Richard Rorty and the poet's utopia

Richard Rorty's vision of the liberal utopia, which he outlines in the introduction to his recent book, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity,* is an explicit example of a narrative that is common, if submerged, in many recent adaptations of post-structuralism. The utopian pleasures of the text promise liberation from the cramping empiricism of science, the leaden labour of politics, and the dragging chains of metaphysics. Or is it a delusional escape? Rorty's book is dedicated: 'In memory of six liberals: my parents and grandparents'. This chapter dedicates itself to exploring the strange coupling of liberalism and post-structuralism.

Rorty writes a contemporary kind of pragmatism which makes use of post-structuralist writing against the scientism of Anglo-American philosophy. He has popularised a particular reading of philosophy as 'just a kind of writing' in American philosophical and literary circles. However, the problem for Rorty is that while he wants to challenge scientism with a Vision Splendid of the literary imagination, he does not want to question the liberal subject on whose behalf he writes.

Rorty does not see the need for a theory of subject-making, a theory of the production of meaning/value nor a critique of inequality (all significant preoccupations in French post-structuralism). He refers to these kinds of questions as 'not theoretical'. But they are not beyond theory, as he implies; he already has a theory of them, the pragmatist/liberal postulations for which he does not argue.

Rorty's pragmatism is aestheticised. Speech act theorists like John Searle give us a straight 'mercantile' pragmatism in their conception
of the use-value of language as a currency of intention. The result for Searle is that metaphor, fiction and other literary uses of language appear as ancillary to, or as deviations from, 'ordinary language'. His analysis of fictional discourse then 'leaves one crucial question unanswered', as Searle himself admits: 'Why bother? That is, why do we attach such importance and effort to texts which contain largely pretended speech acts?' Since Searle's theory already presupposes that use-value is a product of successful communication of intentions, it is not surprising that this importance can't be accounted for on the theory. Rorty's view, on the other hand, emphasises the use-value of poetic language. Whereas for Searle the end product is to be communication of intentions, for Rorty it is the creation of individuality. Liberal individualism meets the Nietzschean self-creation as a work of art.

But the individual of liberalism is a unit of equivalence in the free-market society: 'All men are equal'. The currency for exchange of these units is their freedom, which they are given in equal measure at the start of the game. The guarantee of their equivalence is their solidarity, the brotherhood that ensures that individualism will not result in conflicts of interest that cannot be resolved by appeal to their similarity. 'Liberty Equality Fraternity' succinctly abbreviates it.

Within this individualism that is paradoxically an equivalence, Rorty cannot succeed in claiming the space he wants for a Nietzschean 'strong poet'. No pragmatist labour can release itself from the levelling of meaning that results from this equivalence: the liberal individual cannot differ in any significant sense from his brother. Representing all terms as theoretically equivalent rules out a theoretical account of how meaning is produced. Meaning will become, by default, a string of contingencies and accidents of definition, a view Rorty may not be uncomfortable with. However, it would put him at odds with the French tradition he borrows from, which takes seriously Lacan's marriage of Saussure and Freud. 'Every subject is a signifier for another subject', subjectivity is a formation 'like a language' in that it gains its value in its difference from other subjects/signifiers.

Rorty does not escape the supplementary nature of the literary and poetic either, because he must serve the opposition of public to private on which the liberal subject relies. The private self is always supplementary to this subject, from the moment he is postulated as springing, ready-made, to the defence of his freedom in consensus with other citizens like him. The liberal individual is not his childhood, hunger, nor his desire; these states of being do not define him. He is first and foremost an agent, able to contract with others on the basis of his rational self-interest.
Despite an acquaintance with Derrida, familiar dichotomies uphold Rorty's sanguine prose: public/private, real/representation, subject/object, philosopher/poet.

Authors like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger and Nabokov are useful as exemplars, as illustrations of what private perfection—a self-created, autonomous, human life—can be like. Authors such as Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas and Rawls are fellow citizens rather than exemplars. They are engaged in a shared, social effort—the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel. We shall only think of these two kinds of writers as opposed if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision...

There is no way in which philosophy, or any other theoretical discipline, will ever let us do that. The closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, 'irrationalist', and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time—causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged.8

Rorty establishes his public/private distinction by dividing into two groups a selection of writers who differ, and by characterising their theoretical differences as the difference between the public and the private. This difference is then taken for a 'familiar standoff' that philosophy has tried in vain to resolve. It is suggested that to see the views of these writers as opposed is to be involved in a metaphysical search for unity; but this project cannot be achieved. Rorty therefore concludes that the only outcome is to reject the view that they oppose each other, and to reconcile them in a liberal pluralism such as he will go on to describe.

Rorty considers that the public and the private only seem opposed because we insist on viewing them in relation to each other. He recommends we insulate them from each other: 'This book tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable.'9 However, the public/private distinction is all about the commensurable. It is a relation. To refuse to acknowledge that public and private are opposed is to ignore that what is produced by the distinction is an opposition.

Ironically, this insulation makes them precisely commensurable. Reduced to the status of 'vocabularies', they are part of a great narrative of equivalence, the analogue of the liberal individual itself. The differences between these writers, far from having been preserved in
this manoeuvre, are obliterated. For one equals the other, and they differ only in their detail.

The possibility of there being a theoretical move that elucidates the entanglement of the private in the public is ruled out. The private is that which happens 'on your own time', that is, in private, so Rorty's reconciliation is conservative in character, in the sense of being reconciled to the dichotomy.

This reconciliation prepares the ground for the utopia. Rorty then sketches the figure of the 'liberal ironist', whose utopia it is. A liberal is a person who thinks 'that cruelty is the worst thing we do'; an ironist a person 'who faces up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance.'

Which of us is not such a liberal in our waking lives? The ironist, too; are there any of the philosophically initiated who imagine their beliefs and desires are written in the stars, beyond the reach of time and chance? But our assent turns out to commit us to a stronger relativism; to the position that these desires are therefore ungroundable. 'Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished ...' And yet those desires are strictly grounded in the text of experience, in the body whose experience it is. The move which has committed us to recognising our desires as ungroundable rests on opposing contingency to necessity in time-honoured metaphysical fashion.

If desire cannot be grounded 'beyond time and chance', this does not make it groundless; and the appearance that it does is an effect achieved by representing it within the logic of the opposition. The liberal ironist, reconciled to the private as 'on one's own time', and accepting that the contingent is ungroundable, has merely agreed to abide by the very oppositions that produce the contradictions he now accepts as fate.

But if we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found.

Another reconciliation to another opposition: that between 'reality' and 'our descriptions of it'. To the liberal ironist, reality remains indifferent to descriptions, but the self is made by them. The self creates itself, romantically, in the freedom of an existence prior to essence.

Is the liberal ironist a post-structuralist? Not quite. The liberal ironist's self is equated with consciousness and with a mentality
whose embodiment is theoretically insignificant. This is a liberal necessity; if the self is to be a unit of exchange, then each self must be in principle the same. Rorty reads Freud as a theory of mind, not of psyche. According to Rorty,

Freud gave up Plato’s attempt to bring together the public and the private, the parts of the state and the parts of the soul . . . He distinguishes sharply between a private ethic of self-creation and a public ethic of mutual accommodation. He persuades us that there is no bridge between them provided by universally shared beliefs or desires . . . In Freud’s account, our conscious private goals are as idiosyncratic as the unconscious obsessions and phobias from which they have branched off.\(^\text{12}\)

The move from ‘universally shared desires’ to ‘idiosyncratic goals’ overlooks Freud’s meticulous modelling of the individual in society. The hysterical symptom, for example, is a compromise between individual desire and social requirement, that is, it represents a sexual desire to which society must refuse direct expression. While desires, beliefs and symptoms are particular to the subject and her history, they are not therefore idiosyncratic or peculiar to her, since their structuring is governed by social norms at work in her individual circumstances.

The body of this self is a contingent detail, not a defining surface; neither the body/unconscious, nor the repression that founds it, are represented in Rorty’s reading of Freud. As such, the real is insulated from representation in a way reminiscent of the insulation of the public from the private; the self remains an ideational process, negotiated parallel to an ‘out there’ which is material, the indifferent reality.

But what of Freud’s little boy, wrestling with the Oedipus complex, grasping that the sight of the genitals of his sister represents a cultural imperative? This sign, her lack, is both flesh and representation—and his own flesh is threatened with castration if he doesn’t learn this sign. A relationship of greater entailment between the real and the representational is proposed in post-structuralist accounts of the production of experience of the real in representations of it. A representation of the woman’s genitals as lacking something produces the reality of sexual difference, which is ‘indifferent’ only in the sense that it is resistant to our denials of it.\(^\text{13}\) But the liberal ironist, while he accepts the unproblematic distinction between real and representational, meets with a frustrating ‘ungroundability’: ‘The difficulty faced by a philosopher who, like myself, is sympathetic . . . is to avoid hinting that this suggestion gets something right, that my sort of philosophy corresponds to the way things really are’.\(^\text{14}\) To what, then, does it correspond? But the liberal ironist cannot leap the gap, the gap opened up in insulating the real
from the representational. How can his philosophy reach beyond representation to ‘the way things really are’, while these two terms are defined in opposition to each other?

Languages and signs are human, but this does not make them the product of human agency. The word is subordinate to the system of relations which define it in language, and the subject is subordinate to the system of relations that she finds in her cultural scope. She can take no credit for authorship of truth, which is why to speak of truth as ‘made’ and not ‘found’ is also misleading—the made/found opposition, imbued with human agency, is a consequence of the opposition of self to reality.

Instead of speaking of the self as creating itself in the choice of vocabularies, Foucault, Derrida and Lacan posit the subject as inheriting the burden of a speaking position incarnated in history. If the ironist must accept anything in the name of contingency it may be that *nevertheless the beliefs and desires are grounded*. But this acceptance must compromise the opposing of contingent to necessary. The appearance of choice between truth in the world or truth in language is an after-effect of the distinction having been made.

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The view that the contingent nature of truth leads to a set of choices suitable for self-creation is a popular reading since its outcome is in harmony with the liberal goal of freedom. However, the preservation of dichotomies by denying their operation leads to a repression of features that, were they displayed, might be seen to compromise that freedom.

I have argued that, despite his use of post-structuralism, Rorty separates that which is real from that which represents it in language and theory, that which is public from that which is private, that which is necessary from that which is contingent on the basis of familiar oppositions. He then disguises their opposition by insulating them from each other. So, the private goes on ‘on one’s own time’, the contingent is ungroundable, and reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it. The result, then, is that the opposition as a discursive function is repressed.

What is the effect of this? Representation, which for Rorty is synonymous with language, remains supplementary to the central real of liberal society, but this is simultaneously obscured since *this real is missing*. It is this which produces the effect of choice. On the face of the text, nothing bears the weight of the production of meaning and value; this is because the scene of production of the liberal subject is elsewhere, off-stage, in the economic model of a free market in which competition among equals produces value of all
kinds. This is the real; seemingly absent, but merely out of the picture. Representation (language) can then perform its supplementary dance of free-play, self-expression and idiosyncrasy, while the theoretical burden of value production is taken elsewhere, in the real of the free market.

The failures of this choice view of self-creation are grounded in the frauds of a free market philosophy. But the liberal ironist shows us only a detail of a bigger picture—and not the most important part of it. Language is not important for Rorty, despite the fact that he writes of little else, because it carries nothing of the structural weight of a society: it is not a load-bearing structure.\(^{15}\)

This gives Rorty’s theory of language and ‘philosophy as a kind of writing’ the magical effect: no visible means of support. But it also creates a problem for it; how to account for change in a changeable world? Rorty’s attempts to portray it as a choice of vocabularies reduce the history of ideas to a marketing exercise (which indeed exposes the free-market in play behind it):

The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of non-linguistic behavior ...\(^{16}\)

The liberal ironist then relies on a humanist moralism to prevent the contingent from becoming the arbitrary, ergo, the capricious:

In subsequent chapters, I shall try to show how a recognition of that contingency leads to a recognition of the contingency of conscience, and how both recognitions lead to a picture of intellectual and moral progress as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are.\(^{17}\)

The proposal of a use-value for metaphor is not supported by an account of what metaphor is useful for, and similarly a recourse to an idea of progress begs the question. In effect, the fixity and unity of a necessity beyond time and chance is replaced by a contingency of progress and utility, but the reversal is merely apparent. The opposition of ‘increasingly useful metaphors’ to ‘increasing understanding of how things really are’ belies their similarity. But both are narratives ascribing coherence through a unifying principle: in the latter an external reality, in the former the purposes/desires of the subject. With the postulation of progress a unity is upheld. That unity, however much it professes a more general freedom, is the image of the liberal ironist and his free market purposes.

One of my aims in this book is to suggest the possibility of a liberal utopia; one in which ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal. A post-
metaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable ... 18

This utopia is realisable and human solidarity is to be the goal:

It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers ... Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves ... 19

The original gesture, which removed conflict from between the two groups of writers, will be repeated by the citizen, who will come to see all of us, however strange, as equivalent. Our difference will not matter. The liberal identifies the cause of cruelty as the lack of imagination. The possibility of real conflict of interest has lost its structural burden, and is now only ascribable to contingent failures of imagination.

Despite the apparent altruism, this is a dubious ethics. Grounded in narcissism, it makes the other's survival dependent on his ability to be like me. 20 As such, it is a symptom of the psychopathology of imperialism.

UTOPIAN DESIRES

Rorty anticipates a utopian turn against theory and toward narrative. He commends ethnography and journalism, as well as the novel, as genres that are specifically 'not-theory' in the liberating sense.

Freud has made every man a poet, and in the liberal utopia each will explore his private vocabularies for the adornment of his individualism:

For Freud, nobody is dull through and through, for there is no such thing as a dull unconscious. What makes Freud more useful and more plausible than Nietzsche is that he does not relegate the vast majority of humanity to the status of dying animals. For Freud's account of unconscious fantasy shows us how to see every human life as a poem ... 21

Freud is one of a company who, in the 'spirit of playfulness and irony', has already begun the utopia:

For it somehow became possible, toward the end of the nineteenth century, to take the activity of redescription more lightly than it had ever been taken before. It became possible to juggle several descriptions of the same event without asking which one was right—to see redescription as a tool rather than a claim to have discovered essence. It thereby became possible to see a new vocabulary not as something which was supposed to replace
all other vocabularies, something which claimed to represent reality, but simply as one more vocabulary, one more human project, one person’s chosen metaphoric.\textsuperscript{22}

‘It somehow became possible’; this miracle is quickly revealed to be a sleight of hand, making it possible to juggle. The juggling avoids having to ask which one is right, that is, it avoids the anxiety of conflicting claims to truth. Which, through and through, is the liberal ironist’s great anxiety; conflict is his greatest fear. He has already determined how to resolve it; by declaring all to be like him and therefore to share his interests.

The liberal ironist, having thus committed himself to the postulation of every subject as equivalent, to eradicate this anxiety need now only dispense with the universal in favour of the particular. The possibility that \textit{there are different speaking materialities from which different and conflicting truth emerges} cannot on the theory be entertained. ‘Insofar as one can attribute philosophical views to Freud, one can say that he is as much a pragmatist as James and as much a perspectivalist as Nietzsche’\ldots \textsuperscript{23} Pragmatism has consistently failed to read that perspectivalism as implying conflict, whereas post-structuralist readings of Nietzsche make it a logical implication, since the self must create itself by excluding the other.\textsuperscript{24} Freud bases the possibility of society on the individual’s sacrifice of Oedipal desire, arguably the founding lesson in conflicts of interest.

The liberal ironist, then, is involved in a disavowal when he invokes perspectivalism without a clash of perspectives. However, the conflict between ‘speaking materialities’ (which refers not only to the positions from which we speak but the way we are spoken in them) cannot be abolished by fiat. Therefore, since the liberal ironist knows ‘the power of language to make new and different things possible and important’, he must be on guard against the return of the repressed, those other interests he has sought to obscure. For what if other interests were to be spoken and heard? It becomes imperative to depreciate the significance of these self-actualising vocabularies, and to seal off attempts to take them seriously as corresponding with reality or having claims on truth. This must be the import of the banishment of theory in favour of narrative in the ‘postmetaphysical’ utopia.

The implication is that we are constrained by theory, in its oppressive custody and that our release from this is an emancipation devoutly to be wished. Derrida’s critique of western metaphysics becomes read as this kind of liberation. But the rest of Derrida, the \textit{différence} which prevents any liberation from being complete, this is a \textit{remainder} for which the liberal ironist cannot see a use.\textsuperscript{25} Its effects must be left out of account, just as significant features of Freud’s
account must be ignored to arrive at the delightful poetic pleasure he anticipates.

And this is where that well-worn opposition between philosophy and literature will be called to play its part. In the romantic view of language in this poet’s utopia, a powerful desire is satisfied. The defence against conflict is entrenched, and the desire that promotes literature as an escape takes its revenge on philosophy and the Platonic jailer. This is the phantasmagorical satisfaction of the liberal utopia.

The utopia is to be ‘an endless proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth’. And yet, without the disturbing insistence of a remainder, what keeps these narratives proliferating, and in response to what? Différence returns, in the manner of the repressed, to disturb the peace of the liberal utopia.

Has the liberal ironist paid too high a price for the repression of conflict and contradiction? In exchange for equality/equivalence between speaking positions, he has surrendered language as ‘something that represents reality’, and so as anything that could have significance. It is utopian to picture a society where conflict and contradiction is ruled out. But the irony is that the strong poet cannot write in it. The poet’s utopia is characterised finally by a deafening silence. For why listen? What is to be said? Sad strong poets of Rorty’s imagination; endlessly speaking, having nothing to say.
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