"Conversational Constraints: Richard Rorty and Contemporary Critical Theory"

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Harold Bloom has called Richard Rorty "the most interesting philosopher in the world today." Rorty has been a professor of philosophy at Princeton University and president of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. He is now University Professor of Humanities at the University of Virginia. Without speculating on Rorty's private motivations for leaving a philosophy department and taking a more general appointment, I want to read this change as an allegory of Rorty's intellectual career. Beginning with his 1979 book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty has urged the abandonment of Philosophy in the tradition of Plato and Descartes -- a tradition concerned with the articulation of the grounds of knowledge, an articulation that, he says, attempts to mirror the logical structures of reality. For Rorty, there is no ultimate ground or foundation of knowledge, no reality or Truth independent of our linguistic and social practices. One now encounters Rorty's writing as often in the pages of *Critical Inquiry, New Literary History, Salmagundi, Common Knowledge* and the *London Review of Books* as in the *Journal of Philosophy.*

My crude characterization of Rorty's anti-foundationalism appears to ally him with French post-structuralists like Jacques Derrida, and indeed Rorty has written admiringly (though not uncritically) of Derrida and other European intellectuals. Rorty's anti-foundationalism is intellectually akin to literary theories of the open text -- theories that stress the endless play of the literary signifier, the radical instability of meaning, and unconstrained interpretation of the literary text.

But Rorty's greatest intellectual debts are not to Nietzsche, Husserl, or Heidegger, but instead to Anglo-American philosophy. In this respect, Rorty's work has two principal affiliations: on the one hand, to so-called post- analytic philosophy of language, and on

the other hand to American pragmatism, in particular the work of John Dewey and William James.

Pragmatism has attracted a good deal of attention among literary theorists, and Rorty often cites Barbara Hernnstein Smith, Stanley Fish, and Walter Benn Michaels in his own work. But analytic philosopby also has important consequences for our understanding of meaning and interpretation and that's where I want to start this presentation. My particular focus will be the problem of constraint in interpretation. Can an utterance or a text mean just anything at all, or are there limits to semiosis? And if there are constraints, where do they come from? Does the world constrain our descriptions of it, or a text constrain our interpretations? I'm going to start with a sketch of the anti-foundationalist conclusions Rorty draws from the post-analytic philosophical work of Willard Quine and Donald Davidson. This will lead, in my reconstruction, to the familiar prospect of endless semiosis. (This could be a bit misleading: the careful argumentation and non- literary styles of Quine and Davidson would seem to place them far from Derrida's world, though some interesting work has been done on the parallels between Davidson and Derrida. Quine himself remains firmly committed to natural science as the paradigm of human knowledge.)

I'm then going to turn to the pragmatist tradition, in which Rorty claims to find a viable notion of interpretive constraint in the solidarity of interpretive communities. "There are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones," Rorty concludes, " -- no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow inquirers" (COP 165).

Rorty's philosophical work is not concerned with providing or grounding a method for literary studies -- in the way in which, for example, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology has been used, or Derrida's deconstruction, or Saussure's signifier and signified. Indeed, Rorty argues against the notion that literary studies should seek a method in either science or philosophy. Instead, a major thrust of his work has been to argue against the traditional distinction between science and literature. Rorty sees Western culture as moving away from a scientific world-view and toward a more literary

form of life in which we understand that the constraints on our knowledge or interpretations are not objective or imposed by the world but instead are conversational. Literature, for Rorty, is an important practice in the enlargement of our cultural conversation.

(Covering so much territory in such a short time risks superficiality, of course. Many of the arguments at which I will just gesture need, and generally receive, careful articulation. For now, any apparent inadequacies of Rorty's position should be assumed to lie in my account of it. One other note: I will quote widely and extensively from Rorty's work to give some sense of Rorty's written voice -- his studied informality and cosmopolitan insouciance are part of his rhetorical strategy.)

Rorty is often associated with the second generation of analytic philosophers -- among them Willard Quine, Wilfred Sellars, Nelson Goodman, Donald Davidson -- and particularly with their criticisms of the tradition of logical empiricism. We can start to understand this work by considering the distinction made famous by Immanuel Kant between analytic statements and synthetic statements. Analytic statements are those like "All bachelors are unmarried" or "No sisters are male" which, as the tradition goes, are true by virtue of their meanings, not because of the way the world is. "All bachelors are unmarried" is true because the word "bachelor" has the same meaning as the word "unmarried". You don't confirm your belief by conducting a survey of the marital status of bachelors; you confirm it, should you feel uncertain, by checking a dictionary. Synthetic statements, by contrast, are said to be true because of the way the world is; the structure of the world corresponds or fails to correspond to the elements of the proposition, thus making the proposition true or false. "The glass is on the table" is synthetic, in this sense; it is true if the part of the world that corresponds to the phrase "the cat" stands in a relation to the mat expressed or represented by the phrase "is on the mat." You find out if it's true by looking.

The story of the use to which this distinction was put in post-Kantian philosophy, and the emergence of logical empiricism and so-called analytic philosophy, is a complicated one. To over-simplify: The way was now cleared for a division of labor among knowledge-

workers, between the scientists, who would tell us what the facts are, and the philosophers, who would tidy up the conceptual foundations of science through rigorous analyses of the meanings of complex notions like "causation," "explanation," and "scientific law." Everything else in discourse -- ethics, metaphysics, religion, poetry -- was non-sense, emotionally expressive, perhaps, but cognitively empty.

Enter the first saint in Rorty's calendar: Willard van Orman Quine. Quine is professor emeritus at Harvard and formerly chair of the philosophy department there. In a paper published in the 1950s called "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Quine undermined the distinction between analytic and synthetic, arguing on various grounds that the distinction between "true by virtue of the meanings of words" and "true by virtue of facts in the world" has to be replaced by the notion of a single web of beliefs. Some beliefs in the web, Quine argues, lie close to the center and are connected to many other beliefs; others lie on the margins and share connections with relatively few. The beliefs at the margins are easily jettisoned: little else has to change if we give them up. The ones at the center, by contrast, we are loathe to give up; doing so requires adjustments in too many other beliefs, though we can, in principle, make those adjustments. The upshot of Quine's argument, however, is that we can no longer talk so innocently about the difference between language and the world, nor so confidently about the circumstances that make a proposition true or false.

In a later work, the 1960 book *Word and Object*, Quine introduced a related concept, indeterminacy of translation. One way to think about the relationship between language and the world, Quine suggested, is in terms of the activities of an anthropologist learning the language of an unfamiliar tribe. The anthropologist wants to write a translation manual based on the dispositions of her subjects to name objects that she presents to them: rabbits, for instance. But if we think about this, Quine says, we realize that the stimulus evidence -- the physical effects of the world on our senses -- under-determines our translations. Incompatible translation schemes will be equally warranted by the evidence.

There are additional problems, as well, with the analytic/synthetic distinction. One of Rorty's main targets of philosophical criticism is the correspondence theory of truth that often goes along with characterizations of synthetic propositions -- the theory that parts of the world, facts, or states of affairs logically correspond to propositions. It is hard enough, Rorty notes, to make sense of correspondence in the expression "on the mat." It seems hopeless to account in correspondence terms to negative propositions like "There is no dog by the window." Furthermore, the theory generally relies on a verificationist account of meaning and a notion of ostensive definition of primitive terms that are very problematic.

If all this seems counter-intuitive -- if it seems that, in the realm of common- sense observations of glasses and tables that it's the world that surely tells us what's the case -- then Rorty reminds us that "The way in which a blank takes on the form of the die which stamps it has no analogy to the relation between the truth of a sentence and the event which the sentence is about" (ORT 81). The world does not make sentences true, though stimuli may indeed cause speakers to make certain statements. In other words, Quine and others tell us, the world does not tell us what to say about it.

Quine's insights have been elaborated and extended by Donald Davidson, a professor of philosophy at UC Berkeley. Rorty says that Davidson's is the "first systematic treatment of language which breaks completely with the notion of language as something which can be adequate or inadequate to the world or to the self. For Davidson breaks with the notion that language is a medium -- a medium either of representation or of expression" (CIS 10).

Davidson shares Quine's concern with accounting for meaning and truth in terms of the natural conditions under which communication takes place among human beings. On Davidson's account, truth is parsed not as the correspondence of the world to propositions, but instead in terms of the conditions under which a native speaker will assent to a sentence. For Davidson, linguistic meaning is endlessly established in the process of communication. Rorty paraphrases an important paper by Davidson called "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs:"

"Davidson tries to undermine the notion of languages as entities by developing the notion of what he calls 'a passing theory' about the noises and inscriptions presently being produced by a fellow human. Think of such a theory as part of a larger 'passing theory' about this person's total behavior -- a set of guesses about what she will do under what conditions. Such a theory is 'passing' because it must constantly be corrected to allow for mumbles, stumbles, malapropisms, metaphors, tics, seizures, psychotic symptoms, egregious stupidity, strokes of genius and the like. To make things easier," Rorty goes on, "imagine that I am forming such a theory about the current behavior of a native of an exotic culture into which I have unexpectedly parachuted. This strange person, who presumably finds me equally strange, will simultaneously be busy forming a theory about my behavior. If we ever succeed in communicating easily and happily, it will be because her guesses about what I am going to do next, including what noises I am going to make next, and my own expectations about what I shall do or say under certain circumstances, come more or less to coincide, and because the converse is also true. . . . To say that we come to speak the same language to to say, as Davidson puts it, that 'we tend to converge on passing theories'" (CIS 14) -- a convergence that must be re-created from utterance to utterance.

Let's pause to see where we are. Understanding a proposition or a text, according to Quine, Davidson, and Rorty, is not a matter of possessing or grasping something called the "meanings" of words, meanings that are grounded either by their analytic relations with each other ("bachelor" and "unmarried") or by their ostensive connections to the world ("glass" and glasses). Meaning "belongs" to the marks or noises we call "sentences," and sentences belong to each other -- that is, some marks or noises follow predictably upon one another.

Chains of evidence are not therefore denied; experience is relevant to our statements about the world. The language itself gives meaning to the notion of "counting as evidence," not the other way around. As a consequence, Rorty says, "When the notion of 'description of the world' is moved from the level of criterion-governed sentences within language games to language games as wholes, games which we do not choose between

by reference to criteria, the idea that the world decides which descriptions are true can no longer be given a clear sense" (CIS 5).

But if not the world, then what does constrain our descriptions? Is semiosis endless? Are there no limits to interpretation?

Like Davidson, Rorty looks to the conditions for intersubjective communication for an account of interpretive constraint, but he casts his argument in different terms. As an alternative to objectivity -- to any kind of "mind- independent and language-independent reality" or meaning -- Rorty introduces the notion of solidarity, associating this move with the American pragmatist tradition of Dewey and James. "Pragmatists would like to replace the desire for objectivity with the desire for solidarity" (Science as Solidarity 39), he says, "the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can" (Solidarity or Objectivity, 22-23). Rorty's model interpretive community is marked by "the habits of relying on persuasion rather than force, of respect for the opinions of colleagues, of curiosity and eagerness for new data and ideas" (Science as Solidarity, 39).

Rorty considers those habits to have been, historically, most consistently practiced in the scientific community. But in his essay "Texts and Lumps" he goes to great pains to argue that science is no different in kind from literary or other humanistic inquiry. The so-called "hard" subjects like science, he says, have no epistemological superiority to the "soft" subjects like literary criticism. Science has no special method for reaching the truth, Rorty insists; and the lumps that it studies are no different in ontological kind from the texts that humanists study. "Hardness of fact is simply the hardness of the previous agreements within a community about the consequences of a certain event. The same hardness prevails in morality or literary criticism if and only if the relevant community is equally firm about who loses and who wins. Some of Stanley Fish's 'interpretive communities' throw you out if you interpret Lycidas as really about intertextuality. Others will take you in only if you do so" (Texts and Lumps, 80). In this sense, Rorty abjures theory and method in favor of narrative (though not a master narrative). Rorty is bothered

by tendencies within criticism to take philosophy too seriously, to search for a method for interpretation.

The pragmatist's "recommendation to the critic is thus not grounded in a theory about literature or about criticism, but in a narrative whose details he hopes the literary critic will help him fill in. The pragmatist philosopher has a story to tell about his favorite, and least favored, books -- the texts of, for example, Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, Dewey, and Russell. He would like other people to have stories to tell about other sequences of texts, other genres -- stories which will fit together with his. His appeal is not to the latest philosophical discoveries about the nature of science or language, but to the existence of views on these matters which chime with certain views other peoples (for example, contemporary critics looking for the big picture) hold about other matters" (Texts and Lumps, 82)

I have said that Rorty wants to replace objectivity -- the notion that somehow the world makes our interpretations right or wrong -- with solidarity -- with unforced agreement achieved by persuasion in a free and open community of inquiry. Two questions at least arise concerning this notion of community. One, which I will not deal with but which Rorty writes about at length, is the problem of ethnocentricism. For the community that Rorty describes is patently that of middle-class, liberal Westerners, and it seems that Rorty is doing little more than elevating the mores of his particular tribe to something with more universal standing.

The other question that arises is that of conceptual change or innovation. One danger of group solidarity is group-think. If, starting from the assumptions we all share, we seek to persuade each other in respectful and civilized fashion of our beliefs, how will we ever transform those assumptions and move on to something really new?

Rorty extends Harold Bloom's notion of the strong critic or strong poet to include thinkers of all kinds -- Plato, Augustine, Galileo, Newton, and Hegel as much as Blake and Yeats -- who introduce new vocabularies into a community's discourse. Now, new or unprecedented linguistic performances emerge constantly in the speech of individuals, for

all kinds of reasons -- remember Davidson's "mumbles, stumbles, and strokes of genius" -- but not all such performances become the regular practices of a community. Conceptual change -- in science, in critical theory, in poetry -- is marked, according to Rorty, by a community's adoption of new vocabularies and new questions that are found to be more interesting than the old ones.

Rorty trades on the nice ambiguity in the phrase "changing the subject." On the one hand, he suggests, conceptual change occurs by our abandoning less interesting questions in favor of new ones that are more interesting -- not by argued dis-proof of the old positions. On the other hand, he reminds us, just as there is no one true description of the world, there is no one true description of us, of human nature or society, and changes in our vocabulary are changes in who we are. An important function of literature, then, is to challenge our prevailing self-descriptions, to enlarge our individual and collective sense of self: the "process of coming to see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them' is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel." (CIS xvi).

I want to conclude by suggesting that Rorty's own work be read as an attempt to introduce the vocabulary of what he calls a post-philosophical culture to replace the "objective" ideals of science and Philosophy. Such a culture, he says, would be thoroughly literary -- erasing C.P. Snow's famous split between science and literature.

Rorty characterizes this culture as one in which "neither the priests nor the physicists nor the poets nor the Party were thought of as more 'rational' or more 'scientific' or 'deeper' than ... another. No particular portion of culture would be singled out as exemplifying (or signally failing to exemplify) the condition to which the rest aspired." (COP xxxviii). "A post-Philosophical culture, then, would be one in which men and women felt themselves alone, merely finite, with no links to something Beyond. . . . [It would not] erect Science as an idol to fill the place once held by God. It views science as one genre of literature -- or, put the other way around, literature and the arts as inquiries, on the same footing as

scientific inquiries" (COP xlii-xliii). Post- Philosophical culture, Rorty concludes, thus amounts to "a study of the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the various ways of talking which our race has invented. It looks, in short, much like what is sometimes called 'culture criticism'" (COP xl).

Works by Richard Rorty

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. *PMN*

Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982. *COP*
    Recommended essays: "The World Well Lost" and "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth Century Textualism".

Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. *ORT*
    Recommended essays: "Solidarity or Objectivity" and "Texts and Lumps".

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. *CIS*

Works on Richard Rorty, Analytic Philosophy, and Literary Theory

Literary Theory After Davidson, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993.
    Recommended essays: Thomas Kent, "A Davidsonian Critique of Reader-Oriented Literary Theory" and Bill Martin, "Analytic Philosophy's Narrative Turn: Quine, Rorty, DavIdson."

Reading Rorty, ed. Alan R. Malachowski. Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

Redrawing the Lines: Analytic Philosophy, Deconstruction, and Literary Theory, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.