. holism and representationalism vs. anti-representationalism.<sup>35</sup>

While at other times Rorty sees the difference between the experience-pragmatists and the pragmatists after the linguistic turn as using different reasons for different audiences,<sup>36</sup> in fact, Rorty believes that the linguistic turn is part of the future of the end for representationalism. This is something that could have occurred with original pragmatist’s openness to discussing experience. Rorty writes,

Representation in the relevant sense is a matter of part-to-part correspondence between mental or linguistic and non-mental or non-linguistic complexes. That is why it took what Bergmann called the “linguistic turn” to get the issue into proper focus. For thoughts do not have discrete parts in the right way, but statements do. Frege’s dictum that words only have meaning in the contexts of sentences will be seen by future intellectual historians as the beginning of the end for representationalist philosophy.<sup>37</sup>

Rorty is a neopragmatist and he is not doing quite the same thing as the original pragmatists, despite what Rorty says elsewhere about following Dewey and James.<sup>38</sup> Rorty’s affiliation with psychological nominalism does not stem from Wittgenstein, but rather from Sellars. Rorty’s liberal politics is, in part, due to his priority that the way language can potentially be used (e.g. Davidson and Bloom on metaphors) over and against the way language is determined by social practices (e.g. Wittgenstein on language-games). We need to turn now to Davidson’s influence on Rorty.

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<sup>35</sup> Rorty, Richard. “The Banality of Pragmatism and the Poetry of Justice,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 95.

<sup>36</sup> “I don’t think [the Linguistic Turn in philosophy] adds anything much to Dewey: it is just adapting what Dewey said for a different audience, for people with different expectations;” see, “After philosophy, democracy” in *Take Care of Freedom and Truth will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> Rorty, “A Pragmatist view of contemporary analytic philosophy,” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 144.

<sup>38</sup> See Rorty’s interview with Michael O’Shea, when Rorty says, “I see Davidson as rewriting in terms of language the same things that James and Dewey did in terms of experience” in “Toward a Postmetaphysical Culture,” in *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself*, 53.

## **Rorty and Davidson on Truth**

The “take care of freedom,” in “take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself,” refers to freedom as the absence of constraints on inquiry. There are, on Rorty’s radar, two kinds of pressure that restrict freedom. One is cultural, the other is truth. In what follows, I will deal with truth; in the fourth and fifth chapter I will address the cultural. So I will return to “Take care of freedom,” in the phrase, “Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself,” in chapters four and five. I am going to offer a theory (in chapter four) on why Rorty opens himself up to sensationalism.

In this chapter, however, I will trace the development of Rorty’s focus on analytic philosophy, emphasizing Rorty’s exchanges with the philosopher Donald Davidson. Rorty was not trained as an analytic philosopher but his writings on analytic philosophy are both more extensive than his writings on pragmatism and they are an important filter in seeing how Rorty understands pragmatism. In this chapter, I primarily follow the published exchanges between Donald Davidson and Rorty. Davidson is Rorty’s favorite analytic philosopher and his contemporary.

The exchanges bring out a few points that are central to an understanding of Rorty’s philosophy and political affiliations. First, the exchanges clarify the nature and detail of Rorty’s pragmatism. More centrally to this chapter, the exchanges between these two philosophers clarify the nature and status of Rorty’s critique of truth. Since pragmatists see themselves as critics of philosophical realism and representationalism, it is important to discuss the status of truth. Rorty’s pragmatism has not been consistently expressed by his writings. Instead, by tracking the exchanges between Davidson and Rorty, I describe the ways Rorty’s pragmatism has changed over the years by his reading of philosophers in the analytic tradition. I will be

discussing and explaining the details of Rorty's critique of realism and representationalism. The consequences of this chapter are three fold. First, the centrality of language, which separates the neopragmatists from the original pragmatists, is clarified by this discussion of Rorty's critique of Truth. Second, and a consequence of the first, is that Rorty's interest in metaphors (influenced here by both Davidson and Harold Bloom) both defines his pragmatism and shrinks it. Third, by tracking the exchanges between Davidson and Rorty, one question should emerge not previously asked in the literature on Rorty, "Why does Rorty express explicit requests for Davidson to affiliate himself with pragmatism?"

Alan Malachowski's book *Richard Rorty* is a typical approach to describing the relationship between Rorty and Donald Davidson. Malachowski writes, "Rorty's approach to truth is resolutely anti-theoretical and Davidsonian."<sup>39</sup> Although his book is meant as an introduction to Rorty's themes, it betrays its reader by not giving any hint of the nuance and tensions between Rorty and Davidson. Instead, Malachowski uses Davidson as a caricature within Rorty's thought. Indeed, Rorty has been deeply interested in everything Davidson writes. Bjorn Ramberg writes, "Through the 1980s Davidson remains a focal point of Rorty's attention."<sup>40</sup> More illuminatingly, Stanley Fish writes,

Not long ago I heard the philosopher Richard Rorty deliver a characteristically strong and polemical talk. In the question period he was challenged on a central point and replied with a vigorous reassertion of his position. But then he paused and said, "I've heard that Donald Davidson is working on an argument that would go in a different direction from mine, and anything Davidson puts forward I'll have to take seriously." What this means is that internal to the web of Rorty's beliefs is a belief in the importance of anything Donald Davidson says. And even though Rorty doesn't yet know what Davidson may be saying on this particular subject, he is poised to hear it with an attention and a deference he did not grant to the audience member who questioned him. My point is that each of us has a Donald Davidson.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Malachowski, Alan. *Richard Rorty*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 76.

<sup>40</sup> Ramberg, Bjorn. "Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson," in *Rorty and His Critics*, 351.

<sup>41</sup> Fish, Stanley. *The Trouble with Principle*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 282-283. By the end of my argument I hope that it is persuasive to believe that "Internal to the web of Rorty's beliefs is a

Rorty's foray into philosophy of mind specifically, spanned between 1965 and 1972, with the publications of such essays as "Incorrigibility as the Mark of the Mental."<sup>42</sup> However, two years later, in 1974 Donald Davidson published, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme."<sup>43</sup> And although Rorty was reading writers such as Dewey, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and others, by the time of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979, he dropped eliminative materialism. Instead Rorty offered a group of philosophers who perform "therapy" which is "nevertheless, parasitic upon the constructive efforts of the very analytic philosophers whose frame of reference I am trying to put into question."<sup>44</sup>

According to Soames, there are three central ideas, concerning the status of truth that Davidson argues.

First:

It is possible to construct finitely axiomatizable theories of truth for natural languages that include among them logical consequences T-sentences that give the truth conditions for each sentence of the language under investigation. These T-sentences are derived from axioms of the truth theory that specify the referential properties of words and phrases that occur in the language. Thus, a statement of the truth conditions of each sentence is derived from more basic statements about referential properties of the words that make it up.<sup>45</sup>

Second:

A theory of truth for a language of this sort gives the truth conditions of every sentence of the language, and so qualifies as a theory of meaning, or interpretation, for a language.<sup>46</sup>

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belief in the importance of anything Harold Bloom says," but before we conclude that, I need to discuss the sense in which Davidson is relevant to Rorty's writings.

<sup>42</sup> In fact, Daniel Dennett makes a distinction between the Rorty who first propounded eliminative materialism and the later Rorty who read Donald Davidson and others, becoming a pragmatist. Dennett's argument is that Rorty should return to the early insights of eliminative materialism in the philosophy of mind. See Dennett's "The Case for Rorts," in *Rorty and His Critics*, 91-101.

<sup>43</sup> Davidson, Donald. "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *The Essential Davidson*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 196-208.

<sup>44</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Soames, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, 295-96

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

T-sentences are formally presented sentences in a syntax constructed by Alfred Tarski to express a theory of meaning with truth conditions but the truth conditions are not, themselves, a theory of truth. By adopting Tarski's formalism, Davidson's discussions of truth have been focused on truth conditions within a particular language without drawing any conclusions about the nature of truth itself.<sup>47</sup> Thus, "S is true in language (L) if and only if P" is one syntactical set of finite rules which potentially capture an infinite set of truth-sentences (it is not the only possible set of finite rules).<sup>48</sup>

Third:

We empirically verify that a proposed theory of truth for the language of a given group of speakers is correct by comparing the conditions, or situations, in which speakers *hold* particular sentences of their language to be true with the truth conditions *assigned* to those sentences by the theory being tested. All other things being equal, the correct theory of truth for the language of a given community is the theory according to which the conditions in which the speakers actually hold sentences to be true most closely matches the conditions in which the combination of the theory with our theory of the world predicts the sentences to be true. Roughly put, the correct theory is the theory according to which speakers of the language turn out to be true tells more frequently than on any other interpretation of the language.<sup>49</sup>

Consequently, in Davidson's theory of meaning as a theory of truth, the empirically verifiable Tarski style T-sentences leave an important dimension to the word 'true' as part of the conditions of meaningfulness within a given language. Rorty has been uncomfortable with that for two decades.<sup>50</sup> For the rest of this chapter, I will discuss Rorty's difference with Davidson and his eventual concession to a kind of philosophical realism.

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<sup>47</sup> "The difficulty Davidson faces is that meaning is a richer notion than truth." Joseph, *Donald Davidson*, 97.

<sup>48</sup> "For example, the schema is: *S* is True if and only if *p*, where what replaces *S* is the name of a sentence in the language in which the schema is formulated." Tanesini, Alessandra. *Philosophy of Language A-Z*. (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 31.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Indeed, whereas Rorty often conflates Davidson and Wittgenstein together (though not always), Anthony Kenney sees Davidson and Wittgenstein working in two different directions: the former sliding towards empirical science and the latter refraining and retaining philosophy-as therapy; see Kenney, Anthony. *Philosophy in the Modern World. A New History of Philosophy. Volume IV*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 142-43.

In his essay “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” Davidson proposes three interlocking ideas which Rorty uses in varying ways: (1) rejection of the scheme/content distinction; (2) rejection of the strong skeptic or Cartesian skeptic, and (3) charity. Davidson describes the scheme/content distinction as thus,

The images and metaphors fall into two main groups: conceptual schemes (languages) either *organize* something, or they *fit* it (as in ‘he warps his scientific heritage to fit his...sensory promptings’). The first group contains also *systematize*, *divide up* (the stream of experience); further examples of the second group are *predict*, *account for*, *face* (the tribunal of experience). As for the entities that get organized, or which the scheme must fit, I think again we may detect two main ideas: either it is reality (the universe, the world, nature), or it is experience (the passing show, surface irritations, sensory promptings, sense-data, the given).<sup>51</sup>

The distinction between schemes that do the fitting and the content that is fitted has the consequence that even if two groups had the same behaviors and social practices they could still have vocabularies that were different enough that something would be lost in translating between them. This is the burden of intertranslatability. Joseph, summarizing Davidson’s position explains that, “there can be no language that I cannot translate into my home idiom.”<sup>52</sup> In addition, Davidson argues, that to have meaningful doubts and disagreement about any *one* thing, *many* shared background beliefs must be shared. This point was predicted by Wittgenstein who writes, “the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt.”<sup>53</sup> Wittgenstein’s argument makes radical subjectivity impossible but Davidson extends this argument into a question about realism and a shared world. Davidson writes to this effect arguing,

What matters is this: if all we know is what sentences a speaker holds true, and we cannot assume that his language is our own, then we cannot take even the first step towards interpretation without knowing or assuming a great deal about the speaker’s beliefs.

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<sup>51</sup> Davidson, *The Essential Davidson*, 203.

<sup>52</sup> Joseph, Marc. *Donald Davidson*. (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 178.

<sup>53</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *On Certainty*. Anscombe, G.E. M., and G. H. von Wright, eds. Paul, Denis, and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. (New York: Harper Row Publishers, 1969), 44.

Since knowledge of beliefs comes only with the ability to interpret words, the only possibility at the start is to assume general agreement on beliefs. We get a first approximation to a finished theory by assigning to sentences of a speaker conditions of truth that actually obtain (in our own opinion) just when the speaker holds those sentences true.<sup>54</sup>

In order for some beliefs to be doubted many must be shared, but even more, an interpreter must start the interpreting process by projecting agreement about most of our beliefs to his interlocutor. That process is called “charity.” Davidson writes, “charity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory, it is meaningless to suggest that we might fall into massive error...charity is forced on us whether we like it or not.”<sup>55</sup> Davidson concludes his essay writing,

In giving up dependence on the concept of an uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth – quite the contrary. Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme. Without the dogma, this kind of relativity goes by the board. Of course truth-of sentences remains relative to language, but that is as objective as can be. In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.<sup>56</sup>

When Davidson adds, “Of course truth-of sentences remains relative to language” he refers to Tarski style T-sentences for a theory of meaning for a theory of truth. This is the addendum that Rorty has been uncomfortable with for two decades.

Rorty believed that by buying into Davidson’s critique of the scheme-content distinction and by accepting the notion of charity it gave him enough realism to avoid a slide into linguistic idealism. Rorty summarizes himself as follows,

Davidson’s claim that a truth theory for a natural language is nothing more or less than an empirical explanation of the causal relations which hold between features of the environment and the holding true of sentences, seems to me all the guarantee we need that we are, always and everywhere, “in touch with the world.” If we have such a

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<sup>54</sup> Davidson, *The Essential Davidson*, 207.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 208.

guarantee, then we have all the insurance we need against “relativism” and “arbitrariness.” For Davidson tells us that we can never be more arbitrary than the world lets us be. So even if there is no Way the World Is, even if there is no such thing as “the intrinsic nature of reality,” there are still causal pressures. These pressures will be described in different ways at different times and for different purposes, but they are pressures none the less.<sup>57</sup>

Rorty thinks that Davidson’s philosophy does not reaffirm the correspondence theory of truth and thus breaks with philosophy as the mirror of nature. Rorty writes, “Correspondence, for Davidson, is a relation which has no ontological preferences.”<sup>58</sup> Rorty takes early essays by Davidson like “Truth and Meaning”<sup>59</sup> to be making, according to Rorty, a “crucial move” which Davidson writes as being the denial that “individual words must have meaning at all, in any sense that transcends the fact that they have a systematic effect on the meanings of the sentences in which they occur.”<sup>60</sup>

Rorty was convinced in 1979 that Davidson repudiated any sense of correspondence theory. However, Davidson did not. In his essay “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” first published in 1983, Davidson frustrated Rorty when he wrote, “The theory I defend is not in competition with a correspondence theory, but depends for its defense on an argument that purports to show that coherence yields correspondence.”<sup>61</sup> What makes matters more complicated is how Davidson is in partial agreement with Rorty’s writings from 1979 in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. For example, Davidson writes, in this same essay,

What distinguishes a coherence theory is simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief. Its partisan rejects as unintelligible the request for a ground or source of justification of another ilk. As Rorty has put it, ‘nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence.’ About this I am, as you see, in agreement with Rorty. Where we differ, if we do, is on

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<sup>57</sup> Rorty, “Truth without Correspondence to Reality,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 33.

<sup>58</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 300.

<sup>59</sup> Davidson, “Truth and Meaning,” (published in 1967) in *The Essential Davidson*, 155-170.

<sup>60</sup> Davidson, *The Essential Davidson*, 156; Quoted also in Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 303.

<sup>61</sup> Davidson, *The Essential Davidson*, 225.



whether there remains a question how, given that we cannot ‘get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence’, we nevertheless can have knowledge of, and talk about, an objective public world which is not of our own making. I suspect this question does remain, while I suspect that Rorty doesn’t think so.<sup>62</sup>

Later that year, in 1983, Davidson and Rorty discussed together, in person, the notion of correspondence and pragmatism at the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association. According to an appendix that Davidson added four years later, in 1987, to his essay “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” he and Rorty came to a compromise. “I agree,” Davidson wrote,

to stop calling my position either a coherence or a correspondence theory if he would give up the pragmatist theory of truth; he has done his part; he now explicitly rejects both James and Peirce on truth. I am glad to hold to my side of the bargain. If it had not already been published, I would now change the title of ‘A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge’ and I would not describe the project as showing how ‘coherence yields correspondence’. On internal evidence alone, as Rorty points out, my view cannot be called a correspondence theory.<sup>63</sup>

Davidson is right to say that Rorty rejects the pragmatist theory of truth emblematic of both James and Peirce. Three years after Davidson published “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” and a year before Davidson added in his appendix how he and Rorty came to a compromise, Rorty published “Pragmatism, Davidson and truth” where he explicitly repudiated James and Peirce. There, Rorty says that James’ error was,

to assume that ‘true’ needs a definition, and then to infer from the fact that it cannot be defined in terms of a relation between beliefs and non-beliefs to the view that it must be defined in terms of a relation among beliefs. But, as Hilary Putnam has pointed out in his ‘naturalist fallacy’ argument, ‘it might be true but not X’ is always sensible, not matter what one substitutes for X (the same point G. E. Moore made about ‘good’).<sup>64</sup>

Because Rorty follows Davidson’s advice to reject “calling true only the expedient in our way of thinking” Rorty is left without a sense of pragmatist theory – until he recasts the role of

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>64</sup> Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 127

pragmatism. He follows his earlier remarks against James by supposing that James can be kept as making a “negative point.” Now, a pragmatist’s proper role is as a critic, and nothing else. This is a misreading in exactly the sense that Harold Bloom meant it. I will elaborate this point in the next chapter.

For Rorty, as long as we “forget his [James’] occasional attempts to say something constructive about truth . . . we can then, I think, isolate a sense for the term ‘pragmatism’ which will consist *simply* in the dissolution of the traditional problematic about truth, as opposed to a constructive ‘pragmatist theory of truth.’”<sup>65</sup> The question of course is, why if there are so many problems with pragmatism (e.g. focused on experience, were inconsistent by slipping into correspondence theory, were too scientific, were proposing a positive view of pragmatism as true being that which is good by way of belief) does Rorty want to affiliate himself with pragmatism at all? I will answer that in my fourth chapter.

What Davidson may not have expected when he compromised with Rorty three years earlier was that by convincing Rorty to give up a “pragmatist theory of truth,” Davidson set Rorty to writing about a form of pragmatism which consists of making a *negative* point, and that negative point would find, according to Rorty, the perfect parallel in Davidson’s own writings. Pragmatism was thus Davidsonianism. Rorty argues in “Pragmatism, Davidson and truth” that Davidson ought fully to embrace the term pragmatism as his own. Davidson thought the request was eccentric and uncalled for, considering what Davidson was trying to accomplish.

In that essay, Rorty argues that there is a “sense of ‘pragmatism’ in which Davidson and James are both pragmatists.”<sup>66</sup> The term ‘pragmatism’ has the four following tenets according to Rorty:

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.,128.

(1) 'True' has no explanatory uses, (2) we understand all there is to know about the relation of beliefs to the world when we understand their causal relations . . . how to apply terms such as 'about' and 'true of' is fallout from a 'naturalist' account of linguistic behavior, (3) there are no relations of 'being made true' which hold between beliefs and the world, and (4) there is no point to debate between realism and anti-realism, for such debates presuppose the empty and misleading idea of beliefs 'being made true.'<sup>67</sup>

There are, however, certain features of Davidson's philosophical agenda that Rorty leaves largely untouched. Because Rorty wants to reconstitute *good* philosophy as a *negative* point of rejecting dualities like analytic/synthetic, scheme/content, reality/appearance, knowledge/ignorance, realism/anti-realism, empiricism/idealism etc., he wants to conceive of Davidson as simply making room for things like the kind of creativity the "strong poet" has in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. In order to do this, Rorty has to diminish the importance of the empirical dimension of the Tarski style T-sentences as playing a central role in the theory of meaning of a theory of truth for Davidson. Rorty's treatment of Davidson as a pragmatist keeps Davidson's full program at arm's length. The full program Davidson conceives is one where there is still an important sense of "objectivity" and "truth" to philosophical endeavors. Thus Davidson concludes his essay, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," that, "In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false."<sup>68</sup>

In an interview with Giovanna Borradori published in 1991, Davidson discusses the history of pragmatism and his relationship to pragmatism in length. In relaying a brief history of contemporary philosophy, Davidson sees an important role for pragmatism. Davidson says, "The mixture of Kant and pragmatism goes back to Dewey, who picked it up directly in Europe. I see a sort of historical development for post-Kantian philosophy in Germany to pragmatism, as they are combined in Dewey and, to a certain extent, in Peirce. This was then picked up by

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *The Essential Davidson*, 208.

Lewis and then Quine.”<sup>69</sup> When asked about Rorty and the “neo-pragmatist” reading his work, Davidson said, “Owing something to pragmatism is not one of my obsessions. I have the general feeling that I might well have been influenced by the pragmatists, and I certainly was by Quine’s and Lewis’ pragmatism.”<sup>70</sup> This is a subtle backhand; Davidson is noting that owing something to pragmatism *is* one of Rorty’s obsessions. But when asked whether he considers *himself* a pragmatist after reading Rorty, Davidson responds,

I don’t particularly understand what Rorty means by that, because for him that’s a special kind of anti-metaphysical attitude. At one time, he actually had a pragmatic theory of truth, and then dropped it. I remember one of his articles, called “Pragmatism, Davidson and truth,” in which he explains what he means by calling me a pragmatist. But part of what he has in mind is just that I seem to have dropped the attempt to get a certain definition of the notion of truth. I’ve certainly dropped the idea that philosophers are in charge of a special sort of truth. But I don’t think of that as being any more pragmatic than a lot of other positions.<sup>71</sup>

Davidson is arguing, that not only is owing something to pragmatism one of Rorty’s obsessions but Rorty’s pragmatism (after 1983) is only a “special kind of anti-metaphysical attitude,” and an anti-metaphysical attitude is no more Deweyian than it is Nietzschean or Russellian.

In 1995, Rorty published “Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Donald Davidson versus Crispin Wright.” Rorty wrote that the essay started out as a review of Crispin Wright’s book *Truth and Objectivity* but the review grew large. Part of the reason it was such an over-sized review, was that Rorty took the time to review his previous tensions and agreements with Donald Davidson up to that point. This time Rorty redescribed his 1986 article “Pragmatism, Davidson, and truth” in more succinct terms. He said there he interpreted Davidson as saying “that the word ‘true’

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<sup>69</sup> Borradori, *The American Philosopher*, 43.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

had no explanatory use, but merely a disquotational use, a commending use, and what I called a ‘cautionary’ use.”<sup>72</sup> Rorty continues,

My underlying idea in that 1986 article was that the entire force of the cautionary use of “true” is to point out that justification is relative to an audience and that we can never exclude the possibility that some better audience might exist, or come to exist, to whom a belief that is justifiable to us would not be justifiable. But, as Putnam’s “naturalist fallacy” argument shows, there can be no such thing as an “ideal audience.”<sup>73</sup>

The question then between Rorty and Davidson, according to Rorty’s appraisal, is whether the word “true” plays any explanatory role in beliefs and meaning. Rorty describes how in 1990, Davidson’s article “The Structure and Content of Truth” partly rebutted Rorty’s interpretation. Rorty says that Davidson would not consider himself a deflationist or a disquotationalist. Davidson goes on to define a “deflationist” as the view that “Tarski’s work embraces all of truth’s essential features.”<sup>74</sup> Rorty responds by saying, “It is important to realize that what Davidson adds to Tarski, when he displays the connections between the concept of truth and those of meaning and belief, has nothing whatever to do with the question of whether, or how, we can tell when a belief is true.”<sup>75</sup>

Rorty, here and again, sees the gist of Davidson’s argument as a repudiation of the correspondence theory of the “traditional view . . . that we anchor language to the world by giving meaning by ostension.”<sup>76</sup> However, Rorty finally, in “Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?” discusses a deeper and most important disagreement between himself and Davidson, but he relegates it to a footnote. Rorty in his footnote again tries to characterize truth as having no explanatory role by rephrasing the notion of “explanatory use” along the more Davidsonian lines of “Avoiding the favoritism [that interferes with Davidson’s fundamental point that] truth is

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<sup>72</sup> Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 22.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>76</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 303.

automatically a theory of meaning and of rationality – as well as his doctrine that every intensional concept is intertwined with every other such concept.”<sup>77</sup>

In the year 2000, one of Rorty’s previous students, Robert Brandom, edited a collection of critical essays of Rorty and Rorty’s responses titled *Rorty and His Critics*. In that collection Davidson wrote “Truth Rehabilitated” to respond to Rorty’s deflationistic stance towards truth. Davidson begins by describing how Rorty mischaracterizes “any use of truth” as a metaphysical truth. Davidson writes, “It is an error to think that if someone seeks to understand the *concept of truth*, that person is necessarily trying to discover important general *truths* about justice or the foundations of physics.”<sup>78</sup> Davidson argues that truth can be objective but that does not make it a goal of inquiry. He writes,

Instead of giving up the traditional view that truth is objective, we can give up the equally traditional view (to which the pragmatists adhere) that truth is norm, something for which to strive. I agree with the pragmatists that we can’t consistently take truth to be both

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<sup>77</sup> Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 25. Rorty’s entire footnote is worth quoting in full here because it relates to Davidson’s response titled, “Truth Rehabilitated” and Ramberg’s essay to be discussed later. Here is Rorty’s footnote: “For in ‘Structure,’ Davidson says that ‘[s]ince the concept of truth is central to the theory [i.e., to an empirical theory that entails T-sentences], we are justified in saying that truth is a crucially important explanatory concept.’ It does not look particularly central to me. As I see it, what Davidson calls a ‘theory of truth’ could equally be called a ‘theory of complex behavior’ or ‘a theory of justificatory behavior.’ Granted that the production of the sort of biconditionals Taski called ‘T-sentences’ is the whole point of the theory, I am not sure why the production of these sentences illustrates the centrality, or the crucial importance, of the concept of truth. I am quite willing to withdraw my 1986 claim that ‘true’ has no explanatory use, which was a misleading way of putting the point that ‘It’s true!’ is not a helpful explanation of why science works or why you should share one of my beliefs. But although the sort of theory to which Davidson thinks ‘the concept of truth’ central is indeed explanatory, it seems to me somewhat awkward and unnecessary to pick out a given concept that is explicated by reference to such theories and say that *it* has a crucial explanatory role. Avoiding such favoritism would be more congruent with Davidson’s fundamental point that a theory of truth is automatically a theory of meaning and of rationality – as well as with his doctrine that every intensional concept is intertwined with every other such concept. Another way of locating the point at which Davidson and I may differ is that he thinks it significant that we use the same word to designate what is preserved by valid inference as we use to caution people that beliefs justified to us may not be justified to other, better audiences. As far as I can see, there is no deep reason why ‘true’ is used to do both of these jobs, why one of the words that we use to describe the pattern of behavior necessarily exhibited by language users (logical inference) should also be one of the words we use to caution people that they may be believing something that better-advised people would not believe. So I see no reason to look behind both uses for some feature of the *meaning* of ‘true’ which makes that word suitable for both assignments. If I could see such a reason, I might be in a better position to appreciate what Davidson means by the ‘centrality’ of the concept and to see why he speaks of himself as ‘filling in the content’ of his concept” (26-27).

<sup>78</sup> Davidson, Donald. “Truth Rehabilitated,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, 65.

objective and something to be pursued. But I think they would have done better to cleave to a view that counts truth as objective, but pointless as a goal.<sup>79</sup>

But if truth as a norm is sent away, as in Davidson's description of pragmatism, then Wittgenstein's connection between language as true descriptions predicated on language practices is also sent away. Now, instead of casting true descriptions in terms of language practices, Davidson casts true descriptions in terms of a systematic semantic analysis. As Joseph notes, "unlike Wittgenstein (and like Frege) he [Davidson] is persuaded that a language must be amenable to systematic semantic analysis."<sup>80</sup> Thus, Davidson goes on to resubmit to Rorty the importance of Tarski's truth definitions. Davidson writes, "Tarski showed how to give explicit definitions of truth for languages satisfying certain conditions, but at the same time he proved (given some natural assumptions) that no general definition was possible."<sup>81</sup> Davidson uses Tarski to shore up the claim that truth is objective but not a goal of philosophical inquiry. Davidson concludes his essay writing,

Correspondence, while it is empty as a definition, does capture the thought that truth depends on how the world is, and this should be enough to discredit most epistemic and pragmatist theories. Epistemic and pragmatist theories, on the other hand, have the merit of relating the concept of truth to human concerns, like language, belief, thought and intentional action, and it is these connections which make truth the key to how mind apprehends the world. Rorty doesn't much mind my saying that truth is one concept among a number of other related concepts which we use in describing, explaining, and predicting human behavior. But why, he asks, say truth is any more important than such concepts as intention, belief, desire, and so on? Importance is a hard thing to argue about. *All* these concepts (and more) are essential to thought, and cannot be reduced to anything simpler or more fundamental. Why be niggardly in awarding prizes; I'm happy to hand out golden apples all around.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>80</sup> Joseph, *Donald Davidson*, 12.

<sup>81</sup> Davidson, Donald. "Truth Rehabilitated," in *Rorty and His Critics*, 69.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 73.

Although handing out “golden apples all around,” would have precluded the Trojan War,<sup>83</sup> it does not satisfy Rorty. In Rorty’s response, he challenges Davidson to be more “Wittgensteinian.” When Davidson in his essay says that a Rortyan disquotationalist “cannot . . . pretend to give a complete account of the concept of truth, since it works only in the special case where the metalanguage contains the object language,” Rorty responds by saying, “Wittgensteinians . . . think it pointless to ask whether the content of a concept has been exhausted unless we specify which *uses* of the word signifying the concept are to be included and which excluded.”<sup>84</sup> Secondly, Rorty reminds Davidson, who is quoted as saying “truth depends on how the world is,” that such dictum runs the risk of reaffirming the scheme/content distinction and repudiating Davidson’s previous affirmation of triangulation (which is the theory that a theory of meaning is distributed between a common object of thought, at least two speakers, and one of those two speakers is the interpreter).<sup>85</sup> Rorty sees the point of Davidson’s triangulation being that,

you cannot get along with just holistic inferential relations between beliefs and statements (as coherence theorists tried to do) nor with atomic relations of being-caused-by (as realists fixated on perception still try to do). You have to play back and forth between causation and inference in a way which does not permit any of the corners of a triangle to be independent of any of the others.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Davidson here uses ‘golden apples’ as an allusion to the pretext of the Trojan War, which I take him to mean his hopes for signs of reconciliation between himself and Rorty. I assume ‘golden apples’ is in reference to *The Iliad*, in part because Paris was thrown only one golden apple and jealousy ensued and Davidson studied classical Greek texts while at Harvard preparing for his dissertation.

<sup>84</sup> “Davidson, Donald. “Truth Rehabilitated,” 69; and Rorty’s “Response to Davidson,” 76, in *Rorty and His Critics*.

<sup>85</sup> Triangulation works as follows, “Triangulation grounds the possibility of making a mistake by providing an objective criterion for what someone is talking or thinking about. This provides for a distinction between getting it right and getting it wrong. Only another speaker, responding to what you are responding to, can provide that distinction. That is, because whatever you respond to in the same way is the same ‘for you,’ an outside criterion is needed to get ‘objectively the same.’ Only an outside agent, responding both to what you’re responding to and to your responses, can provide such a criterion. Thus a presupposition of language is a common world shared with other speakers.” Wheeler III, Samuel C. “Language and Literature,” in *Donald Davidson. Contemporary Philosophy in Focus*. Edited by Kirk Ludwig. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 186.

<sup>86</sup> Rorty, “Response to Donald Davidson,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, 78.



Rorty, then, is left wondering why Davidson thinks truth has a crucial role to play in meaning. At this point however, it seems that Rorty and Davidson have responded to each other enough to infer that neither is much convinced by the other by what role truth should play. Critics of Rorty, like Frank Farrell, who side with Davidson against Rorty are prone to ask at this point, “Why should we not conclude then that Rorty’s pragmatism has collapsed into some form of linguistic idealism?”<sup>87</sup>

Rorty is susceptible to linguistic idealism until in the year 2000 when Bjørn Ramberg, who wrote “Post-Ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson,” surprised Rorty with his acuity when Ramberg emphasized the importance of agency to Rorty and brokered the tensions between normativity and objectivity, which was left underrepresented in the previous debates between Rorty and Davidson. Unlike the previous eleven philosophers who challenged Rorty in *Rorty and His Critics*, Ramberg’s challenge actually earns two large concessions from Rorty.<sup>88</sup>

Rorty believes that Ramberg gives a good answer to one of the questions Rorty has had about Davidson for years:

Why does it seem important to Davidson to think of a Tarski-type theory for a natural language as a *truth*-theory for that language rather than simply as a way of predicting regularities in the behavior of speakers of that language? Why, given our agreement on the indefinability of ‘true,’ does Davidson object to my saying that there is nothing much to be said about truth.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Farrell, Frank B. “Rorty and Antirealism,” in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, 162.

<sup>88</sup> Ramberg’s argument here is a sort of dialectical compromise and synthesis between Rorty and Davidson. It is complex and relaying it would be partially a digression. Instead, I will restrict myself to conveying the two senses in which Rorty was “enlightened” by Ramberg, although there is good reason to believe that Rorty simply ignores or forgets to write a response to an important section of Ramberg’s essay where he argues for a new assessment of the importance of philosophy in culture; see Ramberg, Bjørn. “Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, 364-367).

<sup>89</sup> Rorty, “Response to Bjørn Ramberg,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, 370.

Rorty says that Ramberg “sets me straight.”<sup>90</sup> For example, Rorty says that Ramberg, “tells me, in effect, that it was a mistake on my part to go from criticism of attempts to define truth as accurate representation of the intrinsic nature of reality to a denial that true statements get things right. What I should have done, he makes me realize, is to grant Davidson’s point that most of our beliefs about anything . . . must be true of that thing – must get that thing right.”<sup>91</sup> In particular, Rorty concedes, “I am going to have to stop saying, in imitation of Sellars, that ‘true’ and ‘refers’ do not name word-world relations. Nor shall I any longer be able to say that *all* our relations to the world are casual relations.”<sup>92</sup> Rorty, here, is making a concession “to my realist opponents,” but his concession is peculiar. He continues,

I shall instead have to say that there are certain word-world relations which are *neither causal nor representational* – for instance, the relation “true of” which holds between “Snow is white” and snow, and the relation “refers to” which holds between “snow” and snow. These relations, however, do not hold between that sentence and what philosophers like to call “reality as it is in itself,” but only between those expressions and snow. No snow, no truth about snow, because nothing to get right . . . What is true in pragmatism is that what you talk about depends not on what is real but on what it pays you to talk about. What is true in realism is that most of what you talk about you get right.<sup>93</sup>

If, however, pragmatism is “what it pays you to talk about” then Rorty has returned to a form of pragmatism which he rejected in 1983 where he refused to “say something constructive about

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 374.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. By following Ramberg, Rorty admits that these two concessions are “to my ‘realist’ opponents.” Rorty concludes saying that “not many” of the positions he has taken on philosophical issues changes as a ramification of these two concessions. Rorty concludes with four theses that remain unchanged: (1) “No area of culture, and no period of history, gets Reality more right than any other,” because there is no norms for talking about Reality, there are only norms for snow-talk, Apollo-talk, but not Reality-talk; (2) There is “no second norm given by facts” (However, Rorty concedes to McDowell, that he should not have talked about “norms set by our peers,” instead – thanks to Ramberg – norms “hover over the whole process of triangulation;” (3) the holism of intentional ascription forbids “sentences being made true of facts;” (4) “I can still maintain that there is no such thing as the search for truth, as distinct from the search for happiness (Rorty defines happiness here as “getting more of the things we keep developing new descriptive vocabularies in order to get”) Rorty, “Response to Bjørn Ramberg,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, 375-76.

truth.”<sup>94</sup> In addition, where Rorty wrote once, “It is important to realize that what Davidson adds to Tarski, when he displays the connections between the concept of truth and those of meaning and belief, has nothing whatever to do with the question of whether, or how, we can tell when a belief is true,”<sup>95</sup> he now has to repudiate that. After reading Ramberg, Rorty concedes that ‘true of’ and ‘refer to’ are now word-world relations. Thus in total, the realism Rorty picked up was the pragmatism he already rejected. This contradiction was neither recognized nor played a role in his later writings on Sellars where, again, Rorty returned to writing about Sellars in the exact same way he wrote all along.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 127.

<sup>95</sup> Rorty, “Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Donald Davidson versus Crispin Wright,” in *Truth and Progress*, 23.

<sup>96</sup> See, Rorty, “Pragmatism and romanticism,” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 113.

## Chapter 4: The Priority of Harold Bloom

I want to return to the phrase “take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself.” Truth will take care of itself if truth serves merely a cautionary use, a disquotational use, and a commending use as part of our social practices. However, crucial for Rorty is that truth has no explanatory use. This is why Rorty conceded to Davidson in 1983 to drop the pragmatist theory of truth and retain pragmatism as making a negative point about what we ought to avoid. Under pressure by Ramberg and the saliency of Tarski style T-sentences Rorty returned to a theory of “true of” and “refer to” corresponding to word-world relations. While nothing can be said about Truth-itself, particulars in the world can be spoken of in ways that are either true or false. The ones that are true statements are not statements cast into eternity as a phrase never to be reframed or recast better. Instead, the litmus test for true and false statements will be “what it pays you to discover.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, Rorty adds later, “Utility for human happiness is all that distinguishes” the salience of more or less accurate reporting about the world.<sup>2</sup> We cannot get reality right, but we can get particulars more or less right on the test of “relative efficiency at accomplishing various purposes.”<sup>3</sup> This is exactly a return to the pragmatist theory of truth Rorty rejected in 1983. The difference between his earlier concession and his later return is that his earlier concession that pragmatism makes only a negative point found its way into much of his later writings. Rorty’s return to a pragmatist theory of truth was a tactical admission which did not manifest itself in his later writings. Why was Rorty not forthcoming about his return? Other questions remain from the last chapter. As Davidson alluded, why is Rorty obsessed with

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<sup>1</sup> Rorty, “Response to Bjørn Ramberg,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, 374.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 375,

owing something to pragmatism? In order to answer that, I will have to add a psychological dimension (e.g. explaining drives and motivations) as I continue to address Rorty's texts.

This chapter will add another dimension absent from the previous chapters: a psychological explanation to account for some of Rorty's conclusions. This is not an anomaly. Jürgen Habermas and John Searle have both done so. Habermas has written that, "The existential background to Rorty's neopragmatism is his rebellion against the false promises of philosophy."<sup>4</sup> Even more, Habermas details Rorty's "program" arguing that it springs "more from the melancholy of a disappointed metaphysician, driven on by nominalist spurs."<sup>5</sup> Rorty was in no way hostile to this psychological account. He responds to Habermas writing, "The initial sections of Jürgen Habermas' paper provide a very sympathetic and perceptive account of the motives which led me to hold my present philosophical views. I understand the course of my own thinking much better after reading this account."<sup>6</sup> By exclaiming that he learns more about himself by listening to others describe him, Rorty participates in the personal drama theorized by Aristotle who describes friends as our greatest external goods, in part because, they can straighten and mold us.<sup>7</sup> John Searle, however, links Rorty's denial of realism *not* with a philosophical position but with a "basic urge to power. Searle writes,

I think there is a much deeper reason for the persistent appeal of all forms of antirealism, and this has become obvious in the twentieth century: it satisfies a basic urge to power. It just seems too disgusting, somehow, that we should have to be at the mercy of the "real world." It seems too awful that our representations should have to be answerable to anything but us. This is why people who hold contemporary versions of antirealism and reject the correspondence theory of truth typically sneer at the opposing view. Richard Rorty, for example, refers sarcastically to "Reality as It is in Itself."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, "Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn," in *Rorty and His Critics*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Rorty, Richard. "Response to Jürgen Habermas," in *Rorty and His Critics*, 56.

<sup>7</sup> See, Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. trans. Joe Sachs. (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 1168a28-1172a18.

<sup>8</sup> Searle, John. *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World*. (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 17-18.

According to Habermas, Rorty's existential background is a rebellious melancholy, while according to Searle, Rorty's existential background is a rebellious machination. Assuming the legitimacy of providing psychological dimensions to account for philosophical explanations, I will proceed in this chapter with my own.

I want to return to Rorty's slogan, "take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself," and focus in this chapter on the clause, "take care of freedom." In the last chapter, I described how the idea that truth will take care of itself is problematic. In this chapter, I want to describe the implications and necessary provisions that go into taking care of freedom. Here is a greater context within which the quote becomes meaningful:

My claim that if we take care of freedom truth will take care of itself implies that if people can say what they believe without fear, then, . . . the task of justifying themselves to others and the task of getting things right will coincide. My argument is that since we can test whether we have performed the first task, and have no further test to apply to determine whether we have performed the second, Truth as end-in-itself drops out.<sup>9</sup>

As we have already seen, Rorty admits that there are further tests to apply to determine whether we have performed the proper test for the proper subject matter. He can slip back into this refrain because he still rejects the idea that anything can be said on behalf of Truth as an end-in-itself.

What I want to focus on, however, is the arguments surrounding the claim that "we can test whether we have performed the first task," the task of taking care of freedom. As I mentioned at the beginning of chapter three, taking care of freedom has two dimensions: one of them is related to truth, the other is related to culture. Chapter three traced the problems surrounding truth. In this chapter I will turn to the cultural dimension of freedom.

My central argument is that in order to understand Rorty, it is more important to understand how Harold Bloom has influenced him, than how John Dewey has influenced him.

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<sup>9</sup> Rorty, Richard. "Response to James Conant," in *Rorty and His Critics*, 347.

Bloom did not influence Rorty's critique of philosophy from within the analytic tradition. That critique draws on the pragmatists and analytic philosophers like Wittgenstein, Quine, Sellars, and Davidson. In this way, my emphasis on how central Bloom is for Rorty does not contradict Rorty's principle biographer's account of Rorty's intellectual development, because that account ends at the same time that Bloom's influence begins.<sup>10</sup>

In order to see how central Bloom is for Rorty, I need to propose that three items of Rorty's writings need to be read together. First, of all the essays in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, the only one that foreshadows a transition in Rorty's interests is his essay, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism." I propose to begin here. This essay anticipates two later works. First, it foreshadows *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and second, it cannot be read apart from *Achieving Our Country*. These three texts are historically chronological and, when read together, show a development in Rorty's thought which is best explained by the influence Bloom.

In "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," Rorty compares the "Yale School" of literary criticism in the twentieth century to the philosophical idealists in the nineteenth century. But Rorty does even more; he compares the Yale School, which includes Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartmann, J. Hillis Miller, and Paul De Man, with the "post-structuralist" thinkers of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, and the historian Hayden White, and the social scientist Paul Rabinow. By the essay's end, Rorty aligns himself with Harold Bloom.

First Rorty notes a few similarities between the textualists and the idealists. They both are ambivalent towards the importance of natural science and they both think that "problems,

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<sup>10</sup> See Gross, Neil. *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*.

topics, and distinctions are language-relative.”<sup>11</sup> The textualists, according to Rorty, have, like him, taken the linguistic turn. The textualists are the “spiritual descendents of the idealists,” who, unlike the idealists, are not making a “metaphysical thesis.” Instead, phrases like Derrida’s “there is nothing outside the text” should be read “cryptically and aphoristically” to mean “truth as correspondence, language as picture, literature as imitation – ought to be abandoned.”<sup>12</sup> The textualists cannot claim to have discovered something new about language, because discovery is just one more metaphysical return. One of the great qualities of the textualists, according to Rorty, is that they want to shift around our central focus. They want to shift “literature to the center, and to treat both science and philosophy as, at best, literary genres.”<sup>13</sup>

The difference, on Rorty’s account, between the sciences and literature is that the former requires argument before a new theoretical term can be introduced while the latter prides itself on its openness to new theoretical terms. “We do not *want* works of literature to be criticizable within a terminology we already know,” writes Rorty. Rorty then introduces the term, “romanticism,” which denotes a historical period and a literary disposition that Rorty has affiliated himself with ever since. He writes that romanticism is the thesis that “what is most important for human life is not what propositions we believe but what vocabulary we use.”<sup>14</sup> Romanticism is not a metaphysical thesis but an evaluation of the moral value of metaphysical theses.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, “objectivity becomes *merely* conformity to rule, merely going along with the crowd, merely consensus.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism,” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 140.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 142. Shortly thereafter, he shifts from “what propositions we believe” to which ones are true by adapting romanticism’s thesis as “not which propositions are true but rather which vocabularies are useful.” *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Sandel would argue here that this moral evaluation of values inevitably implies a metaphysical construction of the person as an “unencumbered self,” which I discuss in chapter five.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.



The thesis of romanticism, according to Rorty, that exclaims it is not which propositions are true that matters, but which vocabularies are useful to our purposes, is the thesis that unites Frederick Nietzsche and William James.<sup>17</sup> Thus, “Pragmatism is the philosophical counterpart of literary modernism, the kind of literature which prides itself on its autonomy and novelty rather than its truthfulness to experience or its discovery of pre-existing significance.”<sup>18</sup>

This thesis also unites Harold Bloom with pragmatism. Rorty quotes Bloom who offers a “strong misreading” of literary texts. “The critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions,” Rorty writes explaining Bloom’s concept, “but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose . . . He does this by imposing a vocabulary – a ‘grid,’ in Foucault’s terminology – on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and sees what happens.”<sup>19</sup> According to Rorty, Bloom’s concept of “strong misreading” is simply the pragmatist method of usefulness dictating content. What makes it a misreading, according to Rorty, is that “the critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions.” This is of course, *not* what Bloom means by strong misreading. Yet, and ironically, Rorty is too good at strong misreading to discuss strong misreading in terms that are not his own. I will argue this point shortly. However, returning to the text, it is clear that Rorty does not think that Bloom is providing a theory of strong misreading but is actually engaged as a strong misreader. “[Bloom] prides himself . . . on being able to get more out of the text than its author or its intended audience could possibly have found there . . . He is in it for what he can get

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<sup>17</sup> That James thought Nietzsche insufferable, comparing him to a “shrieking” dying rat, does not give Rorty pause except for the caveat that Rorty adds saying they spoke in “different tones of voice.” On Rorty’s reading James’ dismissal of Nietzsche is irrelevant for their broader commonalities. See, James, William. “Conscription on the [Religious] Topic,” from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, reprinted in *The Writings of William James. A Comprehensive Edition*. ed. John J. McDermott. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 749.

<sup>18</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism,” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 153.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

out of it.”<sup>20</sup> The textualists add one thing to pragmatism which the pragmatists did not already conceive. This addition is in fact another way of putting Rorty’s description of strong misreading: “that a person’s own vocabulary of self-description is not necessarily the one which helps us understand him.”<sup>21</sup> Thus the textualists add to the pragmatists an “extra metaphor.”<sup>22</sup>

Rorty concludes two things after adopting (and adapting) Bloom’s concept of misreading which are both related. First, Rorty writes, “the serious objections to textualism, I think, are not epistemological but moral.”<sup>23</sup> This objection, that misreading is morally objectionable will find its counterpart in the way Rorty relegates misreading to the private sphere of self-creation in his later book, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. The distinction between the public realm of solidarity and the private realm of self-creation is alluded to in the essay on textualists, Rorty writes, “Put in the pragmatist’s own preferred cost-accounting terms, it says that the stimulus to the intellectuals private moral imagination provided by his strong misreading, by his search for sacred wisdom, is purchased at the price of his separation from his fellow-humans.”<sup>24</sup> The second thing Rorty concludes is that he has “no ready way to dispose” of the moral objection that strong misreadings are a form of “isolation from common human concerns.” What Rorty proposes is that we focus on Bloom as a strong textualist rather than someone like Foucault. “Bloom is a pragmatist in the manner of James,” Rorty writes, meaning, Bloom preserves our “sense of a common human finitude by moving back and forth between the poet and his poem.”<sup>25</sup> Foucault’s strong textualism, on the other hand, is, according to Rorty, a kind of “inhumanism” that is “designed to eliminate the author – and indeed the very idea of ‘man’ –

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

altogether.”<sup>26</sup> Rorty just dismisses Foucault in this essay, but in another essay, “Method, Social Science, and Social Hope,” Rorty describes the problem with Foucault who, “is attempting to transform political discourse by seeing ‘power’ as not intrinsically repressive – because, roughly, there is no naturally good self to repress.”<sup>27</sup> Discourse, on Rorty’s reading of Foucault, is just a “network of power-relations.”<sup>28</sup> The concept of power needs to be freed from the connotation of repression. Other than Dewey (who Rorty mentions in “Method, Social Science, and Social Hope,” as an alternative to Foucault), Rorty offers Harold Bloom.

The manner in which Rorty concludes his discussion on Bloom is one that differs from the way he concludes any other essay on any of the pragmatists. At the end of Rorty’s essay on textualism, he concludes with a provocative foreshadowing of his late writings. Rorty writes that he has every wish

... to praise Bloom’s sense of our common human lot. But I do not know how to back up this preference with argument, or even with a precise account of the relevant differences. To do so would involve a full-scale discussion of the possibilities of combining private fulfillment, self-realization, with public morality, a concern for justice.<sup>29</sup>

Anticipating a “full-scale discussion of the possibilities” is the closest thing to a philosophical program that Rorty has ever had. Alexander Nehamas noticed as much writing in the year Rorty published *Consequences of Pragmatism*; he writes, “It is obvious...Rorty has generated a program.”<sup>30</sup> The implications are that this program will reveal itself when Rorty takes on a full-scale discussion; Nehamas writes, “Ultimately, then, there is a strong political element in Rorty’s

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Method, Social Science, and Social Hope,” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 208.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism,” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 158.

<sup>30</sup> Nehamas, Alexander. “Can We Ever Quite Change the Subject?: Richard Rorty on Science, Literature, Culture, and the Future of Philosophy,” 412.

pragmatism.”<sup>31</sup> Rorty, at this point in his career, had not written anything substantive about politics or culture. He was still working out the implications of his initial critic of philosophy and his own brand of pragmatism. What is clear is that the seeds of Rorty’s post-philosophical proposals were set in Harold Bloom’s garden.

Summarizing the previous discussion reveals two points. First, Rorty thinks that misreading carries with it a “moral objection” and the only way to resolve the problems it produces is to initiate a full-scale discussion that combines self-realization, which is a form of private fulfillment with a public concern such as justice. Second, by couching his future discussion in this light, Rorty suggests that his reading of Bloom has made an important impression on him. This becomes clear because Rorty’s later emphasis on autonomy has its origins in Bloom’s sweeping and romanticized description of autonomy.

Slightly less than a decade later, Rorty decided, in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, that the “full-scale discussion of the possibilities of combining” turned into a full-scale discussion on the possibilities of dividing ourselves and our corresponding behavior between two realms. The first realm is the private space of self-creation and the second realm is the public space of solidarity. These two do not need to be brought together.<sup>32</sup>

The private realm of self-creation is where our eccentricities are allowed to flourish. The most eccentric are not those who behave outrageously but who find some intellectually stimulating way to break out of their given mold and create. The paradigm is the poet and an example would be Emerson, who wrote, “The poet does not wait for the hero or the sage, but, as

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Commenting on his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty said, “I was...urging that there was nothing wrong with letting people divide their lives along the private/public line. We don’t have a moral responsibility to bring the two together. It was a negative point, not a positive recommendation about how everybody should behave.” Rorty, Richard. *Against Bosses, Against, Oligarchies*, 62-3.

they act and think primarily, so he writes primarily what will and must be spoken.”<sup>33</sup> The poet’s readiness makes him predisposed to use “freer speech.”<sup>34</sup> In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, the freer speech of the poets have immortalizing implications: “A sense of human history as the history of successive metaphors would let us see the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the freer speech of the poets is a framing speech for the non-poet. The freeness of the poet determines the speech for his successors.

What makes the poet free is desire to change the subject rather than argue the subject. In “Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics,” Rorty argues by proposing that we should think of three ways of acquiring new beliefs. The first is by perception, which is an intruding of new beliefs by rearranging old words; the second is by inference, which is a kind of shuffling and comparing beliefs that can create new ones; and the third is by metaphor. Perception and inference leave our language unchanged but not metaphors. Metaphors are a voice “from outside logical space, rather than an empirical filling-up of a portion of that space.”<sup>36</sup> Rorty writes elsewhere, “when a metaphor is created it does not *express* something which previously existed, although, it is *caused by* something that previously existed.”<sup>37</sup> The task of intellectuals, according to Rorty is to “help their fellow citizens live with the thought that we do not yet have an adequate language.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, “the most appropriate foundation of a liberal democracy is a conviction by its citizens that things will go better for everybody if every new metaphor is given

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<sup>33</sup> Emerson, Ralph W. “The Poet,” in *The Portable Emerson*. Edited by Carl Bode. (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 244.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>35</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics,” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers. Volume 2*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13.

<sup>37</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 37.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

a hearing.”<sup>39</sup> One of the problems, at this point, is that Rorty idealizes democratic discourse by expecting/hoping that “every new metaphor is given a hearing.” As Michael Walzer points out, there are many constraints on democratic discourse that are part of the shoddy and unorganized, yet pervasive background of public discourse.<sup>40</sup> He concludes, “There is no setting in the political world quite like the jury room, in which we don’t want people to do anything *except* deliberate.”<sup>41</sup> Yet, Walzer would agree that poets as metaphor-creators are not hostile to democracy. The activity of philosophers is seeking foundations and universalizing. Therefore they cannot be fully attached to any community, “The poet must prove himself a citizen there; the philosopher must prove that he is not a citizen anywhere. The poet needs fellow citizens, other poets and readers of poetry, who share with him a background of history and sentiment.”<sup>42</sup> In a community of philosophers, everything one of them writes must be explained, but the poets who use metaphors ought to be heard, but what is overheard need not necessarily be explained. This is why constraints on deliberation are acceptable to a community of poets but unacceptable for a community of philosophers. The first problem for Rorty’s connection between metaphors and democracy is Rorty’s conviction that democracy can function in a way that gives every new metaphor a hearing. This cannot be done according to Walzer, and yet, the poet, not the philosopher, can find a home in a democracy. He can make his home here because he can accept the possibility that his metaphor may not receive identical attention from his peers; his hearing may not be as long as others or be heard by as many people. For the philosopher, this is

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> See, Walzer, Michael. “Deliberation, and What Else?” in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, 134-146. Walzer creates a list of “nondeliberative activities” which make democratic politics legitimate, including: political education, political organization, the ability to mobilize, the effectiveness of demonstrations, the clarity of making a statement as part of demonstrating, debating, bargaining as part of debating, lobbying officials, campaigning, voting, fund-raising, corruption, scut work, and ruling.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>42</sup> Walzer, Michael. “Philosophy and Democracy,” in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, 4.

insufferable, for the poet this is understandable considering that his truth can only be intimated but “never directly implemented.”<sup>43</sup>

Where do the metaphors come from? Rorty’s answer is that they come from “strong poets.” Rorty uses Bloom’s concept of strong poets to relate back to his own notion that poets are the “vanguard of the species” because their succession of metaphors are the most compelling features of human history. Harold Bloom sets out in two books, *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*, to describe a phenomenology of poetry; or, to describe the history of poetry as the history of poetic influence. Poets like Milton and Emerson are not just creative. Creativity has a phenomenological, psychological, and historical dimension.

Following Bloom closely, there appears to be themes presented in six tropes that the poet goes through on his way to creativity. First the poet writes in a corrective measure, implying the existence of a precursor and that the precursor swerved in a way that creates an opportunity for the poet. Second the poet writes as a culmination of the precursor. Third, in the exercising of the previous tropes of correction and culmination, the poet is enacting a “defense mechanism” which Bloom coins as a “breaking device.” This third trope is the trope of repetition and discontinuity. The poet is now so obsessed with correction and completion that the precursor emerges again and again in the poet and therefore repetition and discontinuity abound. In the fourth trope, the poet produces a “counter-sublime” that he found within the precursor that the precursor specifically did not see. In the fifth trope, the poet now embraces his own revision and thus embraces his solitude of creativity. However, in the sixth trope, the poet returns to the precursor and holds his poetry up against the precursor’s poetry in the kind of light that forces

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

future readers of the precursor to read the precursor in light of his successor.<sup>44</sup> Poets who drive through these six tropes, or six “revisionary ratios,” are called “strong poets.” Bloom both collapses and expands those six tropes as he grapples with the nearly ineffable qualities of creativity. Collapsing the tropes, Bloom summarizes them writing,

Poetic influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets, - always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, as an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.<sup>45</sup>

On my reading of Bloom, the first two tropes of correction and culmination are constitutive of misreading. This misreading reaches the closest point of concretization in the counter-sublime of the fourth trope. In this fourth trope the poet has opened a door to his own creativity; he has walked through the door. In the fifth trope the poet recognizes the solitude on the other side of the door and in the sixth trope he turns back to the door – realizing the door is the key – and determines to keep the door always open. By doing this he is responsible for illuminating the room where the precursor resides. The strong poet wants us to see the precursor through his door and by his light. In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom writes, “Poems...are neither about ‘subjects’ nor about ‘themselves.’ They are necessarily about *other poems*.”<sup>46</sup> By turning around and forcing the door to stay open, the poet preserves his sense of autonomy while securing that *we* in the future will see the past through his door by his light. The strong poet is rebelling against his precursor; angry that he first had to confine himself to the precursor’s room. In the room he suffers from a kind of anxiety called “belatedness.” This is the worry that the strong poet has

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<sup>44</sup> Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1997), 14-16. Bloom titles these collectively as the “six revisionary ratios” and titles the first as “clinamen,” the second as, “tessera,” the third as, “kenosis,” the fourth as “daemonization,” the fifth as “askesis,” and the sixth as “apophrades.”

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 30. The original quote from Bloom is in italics.

<sup>46</sup> Bloom, Harold. *A Map of Misreading*. (New York: Oxford University, 2003), 18.



arrive too late to create: the room is too large and beautiful and, in turn, too distracting that the strong poet has trouble making a door. By staying in the precursor's room too long the poet feels as if the room is suffocating him; his death is imminent and the room is to blame. "A poem is written to escape dying," Bloom muses, "Poems are refusals of mortality. Every poem therefore has two makers: the precursor, and the ephebe's [i.e. strong poet's] rejected mortality."<sup>47</sup> He adds, "A poet, I argue in consequence, is not so much a man speaking to men as a man rebelling against being spoken to by a dead man (the precursor) outrageously more alive than himself. A poet dare not regard himself as being *late*, yet cannot accept a substitute for the first vision he reflectively judges to have been his precursor's also."<sup>48</sup> Bloom fits within the "linguistic turn" of philosophical discourse which is typified by Wilfrid Sellars' conclusion that "all awareness... is a linguistic affair."<sup>49</sup> To this effect, Bloom writes, "Influence as I conceive it, means that there are *no* texts, but only relationships *between* texts."<sup>50</sup>

Rorty does some fascinating things with Bloom's concepts. First, I argue that Rorty deeply bought into the notion of misreading, so much so that he actually wants to misread Bloom on the topic of strong poets who are misreaders. For example, Rorty describes only three features of the strong poet in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. He notes that the strong poets suffer from anxiety – the worry that they will be a copy if they do not create, Rorty relegates to a footnote that every strong poet deliberately misreads his precursor in order to assert himself, and Rorty notes that strong poets require and carry their precursors. However, Rorty *drops* the analytic details that Bloom describes as part of the phenomenology of poetry and thereby shrinks the strong poet's dynamic. For example, Rorty praises Bloom for arguing that poets are parasitic

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Rorty, Richard. "Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy," in *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xx.

<sup>50</sup> Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 3.

on precursors but he leaves behind important elements of misreading. One thing he leaves behind is the counter-sublime – the notion that the strong poet finds in the precursor something the precursor was unaware of and does not belong to the precursor. Another thing he leaves behind is that part of the strong poet’s desire to make future readers read the precursor in light of the strong poet. Rorty shrinks Bloom’s strong poet, writing,

The fear in which Bloom’s poets begin is the fear that one might end one’s days in such a world, a world one never made, an inherited world. The hope of such a poet is that what the past tried to do to her she will succeed in doing to the past: to make the past itself, including those very causal processes which blindly impressed all her own behaving, bear *her* impress. Success in that enterprise – the enterprise of saying “Thus I willed it” to the past – is success in what Bloom calls “giving birth to oneself.”<sup>51</sup>

This is a confused paragraph because Rorty is caught between dictating Bloom’s ideas and misreading them. He ends by misreading. The strong poet wants the past to be seen in his light, not simply to break with the past. When Rorty says, “she will succeed in doing to the past,” he is reporting Bloom; when Rorty says, “to make the past itself,” he is expanding on a misreading; when Rorty says, “bear her impress,” he is reporting Bloom; when Rorty says, “Thus I willed it,” he is expanding on a misreading. So, at the same time that Rorty shrinks the strong poet, Rorty makes him expand. The *way* Rorty expands the strong poet is by, ironically, making the word ‘poet’ into a metaphor for any genre where vocabularies change. In other words, a poet can mean Emerson or Isaac Newton. Rorty writes, “I assume that Bloom would be willing to extend the reference of ‘poet’ beyond those who write verse, and to use it in the large, generic sense in which I am using it.”<sup>52</sup> Bloom would not.

Bloom does accept Rorty’s addendum that strong poets, like Nietzsche, can recognize their own contingency. But Bloom could not accept that the strong poet be understood across disciplines into, for example, the physical sciences. The point Rorty misses is that while he may

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<sup>51</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 29.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

be right that the differing methods between the physical sciences and literary tradition are not differences between ‘in touch with truth and reality’ on the one hand, and ‘opinions’ on the other, that does *not* mean that the dynamics of strong poets can exist across genres and still retain their metaphoric power. Someone working in a laboratory may suffer a form of anxiety that he has not produced a discovery but he does not struggle with a precursor in the same way a poet does. Einstein was not struggling with Newton in the same way that Emerson was struggling with Shakespeare. Locke was not struggling with Hobbes in the same way Ptolemy was struggling with Aristotle. Machiavelli was not struggling with Roman history in the same way Thomas Kuhn was struggling with scientific history. When Rorty drags the metaphor around in that way, it loses meaning. This is why Rorty’s strong poet in the previous paragraph is so confused: he cannot decide where he wants to will-something-new (make the past itself) or will-it-new-by-recasting-the-past (do to the past what the past did to him). The former can be applied to many different genres (e.g. a Kuhnian paradigm shift), but only the latter is Bloomian and the metaphor *will not allow itself* to be reapplied without changing its meaning.

Alternatively, if Rorty was knowingly trying to change the meaning of ‘strong poet’ by changing its use, then, within a Bloomian reading, Rorty is purposefully misreading Bloom’s concept of strong poet. In other words, Rorty is using Bloom’s concepts against him. René Arcilla agrees, noting that the discussion about Bloom’s influence on Rorty,

incidentally, casts further light on how Rorty reads and appropriates for his purposes the work of Descartes, Davidson, Gadamer, and others. It shows why it would be beside the point to accuse Rorty, without further ado, of misreading these authors. Indeed, the argument extends to him the liberty to (willfully) identify Harold Bloom’s strong poet with the self in general, and with himself, and other wondering philosophers.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> René, Arcilla V. *For the Love of Perfection: Richard Rorty and Liberal Education*, 95. Arcilla considers the idea that Rorty adopts misreadings as a reason to discuss something else, and for the rest of Arcilla’s book he imports Rorty’s critique of philosophy “to reenvision the scene of liberal education in a multiculturally pacifistic context” (132). I consider the idea that Rorty adopts misreadings as a reason to discuss exactly that.

Unlike Arcilla, who does not give this thought a pause but instead turns away, I want to see the full implications of misreading.

Another way Rorty adapts Bloom's concepts is by dropping the aesthetic connection between the *meaning* the strong poet produces and the *tactics* he uses. This plays out in an important way. Rorty presents metaphors as limitless and communities as infinitely revisable. Infinite revisions make contingency goes all the way down. All is potentially flux, while (following Wittgenstein and Davidson) not everything can be in flux all at once. Ontology shifts. Bloom would not push this point. The aesthetic, the sublime is part of his wall which buffers contingency's push; Bloom writes to this effect noting,

You cannot get beyond *Hamlet*<sup>54</sup>, which establishes the limits of theatricality, just as Hamlet himself is a frontier of consciousness yet to be passed. I think it wise to confront both the play and the prince with awe and wonder, because they know more than we do. I have been willing to call such a stance Bardolatry, which seems to me only another name for authentic response to Shakespeare.<sup>55</sup>

Rorty could not have read that recently published writing by Bloom, nor could he have read (until 1997) the second edition of Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* where Bloom adds a preface which magnifies the sense in which Bloomian pragmatism (if that is what Rorty would call it) necessarily grates against Bloomian bardolatry. "Shakespeare invented us, and continues to contain us," Bloom exclaims in the new preface.<sup>56</sup> In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*,

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<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche writes of Shakespeare, "He speaks out of a restless, vigorous age which is half-drunk and stupefied by its excess of blood and energy – out of a wickeder age than ours is: which is why we need to first to *adjust* and *justify* the goals of a Shakespearean drama, that is to say, not to understand it;" see, Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Daybreak* reprinted in *A Nietzsche Reader*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 130. If Shakespeare's "wickeder age" denotes a Nietzschean appropriation of Shakespeare as beyond good and evil, then would Rorty's liberal utopia populated with liberal ironists and a few strong poets be a community beyond good and evil?

<sup>55</sup> Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), 7. Less prostrate before the majesty of Shakespeare, A. D. Nuttall tries to explain the same sense in which Bloom writes "you cannot get beyond *Hamlet*," by instead writing, "*Hamlet* is the equivalent in literary art of a Rorschach blot – that is, it is expressly framed for maximum ambiguity." Nuttall, A. D., *Shakespeare: The Thinker*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 201. But Bloom and Nuttall are in great agreement about the sublime in Shakespeare. Nuttall concludes that that Shakespeare "joins verisimilitude to wonder" because Shakespeare "starts so many thoughts that the reader is paralyzed, like Hamlet, by the excess of intellection" (383).

<sup>56</sup> Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, xvi.

Bloom expands that by writing, “Shakespeare, by inventing what has become the most accepted mode for representing character and personality in language, [he] thereby invented the human as we know it.”<sup>57</sup> Bloom adds elsewhere,

Wittgenstein, who disliked Shakespeare, tried to defend philosophy from the best mind we can know by insisting that Shakespeare was less a writer than he was a “creator of language.” It would be nearer the truth to say that Falstaff, Hamlet, and Iago are creators of language, while Shakespeare, by their means, created *us*.<sup>58</sup>

Rorty does not proffer a response to Bloom’s Shakespeare, who is the paradigm of strong poets.

Rorty’s response, plausibly, would be Stanley Cavell’s Emersonian treatment of Shakespeare.

Cavell writes,

When the Shakespeare repertory is given preeminence, what is being granted is that Shakespeare is best at representing how things are because the way they impress Shakespeare proves to be the commonly most memorable way their impression is iterated in us, or say communicated among us. His originality best discovers the originality of our language.<sup>59</sup>

If Rorty agreed with Cavell here, he could concede to Bloom that Shakespeare invented us, while at the same time tearing down the wall of the sublime (which keeps contingency from going all the way down) that Bloom raises when he writes that “you cannot go beyond *Hamlet*.” Whether Rorty would agree with Cavell or not does not affect the fact that Rorty and Bloom disagree on the sublime: Rorty’s strong poets embrace their contingency and finitude while Bloom’s strong poets find it, according to Bloom, “very painful to accept contingency.”<sup>60</sup> Bloom, however, does concede that “Richard Rorty makes the crucial observation that only the strong poet . . . is able to appreciate his own contingency, and thus to appropriate it.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 714.

<sup>58</sup> Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, xxvii.

<sup>59</sup> Cavell, Stanley. *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 52.

<sup>60</sup> Bloom, Harold. *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 236.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

The concluding implications, here, are that Rorty's misreading of the concept of misreading (e.g. that every human engine of creativity is a kind of strong poet) has two consequences. First, importing Bloom's concepts in such an expansive way threatens their meaningfulness with ambiguity. This kind of ambiguity threatens the usefulness of a given concept (a notion both Wittgensteinians and pragmatists share). Second, importing and stretching Bloom's concepts to apply to any and all knowledge-genres in this way diminishes the role of any one strong poet (e.g. Shakespeare). Consequently, the sublime is relegated to the eccentric. What makes Rorty's liberal utopia so interesting, and so unlikely, is that his strong poets have compartmentalized and recast their passions for sublimity into pursuits of eccentricity.

Rorty's liberal utopia is filled with 'liberal ironists.' These are people who are ironic for this reason: they consider the meaningfulness of their lives emanating from the vocabularies they pick but they doubt the finality of all their expressions.<sup>62</sup> Thus, they value new vocabularies and new metaphors because these add new meanings. These new meanings open up new experiences. Language both creates and filters our possible experiences. The most important political experience for the liberal ironist is suffering. According to Rorty, "Liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do."<sup>63</sup> Cruelty has two dimensions: a physical dimension and a psychological dimension. The psychological dimension is Rorty's more interesting contribution.<sup>64</sup> He writes that humiliation is the kind of cruelty that liberal ironists need to be politically motivated to mobilize and campaign against.

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<sup>62</sup> Again, Bloom's concepts are central: "In my view, an ideally liberal polity would be one whose culture here is Bloom's 'strong poet,' rather than the warrior, the priest, the sage, or the truth-seeker, 'logical,' 'objective' scientist." Rorty, *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>64</sup> "She [the liberal ironist] thinks that what unites her with the rest of the species is not a common language but *just* susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans – humiliation." Rorty, *Ibid.*, 92.

An additional, implicit, dimension of irony is that the liberal ironist who is most likely motivated to mobilize and campaign politically *against* cruelty has as his cultural hero the strong poet who is in the business of humiliation. This is circular, but it may not be a vicious circle. First, changes in vocabularies or additional metaphors place continuous experiences under redescription. Redescription is pervasive: “Redescription is a generic trait of the intellectual, not a specific mark of the ironist;” albeit Rorty admits, “Redescription often humiliates.”<sup>65</sup> However, the strong poet who is the “cultural hero” for liberal ironists is in the business of humiliation. There are tropes, as I discussed earlier, within the dynamic of strong misreading that included the fourth trope of a “counter-sublime” and the final trope that solidified the strength of the poet by impressing upon future readers that the precursor will be read in light of the strong poet. These two dynamics are part of what makes humiliation essential for the strong poet. Thus, the literary character O’Brien in Orwell’s *1984* is “in a qualified sense . . . the last ironist in Europe.”<sup>66</sup> Rorty’s description of a “qualified sense” to O’Brien’s irony is the first part of why the strong poet as the cultural hero of the liberal ironist (who, as a liberal ironist, is mobilized against the strong poet’s forms of humiliation) is not caught in a vicious circle.

In order to resolve this vicious circle I am going to construct a distinction between the “invidiously strong poet” (my term) and the “strong poet.”<sup>67</sup> O’Brien is the invidiously strong poet because instead of relying on the strength of poetic redescription he relies on a kind of skill that destroys the redescriptive powers of his precursor. The precursor in this case is the literary character Winston. O’Brien, according to Rorty, tortures Winston psychologically in such a way

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>67</sup> Here I am redescrining a (roughly) parallel distinction that Rorty makes but does not apply to the case of O’Brien. Rorty describes “ironists novelist” and “ironist theorists” (Ibid., 99-100). The former is not too hostile to a successor’s redescription – he expects it as an inevitability (just as Bloom’s strong poet), while the ironist theorist is at his core hostile (just as the ‘invidiously strong poet’ breaks the descriptive powers of his interlocutors). Rorty sides with the former, I prefer to keep the focus on strong poets because, essentially, Rorty is extending Bloom’s concepts here.

that Winston “could never pick up those pieces again.” In other words, Winston is brought to a place where he could not “weave a story around” his own ethical choices in order to keep a coherent self-conception. O’Brien breaks Winston apart and, even worse, breaks his spirit in a way that Winston, himself, cannot feel able to redescribe.

The distinction between the invidiously strong poet and the strong poet works nicely here. O’Brien is a kind of strong poet because of his powers of redescription. He is a paradigm figure of the fourth and fifth tropes of Bloom’s dynamics. However, O’Brien is invidious because he denies Winston the status of the precursor by breaking him rather than redescribing him. In other words, O’Brien neglects, as a strong poet, the first three tropes of Bloom’s conception of strong misreading.

The second reason the distinction between invidiously strong poets and Bloom’s strong poet is useful distinction is that Bloom’s strong poet is battling<sup>68</sup> with a strong precursor for the affections of an audience, future readers; while the invidiously strong poet is battling before no audience but instead wants to deceive the audience into thinking there is no one here but the invidiously strong poet. The invidiously strong poet (e.g. O’Brien) hates individual difference, which in his organization in *1984*, “Big Brother,” crashes through every social barrier and is the antithesis of Walzer’s conception a “world of walls.”<sup>69</sup> This is not to say that Bloom’s strong poet has ethical prescriptions built within it. Indeed, as Rorty has been noted to say earlier in this chapter, the strong poet (on a slimmed pragmatist reading) desires “isolation from common human concerns.” This isolation makes it indifferent to human concerns, thus increasing the likelihood that the poet will humiliate.

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<sup>68</sup> Bloom writes, “The father [precursor] is met in combat, and fought to at least a stand-off, if not quite to a separate peace” (80). Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 80. The metaphor of “father” is distinctly and explicitly a Freudian import; see *Ibid.*, 90-101.

<sup>69</sup> “Liberalism,” Walzer writes, “is a world of walls, and each one creates a new liberty.” See, Walzer, Michael. “Liberalism and the Art of Separation,” in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, 53.



Bloom's strong poet, however, is more likely to cause humiliation than Rorty concedes. The particular kind of humiliation, however, is, ironically, a kind of respect. In order for anxiety to overwhelm the poet he must feel that, by his reading a text, he is in the presence of a strong precursor who is beautiful with words. The strong poet, as noted previously, is the liberal ironist's cultural hero. The Bloomian strong poet's act of humiliation mixed with a kind of deepened respect and devotion to a precursor is a literary feat.<sup>70</sup> Influenced by Derrida who famously quipped there is nothing outside the text, Bloom writes, "there are *no* texts, but only relationships *between* texts."<sup>71</sup> The "between" conveys the combative struggle for autonomy and singularity by strong poets. The struggle, as Bloom describes it, is a "combat" that conveys the strong poet's victory over the precursor involves the kind of redescription that humiliates because being redescribed is exactly what a strong precursor would not want. Time rolls on, redescription is historically inevitable. Yet, autonomy can be achieved if but for a moment. Even more, autonomy is rare; as Rorty writes, "Autonomy is not something which all human beings have within them and which society can release by ceasing to repress them. It is something which certain particular human beings hope to attain by self-creation, and which a few actually do."<sup>72</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre calls the Bloomian strong poet a "somewhat aristocratic conception."<sup>73</sup> Rorty gives the strong poet his more explicitly aristocratic dimensions by describing the social practices involved in becoming a strong poet. Indeed, by retaining Sellars' axiom that all awareness is a linguistic affair, Rorty's liberal ironist is in a special position to attend to suffering. "pain is nonlinguistic," Rorty writes harkening back to Sellars' notion that

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<sup>70</sup> Thus, again, there the strong poet's powers of redescription differ from O'Brien's invidiousness because by breaking Winston's will-to-describe, O'Brien negates the future of his own creativity because strong poets need strong precursors not defeated ones.

<sup>71</sup> Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 3.

<sup>72</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 65.

<sup>73</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair. "Review of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*." *The Journal of Philosophy*. 87, no. 12 (1990): 709.

experience is simple, discrete, and devoid of content, “So victims of cruelty, people who are suffering, do not have much in the way of language. That is why there is no such things as the ‘voice of the oppressed’ or the ‘language of the victims.’” Thereby Rorty constitutes the social role of the intellectual who, having no privileged access to truth, has only a more diverse and expressive access to language. “So the job of putting their [sufferers] situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else.”<sup>74</sup> Rorty writes that the people who are good at this are the “liberal novelist, poet, or journalist.”<sup>75</sup> Rorty is not alone in glorifying the role of, for example, novelists. Martha Nussbaum writes that the novel’s “genre itself, on account of some general features of its structure, generally constructs empathy and compassion in ways highly relevant to citizenship.”<sup>76</sup> Lynn Hunt describes how human rights became “self-evident” when novelists were expounding on the depths of interiority: “the epistolary novel was able to demonstrate that selfhood depended on qualities of ‘interiority.’”<sup>77</sup>

Rorty is adding dimensions and extending the idea of the strong poet in ways Bloom never intended (as with the idea that Newton and Darwin are poets). By this act Rorty is misreading Bloom. Rorty, always looking for a redescription, describes the method of Bloom’s “literary criticism” as,

placing books in the context of other books . . . this placing is done in the same way as we place a new friend or enemy in the context of old friends and enemies. In the course of doing so, we revise our opinions of both the old and the new. Simultaneously, we revise our own moral identity by revising our own final vocabulary.<sup>78</sup>

Rorty, who knowingly wrote of “misreading” in his essay on textualists but failed to mention strong poets then, now, in this book, knowingly writes of “strong poets” but fails to mention

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<sup>74</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 94.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Nussbaum, Martha. *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 10.

<sup>77</sup> Hunt, Lynn. *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007), 48.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

misreading. Instead, here, he describes misreading as “placing.” Rorty writes that “ironists read literary critics” like Harold Bloom, “and take them as moral advisors.”<sup>79</sup> But if the literary critics are the moral advisors of liberal ironists, and if strong poets are the liberal ironist’s cultural hero, then what is the relationship between the moral advisor and the cultural hero? In Rorty’s analysis these two are considered separately. Yet, they seem inextricable, at least in the case of Bloom. Bloom is both critic and poet on Rorty’s reading.

Considering Rorty and Bloom’s agreement on this final point – that the strong poet accepts his own vocabulary as contingent – what are the political implications? Since our language does not correspond to items in the world in an atomistic way correspondence is relegated to a trivial position. The recognition of contingency translates into the recognition of the need for freedom of expression. “An ideal liberal society is one which has no purpose except freedom...the idea of truth as what comes to be believed in the course of free and open encounters.”<sup>80</sup> Peter Lawler interprets Rorty as concluding that, “there are no limits to what political reform might and should achieve, and there are no human limits to the reach of government inspired by therapeutic intellectuals.”<sup>81</sup> But Rorty does not draw that conclusion. It is in fact antithetical to Rorty’s entire enterprise. This time, not in reference to a “liberal society” but to “liberal politics,” Rorty says, “With luck, politics doesn’t permeate all realms of human life. It does in countries like China. But in countries that are better off, it often doesn’t, and I don’t see why anybody would want it to. I think of the aim of liberal politics as leaving as much

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 60, 68. Rorty’s most explicit description here is, “In such an ideal society, discussion of public affairs will revolve around (1) how to balance the needs for peace, wealth, and freedom when conditions require that one of these goals be sacrificed to one of the others and (2) how to equalize opportunities for self-creation and then have leave people alone to use, or neglect, their opportunities,” (Ibid., 85).

<sup>81</sup> Lawler, Peter. *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought*. (New York: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 71.

space for privacy as possible.”<sup>82</sup> But if Rorty wants to leave as much space in the private realm as possible, why does Lawler write, “there is no human limits to the reach of government inspired by therapeutic intellectuals”? Lawler is not engaged in a strong misreading of Rorty but rather in a misunderstanding about Harold Bloom which ends in a cluster of peculiar conclusions.<sup>83</sup> Lawler’s discussion of the way Rorty treats Bloom’s ideas is peculiar. Lawler writes,

Rorty goes on to deconstruct a noteworthy quote from Harold Bloom, one that resonates from the philosophical and poetic traditions: “every poet begins (however ‘unconsciously’) by rebelling more strongly against the fear of death than all other men and women do.” Bloom appears to mean that all men fear death and rebel against it. But poets, or great creators, rebel with special intensity. Rorty gives a different view: “Such people [poets] are...to be thought of as rebelling against ‘death’ – that is, against the failure to have created – more strongly than most of us.” They do not really rebel against the inevitable end of one’s life or existence. “Death,” for the great creator, really means “not having impressed one’s mark on the language,” not having distinguished oneself through creative transformation. So the only “anxiety” felt by human beings and especially poets is that of not having any influence.<sup>84</sup>

When Lawler describes that “Bloom appears to mean that all men fear death and rebel against it,” he is engaged in what I call “deliberate misunderstanding” as opposed to “strong misreading.” Rorty is reading Bloom as a strong misreader – Rorty knowingly manipulates

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<sup>82</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Postphilosophical Politics. Interviewed by Danny Postel. *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself*, 31.

<sup>83</sup> Lawler writes, polemically, that according to Rorty, “All of our experiences are a linguistic or poetic creation. We cannot say that they mirror any aspect of reality at all.” Lawler, Peter. *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought*, 45. In my chapter “Rorty and Analytic Philosophy” I showed that Rorty’s philosophy of language has – through the years – revealed inconsistencies; however, both of Lawler’s sentences in the aforementioned quotation are couched in the wrong language (Lawler nowhere quotes Wittgenstein, Sellars, or Davidson). Although Lawler calls himself a “postmodern[ist] rightly understood,” Rorty would call him a modernist trapped treating philosophy as the mirror of nature, Lawler writes, “There is some correspondence between human thought and the way things really are” (Ibid., 2). Rorty would respond, “of course there is correspondence but what sense can we give to ‘the way things really are’?” Rorty’s response to Susan Haack would be identical as his response to Lawler: “Everything turns on whether there are criteria for truth *distinct from* criteria for justification to the best, most critical, and most informed audience that I can imagine...Unless we can provide a criterion for achieving truth different from our criterion for achieving justification, there will be no way to answer, and thus no point in posing the question, Am I using the right standards?” (Rorty, “Response to Susan Haack,” in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, 148.). Lawler quotes Charles Hartshorne from the collection of essays that includes Haack, but Lawler does not engage Rorty on the issue of the distinction between criteria-for-justification and criteria-for-truth. Lawler does mention the former, but he does not mention the criteria for the distinction.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 44.

Bloom as part of Rorty's acceptance of the dynamics of misreading (they are inevitable for strong poets who suffer from the anxiety of influence). Lawler, however, is reading Bloom as a deliberate misunderstander – Lawler, as a realist, would reject Bloom's concepts of strong poet and the notion of misreading and therefore does not perform a strong misreading on Bloom as a part of his own anxiety of influence. The consequence is that Lawler is not misreading but simply misunderstanding. I call this misunderstanding "deliberate," because the quotation of Bloom that he lifts from Rorty's book and isolates is only one page away from another quotation that fills out the connection between rebelling against death and the anxiety that grows from being in the shadow of a precursor-poet. Lawler's goal is to describe pragmatists like Rorty by saying "that the human goal must be to free human beings from being moved by death at all."<sup>85</sup> Rorty and Bloom, together, are saying something much more complicated than that. As Bloom writes, "Reductively, the anxiety of influence *is* the fear of death, and a poet's vision of the vigilance of immortality includes a freedom from influence."<sup>86</sup> This freedom from influence is the crucial Bloomian trope which Lawler misses and which Rorty extends to justify limited state interference society's private realm where – at long last – a sense of autonomy germinates.

The contrast between Lawler's reading and my own highlights an important difference. Lawler summarizes Rorty as if Rorty is dismissive of Bloom, whereas I argue that Rorty has deeply internalized Bloom. If I am right, and Lawler is wrong, then we must take Rorty seriously when he writes "I think of the aim of liberal politics as leaving as much space for privacy as possible."<sup>87</sup> Rorty elaborates on the discussion of private space by affiliating himself with Mill's no-harm doctrine: "Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>86</sup> Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 198.

<sup>87</sup> Rorty, Richard. "Postphilosophical Politics. Interviewed by Danny Postel. *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself*, 31.

optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word."<sup>88</sup> But this balance is peculiar. Wherever the balance is, that is where the sliver of light that is Rorty's "liberal utopia" resides.

But this liberal utopia is peculiar indeed. To repeat, the liberal ironist follows the mantra that "cruelty is the worst thing we do," and the most relevant form of cruelty (in a liberal democracy) is that of humiliation. At the same time, the liberal ironist's cultural hero is the strong poet and this poet both humiliates and respects his precursors. Thus the paradox: the liberal ironist wants to become the individuated hero who he is also politically mobilized in order to stop. Instead of harmonizing our public moral obligations with our private sense of self, Rorty gives us a clash, an unending give and take:

On the *public* side of our lives, *nothing* is less dubious than the worth of those freedoms. On the *private* side of our lives, there may be much which is *equally* hard to doubt, for example, our love or hatred for a particular person, the need (like the fact that we may belong to several communities and thus have conflicting *moral* obligations, as well as conflicts between moral obligations and private commitments) generates dilemmas. Such dilemmas we shall always have with us, but they are never going to be resolved by appeal to some further, higher set of obligations.<sup>89</sup>

While Nehamas agrees with my argument that there is a dimension of "cruelty involved" in Bloom's notion of the anxiety of influence, Nehamas misses the full picture of the strong poet as both the paradigm and the problem of Rorty's liberal utopia. Nehamas writes, "Having denied that they are the same [the public realm of solidarity and the private realm of self-creation], he [Rorty] seems to conclude that they are totally irrelevant to one another."<sup>90</sup> Nehamas, like Lawler, misses the dynamics involved when Rorty appropriated Bloom's concept of the strong poet.

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<sup>88</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 63.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>90</sup> Nehamas, Alexander. "A Touch of the Poet," *Raritan*, 125.

I want to conclude by propping up a division I already discussed in my introductory chapter. It is convenient to divide Rorty's writings into two periods: the period surrounding the time of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where Rorty was in the business of providing a critique of philosophy; and the period after the writing of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. This division is neither arbitrary nor highly contrastive. However, there is one important change which highlights the influence of Harold Bloom. Rorty writes in 1979, "Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause."<sup>91</sup> By 1989, Rorty had sided with the "liberal novelists," over the edifying philosophers. What Nietzsche and Heidegger were doing as edifying philosophers was inferior to what Proust and Orwell were doing as liberal novelists. In my narrative of Rorty's intellectual transition, pragmatism plays a real but diminished role. Rorty believes that James and Dewey charted the course for a healthy future for American philosophy professors.<sup>92</sup> In this sense James and Dewey are engaged in the same conversations as philosophers and therefore more likely to persuade them to stop taking philosophical problems seriously than novelists. Yet, Rorty took a further turn, away from pragmatism, which he has trouble explaining. With an ironic tone, Rorty tells of how he wanted to redefine the title of his last academic position, "I suggested I be called Transitory Professor of Trendy Studies, but nobody liked the idea."<sup>93</sup> Rorty has aligned himself with the poets, and mocks his former life.

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<sup>91</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 370.

<sup>92</sup> See, Rorty, Richard. "Intellectual Historians and Pragmatist Philosophy," in *A Pragmatist's Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*, 208.

<sup>93</sup> Rorty, *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies*, 56.

## Chapter 5: Rorty's Wedge between Liberalism and Communitarianism

Most every conclusion that Rorty has reached has been called into question by one or another critic. Rorty's approval of John Rawls' writings on justice is another example. Rorty, in writing about Rawls, is only concerned with the question of whether or not a society can function with a moral standard for justice without a transcendent standard for justice that would apply to all societies for all times. Once Rawls began writing such works as *Political Liberalism*, *The Law of Peoples*, and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Rorty became an advocate of Rawlsian liberalism. But Rorty's advocacy is peculiar indeed.

I have already cast doubt on the relative importance Rorty places on pragmatism in chapter two. In my third chapter, I described how Rorty affiliation with pragmatism is in tension with his desire to complete the turn in linguistic philosophy to the Sellarsian conclusion that all awareness is a linguistic affair. This tension was brought out by Davidson to whom Rorty conceded that he ought to drop the pragmatist theory of truth. Later, Ramberg convinced Rorty to pick back up a pragmatist theory of truth which returned Rorty to an uncomfortable acceptance of some kind of minimalist correspondence-talk (Rorty would deny that there is anything like a "theory" which can emerge out of his concession to talking about correspondence like a realist). Meanwhile, the most outstanding feature of that chapter was Rorty's felt need to owe something to pragmatism. Rorty's sense of a need for allegiance to pragmatism struck Davidson as peculiar. In chapter four, I described a group of Bloomian metaphors which most likely explain Rorty's post-philosophic proposals. Now in this fifth chapter, I am going to continue chartering this small map of how Rorty misreads and continue the discussion begun in the third chapters concerning his weakness and vacillations.



In this chapter I will pursue three topics. First, Rorty's writings on Rawls show a strong misreading. Second, Rawls' writing on public reason seems to create the kind of discourse that Rorty's liberal ironist would oppose. Third, Rorty's liberalism, which is a sharp division between the private realm of self creation and the public realm of obligation and solidarity, is broken by Rorty's own narrative of American political history. This tension both highlights Rorty's wedge between liberalism and communitarianism and it calls his position into question. I conclude noting that Rorty's support for democratic deliberation is basically Rawlsian liberalism emphasizing primarily the Deweyian notion that democratic culture does not need a rational basis. What makes Rorty wedged between liberalism and communitarianism, however, is that the sense in which the strong poet *needs* strong precursors implicitly takes on the political dimensions of an allegiance. Rorty's communitarianism is a kind of collectivized and distributed notion of strong precursors. This explains why Rorty glorifies the "Reformist Left" of Progressive Era and charts a narrative through American history that his felt need for allegiance would find compatible. In other words, Although Rorty's values stem from his allegiance to modern democratic liberalism (e.g. Deweyian), he values allegiance *qua* allegiance by virtue of Harold Bloom's influence.

## **Rorty's Strong Misreading of Rawls**

There are two dimensions to Rorty's misreading of Rawls. First, Rorty misreads Rawls' entire writings as if they were in continuity, while Rawls himself believes he has altered his philosophical position substantively. Second, Rorty misreads Rawls into an alliance with Michael Walzer. Walzer, implicit in his writings, rejects this alliance and would, I argue, think that the alliance misses the more substantive debates. If I am correct, then explaining the way Rorty reads John Rawls is part of the map of Rorty's political misreading.

Philip Pettit, among others, has argued that after J. S. Mill and until the late 1950s, political philosophy was dead and silent. During that time political theory, “ceased to be an area of active exploration . . . there was little or nothing of significance published in political philosophy itself.”<sup>1</sup> Pettit goes on to note watershed moments for the revival of political philosophy and focuses on the contribution of John Rawls.<sup>2</sup> However, Andrew Vincent has responded that to characterize this period as “bereft of political philosophy” is “far-fetched and odd.”<sup>3</sup> Vincent then goes on to list twenty-nine names of political philosophers who were significant, including, Arendt, Strauss, Voegelin, Oakeshott, and Dewey, among others. But it goes without saying that the method and substance of John Rawls’ writings on justice were seminal. Rorty, in particular, did not publish anything on Rawls until after Rawls had conceded that “Political philosophy has no special access to fundamental truths, or reasonable ideas, about justice and the common good, or to other basic notions.”<sup>4</sup> The moment Rawls began to believe this was not part of an epiphany, but rather, it occurred to him through the give and take of debate with his critics like Michael Sandel and Michael Walzer. But once Rawls did concede that, he became a strong-precursor for Rorty’s fodder.

Rawls’ early writings, in such works as *A Theory of Justice*, were being accused of prioritizing a conception of justice that focuses on the procedures rather than substance. Thinking about justice, then, is orientated toward the correctness of the procedures we use to make conclusions about justice rather than the conclusions themselves. Rawls writes,

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<sup>1</sup> Pettit, Philip. “The contribution of analytic philosophy,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy. Blackwell Companions to Philosophy*. Goodin, Robert E., and Philip Pettit, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Pettit quotes the theorist Brian Berry who uses the words “watershed that divides” to describe the revival of political philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent, Andrew. *The Nature of Political Theory*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 93.

<sup>4</sup> Rawls, John. *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

It is not our aims that primarily reveal our nature but rather the principles that we would acknowledge to govern the background conditions under which these aims are to be formed . . . We should therefore reverse the relation between the right and the good proposed by teleological doctrines and view the right as prior.<sup>5</sup>

The right is prior to the good. On Sandel's reading, Rawls' picture carries with it a conception of the self. Rawls' famed construction of parties behind a veil of ignorance in the original position choosing a conception of justice is, according to Sandel, presupposing a conception of the autonomy of the will. Taking care of the right procedures (e.g. a veil of ignorance) carries with it a conception of the self which chooses ends independent of its core constitution. "Only if the self is prior to its ends can the right be prior to the good," Sandel writes. These selves, according to Sandel, are "unencumbered" and they therefore voluntarily cooperate in community settings. All the while, these unencumbered selves are not totally part, not completely defined by, their relation to a community or to any ends. Nothing, on this reading of the self, is constitutive of the self, other than its capacity to will ends. When ends are chosen, they do not become part of the unencumbered's self's definitions of him. Charles Taylor has called this "procedural justice" and concludes that it is one of the "malaises" of modernity, resulting in the diminishing value of substantive moral arguments.<sup>6</sup> Samuel Freeman summarizes what Taylor and Sandel share in common: "For communitarians our moral identity is given by the final ends and commitments we affirm, and these are provided to us by social contexts and the community with which we identify or within which we share."<sup>7</sup>

Rawls, however, amended his arguments in such works as *Political Liberalism* and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. In the latter work, he characterized his initial flaw as

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Sandel, Michael, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," in *The Public Philosophy: Essays in the Morality of Politics*, 162-63.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 51. See however, Ruth Abbey's remarks that Taylor's conception of a consensus on the status of international human rights issues should take the form of a Rawlsian "overlapping consensus." See, Abbey, Ruth. *Charles Taylor*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 132.

<sup>7</sup> Freeman, *Rawls*, 304-05.

presenting his conception of justice as a comprehensive moral doctrine. The problem of the comprehensive position was that in order to adopt Rawls' view of justice as fairness *everyone* had to affirm it in the same way. In his latter works, Rawls adopted the view that what was needed for a well ordered society that affirmed justice as fairness was minimally an overlapping consensus between differing conceptions and standards for justice. By requiring this minimal overlapping consensus Rawls is able to deflect the argument that he is presenting a conception of the self as unencumbered. Rawls now offers a political conception of justice. He writes in his preface to *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* that what is needed for a shift from justice as fairness as a comprehensive moral doctrine to a political conception of justice is a cluster of new ideas including: "overlapping consensus," "reasonable pluralism," "public basis of justification and public reason," and "the burdens of judgment."<sup>8</sup>

But before Rawls developed these new concepts fully, Rorty recognized Rawls' shift away from a comprehensive moral doctrine and instead of predicting that Rawls would need a new cluster of concepts to explain the shift, Rorty reread Rawls' earlier works as if there was never a shift. This is a Bloomian misreading. Rorty is hoping that we will reread Rawls in light of his discover of, for example, a kind of counter-sublime (e.g. the acceptance of philosophical contingencies).

Rorty's writings on Rawls occur primarily in two essays, "The priority of democracy to philosophy," and "Justice as a larger loyalty." In his first writings on Rawls, Rorty begins,

Rawls, following up on Dewey, shows us how liberal democracy can get along without philosophical presuppositions . . . But I shall also argue that communitarians like Taylor are right in saying that a conception of the self that makes the community constitutive of the self does comport well with liberal democracy. That is, if we *want* to flesh out our self-image as citizens of such a democracy with a philosophical view of the self, Taylor gives us pretty much the right view.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rawls, John. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, xvii.

<sup>9</sup> Rorty, Richard. "The priority of democracy to philosophy," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*," 179.

Rorty here refers to the inevitability of self-fashioning out of larger communal influences. There is no analytical possibility of a pure unencumbered self purely veiled behind ignorance. However, Rorty's liberal ironist (whose cultural hero is the strong poet) is, in a sense, unencumbered. The liberal ironist is unencumbered by the finality of his own vocabulary. The totalizing qualities of final vocabularies which refer back to first principles of justification (e.g. materialism or idealism) are held by Rorty's liberals in an ironic way. Thus in one sense the self is constituted by the community, in another sense no one community demarcate the liberal ironist's ultimate intentions. In other words, Rorty is wedged between communitarianism and liberalism.

Rawls used the term "reasonable" to impose restriction on the knowledge of parties behind the veil of ignorance in the original position. When Rorty first read that, he interpreted reasonable to mean "ahistorical criteria" but after Rawls' more explicit shift away from a comprehensive moral doctrine, Rorty misreads Rawls' past use of reasonable to mean "in accord with the moral sentiments characteristic of the heirs of the Enlightenment."<sup>10</sup> Rorty concludes this because Rawls wrote that behind the veil of ignorance in the original position the parties know "the general facts about society" which include "that institutions are not fixed but change over time" and Rawls uses that fact to persuade the parties in the original position that a "feudal or a caste system" will not be appropriate for a conception of justice as fairness.<sup>11</sup> Rorty concludes that parties in the original position "exemplify a certain modern type of human being,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 180.

not an ahistorical human nature.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, Rorty writes, “Rawls’ writings subsequent to *A Theory of Justice* have helped us realize that we were misinterpreting his book.”<sup>13</sup>

In response to Sandel who writes of Rawls that if the self is prior to its ends then the right is prior to the good, Rorty writes, “But reading *A Theory of Justice* as political rather than metaphysical, one can see that . . . he [Rawls] need not mean that there is an entity called ‘the self’ that is something distinct from the web of beliefs and desires that that self ‘has.’”<sup>14</sup>

Freeman’s reading of Rawls, on this limited point, is the same as Rorty’s reading of Rawls.<sup>15</sup>

Freeman and Rorty agree that there is no inherent metaphysical conception of the self in Rawls early writings. However, what Rorty misreads is the larger issue that the debate of the “Rawlsian self” plays only a part. The question of the unencumbered Rawlsian self is a question of whether there is a universal standard (embedded in our nature in this instance) that our political and cultural institutions can and should support and reflect. Rorty construes Rawls’ concept of “reasonable” to mean “in accord with the moral sentiments characteristic of the heirs of the Enlightenment.”<sup>16</sup> But the real issue is neither about sentiments nor about our historical place as heirs of the Enlightenment.

Both Freeman and Rawls agree, against Rorty, that the issue is properly the status of trans-cultural standards which are not specific to any culture or set of historical institutions. This is why Rawls refers to the doctrine he rejects as a “comprehensive moral doctrine.” Freeman

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 180-81.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> See Freeman, *Rawls*, 305-06. Rorty reads Rawls as a cultural relativist because all Rawls is trying to describe is our considered convictions about justice that grow out of our democratic ideals. Freeman disagrees with reading Rawls this way and argues that Rawlsian moral constructivism “affirms a universal conception of moral objectivity and applies fundamental moral principles to all persons capable of understanding moral requirements, no matter how culturally situated.” Ibid., 291.

<sup>16</sup> Rorty, Richard. “The priority of democracy to philosophy,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*,” 183. Nussbaum makes an important distinction that Rorty misses. She writes, “benevolent sentiments . . . do not belong to the parties in the original position [it instead] belong to the model as a whole; as the citizens in the well ordered society are imagined as having such sentiments.” See Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, 64.

writes, “Rawls thinks in *A Theory of Justice* that justice as fairness applies to ascertain the degree of justice or injustice in any society, regardless of how people there think of themselves.”<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the Rawls of *Political Liberalism* and *Justice as Fairness* only begins with our moral sentiments as heirs of the Enlightenment, but it does not remain precisely “in accord.” Sandel, writing a follow-up to Rorty’s article describes the difference well.

On [Rorty’s] view, Rawls is not “supplying philosophical foundations for democratic institutions, but simply trying to systematize the principles and intuitions typical of American liberals.” Rorty endorses what he takes to be Rawls’ pragmatic turn, a turn away from the notion that liberal political arrangements require a philosophical justification . . . in a theory of the human subject. “Insofar as justice becomes the first virtue of a society,” Rorty writes, “the need for such legitimation may gradually cease to be felt. Such a society will become accustomed to the thought that social policy needs no more authority than successful accommodation among individuals . . . who find themselves heir to the same historical traditions and faced with the same problems. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls pulls back from this purely pragmatic account. Although justice as fairness begins “by looking to the public culture itself as the shared fund of implicitly recognized basic ideas and principles,” it does not affirm these principles simply on the ground that they are widely shared. Though Rawls argues that his principles of justice could gain the support of an overlapping consensus, the overlapping consensus he seeks “is not a mere *modus vivendi*,” or compromise among conflicting views. Adherents of different moral and religious conceptions begin by endorsing the principles of justice for reasons drawn from within their own conceptions. But, if all goes well, they come to support those principles as expressing important political values.<sup>18</sup>

The salience of the idea of an overlapping consensus for a political conception of justice over and against the comprehensive moral doctrine of *A Theory of Justice* means that Rorty is caught in a peculiar dilemma.<sup>19</sup> If Rorty argues that Rawls should be reread (against Rawls’ way of reading himself) as writing a systematized, historicist description of the “principles and intuitions typical of American liberals” then Rawls is consequently incoherent and unsystematic considering his needs for a new family of concepts (e.g. overlapping consensus, public reason,

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<sup>17</sup> Freeman, *Rawls*, 291-92.

<sup>18</sup> Sandel, Michael. “Political Liberalism,” in *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics*, 222.

<sup>19</sup> “An overlapping consensus, therefore, is not merely a consensus on accepting certain authorities, or on complying with certain institutional arrangements, based on a contingent, or historical, convergence of self- or group-interests.” Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 195.

reasonable pluralism, burdens of judgment, etc.). As a result, I argue that the best way to read Rorty's writing on Rawls is to consider Rawls' move to political liberalism and away from comprehensive liberalism as revealing Rawls' relevance as a strong precursor for Rorty.

On this Bloomian reading of Rorty, Rorty's desire for us to read Rawls' earlier works in light of a counter-sublime (contingency is Rorty's counter-sublime) is akin to Bloom's sixth trope in the strong poet's drive for autonomy. The strong poet returns to the writings of the precursor in order to present the precursor to a future audience as part of the strong poet himself. This would also explain why Rorty's reading of the parties in the original position, who are "mutually disinterested," is to be reread as mutually interested to "justify their choice to their fellows."<sup>20</sup> It could not, logically, be the case that the parties behind the veil of ignorance in the original position could be mutually interested to justify their choices to their fellows because as Michael Walzer writes, "for his [Rawls'] purposes, no more than one speaker is necessary. What we hear from behind the veil of ignorance is really a philosophical soliloquy."<sup>21</sup>

## **Rorty and Public Reason**

Nine years after he wrote, "The priority of democracy to philosophy," Rorty returned to Rawls in "Justice as a larger loyalty." At this later point, Rawls had already written *Political Liberalism* and *The Law of Peoples*. Rorty, still largely in agreement, writes, "Practical reason for Rawls is, so to speak, a matter of procedure rather than substance – of how we agree on what to do rather than of what we agree on."<sup>22</sup> It makes sense that Rorty, who as an antifoundationalist and antiessentialist, would prioritize *how* we agree rather than *what* we agree (e.g. "take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself"). This is in keeping with a kind of

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<sup>20</sup> Compare Rorty, "The priority of democracy to philosophy," 184 footnote 22 with Freeman's *Rawls*, 149-151.

<sup>21</sup> Walzer, Michael. "A Critique of Philosophical Conversation," in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Rorty, Richard. "Justice as larger loyalty," in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 51.



liberalism. The right is still prior to the good even if Sandel's description of the self as prior to its ends has lost its import. Stephen Mulhall writes noting how Rawls' description of how the right and good are complimentary still prioritizes the right:

Rawls in his more recent work . . . requires a societally endorsed common understanding of what is of value in political community. But that common understanding is of the right, not the good. It is the genuinely common good of the rule of law, or respect for one another's rights as citizens, and it can form the basis of a powerful notion of patriotism. But such forms of procedural liberalism continue to eschew any form of citizen identification that is based on a broader common conception of the good life of human beings embodied in political institutions and actions, for any such common good would violate citizens' rights to equal respect before the law.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, when Rawls writes that "the right and the good are complimentary," Mulhall responds that the values of the good are only the ones compatible with the right.<sup>24</sup> Sandel adds that Rawls "rescues the priority of the right from controversies about the nature of the self only at the cost of rendering it vulnerable on other grounds."<sup>25</sup> Sandel argues that Rawls description of public discourse cannot abide certain topics. For Sandel, the idea that "grave moral questions" are bracketed out of public discourse is an "unduly severe restriction" that would "impoverish political discourse."<sup>26</sup>

Rorty has said of Walzer, "I think his take on contemporary politics and mine are pretty much identical." Yet Walzer would side here with Sandel against Rorty concerning the vacuity of Rawlsian public discourse. Walzer has called into question the whole project of constructivism. He calls Rawls social contract theory a "constructed conversation," "where the whole purpose of the construction or design is to produce conversational endings."<sup>27</sup> For Rorty, "the point of Rawls . . . is one in which the only test of a political proposal is its ability to gain

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<sup>23</sup> Mulhall, Stephen. "Articulating the Horizons of Liberalism: Taylor's Political Philosophy," in *Charles Taylor. Contemporary Philosophy in Focus*. Edited by Abbey, Ruth. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 115.

<sup>24</sup> Rawls concedes as much; see Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 140-145.

<sup>25</sup> Sandel, "Political Liberalism," in *Public Philosophy: Essays in the Morality of Politics*, 223.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-30, 239-47.

<sup>27</sup> Walzer, "A Critique of Philosophical Conversation," in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, 22.

assent from people who retain radically diverse ideas.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, for example, religion needs to be privatized because it is a “conversation-stopper.”<sup>29</sup> Walzer, however, is calling the whole Rawlsian project into question: “Rawls guarantees agreement with his veil of ignorance, which separates the speakers from any reasons they might have for disagreeing.”<sup>30</sup> Rawls has called the veil of ignorance a “device of representation” and “a thought-experiment for the purpose of public- and self-clarification.”<sup>31</sup> But these speakers behind the veil of ignorance in the original position can never be there – even hypothetically, the device has its heuristic limits. Parties in the original position “cannot *be there*,” Walzer writes, “even hypothetically, lest they gather information for themselves and make mistakes.” Rorty’s allegiance to Rawls in support of a kind of political liberalism works against Rorty’s belief that public discourse should never end the conversation.

Rorty has written glowingly that Dewey has helped us see that we ought to “abandon the attempt to find a theoretical frame of reference within which to evaluate proposals for the human future . . . what he dreaded was stasis.”<sup>32</sup> But a theoretical framework to evaluate proposals for the human future is exactly what parties behind the veil of ignorance in the original position are supposed to do as they choose based on their considered convictions which the public conception of justice will apply to the basic structures of society. Writing against Rawlsian constructivism, Walzer describes an arrival at a conception of a just society

Through a conversation that is constrained, indeed, by ordinary constraints of everyday life: the pressure of time, the structure of authority, the discipline of parties and movements, the patterns of socialization and education, the established procedures of institutional life. Without any constraints at all, conversation would never produce even those conventional (and temporary) stops which we call decisions or verdicts; because of

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<sup>28</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Religion as Conversation-stopper,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 173.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>30</sup> Walzer, “A Critique of Philosophical Conversation,” in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 20.

the constraints, every stopping point will appear, to some of the speakers, arbitrary and imposed<sup>33</sup>

Walzer's descriptions of the "ordinary constraints of everyday life" grind to a halt Rorty's hope that every new metaphor will receive a public hearing. Rorty writes, "the most appropriate foundation of a liberal democracy is a conviction by its citizens that things will go better for everybody if every new metaphor is given a hearing."<sup>34</sup> Walzer's response would be that giving every new metaphor a hearing would be like giving *no* metaphor a hearing; a cacophony would result. Rorty's description of the omnivorous ears who hear all metaphors is, ironically, parallel with what Walzer describes as Rawls' "hypothetical conversations tak[ing] place in a social space."<sup>35</sup> Rorty writes, "your devotion to democracy is unlikely to be wholehearted if you believe, as monotheists typically do, that we can have knowledge of an 'objective' ranking of human needs that can overrule the results of democratic consensus." But Walzer would respond to Rorty – your devotion to democracy is unlikely wholehearted if you believe, as Rawlsians typically do, that we can have knowledge of an 'objective' ranking of democratic values that can overrule the results of democratic consensus.

David Owen asks a good question, "Should Rorty, as a liberal ironist, accept Rawls' conception of public reason, that is, the rules of preclusion which Rawls proposes on the sorts of reason which may be appropriately expressed in public political debates on fundamental matters?"<sup>36</sup> Owen concludes that Rorty should reject Rawls rules of preclusion because it curbs the liberal ironist's ability to express himself against cruelty as the *summum malum*.<sup>37</sup> Rorty, in

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<sup>33</sup> Walzer, "A Critique of Philosophical Conversation," in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Owen, David. "The Avoidance of Cruelty: Joshing Rorty on Liberalism, Scepticism and Ironism," in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*. Festenstein, Matthew, and Simon Thompson, eds. (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2001), 105.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

his response paper is unconvinced that his liberal ironist should reject the rules of preclusion. I suspect that the question is correct but Owen's argument goes in the wrong direction.

## Rorty and Narration

In order to set Owen's question in the right direction, I want to discuss how Rawls' rules of preclusion would affect what Rorty calls "we-intentions." Rorty argues that we-intentions is a metaphor for a distinction that helps separate the "ethical considerations which arise from one's sense of solidarity and ethical considerations which arise from, for example, one's attachment to a particular person, or one's idiosyncratic attempt to create oneself anew."<sup>38</sup> What Rorty cannot fit within his own distinction is a way to describe a we-intention, we creates *us* anew.

Rorty begins *Achieving Our Country* with the pithy remark, "National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement."<sup>39</sup> Rorty's reason for taking national pride is in the notion that America itself is the greatest poem. America is a nation of self creation. This description that America is a creation out of nothing is a common refrain. Joseph Joffe writes,

America was practically *ex nihilo* the original state of nature, as in Locke's imagination, when he famously proclaimed in the *Second Treatise*: "In the beginning all the world was America. The country was not *in* history, to use a Hegelianism; it was deployed *against* history. It was the first polity that made itself, so to speak; it was not the fruit of royal conquest, like England, Spain, and France, or of wars of national unification like Germany. It was of Europe, but it left Europe."<sup>40</sup>

Walzer adds, "The members of liberal society share no political or religious traditions; they can tell only one story about themselves and that is the story of *ex nihilo* creation, which begins in

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<sup>38</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 194.

<sup>39</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Joffe, Joseph. "A Canvas, Not a Country: How Europe Sees America," in *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation*. Schuck, Peter H., and James Q. Wilson, eds. (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 600.

the state of nature or the original position.”<sup>41</sup> In addition, Harold Bloom writes, “Something in the American self is persuaded that it also preceded the created world.”<sup>42</sup> Rorty exclaims,

Whitman thought that we Americans have the most poetical nature because we are the first thoroughgoing experiment in national self-creation: the first nation-state with nobody but itself to please – not even God. We are the greatest poem because we put ourselves in the place of God: our essence is our existence, and our existence is in the future.<sup>43</sup>

A few years before Rorty wrote those words, Bloom gave Whitman the position of first typifying the dueling self of the liberal ironist: a self interested in self creation and a self interested in obligation and solidarity. The latter is always in tension with the former. Bloom writes,

Walt Whitman is our Hermetic national poet, our celebrant of the American self, but he sings two selves at once. One is Walt Whitman, an American one of the roughs, endless merging into groups, but the other is “the real me” or “me myself,” absolutely fragile, always standing apart. Two American selves (at the least) . . .<sup>44</sup>

The problem, as Walzer points out, is that there is only *one* story Americans can tell themselves and that is the story of creation *ex nihilo* and according to Bloom and Rorty, Whitman is the American Adam. This one story sustains the private realm of self creation, yet, all the while it preserves only the memory of a public realm of self creation. That memory was the last moment of public self creation. This is liberalism.

Rorty was quoted earlier to have agreed with Charles Taylor that “a conception of the self that makes the community constitutive of the self does comport well with liberal democracy.”<sup>45</sup>

Now, agreeing with one dimension of liberalism, Taylor writes, “where formerly poetic language could rely on certain publicly available orders of meaning, it now has to consist in a language of

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<sup>41</sup> Walzer, Michael. “A Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,” in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, 97.

<sup>42</sup> Bloom, Harold. *The American Religion*. 2nd ed. (New York: Chu Hartley Publishers, 2006), 15.

<sup>43</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Bloom, *The American Religion*, 9. He writes in the later addition of the book, “Walt Whitman was America’s Adam” (304).

<sup>45</sup> Rorty, “The priority of democracy to philosophy,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*,” 179.

articulated sensibility.”<sup>46</sup> This articulated sensibility is the articulation of the poet’s “own world of references.”<sup>47</sup> But this world of references is not a solipsism but rather a “subtler language” where we are made “aware of something in nature for which there are as yet no adequate words.”<sup>48</sup> Taylor calls that “something in nature” a “moral horizon.” Bloom too has a moral horizon, “You cannot get beyond *Hamlet*,” Bloom muses, “Hamlet himself is a frontier of consciousness yet to be passed.”<sup>49</sup> Rorty, however, has no Hamlet, except maybe himself. Rorty cannot embrace Taylor’s subtler language because that itself creates the kind of horizon that makes both a purist form of pragmatism and a purist division between public and private unsatisfying.

Back to Owen’s question now, the reason Rorty should have rejected Rawls public conception of reason as rules of precluding certain kinds of discourse is because the nature of the relationship between the poetic and the subject of poetry – the sublime – will not allow for such rules of preclusion. Poetic discourse limits itself, as Walzer writes, “Poetry leaves in the minds of its readers some intimation of the poet’s truth. Nothing so coherent as a philosophical statement, nothing so explicit as a legal injunction: a poem is never more than a partial and unsystematic truth [that can be] communicated but never directly implemented.”<sup>50</sup> But as Walzer has also been quoted to say, liberalism can only tell itself one story, the creation of itself *ex nihilo*. This means that there is no poetry left for the public realm of solidarity. The role of poetry in the public realm will now only be the kind that rouses moral sympathies to the problems of cruelty and humiliation. Poetry, after the initial act of collective self-creation, cannot do the same work anymore.

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<sup>46</sup> Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 84.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Walzer, Michael. “Philosophy and Democracy,” in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, 4.

## Rorty and Metaphors Revisited

In “What Metaphors Mean,” Davidson writes, “Metaphor is the dreamwork of language and, like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator.”<sup>51</sup> Metaphors, he argues, mean their most literal interpretation, but their *use* is what is important. “No theory of metaphorical meaning . . . can help explain how metaphor works.”<sup>52</sup> Kirk Ludwig summarizes Davidson writing, “It is a mistake to think that metaphors function by virtue of having a special kind of meaning – metaphorical meaning; instead, they function in virtue of their literal meanings.”<sup>53</sup> But how then do metaphors function if not to convey their meaning? Rorty concludes, “we can say that we come to understand metaphors in the same way that we come to understand anomalous natural phenomena. We do so by revising our theories so as to fit them around the new material . . . by casting around for possible revisions in our theories.”<sup>54</sup> Metaphors are a voice “from outside logical space, rather than an empirical filling-up of a portion of that space.”<sup>55</sup> Rorty writes, “When a metaphor is created it does not *express* something which previously existed, although, it is *caused by* something that previously existed.”<sup>56</sup> Rorty’s rather striking political implication is, “the most appropriate foundation of a liberal democracy is a conviction by its citizens that things will go better for everybody if every new metaphor is given a hearing.”<sup>57</sup> As I noted in the third chapter, drawing on Walzer, this is both impossible and not necessarily an intrinsic good. However, I want to add, now, that the idea that a liberal democracy has as its foundation the premise that every new metaphor is given a hearing does not quite resonate with Rawls. Rawls wrote in “The Idea of Public Reason

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<sup>51</sup> Davidson, Donald. “What Metaphors Mean,” in *The Essential Davidson*, 209.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>53</sup> Ludwig, Krik. “Introduction,” in *Donald Davidson. Contemporary Philosophy in Focus*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Unfamiliar noises: Hesse and Davidson on metaphor,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 167.

<sup>55</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics,” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers*, 13.

<sup>56</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 37.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

Revisited,” that new metaphors can be introduced into the realm of a public conception of justice so long as they are introduced under “the proviso” that they can be adjusted over time to meet the public minimum of a justification based on an overlapping consensus.<sup>58</sup> This proviso will inevitably have a chilling-effect on the kinds of metaphors which are introduced. How can Rorty justify limiting the public realm of open democratic discourse in a Rawlsian way? I suspect that Rorty’s desire for a private realm of self-creation where strong poets flourish with limited constraints would trump his naïve view that a modern liberal democracy can or even should give every metaphor a chance. Rorty would have to concede, the last metaphor for liberal democracy is collective self-creation, *ex nihilo*. All other narratives must remain in the private realm. What, then, does a private realm of experimentation look like?

Rorty gives himself as an example of a private realm of experimentation. Ironically enough, Rorty’s own experimentation with his experiences as a leftist intellectual are redescribed in different ways as both a form of self-expression (private self-creation) and as an attempt to build solidarity (public warranted-assertability). Rorty’s pragmatism is his experimentation with metaphors. Examples abound once Rorty’s writings are seen synoptically. He labeled his view “epistemological behaviorism” in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. He later called himself a pragmatist in *Consequences of Pragmatism* but later called himself a “neopragmatist” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*. In “The Unpatriotic Academy,” reprinted in *Philosophy and Social Hope* Rorty refers to “traditional American pluralism” in contrast to “multiculturalism” while in *Achieving Our Country* Rorty converted these terms to the “Reformist Left” in contrast to the “Cultural Left.” In “Charles Taylor on Truth” Rorty dropped the phrase “Nature’s Own Language” while in “Rationality and Cultural Difference,” and “Feminism and Pragmatism,”

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<sup>58</sup> See, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” in Rawls, John. *The Law of Peoples*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 152.



Rorty borrows from Richard Dawkins the concept of a “meme” which is the “cultural counterpart of a gene.”<sup>59</sup> But in Rorty’s later writings, he drops the metaphor of meme all together. In “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism,” Rorty he will use the term “postmodernist” in the sense Lyotard gave it as,

distrust of metanarratives . . . these metanarratives are stories which purport to justify loyalty to, or breaks with, certain contemporary communities, but which are neither historical narratives about what these or other communities have done in the past nor scenarios about what they might do in the future.<sup>60</sup>

About a decade later, in a debate, Rorty retracted his statement in a radical way: “I’ve never known what the term ‘postmodern’ means . . . I think the term ‘postmodernism’ was a pure journalistic construction like ‘existentialism.’”<sup>61</sup> Rorty wrote that the cultural hero of the liberal ironist is Bloom’s “strong poet” in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. In “Philosophy as a transitional genre,” he argued that someone who seeks “Bloomian autonomy” can be defined as an “intellectual.”<sup>62</sup> In Rorty’s essay on textualists, he called Bloom a pragmatist, later in an appendix to *Achieving Our Country* Rorty calls Bloom a “functionalist.” It therefore seems that Rorty’s communitarianism revolves around his desire to have strong precursors and the uses and misuse of their metaphors. A peculiar kind of communitarianism, one that favors allegiance as an extension of Bloom’s idea of a “precursor,” is an inevitable precondition for liberalism.

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<sup>59</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Rationality and Cultural Difference,” in *Truth and Progress*, 191; see also 206.

<sup>60</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism,” in *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, 198-99.

<sup>61</sup> Rorty, Richard, and John Searle. “Rorty v. Searle, At Last: A Debate.” *Logos*. 2 no. 3 (1999): 46.

<sup>62</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Philosophy as a transitional genre,” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 90.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Daniel Dennett playfully wrote that what a reader of Rorty needs was the “Rorty Factor.” To apply the Rorty Factor, “you multiply what he [Rorty] says by the number .673 then you get the truth. Dick always exaggerates everything in the direction of the more radical.”<sup>1</sup> Later, after Rorty’s death in 2008, Dennett remembered a conversation between them over lunch; Dennett writes, “I had said that it mattered greatly to me to have the respect of scientists – that it was important to me to explain philosophical issues to scientists in terms they could understand and appreciate. He replied that he didn’t give a damn what scientists thought of his work; he coveted the attention and respect of poets!”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Rorty’s language for his favorite critic of poetry could not be more glowing,

Harold Bloom, by remaining sublimely indifferent to practically everything except his own obsessions, and in particular to the distinction between knowledge and opinion, has earned himself a place in Heaven at the right hand of Samuel Johnson. Bloom is the only American academic of my generation whom I am convinced will still be read with enthusiasm in the twenty-second century.<sup>3</sup>

Rorty gained the attention and respect of poets when Bloom dedicated his book *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* writing, “For Richard Rorty.” But within that book, Bloom does to Rorty what Rorty has been doing to Bloom for years. Rorty has called Bloom a pragmatist, and later, a functionalist. Rorty uses Bloom’s “strong poet” liberally, attaching “intellectual” to those who read books in order to achieve “Bloomian autonomy.” Within, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* Bloom engages the same game of labeling and remaking that Rorty has been doing for over

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ryerson, James. “The Quest for Uncertainty: Richard Rorty’s Pilgrimage,” in *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself*, 4. Elsewhere, Dennett has called the Rorty Factor a modulation of “.742;” see Dennett, Daniel. *Consciousness Explained*. (New York: Back Bay Books, 1991), 461.

<sup>2</sup> Dennett, Daniel. “Richard Rorty: What Made him a Crucial American Philosopher? *Slate Online Magazine*. June 18, 2007. <http://www.slate.com/id/2168488/pagenum/all/> (accessed June 20, 2007). Here, too, Dennett remembers using the “.742” to describe the Rorty Factor.

<sup>3</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Tales of Two Disciplines.” *Callaloo*. 17. No. 2. (1994): 577.

twenty years. Bloom calls Rorty an “Emersonian on the Left,” and a “post-pragmatist.”<sup>4</sup> Years earlier, Cornel West labeled Rorty’s reading of Dewey “Emersonian.”<sup>5</sup> It surely had a certain sweetness coming from Bloom. However, Stanley Cavell is unsatisfied with the affiliation between Emerson and pragmatism: “The identification of Emerson in terms of pragmatism (a tendency associated with the writing of Cornel West and Richard Rorty) is, to my mind, yet one more form in which the distinctiveness of Emerson’s writing is repressed.”<sup>6</sup> Cavell objects that an association of pragmatism with Emerson neither does justice to the distinctiveness of pragmatism nor to the distinctiveness of Emerson. What may save Bloom from Cavell’s criticism is Bloom’s criticism of Rorty. By calling Rorty a “post-pragmatist” Bloom is both able to avoid Cavell’s criticism and criticize Rorty.

I have been arguing for the last five chapters that Rorty is a kind of post-pragmatist. Rorty has aligned himself with the poets all the while he has continued to talk about philosophy. In chapter two I described how Rorty’s pragmatism – if it can be called that – has many striking features. I presented five facets of Rorty’s peculiar pragmatism. I argue that it is reasonable to see Rorty’s desire to affiliate with pragmatism having less to do with the power of pragmatist’s arguments but rather with the sense that after Rorty’s critique of philosophy, the pragmatists were his strong precursors. “Pragmatism . . . names the chief glory of our country’s intellectual tradition.”<sup>7</sup> By recognizing the opportunity to revive pragmatism, Rorty sets himself poised for glory. But Rorty was not satisfied with the limited subject matter of Dewey and James, or the banal prose of Peirce and Holmes. Instead, Rorty embarked on a mission of self creation unusual for an American philosopher. In that vein, Rorty has recreated himself following Nehamas’

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<sup>4</sup> Bloom, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, 204.

<sup>5</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 199.

<sup>6</sup> Cavell, Stanley. *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism,” in *Consequence of Pragmatism*, 160.

description of Nietzsche that “life is literature.” Rorty has written systematic analytic philosophy as in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. He has written literary criticism as in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. He has written political radical equivalent of Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” in *Achieving Our Country* and the essay “The Unpatriotic Academy.”<sup>8</sup> Rorty has written pamphlet length descriptions of what is needed to revive humanism, in “The Humanistic Intellectual: Eleven Theses.” He has written a creative autobiographical account, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchid,” which is not wholly consistent with his principle biographer’s account.<sup>9</sup> He has even dabbled in futuristic fiction writing as in the essay, “Looking Back from the Year 2096,” where he describes a future “Democratic Vistas Party.”<sup>10</sup> Democratic Vistas refers to a paper Walt Whitman once wrote. If the “Democrtic Vistas Party” becomes political viable, maybe Rorty will be due glory for having written years ago about the lamentably diminished position Whitman readership is in. “It rarely occurs to present-day American leftists to quote either Lincoln or Whitman,” Rorty writes.<sup>11</sup>

Andrew Vincent, in his *The Nature of Political Theory*, picks up on what Rorty is doing. Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, according to Vincent, is a “significant Neo-Nietzschean contribution to political theory debate. The difference between Nietzsche and Rorty is that the latter is altogether more optimistic.”<sup>12</sup> After Vincent adds that Rorty is “lighter and wittier” than Nietzsche, Vincent follows a Rortyan theme by writing, “if we *make* rather than

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<sup>8</sup> See for example, in *Achieving Our Country*, “In America, at the end of the twentieth century, few inspiring images and stories are being proffered. The only version of national pride encouraged by American popular culture is simpleminded militaristic chauvinism. But such chauvinism is overshadowed by a widespread sense that national pride is no longer appropriate” (4). Rorty here writes with a boldness and prophetic tone unique to this book and to “The Unpatriotic Academy.” His writings are usefully compared to the harder prose of his compatriot Todd Gitlin; see, Gitlin, Todd. *Intellectuals and the Flag*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Compare “Trotsky and Wild Orchid,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 3-20, with Gross, Neil. *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*.

<sup>10</sup> Rorty, “Looking Backwards from the Year 2096,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 249.

<sup>11</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Vincent, *The Nature of Political Theory*, 251.

*discover* truth, then imagination, aesthetics, and creativity take on a crucial role in cognition.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, “the poet and the aesthete take priority.”<sup>14</sup> However, as we saw in chapter three, the priority of making over discovery prioritizes one point on Davidson’s theory of triangulation. The priority of making may be Nietzschean and Bloomian but Rorty, when pushed by critics like Davidson and Ramberg, has conceded that he should drop the distinction between making and discovering and even agree to loosen the Sellarsian distinction between indiscriminate experience and linguistic awareness. Consequently, Rorty’s theory of language is incoherent, not because it lacks a systematic response to realists but because, over time, Rorty has genuflected in too many directions.

Discussing Rorty, Vincent adds, “There is only the text and nothing outside of it.”<sup>15</sup> But as we have seen, Bloom’s amendment is that, “Influence, as I conceive it, means that there are *no* texts, but only relationships *between* texts.”<sup>16</sup> The metaphor of “between” denotes the *agonal* spirit between poets who both need each other in order to be creative and defy each other in their creative misuse of each other. This relationship between texts, which is *agonal* in its spiritedness, is transmuted in Rorty’s political writings as forms of allegiance (e.g. allegiances to a legacy of pragmatism, a legacy of the “Reformist Left,” and a legacy to Rawlsian liberalism). Reading Bloom and Rorty together, Joan Williams writes on their commonality as part of the Romantic period in poetry: “Mastery and autonomy were key themes in the Romantics’ celebration of the strong poet. Their focus on autonomy reflected the assumption that self-creation entailed “a song of myself.” This celebration of self often is interpreted as evidence of Wordsworth’s

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>16</sup> Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 3.

contribution in unleashing subjectivity”<sup>17</sup> But this song to myself requires, on a Bloomian reading, a kind of harmony with a strong precursor, then cacophony, then lastly, a melody where the strong poet now leads.

I have concluded that Rorty’s writings are, when viewed as a collection, profound yet inconsistent. Coherence, though, on one reading, is overrated. Years before Rorty began offering post-philosophical proposals and restricted himself to criticizing philosophy from within, Stanley Fish called himself an “acolyte.”<sup>18</sup> In memorializing Rorty upon his death, Fish remembered,

Once at a conference Rorty indicated agreement with an account of his work that seemed to me to be antithetical to its very core. I rose and said so, and he agreed with me, too. I thought, no, it has to be one or the other of us. I still hadn’t learned the lesson he was teaching, and now, like everyone else, I will be trying to do so in his absence.<sup>19</sup>

When I asked Fish, months later, what his current thoughts were about that moment where Rorty’s puzzled him, he wrote me saying “I meant that I was still imprisoned in the structure of linear argument and could not respond to Rorty’s ecumenism and his desire to expand the conversation. I still can’t.”<sup>20</sup> It seems that Rorty understood that in order to expand the conversation we sometimes have to leave ourselves behind. He owes a debt to Bloom for what he gained by being able to leave himself behind.

Rorty’s principle biographer, Neil Gross, has argued, “My central empirical thesis is that the shift in Rorty’s thought from technically orientated philosopher to free-ranging pragmatist

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<sup>17</sup> Williams, Joan C., “Rorty, Radicalism, Romanticism: The Politics of The Gaze,” in *A Pragmatist’s Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*, 71. Williams’ worry is that “By associating greatness with the strength and autonomy of the strong poet, the Romantics used masculine gender ideology to exclude women” (Ibid.).

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Simon Blackburn has called Fish, Rorty’s “counterpart.” See, Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide*, 162. Fish, however, has published a substantial critique of Rorty post-philosophic proposals; see, Fish, Stanley. “Almost Pragmatism: The Jurisprudence of Richard Posner, Richard Rorty, and Ronald Dworkin,” in *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech and it’s a Good Thing, Too*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 214-19.

<sup>19</sup> Fish, Stanley. “Richard Rorty: What Made him a Crucial American Philosopher?” *Slate Online Magazine*, June 18, 2007. <http://www.slate.com/id/2168488/pagenum/all/> (accessed June 20, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Stanley Fish, email to author, April 26, 2008.

reflected a shift from a career stage in which status considerations were central to one in which self-concept considerations become central.”<sup>21</sup> Gross’ distinction between “status considerations” and “self-concept considerations” roughly parallels my distinctions between Rorty’s philosophical criticisms, on the one hand, and his post-philosophic proposals on the other. One caveat, however, is that Rorty’s period of “self-concept considerations” is a *new* period of “status considerations.” This new period is where he felt most belated by precursors.

Moreover, in my introductory chapter, I asked a cluster of rhetorical questions. Why is Rorty’s pragmatism so peculiar? Why does Rorty affiliate himself with pragmatism at all? Indeed, why does Rorty drop some descriptions and pick up new ones when he has not changed the subject at all? Why does he write as if he owes something to pragmatism? More broadly, what are the tactics he uses to assimilate other literature into his fold? Why does Rorty call himself a philosopher and at the same time reject the title? If these questions are legitimate, I have proposed that reading Rorty as if he were very much influenced by Bloom’s concepts is a more compelling way of reading Rorty than to read him like a pragmatist. Although Rorty’s values stem from his allegiance to modern democratic liberalism (e.g. Deweyian), he values allegiance *qua* allegiance by virtue of Harold Bloom’s influence. The metaphors that best explain the tactics Rorty uses when addressing and assimilating other authors are properly Bloomian metaphors like “misreading.” A synoptic view of Rorty’s writings convey not only a profound vision in metaphilosophy, they reveal inconsistent conclusions. This incoherent may, in part, be accidental, resulting from an overflow of ideas. However, this inconsistency may, instead, be tolerable, if vicissitude and multiplicity is a counter-sublime to a correspondence theory of truth.

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<sup>21</sup> Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*, 15.

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## Vita

Campbell University graduated Shaun King with a Bachelor of Arts degree before he began studying at Louisiana State University at the graduate level. At Louisiana State University, Mr. King studied a range of ideas but focused his research on contemporary political theory. He presented the paper, "Avenues of Political Power: Richard Rorty and John Searle," at McGill University's conference on Rational Theism in September of 2007. Mr. King extended his work on Rorty into a master's thesis titled, "Richard Rorty's Map of Political Misreading." Mr. King will receive his Master of Arts degree from Louisiana State University in the August 2008.